

# TIME is the ENEMY

The surprising truth about why today's college students  
**aren't** graduating ... AND WHAT NEEDS TO CHANGE

**COMPLETE COLLEGE** AMERICA

## GOVERNORS WHO GET IT

Some leaders run from challenges; others run toward them.

When it comes to college completion, the numbers can be daunting. So troubling, in fact, that some leaders may be tempted to keep the public in the dark. The last thing they want to do is deliver more bad news, especially in times like these.

That's not the case for the leaders listed below. By participating in this groundbreaking report, they have courageously committed their states to confront the college completion challenge head on. These governors understand the consequences of ignoring thousands of college dropouts: the shrinking family incomes, the weakened economic competitiveness, the squandered taxpayer investments, and the hollowing out of our civic engagement.

But they know the upside, too. They share our optimism that better days and millions more college graduates are ahead because — under their leadership — states are on the move. New laws are hitting the books. New policies are taking hold. And students are already beginning to reap the rewards of a reinvented system of American higher education designed to meet modern needs.

It all begins by ensuring that we count the success of every student. Thanks to the courageous leaders of these 33 states, we have now done so. Without them, this historic report would not have been possible. Complete College America, the citizens of their states, and all in our country who hope for a brighter future owe them our gratitude.

When it comes to the vital importance of college completion, there's no question: These governors "get it."

- Gov. Jan Brewer (Arizona)
- Gov. Mike Beebe (Arkansas)
- Gov. Edmund Gerald Brown, Jr. (California)
- Gov. John Hickenlooper (Colorado)
- Gov. Rick Scott (Florida)
- Gov. Nathan Deal (Georgia)
- Gov. Neil Abercrombie (Hawaii)
- Gov. C.L. "Butch" Otter (Idaho)
- Gov. Pat Quinn (Illinois)
- Gov. Mitch Daniels (Indiana)
- Gov. Steven L. Beshear (Kentucky)
- Gov. Bobby Jindal (Louisiana)
- Gov. Martin O'Malley (Maryland)
- Gov. Deval Patrick (Massachusetts)
- Gov. Mark Dayton (Minnesota)
- Gov. Haley Barbour (Mississippi)
- Gov. Jeremiah W. (Jay) Nixon (Missouri)
- Gov. Brian Sandoval (Nevada)
- Gov. John Lynch (New Hampshire)
- Gov. Susana Martinez (New Mexico)
- Gov. Bev Perdue (North Carolina)
- Gov. John Kasich (Ohio)
- Gov. Mary Fallin (Oklahoma)
- Gov. John A. Kitzhaber, MD (Oregon)
- Gov. Tom Corbett (Pennsylvania)
- Gov. Dennis Daugaard (South Dakota)
- Gov. Bill Haslam (Tennessee)
- Gov. Rick Perry (Texas)
- Gov. Gary Richard Herbert (Utah)
- Gov. Robert McDonnell (Virginia)
- Gov. Chris Gregoire (Washington)
- Gov. Earl Ray Tomblin (West Virginia)
- Gov. Matthew Mead (Wyoming)



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# Time is the enemy

## **THIS IS NOT AN ORDINARY INTRODUCTION. THERE'S NO TIME FOR THAT.**

Unless we move with urgency, today's young people will be the first generation in American history to be less educated than their predecessors. Consider this a sobering wake-up call — and an urgent appeal for action now.

Inside these pages you will get an unprecedented look behind the ivy-covered walls of America's public colleges and universities and into how well they are educating all — we repeat, **all** — of today's college students.

The **all** part is what's new.

Surprisingly, until this report, no one has bothered to measure and report the success or failure of all U.S. college students. We've been tracking only students who are first-time and are going full-time. That's all the federal government requires of colleges and universities, and until now few exceeded this minimal standard.

But 4 of every 10 public college students are able to attend only part-time. Which means leaders have been making policy decisions about higher education absent critical information about 40 percent of the students, as if their success or failure was less important than that of "traditional" full-time students. How can this be?

Worse, there's more. Start full-time and then transfer to a different institution? You haven't been counted. Receive some of the billions of dollars in federal grants given out each year to attend college? Few have followed up to check if you dropped out or graduated. Older students, students trapped in remediation, students pursuing valuable career certificates ... all have been virtually invisible to policymakers, elected officials, and taxpayers ... until now.

Complete College America fundamentally believes that to have any hope of leading the world again in the proportion of our citizens with a college education, we must first **see every student**, including the part-timers and older students who are struggling to balance jobs and school, the millions who are trapped in the Bermuda Triangle of remediation, and the many first-generation freshmen who too often are left to fend for themselves when they arrive on campus.

We cannot tackle what's holding them back from success if we do not understand their challenges and the complicated natures of their lives.

Thanks to the courageous and enlightened leadership of governors and higher education institutions that shared their data, this historic report finally allows us to see what's really happening on campuses in 33 states.

All students now count and are being counted. We now have a much more complete picture of where we stand ... and what needs to be done so that all students have a fair shot at success. Consider these findings:

- **There is a new American majority on campus.** Seventy-five percent of today's students are juggling some combination of families, jobs, and school while commuting to class; according to the U.S. Department of Education, only a quarter go full-time, attend

residential colleges, and have most of their bills paid by their parents.

- **Part-time students rarely graduate.** Even when given twice as long to complete certificates and degrees, no more than a quarter ever make it to graduation day.
- **Poor students and students of color struggle the most to graduate.** Even though more of these students than ever before are enrolling in college, too few end up with certificates or degrees. Given changing demographics, the success of these students is critical, or

our country will simply not be economically competitive.

- **Students are taking too many credits and too much time to complete.** Excessive course-taking is slowing down progress to certificates and degrees. And students are spending too much time in school.
- **Remediation is broken, producing few students who ultimately graduate.** Sadly, efforts intended to catch students up are most often leaving them behind.

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## **THE BIG IDEA:** Time is the enemy of college completion.

These historic data have revealed a common thread — and an animating principle to guide our work to boost college graduation: **The longer it takes, the more life gets in the way of success.**

More students are working, and they are working more hours than ever before. Many can afford to attend only part-time, extending the years until they graduate. More come to our campuses underprepared for college — and then get trapped in broken remedial approaches that don't help, as time keeps slipping away. More are overwhelmed by too many choices and too little structure, causing aimless wandering and wasted semesters and years.

All of this adds up to more and more time. As the clock runs and the calendar turns, we all know what happens: Students' lives fill up with jobs, relationships, marriages, children, and mortgages; the list goes on and on. Not surprisingly, college often gets left behind: a few years of courses, no degree, and a lot of debt.

The result is a yawning skills gap caused by too few trained workers for more high-skill jobs than ever. Incomes shrink. And America falls further behind.

But the path forward is clear. And thanks to the leadership of the 33 states that provided the historic data in this report — and to the commitment of the 29 governors who have pledged their states to significant reform as members of the Complete College America Alliance of States — there is great reason for optimism.

We **can** help more students graduate. We **can** provide a better deal for taxpayers. We **can** create stronger economies in our communities, states, and country. But we must redouble our efforts to do so ... now.

**There's no time to waste.**

## METHODOLOGY

The data presented in this report were provided by the 33 participating states themselves, using the Complete College America / National Governors Association Common Completion Metrics. National findings in each category were based on the calculated medians of the state data.

More than 10 million students enroll in public institutions annually in the states whose data

are captured in these findings — a clear majority of American students in public colleges and universities today. While we recognize that there may be some variance in the data higher education institutions provided to their states, the significant number of students represented means that the most alarming trends can be traced across all of the states represented in these findings.

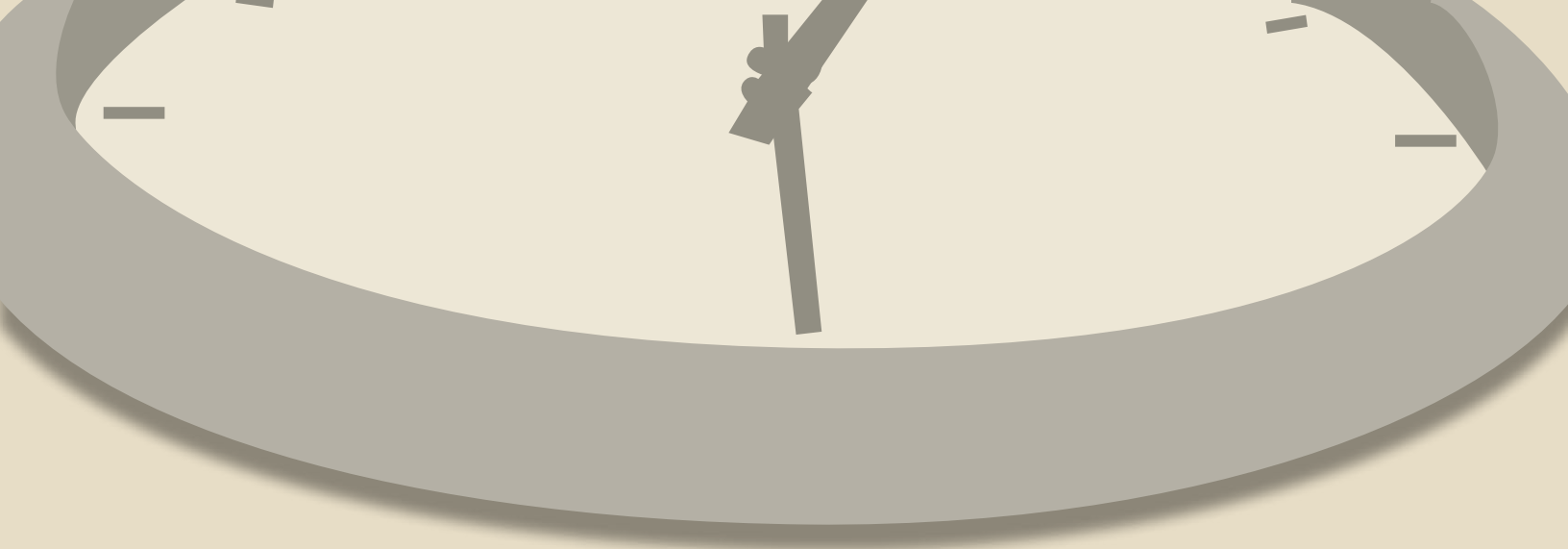
### About the Common Completion Metrics

Common metrics — uniformly designed and applied — help us frame our data collection to be most useful for driving change. Moreover, adopting and reporting common metrics unifies us in a shared goal and communicates our commitment to doing the hard work necessary to bring about improvement.

In July 2010, the National Governors Association (NGA) adopted the Complete College America Common Completion Metrics in announcing its “Complete to Compete” initiative, placing the

metrics at the core of NGA’s call to governors to make college completion a priority. This significant action signaled a new national focus on the importance of consistent data to document the progress and success of postsecondary students across all states.

For more information on the Common Completion Metrics and the companion Technical Guide, please visit [www.completecollege.org](http://www.completecollege.org).



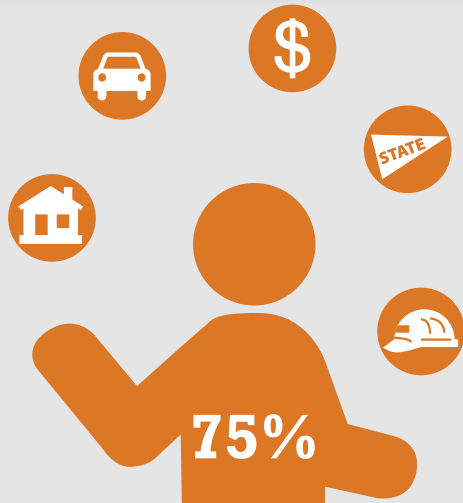
# **PART 1:**

# **The College**

# **Graduation Crisis**

# What have we learned?

## **FINDING 1** Nontraditional students are the new majority.



of students are college commuters, often juggling families, jobs, and school.



of students attend full-time at residential colleges.

And if they attend part-time, the federal government doesn't even track their success ... as if they're invisible.

**Graduation counted: 60%**  
Full-time students



**Graduation not counted: 40%**  
Part-time students

**It's time to start counting all students.**

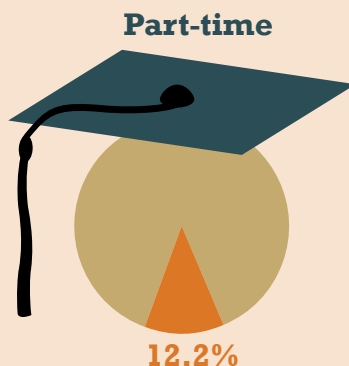
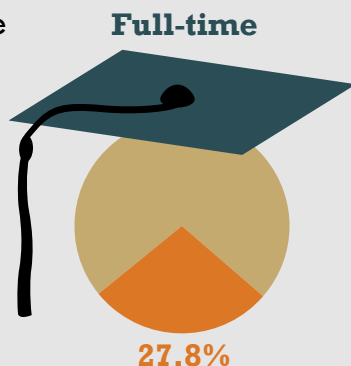




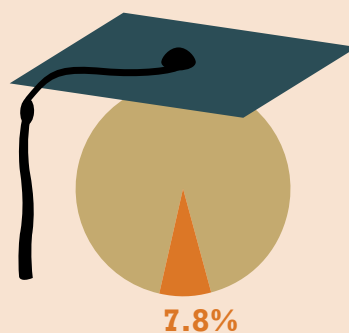
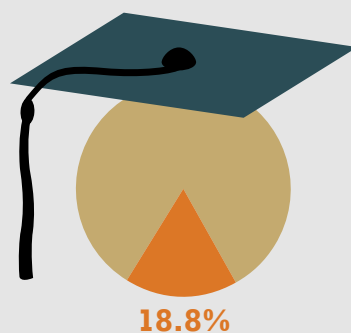
**FINDING 2**

**Part-time students rarely graduate — even when they have twice as much time.**

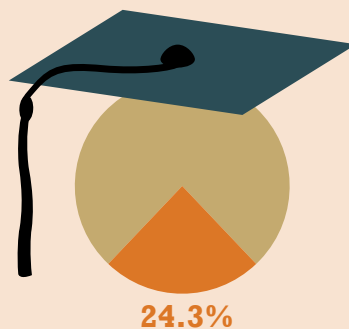
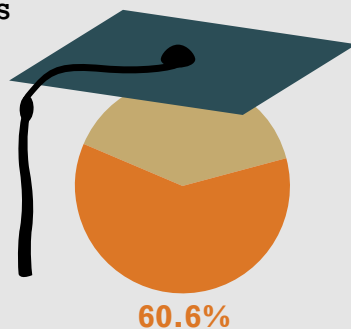
1-year certificate  
within 2 years



2-year associate  
within 4 years



4-year bachelor's  
within 8 years



**It's time to rethink scheduling and programs to help more students attend full-time.**

## What do we do about it?

Today's students need new, shorter, and faster pathways to degrees and certificates of value. Colleges should:

- Use **block schedules**, with fixed and predictable classroom meeting times, so that part-time students who are juggling jobs, families, and school can know with certainty when they can go to work each day.
- Allow students to **proceed toward degrees or certificates at a faster pace**, with shorter academic terms, less time off between terms, and year-round scheduling.
- **Simplify the registration process** by enrolling students once in a single, coherent program rather than making them sign up every term for individual, unconnected courses.
- **Reduce the amount of time students must be in class** by using online technology and allowing students to move on once they've demonstrated competency.
- **Form peer support and learning networks** among students in the same program.
- **Embed remediation** into the regular college curriculum so students don't waste time before they start earning credits.
- **Provide better information** on every program's tuition, graduation rates, and job placement outcomes so that students can make more informed decisions at the front end.

### PROGRESS: Some states are helping students balance priorities



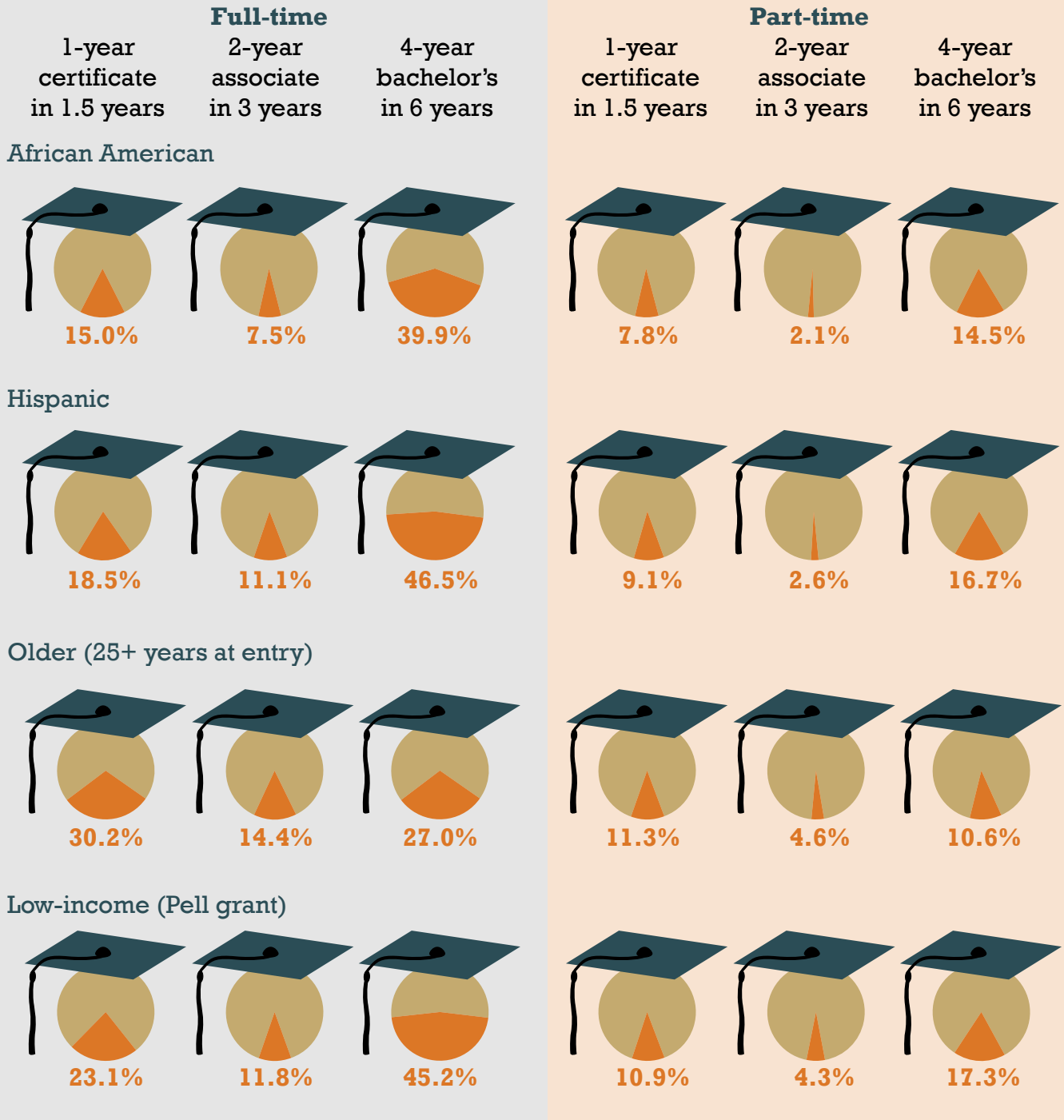
**New York:** The City University of New York offers Accelerated Study in Associate Programs (ASAP) to help students complete associate degrees more quickly. By using block scheduling, student cohorts by major, and other supports, students can effectively balance jobs and school. The results speak for themselves: ASAP students have three times the graduation rate of their peers who do not participate in the program.



**Tennessee:** Only Tennessee has a statewide approach to help students balance work and school. The 27 Tennessee Tech Centers have average completion rates of 75 percent, with some centers regularly graduating all of their students. Unlike traditional approaches, students enroll in whole academic programs, not individual courses, streamlining the path to completion by removing the burdens and confusion of individual course selection and availability. Programs are offered from 8 a.m. to 3 p.m., Monday through Friday, providing students the scheduling predictability to help keep jobs while going to school.

**FINDING 3**

Graduation odds are especially low for students who are African American, Hispanic, older, or poor.



It's time for completion, not just enrollment, to become the goal.

## What do we do about it?

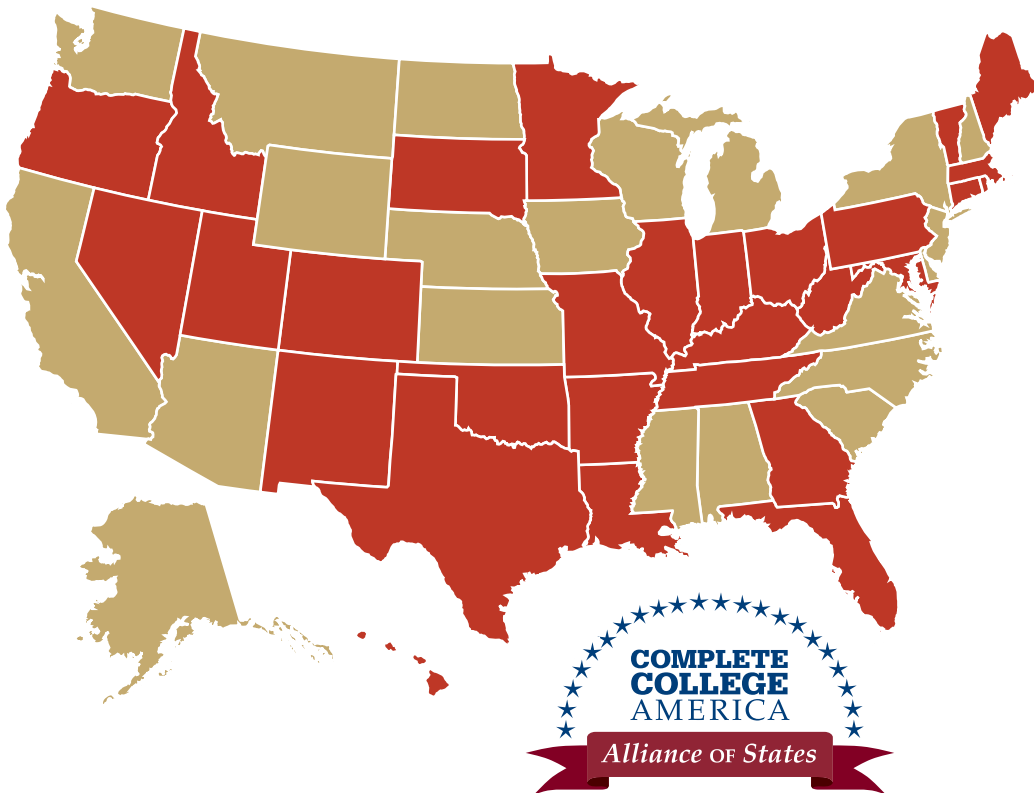
**States must get serious that graduation, not just enrollment, is the goal.** Showing up isn't enough. Colleges need incentives to ensure that their students also finish up. States should set completion goals, statewide and by campus. And they should tie at least part of colleges' funding to their success in meeting these goals. **Start with a handful of explicit, easy-to-understand measures** such as gains

in the number of certificates and degrees awarded, the percentage of students completing "on time" and transferring from two-year to four-year colleges successfully, and the number of courses completed. To ensure sustainability, tie a modest percentage of funding to performance and then steadily increase it over time.

### PROGRESS: 29 states are leading reform efforts

Members of the Complete College America Alliance of States have committed to:

- Setting annual, campus-specific degree and credential completion goals through 2020;
- Collecting and reporting on common measures of progress and sharing those results publicly; and
- Reinventing higher education to smooth paths to completion through aggressive state- and campus-level action plans.



## FINDING 4 Students are wasting time on excess credits ...

### Certificate

Should take **30 credits**  
Students take **68.5 credits**



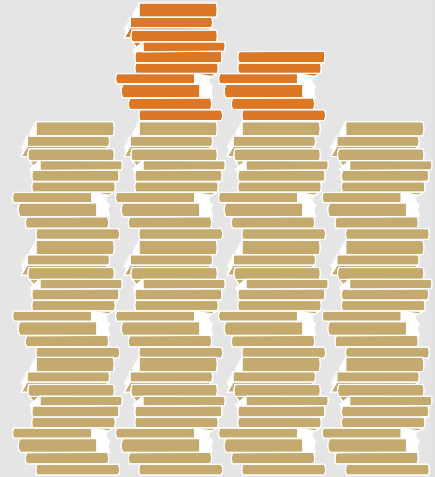
### Associate

Should take **60 credits**  
Students take **85.5 credits**



### Bachelor's

Should take **120 credits**  
Students take **136.5 credits**



... and taking too much time to earn a degree.

### Certificate

Should take **1 year**



Full-time students take **3.3 years**



Part-time students take **4.4 years**



### Associate

Should take **2 years**



Full-time students take **3.8 years**



Part-time students take **5 years**



### Bachelor's

Should take **4 years**



Full-time students take **4.7 years**



Part-time students take **5.6 years**



Staying in school longer doesn't significantly increase students' chances of graduating.

For instance, giving full-time community college students **one extra year** to earn an associate degree and giving full-time college students **two extra years** to earn a bachelor's degree **only increases graduation rates by 4.9 percent** — for both groups. We must help them complete faster.

Students need more efficient pathways to success.

## What do we do about it?

Colleges need to recognize that time is the enemy.

**With today's student population, more time and more choices often add up to less success.**

Being able to engage in an extended period of self-discovery or sample multiple courses out of catalogues the size of phone books might work for students who have the luxury of unlimited time and money. But this approach doesn't work for the nearly 50 percent of students who work more than 20 hours a week or for the 25 percent of community college students who work more than 35 hours a week.

Colleges should:

- **Require formal, on-time completion plans** for every student, updated annually.
- **Enact caps of 120 credit hours** for a bachelor's degree and **60 credit hours** for an associate degree.
- **Create a common general education core program** to ensure consistency.
- **Require full transferability** of common core courses.
- **Adopt alternative pathways** to help students earn college credits, such as through Advanced Placement, online learning, and accelerated competency-based courses.

### PROGRESS: Some states are boosting productivity



**Connecticut:** Full-time enrollment in community colleges increased dramatically when colleges began using full-time enrollment status as the default when processing student financial aid applications. The strategy shows students that attending college full-time is often more affordable than they expect.



**Texas:** To reduce the likelihood that students will earn unnecessary and excessive credits, colleges and universities lose their state subsidy for students who exceed a certain credit-hour threshold. Additionally, students are charged out-of-state tuition if they exceed limits for repeating courses or if they take classes that have content essentially identical to ones they have already completed.



**Florida:** The state is using comprehensive degree acceleration strategies such as dual enrollment (allowing students to earn college credit while in high school), early admission, credit by examination, and Advanced Placement/International Baccalaureate credit. These strategies are made possible through a common course numbering system that allows credits from two-year colleges to be easily transferred to four-year institutions.

**FINDING 5**

# Remediation: Too many students need it, and too few succeed when they get it.

Remedial classes have become the Bermuda Triangle of higher education. Most students are lost, and few will ever be seen on graduation day.

**50.1%** of those seeking an associate degree require remediation

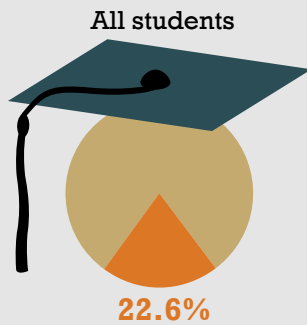


**20.7%** of those seeking a bachelor's degree require remediation

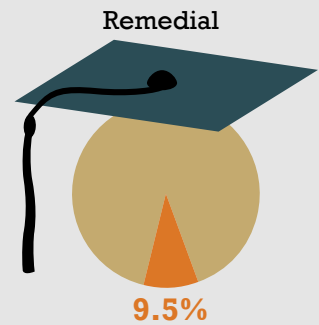
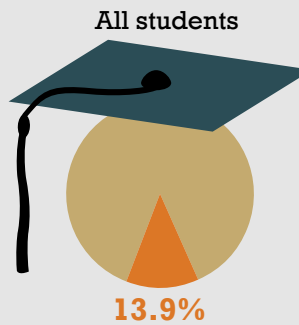


## Remedial students are much less likely to graduate.

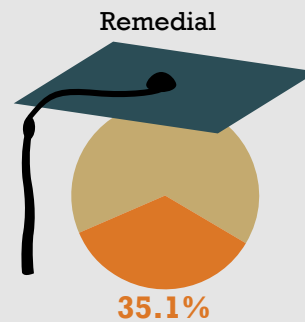
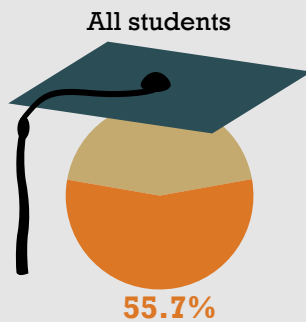
**1-year certificate in 1.5 years**



**2-year associate in 3 years**



**4-year bachelor's in 6 years**



**It's time to fix broken approaches to remediation.**



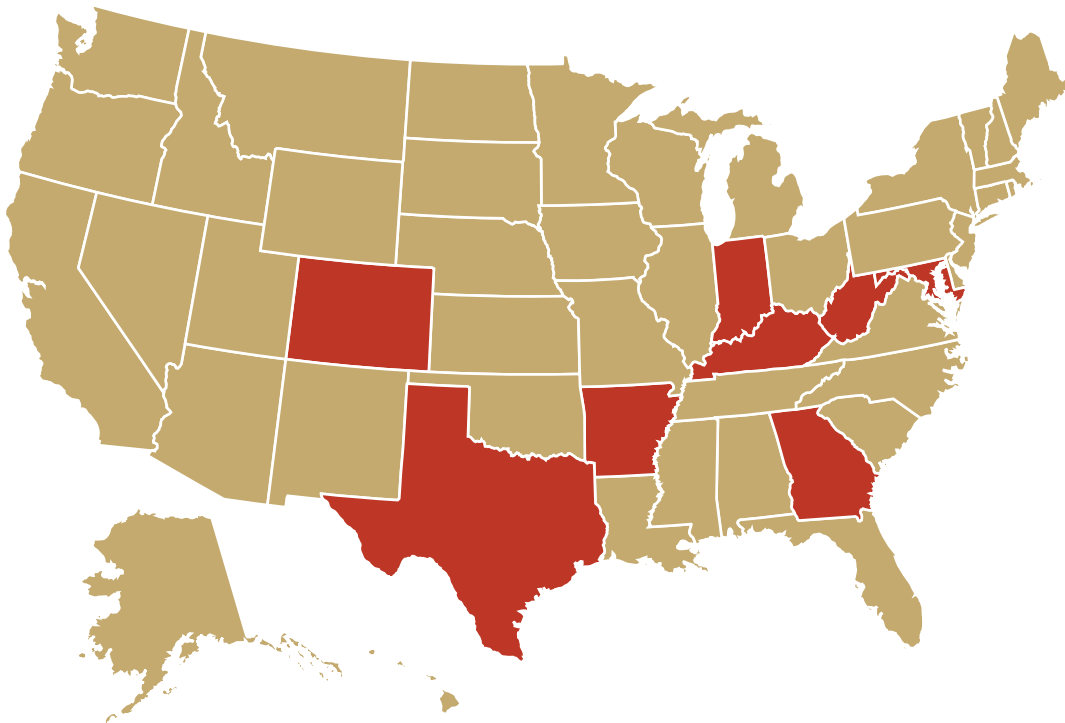
## What do we do about it?

The current remediation system is broken; too many students start in remedial courses and never earn a credential of any kind. Colleges need to:

- **Divert students from traditional remedial programs** — they aren't working.
- **Mainstream as many students as possible into college-level courses.** Provide co-requisite and embedded support for those needing extra help.
- **Intensify instruction and minimize the time necessary to prepare students** for entry into college-level courses.
- **Eliminate the many exit points** where students are lost by either not passing or not enrolling in courses.
- **Provide alternative pathways** to a career certificate or career-related credential for students with major academic weaknesses.
- **Answer the fundamental question — is what's being taught in developmental education what students really need?** It's time to revisit both the structure and goals of remedial math. Math should be a gateway, not a gatekeeper, to successful college and everyday life. Reading and writing should be integrated.
- **Overhaul the current placement system.** Current placement tests are not predictive. If placement tests are given, provide students with pretest guidance, practice tests, and time to brush up.

### PROGRESS: Several states are reinventing remediation

Few states have established statewide remediation policies, but many are moving in that direction. In fact, most of the states that have won Completion Innovation Challenge grants from Complete College America are using the funds to implement remediation reforms, including Arkansas, Colorado, Georgia, Indiana, Kentucky, Maryland, Texas, and West Virginia.



# TIME IS RUNNING OUT

## Five essential steps that states should take right now

### 1. Count all students, set state- and campus-level goals, and uniformly measure progress and success.

By providing data for this report, 33 states have already proven that it's possible to count the success of every student. And the 29 governors who have pledged to fulfill the commitments of membership in the Alliance of States are setting goals and reinventing higher education to create the conditions for higher achievement. More states should do the same. And the federal government should try to catch up by filling damaging gaps in the national database, raising the standard of measurement, and counting every student in our country.



### 2. Reduce the time it takes to earn a certificate or degree.

The surest path to more college completions is the shortest one. This does not mean “dumbing down” courses or undermining quality. Ensure that unnecessary credit requirements are not added to certificate and degree programs. Demand robust, comprehensive transfer agreements across campuses, systems, and states so students can easily take their hard-earned credits with them instead of losing valuable time when they must continually start over.



### 3. Transform remediation so that students earn — as quickly as possible — college credits that count.

It's been proven: Current remediation approaches don't make it more likely that students will graduate. Fixing remediation now may be the best thing we can do to boost college completion. And it's clear what needs to be done: Start as many underprepared students as possible in first-year, full-credit classes. Do this by adding extra class time and tutoring support, but don't make the students wait to earn credits that count toward their degrees.



### 4. Restructure programs to fit busy lives.

It's time to face facts: College students today are going to have to work while trying to graduate. What else can they do when college is so expensive? Our response simply cannot be indifference. The best approaches “block” classes: Students attend full-time by learning from 8 a.m. to 2 p.m., five days a week. Even better, create cohorts so similar students can support one another. Complicated lives are easier when people who understand can lean on one another.



### 5. Join Complete College America.

Governors from 29 states already have, and they're benefitting from access to a hearty band of impatient reformers and experts in higher education policy and practice who understand the necessity of making changes now that can significantly boost college completion. There's no question: A vital movement is building across America to boost college completion. Since time is the enemy, why wait to get on board?



## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This is an unprecedented report, which would not have been possible without the support and hands-on expertise and assistance of many people and institutions.

**THE 33 STATES:** their governors, higher education leaders, and higher education institutions. They showed real courage in providing these data, the good and the bad.

**OUR PHILANTHROPIC PARTNERS:** Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, Carnegie Corporation of New York, Ford Foundation, Lumina Foundation for Education, and the W.K. Kellogg Foundation.

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**AND OUR PRODUCTION PARTNERS:** KSA-Plus Communications, which provided editorial assistance and graphic design.

## **ABOUT COMPLETE COLLEGE AMERICA**

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**It's really about the states ... we're just here to help.**

Established in 2009, Complete College America is a national nonprofit with a single mission: to work with states to significantly increase the number of Americans with quality career certificates or college degrees and to close attainment gaps for traditionally underrepresented populations.

The need for this work is compelling. Between 1970 and 2009, undergraduate enrollment in the United States increased by 138 percent while the completion rate has been virtually unchanged. We've made progress in giving students from all backgrounds access to college — but we haven't finished the all-important job of helping them achieve a degree. Counting the success of all students is an essential first step. And then we must move with urgency to reinvent American higher education to meet the needs of the new majority of students on our campuses, delicately balancing the jobs they need with the education they desire.

Complete College America believes there is great reason for optimism ... and a clear path forward. With a little more support — and a lot of common sense — we can ensure that many more young people get the high-quality college education that will help them live productive and fulfilling lives. All Americans will share in the benefits of their success.

# **COMPLETE COLLEGE AMERICA**

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