

Introduction

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For the United States, the imperative to improve college completion rates for students and to raise the level of education attained by most Americans is now widely accepted. The economic and demographic forces that are changing the face of America, the reconfiguration of labor markets in this country, and the intense educational and economic competition internationally all point to the need for the nation and the states to produce more Americans with college-level knowledge and skills. While college access remains a problem for many Americans, high school graduates now enroll in post-secondary education at historically unprecedented rates. Yet college completion, never a strength of American higher education, shows few improvements, and lags other nations; and the proportion of the population with certificates and degrees has remained flat.

One key component of any strategy to improve college completion and attainment must be to increase the numbers of young Americans who graduate from high school and enroll in higher education prepared to undertake college-level coursework. This requires educational policies that identify the knowledge and skills needed for college, and that assure that they are understood and taught across states. This includes implementing and institutionalizing associated performance standards in curricula, assessment programs, pre- and in-service teacher training programs, and the examinations administered to entering college students for placement. The challenge is to develop systemic approaches to collaboration and coordination of schools and colleges in every state.

In an era when most students who leave high school enroll in postsecondary education, what is needed is a focus on the continuity of the students' educational experiences from school through college, along with greater emphasis on student achievement and the completion of educational programs. The states must play an enabling role in leadership and support to achieve changes of this magnitude—a reality that has been recognized by many state and educational leaders. But this is largely uncharted territory, and finding the appropriate path has required trial and error.

The chapters that follow take stock of much of what has been tried and learned about state policy leadership in bridging the divide between K–12 schools and postsecondary education. They bring together the work and perspectives of the authors and of several sponsoring and collaborating organizations, including: Editorial Projects in Education and *Education Week*; the Southern Regional Education Board (SREB); the Institute for Higher Education Leadership & Policy at California State University, Sacramento; and the National

Center for Public Policy and Higher Education. The National Center is publishing this report to stimulate and encourage examination of the effectiveness of state policies in linking high schools and colleges, in the interest of attaining higher levels of student achievement.