

# Can We Achieve Our National Higher-Education Goals?

BY WILLIAM KIRWAN

## TAKEAWAYS

- 1 While there has been significant analysis—and skepticism—regarding the feasibility of reaching President Obama's goal of having the world's highest proportion of college graduates by 2020, what must not be lost are the audacious aspirations he has put forth and their importance for the nation.
- 2 Achieving significant increases in college graduation rates will require rethinking education as a continuum, rather than as a series of segments, and a corresponding willingness to make strategic investments across the spectrum of education.
- 3 Colleges need to devote more attention to determining why their students leave before they graduate and to developing targeted intervention strategies.

IN SEVERAL HIGH-PROFILE SPEECHES THIS YEAR, President Barack Obama has set an ambitious educational goal: By 2020, the United States will have the highest proportion of adults with a college degree in the world. The emphasis on education in both his proposed budget for fiscal 2010 and in the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009 demonstrates the seriousness and sincerity of his intentions.

In response to Obama's emphasis on education in his State of the Union address in February, Molly Corbett Broad, president of the American Council on Education, noted that "no president in modern times has used an address to a joint session of Congress to make such a clear case for higher education's role in providing the solutions America needs to compete in the world economy."

While every president—regardless of party—has spoken of education as important, never in my lifetime has the issue of education, especially higher education, been so clearly articulated as a vital national priority.

Although there has been significant analysis—and skepticism—as to the feasibility of reaching the president's goal within his stated timeframe, what must not be lost are the audacious aspirations he has put forth and their importance

for our nation.

Last year I chaired the College Board's Commission on Access, Admission and Success, which produced the report *Coming to Our Senses*. While the commission's goal was slightly more modest than the president's—by 2025, 55 percent of our nation's young adults should receive a post-secondary degree—the thrust of our report and its recommendations very closely mirror the president's proposal and the rationale behind it. The State Higher Education Executive Officers, the Lumina Foundation, and the Gates Foundation, among others, all have embraced similar goals of dramatically improving U.S. graduation rates. The challenge of achieving any of these goals is enormous, but there can simply be no doubt as to their importance for the future well-being of our nation.

## The Higher Education Imperative

For most of the 20th century, the U.S. was the world's leader in education, with the top high-school and college completion rates. These gave us a huge global advantage in the quality of our workforce. Sadly, this is no longer the case. Currently, only 39 percent of the 25-to-34 year-old cohort has a postsecondary degree, placing the U.S. 10th among the industrialized nations in such completion rates. If we stay on our present course, given the rising proportions of underrepresented minorities among college-age youth and given their lower participation and success rates in higher education, our population's proportion of degree-holders would drop from 39 percent to below 30 percent by 2025. This would mean that the United States would have gone from first to last in postsecondary completion rates among industrialized nations over the past several decades. This growing educational deficit is perhaps an even graver threat to our nation's future well-being than is the current fiscal crisis.

The problem is particularly acute in the STEM disciplines: science, technology, engineering, and mathematics. In the most recent Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) tests—administered by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and considered the world's most comprehensive and rigorous international comparison of student achievement—the challenges facing the United States were made clear. In “scientific literacy,” students from the U.S. ranked 21st out of 30 OECD countries; in “mathematics literacy,” 25th; and—perhaps most troubling—in “problem solving,” 24th, with one half falling below the threshold of problem-solving skills considered necessary to meet emerging workforce demands.

With America's educational prowess declining, so too is America's economic leadership in the global marketplace. This was highlighted in an essay titled “Is America Falling Off the Flat Earth?” written by Norman Augustine, the former CEO of Lockheed Martin, as well as a regent of the University System of Maryland and chair of the National Academy of Sciences committee that produced the report *Rising Above The Gathering Storm*. He observed in that 2007 article that nearly 60 percent of the patents filed with the U.S. Patent and Trademark Office in the field of information technology now originate in Asia. Further, in 2000, the number of foreign students studying physical sciences and engineering in U.S. graduate schools surpassed—for the first time ever—the number of U.S. students in those fields. And the United States has become a net importer of high-technology products.

There can simply be no argument that we must improve educational attainment if the United States wants to be the world's leader in creativity, innovation, and the knowledge economy. In addition, critical challenges extending beyond economic prosperity, such as addressing global climate change and advancing life-saving medical research, also hinge on producing a well-educated populace.

Regardless of the specific benchmark—the president's goal of having the world's highest proportion of students graduating from college by 2020, the College Board's goal of a 55-percent college-completion rate by 2025, or something in between—achieving success rests on several factors. They include our ability to rethink education as continuum rather than as a series of segments; the corresponding willingness to make strategic investments across the education spectrum; and—ultimately—our capacity to bring about fundamental change in the role played by higher education.

## Viewing Education as a Continuum

Simply funneling more unprepared high-school graduates into our colleges is not the solution. Having more children begin their educational journeys prepared to learn and putting more seventh and eighth graders on the path to college is part of the answer. To accomplish this, we must focus on the youngest students, then move forward—plugging the numerous “leaks” in the educational pipeline along the way—as we map the path to higher education for them.

The National Association of System Heads (NASH) and the think tank Education Trust have conducted research that illuminates those leaks in the pipeline: The United States' on-time, high-school graduation rate stands at 73 percent; the college-going rate at 67 percent; and the six-year college graduation rate at 55 percent—leaving us with only about 40 percent of American adults 25 years or older holding a college degree. For African-American and Latino students, the numbers are lower across the board, resulting in a 26-percent and an 18-percent college completion rate, respectively.

To achieve a result in line with the president's goal, roughly 50 percent of the adult population would need to have a two- or four-year degree by 2020. According to an analysis by the Delta Cost Project and the National Center for Higher Education Management Systems (NCHEMS), at current annual degree-production rates, we would produce about 27 million recipients of college degrees by the end of the coming decade, some 10 million degrees short of the president's goal. That's the bad news. But this gap can be closed if our nation has the will and dedicates the resources to do so. Indeed, the Delta Project/NCHEMS analysis shows that if the high-school graduation rates, college-going rates, and degree-attainment rates nationwide each rose to the levels currently produced by the “best performing” states, the president's goal would be reached.

While moving these three indicators in tandem will unquestionably be a significant challenge, with adequate investments and enlightened policy changes, this certainly can be achieved.

As we have come to understand, the foundation for college graduation is laid well before a child enters primary school. Growing evidence suggests that children who attend high-quality, pre-K programs begin kindergarten equipped with larger vocabularies, the basic building block of language

and learning. Likewise, a fundamental understanding of mathematics—the language of science—must be developed in the earliest grades.

To that end, as the College Board’s report recommends, states need to provide universal, voluntary access to high-quality, preschool programs for three-year-olds and four-year-olds. Children who attend pre-school tend to graduate from high school and college and move into the middle class at much higher rates than those who do not. It is encouraging that President Obama has identified pre-school as a major element of his educational agenda, providing \$5 billion in the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act for early-learning programs, including Head Start and Early Head Start.

While moving students into middle school and through high school, we must work to build and support their college-going aspirations. More attention must be paid to providing middle-school students with the counseling and guidance they need to begin preparing for college. If students do not begin the proper course sequences during middle school that lead to high-school courses that prepare them for college-level work, their paths to higher education will be blocked before they even realize it. In many school districts, however, there is one college-prep counselor for every 2,000 students. In fact, we need one counselor for every 250 middle-school students if we are serious about enhancing not only the college-going rate, but also the college-completion rate.

These initial steps—additional funding and additional staff—are best classified as *evolutionary*. Recognition of what works and the political will to direct the necessary resources toward those efforts are what government is designed to accomplish. While they are important first steps, they will only get us part of the way to our goal. Laying the groundwork that will dramatically reverse our present course and re-establish the United States as the undisputed world leader in higher education will require *revolutionary* change.

## Higher Education’s Challenges

If our nation is to move toward President Obama’s goal, it is incumbent on the higher-education community—public and private, two-year and four-year institutions alike—to reevaluate its structures; re-engineer its operations; place a much higher priority on affordability, access and completion; and establish genuine partnerships with the K-12 community.

A major problem impeding progress on student access and graduation is the gap that exists between high-school exit requirements and college-entrance expectations. This gap leads to unacceptably high levels of remedial education at our nation’s colleges and universities. A recent study by the National Center for Education Statistics estimates that 30 percent of students moving from high school to postsecondary education must begin with remedial courses. The figure for students beginning in community colleges is over

40 percent.

College-completion rates for students who start their post-secondary careers with remedial-education courses are abysmal. A study by the Texas Higher Education Commission showed that only 16 percent of Texas students who began college with a remedial course attained a four-year degree within six years.

Fortunately, a major initiative, has been undertaken—sponsored by the National Governors Association, the Association of Chief State School Officers, and Achieve, Inc., with support from the College Board and American College Testing—to produce a higher percentage of college-ready, high-school graduates. Forty-six states have joined to develop and implement “college-ready” standards. The creation of those standards is an important first step, a necessary but not sufficient condition for improvement. What also must happen is that states need to insist that faculties from higher education and the K-12 sector come together to insure that the content in courses for high-school seniors aligns with first-year college courses. We will have achieved success in this area when the transition from the 12th grade to the first year of college is as seamless as the transition from the 11th grade to the 12th grade.

But aligning the curriculum is only one step if we are to move toward President Obama’s laudable goal. In the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act, President Obama included more than \$30 billion to address college affordability and improve access to higher education, including an increase in Pell Grants, expanded tax credits, science fellowships, and other initiatives. At the same time, he made it clear that university systems, institutional presidents, and governing boards must work internally to bring the rising costs of college under control. By streamlining administrative expenses, cutting energy costs, using instructional faculty resources more effectively, eliminating duplication, revamping financial aid to direct more assistance to the neediest students, and clarifying and simplifying the aid process, we can show a top-to-bottom commitment to keeping higher education affordable.

This is being done in some places, including the University System of Maryland (USM), where we call such efforts our Effectiveness and Efficiency (E&E) initiative. The direct and indirect cost savings in that effort have played a key role in USM’s ability to keep tuition for full-time, in-state undergraduates frozen for the past three academic years and to substantially reduce the debt levels of our graduates.

Beyond this basic ethic of “stewardship,” institutions of higher education—public and private—must open themselves up to inventive methods to improve access and success rates. Active and seamless articulation partnerships with community colleges are essential, especially with President Obama’s recent announcement of a \$12 billion investment aimed at improving degree completion at community colleges. Other innovative approaches that have the demonstrated ability to enhance higher-education access at sub-

stantially reduced costs must be integrated into our program offerings. These include greater use of online instruction and the development of regional education centers that offer courses from multiple campuses in a centralized location. One especially promising innovation is course redesign following the model espoused by Carol Twigg and the National Center for Academic Transformation. This model makes better use of technology and teaching assistants and has proven effective at teaching larger groups of students at lower cost in several fields. Such efforts are under way within USM and have resulted in both improved student performance and substantial savings in instructional costs.

Colleges and universities also need to give much greater attention and priority to teacher-preparation programs. *Rising Above the Gathering Storm*, the 2007 report from the National Academy of Sciences that I mentioned earlier, is the latest in a series of clarion calls for a substantial increase in highly qualified teachers for our nation's K-12 classrooms, especially in STEM disciplines (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics). The remarkably successful UTEACH program at the University of Texas shows what can be accomplished when a university makes producing well-trained teachers a priority.

Finally, as the College Board's report recommends, colleges and universities need to better understand why students leave their institutions without earning degrees. Most universities invest heavily in marketing for new students, but too few have devoted the same kind of attention and resources to figuring out why their graduation rates are not higher. An impressive study by the Education Trust demonstrates that this kind of analysis, coupled with intervention strategies, can produce dramatic results.

I am under no illusion that implementing the agenda I've described on a national scale will be easy. Despite the general perception of their being hotbeds of liberalism, colleges and universities are among the most tradition-bound, conservative organizations in society. Change is not a popular concept in academe. In a way, it is one of our strengths in that it has enabled us to sustain rock-solid values. But on those issues where we do need change, our traditional way of doing things becomes an enormous impediment. Without a resolute commitment on the part of presidents and governing boards to embrace needed change in our administrative and academic operations, progress will be difficult, if not impossible, to achieve.

Along these same lines, we need a fundamental change in the way colleges and universities view themselves. The idea of higher education as "the Academy," separate and apart from the K-12 community, must be rejected. We cannot tell the K-12 community it is their job to get students ready for college and then our job to get them through college. We must recognize that we have a vital role to play before students enroll in our institutions; we have an obligation to help prepare them on the front end. Individual campuses and entire systems must establish partnerships with primary and

secondary schools to enhance teacher training and development, improve student learning, and keep the promise of higher education a realistic, desirable, and attainable goal.

Returning to the initial question about the "achievability" of President Obama's goal, I find the answer to be self-evident: If we stay on our current path, we will not be successful, but rather will find ourselves with less than 30 percent of our young adults earning college degrees. If, however, we make the necessary financial investments and—more importantly—implement the necessary changes in our operations that I've described, we have a real chance of recapturing our once-impressive educational leadership. I can think of nothing more important for the future well-being of our nation or, for those of us in higher education, more worthy of our time and attention. ■

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