

UNLOCKING STUDENT SUCCESS

Addressing Barriers to College Completion

Committee on Education and Workforce, Minority

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Key Takeaways

- Despite expanded access to college for Americans, there are persistent academic and non-academic barriers that make it harder for many students to obtain a college degree.
- The Trump Administration and Congressional Republicans have rolled back federal resources to support students access and succeed in college.
- There are many promising evidence-based practices that have been proven to address barriers to success and increase college completion through providing holistic, wraparound student supports.
- Federal policymakers should commit to developing frameworks to scale evidence-based practices that support college completion for various student populations.

Introduction: College Access is Just the Start

A college degree creates opportunity, but many students fail to reach the finish line.

A college degree remains the surest path towards economic mobility for young people.¹ Studies consistently show that, in general, individuals with a college degree earn significantly more over their lifetimes compared to those with only a high school diploma.² The economic opportunity provided by a college education helps lift individuals, families, and communities out of poverty by creating opportunities for long-term success and economic stability.

Access to higher education has expanded significantly over the last several decades, fueled by expansions of federal and state student aid and a commitment by many colleges to enroll and support students who have traditionally not been well-served by higher education. As a wider range of students enrolls in higher education, significant attention has turned to addressing college retention and completion challenges. In 2025, the national six-year completion rate for students enrolling in 2019 was 61.1 percent.³ Regrettably, the challenge of persisting through college is often exacerbated for students.

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Although there has been progress in overall completion rates over time, significant gaps remain due to unique challenges students may face.

Some college, no degree: supporting re-enrollment for students who “stopped out.”

Despite overall college completion progress, not every student reaches the finish line. At the beginning of the 2023-2024 school year, roughly 37.6 million working adults age 18-65 had enrolled in some college but did not receive a degree.⁴ These students left college prematurely, many with intent to re-enroll rather than drop out entirely, a phenomenon known as “stopping out”; however, many of these students ultimately do not return to their programs. Stopping out also makes it harder for students to ultimately complete their program due to challenges students face re-engaging with their college. As the population of people who have taken some college courses and no degree continues to rise, colleges have started implementing innovative strategies to re-engage students who stopped out. In the 2023-2024 academic year, 42 states and Washington, D.C. experienced increases in re-enrollment of stop out students, with over 1 million students re-enrolling in college across all 50 states.⁵

To fulfill the goals of the Higher Education Act, Congress must provide resources for colleges to implement practices that ensure all students have the support to complete college.

In 1965, Lyndon B. Johnson signed the *Higher Education Act* (HEA) to expand access to higher education through federal resources.⁶ Since then, the HEA has been reauthorized several times to provide federal resources to create equal access to an affordable, high-quality degree. However, it has been nearly two decades since Congress authorized new federal college completion reforms. Instead of allowing Congressional Republicans to continue slashing federal student aid and reducing support for higher education programs, Congress must make changes to higher education policy to address the changing needs of students and the colleges that serve them.

Despite successful institutional and state efforts to expand access to college, ongoing retention and completion challenges that prevent students from obtaining a college degree must be addressed. Evidence-based practices that provide comprehensive

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academic, career, financial, and basic needs support services have been proven to address these barriers and improve college completion rates.⁷ Specifically, the implementation of targeted wraparound student support services that incorporate practices such as holistic advising, career counseling, and basic needs support, have helped increase completion rates at colleges across the country.⁸ As rigorous evaluations of these practices continue to show that improvement in retention and completion rates, Congress should provide resources to scale up these practices to support the modern student.

Higher Education Programs Under Attack: The Trump Administration's Actions Stand to Undo College Access and Completion Progress

The Trump Administration has taken drastic steps to reduce and politicize the federal government's involvement in higher education. In 2025 the Department gutted the Office of Postsecondary Education (OPE), which administers the majority of higher education grant programs, by firing nearly all employees.⁹ Following these cuts, the Department established several interagency agreements (IAAs) to move these programs to the Departments of Labor, Health and Human Services, State, and Interior.¹⁰ In July 2026, Education and Workforce Committee Republicans reported out legislation to codify this gross dismantling of higher education services.¹¹

Since January 2025, the Trump Administration has intentionally targeted higher education grant programs, resulting in intentional disruptions to student success initiatives. Several grant programs have been gutted, and many others have been subject to abrupt grant cancellations, revocations, competition delays, and the encroachment of politically motivated grant priorities. For example, the Trump Administration targeted TRIO—a series of programs designed to help underserved students access and complete college—by cancelling over 100 TRIO grants, disrupting the education services of thousands of students.¹² Further, the Trump Administration refused to disburse both mandatory and discretionary funds for Minority Serving Institutions (MSIs) and vowed to further eliminate the entire MSI grant program.¹³

These brazen actions have already threatened college access and completion for many students. In conjunction with Congressional Republican's cuts to federal student aid, the

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Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), and Medicaid undertaken in their *Big Ugly Bill*, these higher education policies stand to disrupt the education of millions of college students. Instead of following along with the Trump Administration's attacks on colleges and radical changes to the higher education grantmaking system, Congress needs to refocus on what matters most: ensuring all students have the holistic support they need to get to college and successfully earn an affordable degree.

Institution Type	Total grant amount (Treasury*)	Remaining grant value targeted for termination (Treasury*)	Total grant amount (DOGE/HHS*)	Remaining grant value targeted for termination (DOGE/HHS*)
Community college	\$36,576,174	\$24,460,881	\$39,841,055	\$14,762,820
Historically Black college or university (HBCU)	\$344,053,507	\$258,577,839	\$344,935,988	\$221,657,689
Private	\$2,773,728,442	\$1,154,053,967	\$3,208,868,209	\$1,305,937,571
Land-grant	\$2,072,662,843	\$1,102,515,156	\$2,602,773,294	\$1,391,416,048
Public	\$4,102,100,019	\$2,072,099,560	\$4,981,547,920	\$2,424,430,068

Source: Department of Government Efficiency, "Wall of Receipts" (last accessed July 2025); U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Tracking Accountability in Government Grants System, "Grants Terminated" (last accessed July 2025); U.S. Department of the Treasury, Bureau of Fiscal Service, USAspending, "Home" (last accessed July 2025).
Table: Center for American Progress

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Academic Readiness and Continuous Academic Support

Many students enter higher education academically underprepared, and require additional support before starting credit-bearing courses.

To persist and succeed in higher education, students should have the knowledge, skills, and support to navigate academic and non-academic challenges. Unfortunately, racial and economic disparities in K-12 education can create significant barriers to both college access and readiness.¹⁴ The fight for all K-12 students to have equal access to high quality education is 71 years in the making since the monumental Supreme Court’s decision in *Brown v Board of Education* declared “[education]... is a right which must be made available to all on equal terms”.¹⁵ Today, the fight continues to fulfill the promise of *Brown* for all students, to ensure that all students regardless of race or zip code are adequately prepared for post-secondary opportunities.

Strategic long-term investments in public K-12 education have the power to uplift students and communities that have been chronically underserved. The 2024 Nation’s Report Card shows that America’s twelfth grade students are not making the progress necessary to regain ground lost during the pandemic – in fact twelfth grade students’ reading and math scores have reached historic lows.¹⁶ Despite this decline, more students are reporting acceptance into four-year colleges.¹⁷ However, an increasing share of high school students reports feeling academically unprepared to transition to college.¹⁸ Although increased support and resources for public K-12 education—particularly in the subjects of English and math—would help students prepare for college, the approach would have to be sustained for years before we could expect to see results in the postsecondary sector. This report is focused on what happens once students begin their postsecondary journey. Given the crisis in under-preparation colleges are now facing, we must provide them with resources as they work to meet students where they are academically to ensure they have the tools to persist through college.

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Traditional developmental coursework is not always effective in closing achievement gaps.

Developmental education—noncredit coursework at colleges that cover pre-college content for students needing additional academic preparation—is a common intervention tool for academic readiness across colleges. Developmental coursework, sometimes referred to as “remedial education”, aims to build up the academic skills needed for college-level coursework. While there is no universal standard for developmental education, most traditional developmental classes are non-credit bearing and must be taken prior to credit bearing coursework in that subject.¹⁹ Although traditional developmental classes help some students prepare for credit bearing coursework, this model can hinder student progress by elongating time to degree attainment and increasing college costs.²⁰

In general, less than half of students in developmental courses persist to credit-bearing courses, with students citing stigmatization and costs as primary reasons for not progressing.²¹ These students are less likely to complete their degree than those who finished or did not need developmental education, and they incur significant financial costs for a credential they never received.²² Developmental education, as it is employed at many colleges, is a barrier to completion. Since a significant population of students enrolls in, but never benefits from, developmental education, it is imperative educators can consider additional techniques to measure and address academic readiness to support both students coming straight out of high school and adult learners.

Many colleges and states are implementing innovative improvements to developmental education.

Although many colleges continue to use only placement tests to determine academic readiness, others have implemented innovative practices that holistically measure readiness. For example, a multiple measures assessment (MMA)—which combines placement tests with other indicators, such as high school GPA and coursework, to assign students to a course level—allows more students to immediately begin in college classes, improving their likelihood of college completion.²³ Colleges have also implemented corequisites, where students take developmental courses concurrently with credit-bearing courses. This allows students to progress through their program while ensuring mastery of the foundations in a timely manner. Research shows the corequisite model can improve

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students' likelihood of passing college-level courses.²⁴ While these models support students whose test scores do not accurately reflect their academic readiness, it is imperative that colleges still have the resources to provide high-quality developmental education coursework for students who have a demonstrated need for it.

Thirty-three states have implemented state- or system-wide developmental education reforms, including 26 that utilize MMAs, 24 that use corequisites, and 26 that engage in other “innovative... education instructional methods and interventions” including peer tutoring, summer bootcamps, and other innovative approaches.²⁵ Despite this progress, there are still equity concerns to take into consideration. Previously, Committee Democrats pushed to invest over \$160 million to scale remedial programs and address these inequities.²⁶ Policymakers and education leaders should fund this work focus on using outcomes data from developmental education programs to refine developmental education models and determine additional interventions. Further, federal investments in academic readiness programs designed to reduce the need for developmental education²⁷ must be increased, not eliminated. Congress should continue to push for at least \$1.2 billion in TRIO funding²⁸ and \$400 million for GEAR UP²⁹.

Students need targeted academic support through holistic advising models.

Academic advising helps students understand their graduation requirements and navigate challenges with their coursework. Academic advisors play an essential role in ensuring students start college off with an academic plan and persist to graduation. While most colleges offer some form of academic advising, a recent survey indicates that not all students receive it. In 2023, a survey highlighted that only 57 percent of graduating seniors reported receiving academic advising during their collegiate experience.³⁰ The lack of advising support is unsurprising, given the vast overloading of counselors, who nationally have a median caseload of 296 students per year.³¹ This overload suggests students may be unable to receive adequate attention from their advisor, even though students report that access to a supportive advisor is often a determining factor in their success.³² Due to caseload constraints, advisors typically focus solely on students' academic needs; however, more successful advising is holistic, centering the students' full experience inside and outside the classroom.

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Holistic advising is a model that acknowledges and supports non-academic factors that may influence a student and their college experience, including finances, basic needs, and mental health.³³ Holistic advising can best help address these factors by providing integrated, proactive, and personalized resources to students.³⁴ One study found that students who receive holistic advising are 94 percent more likely to remain enrolled in college and 75 percent more likely to earn an associate's degree than those receiving traditional academic advising.³⁵ But again, due to resource constraints, colleges may need additional support from local, state and federal partners to improve their advising models to holistically serve students.

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Scaling the CUNY ASAP Program: The City University of New York's Accelerated Study in Associate Programs (CUNY ASAP) works across nine community colleges in New York City to provide comprehensive support to community college students.³⁶ In 2015, CUNY expanded its efforts to bachelor's students by creating the Accelerate, Complete, Engage (ACE) program. ASAP and ACE leverages tools like personalized holistic advising, developmental education, and career guidance to help students succeed. The programs also provide financial support through tuition assistance, textbooks, and public transit fare compensation. The three-year graduation rate for low-income students in the ASAP program is 53 percent, which is nearly double the completion rate of low-income students not in the program.³⁷ Further, 85 percent of ASAP graduates later enroll in bachelor's programs.³⁸

In 2023, the State Higher Education Executive Officers Association (SHEEO) announced a partnership with the CUNY ASAP National Replication Collaborative to support scaling the model at 14 colleges across seven states.¹ SHEEO provides grants to colleges to develop their own ASAP and ACE programs, which can cost thousands of dollars per student to initiate but provide tremendous gains in college completion.¹

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Transfer Pathways

Although most students express interest in transferring from a two-year to a four-year college, several barriers remain, making the transfer process inequitable.

Eighty percent of community college students intend to transfer to a four-year college, but less than one-third end up transferring within six years and only 13 percent ultimately receive a bachelor's degree within six years.³⁹ While nominal increases in successful transfers suggest colleges recognize the current system needs reform, the transfer process still carries with it many challenges, including credit loss and an increase in out-of-pocket expenses.

The lack of coursework alignment across colleges makes the credit transfer process challenging and leaves students with fewer credits transferred than they have earned.

A 2017 study by the Government Accountability Office (GAO) concluded that students transferring from two-year public colleges lost an average of 22 percent of their credits when transferring to a public four-year college and 56 percent when transferring to a four-year private non-profit college.⁴⁰ Students who chose some of the less common transfer routes, on the other hand, lost a larger proportion of their credits.⁴¹ For example, students who transferred from private for-profit colleges to public colleges lost an estimated 94 percent of their credits in the process.⁴² Losing credits increases the chance a student will either exhaust their federal student aid eligibility or pay more out-of-pocket expenses for repeating courses, creating additional costs for the government and students.⁴³

While these data paint a bleak national landscape for transfer pathways, states have increasingly worked to improve their credit transfer process for students transferring within state public higher education systems. To address credit loss, 38 states have implemented articulation agreements to ensure public state colleges accept credits from local community colleges.⁴⁴ An articulation agreement—a written agreement between institutions, collegiate systems, or states outlining how credits can be transferred between colleges—lessens the ambiguity and difficulty of the transfer process for students.⁴⁵ The federal government can better supporting the use of articulation policies by requiring

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consumer disclosures on the transfer process that provide a full picture of each state's transfer pathways.⁴⁶

Community college students need tailored resources to prepare for the transfer process.

Many community college students looking to transfer to a four-year college struggle with a variety of administrative and academic difficulties in addition to credit transfer. Students must understand new requirements, select the right courses, and meet particular transfer deadlines.⁴⁷ Each transfer applicant must also understand their new colleges' unique credit and course requirements. Improving student guidance must involve providing thorough advising services that focus on navigating the transfer process. This could include creating comprehensive transfer guides, developing online transfer reference software, providing transfer counselors, and disseminating data to students regarding transfer requirements and opportunities.⁴⁸ By implementing these practices, schools could guide students through any roadblocks they may face, advise them how to find and use resources, assist in courses selection, and, in many cases, assure them that they are capable of succeeding.⁴⁹

Additional pathways to credentials should be provided for students who do not complete a traditional four-year degree.

The crisis of stopping out in four-year schools could be improved by better transfer policies as well. Several states have "reverse transfer" policies, which allow students to receive an associate's degree by transferring credits from a four-year college back to a community college. Twenty-five states have statewide reverse transfer policies or memoranda of understanding that provide guidelines for evaluating a student's eligibility to reverse transfer. Eighteen additional states provide reverse transfer opportunities through individual institutional agreements and systemwide programs.⁵⁰ Congress can improve this process by standardizing credit transfers between colleges and eliminating unnecessary administrative burdens to ensure students receive credit for their academic achievements.⁵¹ Providing students with their hard-earned credential can drastically increase completion rates, support career advancements, especially for students who may have "stopped-out" of college.⁵² This would significantly improve credential attainment for

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adult learners who may have stopped out due to ongoing financial or familial responsibilities.

Supporting Students' Basic Needs and Other Non-Academic Challenges

To succeed in higher education, students need—in addition to strong foundational academic skills—their basic needs met. While this was a basic assumption fifty years ago, it is important to remember that the students of today are not a monolithic population of young people attending classes in an on-campus setting. Since students' needs vary based on their life circumstances, they need access to a variety of supports that address challenges including, but not limited to, housing insecurity, food insecurity, childcare, and mental health. Regrettably, the Trump Administration's attacks on these basic needs risk worsening the ongoing affordability crisis⁵³ for families.

This will further perpetuate a range of non-academic challenges that create ongoing barriers to completion until they are addressed. Instead of making it harder for students and families to access what they need to live, Congress, states, and colleges must collaborate to ensure everyone's basic needs are met.

BASIC NEEDS FOR STUDENT SUCCESS



Counseling



Housing



Food



Child Care

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Students need access to stable housing to support their academic success and overall well-being.⁵⁴

Yet, America is facing a severe housing crisis,⁵⁵ which has been exacerbated by the Trump Administration's reckless economic policies. As families struggle to make ends meet,⁵⁶ students across the country are faced with both a shortage of on campus housing and unaffordable off campus options.⁵⁷ Housing instability can lead to significant stress, disrupted studies, and poor academic performance, as students may find it difficult to concentrate on their coursework while worrying about where they will live.⁵⁸ As of 2020, only 18 percent of undergraduate college students lived on campus,⁵⁹ meaning the majority of college students depend on some form of off-campus residence for housing. When housing is affordable and accessible, students can allocate their limited resources more effectively, reducing the risk of financial strain and allowing them to fully engage in their academic program.⁶⁰

Construction delays and residence hall maintenance backlogs across the country have created infrastructure challenges that limit campus housing options for vulnerable students leading to housing insecurity.⁶¹

Stable housing during breaks is equally important. Many students do not have housing options during school breaks and face homelessness or unsafe living conditions when their campus housing is unavailable.⁶² Continuous access to stable housing provides a sense of security and allows students to maintain their focus and momentum throughout their educational journey, without the stress of uncertain, unstable housing.⁶³

Some colleges aim to support their students' housing needs but often face resource constraints. Thus, state and federal governments must provide adequate institutional resources so colleges can prioritize the development and funding of housing programs that safely serve the needs of students. This includes building and maintaining affordable student housing options and offering subsidies or financial aid specifically for housing costs.⁶⁴ Addressing housing needs creates an environment where all students have the foundation, they need to succeed both academically and personally, ultimately leading to higher retention and graduation rates and a more equitable educational system.

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Students need access to quality, affordable, nutritious food during the semester and during breaks.

Students need access to quality, affordable, nutritious food during the semester and breaks to support their academic success and overall well-being.⁶⁵ While some students who live on campus and have a meal plan have access to regular meals, dining hall hours and restrictions on taking food out of the dining hall make meal access more challenging for students.⁶⁶ Unfortunately, many students face varying degrees of food insecurity, struggling to afford or access healthy meals due to financial constraints or lack of resources on or near campus.⁶⁷ Twenty-three percent of college students experienced food insecurity in 2020.⁶⁸ Additionally, fewer than two in five of these food insecure students were eligible for Supplemental Nutrition Assistance (SNAP) program benefits, and less than half of these SNAP-eligible students received benefits.⁶⁹

This problem is expected to get worse following Congressional Republicans reckless decision to cut federal SNAP funding and shift costs to states.⁷⁰ This regressive move will put an estimated 3 million young adults vulnerable to losing food assistance.⁷¹ Rather than exacerbate food insecurity, Congress must instead ensure that students who are eligible for SNAP benefits have access to these benefits and that colleges are proactively communicating with students about their potential benefits.⁷² In conjunction with these efforts, colleges can continue to think critically about how to provide nutritious, affordable meals to all students, regardless of their financial situation or dietary restrictions. For example, while many students have access to on-campus dining services, formalizing additional resources like on-campus food pantries and meal donations can also help address food insecurity. By prioritizing access to quality, affordable, and nutritious food, colleges can help create a supportive environment where students can thrive academically and personally throughout the entire year.

Mental health services tailored to college students are crucial for student success.

Mental health services are crucial for student success in higher education.⁷³ The pressures of academic life, coupled with personal, financial and social challenges, can significantly impact students' mental well-being, leading to stress, anxiety, depression, and other mental health issues.⁷⁴ Recent data revealed that one in five young adults aged 18 to 25 experiences a mental, emotional, or behavioral health issue each year, with serious risk of

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suicide nearly triple the rate of adults in the United States on average.⁷⁵ Among college students, 36 percent have been diagnosed with anxiety and 30 percent with depression.⁷⁶

Instead of addressing these critical mental health challenges, the Trump Administration has chosen to slash funding for various mental health programs that address concerns such as substance misuse treatment, mental health services, and research studies.⁷⁷ Instead of supporting these reckless cuts, Congress should provide resources for colleges to enhance mental health services⁷⁸ and invest in proven programs like the Basic Needs for Postsecondary Students Program, which is authorized under the HEA,⁷⁹ that help colleges implement interventions to address the variety of basic needs challenges students face.⁸⁰

Student parents need access to affordable and consistent child care to stay enrolled in higher education programs.

Student parents represent one in five college students⁸¹ and require access to affordable and consistent child care to remain enrolled in higher education programs.⁸² Forty-five percent of student parents with incomplete degrees in a recent study stated that lack of affordable child care availability in their area created barriers in attending classes and other activities and prevented them from completing their programs.⁸³

Low-income student parents experience unique challenges in completing degrees; in addition to paying for tuition and fees, student parents must also factor in the costs of child care while balancing part- or full-time work and family responsibilities. According to recent analysis, there are no states within America where a student parent can work 10 hours per week at the state minimum wage and still afford college and child care, creating a serious affordability gap.⁸⁴ Without adequate support, student parents experience increased stress and lower completion rates, diminishing their opportunities for economic mobility and stability. Affordable on-campus childcare options, often supported through the Child Care Access Means Parents in School (CCAMPIS) grant⁸⁵ authorized under the HEA, allow student parents to take the time they need to focus on their studies, creating more inclusive and diverse academic communities.⁸⁶

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Policymakers must prioritize helping colleges and states develop and fund child care programs tailored to the needs of student parents to ensure they have the resources and support necessary to achieve their academic goals and secure a brighter future for their families. Congress must ensure CCAMPIS is funded to at least \$80 million⁸⁷ and should continue to ensure on-campus child care facilities have the resources to empower student parents to succeed academically and contribute positively to society, breaking the cycle of poverty and creating more opportunities for future generations.⁸⁸

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New York State Child Care Expansion: In 2023, the state of New York made investments to expand the capacity of child care centers at 12 State University of New York (SUNY) colleges by 200 spots by providing a \$1.72 million investment for various improvements needed in the SUNY schools, which built upon several CCAMPIS grants awarded to SUNY colleges.⁸⁹ These childcare centers have already empowered student parents at SUNY to continue their education as a working parent.⁹⁰ Building off of this initiative, New York announced in 2025 its commitment to increased investments in 2-K education across New York City.⁹¹ Together, these initiatives empower New York student parents to complete college.

Some students have additional familial responsibilities that require additional support to achieve college completion goals.⁹²

Beyond adult learners with dependent children, some students also care for younger siblings, older relatives and other household responsibilities, which may require students to sacrifice time, money, and energy that could otherwise be devoted to their studies.⁹³ The burden of these obligations could potentially result in lower completion rates, increased stress, and reduced time for academic work.⁹⁴ Addressing these barriers through supportive measures and programs is crucial for improving college completion rates among these populations. By leveraging local, state, and federal family support programs and by educating college administrators on the nuances of familial responsibilities, colleges can lessen these obstacles and help students persist.⁹⁵

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Students From Mixed-Status Families Face Unique Challenges Engaging in Higher Education: Families comprised of people with different immigration statuses (mixed-status families), face unique challenges that impact a student's ability to complete college, such as inequitable access to federal student aid, attacks on immigration status, and high anxiety levels.⁹⁶ Under the Trump Administration, mixed-status families have experienced ongoing attacks to their enrollment in college and their presence within the country.⁹⁷ These attacks create severe ripple effects in students' ability to apply for college and safely remain on campus to complete their education.

As immigrant communities continue to face attacks from the executive branch, higher education programs can comprehensively support the unique circumstances of mixed-status families through targeted resources. Colleges should ensure counseling services are linguistically and culturally competent so that they can help students navigate their experiences more effectively, allowing them to devote more time to learning and building community.⁹⁸ Initiatives that offer immigration counsel and legal assistance have also been successful in helping these students feel less anxious and stressed.⁹⁹

Leveraging Wraparound Support Services to Improve Campus Climate and Student Success

A welcoming campus climate is essential for students to thrive and ultimately graduate from college.

The strongest campus community, according to students, is one where students care for each other.¹⁰⁰ Students also value free expression, individuality, and acceptance, as well as support services for those who need them.¹⁰¹ Recent years of increased racial animus on campus—now further fueled by the Trump Administration—have reinforced the need for schools to maintain welcoming environments, free of discrimination and harassment for students of all backgrounds.¹⁰² Furthermore, a positive racial climate allows students to feel valued and supported by their peers and institutional leaders and leads to a decrease

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in reports of racial tensions.¹⁰³ Strategies and tools exist to foster a welcoming campus climate and ensure that all students feel like they are in an environment designed for them to succeed.

The federal government can help colleges scale up wraparound student support services that improve campus climate for all.

Colleges have a responsibility to ensure students have a positive campus climate, and one evidence-based solution is to implement wraparound student support services. Wraparound services comprehensively address students' needs, including social, personal, and academic challenges one may encounter. These range from first-year orientation programs and holistic academic advising to cultural and identity-based campus spaces and mental health services. Colleges can continue to foster students' sense of belonging through services such as mentorship, cross-cultural dialogue, and clear protocols to address complaints of bias.¹⁰⁴ In the wake of the Oct. 7th attacks, there are many schools that relied on wraparound services to attend to students' needs, while others created cross-cultural dialogues to give students support they needed to address complex issues.¹⁰⁵ It is clear that more efforts, not less, are necessary to make sure all students feel welcome.¹⁰⁶ Students also have requested their schools to focus on developing mental health support and multicultural centers to advance campus climate.¹⁰⁷ A recent survey showed that fifty-eight percent of students feel that cultural centers and affinity groups are vital for a positive campus climate.¹⁰⁸ Cultural centers and affinity groups can help build connection and community for students in minoritized communities—including, but not limited to, students of color, students with disabilities, LGBTQ students and international students—who may feel isolated on their campus.

Beyond these structural reforms, ensuring competency of college administrators is essential in creating lasting improvements to campus climate. Many colleges and higher education professional organizations have developed training to improve faculty and staff's cultural competencies, which supports the campus climate for all populations of students.¹⁰⁹ Both students and staff have called for policymakers to acknowledge and respond to racial inequities on campus.¹¹⁰ Federal policymakers can help colleges foster a welcoming campus climate for all students by providing resources to deploy wraparound

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services that proactively educate students and respond to instances of heightened campus climate issues.

The Postsecondary Student Success Grant Program.

In 2022, the Department of Education began administering the Postsecondary Student Success Grants (PSSG) program. The program is “designed to equitably improve postsecondary student outcomes, including retention, upward transfer, and completions of value, by leveraging data and implementing, scaling, and rigorously evaluating evidence-based activities to support data-driven decisions and actions” improve student success.¹¹¹ PSSG award recipients have developed or scaled up wraparound support tools that address various barriers to college completion discussed throughout this report. To protect this program, Congress must authorize and provide robust funding of no less than \$100 million¹¹² so the executive branch continues to operate the program, and more colleges receive the financial resources to scale their wraparound support services.

Helping First-Generation Students Seize Opportunities: First-generation college students—students whose parent(s) did not receive a bachelor’s degree—make up one-fourth of all college students.¹¹³ Only 24 percent of first-generation students earn a bachelor’s degree within six years of starting college, compared to 59 percent of students whose parents obtained a bachelor’s degree.¹¹⁴ Some colleges have implemented creative wraparound supports to address the unique retention and completion barriers of first-generation students. For example, as a recipient of the Postsecondary Student Success Grant, the University of Texas – San Antonio developed a program building off of evidence from the *What Works Clearinghouse*¹¹⁵ to provide “personalized student success coaching, guided learning pathways, and financial incentives” to help first-generation students navigate and use campus resources.¹¹⁶

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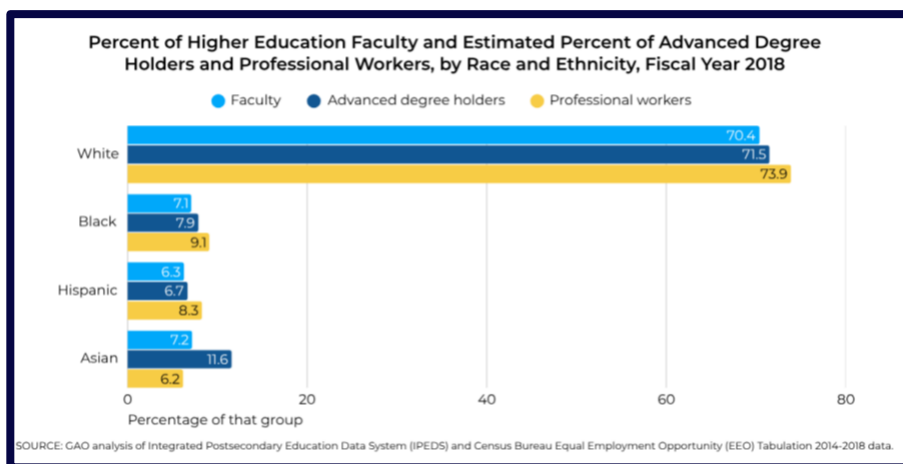
Students thrive when they have faculty that reflects the diversity of the country, but faculty diversity lags behind student diversity in higher education.

Research shows that faculty diversity is essential in improving students' sense of belonging and college success.¹¹⁷ Students benefit from learning from a diverse faculty because it builds empathy and respect, exposes them to new perspectives, and improves problem solving skills. Further, students of color who learn from faculty of color are more likely to persist and graduate because their mentors reflect their racial identity and foster a more inclusive campus climate.¹¹⁸

Despite the proportion of Black and Hispanic faculty increasing between 2003 and 2021, faculty is still not representative of the wider student

population. According to a 2024 GAO study, Black and Hispanic faculty represented only 7.6 and 6.8 percent of faculty across higher education, respectively, compared to Black and Hispanic students representing 11.7 and 19.4 percent respectively.¹¹⁹

Representation also varies by field; faculty of color remains significantly lower in STEM fields.¹²⁰ Similarly, faculty of color are underrepresented in tenure track positions, but are more often tasked with “service work” such as sitting on school committees or advising students of color.¹²¹ These inequities within academia harm both the faculty themselves and the students they are meant to serve. Since faculty representation greatly impacts student experience and achievement, colleges and stakeholders should continue to improve faculty representation. Scaling programs that support students of color into becoming faculty benefit both participants and their students through creating a more welcoming climate that sets students up for success.



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Many students choose to attend HBCUs, TCUs, and MSIs, since they foster welcoming environments and provide support for specific student populations, and there must be increased federal and state investments into these colleges.

Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs), Tribal Colleges and Universities (TCUs), and Minority Serving Institutions (MSIs) have played a transformational and unique role in America's progress towards equity in college completion. For example, HBCUs represent only 3 percent of all four-year colleges, yet they confer 17 percent of all bachelor's degrees awarded to Black students and 24 percent of bachelor's degrees awarded to Black students in STEM fields.¹²² Similarly, while Hispanic Serving Institutions (HSIs) represent 21 percent of all degree-granting colleges, they enroll two-thirds of all Hispanic students.¹²³ These colleges provide students with a culturally relevant, supportive, and positive learning environment that can tailor the experience to their needs.¹²⁴

During the 117th Congress, Democrats provided a historical federal investment of over \$5.7 billion for HBCUs, TCUs, and MSIs in the wake of the COVID pandemic,¹²⁵ which allowed these colleges to provide direct students support through initiatives like tuition relief and emergency grants, and institutional support to help improve student services, infrastructure and technology in response to the pandemic.¹²⁶ This progress has been rolled back by the Trump Administration via attacks on MSIs and drastic changes to MSI funding. In both 2025 and 2026, the Department eliminated funding for MSIs¹²⁷, forcing many MSIs to decide whether they have the financial resources to support these essential programs and putting college completion at risk for millions of students. Instead of targeting these colleges, Congress must authorize and appropriate sustained federal funding¹²⁸ and provide technical support for HBCUs, TCUs, and MSIs to ensure these colleges are well-equipped to support their students.

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HBCU, TCU, and MSI Research & Development Infrastructure Grant: Salish Kootenai College: In 2023, the Department of Education awarded the first ever Research and Development Infrastructure (RDI) Grant to provide HBCUs, TCUs, and MSIs with “funds to implement transformational investments” to improve research and development activities. Salish Kootenai College, a TCU in Pablo, Montana, received this grant in 2024 to develop a new graduate-level life sciences program and design culturally appropriate teaching pedagogy for teaching indigenous students to address the lack of representation of Native scholars in the field of life sciences.¹²⁹

Financial aid is an integral component of ensuring students have the resources to succeed in college.

Congress must further invest in front-end federal student aid to help students persist through college and graduate without being saddled with student loan debt. The Pell Grant is the cornerstone of federal student aid designed to help low-income students access higher education. However, the maximum Pell Grant award of \$7,395 for the 2026-2027 academic year does not cover the rising costs of attendance for many students.¹³⁰ In the 1970s, the maximum Pell Grant award used to cover almost 80 percent of tuition and fees at a public four-year college; today it covers just one-third of tuition and fees at a four-year public college.¹³¹ Congress must ensure low-income students have sustained access to the Pell Grant by permanently funding the program, and at least doubling the maximum award amount to \$15,000, and increasing the number of semesters of eligibility.

While increased Pell Grants are critical, they are not the only useful financial aid resource. A student's inability to cover the costs of unexpected barriers such as a broken laptop, flat tire, or health incident could determine whether that student stays in college or drops out. Emergency grant aid is a powerful tool that helps prevent these unforeseen situations from forcing students to drop out. During the COVID pandemic, Congress provided emergency grant funding directly to students to support their unexpected costs in the wake of the pandemic.¹³² These emergency grants helped alleviate unexpected financial burdens,¹³³ allowing students to remain enrolled and in turn increasing retention and completion

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rates.¹³⁴ Democrats also previously proposed authorizing a permanent emergency grant program.¹³⁵ In addition to funding Pell Grants and other targeted aid such as Federal Supplemental Education Opportunity Grants (FSEOG), Congress should invest in a permanent emergency grant aid program.

Leveraging Data to Improve Student Outcomes

Federal education research is essential in evaluating and disseminating the effects of evidence-based practices.

For colleges to best serve students, the federal government must enhance its education research tools that help collect and disseminate information around evidence-based practices that improve education. Under the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) at the Institute of Education Sciences (IES), there are several data sources that offer insights into college affordability, student success, and evidence-based tools for improvement. The *Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System* (IPEDS) is a system of several annual studies that collects data from colleges on enrollment, outcomes, costs, institutional finances, and student aid.¹³⁶ The *National Postsecondary Student Aid Study* (NPSAS) provides data every 3-4 years on various student characteristics, including housing and food insecurity, to better understand the student populations enrolling in college and their outcomes.¹³⁷ Together, IPEDS and NPSAS data are the biggest federal tools policymakers, researchers, and colleges rely on to analyze higher education trends.¹³⁸ Further, IES' *What Works Clearinghouse* serves as a hub for high-quality research evaluating innovative practices that can improve student outcomes.¹³⁹ The clearinghouse is critical in disseminating evidence to scale up best practices across the country.

The Trump Administration abruptly gutted the Institute of Education Sciences (IES) in March 2025 by eliminating all but three employees and terminating research contracts, ultimately leaving IES “unable to perform its statutory functions.”¹⁴⁰ Without taking data and research seriously, the executive branch is making it harder to evaluate student access, success, and affordability. It is imperative for Congress to continue funding these essential programs at IES and for the federal government to fully leverage education research to improve student success.¹⁴¹

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An improved postsecondary data infrastructure will help improve targeted interventions.

To track how campus interventions impact students' college completion, the federal government must commit to developing an improved postsecondary data infrastructure. While the above data sources are useful tools, the federal government still lacks a data system that is comprehensive and can analyze racial and socioeconomic gaps in student success. This is, in part, due to the current ban on student-level data collection.¹⁴² Without student-level data, it is difficult to analyze the variance of outcomes across student populations, therefore making it hard to have a full picture of equity gaps.¹⁴³

Thus, Congress must establish a student-level data network that collects student outcome data such as retention, transfer, and completion rates, provides colleges with a streamlined reporting process, and disaggregates the data by demographics like race, gender, and income.¹⁴⁴ By enhancing data with student-level information, students and families will be able to make more informed decisions about college. Policymakers, states, and higher education systems will also be able to evaluate outcomes across different colleges and student populations, with a focus on addressing any equity gaps in student outcomes. Ultimately, by developing a national student-level postsecondary data system, the federal government can better target resources towards effective practices that improve college completion and will have enhanced oversight of how federal student aid is used.

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Addressing Barriers to College Completion Must Be a Federal Priority

The Trump Administration and Congressional Republicans have made clear their intent to weaken federal support for students, colleges, and the broader American higher education system. Instead of bending to the political pressures to attack higher education, Congress must prioritize policies to help students succeed in higher education. By leveraging the findings of robust college access and student success research, policymakers can make informed decisions to fund evidence-based best practices that improve college completion rates. Through investments to scale up these evidence-based practices and interventions, Congress can help fulfill the goals of the HEA and eliminate barriers to college student success for *all* students.

Sixty years after the initial passage of the HEA, America still falls short of the law's original promise to provide the benefits of higher education to all students. And the Trump Administration's reckless attacks on students, colleges, and grant programs threaten to undo great progress made by colleges, states, and the federal government to improve higher education. The next reauthorization of the HEA and any changes in federal policy outside of a full reauthorization must protect student success programs and work to close the gaps in college completion so that as many Americans as possible can receive the financial and nonfinancial benefits of a college degree.

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² *E.g., Id.* ("In recent years, the median college graduate with just a bachelor's degree earned about \$80,000, compared to \$47,000 for the median worker with only a high school diploma. This means a typical college graduate earned a premium of over \$32,000 per year, or about 68 percent—near its all-time high."); Kristen Broady & Brad Hershbein, *Major Decisions: What Graduates Earn Over Their Lifetimes*, Brookings (Oct. 8, 2020), <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/major-decisions-what-graduates-earn-over-their-lifetimes/>; Anthony Carnevale et al., *The College Payoff*, Georgetown Univ. Ctr. on Educ. and the Workforce, 1 (2021) <https://cew.georgetown.edu/cew-reports/collegepayoff2021/#resources>; Matea Pender et al., *Education Pays 2026, the Benefits of Higher Education for Individuals and Society* 4, The Coll. Bd., (Jan. 9, 2017), <https://research.collegeboard.org/media/pdf/education-pays-2026-full-report.pdf> ("Individuals with higher levels of education earn more, pay more taxes, and are more likely than others to be employed.").

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⁶ Higher Education Act of 1965, Pub. L. No 89-326, 79 Stat. 1219 (codified as amended at 20 U.S.C. § 1001 et seq.) For a comprehensive review of the *Higher Education Act of 1965* and its subsequent revisions, see Kyle Shohfi & Rita Zota, Cong. Rsch. Serv., R43351, *The Higher Education Act (HEA): A Primer* (2023) <https://www.everycrsreport.com/reports/R43351.html>.

⁷ See MDRC, et al., *College Completion Strategy Guide*, <https://www.mdrc.org/work/blogs/college-completion-strategy-guide> (last visited Sept. 25, 2026) (highlighting a collaborative resource that “provides clear policy guidance and summarizes the research on strategies to increase college completion” with “evidence-based policy”); see also Sophie Nguyen, *New Bipartisan Bill Aims to Improve College Completion through Evidence-Based Practices*, New America (Mar. 26, 2024), <https://www.newamerica.org/education-policy/edcentral/new-bipartisan-bill-improves-college-completion/>.

⁸ Nat'l Ctr. For Educ. Evaluation and Reg'l Assistance, *Effective Advising for Postsecondary Students*, Inst. of Educ. Sci., <https://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc/PracticeGuide/28> (last visited Dec. 10, 2024) (including a full list of What Works Clearinghouse recommendations); see *Why the Postsecondary Student Success Grant Program Matters*, The Inst. for Coll. Access & Success, 2 (Jun. 23, 2023), <https://ticas.org/cass/a-guide-to-college-completion-with-targeted-and-evidenced-based-strategies/>.

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