

WEST VIRGINIA HIGHER EDUCATION POLICY COMMISSION & COMMUNITY AND TECHNICAL COLLEGE SYSTEM

# **EDUCATING WEST VIRGINIA IS EVERYONE'S BUSINESS:**

Report from the West Virginia  
College Completion Task Force

May 2012

## West Virginia **COLLEGE COMPLETION** Task Force

### **James Clements (Co-Chair)**

President  
West Virginia University  
103 Stewart Hall  
P.O. Box 6201  
Morgantown, WV 26505

### **Johnna Beane**

Representative, Advisory Council for Classified Employees  
West Virginia University Health Sciences Center -  
Charleston Division  
3110 MacCorkle Avenue, South East  
Charleston, WV 25304

### **Bob Brown**

Chair, West Virginia Council for Community  
and Technical College Education  
West Virginia School Service Personnel Association  
1619 Washington Street, East  
Charleston, WV 25311

### **Betty Dennison**

Past Chair, Advisory Council of Faculty  
Mountwest Community and Technical College  
One John Marshall Drive  
Huntington, WV 25755

### **Cassidi Hall**

Representative, Advisory Council of Students  
Concord University  
Vermillion Street  
P.O. Box 1000  
Athens, WV 24712

### **David Hendrickson**

Chairman, West Virginia Higher Education  
Policy Commission  
Hendrickson and Long, PLLC  
214 Capitol Street  
Charleston, WV 25301

### **Tom Heywood**

Partner  
Bowles Rice McDavid Graff & Love LLP  
600 Quarrier Street  
Charleston, WV 25301

### **Mary Lucinda Hutchins**

Assistant Principal  
Warwood School  
150 Viking Drive  
Wheeling, WV 26003

### **First Lady Joanne Tomblin (Co-Chair)**

President  
Southern West Virginia Community  
and Technical College  
P.O. Box 2900  
Mt. Gay, WV 25637

### **Dr. Kristin Mallory**

Vice President, Academic and Student Affairs  
Bridgemont Community and Technical College  
619 2nd Avenue  
Montgomery, WV 25136

### **Dr. Roy Nutter**

Professor, Computer Science and Electrical Engineering  
West Virginia University  
933 Engineering Sciences Building  
P.O. Box 6109  
Morgantown, WV 26506

### **The Honorable Robert Plymale**

Co-Chair, Legislative Oversight Commission  
on Education Accountability  
Chair, Senate Education Committee  
West Virginia State Senate  
Room 417M, Building 1  
State Capitol Complex  
Charleston, WV 25305

### **The Honorable Mary Poling**

Co-Chair, Legislative Oversight Commission  
on Education Accountability  
Chair, House Education Committee  
West Virginia House of Delegates  
Room 434M, Building 1  
State Capitol Complex  
Charleston, WV 25305

### **Dr. Maria Rose**

Interim President  
Fairmont State University  
1201 Locust Avenue  
Fairmont, WV 26554

### **Dr. Susan Spangler**

Vice President for Student Services  
Kanawha Valley Community and Technical College  
103 Cole Complex  
P.O. Box 1000  
Institute, WV 25112

### **Carla Williamson**

Executive Director, Office of Instruction  
West Virginia Department of Education  
Building 6, Room 608  
1900 Kanawha Boulevard, East  
Charleston, WV 25305

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## Executive Summary

In December 2010, the Chancellors of West Virginia's Higher Education Policy Commission and the Community and Technical College System of West Virginia invited a diverse group of higher education stakeholders from across the state to serve on the West Virginia College Completion Task Force. The charge of this group was to examine state and national data on college completion and develop recommendations for increasing the number of West Virginians with high quality certificates and degrees. The Task Force included state policy leaders, faculty, higher education administrators, business leaders and representatives for students, classified staff and the public education system. Co-chaired by First Lady and President of Southern Community and Technical College Joanne Tomblin and West Virginia University President James Clements, the Task Force met throughout the past year to develop a roadmap to improve college completion in the state's public higher education institutions and ensure that West Virginia will have the educated citizens it needs to meet the demands of the 21st century knowledge economy.

In order to reach this target, the West Virginia College Completion Task Force has developed a strategy built around five key recommendations.

- 1 Make graduation a visible and tangible priority across the state
- 2 Reduce the time it takes for students to earn a college certificate or degree
- 3 Improve developmental education
- 4 Increase adult completion rates
- 5 Connect funding to priorities

Though the challenges to reaching the target are significant, pursuing a college completion agenda built around these five areas will ensure that more West Virginians earn postsecondary credentials and degrees and are ready to participate fully in the social and economic life of the state.

Efforts to reach this completion goal must be guided by four fundamental principles. First, higher education institutions must partner with secondary schools and employers to help align learning objectives and stop the leaks in the education pipeline. Second, clear and effective communication within institutions and across public and private partners is essential to ensuring that all parties have access to the information they need to achieve this goal. Third, quality must remain central to all of these efforts and cannot be sacrificed to increase completion. Finally, if West Virginia is going to reach its potential for social and economic development, access to higher education must be an opportunity for all citizens. Emphasizing partnership and communication, while protecting quality and access should be part of any completion effort.

## The Target

If West Virginia is going to have enough skilled workers to meet the needs of the economy, half of the state's workforce will need education and training beyond high school by 2018. This will require at least 20,000 more certificate and degree holders beyond 2008 levels.

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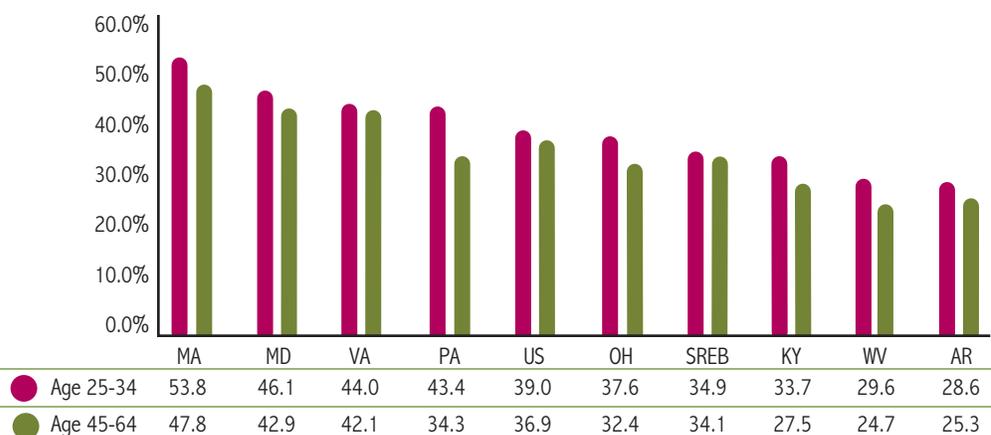
## West Virginia's College Completion Challenge

Out of every 100 students enrolled in the 9th grade in West Virginia, only 17 will earn a two- or four-year college degree within ten years. In the best performing states in the U.S., 30 students achieve this benchmark.<sup>1</sup> While more than half of the students that start 9th grade in West Virginia leave the education system before they enter college, sixty percent of those that start college never finish. A recent analysis shows that, for every 100 students that enter a college or university in West Virginia, only 40 will graduate with a certificate or degree within six years.<sup>2</sup> The others will leave college, many of them with student loan debt but no academic credential. Who these students are, and what causes them to leave college without earning a degree, is a question that impacts the social and economic well-being of all of West Virginia's citizens. Developing a set of recommendations to address this challenge was the charge given to the West Virginia College Completion Task Force by the Chancellors for the state's two-year and four-year higher education systems.

In order to achieve this goal, the members of the Task Force examined data in several key areas: state demographics and labor market needs, college completion rates of different student populations, and the specific challenges faced by rural and first generation students. Several key issues emerged from this review. First, West Virginia's workforce is facing a skills gap that will require at least 20,000 additional certificate or degree completers by 2018. Labor economists at the Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce predict that by 2018, 49 percent of the jobs in West Virginia will require education and training beyond high school.<sup>3</sup> Much of the skills gap is going to be concentrated in "middle skill" jobs; those skilled technical jobs that require more than a high school diploma but less than a four-year degree. These positions are found in diverse sectors of the economy such as advanced manufacturing, construction, energy, bio- and nanotechnology, cyber security, information technology, telecommunications and public safety, and the necessary training is usually provided by community and technical colleges. A recent report prepared for the Southern Governors' Association notes that 54 percent of West Virginia's jobs fall into this category, but only 45 percent of the state's workers are trained in these areas.<sup>4</sup> Without an educated workforce, West Virginia will simply not be able to sustain its economy. Without increasing college completion rates, West Virginia will not have the educated workforce it needs.

The chart below shows the percentage of West Virginians that have an associate's degree or higher by age group. While just under 25 percent of 45-64 year old workers have an associate's degree or higher, nearly 30 percent of younger workers have at least a two-year degree. Although overall educational attainment is low, the increase in education level between younger and older workers exceeds that of the U.S. and the region as a whole and shows state progress toward increased degree attainment.

**Percentage of Population with Associates Degree or Higher by Age Group (2009), Regional and National Comparison**



After examining the data and learning from national policy experts, it became clear that increasing college completion in West Virginia is a task that will require the combined effort and attention of everyone who comes into contact with students. A recent report by the Southern Regional Education Board (SREB) examined fifteen public four-year colleges around the country that have graduation rates that outperform their peers.<sup>5</sup> The SREB found that a common element on these campuses was the existence of a graduation-oriented culture that pervaded the entire campus. This culture exists when everyone on campus, including senior leadership, faculty and staff, articulate high expectations for students and provide them with the resources they need to meet them. This culture is strengthened when everyone on campus becomes familiar with their institution's data on retention, completion and student success.

The Task Force finds that, within higher education institutions, information about graduation rates, student retention, and effective strategies for increasing college completion do not always filter through the entire organization. Faculty and personnel cannot tackle the college completion challenge unless they know it exists and understand the key levers they can move to improve results. This lack of communication can extend to outside groups as well. Members of the West Virginia business community suggested that they would be willing to support campus completion efforts if they knew more about them. If colleges and universities were to reach out to business leaders and communicate more effectively about how the private sector can support completion efforts it could be beneficial to students, colleges and industry.

One of the key factors in increasing college completion is reducing the time it takes students to earn a certificate or degree. Once they reach college, students often lack a clear idea of what courses they need to take and when they need to take them in order to graduate in a timely manner. Without a clear plan, students accumulate credits well beyond the 60 that they need for an associate's degree and the 120 to 128 credits they need for a bachelor's degree. This costs students and taxpayers and adds years to the time students spend in college. In West Virginia's community and technical colleges, the average graduate earns 99 credits and takes five years to earn a 60 credit two-year degree. For the state's public four-year colleges, the average graduate takes 5.3 years and earns 144 credits on the way to completing a bachelor's degree.<sup>6</sup> While some of these excess credits can be explained by changing majors or the need to take developmental courses, some of it is caused by programs that require students to take more than 128 credits. While student affairs professionals and targeted intervention programs provide valuable information and support for many students, the availability of these professionals and programs is not consistent across campuses. Policies that cap the number of credit hours required to earn a degree and articulation agreements that ease the transfer of course credits so that students do not find themselves having to retake courses are also key actions that can reduce the amount of time to degree for students.

The third of the Task Force's recommendations is to transform developmental education in the state so that students can acquire the skills they need and move quickly into credit-bearing college-level courses. Developmental education is a serious challenge in West Virginia and across the country and a major impediment to reducing time to degree. In the current system, too many students need remediation when they enter college and too few of those that enroll succeed in passing college-level

courses or graduating from college. This is an issue that impacts not only recent high school graduates entering college for the first time, but also returning students that may have not been in a classroom for several years.

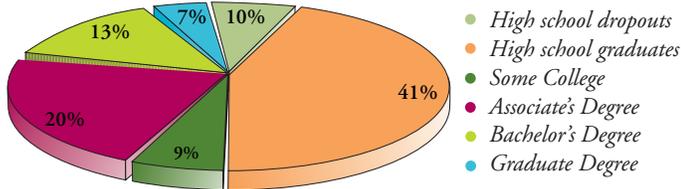
A review of college completion rates for different populations of students in West Virginia revealed that the most serious achievement gap exists between students who need to take developmental education when they enter college and those that do not. Approximately 69 percent of all students in two-year institutions and 20 percent of all students in four-year institutions require at least one developmental education course when they enter college. An analysis conducted by the Higher Education Policy Commission found that fewer than 13 percent of associate-degree seeking students who need developmental education earn a degree in four years, while, of those who do not need remediation, almost 27 percent complete a degree in that time (see chart below). For bachelor's degree seeking students that need at least one developmental course, 36 percent earn a degree in eight years, compared to 57 percent who do not need remediation. Changing these courses so that students can move into credit-bearing classes as quickly as possible lowers the cost of college, improves students' motivation and sense of success, and increases their chances of completing college.<sup>7</sup>

Degree Sought (Cohort)	Students by category	2nd Semester Retention	2nd Year Retention	Graduate in 100% (any institution)	Graduate in 150% (any institution)	Graduate in 200% (any institution)
Associate's Degree Seekers (2004)	Took Dev Ed Course	79.0%	56.8%	2.3%	8.8%	12.9%
	No Dev Ed Course	75.9%	58.9%	14.9%	23.1%	26.7%
Bachelor's Degree Seekers (2002)	Took Dev Ed Course	88.1%	69.2%	9.6%	31.6%	36.3%
	No Dev Ed Course	89.4%	77.8%	32.9%	54.5%	57.4%

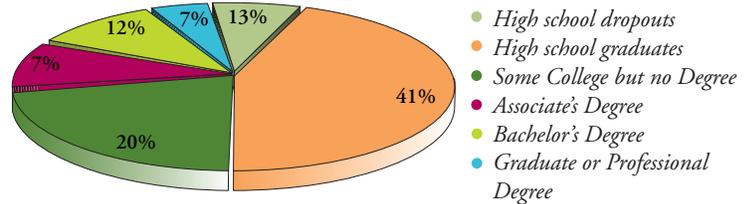
Source: WVHEPC (2011)

In West Virginia, a disproportionate number of adult students enroll in developmental education. This is troubling because the data show that helping adult learners complete certificate and degree programs is critical to solving West Virginia's workforce readiness issue. This group of students plays an important role for several reasons. First, approximately 20 percent of working age adults have some college credits but no degree, as illustrated by the chart below.

**Predicted 2018 WV Workforce Needs by Education level**



**Levels of education for West Virginia residents, ages 25-64**



Source: Carnevale et al. (2010); NCHEMS (2010)

That 20 percent of working adults with some college but no degree constitutes nearly 195,000 adults in the state. Of that group, there are at least 36,000 who are more than halfway to a bachelor's degree and an additional 24,000 that are more than half way to an associate's degree. Targeting adult learners is also important for two other reasons: the number of high school graduates is predicted to decline over the next several years and 72 percent of the workers who will be in the state's workforce in 2025 are already in the workforce now.<sup>8</sup> While recent research shows that bringing adults back to college to complete a degree presents some challenges, this group has tremendous potential for helping meet the workforce needs of West Virginia.<sup>9</sup> Providing the opportunity for them to gain new skills is essential to the economic competitiveness of West Virginia's economy.

Finally, it is important that the state policymakers create incentives that help align the activities of students and institutions with the stated goal of increased college completion. One of the ways that this can be accomplished is by implementing and funding an outcomes-based funding model for higher education. In a traditional higher education funding system, institutional budgets are determined based on enrollments and the previous year's expenditures. In an outcomes-based model, some portion of institutional funding is connected to meeting certain goals. This type of policy can be used to more broadly hold institutions accountable for the state funds they receive by tying their funding to outcomes that the state deems important. A number of states have implemented outcomes-based funding models and seen improvements in achieving state goals. Ohio, for example, implemented small-scale changes to finance policy in the 1990s that reduced the median time to degree for in-state bachelor's degree graduates from 4.7 years in 1999 to 4.3 years in 2003 and increased the percent of graduates earning their degree in four years or less from 34 percent in 1999 to 43 percent in 2006.<sup>10</sup>

Outcomes-based funding has also been used to change student behavior as well as institutional behavior. For example, the Opening Doors Program in New Orleans offered community college students \$1,000 per semester for two semesters if they enrolled half-time and maintained a C average or better. This funding increased overall student registration, full-time student enrollment and total credit accumulation.<sup>11</sup> In West Virginia, research has shown that making reception of the PROMISE scholarship contingent on both credits earned and GPA has led to increases in students' college completion rates.<sup>12</sup> These are just a few examples of policy changes that states have used to change the way they fund higher education that have had positive results.

*Most students who leave college do so during their first year. West Virginia University's Mid-Semester Help Center provides a one-stop shop where students can add and drop classes, speak with a Financial Aid Counselor, meet with an advisor from the Undergraduate Academic Service Center, or get information on free tutoring. By intervening in the middle of the semester, the institution can help students address any challenges they are having and stay in school.*

## Recommendations

After reviewing the data and engaging in discussions with faculty, staff, students, employers, policy makers and community leaders across West Virginia, the College Completion Task Force recommends a college completion strategy built around five key recommendations:

- 1 Make graduation a visible and tangible priority across the state
- 2 Reduce the time it takes for students to earn a college certificate or degree
- 3 Improve developmental education
- 4 Increase adult completion rates
- 5 Connect funding to priorities

By focusing efforts in these five areas, West Virginia will be positioned to increase the education level of the state's workforce to at least 49 percent by 2018. As we focus our efforts in these five areas, four fundamental strategies must guide our work. First, higher education institutions must partner with secondary schools and employers to help align learning objectives and stop the leaks in the education pipeline. By working collaboratively across systems, the state will be positioned to increase the number of college graduates. Second, clear and effective communication within institutions and across public and private partners is essential to ensuring all parties have access to the information they need to achieve this goal. This holds true for the lines of communication between colleges and students, faculty and administrators and university leaders and policy makers. Third, quality must remain central to all of these efforts and cannot be sacrificed to increase completion. If we increase the number of college graduates but diminish the quality of their degrees, we will have done nothing to help students or our state. Finally, if West Virginia is going to reach its potential for social and economic development, access to higher education must be an opportunity for all citizens. West Virginia has a number of economic challenges, and more and more often, the path to the middle class leads through college. We must make sure that path remains open for all those that wish to pursue it.

### 1. Make graduation a visible and tangible priority across the state

One of the first steps to increasing college completion is making sure students are on track to graduate before they reach college. One program already underway in West Virginia is West Virginia GEAR UP (Gaining Early Awareness and Readiness for Undergraduate Programs). This state and federally funded grant program aims to increase the academic preparation and college readiness of students in ten underserved counties in West Virginia by increasing parental and student knowledge about college costs and preparing students academically and socially for success in college.<sup>13</sup> Another program designed to increase college readiness is the collaboration between K-12 and higher education to develop transitional courses in math and English for high school students. An assessment of 11th grade students identifies college readiness in the areas of math and English. If students are not found to be college-ready, they have the opportunity to take a transitional course in math and/or English during the senior year to better prepare for college-level courses. The transitional math courses are currently being provided in West Virginia high schools and the English courses began being piloted in fall 2011. Once students arrive on a college campus, continued academic, financial and social supports are critical to retention and completion, especially in the first year. Creating student learning communities, providing all students with individualized graduation plans and providing mid-semester outreach programs that provide academic support and financial advice are all examples of ways in which institutions can, and are, supporting student retention and completion.

It is also important that campuses shift their focus from increasing enrollment to increasing completion. This will require that everyone on campus knows the basic facts about student retention and completion. One way to do that is to conduct institutional college completion days where faculty and staff have the opportunity to become familiar with their college's completion data, learn about the challenges to increasing college completion and identify ways to overcome them. In any effort to reorient a campus culture towards completion faculty member support is critical. Faculty members are responsible for designing the academic curriculum and assigning the grades that indicate successful progress towards graduation. They also frequently serve as academic advisors and mentors to students. One way to build faculty support for increasing college completion is to revise faculty evaluation systems and merit pay systems so that they reward and support high quality teaching and advising. While any campus adopting such a system should tailor it to fit with its institutional mission, providing comprehensive, clear, and concise communication alerting faculty to these new expectations, as well as adequate training for the efficient use of these resources, should be part of any adoption effort. In addition to faculty outreach, campuses can increase college completion by helping their own staff to complete college degrees. Building partnerships off-campus with businesses is also important to promoting college completion efforts. Mentoring programs, internships, and increased awareness of job opportunities have all been shown to improve students' chances of graduating from college.

## **2. Reduce the time it takes for students to earn a college certificate or degree**

The Community and Technical College System of West Virginia and the Higher Education Policy Commission have both revised their policies and call for institutions to lower the number of credits required for the completion of academic programs. Policy change in this area, combined with personalized advising and clear graduation plans could help students avoid extra credits and semesters. In order to help students develop clear graduation plans once they are in college, fourteen of the state's public colleges and universities will begin using DegreeWorks. This program will provide a detailed course plan for each student that shows the courses he or she needs to graduate. When combined with strong student advising it provides important information for each student about what they need to take each semester in order to complete their degree in a timely manner.

While this effort should help reduce students' time to degree, there is more that can be done. For example, in Tennessee, the Tennessee Technology Centers began using block scheduling for associate degree seeking students which has both reduced the amount of time it takes for student to get a degree and increased the college completion rates of their students. Some institutions automatically fill students' schedules with courses they will need to graduate and allow them to opt out, rather than using the traditional method of having students choose each class. Campuses are also implementing more intrusive advising for students, including calling students who do not show up for class, which has proven to be one of the most cost effective methods for improving college completion.<sup>14</sup> Regardless of which approach individual campuses pursue, it is essential that all campuses take a closer look at what they are doing and identify strategies for improving student support services and helping students achieve their degree goals in a timely and efficient manner.

*In order to shorten the time to degree for students, Southern West Virginia Community and Technical College adopted a trimester class format in fall 2010. Part of a comprehensive strategy to provide flexible scheduling for students, the new trimester schedule shortens terms from 16 to 14 weeks and provides a full array of classes three times per year.*

*Part of helping students succeed in developmental education is supporting the faculty members that are teaching those courses. In order to increase support for developmental education faculty, Blue Ridge Community and Technical College has eliminated separate departments of developmental education and moved those faculty into academic departments. This move also enables faculty members to work together to create seamless connections between developmental and credit-bearing courses.*

### **3. Improve developmental education**

In order to address the challenge of low graduation rates for students that enroll in developmental education, the Community and Technical College System assembled a Developmental Education Task Force in February 2011 to develop a strategy for reforming developmental education across West Virginia's Community and Technical College System. After reviewing successful practices from across the country this group put in place a series of recommendations to revise both the structure of developmental education and the policies that affect it. These plans include: 1) standardizing the expectations for developmental education; 2) modularizing developmental and college level courses so that students can move forward once they demonstrate competency, thereby finishing course work more quickly; 3) broadening the use of accelerated courses so that students enroll in credit-bearing courses as quickly as possible; and, 4) making changes to the statewide higher education database in order to more effectively track the progress of these efforts. In just a short time, this work has expanded to the four-year sector and is being supported by a grant from Complete College America with support from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation.

As this program expands, there are several key things to consider. First, maintaining the status quo will not work. Every aspect of the way developmental education is taught in West Virginia needs to be rethought and revamped in order for students to be successful. Second, the goal is to get students into credit-bearing courses, not just through developmental education. Third, there is some evidence to suggest that placement tests do not accurately predict a student's ability to succeed in college level courses. Revisiting the role of placement exams and evaluating their impact on student success is worth considering.

### **4. Increase adult completion rates**

Any plan to increase college completion in West Virginia and meet the state's workforce needs will need to incorporate adult students and assist students with some credits but no degree in finishing their credentials. There are a number of specific things that policy makers, higher education institutions and employers can do to facilitate this goal. One program that is currently underway in West Virginia is called DegreeNow. This integrated statewide adult degree completion program is a combined effort by the West Virginia Higher Education Policy Commission and the West Virginia Community & Technical College System, in partnership with NASPA-Student Affairs in Higher Education, with support from the Lumina foundation for Education. The initiative incorporates the WV Board of Governors Associate in Applied Science (AAS), the Regents Transfer Agreement, and the Regents Bachelors of Arts to provide a continuum in which adults with prior college experience can earn associate's degrees or bachelor's degrees and facilitate progress for those who complete an associate's and choose to work toward earning a bachelor's degree. This program also provides information for campuses on how they can implement and improve adult-focused student and academic services.

While this is an important start, more must be done to help adults complete their degrees. Some of these include identifying and reaching out to adults that are close to completing a degree, developing courses tailored for working adults, providing more courses online or at times that fit with the schedules of working adults, allowing workers paid time off for continuing education, making sure there is a college counselor in every state unemployment office and developing reverse transfer policies that help students receive recognition for the credits they have taken. These policies can also help an important group of adult students: returning veterans. A recent study conducted by the Community and Technical College System of West Virginia has shown that institutions are not sufficiently awarding veterans the credit hours they have earned as a result of their specialized training. This practice

discourages veterans from reenrolling in West Virginia's public higher education institutions and adds unnecessary time to degree completion for them. We have both a practical and moral imperative to give back to those who serve this county and make sure they receive the credit they deserve for the specialized and valuable skills they have acquired.

### **5. Connect funding to priorities**

Making completion a tangible priority by connecting incentives, financial or otherwise, to the achievement of certain targets can help improve college completion. Both the Community and Technical College Council and the Higher Education Policy Commission have approved outcomes-based funding models for the state's public higher education systems. Both of these funding models provide incentives to campuses for enrolling adults, increasing the number of graduates in needed fields and improving completion. Developing policies and programs that connect state grants to learning outcomes would also help improve college completion rates in West Virginia. While making the PROMISE scholarship contingent on both credits earned and GPA has led to increases in students' college completion rates, there is more that needs to be done.

Rethinking how both students and institutions receive funding can help align their actions more closely with state priorities. Over the last twenty years, twenty-six different states have experimented with performance funding models.<sup>15</sup> Researchers argue that many of these models failed because they were either too complicated or had too much money at stake. West Virginia has learned from those mistakes and developed a set of clear models that tie funding to student achievement and graduation and reward institutions for helping students acquire the skills they need to participate fully in the economic and social life of the state. In addition to funding higher education institutions for improving important student outcomes, looking at ways that students can be incentivized directly has the potential to increase college completion and success in West Virginia.

## **Conclusions**

If West Virginia, as a state, commits to increasing the educational attainment of its citizens, these five recommendations can help achieve that goal. While it will require partnership, communication and dedication on the part of educators, parents, policy makers, community leaders and students to make it a reality, these five recommendations represent a set of actionable steps that, if implemented, can help improve college completion and ensure that West Virginia will have the workforce it needs to meet the demands of the future economy. Educating West Virginia is everyone's business.

*A critical group of adult students in West Virginia is veterans. In 2011, Concord University was ranked the nation's number 1 four-year college for veterans by Military Times Edge magazine. Established in 2009, the Concord University Veterans Office has worked to help veteran students utilize their GI benefits and offered assistance in areas from housing to tutoring to counseling.*

## Appendix —Strategies for Overcoming the Barriers to College Completion

Increasing the college completion rate of West Virginia's undergraduates will require a concerted effort on the part of students, parents, faculty, staff, business leaders and university administrators. This appendix provides background information on the barriers that prevent students from completing college and some suggested strategies that campuses can use as a starting point for developing a college completion plan that meets the needs of their student population and community.

There are a variety of academic and non-academic factors that influence a student's decision to leave college before completing a certificate or degree. Academic preparation, motivation, self-confidence, financial support, institutional commitment and social networks can all impact whether a student departs or graduates from college.<sup>16</sup> In order to better identify strategies for increasing college completion, the West Virginia College Completion Task Force reviewed the research on college retention and completion and met with a variety of higher education stakeholders within the state to begin to understand the unique college completion challenges faced by West Virginians.<sup>17</sup> As a result of this work, the Task Force identified three broad categories of barriers that prevent students in West Virginia from completing college: social, academic, and financial.

Underlying these three sets of barriers is the concept of integration. Research on student departure from college finds that the more integrated and involved students are in the social and academic life of the institution: the more likely they are to persist and ultimately graduate.<sup>17</sup> Integration, or having a sense of belonging to the intellectual and social life of an institution, takes place through both formal and informal systems. Formal integration takes place through success in coursework and participation in extracurricular activities, while informal integration occurs through interactions with faculty, staff and fellow students.<sup>18</sup> Both academic and social integration are important to student persistence, and though the concepts were developed through research on four-year college students, there is support for their importance in understanding two-year college student retention as well.<sup>19</sup>

This research suggests that increasing college completion among West Virginia's students will require a combined effort on the part of faculty, staff and campus leadership in partnership with families, K-12 and members of the local community. The participation of all of these groups is important to ensure that students are fully integrated into the academic and social life of their institutions. In a state where only 17.1 percent of adults have a bachelor's degree or higher and 43 percent of college students are low-income, it is especially important that groups both on- and off-campus reinforce the importance of a college education. However campuses and communities choose to tackle this challenge, the message is clear that educating West Virginia is everyone's business.

### Social Barriers to College Completion

Going to college for the first time, or returning after a period of stopping out, can present a number of challenges for students. For students making the transition from a tight-knit community to a large and potentially alien college environment, social integration may prove difficult. First-generation college students may experience conflicts between the expectations of their professors and peers at school and those of their family and friends at home.<sup>20</sup> Further, first-generation college goers are at a disadvantage the moment they step foot on a college campus because they lack the intimate knowledge about college-going that parents who have gone to college are able to provide for their children.<sup>21</sup> If they do not know individuals who have been to college, they may not know how to negotiate this new and complex bureaucratic organization without help. For adults returning to college, balancing academic, professional,

and familial responsibilities provides a set of logistical challenges that can also thwart college completion.

In order to help students overcome these barriers there are a number of strategies that campuses may find valuable. A few general approaches are identified below:

### **1) Provide robust support services for all students**

Campuses often have strong student support services available to some students, such as athletes or those that participate in federally funded programs like TRIO or GEAR UP. Developing strategies for providing comprehensive support services, both social and academic, for all students, can help improve retention and completion.

### **2) Involve families**

For traditional age students, programs that bring families to campus during the application process can help dispel fears about moving away from home. For adult students, providing daycare services or other familial supports can help remove barriers to college participation and success.

### **3) Provide individualized academic advising to all students**

On average, graduates of one-year, two-year, and four-year programs earn many more credits than they need to complete their intended degree goals. One of the reasons for this is the lack of a clear graduation plan. By providing individualized advising that informs students about what courses they need to graduate, and when they should enroll, in them, colleges have assisted students in completing their certificate and degree programs more quickly. Going one-step further and automatically enrolling students in the courses they need has been a successful strategy adopted by institutions in Tennessee.

### **4) Work with the broader community to build a college-completion culture**

Students belong to a number of interrelated communities: families, churches, volunteer organizations, athletic teams, businesses, etc. Building bridges between higher education institutions and the local community that reinforce the importance of college completion can help support students and deepen their integration into the social and academic life of their college or university. This community-focused approach, along with the creation of an inclusive graduation-oriented institutional culture helps create an environment that supports and reinforces the importance of college completion.

## **Academic Barriers to College Completion**

Nearly 70 percent of two-year college students and over 20 percent of four-year college students arrive on a college campus unprepared for college-level work in at least one area, usually math. Developmental courses present a psychological as well as an academic barrier to a student's success in college. Helping students acquire the skills they need, when and where they need them, can build confidence and enthusiasm as well as the academic knowledge that is crucial to their success. It is also important to ensure that all students, not just those who need developmental education, have the opportunity to receive academic support from faculty, tutors or peers so that they can develop the knowledge and critical thinking skills they need to be successful in college and the workforce. Some strategies for helping students overcome the academic barriers to college success include:

**5) Partner with K-12 to align expectations of college readiness**

Providing clear definitions of college readiness for students can help them enter college academically prepared. Exams given in the junior year, combined with guaranteed placement when students enroll in college, are one way to help students arrive on campus ready for college level work. The Common Core State Standards may provide an especially valuable platform for aligning K-12 and higher education's learning expectations.

**6) Shorten or eliminate the gap between developmental education and credit-bearing courses**

Completing developmental education is only the first step toward college completion. Too many students pass developmental education courses, but wait several more semesters before enrolling in credit-bearing courses. This can weaken a student's readiness and create a barrier to graduation.

**7) Provide stackable, transferrable certifications**

Many students earn enough credits for a certificate on the way to an associate's degree, or for an associate's degree on their way to a bachelor's degree. Providing mechanisms for students to receive certifications at each step in the process can help reinforce their academic progress. This provides a certification of value they can take into the labor market and can deepen their investment in the institution.

**8) Create student learning communities**

Creating opportunities for students to interact with faculty and fellow students can create communities that help deepen their integration into an institution. These can take a variety of forms, but ensuring that students connect to a group of peers that are engaged in the intellectual life of the institution helps to increase retention and completion.

**Financial Barriers to College Completion**

Though higher education costs in West Virginia are relatively low compared with neighboring states, over 43 percent of college students qualify for federal Pell grants. The share of higher education operating budgets that comes from the state has declined to about one-third, placing the rest of the revenue burden on tuition and fees. While financial aid is broadly available, in large part due to the legislature's commitment to both need-based and merit-based aid, misinformation about college costs is widespread. In order to help students overcome some of the financial barriers to college completion, there are several strategies that institutions can consider:

**9) Provide easy to understand information about college costs and benefits to students and families.**

Federal regulations now require colleges and universities to have net price calculators on their websites. These enable students and families to have a realistic idea of what college will cost by providing an estimate of what financial aid they will qualify for. Providing information and outreach about college costs can help dispel misinformation and enable students and families to develop realistic budgets.

**10) Provide students and families with realistic evaluations of their earning potential, based on their degree goals and anticipated major.**

Students and families know that going to college is increasingly important for finding a good job. What they often do not know is that where they go and what they study will have an impact on their career prospects. Institutions and state agencies should work together to provide students and families with information on graduate earnings and the return on investment that a college education provides.

**11) Develop policies that reward staff for completing certificates and degrees.**

Many of the classified staff working on college campuses have some college credits but no degree. Changing policies and creating a culture that encourages and enables staff to complete or obtain degrees sends a message to the whole campus that college completion is important and attainable. Policies that support that effort may include release time for attending class or discounted tuition.

**12) Focus on productivity**

As demand for higher education increases, colleges and universities need to do more with less. One of the ways to do this is look for low-cost, high-return ways to increase college completion. Recent research suggests that opening a call center on campus to follow-up with students that miss class is one of the most efficient ways to increase retention and completion.<sup>22</sup> Strategies that increase productivity can help campuses free up revenue for reinvestment in other priority areas.

## Summary

Increasing student completion on West Virginia's college campuses will require the cooperation of faculty, staff and students on campus as well as collaboration with the K-12 system and local communities. As institutions begin to develop strategies that they think will work for them, it is important to keep several things in mind. First, both academic and social integration are important to student retention and completion efforts. Identifying strategies that support both and provide meaningful avenues for faculty and staff cooperation will benefit students and make the collaboration more valuable for campus personnel. Second, reaching out to families, business leaders, K-12 educators and community groups can reinforce the message that college completion is important and help create mutually beneficial partnerships. Third, clear communication should be a component of any college completion endeavor. When students know how to achieve their goals and other stakeholders know how to support them, everyone will benefit. Finally, students need to know that the people around them care about them and want them to complete their certificate or degree. Though difficult to create with policy, this element should help guide completion efforts on campuses across the state. Educating West Virginia is everyone's business.

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