



*Leading the Way*  
**Access. Success. Impact.**



*Leading the Way* **Access.**

**2013-18 Master Plan**

▶ *Dana is a high school junior who is unsure what her future plans are after graduation. Her favorite course in school has been biology and she has thought about becoming a nurse or even a veterinarian. Although she has been very successful in her science courses, she has struggled with math. Like many of her peers, Dana's academic record is not exemplary and she is often overlooked when academic and career enrichment opportunities are available at her school. She has been present at school activities and assemblies that have addressed college-going, but has never received any one-on-one support. Both Dana's parents graduated high school but never went on to college, and on the few occasions that the subject of college has come up, they have dismissed it due to concerns over cost. On the brink of entering her senior year of high school, Dana is settling on entering the workforce and has taken few of the necessary steps to matriculate to a postsecondary institution.*

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### **Series Introduction**

The 2013-2018 West Virginia Higher Education Policy Commission master plan, *Leading the Way: Access. Success. Impact.* was developed to provide a programmatic framework and goals to enable the state's system of public four-year institutions to meet the educational needs of West Virginians. A state economy in flux with declining revenues and increased demands on developing a larger, highly educated and trained workforce has resulted in greater scrutiny on postsecondary education outcomes in the state. Education stakeholders, including publicly elected leadership, have developed greater expectations for West Virginia's public four-year colleges and universities. These expectations include institutions meeting multiple educational challenges simultaneously: expanding access, improving retention and on-time graduation, and increasing degrees in particular fields that match regional and statewide priorities.

Beyond the development of the master plan and the facilitation of the compact process, the Commission's Division of Policy and Planning is offering an additional series of white papers that will address each major theme of the master plan. Each paper will elaborate on a particular theme, providing further insights into the Commission's vision in the focal area and sharing best practices. It is the intention of the Commission that these additional resources foster discourse among institutional administrators, faculty, staff, and students, enabling them to develop a common understanding of the challenges, goals, and the mechanisms necessary to meet them.

## Highlights

- College access remains a priority for West Virginia. However, additional support is needed to help more students successfully transition to college.
- GEARUP and other college-going outreach efforts have been successful, but more support is needed to help additional students develop college-going skills and prepare for the rigors of college-level work.
- Low-income students will continue to make-up a large portion of in-state enrollment.
- Student and institutional success can be furthered by providing assistance and information to students much earlier than the typical recruitment and admissions cycles.
- Along with other best practices, data analysis at the institutional level will be key to determine how best to proceed with access efforts.

## Defining College Access in West Virginia

West Virginians of all ages have the right to a quality education that empowers them to act as productive members of the citizenry and workforce. Receiving a quality education includes the option to pursue undergraduate and graduate postsecondary educational opportunities that correspond with individual career and life aspirations. By continuing to promote postsecondary education, West Virginia intends to foster a state culture that values higher education as a means to individual, community, and economic development. In West Virginia, access to postsecondary education depends on three central factors: adequate preparation, accessible information, and feasible cost.

Progress continues to be made, but there is still much work to be done regarding college access in West Virginia. Current efforts allow the Commission and its institutions to reach a population of students who are college-ready both academically and aspirationally, or students who have the potential to be ready and only need additional assistance in one or two areas of the college-going process (application assistance, standardized test/advance placement preparation and registration, assistance completing the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA), institutional choice, etc.). Behind this cohort is another population of students that require comprehensive college-going assistance in areas such as aspiration building, secondary curriculum planning, tutoring, a mentor experience, and parental outreach, in addition to those services that college-ready students require.

To meet West Virginia's future educational and workforce goals, the Commission will require additional outreach and support assistance from the four-year colleges and universities to enhance postsecondary access throughout the state. Working together with the West Virginia Department of Education, local school officials, and regional college access organizations, these activities will not only boost institutional enrollments, but also improve student success and allow institutions to develop stronger ties to the surrounding community.

## West Virginia Access Data Trends

Of the 2012 West Virginia high school graduating cohort, only 56.4 percent of students enrolled at a postsecondary institution the following fall. As expected, with an improving economy enrollments have begun to decline across the country. This is no different in West Virginia, where enrollment decreased by 1.5 percent between the 2011-12 and 2012-13 academic years. With a declining West Virginia high school population expected for the near future, all postsecondary institutions will have to compete with a rebounding number of other opportunities presented to high school graduates.

As indicated previously, maintaining or growing enrollment will depend on enrolling additional low-income, and first generation students. Fortunately, this comes at a time when more West Virginia high school students are qualified to attend. According to the Commission's 2012 High School Senior Opinions Survey, 60 percent of students were enrolled in the high school professional curriculum pathway, which prepares students to meet most of West Virginia's public postsecondary institutions' academic qualifications for admission. More important, 90 percent of students reported that they were enrolled in Algebra II, so students not on the professional curriculum track could still meet many of the admissions criteria. Statewide ACT average subject scores have remained stable between 2008 and 2012 even as increasing numbers of low-income students take the test, demonstrating that academic performance has not varied widely in recent years (ACT, 2013).

### **West Virginia's College Access Footprint**

The Commission has addressed postsecondary access in the state through a number of initiatives and special programs through the Divisions of Student Success and P-20 Initiatives, Academic Affairs, and Financial Aid. These divisions work independently and cooperatively to offer programs such as Gaining Early Awareness and Readiness for Undergraduate Programs (GEAR UP), DegreeNow, College Goal Sunday, and other projects funded through the state's federal College Access Challenge Grant (CACG).

The Division of Student Success and P-20 Initiatives coordinates the Commission's access efforts. The division oversees three major programs: the College Foundation of West Virginia (CFWV), GEAR UP, and CACG activities. The Division of Academic Affairs has coordinated with the West Virginia Department of Education to ensure that students are adequately prepared for the academic rigor of college-level work. The division supported the adoption of the new K-12 statewide Next Generation Standards and Smarter Balanced Assessment, and has worked with public institutions to promote awareness of and train faculty on the new standards. Also, the Division has partnered with the West Virginia Department of Education to begin offering senior transition courses in English and math. These courses are designed to eliminate the need for developmental education after postsecondary enrollment.

In addition, local and regional organizations, such as Greater Appalachia Outreach and Heart of Appalachia, partner with public and private higher education institutions across the state to offer TRIO programs in local high schools. Also, the professionals of our public secondary schools work diligently to help students succeed academically and pursue their career and educational aspirations after graduation. Yet, those with the most college-going expertise, West Virginia high school counselors, have an average student caseload of 383 students (NCES, 2011). It is impossible for many high school counselors to provide the significant level of support that low-income, and first generation students require based on student load and the number of other administrative duties, beyond postsecondary and career counseling, they are expected to fulfill (Kirst & Venezia, 2004; Perna, Rowan-Kenyon, Thomas, Bell, Anderson, & Li, 2008).

Based on a 2011 study, the Commission determined that only 34 percent of West Virginia high school students are receiving supplementary college-going support from state and local organizations. The services vary widely by organization, county, and school, but the majority of services focus on high school juniors and seniors. The study also highlighted that few college access organizations provide outreach to students while they are enrolled in middle school, a key period when young people are developing academic aspirations (Hossler, Schmit, and Vesper, 1999).

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### Promising Institutional Access Strategies

The Commission believes that the continued success of college access activities in West Virginia depends on institutions providing sustained outreach activities to secondary students well before matriculation. Below is a list of best practices concerning college access, garnered from the most recent research in the field.

- **Early Outreach**

In West Virginia, institutional and federal access programs such as GEAR UP, Upward Bound, and Talent Search have been very successful in promoting college aspirations and assisting first generation students with completing the essential tasks necessary to enroll. However, these programs are limited in scale and do not have the logistical capability to address all West Virginia students in need of college-going support. Additional support is required to provide academic advising and assistance to this population prior to matriculation. Institutional partnerships with local high schools are critical to supplement state and federal support efforts (Perna & Swail, 2002; Walpole, 2007).

With many West Virginians attending their local public college or university, institutions have opportunities beyond their admissions operations to provide additional support and guidance. Research shows that early outreach efforts, as early as middle school, can have positive effects on student performance as they enter college (American Association of State Colleges and Universities, 2012; St. John, Hu, & Fisher, 2011). Reimagining the types of contact institutions have with students in secondary school allows opportunities to offer dual enrollment courses, remediation, and early course scheduling; provide exposure to other aspects of campus life; and establish relationships with parents and community members.

Additional support for middle and high school students does not require institutions to "reinvent the wheel" by developing all new initiatives. In some cases, institutions with existing TRIO programs could help to expand those programs to additional students. CFWV and NCAN (National College Access Network) offer a host of resources on program development, staff training, and developing K-12 school partnerships.

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### STRATEGIES IN ACTION

Iowa State University's EOP@ISU program is designed for first generation and minority students who can enroll in the program as early as 9th grade. The program provides opportunities to visit campus, interact with institutional role models, receive career guidance, and participate in extended orientation which can support students through their college transition.

Fayetteville State University created the Office of College Access Programs. The office coordinates the services of five federal programs (Talent Search, GEAR UP, Upward Bound Classic, Upward Bound Math & Science, and 21st Century Community Learning Centers) for a three county area of North Carolina. The office also provides teacher and parent resources and operates summer camps.

- **Academic Preparation**

Despite educational reform efforts at the K-12 level, there continues to be a significant "college readiness gap" between students who have successfully completed their high school on college-going academic tracks and postsecondary institutions of all levels of selectivity (SREB, 2010). Along with providing college-going support, institutions will have to play a more active role in ensuring that prospective students are both academically prepared and advised to enter college (AASCU, 2012). Such efforts could involve offering early remediation, setting recommendations for senior year course registration, and providing students information that links prospective majors to career and workforce outcomes. These activities should not be confused with mission drift or academic incursion, but seen as continued progress of K-12/postsecondary alignment. Institutions, like the University of Arizona, have created offices of early academic outreach to compliment other institutional efforts in secondary schools. These programs often focus on first generation students and encourage them to explore STEM majors and other academic areas where low-income students are underrepresented.

### STRATEGIES IN ACTION

The University of California's Early Academic Outreach Program (EAOP) offers individual and group academic advising to high school students, as well as academic enrichment activities such as tutoring, a "Saturday College", and summer residential academies. The program also places special emphasis on students taking the required high school coursework required for the institution for admission.

Georgia College's Academic Outreach program has provided free academic support programs to K-12 schools since 1968. The program uses student volunteers to facilitate in-school visitations, after-school programs, and trips to campus and other area locations. While most of the program focuses on STEM subjects, it has also supported students interested in the arts and humanities.

- **Parental Education & Support**

Parents play an important role in the academic lives of our most successful students. Ethnic background, socio-economic status, and geography can impact parents' attitudes and level of support for postsecondary education (Bergerson, 2009; Choy, 2001; McCarron & Inkelas, 2006; McDonough, Gildersleeve, & Jarsky, 2010; Perna & Titus, 2005). Without violating FERPA protections, institutions can be proactive in educating parents and guardians about general curricular and co-curricular obstacles that students face throughout their academic career, then encouraging them to be active participants in their student's progress.

### STRATEGIES IN ACTION

In 2004, the University of Arizona developed the College Academy for Parents, a limited space program that targets families in a specific school district. The program offers a series of workshops for parents on how to advocate for and support their child through the college-going process.

The University of Texas at Austin offers UT Outreach Austin, a program that requires both the participation of the student and their parents. The program provides 10th through 12th graders academic enrichment activities, while parents are required to attend activities, assist their student with college planning, and volunteer at program events.

• **Financial Literacy**

Through its administration and stewardship of the PROMISE Scholarship; Higher Education Grant Program; Higher Education Adult Part-Time Student Grant; Engineering, Science and Technology Scholarship; and Underwood-Smith Teacher Scholarship programs, the Division of Financial Aid has been able to incentivize both recent high school graduates and non-traditional adult students to enroll by helping to eliminate one of the greatest enrollment barriers, cost.

Although students and their families receive support in completing and filing the FAFSA, the various forms and mechanics of aid continue to be confusing. In the Commission's 2012 High School Senior Opinions Survey, 57 percent of high school seniors overestimated the cost of tuition at West Virginia public four-year institutions. The survey also found that students were better informed on federal and state grants than institutional aid programs. The growing three-year student loan default cohort rates have called new attention to how institutions are educating students about college costs and financial aid programs before, during, and after enrollment.

Providing clear and concise information (particularly to low-income students) concerning basic financial aid definitions, information on average awards based on income and location, and easy ways to contact the financial aid office for more information were found to be critical components to not only encourage students to apply, but also to enroll (Perna, Lundy-Wagner, Yee, Brill, & Tadal, 2011). Even prior to admission, financial aid staff can be proactive in the ways in which they deliver information on aid packages and processes to local high school students. Aid packages could be explained in person, providing clarity and additional information on costs and aid, particularly concerning student loans. Research has shown that low-income, first generation students are price sensitive and that incremental changes, even at the \$100 level, can lead to significant declines in low-income student enrollment (Heller, 1997; Keane, 2002).

**STRATEGIES IN ACTION**

The University of Michigan's Office of Financial Aid Events and Outreach Activities offers prepared or customized presentations and workshops to community organizations and high schools throughout the state. The program also provides one-on-one support at a satellite location as well as their home office.

The Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation (FDIC), 4-H, and the Office of the West Virginia State Treasurer offer financial literacy curricula that are appropriate for children in elementary school through college. These resources could be used in partnership with K-12 schools and community organizations to provide personal finance education along with information about college financial aid opportunities.

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• **Pathways to Degree**

Based on a recent Commission study, West Virginia public college graduates whose major remained in the same academic area reduced their completion

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time to degree by almost an entire semester (Holly, Bell, & Crane, 2013). Providing academic and career counseling prior to matriculation can help prevent dramatic degree shifts, which result in additional courses, time, and costs required to complete their degree (Complete College America, 2013). Understanding student outcomes, as early as middle school, can identify academic strengths and weaknesses that can be addressed prior to matriculation. Encouraging prospective students to enroll in the more academically rigorous "professional" high school curriculum track can be part of this outreach.

#### STRATEGIES IN ACTION

CFWV.com offers detailed information to both students and advisors on high school, career, and college planning. These resources form a strong foundation that has been utilized by the GEAR UP program and other college access organizations in West Virginia. The website also allows students to develop an online portfolio that can be shared with parents and school counselors.

The Virginia Community College System's Career Coaches program embeds advisors in high schools to support student career and post secondary choices. Coaches use a combination of career inventories, state workforce outcomes, and institutional program offerings to help students find and apply to an institution and create an academic course plan toward their degree prior to matriculation. The program has recently shifted efforts toward providing activities to students in middle school.

#### • Admissions/Advising/Mentoring

West Virginia public colleges and universities admit a significant number of low-income, first generation college students. In order to make it to orientation, these students have overcome a number of obstacles to attend, receiving support from numerous individuals and organizations along the way. However, a gap continues to exist between support students received in high school and support services in college. Summer "bridge" programs have been shown to have positive results, but often come too late for many students (Colyar, 2011). Developing relationships with students early on and providing a continuity of support between high school and college could lead to improved student outcomes, especially when those efforts make the experience more intimate (Bowen, Chingos, & McPherson, 2009).

#### STRATEGIES IN ACTION

The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill College Advising Corps places recent college graduates in local high-need high schools to support first generation, low-income students. The program focuses on matching recent graduates of similar background with partnering high schools. Advisors provide college-going support with students one-on-one or in groups.



James Madison University offers a STEM skills focused dual enrollment course to local high school students. The course focuses on solving local community issues through use of geospatial technology. Students are not only exposed to the rigor of a college-level STEM course, but also develop relationships with university faculty that help bridge the gap between high school and college.

- **Adult Student Outreach**

Although many institutions have seen the growth of adult enrollment (age 25+) as an effect of a bad economy, non-traditional students will continue to be an important focus in the coming years. Those who have obtained a certificate or associates' degree, stopped-out of bachelor's studies, or have delayed matriculation remain prospective students. The Commission estimates that there are close to 200,000 West Virginians who have begun a two- or four-year degree and are not currently enrolled. Maintaining and developing outreach programs and services dedicated to this population will remain necessary. These same efforts apply directly to returning veterans who require similar services.

As part of Lumina's DegreeNow initiative, the Commission has been providing support for the Regents Bachelor of Arts (RBA). Between 2009 to 2012, RBA enrollment grew by 12.5 percent, from 2,002 to 2,252 students. In addition to RBA program support, the Commission has provided information sessions for prospective students through WVROCKS, offered "train-the-trainers" workshops for campus staff who work directly with adult students, and partnered with NASPA (Student Affairs Professionals in Higher Education) to develop the guide book *Building a Culture of Evidence in Student Affairs: A Guide for Leaders and Practitioners*.

### STRATEGIES IN ACTION

Train the Trainer graduates and the Director of Financial Aid at Pierpont Community and Technical College co-hosted an information luncheon for directors of local service agencies whose clients are adult learners. The luncheon allowed the institution to provide important enrollment information to community members that work with the adult population on a day-to-day basis.

Shepherd University is in the process of conducting an in-depth analysis of adult learners in the recruitment and admissions process to develop specific communication plans that meet the needs of its adult learner population.

- **Leveraging Data to Inform Strategies**

Improvements in data collection and analysis now allow institutions to target efforts at specific groups and individuals. Institutions should conduct their own internal analyses to further their understanding of factors that are impacting their student success and if those factors can be addressed by access efforts. Institutional researchers are critical in shaping current and new initiatives through their understanding of what data is available and how it can be best utilized and what questions need to be asked concerning that data.

Transcripts from previous cohorts could be examined to determine patterns in high school course taking, grades, and academic interventions required in the freshmen year (academic probation, developmental education, inability to maintain financial aid and scholarships). This could lead to the identification of

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specific schools and courses where outreach services could be targeted. Institutions could also conduct an institutional inventory to determine what specific academic support and student affairs services are focused on low-income, first generation students. In doing so, outreach programs could begin to connect students to these programs and services prior to enrollment. Information gleaned from analyzing historical enrollment patterns and post-matriculation outcomes could inform how financial aid could be distributed to future cohorts to increase enrollment, reduce "summer melt", and aid in retention.

### STRATEGIES IN ACTION

The Lumina Foundation (2009) developed recommendations for institutions and other organizations to inform college access activities through use of better data. Rather than operating from assumptions about local students, institutions should utilize data from K-12 schools, community organizations, state and national databases, along with their own data to develop programs and coordinate local resources in order to inform college-going efforts. In brief, the report recommends developing data sharing agreements with local schools and organizations. Partners should agree on a standard format so time is not constantly reformatting data. Data points should focusing on what access services a student is receiving, along with tracking if a student reaches certain college-going milestones, such as FAFSA completion, ACT registration, and college acceptance.

### Connecting Access and Success

The onus of succeeding in college is on the student. That being stated, there are many non-academic, systemic hurdles that institutions can remove in order to help students complete their degree in a timely manner. Establishing a relationship with a prospective student early in high school allows for the student to be better informed of all aspects of the college-going and matriculation process, and allows institutions to learn what necessary interventions can be performed prior to enrollment. Primarily, these are good faith efforts to help students transition successfully to post-secondary education. Secondly, the resources that institutions invest in prospective students will ultimately benefit both the institution and student post-enrollment.

Therefore, Access strategies and plans should be conceptually linked with those in Success. Developmental education courses continue to be a quagmire, affecting time to completion, retention, and sometimes, loan default. Encouraging rigorous high school courses, offering tutoring support, and providing "bridge" courses could reduce the number of students that need to enroll in development coursework upon enrollment. In another example, STEM majors are in great demand; however, students that enter these programs often have a difficult time succeeding in program level gateway courses. Offering students who are interested in STEM additional academic support and advising during high school could place students on a more successful path toward completing those courses on schedule and avoiding financially costly shifts in major later on.

### Questions and Continued Support

The staff of the Commission's Division of Policy and Planning are eager to answer questions you or your campus teams might have concerning any aspect of the master plan and its compact process. The Commission offers a range of expertise and programs that are the disposal of our institutions. In addition to providing support through existing programs, the Commission can provide additional contacts and information to aid institutions in developing and supporting access initiatives.

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1018 Kanawha Blvd. East  
Charleston, West Virginia 25301-2025