

**Testimony before the United States Senate
Committee on Health, Education, Labor and Pensions**

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Introduction

Since our founding in 2009, Complete College America has worked closely with 33 states, the District of Columbia, and the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands with a single mission in mind: increase the number of Americans with a college degree or credential of value, and close persistent attainment gaps for traditionally underrepresented populations.

This critical work has been driven by the reality that America faces a college completion crisis, and a failure to act decisively on these issues would perpetuate an ongoing skills gap that threatens our economic future and degrades our intellectual leadership around the world.

A look at the data shows just how serious this challenge is for our country: only 4% of full-time students complete an associate degree on time, that is, within two academic years. At non-flagship, four-year institutions, only 19% complete their degree on time. Even given three years for an associate degree and six years for a bachelor's degree, these numbers inch up only slightly to 13% and 45% respectively. For part-time students, the results are even more discouraging.

These consistently low completion rates come at a great cost to students and their families. In our 2014 report, *Four-Year Myth*, we outlined that each additional year of college costs two-year students over \$50,000 in tuition, fees, lost wages, and other expenses and close to \$70,000 for four-year students. Further, data taken from Temple University and University of Texas-Austin show that two extra years at their campuses increase debt by nearly 70% among students who borrow. Add it all up, and everyone loses. The public invests in college studies that – for too many students – often lead nowhere. Students defer earning income, and they and their families take on massive amounts of debt to earn degrees that could be much less time consuming and costly.

Additionally, while we have experienced great success in the college access agenda, a closer look at graduation day reveals that those who do eventually earn degrees are not representative of the rich diversity that defines this nation. The hopes raised by nearly equitable enrollments in the freshman class for students of color, low-income students, and first generation students are crushed by gaps in achievement and completion.

Taken together, this crisis costs our nation and the states billions of dollars, contributes to the more than \$1 trillion in student loan debt, and stifles our economic growth.

There is no doubt that the mission to boost college completion and success is a difficult one, but this work is critical. Complete College America's Alliance of States, now at 35 members, is ensuring that both colleges and higher education policymakers value access and success equally. We are working together to identify and enact powerful reforms that help students succeed. New laws are being forged. New policies are being implemented. And students are beginning to enjoy the rewards of a reinvented system of American higher education.

The strategies outlined below are instrumental in achieving those successes. The Game Changers are designed to give states and campuses the greatest return on investment. These strategies, which we are working to implement every day, are achieving transformational results around the country – gains in student success that are 20, 30 or 40 percentage points greater than current practices. The success of these efforts are the result of tackling systemic problems head on, ensuring that many more Americans earn a degree or other credential of value. Now, our challenge is to see that these powerful ideas are taken to scale around the country.

Corequisite Remediation

For far too many students in the U.S., college begins – and often ends – in remediation. Of the 1.7 million students assigned to this broken system each year, only about one in ten will graduate. Seventy percent of students placed into remedial math fail to enroll in the college-level gateway course within two academic years.

Efforts around the country have shown that the best way to support students who are currently placed into remedial education is to put them directly into college-level courses with additional academic support. By providing remediation as a corequisite – not as a prerequisite sequence that sets students back – we eliminate the all too frequent problem of remedial students never making it to a college-level course. Institutions that have adopted corequisite approaches have reduced attrition and seen dramatic increases in student success.

Corequisite remediation is implemented in a number of ways: as an additional class period alongside the college-level course, a required lab with mentors, or five weeks of remediation followed by ten weeks of the regular course. The overarching goal is to free students from long remedial sequences that do not count toward a degree and that create more points at which students are likely to drop out.

In states and institutions where corequisite remediation is being utilized, the results have been astounding. In places like Colorado, Indiana, Tennessee and West Virginia, data shows that students enrolled in single-semester, corequisite English typically succeed at twice the rate of students enrolled in traditional prerequisite

English courses. Students enrolled in corequisite gateway math courses saw results five to six times the success rates of traditional remedial math sequences.

- West Virginia: Under the leadership of Chancellor Jim Skidmore, the Community and Technical College System of West Virginia scaled corequisite remediation across its campuses. Under the corequisite model, 68% of students completed gateway English within one semester, up from 37% within two years under the traditional model. In mathematics, success rates increased from 14% under the traditional model to 62% under corequisite remediation.
- Tennessee: The Tennessee Board of Regents reports that under corequisite remediation, gateway course success rates increased from 12% to 63% in math and from 31% to 74% in English. Additionally, Tennessee's data shows that students at every level of academic preparedness (based on ACT sub-scores) did better under the new model.

Seven states have committed to scaling corequisite remediation by 2015. Twenty-two state and the District of Columbia have committed to transforming remediation to dramatically increase the percentage of students who complete college-level gateway courses in math and English within one academic year.

Fifteen to Finish

As mentioned above, the vast majority of American college students, and almost no one at community colleges, graduates on time, costing families billions.

One frustratingly simple reason for late completion is that most college students are not taking enough credits (at least 30) each academic year to finish within two or four years – an unintended consequence of flawed federal policy and misguided conceptions about what is in the best interest of students.

Research has shown that when students take at least 30 credits in their first year, they earn better grades, they are more likely to be retained from one year to the next, and they graduate at a higher rate – regardless of their level of academic preparation.

Fifteen to Finish campaigns – which originated at the University of Hawaii System, have been launched across the country, both on campuses and statewide, to encourage more students to take at least 15 credits per semester or 30 credits per year. Citing information on college affordability and time to degree, these campaigns – ranging from print advertisements on campus to creative infomercials – urge students to take the credits necessary to complete on time.

Additionally, states are implementing policy changes to encourage greater enrollment intensity, including banded tuition, in which students are charged the

same amount of tuition regardless of whether they take 15 credits or the customary 12. The incentive for students to make use of this opportunity is that enrolling in a heavier course load not only reduces the cost they pay per credit but saves all the other expenses associated with an extra semester or year on campus. At the City Colleges of Chicago, students are offered two free summer courses if they enroll in 15 credits for both the fall and spring semesters.

- Indiana: At Indiana University-Purdue University, Indianapolis, more than half of students are now enrolling in enough credits to graduate on time, up from 28% the year before. Purdue University-Calumet increased the number of students taking 15 credits from 40% in 2013 to 66% in 2014.
- Ohio: At the University of Akron, Fifteen to Finish efforts led to a 28% increase in the number of full-time freshmen taking at least 15 credit hours per semester.

24 states have either statewide or campus-based Fifteen to Finish initiatives to encourage more students to take at least 15 credits per semester or 30 credits per year.

Guided Pathways to Success (GPS)

One of the most important hindrances to timely college completion is that students often have no clear path to graduation. They are faced with hundreds of majors, countless course offerings, and far too few academic advisors. Take together, these things result in students having too many choices and not nearly enough guidance.

The result: students wander through the curriculum, taking courses that do not count toward their degrees and exhausting their financial aid. The courses they do need are often unavailable. At two-year institutions, students rack up 81 credits rather than the standard 60 credits and take 3.6 years to complete. At four-year, non-flagship institutions, students take 134 credits rather than 120 and take close to 5 years to complete. College ends up taking too long and costing too much, and too few complete.

Guided Pathways to Success (GPS) addresses these issues directly. By building highly structured degree plans as default pathways to on-time graduation, states can place every college student on a road to success. Rather than being considered “unclassified,” students can select meta-majors and are given semester-by-semester plans that lay out a clear path to completion.

- Florida: At Florida State University, degree maps combined with other GPS strategies increased on-time graduation rates from 44% to 61%. Additionally, attainment gaps have narrowed. African American, Hispanic and first-generation Pell students graduate from FSU at significantly higher rates than the national average.

- Arizona: The use of GPS strategies in Arizona State University's eAdvisor system increased on-time graduation rates by nearly 16 percentage points.
- Georgia: The use of GPS, specifically intrusive advising, at Georgia State University has wiped out attainment gaps entirely: African American and Hispanic students now graduate at higher rates than the overall student body.

Four states are working to take GPS to scale, and five states are implementing GPS in STEM. 7 cities around the country are working to implement GPS through our Community Partnerships for Attainment.

Structured Schedules

75% of today's college students are commuters, often juggling families, jobs and school. But even in the face of this "new majority," much of American higher education has gone unchanged.

Most students begin college with the expectation of attending full-time and completing within two or four years. But quickly the cold realities hit them. Remedial classes block their entrance into programs of study. The courses necessary to stay on track are not available. Bit by bit, full time becomes part time and, all too often, students become one of the 30 million who have some college credit but no degree.

While there will always be those who insist on or need to go to college part time, we must look for ways to help more students attend full time. Structured schedules – for example, going to school every day from 8 to noon or from 1 to 5 – provide daily certainty that allows for easier scheduling. Students can predict their course requirements and arrange schedule with employers and childcare providers without the complications of day-to-day and semester-by-semester alterations.

Under this Game Changer, many more students are able to manage a full-time load and completion becomes twice as likely. Additionally, structured schedules for part-time students can help them increase credit accumulation toward successful completion. States should redirect the good intentions that led to limitless part-time enrollment and make the necessary changes to deploy structured schedules across their campuses.

- Tennessee: Structured schedules have regularly produced graduation rates of 75% or higher for career certificates at the Tennessee Colleges of Applied Technology.
- New York: Structured schedules through the CUNY ASAP program have led to graduation rates double that of peers in traditional schedules.

Seven states have programs within them that currently utilize structured schedules.

Performance Funding

In the past, taxpayers in most states have supported higher education based on the number of students enrolled on or around the 12th day of the semester. Consequently, colleges and universities have had few financial incentives to prioritize student success.

Under performance funding, institutions receive state dollars based on factors such as credit accumulation, remedial student success in gateway courses, and degree completion. While institutions are still rewarded for enrollment and access, progress and success are equally valued.

To date, 26 states have implemented or are in the process of implementing performance funding. While this strategy cannot guarantee more college graduates, it can help ensure that campuses are motivated to adopt successful reforms. Simply put, money focuses minds.

Actions Congress Can Take

- Address gaps in the integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS). The current data collection system does not fully capture the needs of today's students. Data is currently unavailable regarding part-time students, transfer students, students aged 25 or older, gateway course success for remedial students, credit accumulation, time to degree, courses completion, and most importantly, the system does not track Pell students. Ultimately, IPEDS data does a very poor job of counting all students.
- Incentivize students to take 15 credits per semester. Based on a recent survey commissioned by Complete College America, most "full-time" students are not taking the credits needed to graduate on time. Federal and state policies should encourage students to take at least 15 credits per semester or 30 credits per year. For example, reinstate year-round Pell grant funding that enables students to accumulate the credits necessary to graduate on time, including allowing students to receive Pell Grant resources through 15 credits, rather than the current 12 credit limit.
- Encourage Pell grants to provide students the opportunity to complete remediation and a college-level course within their first academic year.
- Consider a Pell bonus for institutions that enroll high numbers of Pell students to help colleges do more to become high quality institutions.

- For legislation such as America's College Promise, do more to support and incentivize colleges to implement Game Changer strategies to create "high quality institutions" as referenced in the original proposal.

There are any number of innovations we can employ to move the needle on college completion, but the magnitude of these challenges requires that our reforms be structural and systemic. The Game Changers are proven strategies that lead to real and lasting results. When it comes to college completion, our nation cannot afford to wait any longer. We must take action now.