



# A REVIEW OF STATE POSTSECONDARY ATTAINMENT GOALS AND PROGRESS

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# Abstract

In 2017, New Jersey set a goal of increasing the proportion of residents with a postsecondary credential to 65% by 2025. This initiative, rooted in the necessity to meet the skills needed amid a fast-evolving job market, seeks to expand access to education and training beyond high school, and has included efforts such as financial assistance and barrier reduction to increase access and retention of postsecondary programs. This report outlines New Jersey's strategic approach while examining the national landscape of initiatives and progress undertaken by other states. It underscores key strategies, challenges, and milestones achieved in pursuing the goal. The report provides a comprehensive overview of the broader context, offers examples from selected states, and outlines New Jersey's approach to provide critical background in advance of the second report in this series, which will utilize administrative and public data to measure current benchmarks and progress toward this goal.

# Executive Summary

New Jersey embarked on an ambitious initiative in 2017 with its 65 by 25 goal, aiming to increase the percentage of its residents ages 25 to 64 with a postsecondary degree or credential to 65% by 2025. This initiative, rooted in the need for a highly educated workforce to meet the skills needed amid a fast-evolving job market, seeks to expand access to education and training beyond high school. This report outlines New Jersey's strategic approach while examining the national landscape of initiatives and progress undertaken by other states. It underscores key strategies, challenges, and milestones achieved in pursuing the common goal, providing a comprehensive overview of the broader context. The report offers insights into the innovative approaches in striving toward these educational benchmarks.

## Key Highlights

### Innovative Initiatives in New Jersey to Support the 65 by 25 Postsecondary Goal

- ▶ **College Promise:** A cornerstone of New Jersey's approach, providing significant financial support to eligible students, thus reducing the financial barriers to higher education.
- ▶ **Basic Needs Resource Hub:** Addressing non-financial barriers to education by providing students with resources to meet basic needs in order to improve retention and completion rates.
- ▶ **Some College, No Degree Initiative:** Reengaging over 790,000 New Jersey residents with some college experience but no degree, enhancing workforce qualifications, and supporting economic growth.
- ▶ **Mental Health Support:** Expanding services to address the mental health crisis among college students, improving the overall college experience, and supporting student success.



## National Landscape of Postsecondary Attainment Measurement

- ▶ **Enrollment:** Tracking the college-going rate<sup>1</sup> and the enrollment of high school students in two- and four-year programs and assessing postsecondary student readiness and enrollment trends by demographic factors, institution types, and program types.
- ▶ **Persistence and Retention:** Monitoring the first-year college retention rate/student success index and the reengagement rate of high school graduates, and evaluating credit completion rates and the average credits to a degree.
- ▶ **Completion Rates:** Analyzing the overall count of high school graduates and tracking the progress and outcomes of those who pursue higher education, and assessing annual degrees and certificates awarded, as well as the overall postsecondary completion rate.
- ▶ **Various States' Attainment Highlights:** Examining the progress of specific states like Colorado, Massachusetts, Minnesota, and Utah, this report details how each of these states not only established ambitious postsecondary educational attainment targets, but surpassed the 60% postsecondary educational attainment level mark. Through strategic initiatives aimed at closing equity gaps, enhancing student success, and linking education to workforce needs, these states highlight comprehensive approaches to elevate educational attainment and address the evolving demands of the job market.

## Introduction

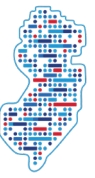
New Jersey set an ambitious goal of increasing the number of residents with a postsecondary degree or credential to 65% of the population by 2025. Rooted in the recognition of the evolving job market and the need for a highly skilled workforce, this initiative strives to enhance education and training beyond high school. In addition, it supports the growth of New Jersey's innovation economy. To examine the progress toward these ambitious goals, this report, which is the first in a two-part series, details specific programs New Jersey has implemented to achieve its postsecondary education goals, such as College Promise and the Basic Needs Resource Hub. Then, through a national landscape, it examines strategies, challenges, and initiatives implemented by other states to boost postsecondary education enrollment, persistence, and completion rates. The final section of the report provides an overview of four states — Colorado, Massachusetts, Minnesota, and Utah — that have made notable progress in advancing toward their postsecondary educational attainment goals.

### New Jersey's Attainment Goal - 65 by 25: Many Paths, One Future

In 2017, a statewide 65 by 25 goal was initiated in New Jersey aimed at increasing the percentage of residents (ages 25 to 64) with a postsecondary degree or credential to 65% by 2025 (New Jersey State Employment and Training Commission, 2017). At the time of the launch, 51% of New Jersey's workforce possessed some level of education or training beyond high school (OSHE, 2019). The Lumina Foundation (n.d.-a) estimates the postsecondary attainment rate was 58.9% in New Jersey as of 2022 for the 25- to 64-year-old age group.

The goal was established in response to the growing demand for a highly skilled workforce in a rapidly changing job market. The initiative seeks to promote education and training beyond high school and to ensure that New Jersey residents are equipped with the skills and knowledge necessary to succeed in the modern economy (OSHE, 2019).

<sup>1</sup> Defined as the percentage of high school seniors enrolling in two- or four-year degree programs shortly after graduation.



Central to this goal was the dual focus on improving college completion rates and adult enrollment, to foster balanced economic growth within the state. Evidence shows that higher education enhances employment opportunities and income potential (Ma & Pender, 2023). Bachelor’s degree holders, on average, earn substantially higher lifetime earnings compared to those with a high school diploma or an associate degree. Moreover, they face lower unemployment rates, highlighting the clear advantages of pursuing higher education (Abel & Deitz, 2019).

To actualize this vision, New Jersey adopted a long-term strategy concentrating on three pivotal areas for maximum impact:

- ▶ increasing college enrollment among high school students,
- ▶ increasing the number of working-age adults enrolled through reengagement, and
- ▶ increasing degree completion among all students, by addressing disparities in high school graduation and college enrollment to ensure equity (OSHE, 2019).

One of the key elements of the 65 by 25 initiative is to ensure that education and training beyond high school are accessible and affordable for all New Jersey residents. This includes programs that help students pay for college, such as grants and scholarships, as well as initiatives that provide support for working students and adult learners. Additionally, the initiative seeks to promote equity and ensure that underrepresented populations, such as low-income students and students of color, have access to the education and training they need to succeed in the workforce (Sell, 2022).

There are numerous other benefits to achieving the 65 by 25 goal. For individual residents, having a postsecondary degree or credential can lead to better job opportunities, higher salaries, and improved job security (Simone et al., 2023). For businesses, a highly skilled workforce can increase productivity, competitiveness, and economic growth (Blank, 2021). For the state, achieving the 65 by 25 goal can result in a stronger economy.

## **Key Initiatives to Advance New Jersey’s Attainment Goal**

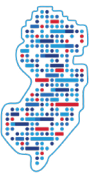
Although the attainment goal was set and formalized in 2017, it was the State Plan for Higher Education,<sup>2</sup> launched in February 2019, that laid the groundwork for OSHE and the broader educational sphere in New Jersey. The effort was led by three state agencies: OSHE, the New Jersey Department of Labor and Workforce Development (NJDOLE), and the New Jersey Department of Education (NJDOE). This plan, synchronized with Governor Murphy’s economic vision as articulated in the 2019 economic plan,<sup>3</sup> formed the backbone of a series of interconnected initiatives. These efforts are geared toward improving postsecondary success by addressing not just the academic but also the financial, logistical, and wellness barriers students face.

Some of these initiatives include College Promise; the Basic Needs Resource Hub; the Some College, No Degree initiative; and enhanced mental health support, which collectively aim to remove obstacles to higher education. By making college more accessible, affordable, and supportive of students’ holistic needs, New Jersey is working toward a future where 65% of its residents hold a postsecondary credential, ensuring the state’s workforce is prepared to meet the demands of a rapidly evolving economy. The initiatives outlined below are those that were recently implemented. New Jersey has many other innovative and successful efforts to promote postsecondary access and attainment, such as the Educational Opportunity Fund, Tuition Aid Grant, NJBEST 529 savings plan, and many local and regional student support initiatives.

<sup>2</sup> Visit <https://www.nj.gov/highereducation/stateplan.shtml> for more information on New Jersey’s state plan for higher education, *Where Opportunity Meets Innovation*.

<sup>3</sup> See <https://www.njeda.gov/economicplan/> for more information on New Jersey’s economic plan.





## College Promise

The College Promise initiative aims to make higher education more accessible and affordable across New Jersey (Higher Education Student Assistance Authority [HESAA], 2024). This program consists of two financial aid programs, used in tandem: Community College Opportunity Grant (CCOG) and Garden State Guarantee (GSG), both designed to alleviate the financial burden of tuition and fees for eligible students based on income (HESAA, 2024). Since 2019, more than 70,000 students have benefited from these programs in their pursuit of postsecondary degrees<sup>4</sup> (New Jersey Office of the Governor, 2023, April 5). To further increase the reach and number of beneficiaries of these programs, Governor Murphy's FY2024 budget proposed an expansion of \$134 million and increased the income eligibility cap from \$80,000 to \$100,000 (New Jersey Office of the Governor, 2023, April 5). This enhancement aims to extend affordable higher education access, supporting New Jersey's commitment to reducing financial barriers, reducing debt burden, and increasing postsecondary attainment.

### *Community College Opportunity Grant*

The CCOG program, a cornerstone of College Promise, underscores New Jersey's pledge to offer tuition-free community college education. Eligible students, including New Jersey Dreamers,<sup>5</sup> can pursue their initial associate degree without tuition fees or at a significantly reduced rate, depending on their household income. This last-dollar financial program<sup>6</sup> scales financial support as follows:

| Adjusted Gross Income (family's earnings) | Tuition Support  |
|---|--|
| Between \$0 and \$65,000                  | Receive full coverage for tuition and approved educational fees.                   |
| Between \$65,001 and \$80,000             | Reduced tuition costs, utilizing up to half of the maximum CCOG award.             |
| Between \$80,001 and \$100,000            | Tuition costs reduced further, applying up to one-third of the maximum CCOG award. |

Upon completing their associate degree, students are eligible to progress to a public four-year institution within New Jersey and receive further assistance through GSG (HESAA, 2024).

### *Garden State Guarantee*

The GSG program complements New Jersey's initiative to enhance higher education affordability by offering significant financial relief in tuition and fees for juniors and seniors at public four-year educational institutions. To qualify, students must pursue their bachelor's degree on a full-time basis. GSG is structured as a last-dollar program, which adjusts financial assistance based on the following scale:

| Adjusted Gross Income (family's earnings) | Tuition Support  |
|---|--|
| Between \$0 and \$65,000                  | Receive full coverage for tuition during their third and fourth years.             |
| Between \$65,001 and \$80,000             | Reduced tuition costs, guaranteeing that tuition will not exceed \$7,500 annually. |
| Between \$80,001 and \$100,000            | Tuition costs reduced further with tuition not exceeding \$10,000 annually.        |

This ensures more manageable costs for students in their final years of undergraduate study, aligning with New Jersey's commitment to making a bachelor's degree both accessible and affordable (HESAA, 2024).

<sup>4</sup> Tailored to income levels, these programs have made considerable strides in furthering New Jersey's 65 by 25 educational goals, aiding over 56,000 students through CCOG and an additional 14,000 students through GSG since 2019.

<sup>5</sup> New Jersey Dreamers are residents of the state who came to the United States without documentation.

<sup>6</sup> First-dollar programs provide scholarships and grants that students receive before any other form of financial aid is applied, which can cover tuition and potentially other educational expenses. Last-dollar programs are designed to cover the remaining tuition fees after all other forms of federal and state financial aid or scholarships have been applied.



## Basic Needs Resource Hub

In 2023, New Jersey introduced the Basic Needs Resource Hub. This online platform provides college students struggling to meet basic needs, especially low-income students of color, with essential, accessible, and actionable information to address food, housing, childcare, and transportation needs (New Jersey Office of Innovation, 2023). This initiative plays a vital role in advancing New Jersey's 65 by 25 goal by addressing non-academic obstacles to college success and completion (New Jersey Office of the Governor, 2023, November 17).

## Some College, No Degree Initiative

OSHE, in partnership with ReUp Education, launched the Some College, No Degree program to reengage more than 790,000 residents who have some college experience but have not completed a degree (OSHE, 2023, March 30). The program is working with 22 higher education institutions, and since the program's inception in 2023, more than 2,800 students have reenrolled (OSHE, 2023, December 7). By providing targeted outreach and support, New Jersey not only aids individuals in completing their degrees but also strengthens its workforce and economy. The collaboration with ReUp Education has already yielded \$8 million in recaptured tuition for participating institutions. Some College, No Degree is an important component of New Jersey's strategy to increase the proportion of residents with postsecondary credentials.

## Mental Health Support

In response to the growing mental health crisis among college students (Lowrie & Schwartzman, 2023), New Jersey allocated \$55 million in FY2023 to expand mental health services on college and university campuses (OSHE, 2023). This funding includes \$26 million from the State and Local Fiscal Recovery Fund to OSHE. Of this, \$10 million supports free mental health and wellness services for students, and \$16 million funds grants for creating community provider partnerships and professional development aimed at building multicultural competency among faculty and staff (OSHE, 2023). This initiative not only addresses the immediate mental health needs of students but also provides faculty and staff with training to recognize and respond to signs of distress among students (New Jersey Office of the Governor, 2023, October 19). By prioritizing mental wellness, New Jersey aims to enhance the overall college experience, thereby supporting student retention and success in line with the 65 by 25 goal. However, to analyze the full effect on persistence and completion rates of these programs in New Jersey, continuous monitoring and future research will be necessary to determine the long-term outcomes of such investments on postsecondary success.

## Career Accelerator Internship

Launched in May 2018 by Governor Phil Murphy, the Career Accelerator Internship grant program is designed to enhance practical training for college students across New Jersey by facilitating summer internships in key industries.<sup>7</sup> This initiative strengthens the link between postsecondary institutions and local employers, thereby improving the educational and career prospects of students. Employers participating in this program can receive funding covering up to 50% of the wages paid to interns, with a cap of \$3,000 per student, which promotes the creation of high-quality, experiential learning opportunities (OSHE, 2023, August 1).

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<sup>7</sup> Internship opportunities within the New Jersey Career Accelerator Internship grant program include, but are not limited to: agriculture, architecture and interior design, biopharmaceutical and life sciences, construction and energy, finance, healthcare, information technology, manufacturing, and media and entertainment (OSHE, 2022a).



Additionally, the program strategically aligns educational outcomes with the state's economic needs, particularly in the science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) fields. In recognition of the crucial role that STEM education plays in sustaining economic competitiveness, NJDOL expanded the program in 2019. This enhancement increased funding incentives for businesses to hire interns in critical sectors such as information technology/software, life sciences, healthcare, and energy, fostering a robust integration of academic learning with industry experience (OSHE, 2022a). By integrating students into the workforce through these internships, the program not only supports New Jersey's economic agenda but also contributes to the 65 by 25 goal.

## Hunger-Free Grant

The Hunger-Free Campus Grant Program addresses food insecurity on college campuses across New Jersey. With \$1 million allocated in Governor's Emergency Education Relief funding, this program underscores the state's commitment to supporting students facing nutritional challenges. It offers grants ranging from \$40,000 to \$100,000 per institution, aimed at developing sustainable solutions to student hunger and enhancing existing campus services that address this critical issue (New Jersey Office of the Governor, 2021, February 24).

In 2022, OSHE expanded the program to include both public and independent public mission institutions, reflecting a comprehensive approach to tackling food insecurity that affects a wide range of students. Moreover, as of 2023, the program had awarded \$4 million to institutions, aiding 50,000 students, thereby ensuring that students have the necessary support to achieve academic success (New Jersey Office of the Governor, 2022, November 12).

## Adult Students in Transition

The Transition to Adult Life initiative, guided by the Office of Special Education within NJDOE and aligned with the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, is designed to ensure that all children with disabilities receive a free public education that meets their unique needs and prepares "them for further education, employment, and independent living" (NJDOE, 2023). Key strategies of the program include person-centered planning, community-based instruction, and systematic instruction in real-world settings — essential for effectively integrating students into their communities and the workforce (NJDOE, 2023).

In response to educational disruptions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, in July 2022, OSHE enhanced this initiative by establishing County College-Based Centers for Adult Transition with a \$4.5 million state investment. This funding aims to assist students with intellectual and developmental disabilities in making a smooth transition from secondary school to postsecondary environments and independent living. The centers offer crucial services, including mentoring, job coaching, and skills training, to promote independence and employability (New Jersey Office of the Governor, 2022, July 2). These efforts not only support students with disabilities in overcoming educational and transitional challenges but also contribute strategically to New Jersey's broader educational goals.

## Dual-Enrollment Grant Initiative

The Innovation Dual Enrollment Pilot program, launched in 2023 by NJDOE in collaboration with OSHE, aims to expand dual-enrollment opportunities across the state. This competitive grant program, endowed with \$500,000 for its inaugural year, targets high schools with at least 40% economically disadvantaged students that have established partnerships with accredited New Jersey institutions of higher education. It provides local educational agencies with funding between \$50,000 and \$150,000 to start or enhance dual-enrollment programs that foster high student participation, especially among underrepresented groups. The maximum award amount eligibility, based on grade 9 to 12 enrollments, is summarized below:



| Local Educational Agency<br>Grades 9 to 12 Student Enrollment | Maximum Award<br>Eligibility |
|---|------------------------------|
| Greater than 2,000  | \$150,000                    |
| 501 to 2,000  | \$100,000                    |
| Fewer than 500  | \$50,000                     |

These innovative dual-enrollment strategies are designed to facilitate seamless transitions for high school students into higher education, equipping them for future employment and aligning with New Jersey’s 65 by 25 goal to increase the proportion of residents with postsecondary credentials. The initiative promises increased access to college courses, enhanced readiness for college-level work, and reduced college tuition costs. Ultimately, this program supports the development of a skilled workforce, crucial for sustaining New Jersey’s economic competitiveness in key industries, including STEM (NJDOE, 2023, October 10).

### **Mandatory Financial Aid Application for High School Graduation in New Jersey**

In January 2024, Governor Phil Murphy signed a bill requiring all public high school and charter school students in New Jersey to complete a financial aid application to qualify for graduation starting with the 2023-24 11th-grade class. Beginning with the 2023-24 cohort of 11th graders, students and their guardians must submit either the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) or the New Jersey Alternative Financial Aid Application as a prerequisite for receiving their diplomas. This legislative measure aims to ensure that financial constraints do not hinder students from pursuing higher education. By mandating the completion of financial aid forms, New Jersey aims to make college more accessible and affordable, particularly benefiting students from economically disadvantaged backgrounds. The law is a key component of New Jersey’s strategic efforts to expand college access (New Jersey Office of the Governor, 2024, January 16).

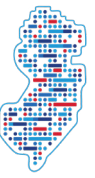
### **New Jersey Gaining Early Awareness and Readiness for Undergraduate Programs (GEAR UP)/College Bond as Well as New Jersey College Readiness Now Program**

Since its inception in 1999, the GEAR UP initiative has sought to improve college readiness, designed to increase college attendance and success among economically disadvantaged students. In 2019, the initiative received a significant financial enhancement with a \$35 million grant from the U.S. Department of Education, disbursed as \$5 million annually over seven years (OSHE, 2019). The GEAR UP program has had over 75% of its participants advancing to college, highlighting its effectiveness in equipping students for postsecondary education (OSHE, 2022b). By 2023, the program had expanded to include Atlantic City, Bridgeton, Camden, Jersey City, Newark, Paterson, Penns Grove-Carneys Point, Pleasantville, and Trenton, ensuring a wider reach.

Collaborating with several prominent higher education institutions, including New Jersey City University, New Jersey Institute of Technology, Rowan University, and Stockton University, GEAR UP offers a broad array of support services. These include after-school and Saturday tutoring, summer programs, mentoring, counseling, test preparation, and college visits. The program also provides financial aid information and promotes rigorous academic preparation in secondary education to facilitate a smooth transition to higher education (OSHE, 2022b).

In addition, New Jersey’s College Readiness Now program is funded by OSHE and administered by the New Jersey Council of County Colleges to support community and county college initiatives to work with high schools to improve college readiness. These initiatives include locally designed collaborative partnerships between community/county colleges and high schools and offer programming in math and/or English to prepare students for college courses. Additional programming provides transition or bridge courses to improve study and test-taking skills (New Jersey Council of County Colleges, n.d.).

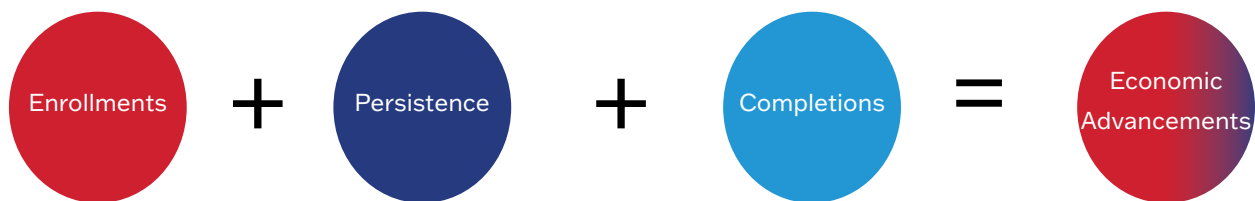




New Jersey's pursuit of the 65 by 25 goal uses a multifaceted approach addressing financial, logistical, and wellness barriers for students. While the highlighted programs, including CCOG and GSG, exemplify recent implementations, it is essential to recognize that New Jersey has an array of other efforts like the Educational Opportunity Fund and Tuition Aid Grant, NJBEST 529 savings plan, along with various local and regional student support initiatives, contributing to the broader vision of equitable and inclusive postsecondary access and attainment.

## Exploring the National Landscape

In the pursuit of advancing education and workforce development and meeting the nationwide college completion goal set by the Lumina Foundation<sup>8</sup> (Nettles, 2017) that 60% of Americans hold degrees, certificates, or other high-quality postsecondary credentials by 2025, numerous states across the nation have undertaken initiatives like New Jersey's 65 by 25 campaign. These initiatives, driven by the recognition of the pivotal role education plays in economic growth and individual opportunity, aim to elevate postsecondary educational attainment rates.



This section presents an overview of these postsecondary goals and the measures utilized by various states across the nation to gauge their progress. These measures relate to enrollment, persistence, and completion, including high school completion rates, postsecondary enrollment, college completion rates, and retention rates. Together, these factors drive economic advancement, reflecting the interconnectedness of educational success and economic prosperity. States assess these components in conjunction with demographic variables such as race, ethnicity, gender, and subgroups — including low-income students, students with disabilities, and English language learners — to ensure a comprehensive evaluation of progress.

Furthermore, this section explores the diverse initiatives and resources that states have put in place to support students in their pursuit of these educational goals. These programs include financial aid and grants, free tuition, grants for the purchase of tuition and training programs, online learning programs, flexible scheduling, internships, dual-enrollment programs, and scholarships.

### Enrollments

Increasing enrollment is a key strategy to boost postsecondary educational attainment rates (McLoughlin, 2023). According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2023), combined enrollments for two- and four-year postsecondary degrees in the United States declined slightly from 41% in 2010 to 39% in 2022, led by a decline in two-year college enrollment rates, decreasing from 12.9% to 8.5% during the same period. In contrast, four-year institution enrollment rates exhibited slight growth, increasing from 28.2% in 2010 to 30.5% in 2022 (National Center for Education Statistics, 2023). This downward trend in postsecondary enrollment was observed before the pandemic.

<sup>8</sup> In 2009, following the Great Recession, the United States set a goal for 60% of the U.S. population between the ages of 25 and 34 to achieve an associate degree or higher by 2020. Concurrently, the Lumina Foundation also set a goal for having 60% of the U.S. population between the ages of 25 and 64 earn a postsecondary certificate, associate, or bachelor's degree by 2025 (Nettles, 2017).



In the fall of 2021, total postsecondary enrollment declined by 2.7% (476,100 students), amounting to a total two-year decline of 5.1% (937,500 students) since the start of the pandemic (National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, 2021). Fall 2021 enrollment declined in all states except Arizona, Colorado, New Hampshire, and South Carolina (National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, 2021)

In a recent educational census, the top states with the highest number of postsecondary enrollments include California, New York, and Texas. On the other end of the spectrum, states like Alaska, Vermont, and Wyoming have the least enrollments, with Alaska having just 20,929 students enrolled. In terms of percentage of the population, the District of Columbia and New Hampshire stand out with 14.85% and 14.18% of their populations enrolled as students, respectively. Conversely, Alaska again finds itself on the lower end, with only 2.86% of its population enrolled as students (McLoughlin, 2023).

## Measuring Statistics and Monitoring

To effectively assess and enhance postsecondary enrollment, states use diverse metrics that help track the progress made toward postsecondary enrollment levels. These metrics include the college-going rate, which tracks the percentage of high school seniors enrolling in two- or four-year degree programs shortly after graduation. Such data, segmented by demographics, parental education levels, and program types, provide valuable insights into the factors influencing postsecondary access and readiness. Measures also examine student readiness through average American College Testing scores and statewide enrollment trends across various institution types and student demographics. Additionally, measures focusing on adult reengagement in education, postsecondary aspirations among high school students, and the engagement of disconnected youth offer a comprehensive view of the educational landscape. These efforts aim to identify barriers to entry, monitor progress toward higher education goals, and devise strategies that address the unique needs of all learners, ensuring broader access to and success in postsecondary education. Insights drawn from these can offer valuable lessons on improving access and educational outcomes within the postsecondary landscape.

This study included a national scan of postsecondary attainment goals and measures used to track performance. Table 1 outlines selected metrics being used to measure postsecondary enrollment across the United States.

Table 1: Postsecondary Enrollment Metrics

|   |
|---|
| <b>College-Going Rate</b>   |
| <b>High School Students Enrolled in Two- and Four-Year Programs</b>   |
| Percentage of high school seniors enrolled in a two- or four-year degree program within six months of graduation. This helps determine how delayed enrollment reduces the likelihood of completing a degree on time.                      |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>▶ By demographics (gender)</li><li>▶ By parental educational attainment (first generation and second generation)</li><li>▶ By program type (two- and four-year programs)</li></ul>                  |
| <b>Postsecondary Student Readiness</b>  |
| This looks at the postsecondary enrollment by academic achievement using average American College Testing composite score as proxy. American College Testing scores are a common proxy for student readiness for postsecondary education. |



Table 1: Postsecondary Enrollment Metrics (continued)

|  |
|--|
| <b>Postsecondary Enrollment</b>  |
| This looks at the state enrollment data for community, technical, colleges, and universities. It examines enrollment in postsecondary degrees, including certificates and associate, bachelor's, master's, doctoral, and professional degrees. It explores data trends by year and semester.   |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>▶ By demographic factors (gender, race/ethnicity)</li><li>▶ By major type (community, technical, colleges, and universities)</li><li>▶ By program type (two- and four-year programs)</li><li>▶ By course load (full time, part time)</li><li>▶ By student type (first time in college, not first time in college)</li><li>▶ By 99 academic programs (Classification of Instructional Programs codes)</li><li>▶ By institution name</li><li>▶ By economically disadvantaged students, students with disabilities, and English language learners</li></ul> |
| <b>Adult Enrollment</b>  |
| Reengagement of adults (between the ages of 25 and 60) to enroll in undergraduate two- and four-year institutions by students who are between the ages of 25 and 64. It looks at the number of post-traditional students. <sup>9</sup>   |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>▶ By demographic factors (age, gender)</li><li>▶ By program type (two- and four-year programs)</li><li>▶ By student type (full time, part time)</li></ul>  |
| <b>Postsecondary Aspiration<sup>10</sup></b>   |
| <b>Postsecondary Aspiration Rate</b>   |
| The aspiration rate is defined as the percentage of high school seniors who report that they plan to continue their studies and enroll in a credential program or training within six months of graduating high school.  |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>▶ By demographic factors (gender)</li><li>▶ By parental educational attainment (first generation and second generation)</li><li>▶ By counties (regional differences)</li></ul>   |
| <b>High School Students Pursuing Postsecondary Credit</b>  |
| This looks at the percentage of high school students enrolled in secondary programs such as dual enrollment, early college, or fast forward, to gain postsecondary credit.   |
| <b>Adult Learners Aspirations</b>  |
| This looks at the number of individuals between the ages of 25 and 60 without a credential of value who are interested in starting or completing one.  |
| <b>Opportunity Youth</b>   |
| This measure looks at disconnected youth who are defined as between the ages of 16 and 24 who are neither in school nor working. It looks at their unemployment and out-of-school rates.   |
| <b>Non-Working, Not in School</b>  |
| This measure looks at the percentage of young adults between the ages of 18 and 24 and teenagers between the ages of 16 and 19 who are not in school or working and who have a high school degree as the highest credential.   |

<sup>9</sup> Post-traditional students are adult learners, full-time employees, low-income students, students who commute to school, and working parents (Advance Vermont, 2023).

<sup>10</sup> The data on aspirations is collected in Vermont from the non-random senior survey that the Vermont Student Assistance Corporation collects every two years from Vermont high school seniors attending public and private high schools. Student participation is voluntary but encouraged (Vermont Student Assistance Corporation, 2023).



## Initiatives

States across the nation are deploying a range of initiatives to boost postsecondary education enrollments. Such multifaceted initiatives underscore the commitment of states to not only expand access to postsecondary education but also improve the preparedness of their students for the demands of college. These initiatives pertain to enhancing college awareness, readiness, and access for students from diverse backgrounds. Programs like GEAR UP and Advancement Via Individual Determination target early exposure to college, aiming to bridge the educational gap for students from underrepresented or low-income families by offering academic tutoring, financial aid workshops, and college advising. Similarly, dual-enrollment and early-college high schools allow high school students the opportunity to earn college credits, encouraging a seamless transition to higher education. Moreover, financial aid programs, including the federal Pell Grant and state-specific initiatives like the California Adult Education Program, aim to make college more accessible and affordable, particularly for adult learners and those who might not immediately pursue higher education after high school. These multifaceted efforts reflect a broad commitment to expanding access to postsecondary education, highlighting the importance of comprehensive support systems in achieving higher education goals.

Table 2 presents various state-led initiatives aimed at increasing postsecondary enrollment, highlighting programs focusing on early college awareness, readiness, and financial support mechanisms designed to bridge the educational gap and support diverse student needs.

**Table 2: Initiatives Implemented to Enhance Postsecondary Enrollments**

|  |
|--|
| <p><b>Enhance College Awareness and Preparedness Among K–12 Students</b></p> <p>Programs are aimed at increasing college awareness among students from an early age.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▶ GEAR UP</li> <li>▶ College Connection Program</li> </ul>   |
| <p><b>College Readiness</b></p> <p>These programs ensure that high school students enroll in rigorous courses, better equipping them for the challenges of higher education. These include academic tutoring, mentoring programs, college advising and exploration workshops, and support services (to prepare students for college entrance exams and the application process).</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▶ Advancement Via Individual Determination</li> <li>▶ Upward Bound</li> <li>▶ TRIO Programs</li> </ul> |
| <p><b>Dual-Enrollment Programs</b></p> <p>These initiatives allow eligible high school students to enroll in courses at public colleges while simultaneously earning credit toward their high school diploma and future college degree.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▶ Dual Enrollment/Concurrent Enrollment</li> <li>▶ Early College High Schools</li> </ul>  |
| <p><b>Financial Aid and Scholarship Programs</b></p> <p>Many states offer robust financial aid and scholarship programs to make higher education more accessible and affordable for students.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▶ Federal Pell Grant</li> </ul>   |
| <p><b>Adult Education Programs</b></p> <p>States are investing in adult education and literacy programs to provide opportunities for adults who did not pursue higher education immediately after high school.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▶ California Adult Education Program</li> </ul>  |



## Persistence

The pursuit of postsecondary education is marked by persistence challenges that vary notably across demographic groups. Students from diverse racial backgrounds, as well as full-time employees, veterans, and those with responsibilities as caregivers, often encounter unique barriers to retention. Furthermore, first-generation college students may lack the familial guidance that can be instrumental in navigating the academic environment. What they require is a system that offers adaptability, affordability, and readiness to cater to their unique requirements.

Data from the National Center for Education Statistics show that across all 50 states and the District of Columbia, the overall retention rate for first-time, full-time, degree-seeking undergraduate students entering four-year degree-granting institutions in the fall of 2019 was 82% in the fall of 2020 (Irwin et al., 2022).<sup>11</sup> In contrast, the retention rate for first-time, full-time, degree-seeking undergraduate students who entered two-year degree-granting institutions in the fall of 2019 was 61% during the same period (Irwin et al., 2022).

Additionally, the National Student Clearinghouse's (2020) persistence and retention report states that for students who enrolled between the fall of 2018 and the fall of 2019, the retention rate was 67% (more than 1.7 million individuals were retained at their initial institution). These statistics encompass full- and part-time students starting at various institution types, including two- and four-year, public and private, for-profit, and nonprofit institutions (National Student Clearinghouse, 2020).

There is variation among states in retaining students who first entered postsecondary education over the age of 24. In 2021, those with the highest persistence rates were the District of Columbia (63%), Ohio (61%), New York (56.2%), Georgia (56%), and South Dakota (55.5%). This district and these states have shown remarkable success in supporting the persistence and retention of non-traditional students, a significant demographic in higher education. On the other hand, states with low retention rates include Alaska, Mississippi, Nevada, New Mexico, and West Virginia (National Student Clearinghouse, 2023).

## Measuring Statistics and Monitoring

Several key metrics are used by states to track student persistence and retention. These include tracking the first-year college retention rate, reengagement rates for high school graduates entering postsecondary education, as well as other measures such as the high school-to-college dropout rate, enrollment figures for high school graduates in colleges, and credit completion rates — annual and average credits toward a degree. Analyses can be further disaggregated by institution type, program of study, and student demographics like gender, race/ethnicity, and income.

Table 3 outlines the metrics being utilized by various states to track and analyze postsecondary persistence and retention.

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<sup>11</sup> For more detailed insights, refer to the "Completion and Graduation Rates" chapter in the National Center for Education Statistics' report, *Condition of Education 2022*, available at: [https://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/pdf/2022/ctr\\_508.pdf](https://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/pdf/2022/ctr_508.pdf)



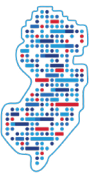


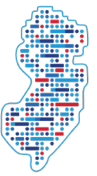
Table 3: Metrics for Monitoring Postsecondary Persistence and Retention

|   |
|---|
| <p><b>Retention Rates (Massachusetts Strategic Equity Agenda, Washington Path to 70, Pathways to Opportunity: The Virginia Plan)</b></p> <p><b>First-Year College Retention Rate</b></p> <p>This metric assesses the percentage of first-year college students who continue into their second year at the same institution, providing insights into student persistence and institutional effectiveness in supporting students.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▶ By institution type (all colleges, including community colleges)</li> <li>▶ By program of study</li> </ul> <p><b>Student Success Index</b></p> <p>This measures student retention beyond the first term and into the second academic year, focusing on whether students remain at the same institution.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▶ By same institution</li> </ul> <p><b>Reengagement Rate (Washington Path to 70, One Utah)</b></p> <p><b>High School Transition</b></p> <p>This set of measures tracks the transition of high school seniors into degree programs, highlighting the number of individuals with high school degrees to enroll in a postsecondary degree program.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▶ Number of public high school graduates who attended college</li> </ul> <p><b>High School-to-College Dropout Rate (Tennessee Drive to 55)</b></p> <p>This rate examines the percentage of high school graduates who enroll in college but do not continue their education, offering critical data on dropout rates and potential barriers to college completion. It also includes the overall number of public high school graduates attending college, aiding in the assessment of college-going trends.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▶ High school-to-college enrollment</li> </ul> <p><b>Credit Completions Rate (Massachusetts Strategic Equity Agenda)</b></p> <p>Focusing on the rate of credit accumulation, this measure evaluates the annual credit course completion rate, average credits to degree attempted, and first-year college credit accumulation.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▶ By demographic factors (gender, race/ethnicity, and income)</li> </ul> |
|---|

## Initiatives

States nationwide are also implementing strategies to enhance persistence and retention rates in postsecondary education. These efforts demonstrate dedication not only to retaining students but also to supporting their successful navigation through the challenges of higher education. By focusing on measures that address both academic and non-academic barriers, states are working to ensure students are not only enrolled but are also positioned for success and completion.

These efforts range from coaching, mentoring, and tutoring services aimed at underserved populations and student loan borrowers, to innovative financial aid programs designed to alleviate barriers related to childcare and emergency needs. For instance, programs like the Intervention for College Attendance Program Grants and Utah's Refer a Student program focus on individualized support and referral systems to reengage learners. Additionally, leveraging data for early intervention, as seen with the Purdue Early Intervention Information Technology System and the University of Missouri System, allows institutions to proactively address academic challenges. Also, efforts to support returning students, such as the Kentucky Council on Postsecondary Education's Adult Learner Initiative, along with student success programs like the Buff Undergraduate Success initiative and Utah's 15 to Finish program, underscore a comprehensive strategy to foster a culture of completion. These programs contribute to a supportive educational ecosystem, ensuring students not only remain in their studies but also thrive



toward timely graduation. Table 4 highlights a selection of innovative initiatives across the United States designed to augment postsecondary persistence and retention rates. These initiatives focus on various areas, addressing both academic and non-academic challenges, such as coaching and mentoring services, financial aid programs, and adult learner support programs.

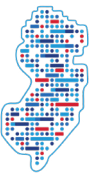
Table 4: Initiatives to Enhance Postsecondary Persistence and Retention

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| <b>Coaching, Mentoring, and Tutoring Services</b>  |
| These programs provide support services to those historically underserved and student loan borrowers to gain the skills needed to graduate.  |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>▶ Intervention for College Attendance Program Grants</li><li>▶ Utah's Refer a Student Program</li></ul>  |
| <b>Financial Aid and Scholarships Programs</b>   |
| Such financial aid and scholarship programs aim to support students who experience financial barriers affecting their attendance/persistence, including those who are using childcare, etc.  |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>▶ Postsecondary Child Care Grant</li><li>▶ Emergency Assistance for Postsecondary Students Grant Program</li></ul>   |
| <b>Early Intervention Using Data</b>   |
| These systems leverage data to identify students who may be at risk of academic challenges and provide them with specific strategies and support to enhance their academic performance.  |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>▶ Purdue's Early Intervention Information Technology System</li><li>▶ University of Missouri System Number</li></ul>   |
| <b>Support of Returning Students</b>   |
| Designed to recruit, retain, and graduate returning students, these programs offer incentives, personalized support, and tailored action plans for academic success.   |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>▶ Kentucky Council on Postsecondary Education Adult Learner Initiative</li></ul>   |
| <b>Student Success Programs</b>  |
| These programs focus on enhancing undergraduate student success (degree completion, timely graduation) through cross-campus collaborations, uniting faculty, staff, and various departments to implement programs and processes aimed at students. |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>▶ Buff Undergraduate Success Initiative</li><li>▶ Utah's 15 to Finish Program</li></ul>  |

## Attainment

In today's job market, over 80% of rapidly growing sectors like healthcare, STEM, education, and government services require postsecondary education (Joubert, 2020). This level of education not only leads to higher earnings but also facilitates students with their loan repayment. The National Student Clearinghouse (2022) reports a 62.3% completion rate for students who started college in 2016 and graduated by June 2022, closely mirroring the 62.2% rate for students who started college in 2015. These numbers underscore the importance of postsecondary education for career prospects and financial stability, highlighting the need for states to redouble their efforts to improve graduation rates.

In 2008, Hawaii became the first state to establish a postsecondary degree or certificate attainment goal for its population (Herder, 2023). Following this pioneering move, 47 states set their own attainment goals, ranging from 40% to 70%. Notably, the percentage of U.S. adults ages 25 to 64 holding college degrees, certificates, or industry-recognized certifications has risen from 33.1% in 2009 to 53.7% in 2021 (Lumina Foundation, n.d.-b).



Since 2019, every state and the District of Columbia and Puerto Rico has witnessed growth in the proportion of individuals ages 25 to 64 possessing associate degrees or higher. The Lumina Foundation’s tracking tool indicates that 40 states and the District of Columbia now have 50% or more of their adult populations holding postsecondary credentials (Lumina Foundation, n.d.-b).

Among those surpassing the 60% national attainment goal, the District of Columbia has the highest rate at 75.4%, followed by Colorado (62.9%), Massachusetts (62%), Utah (61.5%), and Minnesota (60.6%). Meanwhile, New Jersey secures eighth position at 58.9%. In contrast, states with lower attainment rates include Nevada (42.7%), West Virginia (45.4%), Arkansas (46.2%), Mississippi (46.6%), and Alabama (46.9%) (Lumina Foundation, n.d.-b). Ultimately, attaining a postsecondary credential or degree is the primary goal of these initiatives.

## Measuring Statistics and Monitoring

Multiple metrics are used for educational outcomes, including the total number of high school graduates, persistence and success rates of college-going high school graduates, and postsecondary completion rates across different demographics and institutions. Additional analyses include the time required to complete degrees and the overall number of credentials earned, with a particular focus on underrepresented minorities. This aims to uncover and address disparities in educational attainment.

Table 5 outlines postsecondary attainment metrics being used by various states to track and analyze postsecondary persistence and retention.

**Table 5: Key Metrics for Evaluating Postsecondary Educational Attainment**

|   |
|---|
| <p><b>Annual Degrees and Certificates Awarded (the Virginia Plan)</b></p> <p>Tracks the annual issuance of postsecondary credentials, including certificates and associate or higher degrees among adults between the ages of 25 and 64.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▶ By institution type (public/private)</li> </ul> |
| <p><b>Time to Completion (Connecticut)</b></p> <p>Measures the duration students take to complete their postsecondary education within 150% of normal time.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▶ By age, gender, and race/ethnicity/county/credential</li> <li>▶ By institution, sector, and program of study</li> </ul>      |
| <p><b>Total Credentials Completed (Colorado Rises)</b></p> <p>Tracks the total number of postsecondary credentials awarded.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▶ By demographics (race/ethnicity, income, region, and gender)</li> <li>▶ By locality</li> <li>▶ By underrepresented minority<sup>12</sup></li> </ul>          |

<sup>12</sup> "Underrepresented minority" consists of the following racial/ethnicity groups: Native American, Alaska Native, Black/African American, and Hispanic.



## Initiatives

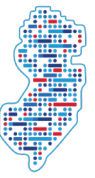
To support the goal of increasing postsecondary attainment, states are implementing a broad spectrum of initiatives aimed at improving academic achievement by providing support for adult learners, enhancing access to financial aid, and connecting education with workforce needs.

For instance, the Massachusetts Completion Incentive Grant rewards students for academic milestones, and the District of Columbia's Adult College and Credentials Initiative offers tailored support for adults aiming to resume their educational journeys. Programs like the FAFSA Completion Initiative simplify the financial aid application process, making college more accessible. Moreover, workforce development programs, such as Ohio's Innovative Workforce Incentive Program, establish direct links between education and in-demand career opportunities, ensuring students gain relevant, marketable skills. Initiatives like Amplifying Ohio's Pathways to Graduation focus on bridging educational gaps exacerbated by the pandemic, ensuring equitable access to education, and facilitating the completion of degrees and credentials. Collectively, these initiatives underscore a strategic approach to enhancing student performance, supporting lifelong learning, and preparing a skilled workforce to meet the evolving needs of the economy.

Table 6 offers an overview of initiatives undertaken by states to promote postsecondary attainment. Focused on areas such as academic achievement, adult education support, financial aid accessibility, workforce development, and educational equity, these initiatives represent targeted efforts to enhance student success and align education with labor market demands.

Table 6: State-Led Initiatives for Enhancing Postsecondary Attainment

|  |
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| <b>Academic Achievement Incentives</b>   |
| These initiatives aim to enhance student performance and degree completion by offering financial incentives based on academic success criteria such as credit completion, grade point average, and continuous enrollment, as well as utilization of campus support services                              |
| ▶ Massachusetts Completion Incentive Grant   |
| <b>Adult Education and Career Advancement Support</b>  |
| Programs under this category are tailored to assist adult learners in resuming their education and obtaining degrees or certifications. They provide the necessary flexibility and specialized support for adults returning to the educational system.   |
| ▶ The District of Columbia's Adult College and Credentials Initiative  |
| <b>Financial Aid Access and Completion Support</b>   |
| This category encompasses initiatives designed to encourage and facilitate the completion of financial aid applications, which is a pivotal step in securing funding for higher education, thereby supporting academic progression and completion.   |
| ▶ FAFSA Completion Initiative  |
| <b>Workforce Development and Credentialing Programs</b>  |
| These programs focus on bridging the gap between education and the labor market by fostering partnerships that create pathways to in-demand jobs and equipping students with the credentials needed to succeed in high-growth industries.  |
| ▶ Ohio's Innovative Workforce Incentive Program  |
| <b>Educational Equity and Graduation Pathway Enhancement</b>   |
| Initiatives are aimed at providing resources to educational entities to develop and expand graduation pathways. They address educational disparities exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, ensuring all students have equitable access to the competencies required for graduation and career readiness. |
| ▶ Amplifying Ohio's Pathways to Graduation   |



# Overview of Selected States

Among the states committed to enhancing postsecondary educational attainment, several stand out as noteworthy examples. Colorado, Massachusetts, Minnesota, and Utah have made significant progress. Notably, each has exceeded the 60% mark, surpassing the national average of 54.3% (Lumina Foundation, n.d.-b). This section highlights the aforementioned states for their strategic approaches to achieving high levels of postsecondary education among their populations. It delves into the specific goals set by each state, outlines the metrics used to track progress, and examines the wide range of initiatives implemented to support their educational objectives.

## Colorado - Colorado Rises

The Colorado Rises plan is centered on elevating the statewide attainment rate to 66% by 2025, while focusing on reducing attainment gaps among students from underserved communities. This plan is guided by a comprehensive framework of four strategic objectives. The primary objective is to increase credential completion, closely followed by the critical mission to eliminate disparities in educational equity, improve student success rates, and channel resources into affordability and innovation initiatives.

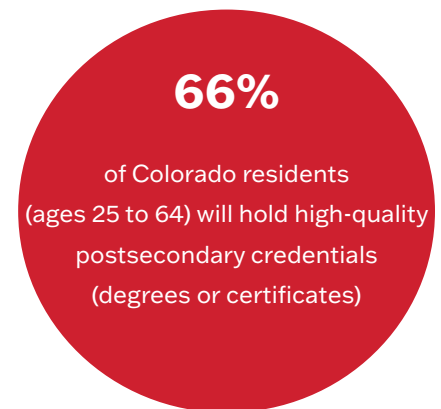
State Attainment Goal

66%



Current Attainment

60.5%

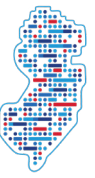


|                                |                   |                         |                              |
|--------------------------------|-------------------|-------------------------|------------------------------|
| Strategic Goal #1              | Strategic Goal #2 | Strategic Goal #3       | Strategic Goal #4            |
| Increase Credential Completion | Erase Equity Gaps | Improve Student Success | Affordability and Innovation |

Note: Attainment goals referenced in this figure have been retrieved from the Lumina Foundation's Stronger Nation Dashboard.

To effectively monitor progress, the plan incorporates a set of complementary performance metrics. These metrics encompass key indicators such as the completion of undergraduate credentials across diverse ethnic groups, the success of Pell Grant-eligible students, the advancement of underrepresented minorities, and the retention rate of undergraduate students (Colorado Department of Education, 2019).



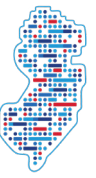


## Measuring Statistics Used

- ▶ Undergraduate credentials completed;
- ▶ Undergraduate award counts;
- ▶ Undergraduate credentials by underrepresented minority;
- ▶ Consists of the following racial/ethnicity groups: Native American, Alaska Native, Black/African American, and Hispanic; and
- ▶ Undergraduate retention rate (Colorado Department of Education, 2019).

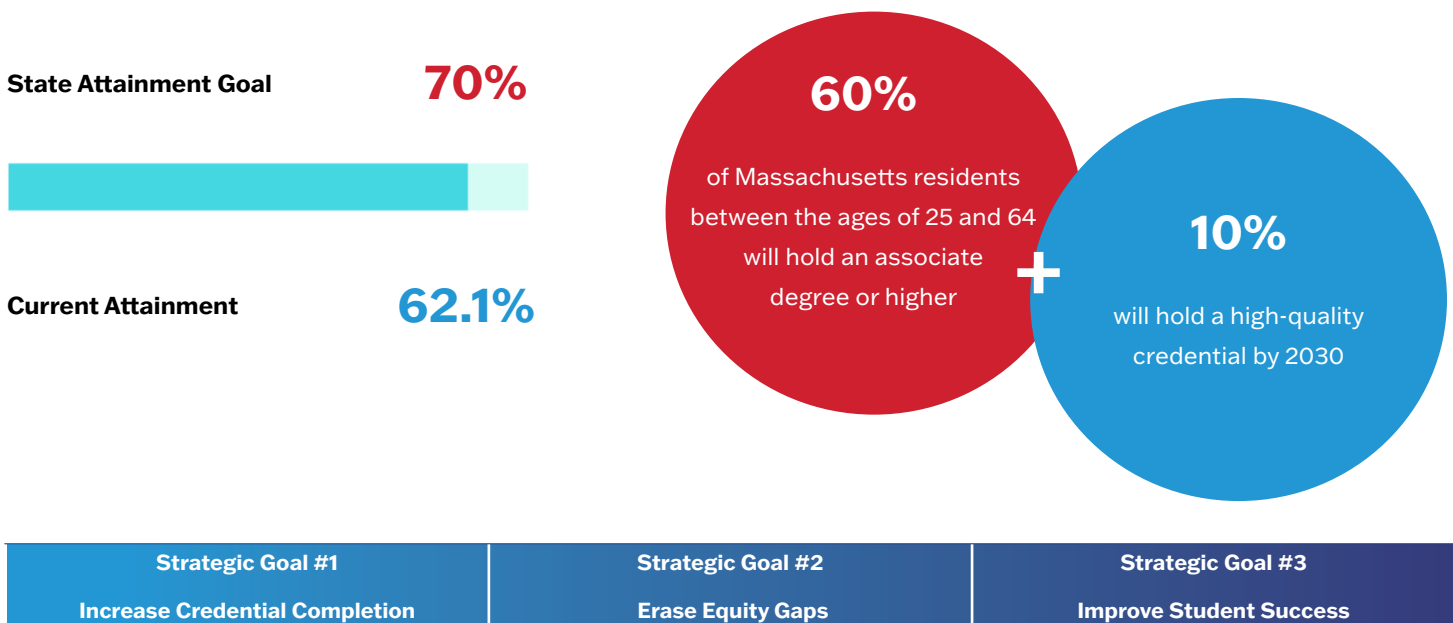
## Initiatives to Promote the Goal

- ▶ **Postsecondary and Workforce Readiness:** Supports Colorado students in developing competencies for success in postsecondary settings and career pathways through personalized education and career planning.
- ▶ **Colorado Re-Engaged Initiative:** Permits four-year higher education institutions in Colorado to award an associate degree to students who have stopped out with at least 70 credit hours, helping to improve their employment prospects and educational achievement.
- ▶ **Accelerating Students Through Concurrent Enrollment:** Offers Colorado students a fifth year of high school to earn college credits at no cost, alongside the Career Development Success Program, which rewards districts for students graduating with career experiences or credentials.
- ▶ **Care Forward Colorado:** Invests in zero-cost short-term healthcare credentials for students, with additional funding, expanding support for credentials in high-demand fields like construction and education.
- ▶ **GEAR UP:** A federally funded program aimed at increasing the number of low-income students prepared for postsecondary education through comprehensive support services starting in the ninth grade.
- ▶ **CollegeInvest:** Offers Colorado families various tax-advantaged 529 college savings plans and financial planning tools, alongside scholarship and grant programs for lower- to middle-income families.
- ▶ **College Opportunity Fund:** Provides a stipend to eligible undergraduate Colorado students to pay a portion of in-state tuition at participating colleges.
- ▶ **Path4Ward:** Enables early high school graduates from low-income households to access funding for postsecondary education or approved workplace learning programs during what would have been their fourth year of high school.
- ▶ **FosterEd Program:** Covers the total cost of attendance for qualifying students who were in foster or non-certified kinship care in Colorado, ensuring they can pursue higher education without financial burden.



## Massachusetts - The Vision Project and Strategic Equity Agenda

Massachusetts has set a postsecondary attainment goal to increase the percentage of residents between the ages of 25 and 64 with a postsecondary credential to 70% by 2030. This goal is in alignment with the broader statewide commitment to enhancing educational attainment and workforce development. At its core, this initiative aims to equip individuals with the essential skills and knowledge necessary for success in an ever-evolving economy. In doing so, it not only fuels economic growth but also enhances overall quality of life and bolsters the state's competitiveness in the workforce (Massachusetts Department of Higher Education & Deloitte, 2022).

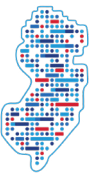


Note: Attainment goals referenced in this figure have been retrieved from the Lumina Foundation's Stronger Nation Dashboard.

Massachusetts pursues this goal through a multifaceted approach, including education reform, robust financial aid programs, and strategic partnerships between educational institutions and industries (Massachusetts Department of Higher Education & Deloitte, 2022). Furthermore, this effort places a strong emphasis on achieving racial equity. It is a pivotal component of the Massachusetts Department of Education's comprehensive plan known as the Strategic Plan for Racial Equity, which was enacted in 2018 (Massachusetts Department of Higher Education, 2022).

### Measuring Statistics Used

- ▶ Annual credit course completion rate,
- ▶ First-year retention rate, and
- ▶ Number of annual degrees and certificates awarded.

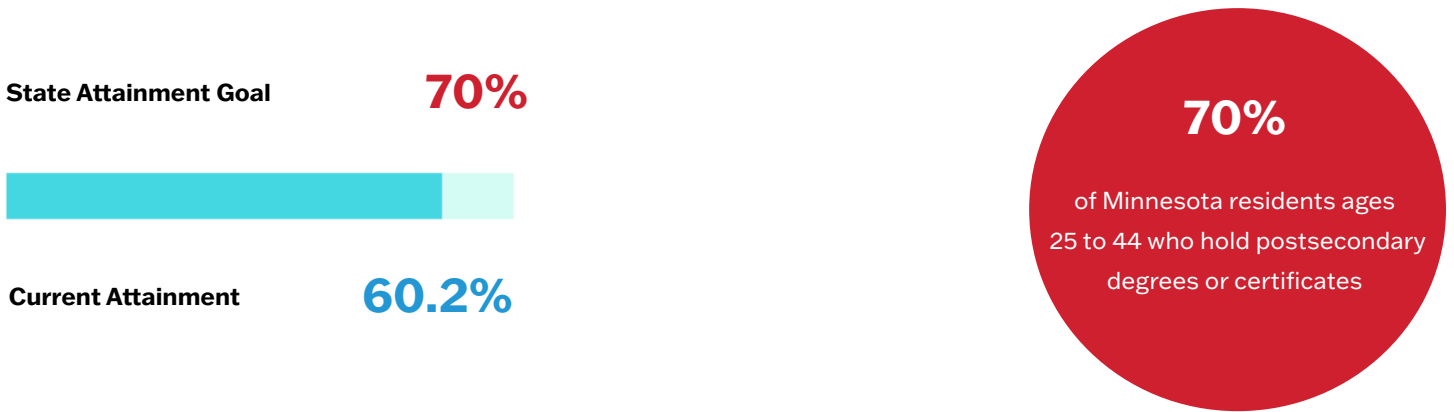


## Initiatives to Promote the Goal

- ▶ College Connection Program and GEAR UP:<sup>13</sup> Increases awareness of college for K-12 students.
- ▶ MassCore: Increases college readiness by ensuring high school students enroll in rigorous courses.
- ▶ Commonwealth Dual Enrollment Program: Enables eligible high school students to take courses at public colleges, simultaneously earning credit for their high school diploma and future college degree.
- ▶ Completion Incentive Grant: Offers incentive grants of up to \$2,000 a year to students who meet a threshold for credit completion and grade point average each semester, maintain continuous enrollment, and use campus support services.
- ▶ Massachusetts College Access Challenge Grant Program: Established by the U.S. Department of Education, aims to increase college access for underrepresented and low-income students, offering states resources to address the specific needs of these populations.
- ▶ Bridges to College: Initiated by the Massachusetts state legislature in 2013, enhances adult college transition services, aiming to elevate the number of low-income, underrepresented adult workers entering and succeeding in postsecondary education by providing support for academic preparation and college completion.

## Minnesota - Educational Attainment Goal 2025: Educating for the Future

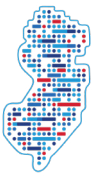
Minnesota embarked on a transformative educational journey in 2015, setting forth a bold vision for the future. The state's goal is to see 70% of its adult residents ages 25 to 44 equipped with postsecondary certificates or degrees by 2025. This aspiration extends beyond traditional degrees, embracing a wide spectrum of credentials, including certificates, apprenticeships, and recognized certifications. Minnesota's educational agenda is strategically focused on enriching the skills and competencies of its workforce to meet the demands of a rapidly evolving job landscape (Minnesota Office of Higher Education, 2021)



|   |  |  |  |  |
|---|--|--|--|--|
| <b>Strategic Goal #1</b><br>Increase Educational Attainment | <b>Strategic Goal #2</b><br>Enhance Workforce Skills | <b>Strategic Goal #3</b><br>Economic Competitiveness | <b>Strategic Goal #4</b><br>Diverse Credential Options | <b>Strategic Goal #5</b><br>Collaboration and Partnerships |
|---|--|--|--|--|

*Note: Attainment goals referenced in this figure have been retrieved from the Lumina Foundation's Stronger Nation Dashboard.*

<sup>13</sup> According to the U.S. Department of Education (2024), "GEAR UP provides six- or seven-year grants to states and partnerships to provide services at high-poverty middle and high schools."



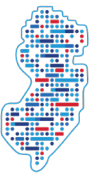
To turn this vision into reality, Minnesota has laid out a comprehensive framework of strategic objectives. Its primary aim is to foster increased educational attainment among adults ages 25 to 44, driving participation in postsecondary education and training programs. The state is dedicated to aligning educational curricula with the ever-changing needs of industries and employers to ensure that its workforce remains adaptable and highly skilled. This commitment to education extends to boosting the state's economic competitiveness by attracting businesses, nurturing innovation, and catalyzing economic growth. By offering diverse educational pathways and fostering collaboration among educational institutions, employers, and communities, Minnesota is steadfastly working toward achieving its postsecondary education goals and securing a prosperous future for its residents (Minnesota Office of Higher Education, 2021).

### Measuring Statistics Used

- ▶ Overall educational attainment, ages 25 to 44, by basic racial groups;
- ▶ Count and percentage of the population, ages 25 to 44 with a certificate or higher credential, by basic racial groups; and
- ▶ Educational attainment for associate degree or higher credential disaggregated by detailed racial/ethnicity groups, 2022 estimates.

### Initiatives to Promote the Goal

- ▶ **Statewide Coaching Service:** The Minnesota Office of Higher Education, in collaboration with the nonprofit InsideTrack, "will build a statewide coaching service to help first-time student loan borrowers stay on track and complete their degrees" (InsideTrack, 2021).
- ▶ **Minnesota 529 College Savings Plan:** The Minnesota Office of Higher Education partners with the Teachers Insurance and Annuity Association of America to manage tax-advantaged savings accounts, aiding families in preparing for future postsecondary education costs.
- ▶ **Get Ready:** Through a GEAR UP grant, the Minnesota Office of Higher Education's Get Ready initiative tackles racial disparities in postsecondary outcomes by delivering evidence-based interventions to enhance college readiness, bridging connections between schools, communities, and the workforce for sustained impact.
- ▶ **Postsecondary Enrollment Options:** Enables 10th to 12th graders to earn college credit at no cost while in high school, offering courses on college campuses and online, facilitating advanced academic progress before high school graduation.
- ▶ **Minnesota Goes to College:** Two major initiatives — College Knowledge Month to aid college applications in October and Minnesota College Goal for FAFSA completion support — aim to equip every high school senior, especially those from underrepresented groups, with the resources to apply to college.
- ▶ **Pipeline Project Dual Training Grants:** Initiated by Minnesota's legislature to bolster dual-training and apprenticeship opportunities, this program provides grants to employers for the development of such programs, enhancing vocational education and workforce readiness.
- ▶ **Financial Aid/Grants:** The Minnesota Office of Higher Education administers numerous financial aid programs, including the state grant, childcare grants, work study, American-Indian scholarships, occupational scholarships, dual training, and the Minnesota Student Educational Loan Fund program.



## Utah - One Utah

Utah's educational vision aims to empower 66% of its adult population, ages 25 to 64, with postsecondary credentials by 2030. Its mission revolves around the core principles of accessibility, timeliness, and the pursuit of meaningful degrees and awards. To accomplish this transformative mission, Utah has strategically outlined a set of goals that drive its educational agenda forward. These objectives encompass enhancing educational opportunities, increasing college-going rates, boosting degree completion, and aligning education with high-demand careers (Governor's Education Excellence Commission, 2017).



|   |  |   |  |
|---|--|---|--|
| <b>Strategic Goal #1</b><br>Enhance Educational Opportunities | <b>Strategic Goal #2</b><br>Increase College-Going Rates | <b>Strategic Goal #3</b><br>Boost Degree Completion | <b>Strategic Goal #4</b><br>Align Education with High-Demand Careers |
|---|--|---|--|

*Note: Attainment goals referenced in this figure have been retrieved from the Lumina Foundation's Stronger Nation Dashboard.*

Intricately woven into Utah's educational blueprint are specific targets, including a 10% increase in three-year college-going rates, a parallel growth of 10% in six-year degree completion rates, and a 20% increase in the conferment of awards closely aligned with high-demand careers over the span of a decade. Additionally, Utah has placed a steadfast focus on addressing equity gaps, ensuring that underrepresented students receive the support and opportunities they deserve to succeed. Utah's commitment to these objectives serves as a beacon, guiding the state toward a future where education is accessible, responsive, and inclusive, ultimately fostering the success of its diverse population.

### Measuring Statistics Used

- ▶ Adults/residents ages 25 to 64 with a high-quality certificate or higher;
- ▶ Adults/residents ages 25 to 64 with an associate degree or higher;
- ▶ High school graduates by race/ethnicity;
- ▶ High school graduates going directly to college;
- ▶ Retention from first year to second year;
- ▶ Graduation within 150% of normal time;





- ▶ Postsecondary awards conferred by public, private, and nonprofit institutions by level;
- ▶ Postsecondary certificates by Utah public institutions; and
- ▶ Associate/bachelor's degree production in Utah public institutions.

### Initiatives to Promote the Goal

- ▶ **GEAR UP Utah:** A transformative initiative that provides crucial mentoring and active learning opportunities aimed at preparing students for high school graduation, fostering a college-going mindset, and ensuring successful transition and persistence in postsecondary education.
- ▶ **15 to Finish:** Launched by the Utah System of Higher Education, this campaign encourages students to enroll in 15 credits per semester to facilitate on-time completion of degrees, highlighting that full-time enrollment leads to better grades and faster graduation, with the incentive of paying the same tuition for 15 credits as for 12 credits.
- ▶ **Opportunity Scholarship:** Designed to motivate high school students in Utah to undertake advanced courses in preparation for college, offering financial aid to cover tuition and fees after other state aids, with an annually set maximum award amount.
- ▶ **Utah Promise Grant:** A statewide scholarship aimed at enhancing higher education accessibility for Utah residents by offering financial support to those demonstrating financial need, ensuring broader access to postsecondary opportunities.
- ▶ **Adult Learner Grant Program:** Provides targeted financial assistance to adult learners pursuing designated online programs in fields of critical industry need, supporting non-traditional students in completing their education for enhanced career prospects.

## Conclusion

This report highlights several postsecondary educational attainment goals and programs and offers insights from Colorado, Massachusetts, Minnesota, and Utah as examples for their innovative approaches to promoting educational success and workforce readiness. These states show the benefits of setting educational benchmarks and providing accessible, affordable pathways to higher education for all citizens. Colorado's strategic plan for enhancing credential completion, Massachusetts's commitment to equity-focused education reform, and the ambitious goals and inclusive policies of Minnesota and Utah underscore the critical importance of aligning educational initiatives with modern economic demands.

Building on New Jersey's success and incorporating further lessons from these other states offers valuable insights for New Jersey's postsecondary attainment goal. For example, New Jersey's College Promise and initiatives like the Basic Needs Resource Hub mirror successful strategies employed nationally, targeting both financial and non-financial barriers to education. Furthermore, New Jersey's focus on reengaging the "some college, no degree" demographic aligns with a broader recognition of this group's potential to contribute to the state's economic and educational goals. By adopting such a holistic



approach that addresses comprehensive financial support and systemic challenges, New Jersey not only moves closer to reaching its 65 by 25 postsecondary objective but also contributes to setting a new benchmark for educational excellence and equity in the United States.

The second and final part of this report series provides a landscape assessment of New Jersey's postsecondary attainment, defines measures using the New Jersey Statewide Data System, and proposes a strategy for monitoring and reporting progress toward the goal going forward.

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## About the New Jersey Statewide Data System

The [New Jersey Statewide Data System](#) (NJSDS) is the State of New Jersey's centralized longitudinal data system for education and workforce data. Its mission is to safely use the state's existing administrative data for evidence-based policymaking. Developed in 2012 through a grant from the U.S. Department of Education, NJSDS creates a single place where state education, postsecondary education, employment, and workforce longitudinal data are securely stored to help stakeholders make data-informed decisions to improve student learning and labor market outcomes. The data system is owned by the State of New Jersey and operated by the John J. Heldrich Center for Workforce Development at Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey. NJSDS is a collaboration between the New Jersey Office of the Secretary of Higher Education, the New Jersey Department of Labor and Workforce Development, the New Jersey Department of Education, and the New Jersey Higher Education Student Assistance Authority.

## About the Heldrich Center for Workforce Development

The [John J. Heldrich Center for Workforce Development](#) at Rutgers University is devoted to transforming the workforce development system at the local, state, and federal levels. The center, based at the Edward J. Bloustein School of Planning and Public Policy, provides an independent source of analysis for reform and innovation in policymaking and employs cutting-edge research and evaluation methods to identify best practices in workforce development, education, and employment policy. It is also engaged in significant partnerships with the private sector, workforce organizations, and educational institutions to design effective education and training programs. It is deeply committed to assisting job seekers and workers attain the information, education, and skills training they need to move up the economic ladder.

As captured in its slogan, "Solutions at Work," the Heldrich Center is guided by a commitment to translate the strongest research and analysis into practices and programs that companies, community-based organizations, philanthropy, and government officials can use to strengthen workforce and workforce readiness programs, create jobs, and remain competitive. The center's work strives to build an efficient labor market that matches workers' skills and knowledge with the evolving demands of employers.