

College Access and Success:

State Higher Education Leaders Call for One Million More Postsecondary Graduates per Year

The next President of the United States has a unique – and challenging – opportunity to lead the nation in securing American higher education’s competitive edge. This means not only ensuring that more students have access to college, but that many more make it through to graduation. It also means making the investments necessary to sustain and extend our scientific and technological prowess.

In an open letter to the two major party presidential candidates, the chief higher education leaders from the states spell out the competitive threat American higher education faces, and outline the specific leadership actions the next president should take, in partnership with states, schools, and colleges, to ensure that higher education is more successful in driving our economy, ensuring social mobility, and keeping the nation globally competitive.

State of Higher Education in the United States

- **Falling behind.** While our adult population in every age group led the world in educational attainment a decade ago, the United States is now tenth in the percentage of young adults with a postsecondary credential. Most countries are rapidly increasing attainment in younger generations, and 55 percent of young adults in the leading Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) countries are projected to have an associate’s degree or higher by 2025. Just 40 percent of American 25-to-34 year olds now have an associate degree or higher.

By the end of the next President’s 1st term:

- The United States will have 3 million more jobs requiring a bachelor’s degree and not enough college graduates to fill them;
- Ninety percent of the fastest-growing jobs, 60 percent of all new jobs, and 40 percent of manufacturing jobs will require some form of postsecondary education; and
- Global competition will demand research and innovation on a scale that even the U.S. is not yet prepared to support.

***“Despite high participation and enrollment rates,
(the U.S. has) the worst degree-completion rate
among developed nations.”***

- SHEEO Letter to Candidates

- **Research at risk.** A decade ago U.S. research universities were virtually unchallenged in attracting the world’s most gifted scholars. Today, universities around the globe are rapidly developing world-class scientific and technical capacity, offering attractive educational and research opportunities to the world’s most accomplished scholars. This increased competition puts our research preeminence at serious risk.

Why Did This Happen?

Our higher education system is falling behind for a variety of reasons that the nation must address with urgency.

- **Academic preparation for college is inadequate.** Only one-third of high school students graduate on time, ready for college and work. More than half the freshmen at many colleges take one or more remedial courses.
- **Financial aid is complex and poorly targeted.** Every year, one million low-income students don’t apply for financial aid because they lack information about the process or find it too difficult to navigate.
- **Student success is not a priority.** Many low-income and first-generation college students attend community colleges and less-selective public universities that have too few resources to invest in student success.
- **Our research preeminence is threatened.** Foreign universities are attracting more of their own top students, and many who choose American institutions often return home upon graduation to live and work rather than stay in the United States.

***“Educational attainment and excellence in discovery and innovation
must be a unified national agenda – a partnership, not a tradeoff.
We must have both, or in the long run we will have neither.***

- SHEEO Letter to Candidates

The Solution: More Degrees and Better Research Support

The U.S. needs to produce 16 million more graduates with associate's or bachelor's degree by 2025 to match today's leading industrialized nations. That means setting an ambitious but achievable goal of ensuring our colleges graduate an average of one million more students with degrees or certificates every year from now thru 2025. This achievement alone would improve the talent pool available for research universities. Also immigration reform, together with greater federal investments in science and technology, is needed to maintain our research superiority.

How to Get There

To achieve these goals, SHEEO recommends a series of concrete steps that must be taken by states, colleges, and the federal government, *inspired by the commitment and leadership of the next President*. These include:

- **Targeting low-income and first-generation students.** Ensuring that those who are the least likely to succeed in college complete their degree programs in a timely manner would be the fastest and most effective way to generate one million more degrees each year. To achieve this, states should allocate greater public resources to community colleges and regional four-year institutions, while also providing adequate need-based financial assistance.
- **Overhauling financial aid.** The notoriously complex Free Application for Federal Student Aid, or FAFSA, should be revised so that most required data can be transferred directly from the federal income tax form. States and institutions must cooperate in achieving aid simplification. The Department of Education should publish a financial aid table, explaining how average levels of aid from different programs can finance a college education. The Pell Grant should be targeted on students' basic living costs rather than tuition, to highlight the responsibility of states and colleges to moderate tuition and fees and to provide tuition aid to low-income students. Finally, the confusing array of federal tuition tax credits should be replaced by a single refundable tax credit for middle- and lower-middle-income students.
- **Improving data.** The federal government should help states develop information systems that can track students' progress and determine whether they are at risk of dropping out. To better measure the knowledge and skills of our workforce, the federal government should finance state-level samples of learning measures such as the National Assessment of Adult Literacy, the Program for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies, and the twelfth grade National Assessment of Educational Progress.

*“We have to improve not just the quantity
but the quality of college degrees.”*

- SHEEO Letter to Candidates

- **Sustaining innovation.** With other nations poised to challenge America’s preeminence in science and technology, the federal government should increase its investment in both the research and development of the nation’s pool of talented scientific investigators. And because drawing on the global talent pool will remain necessary for maintaining our competitive edge, we must balance the need for effective security screening with immigration policies that enable us to attract and retain top minds from around the world.

National imperative to be second to no other nation in:

- The educational attainment of young adults; and
- The discovery of new knowledge and innovative applications of knowledge.

Summary

The aspirations and performance of American higher education, which led the world in the past century, no longer measure up to rising global standards. To reestablish and secure our college and university system as second to none in attainment and innovation, the state higher education leaders believe the next administration must acknowledge the rising global challenge and lead the nation in responding. These issues are vitally important to our nation’s future, and SHEEO members stand ready to work in partnership with the new president on these urgent reforms.

The full text of the Open Letter, “Second to None in Attainment, Discovery, and Innovation: The National Agenda for Higher Education” may be found on www.sheeo.org.

SHEEO, the national association of the chief executives of statewide governing boards and coordinating boards for postsecondary education, works to assist its members and the states in developing and sustaining excellent systems of higher education.



3035 Center Green Drive, Suite 100 • Boulder, CO 80301-2205 • 303-541-1600 • Fax: 303-541-1639
Email: sheeo@sheeo.org • www.sheeo.org