

Developing 20/20 Vision on the 2020 Degree Attainment Goal:

The Threat of Income-Based Inequality in Education

“I ask every American to commit to at least one year or more of higher education or career training. This can be community college or a four-year school; vocational training or an apprenticeship. But whatever the training may be, every American will need to get more than a high school diploma. And dropping out of high school is no longer an option. It’s not just quitting on yourself, it’s quitting on your country — and this country needs and values the talents of every American. That is why we will provide the support necessary for you to complete college and meet a new goal: *by 2020, America will once again have the highest proportion of college graduates in the world.*”

PRESIDENT OBAMA, FEBRUARY 24, 2009, ADDRESS TO A JOINT SESSION OF CONGRESS

Developing 20/20 Vision on the 2020 Degree Attainment Goal: The Threat of Income-Based Inequality in Education

Improving college degree attainment is essential as the United States seeks to remain economically competitive in a globalized marketplace. As the economy continues to evolve and become increasingly more complex, it is critical that our education system provides our youth with the skills, ingenuity, and critical thinking abilities that can stimulate and maintain the economy as we advance in the 21st century. Understanding this need, President Obama has identified education as a key component of his Administration's agenda. In the President's February 24, 2009 address to a Joint Session of Congress, he announced his goal for the United States to become once again the nation with the largest percentage of college-educated citizens in the world. This goal will require raising the percentage of Americans ages 25 to 64 with a college degree from 41.2% to nearly 60.0% (OECD, 2010). However, at the current pace, projections using the U.S. Census Bureau's Current Population Survey suggest that only 46.4% of Americans in the target age group will have earned a college degree by 2020, leaving the nation nearly 24 million degrees shy of the 60% target rate.¹ The Pell Institute for the Study of Opportunity in Higher Education argues in this brief that income-based inequality in educational attainment is a central obstacle to achieving the 2020 goal and that decreasing income-based attainment gaps must become a central focus of federal education policy. Additionally, we offer four federal policy recommendations that address the challenge of income-based disparities in degree attainment.

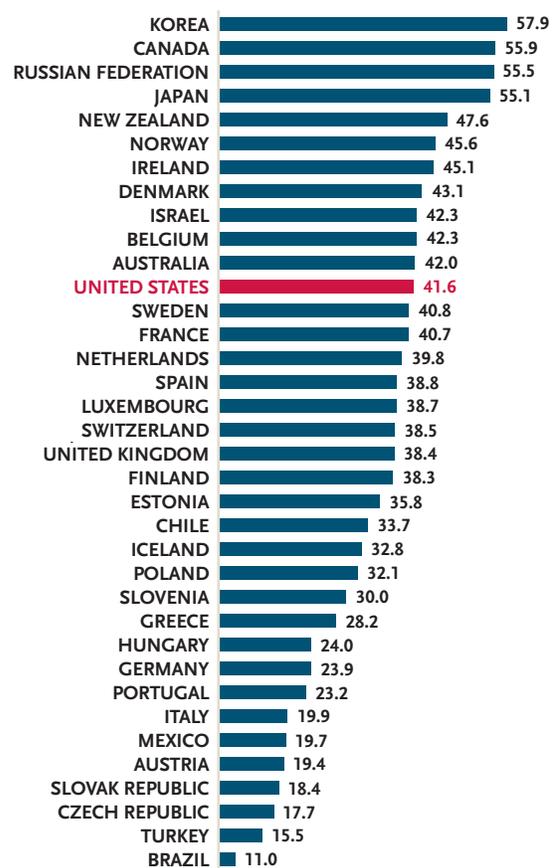
Background

Increased scrutiny of college degree attainment is related to concern over the nation's ability to remain competitive in an economy that is becoming more globally inclusive and complex. Many believe the nation's standing and competitiveness is being jeopardized as numerous countries begin and continue to surpass the United States in degree attainment. According to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD, 2010), the United States ranks 12th out of 36 developed countries in the number of 25- to 34-year-old adults with some

type of college degree (see Figure 1).² OECD data indicate that an increasing number of countries will catch or surpass the United States in tertiary degree attainment in coming years due to the lack of progress in educational attainment among the younger segment of adult Americans compared to their same-age peers in other countries (OECD, 2010).

FIGURE 1

Percentage of Population (age 25 to 34) with a Tertiary Degree by Country (2008)



Source: OECD, 2010

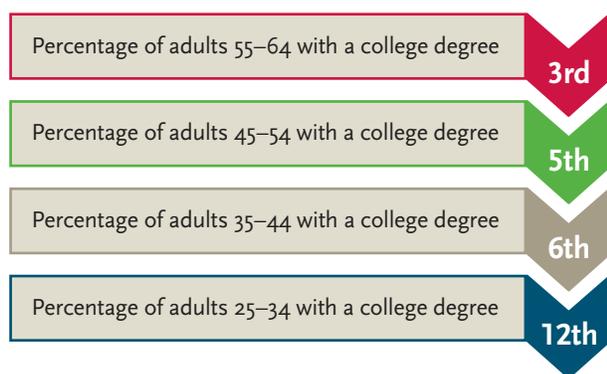
¹ The annual percent change in degree attainment from 2000 to 2009 was 0.47%. The 2020 degree attainment figure of 46.4% was calculated by projecting a 0.47% yearly increase in degree attainment from 2010 to 2020. The 2009 rate of 41.2% was the baseline rate on which projections were based.

² OECD defines degree attainment (tertiary attainment) as the share of the population with a tertiary-type B (equivalent to an associate's degree), tertiary-type A (includes some bachelor's degrees and master's degrees), or an advanced research degree (equivalent to the doctorate).

Overall, the United States is positioned 5th in degree attainment among adults (ages 25 to 64), but this ranking is largely a product of the attainment gap between Americans who are 45 to 64 years of age and their peers in other developed countries. The United States is one of only four countries included in the OECD analysis with degree attainment rates that are similar for 25- to 34-year-old and 55- to 64-year-old adults. The United States' degree attainment rate has leveled over the past 30 years, while degree attainment in other countries has dramatically increased. Figure 2 illustrates the decline in the United States' OECD ranking in educational attainment by age group.

FIGURE 2

Decline in the United States' OECD Ranking in Educational Attainment by Age Group



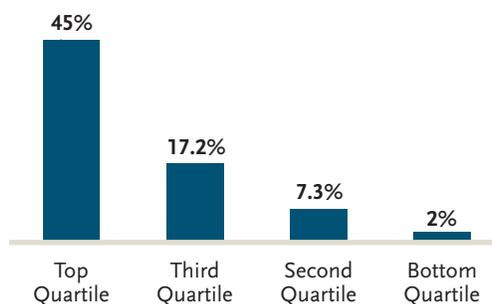
Source: OECD, 2010

Income-Based Inequality in Degree Attainment

The nation's failure to keep pace with other countries in educational attainment among 25- to 34-year-old adults can largely be traced to our inability to adequately educate individuals from families in the bottom half of the income distribution. Tom Mortenson's (2010a, 2010b) analysis of bachelor's degree attainment by age 24 among dependent 18- to 24-year-old adults (nearly half of all 18- to 24-year-olds) reveals that over the past 30 years, degree attainment rates have steadily increased for students from families in the top half of the income distribution and remained fairly constant for students from families in the bottom half. Figure 3 shows the dramatic gains in bachelor's degree attainment since 1977 by students from families in the top two quartiles as compared to relatively stagnant attainment rates of students from families whose income falls in the bottom two quartiles (Mortenson, 2010a).

FIGURE 3

Change in Estimated Bachelor's Degree Attainment Rate by Age 24 by Family Income Quartile from 1977/79 to 2007/09



Source: Mortenson, 2010

According to Mortenson's analysis of U.S. Census Bureau data (2010b), the bachelor's degree attainment rate by age 24 for dependent students was 30.3% in 2009. Using these data, we were able to calculate that the bachelor's degree attainment by age 24 for dependent students from the bottom half of the income distribution was 12.0%. However, their counterparts from the top half of the income distribution attained bachelor's degrees at a 58.8% rate. This differential represents an astonishing 46.8% gap in bachelor's degree attainment based on family income. Similarly large discrepancies in bachelor's degree attainment by family income have also been documented by the Advisory Committee on Student Financial Assistance (ACSFA – 2006, 2010).

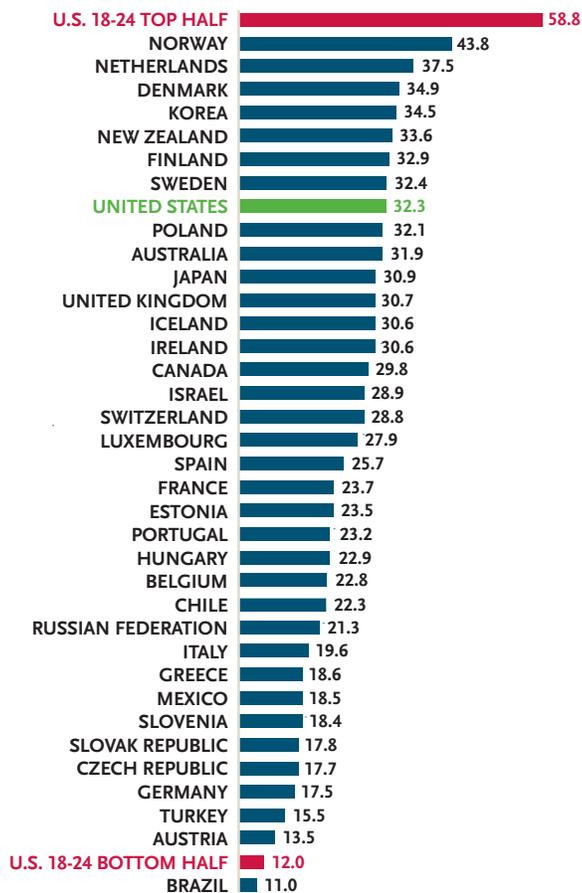
Juxtaposing the figures derived from Mortenson's analysis of bachelor's degree attainment with the OECD rankings on tertiary-type A (bachelor's degree) attainment for adults ages 25 to 34 reveals interesting results (see Figure 4).³ OECD rankings place the United States 8th in tertiary-type A attainment among 25- to 34-year-old adults. However, if all Americans attained bachelor's degrees by age 24 at the same rate as individuals from the top half of the income distribution (i.e., 58.8%), the United States would currently have the highest share of bachelor's degree recipients in the world. This current bachelor's degree attainment rate of 58.8% would be more than enough to achieve the Administration's goal of becoming the nation with the highest share of college graduates by 2020. On the other hand, if all Americans attained bachelor's degrees by age 24 at the same rate as students from the bottom half of the income

3 Tertiary-type A degrees are considered reasonably equivalent to U.S. bachelor's degree. For more details, reference the glossary of Education at a Glance, 2010 (p.57) — www.oecd.org/dataoecd/44/7/43642148.pdf.

distribution (12.0%), the United States would be nearly last in OECD bachelor's degree attainment rankings.⁴

FIGURE 4

Percentage of Population (age 25 to 34) with a Tertiary-Type A Degree by Country with U.S. Bachelor's Degree Attainment by 24 by Upper and Lower Income Half



Adapted from: OECD (2010) & Mortenson (2010)

These data depicted in Figure 4 show that reducing the income-based gap in bachelor's degree attainment will, in time, enable the United States to become the nation with the largest share of college graduates. Our estimates suggest that closing this attainment gap could lead to an additional 3.6 million bachelor's degrees attained by age 24 per cohort of 18- to 24-year-old dependent students from the bottom half of the income distribution. Additionally, closing the bachelor's degree

gap would likely produce additional degrees and credentials as students engage in postsecondary education. However, most federal education policy discussions of the 2020 goal neglect the issue of reducing income-based disparities in educational attainment through targeted intervention for students from low-income and working-class families. Without such targeted action, it is likely that the 2020 goal will remain more of an improbable aspiration instead of a practical objective.

Reaching the goal will require various efforts, but improving educational opportunity, academic success, and degree attainment for low-income and working-class students must be a central component of efforts to achieve the 2020 goal. However, the 2020 goal is rarely articulated in a manner that places the emphasis on improving the educational experiences of students from low-income and working-class families. The American education system is rather effective for children from middle- and upper-income families (ACSFA, 2006, 2010). In addition to having the advantages afforded by their socioeconomic status, these students are also the beneficiaries of state and local education systems that typically direct more resources and more experienced teachers to their schools. Federal education policy should seek to offset these advantages and empower the disadvantaged. Thus, if federal policymakers are serious about achieving the 2020 goal, they must construct policies, implement strategies, and financially invest in programs that exclusively focus on assisting the students, teachers, and schools in the low-income and working-class communities that have the fewest resources and need the most assistance.

Limitations

OECD's annual publication, *Education at a Glance*, has been criticized for lacking comparative consistency and context regarding educational structures and population demographics (Adelman, 2009). Also, while the OECD data we highlight examines bachelor's degree attainment of 25- to 34-year-old adults, Mortenson's analysis examines bachelor's degree attainment by age 24. We acknowledge this comparison is not ideal. However, over time, degree attainment by age 24 largely shapes degree attainment of 25- to 34-year-old adults since the majority of bachelor's degrees conferred come from the traditional pipeline, even though many current efforts are focusing on improving degree attainment for adult learners. Additionally, Mortenson's data yields a calculated estimate from U.S. Census Bureau data and is not a true attainment rate – see Mortenson (2010a, 2010b) for more detail.

⁴ Independent students were not included in the analysis because their current income does not always reflect their socioeconomic status.

Recommendations

Set and track goals to reduce income-based disparities on key educational outcomes related to the 2020 goal

Achieving the 2020 goal will be dependent on the nation's ability to decrease income-based disparities on a number of key education outcomes. In addition to the overarching national goal of increasing degree attainment, smaller goals and strategies dedicated to reducing income-based gaps should be developed. These goals should include, but not be limited to, decreasing the income-based disparities in high school graduation, college enrollment, and degree attainment. Moreover, these goals should address concerns about inequities in the types of institutions in which students enroll and the types of degrees these students earn. If we are expected to reach the 2020 goal, low-income and working-class students cannot be primarily tracked to two-year and for-profit institutions, where attendance drastically reduces the likelihood of degree attainment, especially bachelor's degree attainment (ACSFSA, 2010).

Yearly progress on these indicators should be tracked in a manner that allows for analysis by family income or socioeconomic status. Disaggregation of data by race/ethnicity has become a common practice, but data indicating differences based on family income or socioeconomic status are less frequently published and made easily accessible. The disaggregating of outcome data by family income quartile, free and reduced price lunch status for K-12 students, and Pell Grant receipt for college students must become standard practice. These data must be publicly available in a format that allows for easy access, interpretation, and analysis. These data will be useful information that can inform federal policy decisions.

Funnel federal dollars, such as Title I funds, to the low-income, underperforming students that need it most

Data clearly identify schools that are producing many of the dropouts and non-college enrollees. In *Building a Grad Nation* (2010), it was reported that approximately 1,750 high schools, labeled dropout factories, produce roughly 50% of the nation's dropouts. Additionally, in 2008, more than two million students were found to attend high schools with graduation rates below 50%. Attending these schools where students rarely graduate or persist to their senior year (i.e., promoting power⁵)

⁵ Promoting power compares the number of high school seniors (12th graders) in a school to the number of high school freshmen (9th graders) that attended the school three years earlier. It is designed to estimate the proportion of high school students who advance to senior class standing.

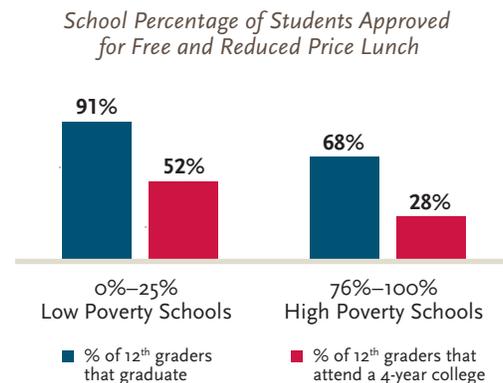
are high percentages of students receiving free and reduced price lunch. In their 2004 report, *Locating the Dropout Crisis*, Balfanz & Letgers concluded:

Poverty appears to be the key correlate of high schools with weak promoting power. Majority minority high schools with more resources (e.g., selective programs, higher per pupil expenditures, suburban location) successfully promote students to senior status at the same rate as majority white schools. (p. v)

Students who do achieve senior status at high-poverty schools find themselves less likely to complete high school and enroll in college than their peers at more affluent schools. As shown in Figure 5, only about 68% of high school seniors in high-poverty high schools graduate, and fewer than 30% go on to enroll in college. In comparison, seniors in low-poverty schools achieve a graduation rate of 91% and a college enrollment rate of 52%.

FIGURE 5

High School Senior Graduation Rate & 4-year College Enrollment Rate by School Percentage of Students Approved for Free or Reduced Price Lunch (2007/08)



Source: Aud, et al., 2010

Given the impact of concentrated poverty in schools, federal policymakers must be more strategic about structuring policy in ways that shift significant resources that have a systemic and sustainable impact toward the schools with students that need the most assistance. Title I, Part A of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act is designed to serve this purpose by providing school districts with federal funds to provide educational services to students from low-income families. Districts are eligible to receive four Title I grants (i.e., Basic Grants, Concentration Grants, Targeted Grants, and Education Finance Incentive Grants) based upon the number and percentage of low-income students served.

Title I legislation stipulates that the formulas for the Basic Grants, Concentration Grants, and Targeted Grants, roughly 80% of Title I funds, use state and local per student expenditures as a proxy for state and local educational costs in their grant calculations for school districts. Therefore, districts in states that spend more per student receive higher per student Title I funds, and districts in states that spend less per student receive lower per student Title I funds. This is problematic because discrepancies in spending across states are primarily related to variance in state wealth and not the cost of providing quality educational services to students (Carey & Roza, 2008; Miller, 2009).

Moreover, the formulas do not take into account a state's willingness to tax the wealth of residents in order to raise revenue or the share of overall state spending directed toward education (Liu, 2009; Baker, Sciarra, & Farrie, 2010). As a result, these formulas direct funds toward states with more wealth, while failing to reward states that exhibit more effort to generate revenue and invest it in education. Thus, Title I grants can result in providing more per student and total funding to schools in wealthier states that serve fewer low-income students than to schools in less resource-rich states that serve higher numbers of low-income students. This ultimately disadvantages low-income students living in states with limited resources.

Although federal monies constitute a very small portion of school expenditures, it is extremely important that these funds are invested in ways that offset disparities in per student expenditures created by state and local policies that give an advantage to students in wealthy school districts and neighborhoods. In consultation with state governments, federal policymakers must address these Title I formula issues in the next reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act. It is critical that Title I monies mitigate, not exacerbate, school funding inequalities.

Protect the Pell Grant against cuts that will reduce college access for low-income students

Recent increases in appropriations to the Federal Pell Grant Program helped nearly nine million students pay for college in FY2010. However, these same increases have also made the program a ripe target for legislators looking to curtail deficit spending and balance the budget. In February, House Republicans introduced legislation that would cut the Pell Grant appropriation by 15.2%, reducing the maximum award from \$5,550 to \$4,705. Because the maximum award is attached to the eligibility cutoff, the proposal would have prevented nearly

1.7 million students from participating in the grant program (Field, 2011). Although this bill did not pass the Senate, the very debate on the importance of the Pell Grant program in Congress shows growing concern with the program among many members of Congress.

It is unlikely this will be the last time that Pell Grant appropriation come under attack, but legislators must ensure that the program continues to receive adequate funding. As the primary federal grant program for students from low-income and working-class families, the program will only become more necessary as the eligible population continues to grow. The proportion of children in K-12 receiving free and reduced price lunch continues to grow and has recently surpassed 50% (Mortenson, 2011). Additionally, postsecondary tuition prices will likely continue to increase as institutions look to replace funds lost from state budget cuts to higher education. Research clearly indicates that the need for Pell monies is quite high. Seventy-nine percent of dependent students from the lowest income quartile have unmet financial need, compared to 13% of their more advantaged peers (Long & Riley, 2007).

Instead of cutting the maximum award, legislators should explore other policy alternatives. Such options include only making grants available to students with junior or senior class standing who exceed a select GPA threshold or reducing the number of semesters that an individual can receive the Pell Grant. Other considerations could involve placing more stringent credit hour requirements per semester for Pell Grant recipients. One final solution entails limiting institutional eligibility for Pell Grant funds, particularly for proprietary institutions, if specific graduation rates or cohort default rates are not reached. These suggestions, along with other ideas, must be explored in order to fortify, not diminish, the Pell Grant's impact on degree attainment by making college more affordable for low-income and working-class students.

Increase supplemental college access and support services for low-income students throughout the educational pipeline

Financial support alone is not enough to help students from low-income backgrounds navigate the educational pipeline. To bolster the financial support offered by federal investments in secondary schools and the Pell Grant, supplemental academic support and outreach services, such as TRIO and GEAR UP, are needed to help students from low-income families successfully complete high school, enroll in college, and complete a postsecondary degree. These programs help ensure that students are better academically prepared to attend college and succeed in

their pursuit of a higher education degree by providing them with additional services that, in many cases, are not readily available at their respective schools.

The services provided by these programs are quite diverse and invaluable for students who may lack the social and cultural capital needed to inform their educational and career decisions. These programs provide participants with academic instruction, tutoring, career and academic counseling, and mentoring. Precollege programs also focus heavily on supporting students through the college and financial aid application process. Research and evaluations of these college access programs have shown that they effectively increase college enrollment and performance for low-income students.⁶

The recent \$26.6 million funding decrease to TRIO and \$20.4 million funding decrease to GEAR UP in the FY2011 appropriation bill is a policy decision that can impact the nation's ability to achieve the 2020 goal. Instead of investing additional resources, as we recommend, the decision to decrease funding for these programs will directly take supplemental support services from the students and communities that need the most support. According to data from the Council for Opportunity in Education, the \$26.6 million funding decrease to TRIO is projected to result in a loss of services to an estimated 80,000 low-income students.

Without these services, the path to achieving a bachelor's degree will become substantially more difficult for low-income and working-class students. Many beneficiaries of these programs attend high-poverty, under-resourced schools that have difficulty providing students with the support, skills, and knowledge that they need to enroll and excel in college. As the demography of the country changes and the population of children from low-income families continues to increase, an expansion of and greater investment in these programs is absolutely necessary in order to make satisfactory progress toward the 2020 goal.

Summary

Income-based inequality in degree attainment is a significant challenge facing the nation as we advance and compete in the 21st century. To achieve the President's 2020 goal of once again becoming the nation with the largest share of college-educated citizens, federal education policy must focus with clarity and seriousness — that is, develop “20/20 vision” — on the challenges that poverty and the lack of sufficient financial resources have on the educational pursuits of our youth. Adopting such “20/20 vision” is what will be needed if the nation is going to reduce income-based disparities in educational attainment and actualize the 2020 goal. Many educators may believe the 2020 goal is unachievable, but it is certainly plausible that we can make progress toward the objective. We argue that reaching the 2020 goal will require aggressive implementation of a set of reforms and policies largely focused on assisting the students, schools, teachers, and communities that need the most assistance. As outlined above, this effort should involve, but not be limited to:

- 1 Setting and tracking goals to reduce income-based disparities on key educational outcomes related to the 2020 goal;
- 2 Funneling federal dollars, such as Title I funds, to the low-income, underperforming students who need it most;
- 3 Protecting the Pell Grant against cuts that will reduce college access for low-income students; and
- 4 Increasing supplemental college access and support services for low-income students throughout the educational pipeline.

The recommendations we offer will not singlehandedly achieve the Administration's goal, but they provide reasonable solutions that can help the nation reduce income-based inequalities in educational attainment and make progress toward the goal possible by the year 2020.

6 Cahalan, 2009; Chaney, Muraskin, Cahalan, & Rak, 1997; Constantine, Seftor, Martin, Silva, & Myers, 2006; Engle, Bermeo, & O'Brien, 2006; Olsen, Seftor, Silva, Myers, DesRoches, & Young, 2007

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The Pell Institute, sponsored by the Council for Opportunity in Education, conducts and disseminates research and policy analysis to encourage policymakers, educators, and the public to improve educational opportunities and outcomes of low-income, first-generation, and disabled college students. The Pell Institute is the first research institute to specifically examine the issues affecting educational opportunity for this growing population.

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About The Council for Opportunity in Education

Established in 1981, the Council for Opportunity in Education is a non-profit organization dedicated to expanding educational opportunity throughout the United States, the Caribbean, and the Pacific Islands. Through its numerous membership services, the Council works in conjunction with colleges, universities, and agencies that host federally-funded college access programs to specifically help low-income, first-generation students and those with disabilities enter college and graduate.

The mission of the Council is to advance and defend the ideal of equal educational opportunity in postsecondary education. The Council's focus is assuring that the least advantaged segments of the American population have a realistic chance to enter and graduate from a postsecondary institution.

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