

DEFINING HIGH-QUALITY HIGHER LEARNING



**higher
learning**
ADVOCATES

In today's 21st century global economy, higher learning—education and training beyond high school that leads to a degree, credential, or employment—is essential for economic opportunity and upward mobility. But unfortunately, the outdated set of rules that shape our current higher learning system do not adequately respond to the needs of today's students, who are more diverse—in age, race, and income level—more mobile, and have more work experience than the students of yesterday.

Federal policy needs to catch up—and that begins by putting quality at the center of higher learning. Instead of focusing on inputs, postsecondary quality assurance should measure success in student outcomes including completion, employment, equity, and value. Defining quality in the federal context with these metrics will enable students, taxpayers, and providers to more meaningfully answer the question *“what do we get out of higher learning?”*

HIGH-QUALITY HIGHER LEARNING:



COMPLETION

Results in the student's timely **completion** of their program and ensures students are persisting.



EMPLOYMENT

Enables meaningful **employment** and/or further education, and provides skills that are useful for the entirety of the student's career.



EQUITY

Provides **equitable** access to learning and student supports and encourages enrollment of low-income, first-generation, and minority students.



VALUE

Adds **value** to the student through affordable learning that enables them to experience success through employment, further education, licensure, and engaged citizenship.



COMPLETION MATTERS

While it's critical to remove barriers to accessing higher learning, it's equally important to focus on improving timely completion outcomes for today's students.¹ Recent data show graduation rates for first-time, full-time students are only 39.8 percent within four years, and 59.6 percent within six years. Federal policy, specifically our postsecondary quality assurance system, must hold our system of higher learning accountable for improving persistence and completion for today's students.



EMPLOYMENT MATTERS

A report by New America found 91 percent of students participate in higher education to improve their employment opportunities², yet the pathway between education and employment isn't always clear. More complete and accurate data is needed to provide a holistic view of employment and earnings outcomes and better inform credential and degree-seekers as well as policymakers seeking to maximize such opportunities. Additionally, federal policy should encourage innovative delivery models—such as competency-based education, certificates and alternative credentials—to help students gain credentials at an accelerated pace. Experiential and job-based learning should be expanded to provide a stronger relinkage and clear relationship between higher learning and employment.

¹https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d16/tables/dt16_326.10.asp

²<https://www.newamerica.org/education-policy/edcentral/collegedecisions/>

³<https://www.luminafoundation.org/equity-matters>

EQUITY MATTERS

In terms of age, race, income, location and employment status, today's students are more diverse than ever. They are more mobile and may not live on or near a college campus. Most are working while learning. Despite overall gains in college access, historic gaps in degree and completion rates by race, ethnicity and income still persist. While 45 percent of white Americans hold at least a two-year degree, only 29 percent of African Americans, 24 percent of Native Americans, and 21 percent of Hispanics hold two-year degrees.³ Federal policy should hold institutions accountable for providing high quality learning to *all* students, while simultaneously encouraging the enrollment of low-income, minority and first-generation college students. Further, reporting and regulatory systems should accurately portray equity outcomes for student financial aid programs.



VALUE MATTERS

All students seek higher learning for different reasons. Some seek skills that will land them a high paying job, others may need retraining because their skills are outdated, while some are lifelong learners seeking intellectual enrichment or opportunities for continuing education. All students deserve an affordable system of higher learning that delivers an economic return on investment and enables them to have future success. Federal policy should keep value—to taxpayers and individuals—at the heart of higher learning, ensure students have the right information to make informed decisions, and work to break down financial barriers to high-quality higher learning.

This set of outcomes—**completion, employment, equity, and value**—define quality in higher learning for federal policy. As policymakers and policy advocates continue to have important conversations about ways to update our nation's laws to better serve today's students, quality is paramount to a prosperous 21st century higher learning system and workforce where a high-quality degree or credential is within reach for all of today's students.