OUR GOAL: to ensure that all low-income young adults have affordable access to a quality postsecondary education that is tailored to their individual needs and educational goals and leads to timely completion of a degree or certificate with labor-market value.

THE CHALLENGE

Public higher education in the United States is at a watershed moment. As education costs rise and colleges and universities face growing financial pressures, the education gap is widening and public student financial aid systems are getting stretched to the limit—all of this at a time when our economy needs more college-educated workers than ever before.

Left unabated, these trends will leave the U.S. economy without the skilled workforce it needs to remain competitive and will likely increase the education gap between those from low-income backgrounds and the rest of the population. Given the role that higher education has historically played as an engine of social mobility and economic growth, the political and social implications for our nation, and particularly for lower-income people, are profound and unacceptable. They are also avoidable.

THE OPPORTUNITY

Research and practical experimentation at colleges and universities across the country are revealing promising solutions that could enable colleges and universities to increase graduation rates while maintaining or reducing costs and ensuring that all students receive a high-quality educational experience that is tailored to their needs, academic abilities, and career or employment goals.

These solutions include sophisticated technology-enabled teaching and student advising tools, as well as enterprise-wide systems that gather and analyze data to help institutions improve their performance and student outcomes. Also vitally important is close alignment between high school graduation requirements and college entry standards.
Our Postsecondary Success strategy seeks to increase low-income students’ college completion rates through innovations that can improve the productivity and performance of U.S. universities and colleges and ensure that all students have access to a high-quality, highly personalized education.

We work with partners to develop innovative educational models, approaches, and technologies that improve teaching, learning, student advising, and administrative decision making. We support colleges and universities that integrate these innovations, and we invest in efforts to understand the impact of higher-education public policies and regulations and advocate for adjustments where needed.

An engineering class at LaGuardia Community College in Queens, New York, which is developing technology-aided teaching approaches to improve graduation rates.

Our Postsecondary Success strategy, updated in 2012, is led by Daniel Greenstein, director, and is part of the foundation’s United States Program.

Our investments seek to accelerate efforts already under way in higher education and to support the enormous talent, creativity, and energy being applied to improving student completion rates and lowering costs while raising the quality of the U.S. postsecondary education system.

Our primary approach is to play a catalytic role—to support the development of solutions that are unlikely to be generated by institutions working alone and that can trigger change on a broader scale. In each case, we work with our partners to build on the best of practitioner knowledge, available research, and analogous experiences in related sectors. We also rigorously evaluate these solutions in real-world settings, placing as much importance on effective implementation as on student outcomes.
Our partners include highly innovative colleges and universities that are engaged in bold, systematic reform efforts. Their efforts allow us to understand how new tools and approaches can be integrated effectively at the institutional level, and they help us understand the interplay between institutional practice and state and national education policies and regulations. Some of our collaborators are wholly new entities launched in the past few years that are experimenting with groundbreaking new paradigms in higher education.

Our investments address several key factors that are crucial to student success and institutional effectiveness at the postsecondary level:

- **College readiness.** We support efforts to improve student assessment and placement and to restructure remedial education programs to better serve students who enter college academically underprepared.

- **Personalized learning.** We support the development and use of technologies that enhance teaching and learning—such as online courses that can be integrated into college curricula or used by students working on their own over the Internet. These include massively online open courses (MOOCs) and courses that automatically adapt to each student’s learning style and needs.

- **Performance measures.** We support the development and use of key performance indicators and decision support tools that enable institutions to identify problems, set goals and priorities, allocate resources, measure progress, and make adjustments based on evidence in key areas (such as student success and cost). These tools can also enable institutional comparisons and assessment of the relative strengths and weaknesses of specific technologies, solutions, business models, and approaches to instruction and student support.

- **Research and advocacy.** We appreciate that fundamental change at the institutional level will take time and require sustained effort. We support research on the obstacles to student completion and ways to address them, as well as efforts to assess the relative costs and benefits of various solutions. We also work to understand how public policies and regulations affect institutional performance and student outcomes. Key priorities include exploring new approaches to student financial aid and improving the amount and quality of data collected about college and student performance.

All of these efforts will help realize our vision of a postsecondary system that is an engine of social mobility and economic growth and fuels the nation’s competitiveness in the global economy.

**ABOUT THE FOUNDATION**

Guided by the belief that every life has equal value, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation aspires to help all people lead healthy, productive lives. We are dedicated to discovering and disseminating innovative approaches to addressing extreme poverty and poor health in developing countries and improving the U.S. education system. Because our financial resources, while significant, represent a small fraction of what’s needed to address these challenges, we work in partnership with governments, the private sector, and other donors and organizations to achieve the greatest possible impact.

**LEARN MORE**

Our United States Division:  
[www.gatesfoundation.org/united-states](http://www.gatesfoundation.org/united-states)

Our Postsecondary Success Program:  
[www.gatesfoundation.org/postsecondaryeducation](http://www.gatesfoundation.org/postsecondaryeducation)

Our College-Ready Education Program:  
[www.gatesfoundation.org/college-ready-education](http://www.gatesfoundation.org/college-ready-education)