

Report of the SREB Student Success Advisory Council

SREB

# Priorities for Raising College Student Success in the South

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Southern  
Regional  
Education  
Board

SREB.org



Student success = increasing access  
and completion of postsecondary credentials  
that lead to successful careers  
and stronger economies

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# Priorities for Raising College Student Success in the South

## Executive Summary

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Postsecondary education — public and private four-year, two-year, technical and community college — is facing a quandary. The pandemic has exacerbated the decline in college enrollment and completion. According to the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, the undergraduate student population in 2022 was down 9.4% since before the pandemic. A decade prior to 2020, there was already a student enrollment decline of nearly 3 million. Postsecondary education has experienced decades of decreases in state funding and a decrease in the last decade of total federal financial aid, which have contributed to the decrease in enrollment.

Diminishing levels of postsecondary attainment will reduce the ability of future generations to enter or remain in the middle class. A decline in college enrollment and completion stands to contribute to a rise in poverty, diminished access to adequate health care, dependence on social programs, and a shrinking tax base. By not increasing the number of college graduates, the U.S. is in danger of shrinking its highly skilled workforce pool, which directly impacts national and state economies and endangers innovation and global competitiveness.

Given the changing postsecondary education landscape, it is important for institutions of higher education to develop strategies that continue to promote student success. From fall 2021 to fall 2022, the Student Success Advisory Council, a group of state-level and institutional-level representatives across the Southern states, met to research and discuss ways to improve student success in both policy and practice. (See page 20 for a list of council members.)

This report combines collaborative ideas for promoting student success — including evidence-based promising practices and innovations — in the areas of college affordability, student success coaching and workforce development, with the aim of closing long-standing gaps in credential completion. The council's report examines these challenges and outlines priorities for state policymakers and higher education leaders, as well as university administrators and faculty, to make progress on student success in higher education.



By not increasing the number of college graduates, the U.S. is in danger of shrinking its highly skilled workforce pool

*To make progress, state and postsecondary leaders can work together to:*

- make postsecondary education affordable for low- and middle-income families
- help all students navigate, persist and graduate
- help all graduates secure a well-paying job in their desired career field

## Recommendations

This report of the Student Success Advisory Council offers recommendations for states and postsecondary institutions to consider in ways that address their unique needs, capacity and governance.

### Affordability

1. Lower the student and family college cost burden for low- and middle-income populations.
2. Be transparent with students and families about the true out-of-pocket cost of college and the value of obtaining a college degree, and guide students toward degree paths that align with their skills and interests.
3. Support students to complete a degree or credential of value at a faster rate.

### Student Success

4. Directly engage students in the development of comprehensive student success coaching models.
5. Centralize student success services with a concierge office staffed with trained success coaches.
6. Emulate, adapt, customize and modernize existing student success coaching models.

### Workforce Preparation

7. Increase the focus on current and future workforce needs. State and college leaders should understand the importance for postsecondary education to adapt and align programs and articulate how this better serves students and supports the mission of their institution.
8. Improve data governance and use of education and workforce data.
9. Eliminate state policy and process barriers to academic program changes.
10. Continue to build relevant career pathways, with support as students transition to college and on to careers.

# Introduction

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## *Improving Student Success in the South*

Every student should have access to high-quality education after high school. A meaningful postsecondary credential, industry-recognized certification, or degree of value is essential for high-paying employment opportunities. Those who graduate with a college degree are more likely to gain access to higher income and less likely to be unemployed or living in poverty. Ensuring that most students obtain meaningful credentials is crucial for a state's economic success, as outlined in SREB's *Higher Education Return on Investment for Students, Families and Society*.

SREB's report *The Pandemic's Dual Threat for Vulnerable Workers* found that the COVID-19 pandemic accelerated workforce automation and projected that by 2025 nearly one-third of work activities could be automated across the South. This leaves 18 million adults who have only a high school diploma unemployable or less likely to have access to high-wage employment. Postsecondary education can serve as an economic engine, preparing more people for well-paid opportunities in careers that demand middle and high skill levels.

SREB defines student success as increased college access and completion rates for postsecondary credentials that lead to successful careers for more adults. This involves a focused effort on being sure students have access to postsecondary education, remain enrolled and progress toward credential attainment or graduation. It also includes a clear understanding of how well graduates are prepared to enter the workforce and begin careers.

The 2020 *Knocking at the College Door: Projections of High School Graduates* projects that the number of high school graduates in the South will peak in 2026 at over 1.5 million and decrease to around 1.4 million in 2037. The report predicts that in the Southern region, white public high school graduates will account for a smaller percentage of the total population, while Hispanic, Asian/Pacific Islander and multiracial students will account for a larger share. During the pandemic, extreme poverty rose in the U.S., according to data from the World Bank. These demographic and economic shifts highlight the importance of improving enrollment, retention and graduation rates for students from low-income families or from racial and ethnic groups historically underserved in education — Black, Latino and American Indian students — in order to better prepare the SREB region's workforce.

## *The Student Success Advisory Council*

SREB convened the Student Success Advisory Council to help states achieve greater rates of postsecondary success, particularly for students from low-income, rural and other backgrounds underrepresented in higher education. This work supports Southern states in fulfilling critical industry workforce demands and building a stronger economy.

Council members were selected from all 16 states in the region to represent college and university leadership and faculty, state and university system offices, policymakers and other key advocates. (See page 20 for a list of council members.)



The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated workforce automation — leaving millions of adults with only a high school diploma unemployable

The group reviewed key research and data and consulted a diverse group of over three dozen college students from the region to identify the most difficult challenges for student success in higher education. The three key areas that emerged were how to help more students, particularly those from typically underserved demographic groups, afford higher education; navigate college, persist and graduate; and secure employment in their desired career field. This report outlines policy and practice recommendations for each of these challenges.

### *Understanding and Supporting Student Needs*

All students arrive at the start of their postsecondary education journey with assets — and yet all students need help transitioning to college no matter their age, income level, race, ethnicity or background. With complex policies and opaque bureaucracies, college is not always an intuitive environment to navigate. Some students need more help transitioning to and succeeding at two-year, technical and four-year institutions. Some may not have a family member or guide familiar with college processes, while others may need funds for technology, broadband, books, housing, transportation or other resources it takes to be successful.

Various indicators can help colleges determine if a student may be more likely to need additional assistance to be successful in college. It is important to use these not as labels but to inform if, when and how to offer support. Students from low-income families and first-generation college students, for example, may need financial support or study groups. Students of color benefit from culturally competent counseling and advising.

Other factors that could help colleges understand a student's background and potential needs include living in a rural area, coming from an under-resourced high school or returning to college from business or industry. Student-parents, full-time employees or veterans may require targeted support, and colleges should consider the specific needs of students formerly in foster care, formerly incarcerated or experiencing homelessness.

A basic support system should be provided to all students as they transition into college, with additional options that can be stacked year after year as needed. Even students who come to campus with many hours of credit from transfer, dual enrollment or other accelerated learning programs may not know how to navigate the institution's office structure to get the help they need.

As more students experience mental health challenges, colleges also need to consider well-being factors including grief, pandemic or childhood trauma, social isolation or stress from missed learning during the pandemic. This calls for empathy, as well as additional academic and health support for students.

Central to meeting these needs is fostering a positive culture of support at the institution — with all faculty and staff responsible for helping students succeed — so that every student feels valued by the campus community.



A basic support system  
should be provided to all students  
as they transition into college

## Affordability *Why focus on this?*

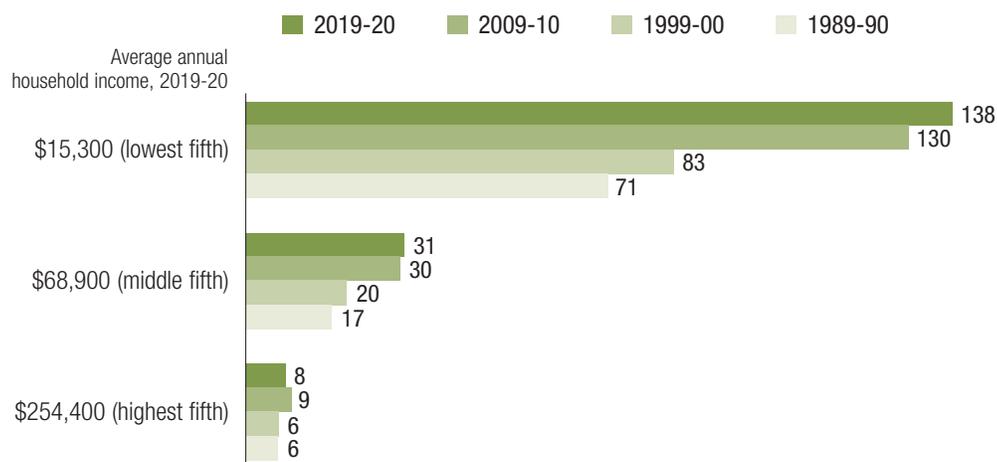
Students cannot attend and benefit from postsecondary education if they cannot afford to pay the cost to attend while also supporting their cost of living, particularly with inflation. Obtaining a college degree is out of reach for most of the U.S. population, according to a report by the Rockefeller Institute of Government. And students from families who are least likely to be able to afford college have been the hardest hit by the effects of the coronavirus pandemic, making them still less likely to start and complete college.

Significant increases in college enrollment and completion will require strategies that target low-income families, students of color and other populations historically underrepresented in higher education with explicit goals to close educational attainment gaps. Closing these gaps will ensure a highly skilled workforce to contribute to the U.S. economy.

College affordability — the relationship of the price of higher education to family income — is driven by tuition, financial aid and other measures that differ from state to state. Whether college is affordable depends on the cost of attendance (tuition and fees, room and board, books and supplies), the ability of students and their families to pay, and the amount of financial aid and scholarships available.

As reported by the *SREB Fact Book on Higher Education*, the average annual costs for an in-state undergraduate to attend a public four-year college in the U.S. reached \$21,000 in 2019-20, more than double the average 30 years ago. Students from families with low to middle incomes are often more affected by the rising costs of college. For students from U.S. households in the lowest fifth quintile of incomes, one year's costs to attend a public four-year college in 2019-20 took 138% of the average annual household income: a year of college for one student required nearly a year and a half of household income.

### Percent of Average Annual Household Income Required to Pay for One Year at a Public Four-Year College, United States



Sources: SREB analysis of National Center for Education Statistics and U.S. Census Bureau data.

The federal Pell Grant program — the nation’s largest need-based grant aid program for college students — has lost buying power over the last 30 years. The lowest-income students could receive a maximum grant of \$6,195 in the 2019-20 school year, covering 56% of the average annual costs of attending a public two-year college, 29% at public four-year colleges and 13% at private four-year colleges. In 1989-90 the maximum Pell Grant covered 70% of the average annual costs at two-year colleges, 46% at public four-year colleges and 19% at private four-year colleges.

“The challenge with the FAFSA is that they take your income from two years ago into account. I became unemployed and I take care of my sick child and mother. Yet I was told I did not meet the income requirement for aid this semester.”

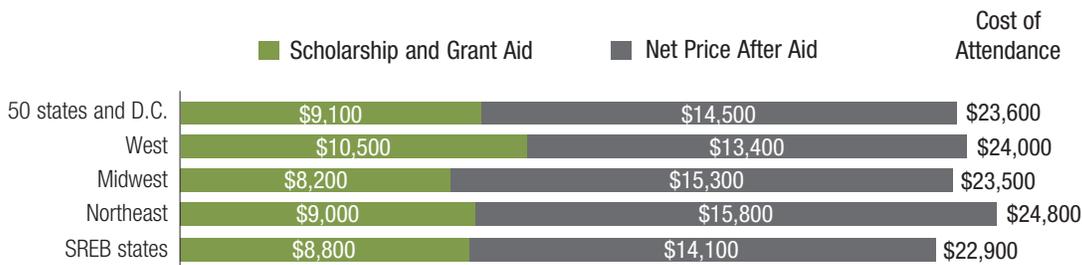
- Atlanta Technical College student

In 2021, only 53% of high school seniors in the U.S. completed the Free Application for Federal Student Aid, or FAFSA, resulting in \$3.75 billion in Pell Grants forfeited by those who didn’t complete the form but would have been eligible, according to the National College Attainment Network. Ninety-two percent of high school seniors who completed the FAFSA enrolled in college in the following fall as compared to 51% who did not complete the FAFSA. In most states, high school seniors in higher-poverty school districts are less likely to complete the FAFSA than students in wealthier districts. Completing the FAFSA is strongly associated with postsecondary enrollment and should be a priority for states as they target affordability issues.

The average amount of grant and scholarship aid covers 39% of college costs, which leaves 61% for students to pay or borrow. In 1989-90, students and their parents borrowed over \$10 billion and received almost \$15 billion in other financial aid. By 2019-20, borrowing was at almost \$102 billion and other forms of financial aid totaled \$154 billion. In 2019, 55% of bachelor’s degree recipients at public four-year colleges in the U.S. graduated in debt, owing \$27,500 on average.

As the number of children in poverty rises, more low-income families will be priced out of a college education, which could limit their upward mobility and increase dependence on government support. It is imperative that state budgets include funding initiatives that increase opportunities for individuals to gain access to higher education and be prepared for high-skill, high-wage employment.

### What Students and Their Families Pay Public Four-Year Colleges and Universities, 2018-19



For fall-term, full-time, first-time degree- or certificate-seeking undergraduates who paid in-state or in-district tuition and who received grant or scholarship aid from federal, state or local governments, or the institution.  
 Because of rounding, Cost of Attendance might not equal the sum of Scholarship and Grant Aid plus Net Price After Aid.  
 Source: SREB analysis of National Center for Education Statistics student financial aid database.

# Affordability Recommendations

## Recommendation 1

### Lower the student and family college cost burden for low- and middle-income populations.



**State leaders** can develop and improve policy related to affordability with actions such as:

- Develop FAFSA completion initiatives, such as those in Alabama, Louisiana and Texas, that strongly encourage or require high school seniors to seek federal aid for college.
- Establish a state longitudinal database, or improve inclusion of workforce and education data in an existing state longitudinal database. Provide clear analysis of the data to inform better higher education funding decisions. Conduct a full financial aid audit to highlight where there may be financial aid gaps for students of various socioeconomic or demographic status.
- Publish an accurate in-state analysis of the true costs of college and incentivize universities to be more efficient and bring down total cost.
- Determine the additional aid that Pell recipients would need to fully cover tuition and fees at public universities, which some organizations previously estimated at \$2,500. Provide state aid to cover the gap between the Pell award and the cost of public tuition and fees.
- Allocate state aid for part-time students and for summer semester courses.
- Establish a strategic process for approving new academic programs. Analyze degree costs to identify the lowest possible costs to students for each new or revised program option.
- Review state policy that allows for additional funding or other incentives to universities that cover more unmet need for low-income students and that offer innovative courses that lower the total cost of degrees for students.
- Incentivize colleges to consider using more open educational resources or low-cost texts, while clearly defining “low-cost.” (For example, Georgia defines low-cost texts as under \$40.)
- Encourage Congress and the federal government to:
  - ◆ Improve Pell Grants to better support the lowest-income students by:
    - Developing a better formula to meet the needs of students with the greatest need
    - Increasing awards to cover a larger portion of the cost of attendance
    - Increasing the yearly maximum Pell Grant award on an annual basis to an amount that will cover at least 50% of the cost of an average four-year public education (and thus fully cover the costs of an average two-year public education)
    - Providing federal aid for low-income part-time students
  - ◆ Simplify the FAFSA completion process by linking information with the federal tax filing process to lessen the complexities for students and their families.

# Affordability Recommendations



**Institutions of higher education** can develop and improve their practices related to affordability with actions such as:

- Switch university need-based aid from a last-dollar to a first-dollar funding method to provide more funding to low-income students so that they have enough to cover costs like school materials, high-speed internet, transportation, housing and childcare at contemporaneous prices.
- Provide more university need-based aid and scholarships to low- and middle-income students. Strive to meet two-thirds of the cost of attendance for as many students as possible, starting with those facing the largest funding gap.
- Expand the use of open educational resources to bring down costs of books. Require OER for general education courses. Provide more reserve copies of high-dollar texts in the college library.
- Provide equipment, broadband or aid to students so they can access online courses and open educational resources.
- Rethink fee structures and reduce additional fees.
- Begin or improve programs that provide emergency funding to students.
- Collaborate with federal, state and local government agencies, nonprofits and businesses to help low-income students with living costs. Partnerships might include food pantries, free campus meals, free bus or ride-share passes, free furniture rentals, free room and board for students experiencing homelessness, case managers to help guide students to apply for government assistance, free medical and mental health care or free hotspots.
- Develop and require a financial literacy course or program for students and expand advising on finances, loans, and financial aid access and availability.
- Provide more on-campus jobs and work-study programs so more students can work while enrolled full-time.

## Recommendation 2

**Be transparent with students and families about the true out-of-pocket cost of college and the value of obtaining a college degree that aligns with their skills and interests.**



**State leaders** can develop and improve policy related to degree cost and value with actions such as:

- Collect, analyze and disaggregate the true out-of-pocket cost of degrees for different student populations with varying resources and needs (such as low-income, traditional, adult learner, student-parent, part-time).
- Analyze and publish the value of different degrees, especially for high-demand professions, and push for increased wages for key professions (such as teaching and health care) so that more students find those degrees and professions valuable.

# Affordability Recommendations



**Institutions of higher education** can develop and improve their practices related to degree cost and value with actions such as:

- Implement a statewide marketing plan to bring students and families better information on the true costs and value over time.
- Provide clearer guidance in high school to students and families about the costs of college and the value of different types of degrees and careers.
- Provide clearer guidance and information to students and families about the use and benefits of FAFSA, including instructions for completing the application.
- Collect and make available to students clear information on the types of support the state and colleges have available — including financial support, aid packages, and student success and completion supports.
- Improve comprehensive financial advising and provide clear information about financial supports for degree costs and living costs available to all enrolled students.
- Improve career advising in high school and college, with clear career pathways information.

## Recommendation 3

**Support students to complete their degree or credential of value at a faster rate.**



**State leaders** can develop and improve policy related to completion with actions such as:

- Adjust financial aid formulas to incentivize completing a degree faster, or give incentive funding to colleges that help students complete faster.
- Adopt statewide universal transfer and articulation policies, allowing for acceptance of more courses for degree credit, such as common course numbering in Florida. Develop policy that calls for greater flexibility for meeting general education course requirements, especially for transfer students. Accredited institutions should be required to count as many credits as possible — for full or even partial credit — to reduce time to degree and cost.
- Support colleges to create better course schedules and sequences.
- Set a state policy that limits degree requirements to 120 credit hours for baccalaureate degree programs or 60 credit hours for associate degree programs (unless more are required for degree-program accreditation).
- Set a state policy for accepting and applying credit toward degree for dual enrollment courses and for Advanced Placement courses with a test score of 3 or higher.

# Affordability Recommendations



**Institutions of higher education** can develop and improve their practices related to completion with actions such as:

- Improve and increase the use of dual enrollment and dual credit programs in high schools.
- Accept more courses for credit that applies to a degree, including accelerated learning courses and transfer credits from previous schools or online courses.
- Inform department leaders and students about course-sharing platforms and other initiatives to increase access to courses students need.
- Accept competency-based learning assessments and demonstrations for credit.
- Offer more quality online and asynchronous courses (and better broadband and equipment access).
- Reduce or eliminate time in remedial courses with strategies such as corequisite education.
- Provide better advising and mentoring to students on degree paths and on courses accepted for a degree.
- Create course offerings and schedules so students can access them when needed. Put students first when setting schedules. Work with nearby universities (or online course-sharing programs) to offer even more scheduling options.

Institutions can offer more quality online and asynchronous courses (and better broadband and equipment access)



## Student Success Coaching *Why focus on this?*

Students need a focal point of human contact and a baseline support structure, with optional, layered supports, to foster success — especially in a post-pandemic world. As postsecondary institutions expand online and hybrid-model academic offerings, engaging students and fostering a connected campus will become increasingly important. Success coaching helps *all* students navigate complicated college systems, especially in non-traditional models of instruction, and stay better connected to campus life and resources.

When the SREB Student Success Advisory Council consulted a diverse group of college students from various socioeconomic, demographic and geographic backgrounds, their most common request was for colleges to provide something like a life coach — a single mentor or point of contact for the student to turn to for guidance on how to navigate campus life, succeed academically through major transition points in college, obtain a degree, pursue a career, and receive overall life coaching support.

Providing students with coaches who relate to their own cultural experiences fosters a sense of community

Coaches can be a powerful strategy for engaging, retaining and graduating students. Students who had frequent interactions (five or more) with success coaches perceived that coaching had greater impact on their academic success than tutoring or supplemental instruction, according to *Assessing Impact of Academic Interventions Through Student Perceptions of Academic Success*.

Success coaching, whether from a faculty or staff mentor or a peer coach, goes beyond typical academic advising. It offers students a human point of contact and a connection to wraparound services that help them navigate college life. Success coaching services allow institutions to increase student retention and graduation and can bolster life skills that will serve them throughout their careers.



Success coaching offers students a human point of contact and a connection to wraparound services that help them navigate college life

Matching students to equally accessible quality success coaching boosts their feeling of overall connectedness to campus. Trained peer coaches meeting with Black and Latino students were able to address root causes of student attrition, according to *Success Central: Addressing the Persistence of African-American and Latinx College Students Using a Peer Success Coaching Intervention*. Providing students with coaches who relate to their own cultural experiences fosters a sense of community, particularly for students of color at predominately white institutions. Success coaching for students from populations historically underserved by postsecondary education can help institutions provide the right resources to retain and graduate more students.

# Student Success Coaching Recommendations

## Recommendation 4

**Directly engage students in the development of comprehensive student success coaching models.**



**Institutions of higher education** can develop and improve practices related to success coaching with actions such as:

- Survey students to learn why they are pursuing a postsecondary education and how best to satisfy their needs. Analyze various strategies to help foster student success.
- Provide all new students (including transfers and returning adults) with the information they need to understand and ask pertinent questions related to their college career, goals and success, through an orientation course that introduces them to the institution and the basics of navigating available resources.
- Recruit students to serve as peer success coaches, giving students familiar faces to connect with.
- Give students choices about the services they may need, with multiple modes for achieving success.
- Provide spaces for students to build community and a sense of belonging.

## Recommendation 5

**Centralize student success services with a concierge office staffed with trained success coaches.**



**State leaders** can develop and improve policy related to centralization of services with actions such as:

- Provide colleges and universities with incentive funding to develop centralized student success concierge offices.
- Develop state education policy that codifies the provision of student success coaching, including academic, social-emotional and basic transition support services and mentorship.
- Replicate successful statewide models of student success coaching and wraparound services such as statewide educational opportunity programs.



**Institutions of higher education** can develop and improve practices related to centralizing services with actions such as:

- Provide a one-stop shop for triaging academic, social, physical and mental health, and basic transition support services on campus.
- Provide training to all faculty and staff on the concierge office's role and responsibilities in student success.

# Student Success Coaching Recommendations

- Train campus staff and faculty on improved success coaching methods, current student needs, and where students should go to access the services available.
- Train students as peer coaches to ensure students have multiple modes of contact.
- Train willing and skillful campus staff and faculty to guide the peer coaches.

## Recommendation 6

### Adapt, customize and modernize effective student success coaching models.



**State leaders** can develop and improve policy related to coaching models with actions such as:

- Adapt and expand on successful coaching programs by providing models of the most successful practices for guidance. Provide additional resources and partner with institutions to support adoption and implementation of these models. There are 60 years of successful coaching models in state and federal programs like U.S. Department of Education's Federal TRIO programs as well as state-funded educational opportunity programs. These programs have provided students with wraparound services, successful academic advising, career counseling, financial support services, mental health support, social service assistance, peer mentoring and student success coaching. They are exemplary models of student success coaching and concierge services, bringing students essential resources to help them stay enrolled and complete credentials.



**Institutions of higher education** can develop and improve practices related to coaching models with actions such as:

- Develop consortia through which institutions can share promising practices and resources related to student success coaching.
- Develop coaching teams dedicated to degree completion, career counseling, life coaching, mental health services, financial support, social and government services, childcare and academic support.
- Modernize early alert and prevention strategies to help with persistence before academic probation — with alerts to student success coaches and faculty.
- Repurpose existing programs to add coaching capacity. The University of Kentucky, for example, converted COVID-19 contact tracing services to student success coaching. Coaches can be trained as student success tracers, using the contact tracing protocols to identify, notify, interview and advise students who are in academic jeopardy. This model could allow more efficient identification of students who need support, better connection to appropriate services based on their needs, and regular follow-up.

## Preparation for the Workforce *Why focus on this?*

Postsecondary education's role of graduating fully prepared students to begin the career they aspire to is as important as its charges of providing a well-rounded education, contributing to research and providing a space for innovation.

*Many Americans no longer follow a straightforward, linear path from education to the workforce to retirement – rather, it is becoming more common for individuals to work while going to school, return to school to get more education or change careers after spending some time in the workforce, or work multiple freelance jobs.*

– RAND Corporation

Employers report that many students complete postsecondary education without up-to-date knowledge, technical skills or life skills, forcing companies to train recent graduates, according to a survey by the American Association of Colleges and Universities. SREB cautioned in the report *Unprepared and Unaware* that 18 million low-skilled workers across the South could be unemployable or stuck earning poverty wages by 2030 if access to high-level training is not made available. The pandemic accelerated these estimates: 18 million workers in the South could be at risk by 2025. And faculty report that the pandemic left some students with a degree of social-emotional immaturity, requiring educators to do more to equip them with the life skills they need to be ready for the workplace.

With constant changes in technology and automation — and high employee turnover as people change career fields and positions more frequently — how can colleges and universities educate people for the rest of their lives?

To prepare students for an ever-changing world, it is essential to align academic programming and curricula with current and predicted workforce needs, especially for high-demand fields. Creating clear, adaptable pathways to careers, increasing education and workforce partnerships, and publishing, analyzing and using state and regional workforce data can help colleges align academic programs with industry needs. But policy, practice and even institutional culture have hampered some or all these strategies across the region.

To better communicate and align academic offerings with workforce needs, university and postsecondary system leaders should work diligently to engage local employers and develop partnerships to improve understanding and align strategies.



It is essential to align academic programming and curricula with current and predicted workforce needs

# Preparation for the Workforce Recommendations

## Recommendation 7

**Increase the focus within postsecondary education on current and future workforce needs.** State and local leaders should emphasize the importance for higher education leaders and faculty to understand workforce needs and to align programs to better serve students and support their institutional mission.



**State leaders** can develop and improve policy related to workforce needs with actions such as:

- Examine funding formulas to identify changes that would encourage institutions to focus on aligning programs to meet industry and employer needs so their students are better prepared to enter the workforce with the skills needed to be successful.
- Develop a list of in-demand occupations and provide incentives for all postsecondary campuses that create or expand programs to address these top workforce needs.
- Develop student financial aid initiatives that support students who are pursuing majors connected to in-demand careers.



**Institutions of higher education** can develop and improve practices related to workforce needs with actions such as:

- Work together with state leaders to provide toolkits, professional development and training for deans, department chairs and faculty to analyze relevant data to develop and align programs and curricula to workforce needs.
- Collaborate with state leaders to promote awareness and cultivate relationships between faculty and industry. These partnerships can foster resource sharing and help design better programs to prepare students for the skills needed by employers.
- Work with administrators and faculty to:
  - ◆ Create comprehensive and coherent strategic plans that commit to being workforce mission-minded
  - ◆ Create work groups that regularly connect faculty with local or regional employers and the community to discuss workforce needs
  - ◆ Engage students in discussions about program or curriculum changes

# Preparation for the Workforce Recommendations

## Recommendation 8

### Improve data governance and use of education and workforce data.



**State leaders** can develop and improve policy related to data with actions such as:

- Require state coordinating or governing boards to provide campuses and policy leaders with a consistent source of data, analysis and data translation, including:
  - ◆ a clear list of high-demand fields in the nation and the state
  - ◆ state-level labor market supply and demand data
- Encourage state coordinating or governing boards to provide increased guidance and capacity to universities to collect regional and local workforce supply and demand data.
- Require state coordinating or governing boards to publicly share information about the types of programs, certificates and degrees available across all colleges in the state to help reduce under- and oversaturation in certain disciplines or industries.
- Create shared definitions and vocabulary between education, workforce development and economic development about the objectives and measures of performance across the higher education and workforce landscape.



**Institutions of higher education** can develop and improve practices related to data with actions such as:

- Encourage a campus culture that is more open to — and capable of — data-informed decisions about what programs to offer and how to deliver them.
- Support faculty use of workforce data during review of academic programs and curricula in order to make adjustments, create programs or end programs that are no longer relevant.

Facilitate positive culture change to be more open to adaptation



# Preparation for the Workforce Recommendations

## Recommendation 9

### Eliminate state policy and process barriers to academic program changes.



**State leaders** can develop and improve policy with actions such as:

- Encourage or require the state coordinating or governing board to reflect on and identify policy and process barriers that may deter or prevent institutions from updating or innovating academic program offerings to better align with current workforce needs.
- Encourage the state coordinating or governing board to approve or deny program changes or approvals promptly, within 60 days if possible.
- Ask the state coordinating or governing board to provide colleges with updated approval processes and clear program development guidance that:
  - ◆ Uses workforce supply and demand data to make data-informed decisions leading to improved job-based curricula, providing students with career skills to succeed in the field
  - ◆ Empowers and incentivizes faculty to use workforce supply and demand data to make regular adjustments to the curricula to keep up with industry needs
  - ◆ Incentivizes the use of relevant current and emerging technologies and software used by employers
  - ◆ Prevents oversaturation of programs in any one industry or discipline
  - ◆ Allows for ending programs that are no longer relevant or needed
- Support and encourage college administrators and faculty to streamline their programmatic approval processes, as these are typically longer than most state approval processes.

## Recommendation 10

### Continue to build relevant career pathways for students, with support as they transition to college and then on to careers.



**State leaders** can develop and improve policy to support students at transition points with actions such as:

- Examine how the postsecondary education system and the workforce system interact, identifying barriers or factors for better communication and engagement.
- Examine state funding formulas and identify incentives that will encourage colleges to build accessible career pathways that are truly tied to industry needs and skills.
- Remove any state policy barriers preventing the use of accelerated learning options, prior learning assessments, stackable credentials or meta majors. Meta majors are collections of academic majors with related courses, clustering groups of degrees and certificates considered similar from a student's perspective. In most cases, students will still declare a major in a specific discipline or department. Require state coordinating or governing boards to provide clear guidance on these strategies.

# Preparation for the Workforce Recommendations



**Institutions of higher education** can develop and improve practices to support transition with actions such as:

- Develop dialogue and processes that lead to more accelerated and innovative learning options for students. These should include:
    - ◆ Supports for students at key transition points
    - ◆ More access to dual or concurrent credit, AP and IB courses
    - ◆ Prior learning assessments to give credit for skills and knowledge already obtained
    - ◆ Job- or industry-based micro-credentials (both for credit and non-credit options)
    - ◆ Stackable micro-credentials, certificates and degree programs
    - ◆ Academic focus or meta major options for students to help select a focus area that enables a more efficient path to an aligned degree
  - Help faculty embed, into all disciplines and curricula, career- or job-related education and preparation skills, including:
    - ◆ Life skills
    - ◆ Critical thinking
    - ◆ Lifelong learning capacity
    - ◆ Self-marketing skills
- K-12 school leaders should also work to embed these skills throughout the middle and high school curricula.
- Increase employer engagement on advisory boards, in curriculum review and in learning opportunities such as internship-to-job pipelines for students.

Help faculty embed career or job-related education and preparation skills into all disciplines and curricula



# The Power of Widespread Change

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Policies and practices that adapt to the changing postsecondary education and workforce landscape and better serve historically underrepresented student populations are the drivers that will improve student postsecondary success.

The Student Success Advisory Council encourages state, postsecondary system and institutional leaders to consider how they might implement these recommendations locally. Improving on any one of the three key areas will increase the success of individual students and dramatically change their lives — but combining the power of affordability, success coaching and constructive workforce preparation can lead to widespread, systemic change.

The council also urges SREB to support action on the recommendations with resources and opportunities to collaborate toward progress. SREB will continue to provide research and data on key postsecondary education issues, convene leaders within and across states, and support action. SREB plans to:

- Assist state leaders and policymakers in improving policy, based on research and data, to improve affordability, student success coaching and workforce preparation.
- Embark on an initiative to provide technical assistance to colleges and universities with implementing, testing, adapting and scaling practice recommendations from this report.
- Deepen services and partnerships with historically Black colleges and universities and other minority-serving institutions in the region to better support their mission.



Combining the power of affordability, success coaching and constructive workforce preparation can lead to widespread, systemic change

Together we can dramatically increase student success in postsecondary education, providing a brighter future, upward mobility and economic security for more students and families across the South.

# Student Success Advisory Council Members

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The Southern Regional Education Board works with states to improve education at every level, from early childhood through doctoral education and the workforce. An interstate compact and a nonprofit, nonpartisan organization based in Atlanta, SREB was created in 1948 by Southern governors and legislatures to advance education and improve the social and economic life of the region. SREB states are Alabama, Arkansas, Delaware, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, Maryland, Mississippi, North Carolina, Oklahoma, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, Virginia and West Virginia.

To partner with SREB on initiatives to increase college student readiness, access and success, contact Stevie Lawrence II, vice president for postsecondary education, at [Stevie.Lawrence@SREB.org](mailto:Stevie.Lawrence@SREB.org).

[SREB.org/CollegeSuccess](https://SREB.org/CollegeSuccess)