

IN PRACTICE: EARLY INSIGHTS FROM THE BEYOND COMPLETION CHALLENGE

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FOREWORD

Ruth V. Watkins, Ph.D.
President, Strada Impact

Higher education is not known for rapid change. For centuries, its stability has served students, families, and societies. There is no question that the core business of higher education — generating and disseminating knowledge through education and the application of research to fundamental human concerns — has changed lives.

It may be, though, that we've been too cautious about change, and too mired in maintaining the status quo for reasons we convince ourselves are in students' interests. More than 15 years ago, I received a grant from Lumina Foundation to improve the transfer student experience at the University of Illinois, particularly to streamline articulation of credit and facilitate the pathway to the baccalaureate for greater numbers of students who start their postsecondary education at a community college. We worked on many of the same issues around persistence and completion during my time as a leader at the University of Utah, and much to my chagrin, we continue to receive many funding requests for initiatives focused on access and completion goals instead of beyond completion outcomes. Yes, there are examples of radical transformation, but, for most students, the barriers to access, transfer, and completion continue with limited systemic change. It is not surprising that frustration around higher education is significant, with large numbers of students giving up on their goal of a baccalaureate degree during the process.

The current context calls for innovation at an accelerated pace. Consider:

- Fortune 500 CEOs and small business leaders alike report that talent is a top concern, namely a sufficient supply of individuals with essential skills who bring diversity of knowledge and experience.

- Public opinion polls reveal increasing uncertainty about the value of higher education, particularly about whether education after high school can be counted on to lead to employment.
- Working adults are leaving jobs at unprecedented rates, many times without other employment, with at least some of this “stepping away” attributed to lack of fulfillment.
- After decades of increases, a lower percentage of high school students are enrolling in postsecondary education immediately after graduation.
- Paradoxically, the most affordable sector of higher education — community colleges and regional four-year universities — has experienced the steepest enrollment decline.

There is urgency in this moment. Intransience may now present higher education's greatest vulnerability. What are students, families, and employers seeking from higher education today? Ideas and answers may come from examining our successes and our failures. After decades built on the belief that increased access to higher education was instrumental to equity, we collectively recognized that real opportunity wasn't created by opening doors alone. Access without completion didn't deliver tangible benefits; in fact, individuals who started colleges but didn't complete a degree — and accumulated debt — often fared worse than those who didn't attend at all. Thus, the access era gave way to an increased focus on completion. We frequently cite data illustrating that associate's and/or baccalaureate degree holders earn significantly more over their lifetimes than peers whose formal education concluded at high school. And while this is clearly true in the aggregate, there

are diverging patterns that can no longer be overlooked. First job earnings, for example, differ for women, students of color, and by programs of study. In some cases, patterns of difference remain a decade after completion. Even as we celebrate the correlation of a baccalaureate degree with higher earnings and a range of positive socioeconomic outcomes, we also must recognize that, in fact, some individuals have faced significant barriers that higher education can exacerbate rather than ameliorate.

In order to fulfill our promise, regain trust, and meet the needs of individuals and industries, our attention and our efforts must extend beyond completion of degrees. It is time for the era of outcomes — particularly the socioeconomic outcomes higher education has long promised, including employment, earnings, and fulfillment of purpose.

There are signs that higher education is moving toward an emphasis on outcomes through and beyond enrollment, persistence, and completion of degrees. Consider, for example, the recent announcement of the collaboration of the Carnegie Foundation for Teaching and Learning and the American Council on Education to redesign the Carnegie classification to incorporate socioeconomic mobility of graduates in a revised classification system. For decades, institutions have sought “R1” status, focused sharply on research prowess, while our mission statements and recruitment materials have touted our influence on students’ lives. The ACE+Carnegie reclassification effort is an opportunity to better connect what we say we value and do with the measurable socioeconomic outcomes our graduates achieve.

Other early indicators of a new era focused on outcomes are visible in emerging state performance-funding proposals that include employment and earnings. As noteworthy as these emerging efforts are, little will be accomplished with rankings or tweaks to incentive models alone. The real work must come from the commitment of two- and four-year institutions to better fulfill our promise of tangible outcomes beyond completion for every student. How can higher education institutions constructively address the urgency of this time?

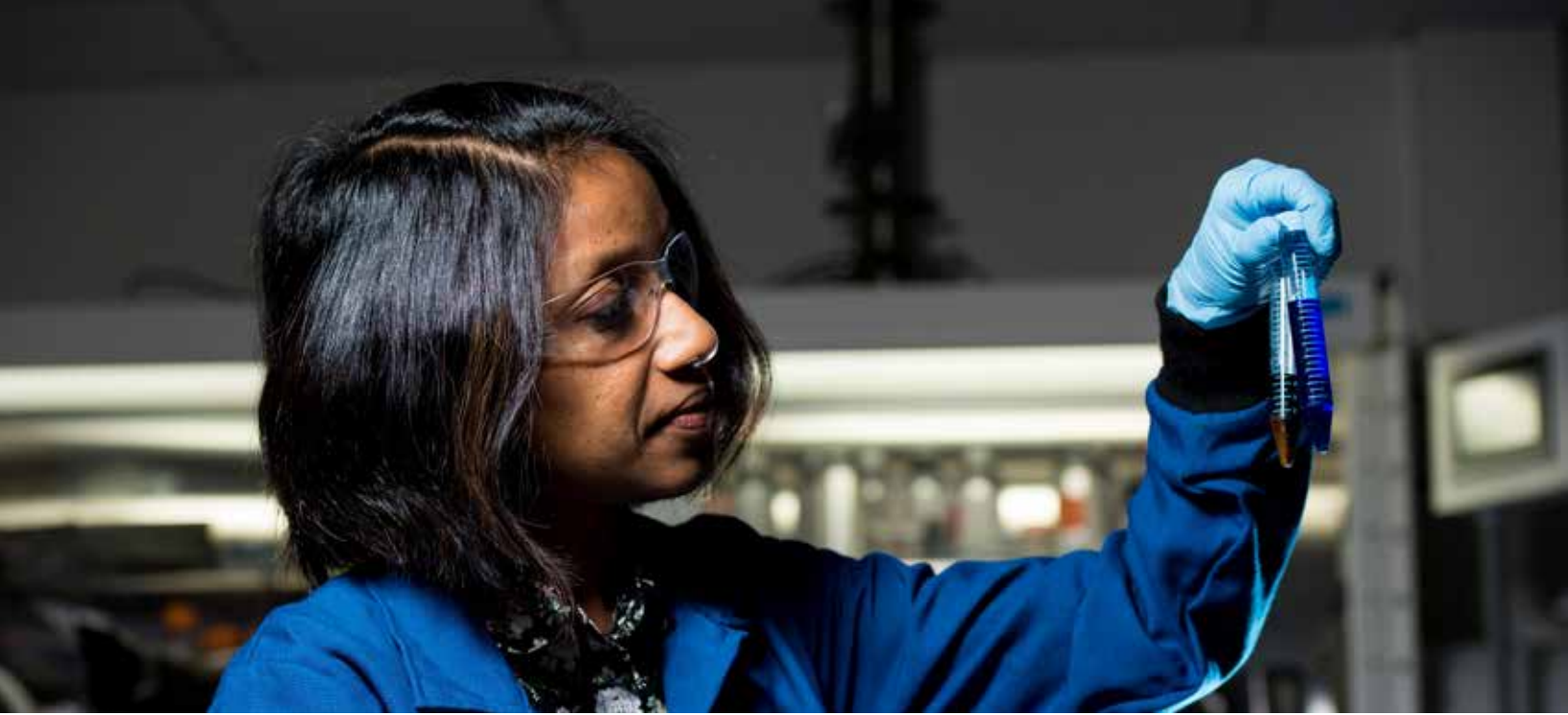
A fundamental step is to see outcomes beyond completion of degrees as part of our compact with

students. Investments in data infrastructure also will be needed to enable the success of efforts like the ACE+Carnegie partnership, and to enable institutions to better understand socioeconomic outcomes and design and measure programmatic efforts to enhance outcomes. And finally, thoughtful, innovative, and scalable solutions that improve higher education’s capacity for enhancing students’ outcomes must be developed, evaluated, and disseminated.

With the aspiration of surfacing and supporting innovative solutions that can enhance outcomes, and close equity gaps in outcomes, Strada Education Network created the Beyond Completion Challenge. In partnership with the Taskforce on Higher Education and Opportunity, a community of 36 energetic, visionary presidents and chancellors from two- and four-year institutions across the nation, the Beyond Completion Challenge is supporting bold changes in higher education all aimed at improving equitable outcomes through and beyond completion. This report shares the research and framing for the Beyond Completion Challenge and also highlights early learnings and examples from the phase one innovation grants.

There is, of course, some potential for higher education to resist the outcomes era, to retreat to the safety of our historic perspectives, that is, we prepare students for life with durable, evergreen skills rather than envisioning new approaches that may better fulfill our promise to students, families, and society. Certainly, higher order skills — communication, critical thinking, and problem solving with teams — are essential. And strengthening these evergreen abilities can be paired with more specific skills that taken together will help students land good first jobs.

Colleges and universities must play a leading role in this new thinking, creating and testing transformative approaches. **Students are clear: they want higher education to allow them opportunities to explore their potential AND greater certainty of a good job after college. Industries need talent from diverse backgrounds prepared with the skills to contribute immediately AND the potential to advance into leadership roles.** As higher education approaches this moment, we strive for a faster pace of innovation and a willingness to lead the dialogue on what we can do better to enable socioeconomic mobility for our students and our nation.



INTRODUCTION

Higher education's measurement of student success is in the midst of an evolution. For nearly five decades, success efforts focused on access, then two decades with completion as the horizon for success, and now the focus is extending to student outcomes beyond completion. Researchers and leaders are increasingly examining post-graduation outcomes, including measures such as earnings, employment, return on investment, and socioeconomic gains, to better understand the value of postsecondary education. Given the expanded focus on outcomes beyond completion and with equitable student success at the forefront, college and university leaders are now mobilizing to pursue solutions that ensure all students realize the full benefits of postsecondary education.

Having spent the past two decades in university and college leadership roles, we have been on the frontlines of examining and implementing programs, practices, and policies aimed at advancing student success. We — like many higher education leaders — have helped institutions respond to the evolving needs and expectations of students, parents, policymakers, and the public. At this critical moment — as our nation grapples with a global pandemic, heightened awareness of racial injustice, and economic uncertainty — higher education leaders see opportunities to enable improved outcomes for all

students, and Strada Education Network is eager to serve as a partner and collaborator in this work.

We joined Strada to support higher education leaders and policymakers in their efforts to innovate, scale, and sustain solutions that will advance more equitable access, completion, and post-graduation outcomes. The daily immersion in work with leaders across the spectrum of higher education — educators, students, policymakers, researchers, advocates, funders, association leaders, and entrepreneurs — points more and more strongly to a core set of effective practices for ensuring equitable outcomes after graduation, including guidance to better navigate educational options, resources to access and complete education, and stronger connections between education and work.

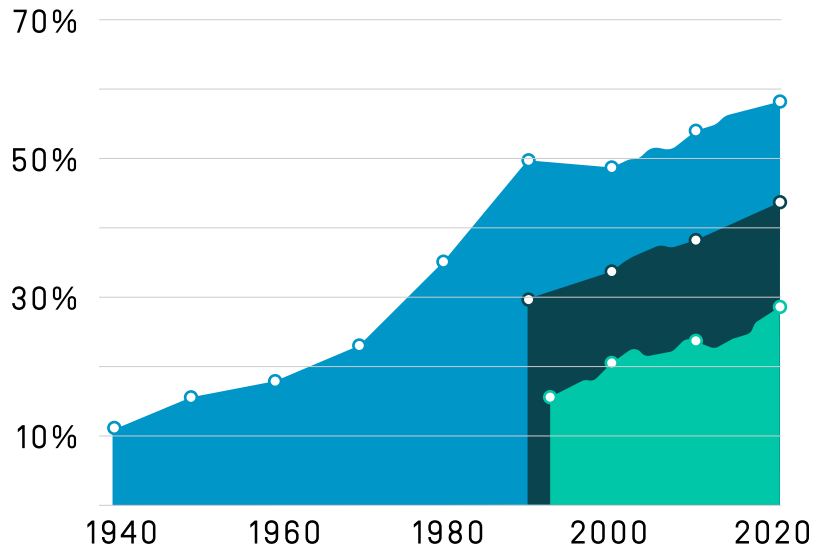
This report is intended to share early observations and insights from our work with Strada's Beyond Completion Challenge — an initiative designed to incentivize and support equitable student outcomes.

As we learn with and from those leading change at higher education institutions across the country, we are committed to synthesizing and sharing these insights with the field in hopes of offering up practices that most effectively drive positive change.



THE CONTEXT FOR A BEYOND COMPLETION CHALLENGE

- **ACCESS**
At least one year of post-high school education
- **COMPLETION**
Associate degree or higher
- **OUTCOMES**
Associate degree or higher + earnings premium*



Strada Impact analysis of data from the U.S. Census Bureau, 1940-2019

* Earnings premium is 20% greater than the median high school graduate, adjusted for inflation and cost of living, calculated for full-time workers employed year-round.

A LOOK BACK: EXPANDING ACCESS AND ADVANCING COMPLETION

President Lyndon B. Johnson declared in 1965 that higher education was “no longer a luxury, but a necessity.” This enduring statement rings especially true now, as our country navigates uncertainty and injustice on a number of fronts. In the pursuit to educate more individuals and advance communities, the past 70 years of postsecondary education have unfolded in two distinct phases — an era of access followed by one of completion.

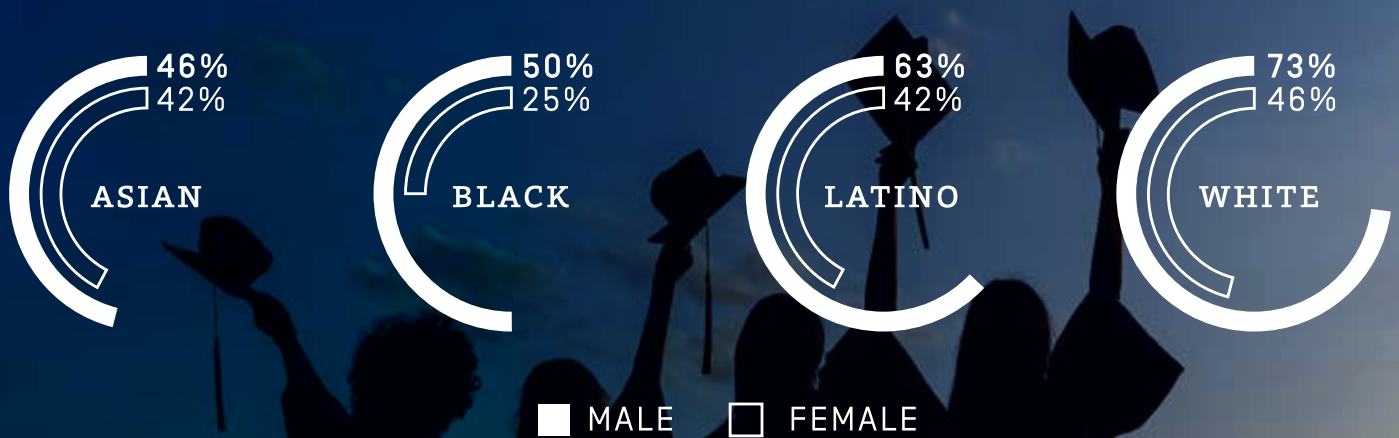
The GI Bill, passed in 1944, and the Higher Education Act of 1965 drove expanded access to postsecondary education with the authorization of federal aid programs for students and federal dollars to improve and create more universities and colleges. In 1940, only 11 percent of adults had completed one year or more of post-high school education, and access then increased to 50 percent in 1990 and to nearly 60 percent in 2019 (see graphic above). As access became more widespread, completion rates stagnated and even declined at some institutions, with only 30 percent of individuals completing an associate degree or higher in 1990 and 44 percent in 2019. Leaders recognized that opening the door of access to more students was not enough. Improving persistence and completion rates became the new

focus and measuring stick of institutional success. The completion movement focused tremendous leadership efforts and resources to develop comprehensive policy and practice solutions to improve graduation rates.

Today a plethora of federal, state, and institutional-level strategies target student success and the advancement of college completion rates. For example, the latest Build Back Better Act includes approximately \$500 million¹ for federal college retention and completion grants. University and college strategies aimed at restructuring curriculum, improving student support services, expanding opportunities for high school students to earn college credits, and targeting outreach to reengage adult students who stopped out all around.

More recently, we have seen dozens of national organizations examining post-graduation outcomes (e.g., earnings, employment, return on investment, etc.) extending the way we evaluate and define postsecondary education success. This movement toward increased focus on post-graduation outcomes and value emerges just in time as myriad challenges, such as equity gaps and a crisis of confidence, press upon postsecondary education.

SHARE OF ALUMNI WHO MEET ALL THREE MEASURES OF POST-COMPLETION SUCCESS



Source: 2021 Strada Outcomes Survey, Strada Education Network

LOOKING FORWARD: MOVING TO OUTCOMES BEYOND COMPLETION

While some notable improvements have been made in completion rates over the past 20 years, equity gaps persist and illuminate the critical need to redefine what success means and to consider expanding our nation's focus to include not only access and completion, but also outcomes beyond the completion of degrees and credentials. The need to focus on post-graduation outcomes emerges in the doubts raised by students and alumni about the value of their education. While not a new phenomenon, the past several years have been marked by a further erosion of public confidence in the value of college and university degrees. The concerns about value shared by many prospective and current students center on ROI and are driven by questions about the connection between education and a "good job." For high school students who delayed college enrollment during the pandemic, only 45 percent believe postsecondary education will be worth the cost². And, only about half of current college students³ believe the investment in their education will be worth it — a number not far afield from the 40 percent underemployment of recent graduates⁴ who find themselves working in jobs where the majority of their peers do not have a college degree.

The perspectives of college graduates also provide insight into this crisis of confidence. When surveyed, only half of bachelor's degree holders⁵ can affirm three key outcomes:

- Their undergraduate education was worth the cost.
- Their university or college experience helped them achieve their goals.
- They earn significantly more (20 percent) than their peers without education beyond high school.

There are clear disparities in both gender and race/ethnicity in how college graduates report the value of their degree using the three key variables outlined above. The chart above shows Latino, Asian, and Black males are less likely than their white counterparts to report positive outcomes across the three variables. Female graduates fare less favorably than men across all racial groups. When considering the intersectionality of race and gender identity, these outcomes are particularly sobering with only 25 percent of Black female alumni achieving positive outcomes across all three variables.



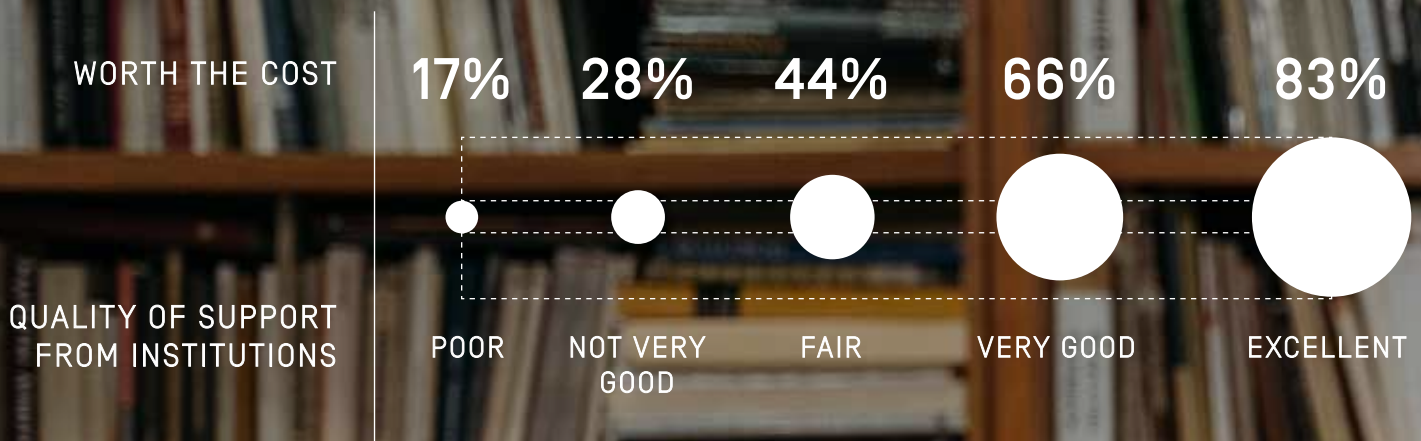
THE CONTINUED VALUE OF A POSTSECONDARY DEGREE

Despite the erosion in public confidence and the inequities in post-graduation outcomes, the value of a degree or credential after high school remains strong for most graduates/completers. In the United States, 65 percent of jobs require postsecondary education or training⁶ and, according to the Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce⁷, workers without a college degree were more likely than their peers with a degree to become unemployed during the pandemic. These data become even more stark when viewed with an equity lens, as the 2020 and 2021 unemployment rates⁸ for African American and Hispanic workers without degrees were far higher than those for white workers. At the same time, employers have made clear that they seek employees who demonstrate both the foundational skills often built through a liberal arts education (e.g., communication, critical thinking) and industry-specific skills⁹ — not one or the other. This indicates that, while earning a degree already leads to stronger labor market outcomes, there is still a need to enhance the value of a degree by integrating career readiness into foundational curriculum. Therefore, programs and solutions that center on stronger connections between education and career can drive better completion rates, as well as improved post-graduation outcomes.



**KEYS TO
SUCCESS
BEYOND
COMPLETION**

WHEN STUDENTS HAVE THE SUPPORT TO CONNECT THEIR EDUCATION TO A CAREER, THEY ARE MORE LIKELY TO SAY THEIR EDUCATION WILL BE WORTH THE COST



Source: 2021 Strada Outcomes Survey, Strada Education Network

Students and alumni are clear and consistent when it comes to the connection between their beliefs about the value of their education and the degree to which they feel it is or was connected to their career. Current college students¹⁰ surveyed in September 2020 were more likely to report they feel their education will be worth the cost when they receive career-relevant support. Similarly, when degree holders look back and report valuable experiences connecting their education to career preparation and the development of skills valued in the labor market, they are more likely to be satisfied with the value of their education and their post-graduation outcomes are markedly better. Data from the national 2021 Strada Outcomes Survey¹¹ show alumni are nearly five times more likely to say their education is worth the cost when they have robust support to connect their education to their future career.

In addition, graduates who had career-related experiences — such as internships, project-based learning, and career and job placement — reported higher post-completion earnings and were much more likely to say their education was worth the cost and helped them achieve their goals.¹²

Unfortunately, these types of career-preparation experiences are not equitably distributed or accessed by all students. For example, among currently enrolled¹³ students, first-generation students are less likely to participate in social capital-building activities or internships, both of which are linked to greater feelings of confidence in career preparation. Addressing inequities in career preparation experiences has increasingly been recognized as a social justice issue, as highlighted in Strada's December 2021 Public Viewpoint¹⁴ report on the career preparation experiences of undergraduate students.

Outside of what students share about the practices that increase the value of their educational experience, we as a field have little evidence about what practices promote student persistence and completion, let alone what drives equitable outcomes beyond completion of a credential or degree. The American Institutes for Research, commissioned by the Department of Education's Institute of Education Science and in partnership with the College Completion Network and the



What Works Clearinghouse, recently conducted a systematic review of the literature on college advising and held dozens of focus groups of college administrators to determine what evidence-based practices are driving student success. AIR noted there is little focus and empirical evidence around what practices and programs drive student success in post-graduation outcomes.

In addition to examining student perspectives and evaluating evidence on practices that drive student success, Strada spent the past year conducting a landscape analysis and dozens of interviews and focus groups with education leaders, employers, and policymakers to better understand the current education and work landscape.

We sought to better understand the major barriers students face, shifts in enrollments, and talent gaps and needs, and how education and training providers were responding to an unprecedented time of change.

What we learned from our research and conversations with leaders has helped to focus our initiatives and investments into three key areas. Our goal is to align our investments and other work around these practices to drive more equitable outcomes for students through and beyond the completion of degrees:

- Guidance to identify and navigate into and through postsecondary education connected to a career.
- Solutions to improve affordability.
- Stronger connections between education and work.



INNOVATIONS IN ACTION



BEYOND COMPLETION CHALLENGE

In light of the national trends and driven by our commitment to partner with leaders to support student success through and beyond completion, Strada launched the Beyond Completion Challenge in 2021. This \$10 million national competitive grant process¹⁵ was designed to incentivize and support innovation aimed at improving equitable outcomes for students. Strada invited institutions within the Taskforce on Higher Education and Opportunity — a group of 36 universities and systems serving 2.4 million students that formed amid the pandemic to reimagine the higher education system — to submit proposals leveraging data to inform their particular challenges and proposed solutions. From a strong group of proposals, 15 projects were selected¹⁶ and awarded approximately \$250,000 each in Phase 1 of the challenge. Through the process of reviewing proposals and engaging with these higher education leaders from across the country, we have gathered initial insights into how leaders and institutions are using data to understand their institutional challenges and adapting and innovating to advance more equitable post-graduation outcomes for the students they serve. It is our privilege to share some of what we have learned with the broader field in hopes to inform, inspire, and support the many leaders working tirelessly to improve students' lives and outcomes.

What is clear from our observations is that there is no lack of dedication from our colleagues on college campuses across the country to drive meaningful change and improve equitable outcomes for students. While many leaders are fatigued with the ongoing challenges related to the pandemic, student mental health crisis, issues of racial injustice, and mounting enrollment pressures, it is clear that higher education leaders remain dedicated and there is a new level of openness to reimagining how to better deliver on the promise of a college degree.

Among the proposals submitted to the Beyond Completion Challenge, there are initiatives that undertake bold, systemic change; those that focus on capacity-building; and others that put forth new, redesigned, or scaled programs. While each of the innovations proposed is unique — taking into account the particular challenges, student populations, and contexts of the individual institutions and communities — we observed themes and insights that cut across institutional type and solution. We have organized our insights from the initiatives into the three thematic areas noted above: guidance, affordability, and education-to-work connections.

GUIDANCE

Beyond Completion Challenge proposals included a wide variety of approaches to guidance, advising, mentoring, and coaching to help students better navigate into and through their postsecondary educational journeys. In reviewing proposals, we learned about innovative examples of mentoring, with a focus on populations of students who often face the greatest barriers to success, including first-generation students, students of color, and students from lower-income backgrounds. The proposed mentorship approaches vary by initiative with some involving new approaches to leveraging untapped alumni, creating curated networks of professional advisors from local corporate and industry partners, using the power of cohorts, and expanding existing programs or initiatives. Across the guidance-focused initiatives, we observe an unwavering commitment to ensuring accessibility of high-quality, career-focused guidance to more students.

Additionally, we saw institutions recognizing that the responsibility of career advising must not reside only within a traditional career center, but rather be spread across campus among faculty, staff, and advisors. This is a notable trend observable across campuses nationally. One institution, for example, is focusing some of its Beyond Completion Challenge work on building the career-advising capacity of faculty and staff to ensure more students have access to individuals prepared to assist them in making the connections between college and career. Given that graduates report that their professors and courses were very valuable¹⁷ to them, but that experiences connecting college to career were not common or uniformly available, this strategy is particularly encouraging. Several institutions are uniquely leveraging new, scalable technologies to provide students with advising, mentorship, professional skills development, and internships to better equip them for academic and career success.

AFFORDABILITY

As we reviewed proposals, it became clear that financial barriers remain a pervasive challenge for students. A number of initiatives proposed approaches to addressing affordability. For example, institutions shared plans to expand paid internships, paid research experiences, summer housing, and professional/career development using a variety of funding sources, including institutional funding, philanthropic funding, and employer-paid internships. One comprehensive institutional approach focused on affordability and resources includes stipends for child care and for students to purchase professional attire. Another particularly innovative approach addresses affordability by completely redesigning curricular and cocurricular experiences and support to accelerate the time to degree, reducing the cost of attendance for students. It is clear that financial barriers are front of mind for institutions looking to close equity gaps by creating access to opportunities that make stronger connections between education and future employment.

Examples of proposed approaches to addressing barriers in affordability and resources for students

- Expanding paid internship opportunities and research experiences.
- Summer housing initiatives.
- Professional/career development.
- Stipends to cover childcare and professional attire.
- Redesigning curricular and cocurricular experiences to accelerate the time to degree, reducing the cost of attendance for students.

EDUCATION-TO-WORK CONNECTIONS

We were excited to see a range of approaches to developing stronger connections between college and career, including work-based learning experiences, creative employer partnerships, and stronger career-relevant curriculum. Institutions are bolstering these connections by leveraging strategies already noted above, including expanding internships, project-based learning, apprenticeships, and mentoring. One institution that received Beyond Completion Challenge funds is creatively leveraging the student work experience on campus and scaling to off-campus work opportunities to ensure working learners are building the skills and mindsets valued by employers, and also expanding the student work supervision model to include reflection, career guidance, and mentoring. Other institutions are building their own technology platforms or contracting with outside companies to provide these career-relevant experiences and connections. We also observed institutions proposing new and creative partnerships with large employers, health systems, and sets of local employers. These partnerships include targeted education, clinicals, internships, and creating clearer, supported pathways from education to work. One campus is leveraging its close physical proximity to a major health care employer to create stronger career relevance for students while also meeting the employer's need for an educated and skilled workforce. We observed leaders focused on creating or scaling education programs that address labor shortages.

Some institutions also are intentionally engaging with employers in their communities to create internships and programs to help meet local workforce needs.

Through the challenge, we also have learned about emerging trends to hardwire connections to career within the curriculum — redesigning both individual courses and, in more extreme cases, rethinking

degree programs more comprehensively. Institutions increasingly are using labor market data to inform existing curriculum and to develop new programs. The University of Texas System (see page 18) has taken the bold step of redesigning specific majors to embed industry-recognized, microcredentials into the curriculum and cocurriculum in an effort to make stronger connections between education and work and to ensure that graduates develop the skills desired by employers.

Efforts of institutions that received Beyond Completion Challenge funds to strengthen education-to-work-connections

- Leveraging the campus work experience and scaling to off-campus work opportunities.
- Expanding supervision models to include reflection, career guidance, and mentoring.
- Building tech platforms or contracting with outside companies to provide career-relevant experiences and connections.
- Proposing creative partnerships with employers to provide targeted education, clinicals, and internships to students.
- Leveraging proximity to major employers to create stronger career relevance for students, while meeting local workforce needs.
- Redesigning individual courses and rethinking degree programs to hardwire connections to career within the curriculum.



EXAMPLES FROM THE FIELD

To further illuminate the themes we have outlined above, our colleagues Lori Carrell at the University of Minnesota Rochester, Kimberly Johnson at the University of Oregon, and Lydia Riley at the University of Texas System offer case studies about their Beyond Completion Challenge initiatives. We appreciate their generosity in sharing the approach they and their colleagues have taken to enhancing the connections between education and work, with a focus on ensuring equitable, high-quality outcomes for graduates. To learn more about all of the Phase 1 Beyond Completion Challenge projects, please visit stradaeducation.org/bcc

UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA ROCHESTER

Nxt Gen Med: Redesigning Health-Related Baccalaureate Degrees for Lower Cost, Faster Completion, Academic Success, and Career Readiness

Lori J. Carrell, Ph.D., Chancellor

At the innovative Rochester campus of the University of Minnesota, our vision is to “inspire transformation in higher education through innovations that empower graduates to solve the grand health challenges of the 21st century.” Launched in 2009, this new public university campus seeks to be a scalable demonstration case for other campuses by decreasing student costs for a high-value college education while increasing student success including equity in educational attainment and post-graduation employment in high-demand health careers. With a diverse student body of 70 percent underrepresented students and a rigorous health sciences curriculum, we have closed the so-called “achievement gap” with evidence-based practices provided to all students. In 2019, these results were described in the Washington Post, Hechinger Report, and The Chronicle of Higher Education.

During this recent period of historic disruptions in higher education, our innovation-focused campus community sought to build on these strong results from our first decade by enhancing the use of technology for student engagement and well-being; connecting more closely with industry partner Mayo Clinic to discern critical career competencies; ensuring disparity-reducing educational practices for all students; and creating a new curricular design to decrease students’ college costs. What emerged from our reimagining, analysis, and faculty design is “NXT Gen Med,” an accelerated, year-round program providing career-focused students with a fast-track, lower-cost, world-class University of Minnesota degree. Paid internships are embedded in the curriculum, and students document their progress toward competencies identified by our health care industry partner, ready for graduation and employment in 2 ½ years. The new technology platform created with partner Google Cloud will not only engage students and support a competency portfolio for employers, but also provide learning analytics for continuous learning enhancement.

With this new pilot program set to launch in August 2022, we are attracting students who want to make a difference in the world — and make a living. For student relevance, experiential courses will be bundled together around themes, such as disparities in the pandemic, evidence-based health care solution design, and the public communication of science. Funding from Strada’s Beyond Completion Challenge will support NXT Gen Med faculty development, industry partner internship program development, and the assessment of every aspect of the student and employer experience. This new model is designed to solve long-standing higher education problems of disparities, student cost, and career connection.

Ultimately, we are aiming to challenge orthodoxies and implement new strategies to reimagine the future of higher education and prepare our most vulnerable students and graduates for security, success, and contribution in the post-pandemic economy. In the past, higher education has squandered human potential, particularly for millions of underrepresented students who start college and drop out with debt. That outcome grieves educators and yet needed revitalization at scale has been slow, at least pre-pandemic. As a higher education enterprise, we have the privilege of developing human potential for the good of individuals and the society. We must find new ways to successfully educate a wider swath of the population to be engaged citizens who are also ready to launch careers in areas of critical workforce shortage. NXT Gen Med is one endeavor poised to contribute to a rapidly changing higher education environment.

“Ultimately, we are aiming to challenge orthodoxies and implement new strategies to reimagine the future of higher education.”

UNIVERSITY OF OREGON

Ducks Rise: Empowering Underrepresented Minorities and Low-Income Students Through Research Internships and Intentional Student Experiences

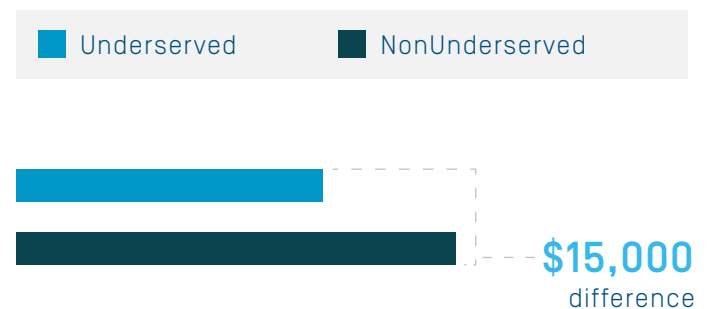
Kimberly Johnson, Vice Provost for Undergraduate Education and Student Success

The University of Oregon is a public flagship research university and serves 18,000 undergraduates annually. Since 2015, student success has been one of the institutional priorities with a goal to increase the four-year graduation rate. Recognizing the increasing need for academic-to-career integration, in 2019 we launched a framework called Flight Paths. Flight Paths are structured around six thematic areas designed to facilitate early career exploration and intentional major selection. The university redesigned its academic advising model by integrating academic and career advising within the Flight Path framework and hired 23 professional advisors to replace a decentralized faculty advising model in the largest academic college at the university.

While we have made significant progress in increasing four-year graduation rates and built the institutional capacity in advising and career exploration, the equity gaps in student success outcomes persisted. The University of Oregon's First Destination Survey in 2019-20 revealed that the average post-graduation salaries for underserved graduates were more than \$15,000 lower compared to nonunderserved peers. We also recognize that simply graduating is not good enough; students must be well-educated and ready for a successful life after graduation. Our career support has been self-service, requiring a student to take the initiative to find, access, and benefit from it, which leaves underrepresented students (racial/ethnic minorities and Pell Grant recipients) at a disadvantage. This disconnect may be caused by a variety of factors, including access to social capital resources such as mentoring and professional networks. Unfortunately, these inequitable opportunities produce a compounding, multigenerational impact, resulting in fewer career opportunities, lower salaries, and less opportunity for future generations to access privileged, yet invisible, social benefits.

Integrating into the existing institutional infrastructure and networks, DucksRise — a six-month intensive cohort-based career development program — is designed to empower underrepresented minorities and low-income students through research internships and student experiences to achieve equitable success and opportunity. The program offers a hybrid career class that builds community, career competencies, and access to career-readiness opportunities, followed with tailored connections to networks such as alumni, cultural affinity groups, community, industry, workshops, professional development opportunities, wraparound coaching and support to secure opportunities. The program further advances integration of the career practices within the entire UO experience with a particular eye toward equity. Our approach is driven on wraparound and inclusive design to amplify the impact.

Average 2019-20 post-graduation salaries for underserved graduates were less than their nonunderserved peers



University of Oregon 2019-2020 First Destination Survey

UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS SYSTEM

Developing In-Demand Skills Among Undergraduates for Better, More Equitable Post Completion Outcomes

Lydia Riley, Director of Academic Affairs

Employers increasingly are raising concerns about skills gaps — the mismatch between the skills they need in their workforce versus the skills job applicants possess. In Texas, there is a persistent and growing shortage of workers with digital and analytic skills. As a result, employers are having a hard time filling high-quality jobs in information technology, cybersecurity, and business (e.g., general managers, project managers, business analysts, etc.). Additionally, based on data from SeekUT — the University of Texas System’s cutting-edge employment and earnings outcome dashboard — we have identified troubling inequities in postsecondary value. In the UT System, we know that a graduate’s field of study has a significant impact on earnings and that median earnings are persistently lower for people of color at every level of degree attainment. While UT System graduates earn 92 percent more than high school-educated workers, a student’s major has the largest impact on post-graduation earnings, with differences of almost \$45,000 per year.

In response to these challenges, UT System recently launched Texas Credentials for the Future, an initiative focused on expanding and creating short-term, industry-recognized credentials that are in high demand. In support of this effort and with funding support from Strada’s Beyond Completion Challenge, UT’s eight academic institutions will redesign undergraduate degree experiences that incorporate skills and knowledge desired by employers for high-demand, high-quality careers. Institutions will incorporate relevant, industry-recognized microcredentials and skills badges into the curriculum and cocurriculum to help produce well-rounded, job-ready graduates with the skills most needed by Texas employers. Students will earn a microcredential or skills badge while pursuing their degrees, resulting in graduates who are both broadly educated and specifically skilled, with the goal of improved job placement and earnings outcomes.

UT institutions will work with leading employers to identify existing (i.e., “off the shelf”) and develop new microcredentials and skills badges that signify tangible skills and knowledge recognized and valued by employers. Faculty will determine the appropriate fit for a microcredential or skills badge within an academic program and align competencies with academic course and program learning outcomes. Faculty may incorporate microcredentials or skills badges as a course capstone, program capstone, after the completion of a series of courses, or as a cocurricular offering, among other approaches.

While attending to persistent skills gaps, this project also will address inequities in postsecondary value by focusing on majors that consistently produce graduates with lower-than-average salaries. Moreover, because a disproportionate percentage of UT undergraduate students of color enroll in majors associated with lower salaries, we also will address racial disparities in postsecondary value while helping to diversify the talent pipeline.

“Students will earn a microcredential or skills badge while pursuing their degrees, resulting in graduates who are both broadly educated and specifically skilled, with the goal of improved job placement and earnings outcomes.”



**RISING
TO THE
CHALLENGE**

Despite the many challenges institutions of higher education and their leaders face, we remain optimistic given what we see happening on campuses across the nation.

Higher education leaders, faculty, and institutions adapted and innovated during the COVID-19 pandemic in unprecedented ways. And many seek to sustain this momentum for continual change and improvement. We've observed a unique openness to innovation in leaders and campuses to better serve students and to build stronger connections between education and careers. We also are seeing the use of data and promising practices to improve student outcomes beyond completion.

We have highlighted some of the unique proposals and themes from the Phase 1 proposals from the Beyond Completion Challenge. We also offer these five observations and early insights from the 39 Phase 1 proposals. We look forward to continuing to build upon their early insights over the next year to keep the field apprised of timely developments on campuses across the country.

- Universities are expanding the responsibility of career services beyond traditional career centers to a shared responsibility across all campus stakeholders, including faculty, staff, advisors, peers, and alumni.
- There is increased use of labor market data to inform curriculum, programs, and strategies to better align education with local workforce needs.
- The use of technology platforms, both internally and outside companies, is filling gaps to better provide mentoring connections, internships, work-based learning opportunities, industry-aligned credentials, etc.
- Employer partnerships are evolving to more closely align student experience and workforce needs.
- Effectively scaling career-related programs continues to be a challenge, especially for those focused on students managing complicated lives and facing the greatest barriers.

At a time when public confidence in the value of higher education has been weakened and amid the current economic, public health, and racial justice context, we must reassert our collective commitment to ensuring that all students who desire postsecondary education not only have access, success while enrolled, and complete their degrees, but also that they realize the full benefits of their investments — a good job, meaningful work, a fulfilling life, and the ability to contribute to their families and their communities. While there is much work to be done, we remain confident that higher education and policy leaders are up to the task.

We look forward to continuing to support and learn with and from the Beyond Completion Challenge Phase 1 and 2 initiatives. We will continue to share our insights with the hope of informing and helping to advance other efforts in the field.

“We must reassert our collective commitment to ensuring that all students who desire postsecondary education not only have access, success while enrolled, and complete their degrees, but also that they realize the full benefits of their investments.”



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Strada Education Network is a nonprofit organization dedicated to helping more people take advantage of education and training after high school that helps them secure a good job and achieve socioeconomic mobility. We conduct research, make charitable grants and social impact investments, and collaborate with educators, employers, policymakers, and organizations to help students succeed beyond completion of a certificate or degree. Learn more at stradaeducation.org.