



Creating Change One Step At a Time: Efforts to Improve College Access and Success in Indiana

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Over the past several decades, Indiana's policymakers, business leaders, and education officials have sought solutions to some of the major educational issues affecting the state, including instituting a more rigorous high school curriculum, expanding opportunities for need-based financial aid, creating a statewide community college system, and improving postsecondary completion rates. These efforts have already begun to make an impact on the state's college access issues. In 2006, more than two-thirds (68 percent) of Hoosier students completed a college preparatory curriculum in high school, compared with only 12 percent in 1994. In 1992, Indiana ranked 34th in the nation in the percentage of high school graduates who enrolled the following fall in postsecondary education. By 2004, its ranking had risen to 10th in the nation. Since 2001, more than 65,000 additional students have enrolled in college in the state, in part because of increased access made possible by the new community college system.

The process Indiana has undertaken is evolutionary and offers a glimpse into how a state has been able to engineer policy and convene various interest groups for a common purpose: improving the postsecondary access and attainment of its residents. While policymakers in other states may not find all of Indiana's best practices relevant to their situations, Indiana is a remarkable example of how priorities can be shifted and consensus reached to increase educational opportunities for state residents.

LESSONS LEARNED

Stakeholders in Indiana believe that academic preparation, higher education affordability, and a differentiated higher education system are integral to ensuring that more students can enroll in higher education. Addressing the needs of students while they are enrolled in postsecondary institutions leads to more students graduating with degrees and certificates, creating an effective workforce for the 21st century's global economy. The points listed below summarize some of the major lessons learned in each of these key areas:

Academic Preparation

- Demand that high academic expectations be the norm for all students.
- Develop clear and rigorous academic standards at all levels of education and ensure that these standards are aligned with the instruments used to test student progress.
- Institute a mandatory high school curriculum that will fully prepare students for college or work and assess the strength of that curriculum through end-of-course exams.
- Recognize that, for students to take full advantage of a rigorous high school curriculum, they must complete that curriculum. Improving high school graduation rates is essential.
- Make the rigorous high school curriculum the minimum admissions standard for the state's public four-year institutions, and hold high schools accountable for their graduates' postsecondary performance.

- Focus on teacher quality, recruitment, and retention.
- Develop an integrated student-level data system so students can be tracked through K-12, postsecondary education, and into the workforce.

Affordability

- Work to control the cost of public postsecondary institutions in the state, but recognize that cost increases are part of a national trend and are unlikely to end soon.
- Make substantial and sustained investments in need-based financial aid, especially in the form of grants.
- Provide an incentive for students to complete a rigorous high school curriculum by tying aid amounts to the diploma earned.
- Reach out to students and parents so they are aware of available financial aid and how to apply for it.
- Use programs like the Twenty-First Century Scholars to offer early-commitment financial aid to low-income students and to provide them with social and academic supports to increase the likelihood that they will enroll in college.
- Ensure that academic and social supports, as well as financial aid, for low-income students are continued once students enter college.

- Recognize the needs of part-time and nontraditional students in designing financial aid programs.
- Address the special needs of at-risk student populations such as low-income, minority, and adult students.

A Differentiated Higher Education System

- Clarify the mission of each of the state’s public postsecondary institutions—from major research institutions to community colleges—so it is clear what role each institution plays in meeting the state’s needs.
- Work to ensure that public colleges and universities are fully meeting the needs of their constituencies and that there are no gaps in educational opportunity because of limited program offerings or geographic distance.
- Recognize the importance of community colleges to postsecondary access. Money invested in the state’s community college system can pay off in increased college access and attainment.
- Focus remediation efforts at the community college level to reduce costs at four-year institutions.
- Increase links among the state’s public postsecondary institutions to build a seamless pipeline for postsecondary education through the graduate level.

Student Success

- Ensure that policy efforts focus on student success as well as on college access.
- Develop postsecondary performance accountability measures that tie funding increases to student outcomes, such as course and degree completion rates, rather than to enrollment growth.
- Establish clear policies for course transfer and program articulation among the state’s public postsecondary institutions.
- Ensure that information on transfer and articulation opportunities and policies is widely available to all interested parties.
- Encourage development of “passport” programs between two- and four-year institutions that serve the same areas of the state.

KEY FACTORS IN CREATING CHANGE

While work remains to be done, the successes Indiana has achieved place it at the forefront of the nation in efforts to improve access to and success in higher education. How was Indiana able to achieve such notable progress? In part, this progress can be attributed to a generally amicable and bipartisan political culture that focuses on creating change for the benefit of the state as a whole. However, Indiana also engages in a number of key practices that have enabled it to create substantial change in the educational policy arena. These practices include the following:

- Recognizing the need for change and expressing that need to all stakeholders.
- Moving forward incrementally—one step at a time—without letting initial setbacks stop the process of change.
- Using data to inform policy decisions. The work of experts inside and outside the state can provide a range of options to address identified problems.
- Connecting to national organizations working in the same areas. These connections offer support in developing new policies and links to other states that may have similar concerns or experiences.
- Seeking financial support for new policy initiatives from nonprofit organizations, foundations, and the federal government.
- Building public support through transparency and aggressive communication efforts.
- Making sure all stakeholders have a seat at the table so problems and policy solutions can be thoroughly discussed before implementation.
- Cultivating strong, sustained, and bipartisan state leadership. A few key individuals can make or break policy initiatives.

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