



# DEGREES OF HOPE

Redefining Access  
for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Student



# FOR TOO MANY STUDENTS, ACCESS TO A QUALITY EDUCATION REMAINS ELUSIVE...

*Degrees of Hope: Redefining Access for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Student* reminds us, through the eyes of five incredible college students, that access to college is still a very real challenge in our communities and nationwide. As demographic shifts and economic factors increase the potential pool of college students in this country, many of the long-standing programs and policies designed to foster access no longer support the needs of today's students. Building on the themes and policy issues addressed in the film, through this guide, we aim to facilitate conversations among policy-makers and decision-makers at all levels to reinvigorate the dialogue on college access in this country and to develop a road map for aligning research, policy, and practice to ensure greater attainment for all.



## FILM SYNOPSIS

*Degrees of Hope: Redefining Access for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Student* depicts the stories of five college students – a first-generation student, a community college transfer student, a military/veteran, an online learner, and an adult learner – and the barriers to accessing college that each student faces on their journey into higher education. The successes of these 21<sup>st</sup> century students, who enter postsecondary education through “non-traditional” paths, are the exception, not the rule. This 40-minute documentary gives viewers an intimate look into the lives of today’s students and sheds light on the importance of clear pathways, as well as the need for stronger policies and practices in areas such as transfer, financial aid, and academic and student support services.

# HOW TO USE THIS FILM

The stories highlighted in the film will resonate with anyone who is involved with higher education, from students and families to faculty, staff, community leaders, and policymakers. A planned group screening provides an excellent opportunity to bring together different stakeholders for an open dialogue to reflect on themes represented in the film. After watching the film, consider using one of the formats to the right to discuss key topics (see discussion questions on page 8) and collectively introduce strategies to promote college access and success.



This 40-minute documentary gives viewers an intimate look into the lives of today's students.

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## SUGGESTED DISCUSSION FORMATS

### **Facilitator-led dialogues**

Identify a leader at your institution or organization who can serve as a facilitator to lead a group discussion.

### **Facilitated panel**

Select various stakeholders to serve on a panel. A facilitator will lead the panel in a discussion.

### **Breakout groups**

Assign a section of the audience to represent each student in the film. Discuss challenges and propose solutions to the larger group.

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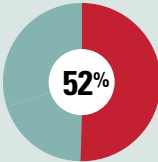
## WHO SHOULD WATCH *DEGREES OF HOPE?*

- ✓ Policymakers
- ✓ Faculty and staff
- ✓ College access programs
- ✓ Teachers
- ✓ Community or faith-based groups
- ✓ Students
- ✓ Families

# 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY STUDENT PROFILES: QUICK FACTS<sup>1</sup>



## SHARON FIRST-GENERATION STUDENT



**More than half** of today's undergraduates are the first in their families to graduate from college.

**Half** of first-generation students rely on Pell grants to afford college.

**64 percent** of first-generation students attend community colleges and for-profit institutions.



**Only 2 out of 10** first-generation students are likely to obtain a bachelor's degree within six years.



## TRAVAL COMMUNITY COLLEGE TRANSFER STUDENT

**40 percent** of undergraduates are enrolled in community colleges; one in three bachelor's degree recipients previously attended community college.



**1 in 4** community college students actually transfer to a four-year institution within six years.

**Only 1 in 10** students who begin at community colleges obtain a bachelor's degree within six years.

Transfer students attempt **more credits**, accumulate **more debt**, and spend **more time** getting their degrees than students who begin at four-year institutions.



## DONALD MILITARY/VETERAN STUDENT

About **1,100,000**, or 5 percent of undergraduates in 2011-12, **had military experience.**

Only about **60 percent** of military/veteran students receive educational benefits from the military.

Most military/veteran students enroll in public institutions, but 1 in 4 enroll in for-profit institutions.

# 1 in 2

military/veteran students stop out of college at some point over a six-year period.



## JENELL & ANDREA ADULT STUDENTS

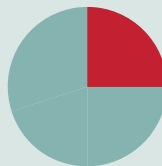
More than **40 percent** of undergraduates today are age 24 or older.

More than **50 percent** of adult students have dependents and **40 percent** work full-time.

# 60%

of adult students take alternative coursework (i.e., online, evening or weekend).

**5 percent** of adult students attain a bachelor's degree within six years.



**One-quarter** of adult students receive federal public assistance to help make ends meet.



# DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

After viewing the documentary, we encourage you to reflect on the access challenges that surfaced in the film as they relate to college readiness, transfer and articulation pathways, financial aid, and academic and student support services, and how these issues impact other students like those featured in the film. In responding to each of the questions below, think critically about how current policies help or hinder the access and success of 21<sup>st</sup> century students and how to introduce strategies for moving forward.



# 1

## PREPARE / COLLEGE READINESS

### CREATE A COLLEGE-GOING CULTURE

Even though Jenell had graduated at the top of her high school class, she was unable to pass college algebra and had to take remedial math before reenrolling in college-level math. As a result, she spent more on tuition and other college expenses than students who started college ready.

**1.1** Every high school student should graduate ready for college and careers. How does your state define and measure the college readiness of high school students? Is this information clearly communicated to schools, parents, students, teachers, and counselors?

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**1.2** Catch-up courses can help high school students master concepts that college-ready exams show they are lacking. Do your students have access to these courses starting in their junior year or over the summer? How are informational, cost, and transportation barriers eliminated for low-income and first-generation students?

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**1.3** Enhanced models of remedial education allow students to progress more quickly towards proficiency and completion. Does your college allow students to receive remediation while enrolled in credit-bearing courses or customize remediation to include only those skills students are lacking?

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# 2

## ALIGN / TRANSFER AND ARTICULATION

### CLARIFY AND STRENGTHEN PATHWAYS TO COLLEGE

Community colleges can be pathways to more affordable bachelor's degree for low-income students and a way to make higher education systems more productive. However, too many students like Travel lack the clear guidance and assurances needed to make sure their time and money are not wasted.

**2.1** Transfer is a critical part of any state higher education system. Do you know what percentage of students in your state transfer successfully from community colleges to public four-year institutions? How can your state create more efficient pathways to increase the percentage of successful transfers and ensure transfer students graduate more quickly and cost-effectively?

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**2.2** Transfer policies must be effectively communicated to students. How do your community college students learn about the steps they need to take to transfer successfully without excess credits? How often do departments communicate with receiving institutions to ensure students have access to the most current information?

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**2.3** Sub-baccalaureate certificates and degrees are in high demand in today's economy. Do community college students have the opportunity and know-how to earn a credential before they transfer? After they transfer, are there opportunities to retroactively review transcripts and reward sub-baccalaureate credentials?

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# 3

## INVEST / FINANCIAL AID

### MAKE COLLEGE AFFORDABLE

College costs are a significant reason why qualified students do not enroll, enroll part-time, take a long time to earn a credential, or leave without a degree. Sharon, Traval, and Andrea showed us different ways financial aid policies can work to remove these barriers to access—and how it can hinder access and ultimately success.

**3.2** Think about the current financial aid programs at the federal level and in your state. What are the goals and priorities of each of these programs? Do any of the programs prioritize helping low-income students enroll full-time by covering the full cost of attendance? How does your state allocate financial assistance? What proportion of financial aid recipients in your state attain a credential or degree?

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**3.2** The process of applying for financial aid is complex and confusing for many of the students who need it most. In what ways are your state, college, or organization making the financial aid process as simple and transparent as it can be? How does this include helping low-income students access other federal income support benefits to pay for living expenses?

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**3.3** In what ways are your financial aid policies and communications strategies tailored to adult students juggling work and families?

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# 4

## SUPPORT / ACADEMIC AND STUDENT SUPPORT

### CREATE A COLLEGE COMPLETION CULTURE

In the film, Donald says, “We don’t need new buildings. We don’t need more money handouts. We need information and the resources readily available; not bureaucracy, not paperwork, but a human being to talk to and walk us through this process.” Academic and student supports, both personal and technological, need to meet all students where they are with the information and support they need.

**4.1** What is the completion rate for non-traditional students in your state? Are there institutions that do a better job of supporting “non-traditional” students? What types of technology-based and in-person supports do those particular institutions provide?

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**4.2** College campuses that prioritize a culture of student success provide well-integrated, customized academic and student supports. Describe the culture on your campus. How does that culture differ for students enrolled in online programs? How important is completion, particularly the on-time completion by “non-traditional” or 21<sup>st</sup> century students?

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**4.3** In your department, are there academic and student support systems embedded within a structured degree pathway? Do students clearly understand what resources are available to help them be successful? Do these systems differ for online learners? Are assessments of prior learning and other opportunities for accelerating time-to-degree embedded in the support systems?

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# BEYOND THE FILM:

## HOW TO GET INVOLVED

Ensuring 21<sup>st</sup> century students achieve their full potential in higher education is no longer optional; it is a national imperative. *Degrees of Hope*, this accompanying viewing guide, and *Access to Attainment: An Access Agenda for 21<sup>st</sup> Century College Students* are resources that can help to reignite our national resolve to remedy the college access problem in this country. In addition to the film screening and discussion, here are some ways that you can get involved:



### **ADVOCATE** FOR ACCESS & SUCCESS:

Use social media campaigns, events, publications, and other public efforts to increase awareness of the access challenges facing 21<sup>st</sup> century students and the supports that can help them succeed. Empower students to advocate on their own behalf.



### **COLLABORATE** ON ACCESS & SUCCESS EFFORTS:

Engage practitioners, policymakers, community leaders, and employers in cross-sector partnerships that align efforts and resources to increase access at sufficient scale to help solve the problem.



### **DEMAND** ACCOUNTABILITY ON ACCESS & SUCCESS:

Hold institutions, communities, and systems accountable for 21<sup>st</sup> century student access and success. Track success rates of subsets of students, recognize and reward success, and identify policy implications for improving success.

# WORKSHEET

## 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY STUDENT CHALLENGES & SOLUTIONS

	Barriers/Challenges to College Access/Success		
	Financial	Academic	Personal
<b>First-generation</b> SHARON			
<b>Community college transfer</b> TRAVAL			
<b>Military/Veteran</b> DONALD			
<b>Online learner</b> JENELL			
<b>Returning adult</b> ANDREA			

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*Take a few moments to reflect on the students and their stories featured in the film and the implications for other 21<sup>st</sup> century students. What specific barriers did they face along the pathway to a college degree? Did any individuals or programs help them overcome those barriers? What additional supports would have been helpful?*

<b>Support System(s) in Place</b>	<b>Potential Policy/Practice Solution(s)</b>
Institutional/Federal/Other	Institutional/State/Federal/Other

**The Institute for Higher Education Policy (IHEP)** is a nonpartisan, nonprofit organization committed to promoting access to and success in higher education for all students. Based in Washington, D.C., IHEP develops innovative policy- and practice-oriented research to guide policymakers and education leaders, who develop high-impact policies that will address our nation's most pressing education challenges.



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