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The Need for First Year Experience Programs

How American colleges can meet the 2025 goal for greater postsecondary education attainment

Second Edition

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Much has been written about the need for us to increase attendance and graduation rates at today's two- and four-year institutions in the national quest to have 60% of Americans holding a degree, certificate or other high-quality credential by 2025.

According to the Lumina Foundation, an independent foundation focused on expanding student success and access to postsecondary education, we're making progress. The proportion of the U.S. population between the ages of 25 and 64 holding a two- or four-year college degree reached 40.4% in 2014, a 2.1% increase since this measure was first reported in 2008 (Lumina Foundation, 2016, p. 2). Degree attainment has increased even faster among adults aged 25 to 34 during the same period, equal to 42.3% in 2014—a 4.5% increase since 2008 (Lumina Foundation, 2016, p. 2).

As encouraging as these trends are, most experts agree they are not enough to reach our 2025 goal. Lumina Foundation projects 35.7 million Americans will earn postsecondary credentials that will count toward Goal 2025. However, the foundation's forecast also notes that an additional *10.9 million more Americans* between the ages of 15 and 54 would be required in order to reach the 60% goal by 2025 (Lumina Foundation, 2016, p. 2).

Why the 2025 Goal is Important

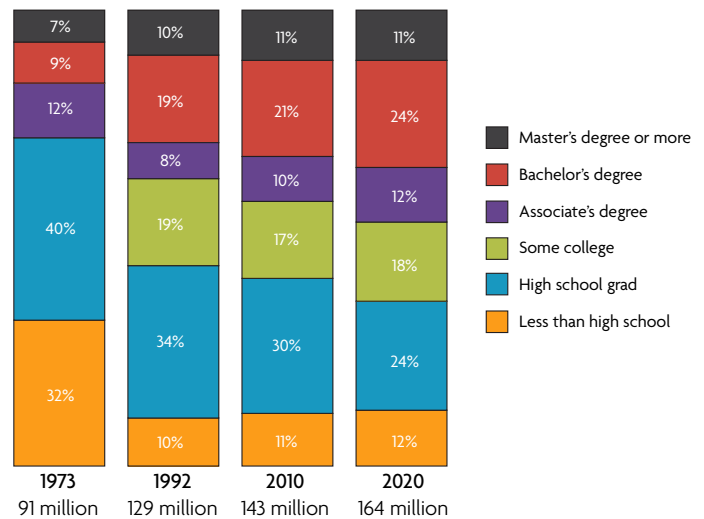
According to data from the U.S. Census of Employment and Wages, the number of jobs held by workers with a high school diploma or less declined by 6.3 million during the Great Recession of 2008. There is little evidence that these jobs have, or will, come back.

While workers with some college also lost employment during the same period, jobs requiring some college have come roaring back – accounting for an increase of 700,000 jobs over the pre-2008 period.

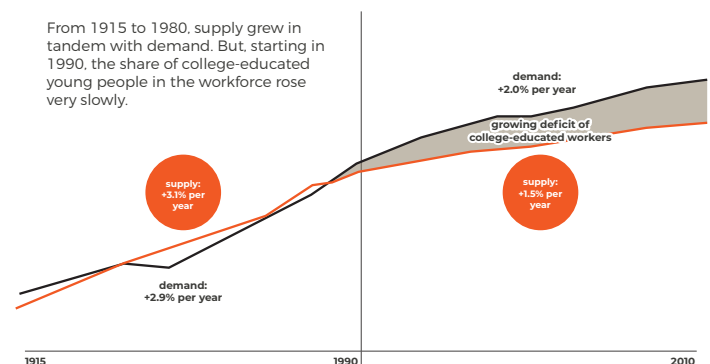
But the real story is the dramatic increase in jobs requiring a bachelor's degree at the minimum. Today there are 8.1 million more jobs for Americans requiring at least a bachelor's degree than when the recession began (Lumina Foundation, 2016, p. 3).

Virtually all of the growth since 2007 has been in jobs requiring some form of postsecondary education (Lumina Foundation, 2016, p. 3). In the future, it's clear that attaining a two- or four-year degree or a high quality certificate will be the key to job and economic growth – and the health and well-being of our communities.

This trend is expected to continue in the future according to Edward E. Gordon, noted human capital consultant and expert. In a May 2014 presentation to the Watertown South Dakota Economic Summit, Gordon shared the “mismatch” of educational job requirements between 1973 and 2020, showing the dramatic increase in the need for college-educated workers (Gordon, 2014).



According to a report by the Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce, the United States has been underproducing college-going students relative to demand since 1990 (Carnevale & Rose, 2014, p. 4).



More importantly, this has led to increasing income disparity between college-educated workers and those with a high school education. The study by Carnevale & Rose concludes, “*Adding an additional 20 million postsecondary-educated workers over the course of the next 15 years is not impossible. It will make our level of college attainment comparable with other developed nations, help us meet the economy’s need for efficiency, and reverse the growth of income inequality.*” (2014, p. 7)

Reaching the 2025 Goal

Where will we get the *additional 10.9 million Americans* to reach our 2025 goal and power job and economic growth? According to Lumina Foundation, sources for growth fall into three groups (2016, p. 4):

1. 3.7 million Americans aged 12 to 24 who will not complete postsecondary education with current approaches. *This can only happen through wide-scale implementation of effective strategies to increase student success and close gaps in attainment for students from underrepresented groups.*
2. 3.9 million Americans aged 25 to 54, especially the roughly 27 million Americans with some college.
3. 3.3 million Americans who hold a postsecondary certification as their highest credential.

Many of these learners will be older and more will be African American, Hispanic and Native American. More will have lower incomes and be first-generation students (Lumina Foundation, 2016, p. 5). They are also members of cohorts that have been historically challenged with access to college and persisting to graduation.

The averages of persisting on to a second year of college for any student are not good. One estimate of the first- to second-year persistence rates at four-year institutions is just 68.7% (National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, 2014). In addition, one study estimates a 40% drop in first- to second-year students at community colleges (Jaggars & Xu, 2010; Jaggars & Xu, 2011).

Much of the first- to second-year drop-off is attributed to a lack of “college readiness” (a broadly defined term) in the average college freshman. Estimates vary, but as high as 60% of all incoming freshmen are judged to be academically unprepared to succeed in college (The National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education & The Southern Regional Education Board, 2010). As a result, as many as 20% of all college freshmen are enrolled in math or English remedial courses at various institutions (Sparks & Malkus, 2013). These figures are generally higher in two-year institutions.

Research on persistence has also uncovered several other, less academically driven factors that are highly predictive of a student’s likelihood to persist to graduation, including:

- o Several research studies (Dowd & Coury, 2006; Sibulkin & Butler, 2005; Webster, et al., 2006; Yakaboski, 2010) have found that a

student who is first in the family to enroll at a postsecondary institution is at greater risk of not persisting.

- o Students who are single parents while attending school are at greater risk of not persisting in college.
- o Students who are required to work more than 20 hours per week while in school are at greater risk of not persisting (Bean, 1980; Bean & Metzner, 1985; Bean & Vesper, 1990; Cabrera, Nora, & Castaneda, 1993).

Existing research also suggests that a student who has few or poor academic and career goals may have less probability of completing college (Bowles, Therriault., Krivoshey., & American Institutes for Research, 2014).

So reaching the 2025 goal isn’t just about increasing access to college and remedial courses. We also need to help students develop the personal insights, goals, habits and behaviors to navigate their first year in college to have a chance at persisting and earning a two- or four-year degree.

Addressing Persistence – The First Year Experience

The concept of the First Year Experience (FYE) is not new to postsecondary education. As early as 1640 in America, it was realized that first year students needed guidance to help “ease the young man’s transition from home to college” (Dwyer, 1989, p. 30).

National data suggests that 94% of accredited four-year colleges and universities in the U.S. offer some form of first-year program to at least some students and more than half offer a first-year program to 90% or more of their student population (Policy Center on the First Year of College, 2002; Keup & Padgett, 2011).

First-year programs run the spectrum from one-day student orientation sessions that cover student behavior expectations and information about student resources, to 15-hour, accredited freshman courses that focus on personal insight and reflection, academic and career goal setting, study habits, time management and money management.

The goal of these programs is to provide first-year students with support and transition structures, enabling them to better grasp the subjects, skills and habits they will need to be successful in college.

The most robust programs address student success as defined by M. Lee Upcraft and John N. Gardner (1989) to include the following six elements (Policy Center on the First Year of College, 2002; Keup & Padgett, 2011):

1. **Developing Academic and Intellectual Competence** – Students should be confident in their abilities to engage and learn in the college academic environment.
2. **Establishing and Maintaining Interpersonal Relationships** – Students should have the ability to create platonic and romantic relationships.
3. **Developing Identity** – Students should be exploring who they are and who they want to be. This may happen through coursework, campus clubs and organizations or through peer relationships and self-exploration.
4. **Deciding on a Career and Lifestyle** – Students, through self-exploration, should explore and decide on the type of career and lifestyle they wish to have post-graduation. This is an important aspect of self-exploration; if students' desires for career will not provide the means for the lifestyle they want, then the student may experience dissonance and need guidance.
5. **Maintaining Personal Health and Wellness** – College is an important time in students' lives. Habits created during this period are likely to have lifelong effect. Students should be forming healthy habits and taking care of themselves.
6. **Developing an Integrated Philosophy of Life** – Students are away from home for the first time and have the opportunity to re-examine beliefs they have always held true. Students will explore different philosophies and hopefully will find those that make sense for them throughout their first year and subsequent years.

Many experts agree that returning students, or adults re-entering postsecondary education, benefit from programs that deliver these attributes, even though the challenges these students face are different.

The majority of research on first-year seminars has focused on the influence of these courses on retention and academic performance. Summing up this research, Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) state that first-year seminar participation has significant and substantial **“positive effects on a student's successful transition to college and the likelihood of persistence into the second year... on a considerable array of other college experiences known to be related directly and indirectly to bachelor's degree completion”** (p.403).

Other research reviews suggest first-year seminars have measurable, positive effects on student success.

Appalachian State students “who enrolled in Freshman Seminar finished their first semester with

a significantly higher GPA (M=2.97) than students who did not (M=2.86), $p < .001$ ” (Griffin & Romm, 2008, p. 9). In addition, the study indicated that students who entered with a lower GPA benefited more than students who performed above norm (Griffin & Romm, 2008, p. 9).

At Babson College, 76.2% of all student respondents indicated they agreed or strongly agreed that their first-year seminar “helped them to develop the skills necessary to become a participatory member of the college community” (Griffin & Romm, 2008, p. 12), while 84.7% agreed or strongly agreed the program helped them develop their understanding of a scholarly community (Griffin & Romm, 2008, p. 13).

Beginning students who took Indiana University Southeast's for-credit, first-year seminar were more likely to be retained than students who did not take the course (Griffin & Romm, 2008, p. 23). Results were repeated in analysis of student retention at Indiana University-Perdue University, Indianapolis (Griffin & Romm, 2008, p. 32).

Students at Miami Dade College who were concurrently enrolled in remedial coursework and in Miami's Student Life Skills course were much more likely to pass their remedial courses (Griffin & Romm, 2008, p. 51). In addition, Student Life Skills students were significantly more likely to re-enroll for the subsequent spring term than students not enrolled in the course (Griffin & Romm, 2008, p. 52).

Students attending the 3-credit first-year seminar at University of Wisconsin - Green Bay were reported to engage “significantly more in class behaviors such as asking questions, making presentations, and working with classmates” than students who did not take the seminar (Griffin & Romm, 2008, p. 90).

Students at Cuyamaca Community College who successfully completed PDC 124 (the institution's FYE online course) had an average persistence rate of 85.4 %; a 26.7 % increase over the persistence rates for all students attending the college (Fralick, 2008).

Beyond impact on retention and academic performance, there is evidence to suggest that first-year seminars significantly impact student lifelong learning orientations.

One study suggests that first-year seminars enhance student development across a complex measure of overall motivation to inquire (Padgett, Keup, & Pascarella, 2013). In addition, the study provides *“empirical evidence that first-year seminars are a legitimate curricular component that impacts not only persistence and student success but also integral student development components, which suggests the first-year seminar is a pervasive tool*

in the overall development of a holistic student and citizen.” (Padgett, Keup, & Pascarella, 2013, p. 146)

In short, the study suggests that investment in first-year seminars has the potential for a high return for institution’s by creating an atmosphere and culture that positively impacts student orientation to lifelong learning.

Empirical Evidence on FYE Program Positive Impact on Outcomes is Emerging

The July 2016 What Works Clearinghouse™ Intervention Report (WWC) by the U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences [IES] and the What Works Clearinghouse [WWC], offered evaluations of four studies (out of 176 in total) on FYE effectiveness that fell within the scope of supporting student success while also falling within WWC design standards for statistical significance (2016). Together, these studies included 12,091 freshman college students from four colleges in the U.S. (U.S. Department of Education, IES & WWC, 2016).

WWC indicated that “in two of the three studies that reported findings, the estimated impact of the intervention (FYE program) on outcomes in the credit accumulation was found to be positive and statistically significant” (U.S. Department of Education, IES & WWC, 2016).

Further, the WWC report indicated “the one study reporting findings estimated the impact of the intervention (FYE program) in college degree attainment as positive and statistically significant (U.S. Department of Education, IES & WWC, 2016).

The studies included in the WWC report and which met WWC design standards included:

Clouse, W. A. (2012). *The effects of non-compulsory freshman seminar and core curriculum completion ratios on post-secondary persistence and baccalaureate degree attainment* (Doctoral dissertation). Available from ProQuest Dissertations and Theses database (UMI No. 3523633).

Jamelske, E. (2009). Measuring the impact of a university first-year experience program on student GPA and retention. *Higher Education*, 57(3), 373-391.

Shoemaker, J. S. (1995, April). Evaluating the effectiveness of extended orientation for new, undecided freshmen. Paper presented at the meeting of the American Educational Research Association, San Francisco, CA <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED384303.pdf>.

Wilkerson, S. L. (2008). *An empirical analysis of factors that influence the first year to second year retention of students at one large, Hispanic Serving Institution (HSI)* (Doctoral dissertation). Available from ProQuest Dissertations and Theses database (UMI No. 3333787).

The clearinghouse further reports findings by Clouse, Shoemaker and Wilkerson indicating statistically significant, increasing levels of performance with students attending a first-year seminar in accumulating additional college credits into the second year of attendance (U.S. Department of Education, IES & WWC, 2016).

These empirical studies show what most professionals intuitively know and anecdotal reports suggest: FYE programs have a positive impact on student success, persistence and degree attainment.

In addition, student persistence can have a positive impact on tuition revenue for the institution by increasing the numbers of students who return for successive semesters and academic years. As a result, an FYE program should also become an administrative planning tool for anticipating future class sizes and attendance.

As has been seen, there are a significant number of serious academic efforts in the field attempting to measure the impact of FYE programs and the trend is clear: FYE programs have a positive impact on student success if implemented properly.

We believe the time for questioning FYE program effectiveness is over. The real question is how to provide this important content to students in an effective way so that student success is heightened and institutional investments in FYE programs become part of the ongoing process of postsecondary planning.

Taking the Next Step

Despite the wide-ranging evidence of the success of robust FYE programs in increasing student persistence and enhancing student engagement, many postsecondary institutions still have not implemented FYE programs. This is for a variety of reasons, ranging from staff and budget shortages to finding appropriate classroom facilities for their sections.

As a result, there is a need for solutions that make it easier and more flexible to deliver FYE programs based on the constraints facing the institution.

These innovative delivery systems can be offered online, integrated with a school’s learning management system (LMS) and managed easily by

faculty from anywhere while diminishing the need for costly classroom resources.

To offset costs to the institution, all entering students should be required to attend the institution's FYE section for paid credit.

Summary

The stakes are high. Meeting 2025 degree attainment goals will directly affect the economic and social well-being of all Americans. Those without some form of college degree or high quality certificate are unlikely to find personally meaningful employment and contribute fully to the economy.

In order to meet national goals for degree attainment, postsecondary institutions must be able to serve the needs of a broad student constituency, including those most at risk of not completing their first year in college, due to socio-economic and cultural factors.

This means providing not only academic support to enable students to work at required levels, but life skills support that help them successfully transition into, and graduate from, college, then move on to a career.

First-year experience courses (seminars) have proven effective at providing students with the life skills support they need to persist in college, at higher performance levels than those who do not receive this support.

More importantly, first-year experience courses have proven effective at increasing student orientation to lifelong learning, which further enables students to advance through their life and become increasingly more important members of the workforce, their communities, and society.

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