

A FRAMEWORK FOR POSTSECONDARY EDUCATION STIMULUS INVESTMENTS

Enroll. Complete. Compete.

The Covid-19 pandemic exacerbated existing disparities across race and income in the United States and displaced thousands of workers. Our higher education institutions faced revenue loss and sharp enrollment declines. Nevertheless, as we collectively recover from the pandemic, postsecondary education leaders have a tremendous opportunity to reimagine current systems and uplift often underserved adult learners through strategic use of the federal stimulus provided by the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security ([CARES](#)), Coronavirus Response and Relief Supplemental Appropriations ([CRRSA](#)), and American Rescue Plan ([ARP](#)) Acts. These three pieces of legislation collectively equip higher education with approximately \$77 billion in higher education emergency relief funds (HEERF) to support students and institutions.

While a portion of these funds are given directly to students and will be used to backfill budgets, leaders have an opportunity to invest in long-term solutions to address higher education's pre-pandemic challenges. This includes addressing equity gaps in access and attainment as well as supporting post-traditional learners. In alignment with the Accelerating Recovery through Credentials [Rapid Response Toolkit](#) and [Adult-Ready Playbook](#), Education Strategy Group, with generous support from the Kresge Foundation, presents a new framework for federal stimulus investments in higher education. Effectively titled, "Enroll. Complete. Compete.," this framework aims to address the current pain points of postsecondary education institutions and our workforce, while uplifting adult learners.

It is clear that we have an opportunity to help more post-traditional learners **enroll** in higher education, **complete** a credential of value, and **compete** in our global economy using the federal stimulus. To seize this one-in-a-generation opportunity, we must act now.

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ENROLL

Overall enrollments in postsecondary education have dropped by a total of 5.8 percent since the start of the pandemic, with the largest declines being in the community college sector (-13.2 percent). While parameters of HEERF preclude the use of funds for marketing and advertising, many other strategies can be used to support engagement with students to improve enrollment and retention rates. High-priority strategies include:

- 1 Promote high-quality, high-demand industry-recognized credentials through targeted tuition aid and program support.
- 2 Target aid for tuition and fees at critical populations, such as post-traditional learners.
- 3 Invest to build institutional capacity for transparent and systemic approaches to review and award credit for prior learning.
- 4 Partner with community-based organizations to provide satellite programs, services, and course offerings to students in diverse locales.

COMPLETE

The data are clear: earning a meaningful postsecondary credential that is recognized by the labor market promotes economic mobility. Unfortunately, the pandemic had a disproportionate impact on stop-outs of underserved student populations due to COVID-related challenges. From fall 2019 to fall 2020, overall persistence rates declined by 2 percentage points nationally. Investing in strategies that promote persistence and completion will have a positive impact on recovery, student outcomes, and institutions' bottom lines. High-priority strategies include:

- 1 Systematically provide emergency aid to address students' basic needs.
- 2 Build and sustain capacity for effective and proactive advising.
- 3 Invest in faculty professional development to give them the tools and resources necessary to develop an active learning ecosystem.
- 4 Increase course and program structure flexibility to better meet the needs of post-traditional students.

COMPETE

Our economy depends on a strong, skilled workforce; this has never been more important than in the recovery. We need to strengthen connections between education and our labor markets to ensure a vibrant, robust economy. In fact, the Bureau of Labor Statistics projects that over the next ten years there will be little to negative job growth in occupations that do not require a postsecondary credential. Purposefully prioritizing career and workforce readiness is essential for economic recovery. High-priority strategies include:

- 1 Integrate career and academic advising that elevates real-time labor market data to inform students of high-wage, high-quality pathways and careers.
- 2 Strengthen relationships with local employers to design programs and enhance regional labor market pipelines.
- 3 Enhance faculty's ability to articulate the connection between course curricula and employer-desired skills to campus stakeholders, including students.
- 4 Strengthen institutional data capacity to track graduate outcomes and for program quality improvement, especially for programs enrolling large numbers of post-traditional learners, learners of color, and low-income students.