

WHAT DO TEXAS, MASSACHUSETTS, AND CALIFORNIA HAVE IN COMMON?

Highlighting Effective Practices in Using State Data Systems to Reach Postsecondary Attainment Goals

Across the country, 46 states¹ have set statewide attainment goals for the share of their population that has a college education. Many of those goals stem from years of research on the changing needs of the economy and workforce, and to specific efforts stemming from the Lumina Foundation setting a national postsecondary attainment goal of 60 percent for completed postsecondary credentials and degrees among adults ages 25 to 64 by 2025.²

The Obama administration set a similar 60 percent goal for the nation, but focused on younger adults ages 25 to 34, completing credentials by 2020.³ Ever since President Obama's 2009 Joint Session to Congress, state attainment goals have proliferated.

States have implemented and overseen progress toward their postsecondary attainment goals in a variety of ways, including the use of newly formed agencies or task forces, existing state higher education coordinating boards, or other state-level governance entities focused on statewide educational outcomes. There is variation across states when it comes to setting an attainment goal and what education credentials count towards that goal. Each state sets its own attainment goal based on factors such as states' goals to increase the educational levels of their adult population and future workforce needs. In 2016, Arizona established its goal of reaching 60 percent of adults ages 25-64 to hold a postsecondary credential or degree by 2030,⁴ whereas in 2018, Iowa set an attainment goal of 70 percent of the workforce to have some postsecondary education by 2025.⁵ Whatever the goal, states have made varying degrees of progress toward them, and they are currently contending with significant roadblocks related to the COVID-19 pandemic, including declines in enrollment, disruption of education, and a shift to online learning.⁶

As one of the last states, and certainly the largest state without an attainment goal, California's Governor Gavin Newsom recently announced an effort for the state to reach the goal of 70 percent of working-aged Californians holding a postsecondary credential by 2030.⁷ Notably, California has not had any statewide higher education coordinating body since the demise of the California Postsecondary Education Commission (CPEC) in 2011.⁸ Currently, the state's plan for meeting this goal relies on increasing intersegmental collaboration with the newly forming statewide longitudinal Cradle-to-Career (C2C) Data System and multi-year agreements with the University of California, California State University, and the California Community College systems.⁹ Statewide collaboration will be further guided by the Governor's Council for Postsecondary Education to make more data-driven decisions.¹⁰

BEST PRACTICES AND LESSONS LEARNED FROM TEXAS AND MASSACHUSETTS

It is critical that attainment goals produce meaningful credentials and workforce opportunities for students. To ensure students receive high-quality postsecondary education and training and have equitable employment outcomes, key stakeholders must coordinate across all relevant state agencies. This includes the state longitudinal data system governing board and advisory bodies, higher education and workforce coordinating agencies, institutional and system-wide governing boards, and other advisory bodies, staff, and policymakers that serve the state. State higher education coordination efforts can encompass a wide variety of planning, budgeting and review activities, and while each state approaches coordination in its own way, robust and effective coordination to meet statewide postsecondary goals in the 21st century relies on a shared synergy of robust data collection, connection, and reporting.

As California implements a new statewide data system and a new postsecondary attainment goal, it has the benefit of learning from the many states that have gone before it. While there is no clear apples-to-apples comparison to California, two key takeaways were outlined throughout our discussions with Texas and Massachusetts staff about how they are working towards meeting their state attainment goals.¹¹

Careful Stakeholder Engagement: Once data is collected, translating it into accessible and usable information for a range of users and stakeholders is critical for its intended impact. States must know and consider their audiences. When setting goals, and before creating data tools and reports, it is imperative to engage stakeholders and to ensure that all data visuals, dashboards, and tables are designed simply so that they are digestible for everyone. Overly complex data resources will prevent people from being able to engage in, learn from, and support the process. Additionally, when it comes to stakeholder engagement, it's important to create small focus groups within targeted communities, including by age, race, and income, as well as with varied end users of the information, including but not limited to policymakers and researchers, academic advisors, teachers, faculty and others working directly with students. It is also critical to not rush the process of engagement and co-learning. Take the time and effort required to ensure ample opportunity for input and to demonstrate the state's commitment to inclusivity.

Centering Equity in Data Design, Collection, and Reporting: It is imperative to have dedicated conversations to identify relevant education equity disparities across the state, especially by race, gender, and income. Additionally, a state needs to define goals related to closing those gaps and be clear about dedicating resources for advancing equity. As a state prepares to collect data, it is important that leaders are thoughtful about which information is included in the reporting and collection, having agreed upon and understood data definitions and categories, and levels of aggregation and disaggregation the data will be able support. Decisions made at the outset will limit future capacity to capture and analyze significant variations in experience and outcomes across student sub-groups.

Appendix 1 highlights the specific goals and best practices to date in both Texas and Massachusetts.

NEXT STEPS FOR CALIFORNIA

As one of the last states to create a longitudinal data system and set a postsecondary attainment goal, California can learn from the successes and challenges encountered by states that have gone before it. Considering the importance of stakeholder engagement, collecting the right data at the right level, ensuring data and information accessibility, and centering equity throughout the process are all integral to making progress toward statewide goals. Without a statewide coordinating body at this time, California should consider creating a mechanism (e.g., a specific coalition or agency) that has a clear directive to engage a wide range of stakeholders across the state to help ensure progress toward achieving the state's 70 percent attainment goal by 2030. While the Cradle-to-Career data system and its governing body will play a central role in tracking and reporting on the state's progress, lessons from other states underscore that increasing educational attainment and closing equity gaps requires coordination and cooperation across government, schools, and outside stakeholders. Setting a goal is the first step, and the work to stand up the data system that will undergird it is underway. But further statewide coordination will be necessary to set California firmly on the path toward increased attainment and shrinking the disparities in educational outcomes by race and by income.

APPENDIX 1

State Goals	Key Best Practices
<p>TEXAS*</p> <p>The Texas Student Data System (TSDS), is a statewide system created by the Texas Education Agency that updated and improved the quality of data collection, management, and reporting in Texas education. The Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board launched the 60x30tx strategic plan, which focuses on the state’s goal of 60 percent certificate or degree attainment for Texas residents ages 25 to 34 years old by 2030.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> » Make Data Accessible: <i>How are policymakers improving data accessibility?</i> Texas has been working to create a data infrastructure that will provide authorized personnel (i.e. researchers, practitioners, consultants) with the ability to access data at the individual level, triangulate the data, and develop strategies to inform policymakers. » Evaluate Processes: <i>How are policymakers creating efficient, objective, and consistent evaluation processes?</i> When building dashboards and collecting data, it’s important to create assessment plans to ensure that the state is answering necessary policy questions: 1) How is the state gathering their data? 2) Does data from various agencies match well with the state longitudinal data system? 3) Does the data show us the impact of a specific policy or investment on a student’s experience? » Establish Milestones: <i>What are the milestones and indicators that policymakers are most interested in?</i> Establish at least three strong milestones to direct the strategies for each goal being set. For example: Texas is focusing on three large milestones by 2030 (1) at least 550,000 students will complete a certificate, bachelor’s, or master’s from an institution of higher education in Texas, (2) undergraduate student loan debt will not exceed 60 percent of first year wages for graduates of Texas public institutions, and (3) all graduates from Texas public institutions of higher education will complete programs with identified marketable skills.
<p>MASSACHUSETTS**</p> <p>The Massachusetts Department of Higher Education created The Vision Project to ensure the state reaches its 60 percent attainment goal of working-age Massachusetts residents ages 25–64 with an associate degree or higher, including an additional 10 percent of the population holding a high-quality credential by 2030.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> » Intentionally Center Racial Equity: <i>How are policymakers and advocates centering racial equity to implement equitable data practices to address the needs of different communities?</i> Through two iterations of planning, The Department of Higher Education (DHE) Research and Planning centered its goals and conversations around improving racial equity for specific communities. In its first Equity Agenda, they included intentional goals by race, specifically that 43 percent of Black and 32 percent of Latinx Massachusetts residents ages 25–64 will hold an associate degree or higher by 2024. After making progress towards those goals, and gathering stakeholder feedback in 2022, they revisited and re-set their plan for improving racial equity, with the updated goal of eliminating racial disparities in Massachusetts public higher education. This new strategic plan will guide engagement and target setting exercises with postsecondary campuses across the state. » Ensure Transparency & Inclusivity: <i>What are some ways policymakers and researchers are making data practices inclusive and transparent?</i> Transparency, both in data sharing and evaluation, is important to give different audiences an overall view of what is really going on within the state. Being transparent about the state’s decision-making and process towards reaching set goals and outcomes allows stakeholders to better understand the nuances of using data to inform policy change. In Massachusetts’ first equity agenda, there were no explicit goals around Asian American and Pacific Islanders (AAPI) and Indigenous students. After feedback from community stakeholders, the DHE engaged these communities and revised their 2022 Strategic Plan for racial equity to explicitly include data on these student populations while also ensuring individual privacy (due to the small population sizes when disaggregating data by these two racial groups)

*Texas Education Agency: <https://tea.texas.gov/reports-and-data/data-submission/texas-student-data-system-tsds>

**Massachusetts Department of Higher Education: <https://www.mass.edu/visionproject/metrics.asp>

ENDNOTES

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12. Discussion happened with David Troutman (Texas) and Elena Quiroz-Livanis and Mario Delci (Massachusetts) in July and August of 2022. Websites which informed us of their planning efforts and public reporting include: <https://www.mass.edu/strategic/equity.asp>; <https://www.mass.edu/strategic/documents/Massachusetts%20Department%20of%20Higher%20Education%20Strategic%20Plan%20for%20Racial%20Equity.pdf>; <http://www.60x30tx.com/goals/>; and <https://capitol.texas.gov/tlodocs/85R/handouts/C0122017022207301/b388002f-c262-4740-b339-843c14f72e2f.PDF>