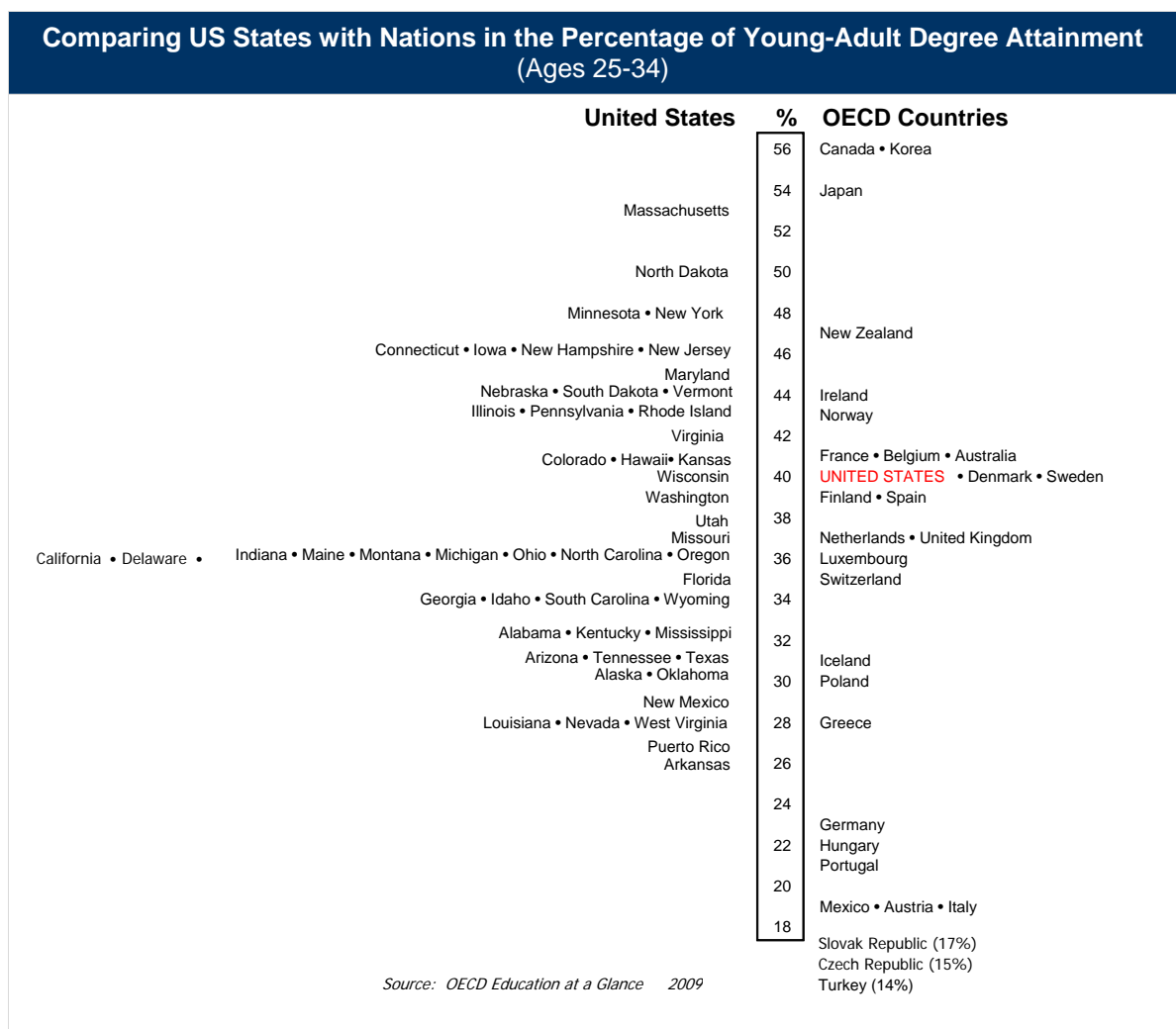


**GETTING STARTED:**  
Framing a College Attainment Agenda

**OVERVIEW**

Research shows that having a highly educated workforce is critical to states and territories' economic competitiveness and to the well-being of their citizens. A growing number of state policymakers are concerned that the nation as a whole and their states are falling behind in the race to accumulate the educational capital needed to ensure that their states will be world-class, not second class. This concern is well-placed.

The figure below shows that the U.S. is far behind many competitor countries when it comes to college attainment among young adults. Also, many states are keeping company with countries to which they will not want to be compared.



The challenge of increasing educational attainment has risen considerably on the public policy agenda. A growing number of governors have announced state-level attainment goals, and major foundations have made this issue a priority for their higher education grant-making.

## IN THE STATES

While everyone is talking about the critical need to develop a more competitive workforce, relatively few states have taken major steps to actually move the agenda forward. More specifically, few states have publicly identified their goals for increasing college completion. Those that have include:

**Tennessee.** Earlier this year, Tennessee enacted the Complete College Tennessee Act. This legislation established a process for setting clear goals for improvements in educational attainment. The resulting goal, developed by the Tennessee Higher Education Commission, calls for producing 269,000 more degrees by 2025 than current levels of production would yield (a 3.5 percent increase each year over the prior year). The legislation also calls for several policy initiatives designed to promote this goal:

- Development of funding policies and formulae that reflect an outcomes-based model (i.e. allocating funds based on completion rather than enrollment);
- Creation of a 60 student credit hour program (41 credits of general education and 19 hours of pre-major instruction) that can transfer across all two- and four-year institutions and be applied toward the requirements of a baccalaureate degree at public universities; and
- Creation of a statewide community college system designed to increase access to needed programs in areas such as health care while coordinating those programs to promote increased efficiency.

**Ohio.** The University System of Ohio has established a goal of increasing enrollments in the state by 236,000 and the number of annual graduates by 37 percent by 2017. The system has followed up with a wide variety of implementation initiatives, including a new funding model, improved articulation and transfer from two-year to four-year institutions, greater emphasis on adult learners, and stronger connections between education and workforce needs.

**Texas.** Texas was the early leader in stating clear improvement goals with its *Closing the Gaps* initiative begun in 2000. The initiative (as revised in 2005) calls for increasing enrollments by 630,000 students by 2015 and increasing the number of certificates and degrees awarded annually to 210,000 over the same period. As did Ohio, Texas has started numerous initiatives designed to get them to their goal, such as revised funding formulas, development of college readiness standards, improvement of developmental education, and streamlined articulation and transfer processes.

**Arizona.** The Arizona Board of Regents has stated clear goals for improved attainment. Specifically, the state is committing to increasing the share of the population with a baccalaureate degree or higher from 29 percent to 35.6 percent. In a state with a rapidly growing population, much of the policy focus has been on creating needed capacity in cost-effective ways, such as the creation of “three plus one” bachelor’s degree programs where students take most of their credits through a community college.

**Oregon.** The governor has articulated clear goals for the education attainment levels of the state's population, setting the target at 40 percent with a baccalaureate degree or higher, 40 percent with a certificate or an associate's degree, and 20 percent with a high school diploma (the 40/40/20 goal). Steps are now underway to place these goals in statute and to better align both finance and governance arrangements in ways that remove impediments to goal achievement.

## IDEAS FOR ACTION

Governors have several options for taking immediate, concrete steps, including:

- 1. Identify area(s) for action.** Indicators to review include:
  - Educational attainment levels of the state's population relative to other states and the international competitors.
  - The state's performance on the educational pipeline indicators, including:
    - High school graduation rates;
    - Rates of college participation – recent high school graduates and adults separately; and
    - College retention and completion rates; and
  - Measures that express the connection between educational attainment and workforce participation, such as:
    - The percentage of adults participating in the workforce by level of education; and
    - Income by level of education.
- 2. Look beyond the averages.** Specifically, it is important to understand the differences in educational attainment among different subpopulations within the state, including:
  - Race/ethnicity, specifically, differences in educational attainment between whites and the largest minority groups in the state;
  - Geographic region, using county-by-county data; and
  - Income, also using county-by-county data;
- 3. Use the data to define goals.** Identify a small number of factors necessary to see improved and set targets (how much improvement and by when);
- 4. Review major policies and regulations to identify potential barriers to reaching attainment goals.** For example, does state funding for institutions encourage any sort of focus on retention and graduation or just on enrollment? Do colleges and universities have real incentives for increasing efficiency, such as being able to keep the savings they realize?
- 5. Emphasize performance as an essential factor in funding discussions and decisions.** For example, consider requiring that a summary of key performance measures be included as part of the annual/biennial executive budget for higher education.

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