Frequently Asked Questions: Project Degree Completion

1. **What is the goal of Project Degree Completion?**
   
   **Answer:** Nearly 500 (487) public colleges and universities commit to increasing the number of undergraduate baccalaureate degrees by 3.8 million between now and 2025. One method for accomplishing this, highlighted in the commitment, is by reducing the time to degree for students. These institutions have also committed to providing access to diverse populations and maintaining academic quality. Perhaps most significantly, these institutions pledge to constrain per student educational costs. On another level, we are also committing to transform our institutions, to make the difficult decisions and enact the changes required to be able to deliver on these goals.

2. **How will the goals be achieved?**
   
   **Answer:** Many campuses are already hard at work developing and implementing programs designed to ensure students who enroll are able to complete their studies. Others are working to attract adult students in need of additional training and who left school prior to completion. Campuses such as Florida State, Indiana State, Montana State, and Kentucky State Universities are at the forefront of these efforts, but many institutions are currently focused on these issues.

3. **Why are public colleges and universities doing this?**
   
   **Answer:** Education is the single most important driver of opportunity and economic growth for individuals, communities and the nation. It is worth the cost to students for their personal return on investment and it is worth the cost to the public sector for the broader public returns on higher education.

   Perhaps even more important, the economic prosperity of the future depends on it. If we don’t advance the number of individuals attaining post-secondary credentials, the medium to long-term economic costs to individuals, businesses and the overall economy will be severe. Simply, significantly more jobs today require a higher education credential. While in 1973, only 28 percent of jobs required a postsecondary degree, in 2007, that number had doubled to 59 percent. By 2018, labor market demand for postsecondary education is projected to rise to 63%.

   In other words, in five years two-thirds of all jobs will require post-secondary credentials. In fact, labor force data shows that employment growth since 1989 has been driven entirely by workers with education beyond high school.

   Despite increases in the average education level of the workforce, those increases still haven’t been enough to keep up with demand. Given current education investment patterns, the gap will continue.

   Many entities, including President Obama, have called for increased postsecondary attainment for Americans. These calls are in direct response to the U.S.’s declining status in the world regarding the percent of the population with a postsecondary credential. Others, like Tony Carnevale at Georgetown, have projected that more college degrees will be needed to meet workforce needs in order to sustain our economic production. It is projected that this generation will be less educated than the one before – this is not a trend for prosperity. As such, this Commitment is about 4-year public institutions recognizing these needs and rising to the challenge. This Commitment is about the economic prosperity of our citizens and for national sustainability.

4. **There are now several groups with completion agendas; how do these relate or do they?**
**Answer:** The efforts of Lumina Foundation, the U.S. Department of Education and other groups to advance the completion agenda are complementary to this effort by public colleges and universities. There are many possible approaches to this challenge and with 487 institutions working on improving their own results, we expect significant innovation in the delivery of instruction, remedial programs and student retention. There is already significant experimentation ongoing on campuses such as Florida State, Indiana State, Montana State, and Kentucky State Universities.

5. **How will the associations support their members?**

**Answer:**

**AASCU**
- College Readiness Partnership – A partnership between the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO) and State Higher Education Executive Officers (SHEEO) centered on the awareness and implementation of the Common Core State Standards.
- Innovations Exchange – AASCU developed a library of promising practices to assist Members with developing strategies to address campus issues.
- HBCU dialogue – AASCU and APLU have begun an effort devoted to the unique challenges HBCU institutions face. One of the areas of focus is on retention and completion.
- Annual Meeting sessions – AASCU has included a number of sessions in its Annual Meetings that expose members to creative solutions to the current funding situation that promote efficiencies and productivity.

**APLU**
- Urban Serving Universities (USU) Student Performance Strand: group of USU focusing on improving the retention and attainment of students at member institutions. Each institution may focus on group/area of particular need on its campus.
- Student Achievement Measure Project: Association partnership to build a website for institutions to report a more accurate and more complete measure of student progress and completion.
- Minority Males in STEM initiative: Effort to better understand and facilitate effective practices at institutions to encourage more men of color to pursue and complete degrees in science, technology, engineering, and math.
- Academic courseware design project: Collaboration among 2 year and 4 year institutions to design and implement a more effective delivery method for core courses such as biology, algebra, and composition that will increase learning and transfer more smoothly among institutions.
- Annual awards/recognition for APLU institutions for innovations in improving student retention and completion.
- Science and Math Teacher Imperative: Institution-led collaboration to increase the number, diversity, and quality of teachers in math and science.

**Moving forward AASCU and APLU might consider:**
- Creating a Member Think Tank on completion.
- Conducting webinars to showcase innovative and promising practices.
- Continue holding general or concurrent sessions at Annual Meeting focused on the topics important to the commitment.
- Partner with other organizations on similar efforts (SHEEO, Ed Trust, Lumina, CCSSO, NGA)

6. **How much will it cost to achieve these goals? Who will pay the costs?**

**Answer:** Students, institutions, state and federal governments and private foundations will each share in costs necessary to meet these goals. We also must find new ways to keep public higher education affordable through improved efficiency in the delivery of instruction.
The institutions making this commitment today will have to direct resources toward this effort. In some cases, these resources will be substantial; however, we expect the current financing structure to remain intact. Currently, the cost of education is borne by families, institutions, and the states. Institutions have and will continue (highlighted in the commitment statement) to do their part in keeping educational costs in check. Everyone is concerned about the rising burden on families, thus it is up to the states to continue doing their part and more if possible. If states are able to remain an engaged and viable partner in this structure, we are confident our institutions can reach this goal.

7. **How will you measure progress?**
   **Answer:** APLU and AASCU will annually report the number of bachelor’s degrees awarded collectively by public universities and colleges during the previous year and progress toward the 2025 goal using data provided to the U.S. Department of Education’s *Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS)*. Information on proven practices, key partnerships, and innovative programs underway on public university campuses also will be highlighted and shared through the Project Degree Completion webpages.

8. **What happens if there is no progress?**
   **Answer:** Failure is not an option. The nation must produce more college graduates over the next decade in order to remain economically competitive in the global marketplace. The economic future of our children and grandchildren is dependent on public universities achieving these goals.

9. **How can universities deliver on this commitment given the quality of many elementary and secondary education and the increasingly difficult financial burdens middle class and first generation students carry?**
   **Answer:** The commitment is a promise on the part of universities to do our part to change and deliver quality education efficiently to meet the needs of students, the economy and society. But we are not the only player on the field. Federal, state, and local governments, elementary and postsecondary education, community colleges and vocational schools and many others have their parts to play to ensure the medium to long term success of this country and its people.