

Aiming Higher:

**How improving postsecondary equity
and attainment will put New York
State on the path to a bright future**

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Now more than ever, economic opportunity and financial security are intertwined with educational attainment. Even in the midst of the coronavirus pandemic and the resulting massive recession, the national unemployment rate is 4.8% for workers with a bachelor's or advanced degree, compared to 9.0% for workers with only a high school diploma and 8.1% for those with some college but no degree.¹

At the start of the pandemic, the Federal Reserve found that 39% of workers with a household income below \$40,000 had suffered a job loss and that workers with bachelor's degrees were three times more likely to be working fully remote — thereby providing job security and lowering health risks — than workers with a high school degree or less.²

The risk of a “K-shaped” economic recovery — with rapidly divergent economic prospects for wealthier, more educated Americans in select industries and continued uncertainty and economic challenges for everyone else — builds on the economic and educational trends of recent decades. Before the pandemic, the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics projected that from 2018 to 2028, jobs in the U.S. that require at least one year of postsecondary education would grow at double the rate of jobs requiring a high school diploma or less.³ In 1973, workers with a postsecondary education held only 28% of jobs. By 2020, that number was expected to reach 65%.⁴

Jobs that require a postsecondary education do not just provide greater job security, they also pay higher incomes, with the nationwide college wage premium estimated at about \$30,000 a year.⁵ Over the course of an entire career, the lifetime earnings of an average bachelor's degree holder are double the lifetime earnings of an average high school graduate.⁶ Young adults with college degrees also report higher levels of career satisfaction than their non-degree holding peers.⁷

Importantly, the relationship between education and economic opportunity also underscores the impact of the wide and persistent opportunity gaps in our

education system, from early childhood to K-12 public schools to colleges and universities themselves.

The disparities in postsecondary opportunity and success for historically underserved students — including, but not limited to, students of color and students from low-income backgrounds — are clear. For example, White students are twice as likely to earn a bachelor's degree than their Black and Latinx counterparts nationwide.⁸ In addition, bachelor's degree attainment rates for young adults with the largest family incomes are four times greater than the attainment rates for young adults with the smallest family incomes.⁹ These inequities existed even in so-called “normal” times and emerging evidence suggests that the COVID-19 pandemic is only exacerbating their impact.¹⁰

Alongside the coronavirus, the nation is also grappling with what some have called the “second pandemic”: systemic racism. The devastating impact of these dual pandemics is evident in the experiences of people of color who are too often denied educational and economic opportunities and, as a result, are overrepresented in low-wage service and hospitality sector jobs that have proven especially vulnerable to layoffs during the COVID-19 pandemic.¹¹ Black workers are also more likely to hold “essential” jobs that place them at higher risk of being exposed to the virus.¹²

As New York State continues to grapple with these dual pandemics, the state must prepare for the future by investing in a postsecondary education system that will help create a high-skilled workforce through an equity framework. Adopting an equity-driven postsecondary attainment goal and enacting the higher education policies necessary to achieve it will not only allow the state to meet the needs of a rapidly changing labor market; it also provides many New York residents — especially Black, Latinx, American Indian, and other residents who are often denied economic and educational opportunities — a pathway to economic security while improving postsecondary outcomes.

Why an Attainment Goal Matters

New York State faces two related challenges: our overall level of college attainment is not keeping up with the needs of our economy, and systemic attainment barriers prevent historically underserved groups of New Yorkers — those who are from low-income backgrounds, communities of color, and others — from earning a college degree or high-quality, industry-recognized workforce credential.

Forty-five states have set their own statewide target for increasing college attainment. This is called an “attainment goal” because it provides a clear and transparent numerical target for the number of additional people in the state who will complete a degree or other high-value credential. In our own region, New York State’s neighbors have all set attainment goals of at least 60% of their workforce having a postsecondary credential.¹³

When implemented through an equity lens, an attainment goal can specifically encourage states to focus efforts on historically underserved students, and especially first-generation college hopefuls who would be the first in their family to complete a postsecondary credential. For example:

- Oregon set an attainment goal of “40-40-20” by 2030, where 40% of adults (ages 25-64) will have their bachelor’s or advanced degree, 40% would have an associate degree or undergraduate certificate, and 20% will have at least a high school diploma. Oregon has also committed to reducing attainment gaps among students who are low-income, students of color, and rural students, including by tracking progress indicators that highlight racial disparities in attainment and earnings potential.
- Rhode Island set an attainment goal of 70% of adults (ages 25-64) with at least an associate’s degree by 2025. Rhode Island has committed to closing equity gaps in the postsecondary system to meet its goal, by tracking its attainment

performance by race and ethnicity and setting a 50% target increase in attainment among Black and Latinx residents.

- Minnesota set an attainment goal of 70% of adults (ages 25-44) with a postsecondary certificate or degree by 2025. Minnesota set specific attainment benchmarks for residents of all races and ethnicities and tracks progress to close attainment gaps for students of color annually.

Setting an equity-driven attainment goal is the first step to launching a postsecondary equity agenda. It creates a clear and explicit target for the state, higher education sectors, and regions, and it requires leaders at all levels to focus on the postsecondary needs of groups of students that too often go underserved.



The relationship between education and economic opportunity also underscores the impact of the wide and persistent opportunity gaps in our education system, from early childhood to K-12 public schools to colleges and universities themselves.

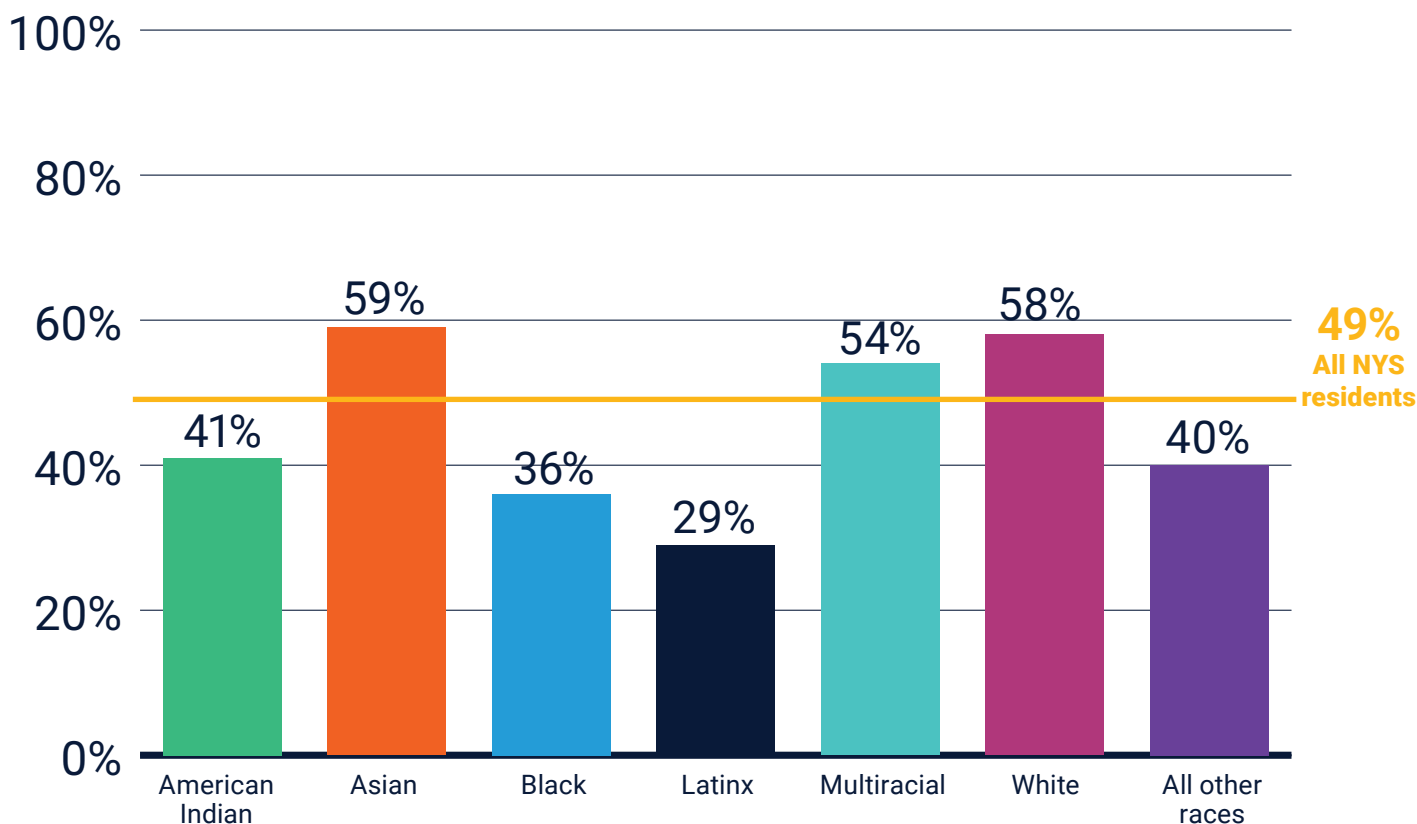
Our Starting Place: Attainment in New York State

According to Census data, in 2010, approximately 4.6 million (44%) of the state's adults ages 25-64 held an associate's degree or higher, and by 2018, that number had increased to 5.1 million (49%). While New York State's high overall attainment rate places it 12th in the country, it also masks the state's persistent gaps in postsecondary attainment by race and ethnicity (Figure 1). In 2018, White residents were 1.8 times more likely to hold a postsecondary degree than American Indian, Black, and Latinx residents, representing only a marginal improvement from 2010, when White residents were twice as likely to

hold a postsecondary degree than American Indian, Black, and Latinx residents.¹⁴

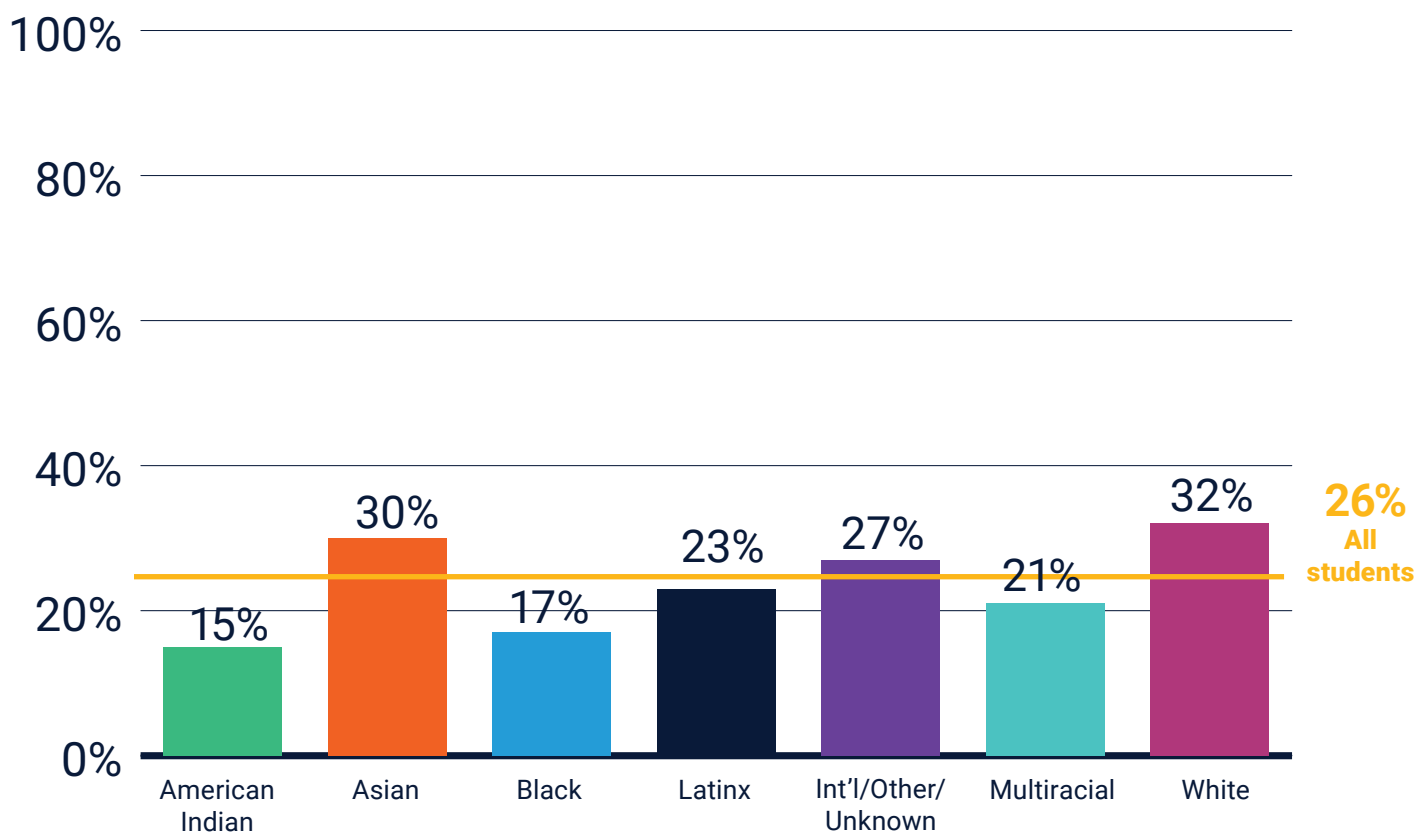
These disparities are also reflected in the state's 2018 postsecondary completion rates. For example, data on public 2-year completions reveal that White students are 1.6 times more likely to complete their certificate or degree than American Indian, Black, and Latinx students (Figure 2). A similar pattern emerges at 4-year institutions, where completion rates and disparities by race and ethnicity can vary by sector and completion

Figure 1: Share of New York State residents (ages 25-64) with an associate's degree or higher by race/ethnicity in 2018



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2018 American Community Survey 1-year Public Use Microdata Sample. See data notes for additional information.

Figure 2: 3-year completion rates for public 2-year institutions in New York State by race and ethnicity (2018)



Source: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS), 2018, graduation rate component. See data notes for additional information.

rates at the institutions with the smallest share of Pell recipients – students from low-income backgrounds who qualify for federal Pell grants – are 1.6 times greater than at institutions with the greatest share of Pell recipients (Figure 3).¹⁵

Projections of postsecondary attainment reveal that opportunity gaps in postsecondary education will continue well into the next decade. From 2010 to 2018, postsecondary degree attainment in the state increased by an average of approximately 1% per year. If that rate of growth continues, nearly six million residents (57%) will hold a postsecondary degree in 2030.

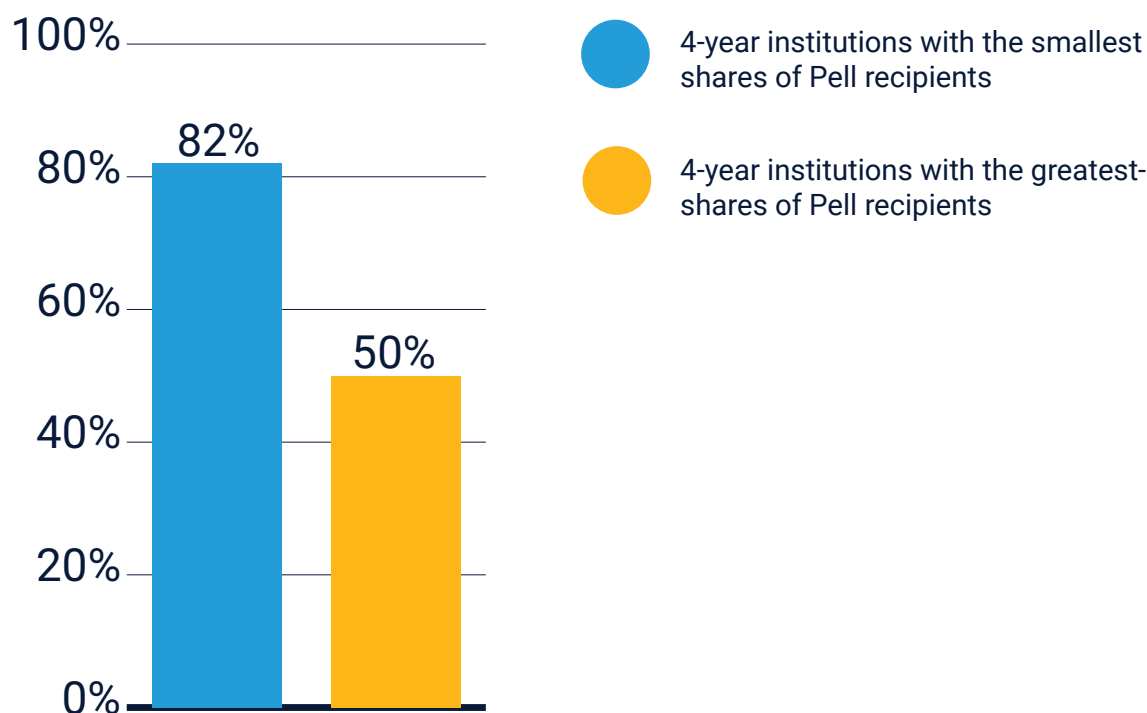
Even if attained, this figure would be below at least 42 other states with higher attainment goals by

2030, and it would not address the disparities in postsecondary attainment that have persisted – and which the pandemic threatens to worsen. Both present an existential threat to New York State’s economy and society.

SETTING AN ATTAINMENT GOAL FOR NEW YORK

To improve the state’s overall economic competitiveness while closing gaps in postsecondary attainment, the REACH NY network of civil rights, student-serving, veteran, education, and business organizations recommends that New York State adopt a postsecondary attainment goal of 60% for New Yorkers of all races and ethnicities by 2030. Overall, this would mean that 6.5 million residents would hold a postsecondary degree or credential

Figure 3: 6-year completion rates for 4-year institutions in New York State by share of Pell recipients (2018)



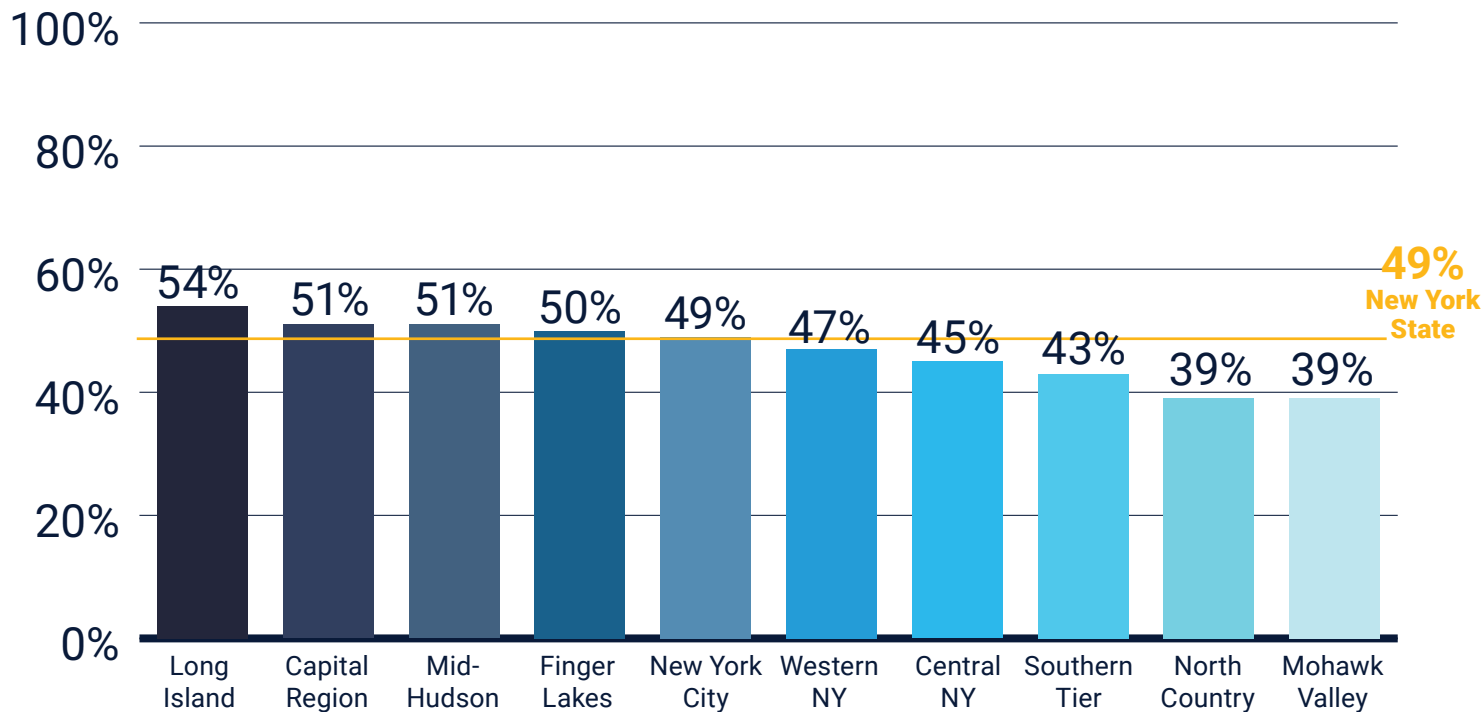
Source: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS), 2018, graduation rate and financial aid components. See data notes for additional information.

by 2030 – representing a 484,000 increase in postsecondary attainment over current projections. New York State’s attainment goal should include minimum thresholds for each degree and credential type by race and ethnicity: 40% for bachelor’s degrees and higher, 15% for associate’s degrees, and 5% for non-degree credentials, like industry-recognized certifications awarded by some community colleges, that are directly related to the skills needed by employers and deliver higher wages to workers. These targets set clear and consistent goals for all New Yorkers, while safeguarding against potential inequities across degree types.

To ensure that the supply of postsecondary degrees is aligned with current and future regional labor needs and support historically underserved groups

Now more than ever, economic opportunity and financial security are intertwined with educational attainment.

Figure 4: Share of New York State residents (ages 25-64) with an associate degree or higher by region (2018)



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2018 American Community Survey 1-year Public Use Microdata Sample.

of students in attaining postsecondary degrees and certificates, the 60% statewide attainment goal should also be translated into regional goals that establish expectations within the 10 Regional Economic Development Councils (REDC).

Current regional attainment rates reveal wide gaps in attainment by region. In 2018, the highest postsecondary attainment rates were in the Capital, Long Island, and Mid-Hudson regions where more than 1-in-2 residents had an associate’s degree or higher. In the Southern Tier, North Country, and Mohawk Valley regions approximately only 2-in-5 residents had completed a postsecondary degree (Figure 4). Despite the variability in regional attainment – every region would need to improve postsecondary attainment rates by at least five percentage points to meet the attainment goal of 60 percent by 2030.

In New York City alone, approximately 700,000 residents – half of the total additional postsecondary degrees and credentials needed statewide – would need to earn a postsecondary degree or credential (Figure 5). To close postsecondary attainment inequities in the region, the overwhelming majority of these degrees (94%) would need to be awarded to Black and Latinx residents. Similar inequities exist outside of New York City, where nearly 1-in-2 of the additional postsecondary degrees would need to be awarded to Black and Latinx residents. Beyond New York City, the Long Island and Mid-Hudson regions would experience the highest increases of postsecondary attainment, with each region projected to gain over 100,000 residents with a postsecondary degree or credential. The remaining regions would each gain a minimum of 45,000 degrees or credentials.

Figure 5: Regional benefits of reaching the 60% postsecondary attainment goal by 2030

Estimated number of additional postsecondary degrees needed to reach 60% postsecondary attainment goal by 2030									
Region	Estimated total of residents with an associate degree or higher in 2018	Residents of all races /ethnicities	American Indian residents	Asian residents	Black residents	Latinx residents	Multiracial residents	White residents	Residents of all other races
New York State	5,129,000	1,352,000	5,300	38,000	362,000	615,000	13,000	308,000	10,000
Capital Region	285,000	54,000	N/A*	N/A**	12,000	6,000	N/A*	34,000	N/A*
Central NY	178,000	59,000	N/A*	N/A*	12,000	4,000	N/A*	40,000	N/A*
Finger Lakes	312,000	65,000	N/A*	1,300	21,000	13,000	N/A*	28,000	N/A*
Long Island	803,000	107,000	N/A*	N/A**	23,000	81,000	2,000	N/A**	N/A*
Mid-Hudson	606,000	121,000	N/A*	N/A**	26,000	69,000	2,000	23,000	N/A*
New York City	2,297,000	700,000	N/A*	34,000	236,000	421,000	N/A**	N/A**	7,000
North Country	84,000	45,000	N/A*	N/A*	5,000	N/A*	N/A*	35,000	N/A*
Mohawk Valley	94,000	52,000	N/A*	N/A*	N/A*	5,000	N/A*	41,000	N/A*
Southern Tier	133,000	56,000	N/A*	N/A**	4,000	N/A*	N/A*	50,000	N/A*
Western NY	338,000	93,000	N/A*	N/A**	20,000	11,000	3,000	59,000	N/A*

*Number of additional postsecondary degrees is not calculated due to small size of estimated regional population (total population (ages 25-64) is less than 10,000)

**As of 2018, estimated attainment rate for regional population is greater than or equal to proposed attainment goal of 60%

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2018 American Community Survey 1-year Public Use Microdata Sample. Estimates for American Indian residents in this table are rounded to the nearest hundred, all other estimates are rounded to the nearest thousand. Analysis by The Education Trust–New York.

Two Paths to Attainment: Greater Enrollment, Stronger Completion

To reach a postsecondary attainment goal of 60% by 2030, New York State needs to increase postsecondary attainment by approximately 1.3 million residents — including 484,000 degrees or credentials in excess of current projections. As described above, historical and current inequities require that a majority of gains in postsecondary attainment be made by Black and Latinx residents.

Meeting these goals will require urgency and action, but our analysis of the state’s postsecondary institutional capacity makes it clear that they are achievable.

One important step to meet the state’s postsecondary goal of 60% by 2030 is to increase enrollment at 2-year and 4-year institutions.

Additional students can come from two sources: adults currently in the workforce who could benefit from a degree or credential, and more historically underserved students, including first-generation college hopefuls, who are graduating from high school.

Enrollment trends from the Great Recession demonstrate that economic downturns often have a positive effect on postsecondary enrollment, especially for adult learners.¹⁶ The state can also work to improve the postsecondary pipeline for students who may already hold a degree, but want to earn a higher degree (e.g., a student with an industry-recognized credential who wishes to earn an associate’s degree, or a student with an associate’s degree who wishes to earn a bachelor’s degree).

Increasing cohort size at postsecondary institutions would also present an opportunity for institutions to increase the diversity of their student body. Increasing enrollment for underrepresented students would not only close opportunity gaps for Black and Latinx residents, it is also necessary to help the state meet a postsecondary attainment goal that

emphasizes postsecondary completion for all New York residents.

In addition to increasing postsecondary enrollment, the state would need to increase completions in 2-year and 4-year institutions.

Data from the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System show that, in 2018, the three-year completion rate for 2-year institutions in the state was 28% and the transfer rate — students who move from a community college to a 4-year college or university — was 19%. Among 4-year institutions, as of 2018, the four-year completion rate was 54% and the six-year completion rate was 69%.

These existing completion rates mean that despite reaching college, far too many students are not receiving the support — financial, academic, and other — to earn their degree. This translates into even greater economic insecurity for many underrepresented students — who leave college with no degree but considerable student debt — and enormous missed opportunities for New York State’s economy and for the education system’s potential to serve as an engine of economic mobility.



Meeting these goals will require urgency and action, but our analysis of the state’s postsecondary institutional capacity makes it clear that they are achievable.

Reaching the Attainment Goal

Once the state adopts an attainment goal, the next step is to meet it.

To reach an ambitious and essential attainment goal of 60% degree and certificate completion by 2030, New York State needs a blueprint for increasing attainment and eliminating attainment gaps.

REACH NY recommends that in implementing the attainment goal, the state should:

- **Establish interim benchmarks** that reflect the specific progress the state is making toward meeting the attainment goal and closing equity gaps;
- **Create a data tool and regional reports** that measure the progress toward meeting the interim and final attainment goals by race and ethnicity; and
- **Create institution-level data snapshots and data-driven analyses** that help stakeholders identify and address opportunity gaps in enrollment, persistence, and completion.

To meet the attainment goal, key policy levers include:

AFFORDABILITY AND ACCESS



- The cost of a postsecondary education is a barrier for many students and the COVID-19 pandemic has heightened the need to **address the academic and non-academic costs of attending college**, including ensuring that students can meet basic needs like food, shelter, clothing, and technology.



- As our nation has grown more diverse, so has the composition of a typical college cohort. Students from low-income backgrounds, student parents, students experiencing homelessness, foster youth, first-generation college students, students of color, veterans, undocumented students, students with mixed-status families, students from immigrant communities, students with alternative high school pathways, and adult learners all face unique needs and institutions should **provide wraparound services to support all learners**.



- For postsecondary education to be accessible — especially during these difficult times — institutions should **improve the ease of access for students, including offering courses at flexible times that meet the scheduling needs of students**.



- During the financial uncertainty of the COVID-19 pandemic and beyond, institutions **need predictable and adequate state funding** to ensure they can invest in meeting the dual goals of supporting student success and meeting the state's labor force needs.

IMPROVING COMPLETION



- Dual enrollment courses provide exposure to college-level work, while allowing high school students to earn college credits. The state should **expand access to dual enrollment courses for high school students** by making them financially accessible, reflective of the diversity of the student body, and ensuring that students receive college credit for successfully completing courses. In addition, learning from programs like P-TECH, the state should **create additional “9-16” pathways** that provide a seamless student experience from the beginning of high school to completion of a bachelor’s degree.



- Navigating a postsecondary education can be overwhelming for many students, particularly for first-generation students and students in historically underserved groups. Institutions should **ensure access to academic and non-academic advising and support** that is culturally responsive and trauma informed.



- Traditional college remediation – where students pay to take courses that do not award college credit – is costly, stigmatizing, and does not work. The state should **fundamentally change remediation to emphasize co-requisite, credit-bearing acceleration** that will improve student persistence and completion.



- There are multiple pathways to postsecondary completion, but the transition from one institution to another is not always easy. The state should establish policies that help **achieve seamless transfers** regardless of a student’s pathway, including by ensuring credit for prior learning based on workforce and other experiences that could translate into college credit.

PATHWAYS TO CAREERS



- Postsecondary institutions should **redesign courses and create focused pathways** that lead to stable and meaningful careers.



- To prepare students for life after graduation, institutions should also **integrate career exposure and development into the student experience.**



- To safeguard a student’s investment of time, money, and energy into a postsecondary education, institutions should **collaborate with employers in fields that pay a family-sustaining wage** and ensure alignment between student skills and industry needs.

ACCOUNTABILITY AND TRANSPARENCY



- The inequities in the state’s postsecondary system are clear and institutions should **focus efforts on admissions, recruitment, persistence, and completion of underrepresented and underserved students.**



- Postsecondary institutions should create safe, supportive, and, inclusive environments on campus and take additional steps to **improve student and faculty diversity.**



- The state should **establish a statewide early childhood-to-workforce data system** that includes college persistence and completion, and wage and employment data, to identify and address equity gaps in the educational pipeline and assess how the pandemic is impacting the education-to-workforce transition.



- The state should **strengthen consumer protection and protect borrowers** by providing oversight of schools that receive funds from federal and state aid programs and enforcing accountability standards.

It’s Time to Aim Higher

Across New York State, our education system has denied students of color and other historically underserved students access to the postsecondary credentials that are needed to secure stable, high-wage jobs and fill the state’s evolving labor needs. The dual pandemics have laid bare the moral imperative for addressing these inequities. Fortunately, the pathway to a more equitable future for all New York residents is clear: an ambitious and equity-driven attainment goal and the policies needed to meet it.

Endnotes

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⁵ Jaison R. Abel and Richard Deitz, “Despite Rising Costs, College Is Still a Good Investment,” Federal Reserve Bank of New York Liberty Street Economics (blog), June 5, 2019, <https://libertystreeteconomics.newyorkfed.org/2019/06/despite-rising-costs-college-is-still-a-good-investment.html>.

⁶ Hershbein, Brad, and Melissa Kearney, “Major Decisions: What Graduates Earn Over Their Lifetimes.” The Hamilton Project, Brookings Institution, Washington, DC. 2014, https://www.hamiltonproject.org/assets/legacy/files/downloads_and_links/Major_Decisions_Lifetime__Earnings_by_Major.pdf.

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¹⁰ See, for example: Polikoff, Morgan, Silver, Dan, and Korn, Shira, “What’s the Likely Impact of COVID-19 on Higher Ed?,” August 4, 2020, <https://www.insidehighered.com/views/2020/08/04/analysis-data-national-survey-impact-pandemic-higher-ed-opinion>.

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¹¹ Maxwell, Connor and Solomon, Danyelle, Center for American Progress, April 14, 2020, “The Economic Fallout of the Coronavirus for People of Color” <https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/race/news/2020/04/14/483125/economic-fallout-coronavirus-people-color/>.

¹² Gould, Elise and Wilson, Valerie, “Black workers face two of the most lethal preexisting conditions for coronavirus—racism and economic inequality,” Economic Policy Institute, June 1, 2020, <https://files.epi.org/pdf/193246.pdf>.

¹³ Neighboring state attainment goals include: by 2025 70 percent of Vermont’s working-age adults will possess a postsecondary degree or “credential of value”; by 2025 40 percent of Connecticut’s adult population will have earned a bachelor’s degree and 30 percent will have earned an associate degree; by 2025 65 percent of the state’s population will complete education beyond high school; by 2020 60 percent of Massachusetts 25-34-year-olds will hold a college degree; and by 2025 60 percent of Pennsylvania’s population ages 25-64 will hold a postsecondary degree or industry recognized credential.

¹⁴ Unless otherwise noted, all attainment data in this report are based on U.S. Census Bureau estimates. Analysis conducted by The Education Trust—New York. See Data Notes for additional information.

¹⁵ Unless otherwise noted, all postsecondary data in this report are from U.S. Department of Education National Center for Education Statistics, Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS). Analysis conducted by The Education Trust—New York. See Data Notes for additional information.

¹⁶ See, for example: Dunbar, Afet, Hossler, Don, Shapiro, Doug, et al. “National Postsecondary Enrollment Trends: Before, During, and After the Great Recession” National Student Center Clearinghouse Research Center, July 2011, <http://pas.indiana.edu/pdf/National%20Postsecondary%20Enrollment%20Trends.pdf>.

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Data Notes

The analysis on educational attainment is based on U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey (ACS), Public Use Microdata Sample (PUMS) 1-Year Estimates from 2010 to 2018. The analysis includes educational attainment for New York State residents with an associate's degree or higher, which includes: associate degrees, bachelor's degrees, master's degrees, professional degrees beyond a bachelor's degree, and doctorate degrees. The analysis also includes attainment data by race and ethnicity which correspond to the following Census categories:

- "American Indian" – combines the Census American Indian alone or Alaska Native alone (including both tribes specified and not specified) race categories;
- "Asian" – combines the Census Asian alone or Native Hawaiian and Other Pacific Islander alone race categories;
- "Black" – the Census Black or African American alone race category;
- "Latinx" – includes residents who have been identified as being of Hispanic ethnic origin as defined by the Census (regardless of race);
- "Multiracial" – the Census two or more races category;
- "All other races" – the Census some other race category; and
- "White" – the Census White alone category.

The analysis on 2-year completions and transfers and 4-year completions is based on the U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS), 2018, Graduation rate component. The data include the grand total of completers within 150% of normal time based on the adjusted cohort (result of removing any allowable exclusions from a cohort such as military enlistment, death, or total and permanent disability). For 2-year institutions,

completion within 150% of normal time is defined as completion within three years. For 4-year institutions, completion within 150% of normal time is defined as completion within six years. The analysis also includes completion data by race and ethnicity which correspond to the following IPEDS categories:

- "American Indian" – the IPEDS American Indian or Alaska Native category;
- "Asian" – combines the IPEDS Asian and Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander racial categories;
- "Black" – the IPEDS Black or African American category;
- "International/Other/Unknown" – combines the IPEDS Nonresident alien and race/ethnicity unknown categories;
- "Latinx" – the IPEDS Hispanic or Latino (regardless of race) ethnic category;
- "Multiracial" – the IPEDS two or more races category; and
- "White" – the IPEDS White category.

The analysis on completion rates by Pell recipients also uses the IPEDS student financial aid component. Analysis includes 2017-18 student financial aid data for all undergraduate students. This data includes the number of undergraduate students awarded Pell grants based on the total number of undergraduates as reported in the student financial aid component. The number of undergraduate students include all undergraduate students enrolled at an institution as of October 15 (or the institution's official fall reporting date). Institutions with the smallest share of Pell recipients are counted in the bottom quartile of institutions (41 institutions). Institutions with the greatest share of Pell recipients are counted in the top quartile of institutions (41 institutions). The two middle quartiles include 80 institutions which are not included in the figure.

