Overcoming the Attainment Gap
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A 2010 report from The College Board contains the alarming statistic that, among developed nations, the United States has fallen from first to 12th place in the proportion of 25- to 34-year-olds holding at least an Associate Degree. Whereas the U.S. percentage of degree holders in this age group has remained steady around 40%, that percentage has increased in other countries. As a result, President Obama has set a national goal of having 55% of 25- to 34-year-olds in the U.S. earn a college degree by 2025.

That national goal will not be attained without overcoming the gap in educational achievement between affluent and white students and low income and minority students. According to the College Board report, fewer than 30% of minority students have an associate’s degree or higher, and students from the wealthiest families are eight times more likely to hold a college degree than students from the poorest households. The report goes on to suggest that “eliminating the severity of disparities between underrepresented minorities and white Americans, it is estimated that more than half the degrees needed to meet the 55 percent goal would be produced.”

To reduce these gaps in educational attainment, the Connecticut State University System has become one of 24 public higher education systems in the U.S. to join the “Access2Success” (A2S) initiative, which aims to increase the proportion of low income and minority students who enroll in and graduate from college. Achieving the goals of A2S will entail far-reaching transformations in the institutional culture at the four state universities.

CCSU is considering new policies to keep students on track to graduate, such as limiting the number of courses from which students can withdraw. We will also carefully monitor student performance to permit timely interventions when students experience difficulties. Resources will also be increased for support services to students, such as advising, tutoring, and mentoring.

However, we must also ensure that students with financial need can afford to attend college. Despite awarding over $84 million in financial aid this year, CCSU was unable to support an estimated $34 million in unmet need. Philanthropy can play an important role in helping universities address this unmet need. Generous recent gifts from Carol R. Ammon and Anthony Bichum will fund scholarships for hundreds of CCSU students in the coming years. As a new partner in the Travelers EDGE program, CCSU will also be able to support minority students pursuing careers in insurance and financial services.

Universities alone cannot bridge the attainment gap, however. The College Board report recommends that efforts begin as early as preschool. CCSU has increased its partnerships with local school districts, and we have just submitted a substantial federal grant proposal to help prepare students in middle and high school to attend college.

It will take such collective efforts by philanthropists, educational institutions, businesses, and communities to help more students in our region attain college degrees.