

Sound the Alarm: Indiana's College-Going Rate Experiences Sharp Decline
Low educational attainment is precarious to state's social and economic prosperity

By Indiana Commissioner for Higher Education Chris Lowery

The future of our state is at risk, and I'm joining leaders around the state in sounding the alarm. [Indiana's college-going rate fell](#) to 53 percent for the class of 2020 (a 6-point drop from 2019 and 12-point drop from 2015). This is the lowest rate in at least a generation and presents stark challenges which must be addressed with urgency and thoughtfulness.

Our new data highlight alarming educational trends, particularly for males, and Black, Hispanic and Latino, and low-income students, who saw the largest declines in college-going rates. We must leverage programs that work to close these gaps, including Indiana's [21st Century Scholarship](#), which has closed the college-going achievement gap for low-income students across all races and ethnicities. Unfortunately, not enough eligible students are enrolling, because they don't know about it or have the support to apply. The [Indiana Commission for Higher Education](#) is advocating to auto-enroll financially eligible students in the program so more Hoosiers can afford college. The 21st Century Scholarship does not just change the lives of students. The return on investment to taxpayers is enormous. Over a lifetime, the extra income Scholars earn from earning a college degree is nearly 10 times the cost of the Scholars program. That extra income has ripple effects throughout our communities. A bigger investment in the 21st Century Scholarship can add billions to the state's economy.

Additionally, the [Frank O'Bannon](#) grant annually helps over 30,000 low- to middle-income Hoosiers afford education beyond high school. The Commission seeks to increase the maximum award to bring it back to pre-Great Recession levels, which will allow thousands of students to have their tuition and fees completely covered by financial aid. If approved, it would provide more financial aid for students who already qualify and spread the eligibility scale to reach additional students who may currently be on the cusp of qualifying.

Another cost savings option for students is earning the [Indiana College Core](#) while in high school. Through dual credit, students can earn essentially a full year of college for little to no cost. About 1,800 high school graduates in 2020 earned the Indiana College Core. The average full "sticker" price for a year at a public institution is \$22,000, equating to a savings of \$40 million for that graduating class alone. The Commission is calling to dramatically increase the number of completions by 2028.

Implementing these recommendations will directly impact Hoosiers' wallets and have the potential to positively change the trajectory of their futures.

Education beyond high school is at the heart of economic and social mobility, and civil society. Statistically, individuals with education beyond high school, especially with a bachelor's degree or higher, have lower unemployment rates, much better labor participation, and significantly higher wages and net worth

But despite state and national data consistently showing the importance of education and training beyond high school, its perceived value has continued to decline. It's going to take a concerted statewide movement involving employers, policymakers, philanthropists, community organizations and any Hoosier willing to add their voice to this challenge to push back on the negative perceptions and reclaim the narrative. Education cannot do it alone.

It's going to be an exhausting yet exhilarating effort to reverse the present trend in educational attainment. I believe Indiana is up to the task.

Let's get to work.

Chris Lowery is the Indiana Commissioner for Higher Education.

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