Acknowledgments

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ATI Steering Committee:
• Mary Schmidt Campbell, President, Spelman College
• Ana Mari Cauce, President, University of Washington
• Christopher Eisgruber, President, Princeton University
• Martin Kurzweil, Director, Educational Transformation Program, Ithaka S+R
• Daniel R. Porterfield, President and CEO, the Aspen Institute
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• Josh Wyner, Executive Director, College Excellence Program, the Aspen Institute

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Executive Summary

ATI’s third annual progress report providing a snapshot of progress and setbacks, coming at a time when a global pandemic has deepened inequality, and a national uprising against systemic racism has sharpened higher education’s focus on advancing equity for underserved communities.

The American Talent Initiative (ATI) brings together a coalition of four-year colleges and universities in pursuit of a common goal: enrolling, supporting, and graduating 50,000 additional lower-income students by 2025 at the colleges and universities that consistently graduate at least 70 percent of their students in six years. ATI’s third annual progress report provides a snapshot of progress—and setbacks. It comes at a time when a global pandemic has deepened inequality, and a national uprising against systemic racism has sharpened higher education’s focus on advancing equity for underserved communities. This backdrop brings a renewed sense of urgency to realizing ATI’s goal.

The progress report includes new enrollment data from the 2019-20 academic year as well as Fall 2020. The pre-COVID and COVID era data reveal four key findings:

Four Key Findings:

1. **Before the pandemic**, between 2015-16 and 2019-20, ATI members (130 during this data collection period) collectively increased Pell enrollment by 10,417 students.

2. **In the years leading up to the pandemic**, 2018-19 and 2019-20, ATI’s progress leveled off and began to reverse, with an enrollment decline of 3,873 Pell students, attributable to two main factors: (1) substantial declines at a set of ATI member institutions that enroll very high shares of Pell students, and (2) insufficient progress at a set of institutions with lower Pell shares.

3. **Fall 2020** enrollment data for 115 ATI members show a single-year drop of 7,166 Pell students (compared to Fall 2019). Driven in large part by declines in first-time and transfer Pell student enrollment at public institutions, and decreased Pell student retention rates at private institutions.

4. **COVID-era declines** have nearly returned Pell enrollment levels among ATI members to 2015-16 levels.
The Accelerating Opportunity campaign aims to reverse recent trends, elevating the priority of access and success for lower-income students across the membership.

The Accelerating Opportunity Campaign

In response, 125 ATI members have renewed their commitment to the initiative by signing onto the Accelerating Opportunity campaign. Signatories pledge to aspirational campus-level goals for lower-income student access and success based on their 2019-2020 enrollment levels:

- Members with a lower-income enrollment share below 15 percent will aim for an ambitious goal between 15 and 20 percent by 2025, or an equally ambitious increase in the number of lower-income students by 2025.
- Members with a lower-income student enrollment share between 15 and 20 percent will make measurable progress toward a 20 percent share of lower-income student enrollment or an equally ambitious increase in the number of lower-income students by 2025.
- Members with a lower-income student enrollment share above 20 percent will aim to at least maintain opportunity for lower-income students at current levels, if not expand enrollment by 2025.
- All members, regardless of lower-income share, aim to minimize equity-based graduation gaps by 2025.

Many ATI members have demonstrated that rapid and substantial progress is possible. Before COVID, 80 ATI member institutions increased Pell enrollment by at least 2 percent, with 53 of those institutions increasing Pell enrollment by more than 8 percent. Together, these institutions enrolled about 20,000 additional Pell students between 2015-16 and 2019-20. Even amid the uncertainty of COVID, 31 members increased Pell enrollment in Fall 2020.

Such examples of progress do not guarantee ATI’s success. The Accelerating Opportunity campaign aims to reverse recent trends, elevating the priority of access and success for lower-income students across the membership. Progress toward the 50,000-by-2025 goal will hinge on whether member actions can match the spirit of their aspirations.
An Overview of ATI’s Progress and the Path Forward
1. Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic laid bare what we already knew to be true. Talent is equitably distributed across the country; opportunity is not.

Joining online classes from phones, supporting parents who lost jobs, grappling with food insecurity, persevering despite the worst circumstances—for lower-income students across higher education, the COVID-19 pandemic laid bare what we already knew to be true. Talent is equitably distributed across the country; opportunity is not. The American Talent Initiative (ATI) launched in 2016 to expand educational opportunity at high-graduation-rate institutions across the country, where, for too long, high-achieving, lower-income students have been underrepresented. Those students who have gained access demonstrated that they can thrive in their academic pursuits and beyond, with campuses and communities becoming richer places as a result.

While gaps in access to the nation’s leading colleges predated the pandemic, disparities for lower-income students and their families have widened in the past year. At the height of the pandemic, 31 percent of lower-wage workers lost their jobs, with over half of Black and Hispanic households with children experiencing setbacks in employment. These employment setbacks left 8 million additional Americans in poverty in a single year.2

At the same time, the pandemic and economic crisis have tested the ability of higher education institutions to educate students and expand access. While enrollment declined at four-year institutions across the board, the steepest declines were among lower-income students: graduates of high schools with relatively large shares of lower-income students experienced a nearly 30 percent drop in college enrollment, compared to a 17 percent drop for those at high schools with relatively large shares of higher-income students.3

The signals from FAFSA completion rates this past year suggest that this trend likely will continue. As of February 2021, FAFSA completion rates among seniors at lower-income high schools were down 12 percent compared to the year before. At high schools with at least 40 percent students of color, FAFSA completion was down by 15 percent, more than three times the decline found at predominantly white high schools.4

As we move forward as a nation, it is more important than ever that ATI achieve its goal of enrolling, supporting, and graduating 50,000 additional lower-income students by 2025 at our nation’s high-graduation rate institutions. This brief report shares an update on ATI’s progress and outlines the steps ATI members are taking in this difficult time to support an equitable national recovery by making their campuses more inclusive and supportive of students from lower-income backgrounds.
2. Progress to the 50,000-by-2025 Goal

Where is ATI today?

The American Talent Initiative (ATI) began in December 2016 with a goal to attract, enroll, and graduate an additional 50,000 lower-income students at the roughly 300 colleges and universities that consistently graduate at least 70 percent of their students in six years. ATI members are a subset of high-graduation-rate institutions. ATI currently measures progress toward the 50,000-by-2025 goal by using Pell enrollment data collected annually from ATI members and, for non-member eligible institutions, obtained via IPEDS. Each year, ATI staff report on ATI members’ collective progress towards the 50,000-by-2025 goal; the first report was issued in 2018, and the second was issued in 2020.

Progress to Date

The graph below demonstrates ATI’s collective progress between 2015-16 and 2019-20, the most recent year for which ATI has data for nearly all 130 members. It also displays enrollment trends through 2020-21 for the 115 members that submitted these data. Below the graph, there are summaries of ATI’s progress-to-date in three distinct phases: early success (2015-16 through 2017-18); slowing progress (2017-18 through 2018-19); and pre-pandemic and pandemic-driven declines (2019-20 and 2020-21).
Early Success: 2015-16 through 2017-18

As previous progress reporting has shown, ATI member institutions made notable progress in the early years of the initiative. The 130 ATI members included in this year’s progress reporting enrolled 13,269 more Pell students in 2017-18 than in 2015-16. During this period, all 334 ATI-eligible institutions enrolled an additional 21,348 Pell students. ATI members contributed disproportionately to the progress at all ATI-eligible institutions, driving 62 percent of the growth despite enrolling 54 percent of total students across the eligible institutions. Overall, these early data indicated that ATI was on track to meet its 50,000-by-2025 goal.

Slowing Progress: 2017-18 through 2018-19

ATI members’ collective progress began to level off in 2018-19. The 130 ATI members enrolled 1,021 more Pell students in 2018-19 than in 2017-18. ATI’s 2020 progress report called attention to this trend, encouraging ATI institutions to renew their focus on socioeconomic diversity. Newly available data on the full population of the 334 ATI-eligible institutions show a similar leveling-off: between 2017-18 and 2018-19, Pell enrollment at ATI-eligible institutions declined by 479 students. Overall, between 2015-16 and 2018-19, ATI-eligible institutions increased Pell enrollment by 20,869 students. Despite the collective leveling off, data from many members continued to indicate that reinvigoration was still possible: 75 ATI members increased Pell enrollment during this one-year period.

Pre-Pandemic and Pandemic-Driven Declines: 2019-20 and 2020-21

In Fall 2019, the first semester of academic year 2019-20 that predated the onset of the pandemic, ATI members (n=130) enrolled 3,873 fewer Pell students than in Fall 2018 (academic year 2018-19). As a result, between 2015-16 and 2019-20, ATI members increased Pell enrollment by 10,417 students. These pre-pandemic enrollment trends are due both to large declines in Pell enrollment at a set of ATI member public institutions that enroll very high shares of Pell students, and insufficient progress at a set of institutions with very low Pell shares. However, many ATI members continued to make progress, as described in the following section.

The COVID-19 pandemic deepened the enrollment challenges that members already faced. Like institutions across the higher education sector, ATI members anecdotally reported the difficulties of maintaining lower-income student enrollment in Fall 2020, the first full semester that accounts for the impacts of the global pandemic. In December 2020, ATI members submitted enrollment data from Fall 2020, which illuminated the magnitude of these enrollment challenges. The 115 members that submitted these data experienced a single-year drop of 7,166 Pell students from 2019-20 to 2020-21, largely due to declines in first-time and transfer Pell student enrollment at public institutions, and Pell student retention rates at private institutions. As evident in the graph on the previous page, these COVID-era declines have nearly returned Pell enrollment among ATI members to 2015-16 levels.
Examples of Success

Despite these recent collective declines, individual ATI members have shown that significant progress toward ATI’s shared goal is possible: 80 of the institutions increased Pell enrollment by at least 2 percent before the pandemic, with 53 of those institutions increasing Pell enrollment by more than 8 percent. Collectively, these institutions enrolled about 20,000 additional Pell students. The top performers are listed below. And, even with the uncertainty of COVID, 31 members increased Pell enrollment in Fall 2020. These numbers demonstrate that ATI members have a strong foundation as they regain ground.

A number of ATI member institutions have led the way toward enrolling and graduating lower-income students, laying the groundwork for collective progress toward these aspirational goals. Table 1 shows the ATI members with the largest Pell enrollment growth since the start of the initiative and the highest Pell enrollment shares.

Top ATI Institutions

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<td>University of California, Merced</td>
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<td>Boston University</td>
<td>+598</td>
<td>Lafayette College</td>
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Progress Amid Trying Circumstances: Fall 2020
Progress is possible for a wide range of institutions. Members from across the initiative have made gains under even the most trying of circumstances, with some institutional examples of success listed below:

Between Fall 2015 and Fall 2019, Claremont McKenna College (CMC) increased the share of Pell students enrolled from 12 to 19 percent. CMC continued to increase Pell enrollment through Fall 2020, even amidst the COVID-19 pandemic.

Between Fall 2015 and Fall 2019, George Mason University increased Pell enrollment by 1,303 students. As of Fall 2020, more than 30 percent of George Mason’s students received Pell grants.

As of Fall 2020, more than 42 percent of Spelman College students received Pell grants, the highest share among ATI private institutions.

In the last few years, Stony Brook University increased its six-year Pell graduation rate from 74 percent (2011 entering cohort) to 78 percent (2013 entering cohort).

Since Fall 2015, Susquehanna University has maintained a Pell share above 25 percent, an above-average share amongst other private, high-graduation-rate institutions. Between Fall 2019 and Fall 2020, the university increased Pell enrollment by 27 students, despite overall enrollment challenges due to COVID-19.

Since 2015, Swarthmore College has increased the share of Pell students enrolled from 15 to 20 percent.

Each year since 2015, more than 64 percent of first-year students at University of California, Merced have received Pell grants.

Between Fall 2015 and Fall 2019, the University of California, Riverside has maintained a Pell share above 50 percent. During that time, UC-Riverside increased Pell enrollment by more than 800 students.

Each fall, the University of Central Florida enrolls 2,200+ incoming Pell transfer students, which represents more than half of all incoming Pell students (Pell first-years and Pell transfers) and nearly 18 percent of incoming students overall.
Between Fall 2015 and Fall 2020, the University of Dayton increased the share of Pell students enrolled from 10 to 14 percent, with plans to further increase to at least 19 percent by Fall 2025. Between Fall 2019 and Fall 2020, Dayton increased Pell enrollment by 111 students, even amidst the COVID-19 pandemic.

Between Fall 2015 and Fall 2019, the University of Illinois increased the share of Pell students enrolled from 21 to 25 percent. Between Fall 2019 and Fall 2020, Illinois increased Pell enrollment by 60 students.

Between Fall 2015 and Fall 2019, Yale University increased the share of Pell students enrolled from 13 to 18 percent, with plans to further increase to 20 percent by Fall 2025.
3. Where is ATI headed next?

*Accelerating Opportunity* for Lower-income Students

Presidential prioritization of expanded opportunity is essential to accelerating our collective progress toward the 50,000-by-2025 goal.

Before and during the pandemic, ATI members that increased lower-income student enrollment have had one thing in common: presidents who prioritize and put resources behind their commitments to expanded opportunity. To address both the pre-COVID and COVID-era declines in Pell enrollment, ATI member presidents have led once again, recommitting to the mission by adopting public, aspirational goals to increase lower-income student enrollment on their own campuses. Based on 2019-20, pre-pandemic enrollment levels:

- Members with a lower-income enrollment share below 15 percent will aim for an ambitious goal between 15 and 20 percent by 2025, or an equally ambitious increase in the number of lower-income students by 2025.
- Members with a lower-income enrollment share between 15 and 20 percent will make measurable progress toward a 20 percent share of lower-income student enrollment or an equally ambitious increase in the number of lower-income students by 2025.
- Members with a lower-income enrollment share above 20 percent will aim to at least maintain opportunity for lower-income students at current levels, if not expand enrollment by 2025.
- All members, regardless of lower-income share, aim to minimize equity-based graduation gaps by 2025.

A full list of ATI members whose presidents or chancellors have reaffirmed their commitments are listed in Appendix A.

A number of ATI institutions have already shared some strategic priorities to help realize their public commitment:

Strategic Priorities from the ATI Membership

Penn is focused on making meaningful progress toward a Pell share of 20% in its undergraduate student body and closing graduation gaps among Pell students. To accelerate that progress, Penn will build out its outreach and programming for students from lower-income backgrounds, highlight its commitment to meeting 100% of demonstrated financial need without loans, and continue to expand Penn First Plus, a hub for students from first-generation and lower-income backgrounds to access academic, financial, and personal support.
Dayton has committed to an effort to increase the representation of Pell-eligible students in its first-year, first-time cohort to at least 20% by Fall 2025 and Pell-eligible students overall to 19% by that time. To realize those goals, Dayton is expanding its network of high school, community-based, community college, and veteran-based partnerships. Alongside this strategy, Dayton will continue to invest in the growth of signature initiatives like the Flyer Promise Scholars program and University of Dayton Sinclair Academy.

In addition to maintaining steady growth in its Pell enrollment, Susquehanna is committing to eliminate graduation gaps among its Pell students. To achieve this goal, Susquehanna will implement SU 2.0, a campus-wide initiative to systematically eliminate obstacles to student persistence and success. Susquehanna has also joined a new TRIO-funded program to expand the suite of resources it provides to students from lower-income backgrounds.

As a part of its recommitment, the University of Michigan will seek to make continued increases in its Pell enrollment and reduce the five-point Pell graduation gap through Fall 2025. In support of these aspirational goals, Michigan will increase funds to support awareness-building for its Go Blue Guarantee, a full tuition scholarship for in-state students, and the Victors Award, which closes the financial aid gap for out-of-state students from lower-income backgrounds.

Wisconsin aims to build on the gains in Pell student enrollment it made during the pandemic and make continued progress toward a 20% Pell share, adding 200 Pell students for the second year in a row. To maintain that growth, Wisconsin will bolster its partnerships with community-based organizations and continue to invest in its full-need and full-tuition financial aid programs. To support students’ success once they arrive on campus, Wisconsin also plans to expand financial assistance for students enrolled in summer courses and institutional emergency funding.

Having already achieved an increase in Pell share in its undergraduate student body from 13 to 18%, Yale aims to increase the total Pell share to 20% by Fall 2025, representing approximately 1,240 Pell students; a more than 70% increase in the number of Pell-eligible students enrolled in fall 2015. To make that jump, Yale has planned aggressive, innovative outreach campaigns that emphasize affordability, dedicated programs for first-generation and lower-income students led by current students from shared backgrounds, and sustaining recently expanded strategic partnerships with Questbridge and College Board.
4. Conclusion

ATI members are demonstrating that they can prioritize equitable opportunity even at a time when institutional capacity and attention is stretched thin and socioeconomic diversity risks being overlooked.

In response to the enrollment downturn, 125 ATI institutions recently committed to ambitious goals for lower-income student opportunity and success. By making these commitments, ATI members are demonstrating that they can prioritize equitable opportunity even at a time when institutional capacity and attention is stretched thin and socioeconomic diversity risks being overlooked.

Ultimately, the drive toward 50,000-by-2025 will require words as well as deeds. To make good on their commitments, ATI members will need to invest in need-based financial aid and change practice and policy to ensure that recruitment, admissions, student support services, and in- and outside-the-classroom experiences are more equitable and inclusive.

The pandemic has shown that higher education can quickly accomplish big goals. When COVID-19 hit the U.S. in March 2020, higher education transformed: in a matter of weeks, schools moved to virtual learning, launched test-optional policies, and distributed emergency financial aid and laptops. In response to the nationwide reckoning with systemic racism, institutions have renewed their focus on efforts to promote diversity, equity, and inclusion on their campuses. Above all, as school and home life became intertwined in the virtual classroom, faculty and staff had an unfiltered glimpse into the challenges—across class, race, and geography—that lower-income students must confront to succeed. We hope this awareness has fostered a greater sense of compassion and appreciation for the talent and resolve these students bring to their educations.

In the coming years, ATI members can harness these shifts to drive opportunity and mobility for the communities hardest hit by the pandemic. There are four years left until 2025, and we have no time to waste.
Endnotes


   Emma Whitford, “Colleges Continue Losing Undergraduate Enrollment This Spring, Even as Graduate Enrollment Climbs,” Inside Higher Ed, March 11, 2021.


5. For more information, visit the What We Do page of our website.

6. For a full public report on these data, please see our 2021 collective progress report here.

7. Data from the 2018-19 school year are the most recently available, public data for non-member ATI eligible institutions. The ATI progress page will be updated with 2019-20 data for all ATI-eligible institutions once it is publicly available.

8. ATI is focused on increasing access and opportunity for students from the bottom half of the income distribution, which approximately aligns with the eligibility for the Pell grant. For now, ATI will continue to use the Pell grant to measure its progress towards its 50,000-by-2025 goal. In the coming months, ATI will consider other ways to measure student enrollment from the bottom half of the income distribution, especially as federal financial aid policies evolve.
Appendix: ATI Member List

As of June 2021, the American Talent Initiative has 125 members.

Allegheny College
Meadville, PA

American University
Washington, DC

Amherst College
Amherst, MA

Bard College
Annandale-On-Hudson, NY

Barnard College
New York, NY

Bates College
Lewiston, ME

Baylor University
Waco, TX

Boston University
Boston, MA

Bowdoin College
Brunswick, ME

Brown University
Providence, RI

Bryn Mawr College
Bryn Mawr, PA

Bucknell University
Lewisburg, PA

California Institute of Technology
Pasadena, CA

Carleton College
Northfield, MN

Case Western Reserve University
Cleveland, OH

Centre College
Danville, KY

Claremont McKenna College
Claremont, CA

Colby College
Waterville, ME

Colgate University
Hamilton, NY

College of Saint Benedict
St. Joseph, MN

College of the Holy Cross
Worcester, MA

William & Mary
Williamsburg, VA

Columbia University in the City of New York
New York, NY

Connecticut College
New London, Connecticut

Cornell University
Ithaca, NY

Dartmouth College
Hanover, NH

Davidson College
Davidson, NC

Dickinson College
Carlisle, PA

Drexel University
Philadelphia, PA

Duke University
Durham, NC

Emory University
Atlanta, GA

Fordham University
New York, NY

Franklin and Marshall College
Lancaster, PA

Georgetown University
Washington, DC

George Mason University
Fairfax, VA

Georgia Institute of Technology
Main Campus
Atlanta, GA

Gettysburg College*
Gettysburg, PA

Hamilton College
Clinton, NY

Harvard University
Cambridge, MA

Haverford College
Haverford, PA

Hobart and William Smith Colleges
Geneva, New York

Hope College
Holland, MI

Illinois Institute of Technology
Chicago, IL

Indiana University-Bloomington
Bloomington, IN

James Madison University
Harrisonburg, VA

Johns Hopkins University
Baltimore, MD

 Juniata College
Huntingdon, PA

Kenyon College
Gambier, OH

Knox College
Galesburg, IL

Lafayette College
Easton, PA

Lawrence University
Appleton, WI

Lebanon Valley College
Annville, PA

Lehigh University
Bethlehem, PA

Marist College
Poughkeepsie, NY

Massachusetts Institute of Technology
Cambridge, MA

Miami University-Oxford
Oxford, OH

Middlebury College
Middlebury, VT

Mount Holyoke College
South Hadley, Massachusetts

Muhlenberg College
Allentown, PA

New York University
New York, NY

Northwestern University
Evanston, IL

Occidental College
Los Angeles, CA

* pending leadership transition
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* pending leadership transition