

Progress Report

One Year into the Accelerating Opportunity Campaign

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1. Background

OVERVIEW OF ATI AND ITS MISSION

The American Talent Initiative (ATI) began in 2016 as a group of 30 colleges and universities, each with a six-year graduation rate of at least 70 percent. While the founding members of ATI differed in many ways, they shared one goal: increase access and success for 50,000 students from lower-income¹ backgrounds by 2025.² Since then, ATI has grown to include 128 institutions with high graduation rates, devoted to addressing disparities in access and success on their own campuses and nationwide. Nearly two-thirds of members have increased lower-income student enrollment on their campuses since joining ATI.

As disparities in opportunity widened during the COVID-19 pandemic, the importance of ATI's mission has remained clear.

Facing financial uncertainty and immense disruption, nearly 1.4 million fewer students participated in higher education in Spring 2022 than just two years before.³ Graduating high school seniors from low-income backgrounds were less likely to attend college than their high-income peers.⁴

Like many colleges nationwide, ATI members collectively experienced steep declines in lower-income student enrollment during the pandemic. In Spring 2021, 125 member presidents committed to reversing that trend through ATI's *Accelerating Opportunity* campaign; this year, three more institutions made these commitments as the newest members of ATI.

Each pledged to aspirational goals to increase lower-income student enrollment over 2019-2020 levels:

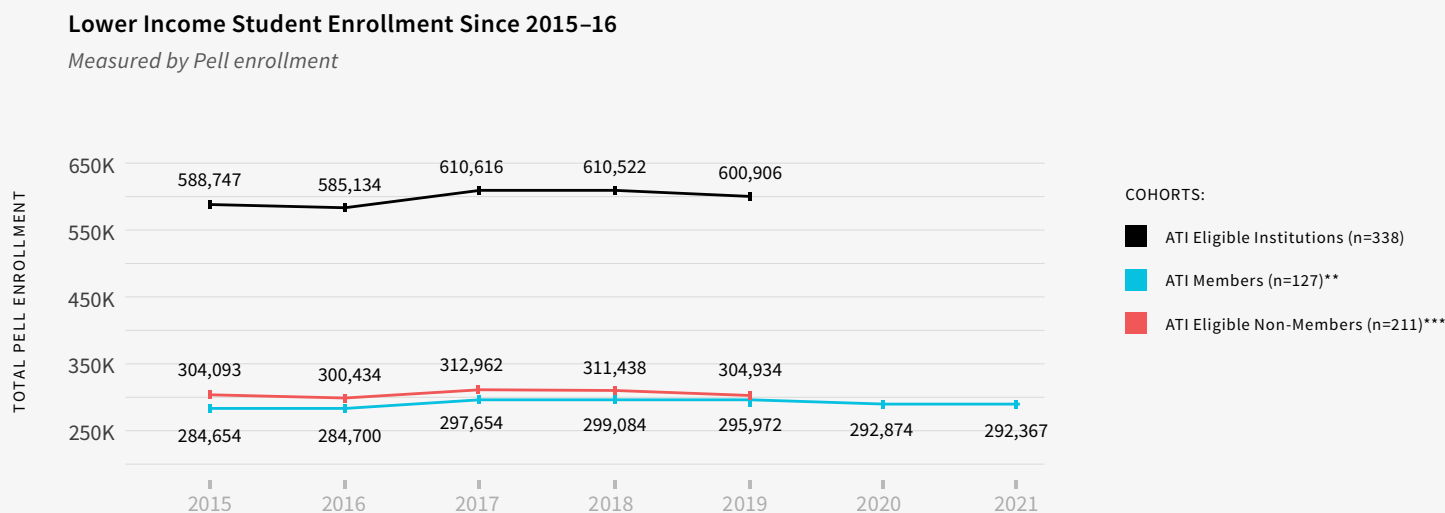
Accelerating Opportunity Aspirational Goals

- 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.

Members' strategies for meeting these goals will begin to bear fruit in the 2022-23 academic year. For now, our annual ATI progress update highlights the pandemic's impact on students across these institutions during the past year.

2. ATI's Progress to Date

The figure below summarizes the aggregate lower-income student enrollment across three groups⁵: ATI members between 2015-16 and 2021-22, ATI eligible non-members between 2015-16 and 2019-20, and all ATI eligible colleges and universities between 2015-16 and 2019-20, the most recent year for which all public data are available.



The years displayed refer to Fall enrollment for each year. Member-submitted data are updated as of July 1st. The Fall 2021 data are considered preliminary.

ATI members have enrolled 7,713 additional lower-income students since 2015-16, progress driven by the 83 members that have added lower-income students since the start of the initiative. Over that time period:

- Sixty-three private members increased lower-income student enrollment from a relatively low baseline in 2015.
- While public members have experienced setbacks in enrollment, most maintain high Pell shares and remain gateways to opportunity for talented students from low-income backgrounds.

While ATI members have enrolled more lower-income students since 2015-16, their current progress falls short of where the initiative stood in 2018. While overall declines in lower-income student enrollment began to stabilize in the past year, members have yet to

recover from initial declines in 2019 and steep drops during the pandemic.

Members enrolled 507 fewer lower-income students in the most recent year (with Pell shares of 24 percent among ATI public campuses and 18 percent among private campuses), driven by declines of nearly 6 percent in transfer student enrollment and 1.3 percent in continuing/returning student enrollment.

However, the most recent data (from 2021-22) also offer encouraging early signs: a six percent increase in first-time, full-time enrollment across the membership. In addition, 64 ATI members consistently increased lower-income student enrollment over the past two years.

ATI members also continue to graduate lower-income students at high rates.

Of the entering cohort of lower-income students at ATI institutions in 2015, 80 percent graduated within six years.

Members must build on those gains and successes to realize our shared 50,000-by-2025 goal. We measure progress not just at our 128 members, but among all 341 institutions with high graduation rates (four-year colleges and universities with six-year graduation rates of at least 70 percent). As of 2019, members enrolled 11,318 additional lower-income students, driving nearly all progress among all ATI eligible

institutions. Meanwhile, ATI eligible non-member institutions enrolled 841 additional lower-income students. Between 2018-19 and 2019-20, even as ATI members began to collectively enroll fewer lower-income students, the drop-off was more noticeable at non-member colleges.

Data for non-members is not publicly available for the pandemic years; however, if the pattern holds, we expect those institutions to have experienced steeper declines in lower-income student enrollment than ATI members.

3. Where Do We Go From Here?

ATI'S APPROACH TO ACCELERATING OPPORTUNITY

ATI emphasizes presidential leadership, innovation, and data-informed approaches as important elements of strategies members use to realize their aspirational goals during the *Accelerating Opportunity* campaign. As a result, ATI is focusing its efforts on:

1. RE-ENGAGING STOPPED-OUT STUDENTS AND INCREASING TRANSFER STUDENTS: Many ATI institutions are prioritizing these two student groups in the face of nationwide declines in transfer and continuing/returning enrollment.⁶

2. CONTINUING TO EXPAND FIRST-YEAR LOWER-INCOME STUDENT ENROLLMENT: While the number of lower-income students enrolled at ATI members has recently declined, 79 members are showing early signs of reversing the tide, increasing first-time, full-time lower-income student enrollment last year. Over the last two years, growth in total enrollment across the membership has outpaced lower-income student enrollment. Many members are working to ensure greater demand among prospective students leads to more equitable opportunity for lower-income students.

Lehigh University aims to double the number of transfer students and decrease the gap between overall and Pell graduation rates by half.



Indiana University-Bloomington (IU) commits to increasing need-based funding for lower-income students to add 350 additional Pell students by 2025. IU has already seen a lift in Pell students by moving to test-optional admissions and test-excluded scholarship policy. The campus will continue to expand its intentionality behind various efforts, including outreach and commitments to transfer recruitment, to achieve its goal.



INDIANA UNIVERSITY

In the past year, presidents and senior teams across the membership explored bold initiatives to tackle longstanding issues related to access, community college transfer, and student success.

For example, **Williams College** became the nation's first college to move to an all-grant aid program, removing year-round work requirements and aiming to significantly reduce students' debt burden. **Stevens Institute of Technology** is piloting a comprehensive four-year cohort program to ensure talented students from low-income backgrounds adapt to and thrive in STEM programs—and gain the support and mentorship they need to graduate and transform the workforce. And **George Mason University** announced plans to extend its ADVANCE transfer program through new offerings known as the Mason Academies, part of its Mason Virginia Promise program. The Mason Virginia Promise provides an opportunity for all Virginians with a pathway to earn a bachelor's degree or an opportunity to start their own business.

Each of these institutions offer promising models undergirded by committed leadership: presidents who regularly elevate the importance of equity and speak from the bully pulpit as well as senior teams that put the models into action. ATI is supporting member presidents and their senior teams with tools, research, and opportunities to engage with peers. These resources are designed to help leaders fully embed their ATI-related priorities to advance access and success into a broader long-term vision.

FOCUSED INNOVATION TO SUPPORT SOCIOECONOMIC DIVERSITY

Realizing the 50,000-by-2025 goal will hinge on ATI members developing and sharing innovative ideas in areas of common interest. In that spirit, ATI introduced two grant opportunities for members to accelerate progress designed to support new initiatives and expand evidence-based programs.

Eight ATI members received seed funding through the **Promising Practice Accelerator** to pilot innovative solutions to transfer and retention challenges. Projects include summer bridge and cohort-based programs that ensure students acclimate and feel like they belong on campus; community college pathway initiatives that support a seamless transition to four-year institutions; and targeted financial aid incentives. Awardees are addressing challenges that too often drive students away from higher education, including unanticipated and non-tuition expenses and disengagement in the classroom.

Recognizing that students who are the first in their families to attend college face similarly imposing barriers to access and success, ATI launched a partnership with the first-generation-focused **Kessler Scholars Collaborative**. Ten ATI members—from small liberal arts colleges to large public flagships—joined a national network of institutions committed to a proven, cohort-based approach to first-generation student success. As we learn from this new partnership, we'll share findings to support the success of first-generation students across ATI campuses and the field.

4. Conclusion

Millions of talented students have left higher education in the past two years, many from lower-income, underrepresented, and first-generation backgrounds. This makes ATI's 50,000-by-2025 goal more difficult to realize but no less important. Members are rising to the moment with bold aspirational goals through the *Accelerating Opportunity* campaign and commitments to the support services, experiences, and financial aid that students and families still reeling from the pandemic need. We know that those students are well-positioned to thrive at ATI institutions if provided the opportunity. Now, it is up to members to lead the way and ensure that tens of thousands of students who can transform society get the chance to realize their potential. ATI's success can strengthen not just opportunity for 50,000 students, but the society that stands to benefit from their talents.



ENDNOTES:

1. We use Pell status as a proxy for lower-income student enrollment.
2. The 50,000 goal is for all institutions eligible for ATI, meaning the institutions have graduation rates consistently above 70%.
3. National Student Clearinghouse Research Center. (2022). [Overview: Spring 2022 enrollment estimates.](#)
4. National Student Clearinghouse Research Center. (2021). [High School Benchmarks Report.](#)
5. Enrollment data for the 338 ATI Eligible Institutions reflect two sources: 1) data from the 127 ATI members that participated in ATI's 2021 data collection and 2) publicly available data on the Fall 2019 cohort from IPEDS for the 211 eligible non-members. The data submitted by 127 ATI members include only full-time, bachelor-degree-seeking undergraduates, while the publicly available data include all undergraduates, regardless of degree-seeking status. Since differences in data sources persist across all years, we can measure changes over time.

**One ATI member did not submit 2021-22 Pell data and is excluded from the ATI Eligible and ATI Member groups.
***Two ATI eligible non-members are missing publicly available data and are excluded from the ATI Eligible and ATI Eligible Non-Member groups.
6. National Student Clearinghouse Research Center. (2022, May 3). [Transfer, mobility, and progress: National Student Clearinghouse Research Center's update on transfer students.](#)