

University Messaging: Accelerating Opportunity Campaign

Educating an additional 50,000 lower-income students at top U.S. colleges by 2025

Overview:

On June 30, 2021, ATI will share the most recent two years of aggregate Pell enrollment data and announce the *Accelerating Opportunity* campaign, a collective effort to reverse recent trends and increase access and success. This launch marks the initial stage of an ongoing, sustained effort to reinvigorate momentum toward the 50,000-by-2025 goal and elevate the promising practices, strategies, and goals that members introduce to realize measurable progress. In the interim, we have prepared content below you can refer to in conversations with individuals across campus, media, and/or other key external stakeholders, including:

1. **Talking Points for ATI Members**
2. **Responses to Frequently Asked Questions**
3. **Recommitment Tough Q&A**

For additional information about the *Accelerating Opportunity* campaign, you can refer to the statement of commitment that ATI member presidents signed [here](#). If you have any questions about this document or would like to discuss it in greater detail, please contact Adam Rabinowitz at Adam.Rabinowitz@aspeninstitute.org and Emily Schwartz (emily.schwartz@ithaka.org).

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Talking Points for ATI Members:

General Messaging:

- The pandemic threatens to widen existing inequities across higher education. We at [institution] commit to doing our part to contribute to a more equitable and inclusive economic recovery by ensuring that students from lower-income backgrounds can access and thrive on our campus.
- We know that when students enroll in [institution], they increase their chances to graduate, get good jobs, and experience upward economic mobility. Greater access and success for lower-income students at institutions like ours is more important than ever.
- We commit to these efforts as a member institution of the American Talent Initiative, a collective of colleges and universities nationwide that graduate at least 70% of its students in six years and aim to enroll 50,000 additional lower-income students by 2025.
- We're members of ATI in an effort to learn from others about what works, share what we've learned along the way, and do our part to support opportunity for lower-income students nationwide.

Case-Specific Messaging:

Recognizing the variations in lower-income student enrollment trends across member institutions, we've included sets of tailored talking points below:

For institutions that experienced lower-income student enrollment declines in 2020:

- It's been an exceptionally difficult year for students from lower-income backgrounds across the country, leading many to pause or delay their education.
 - We want to ensure that those students have the resources and guidance they need to get back on track toward a bachelor's degree.
- Recovering from the pandemic and ensuring students from lower-income backgrounds return to campus is only the first step; we must focus on advancing and sustaining their opportunity over the long-term.

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- To realize this imperative, we are one of 125 member institutions that have reaffirmed their commitment to ATI and set specific goals. [institution] has committed to [applicable goal from statement of commitment]
 - In support of this work, our university is:¹
 - [Insert institution-specific recommitment plan].
 - [Insert how your institution is measuring success].

For institutions that maintained or increased Pell enrollment in 2020:

- Despite the challenges of the last year, we were able to overcome national trends and maintain/expand our commitments to enrolling and retaining lower-income students.
 - This is a testament to the drive of our students, as well as the tireless efforts of our faculty and staff. We've learned so much over the last year about the needs of our students and how to best support them. Now, we hope to use those insights to advance and sustain these efforts.
- We are one of 125 member institutions that have reaffirmed our commitment to ATI and set specific goals. [institution] has committed to [applicable goal from statement of commitment]
 - In support of this work, our university is:
 - [Insert institution-specific recommitment plan].
 - [Insert how your institution is measuring success].

Messaging About the Initiative's Collective Progress:

- During the pandemic, ATI lost significant ground as a collective. While this reflects the exceptional circumstances of the last year, we're doing our part to make sure that this drop is temporary.
- Even before the pandemic, ATI as a collective showed signs of slowing down, underscoring the need to set and make progress toward lower-income student enrollment goals. If we do, we can regain the momentum we saw early on in the initiative.
- While it's hard work, we've done it before as a collective—and can do it again.
 - Since the start of ATI, 80 universities in the initiative enrolled an additional 20,000 students before the pandemic.
 - Even under the most trying circumstances, 31 institutions still made gains in 2020.

On the next page, we outline some responses to questions you may have about this campaign, the goals your university has set, and efforts to realize those commitments.

¹ You can use the strategic priorities template shared upon your institution's recommitment to ATI to insert this information. If you have questions about this document or need another copy, please email Emily Schwartz at Emily.Schwartz@ithaka.org.

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Frequently Asked Questions:

1. What is the *Accelerating Opportunity* campaign?

[Institution] is one of 125 members joining together to reverse collective declines in lower-income student enrollment, reaffirming our commitment to the initiative and pledging to aspirational, lower-income student enrollment goals based on our 2019-20 enrollment. We will set specific strategies to realize this goal and explore joint efforts to increase access and success for talented lower-income students nationwide.

2. Will ATI meet the 50k goal by 2025?

We believe so, yes. The ATI goal is still within reach and many universities have demonstrated that significant progress towards this goal is possible.

3. What is the plan to meet it?

Along with the other ATI members, our plan is to make progress over the short and long-term. This will look different on each member campus. At [institution], we are: [insert institution-specific strategies/practices.]²

[Institutional Examples]

- ***University of Dayton:*** It commits 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. Additionally, Dayton will continue to invest in the growth of signature initiatives like the Flyer Promise Scholars program and University of Dayton Sinclair Academy.
- ***University of Michigan:*** U-M 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.
- ***University of Pennsylvania:*** UPenn will focus on making meaningful progress toward a Pell share of 20% 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 dedicated hub for students from first-generation and lower-income backgrounds to access academic, financial, and personal support.

4. How are you measuring progress toward these goals?

Our institution will demonstrate progress toward these goals by Fall 2023 through leading indicators such as the number and share of entering, first-time lower-income students, lower-income community college transfer students, and continuing students (to name a few). [insert specific metrics if applicable, here.]

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5. What part did COVID play in yours [if applicable] and ATI's lack of progress toward its 50,000-by-2025 goal?

Lower-income students and their families have been hit hardest by the pandemic and its economic fallout, with many forced to delay or pause their education. While ATI members collectively experienced a pre-pandemic slowdown, the drastic impacts of the pandemic on those at the bottom half of the income distribution have accelerated these declines—and pressed ATI members to make commitments to realize their public purpose and reverse these trends.³ [insert your specific institutional experience.]

6. Why did the effort stall, even before COVID?⁴

There's no single story across the membership:

- At a high level, these trends may result from a combination of insufficient progress among institutions with very low lower-income student enrollment shares and declines among high-performing institutions with very high Pell shares.
- What the data don't show is that 80 ATI members made gains in this pre-pandemic period, enrolling an additional 20,000 lower-income students between 2015 and 2019. We need to double down on those efforts, reinvigorating this progress by accelerating gains at some institutions while supporting others in maintaining the access they have long provided [if applicable, discuss challenges your institution encountered].

³Enrollment data from 115 members shows a single-year decrease of 7,166 Pell students from Fall 2019 to Fall 2020, traced to declines in first-time and transfer Pell students at public institutions and retention among Pell students at private institutions.

⁴This slowdown can be traced to two factors, (1) large declines at a set of ATI member public institutions that enroll high shares of Pell students and (2) insufficient progress at a set of institutions with very low Pell shares.

Recommitment Tough Q&As

PROGRESS TOWARD THE GOAL:

1. Will ATI readjust the 2025 goal or lower the bar?

No. The goal is more important than ever because the stakes are higher, with lower-income students and families hit hardest by the pandemic and the need to increase access to bachelor's degrees. To ensure we meet the goal, we join other ATI members in prioritizing this work and committing to steps to increase access and success.

2. Do you think commitments to these aspirational goals will truly be enough to help realize the 2025 goal?

Yes. If [institution] and ATI members advance towards these aspirational goals, we can make significant progress. If the entire high-graduation-rate sector makes these gains, we can collectively realize our goal by 2025.

RECOMMITMENT CAMPAIGN:

1. How many ATI schools have recommitted? Why didn't they all?

We are grateful to be one of 125 institutions in a shared commitment to increase access and success. We recognize that this is a challenging moment for campus leaders across the country, with significant uncertainty surrounding the impact of the pandemic. Even as some institutions have had to pause their membership in ATI, many are advancing this work in other ways on their campuses.

2. Can you point us to the list of presidents/institutions who did, and did not, recommit?

You can find the institutions that recommitted on ATI's new webpage about recommitment. While those institutions that did not recommit may have paused their membership in ATI, they may not have paused their efforts to increase access and success on their campuses.

3. How is this different from before? Why do these goals matter?

We are committing to ambitious, aspirational lower-income student enrollment goals by 2025. By joining a collective of over 120 institutions to make this commitment and support field-wide initiatives like doubling the Pell grant, we can provide a pathway to postsecondary success for lower-income students hit hardest by the pandemic.

4. As a part of this campaign, are ATI members also planning a focus on racial equity? Why just focus on socioeconomic diversity?

Advancing socioeconomic diversity is necessary to support progress towards racial equity, especially given that lower-income students tend to come from communities of color. While we will use the recommitment process and opportunity to set specific goals to devote more attention to racial equity, we know such efforts are not sufficient on their own. [Institution] will explore actions and partnerships, beyond ATI, to advance racial equity. [insert specific steps/strategies if applicable, here]

5. Why focus on doubling the Pell grant as an area of collective advocacy when your institutions are among the most selective in the country?

Doubling the Pell grant helps lower-income students whether or not they enroll at ATI institutions, offering additional financial support for current students to cover their non-tuition expenses and bridge the affordability gap. More students would be able to earn a bachelor's degree with less debt, accelerating our efforts to expand opportunity and ensure an equitable national recovery.

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UNPACKING THE DATA:

1. Do you know which institutions contributed to the decline?

ATI shares *aggregate* progress toward the initiative's shared 50,000-by-2025 goal and does not provide institution-level lower-income student enrollment data. Similar data is publicly-available through IPEDS for earlier years.

2. *[If applicable/your institution has made gains]* Why has your institution been able to make gains while your peers have not?

Every institution is experiencing different challenges and contexts, which have likely only been exacerbated by the pandemic. What we share, though, as members of ATI is a commitment to increasing access and success—and a track record of having achieved progress as a collective. By making individual and joint commitments through the *Accelerating Opportunity* campaign, we can make collective progress once more.

3. What did members do that was successful or sets them apart from their peers, particularly those that made gains during the pandemic?

We are proud to join schools that made gains during this unprecedented time, which are featured on ATI's website. Progress is possible if we take individual and collective steps to realize our public purpose, prioritizing resources to increase financial aid, broaden recruitment and outreach, and expand supports available to students.

4. Did your institution, and ATI schools, fail lower-income students just when they needed it the most?

The pandemic had the most severe impact on lower-income students, forcing many to delay or pause their education—and driving significant declines in enrollment seen across higher education. Thirty-one (31) ATI members still managed to increase lower-income student enrollment, providing a foundation for efforts to ensure they quickly return to our campuses and get back on track toward bachelor's degrees. In the wake of the pandemic, we are doubling down on this work, lending support, resources, and leadership to ensure their return—and success.

OTHER QUESTIONS:

1. How much is this just about finances given the financial constraints institutions are experiencing? What is your institution experiencing, in relation to financial aid, and how are you adjusting?

While finances matter considerably, progress is also possible by prioritizing investments in need-based aid and student support services. That might require some hard choices about where to allocate limited resources, but other ATI members, including numerous smaller institutions show us what is possible; especially those hit hard by the pandemic that were still able to make gains.

2. How much does the back sliding reflect a lessening commitment, or lack of prioritization, by your institution, college presidents and higher ed in general?

[Institution] is dedicated to enrolling lower-income students, a commitment we are doubling down on by participating in the *Accelerating Opportunity* campaign and pledging progress toward [insert lower-income student enrollment goal]. While the initiative experienced collective declines, exacerbated by the pandemic's impact on lower-income students, we know progress is possible since we've done it before. By marshaling cross-campus support and financial resources in service of ATI, we can once again realize our public purpose.