

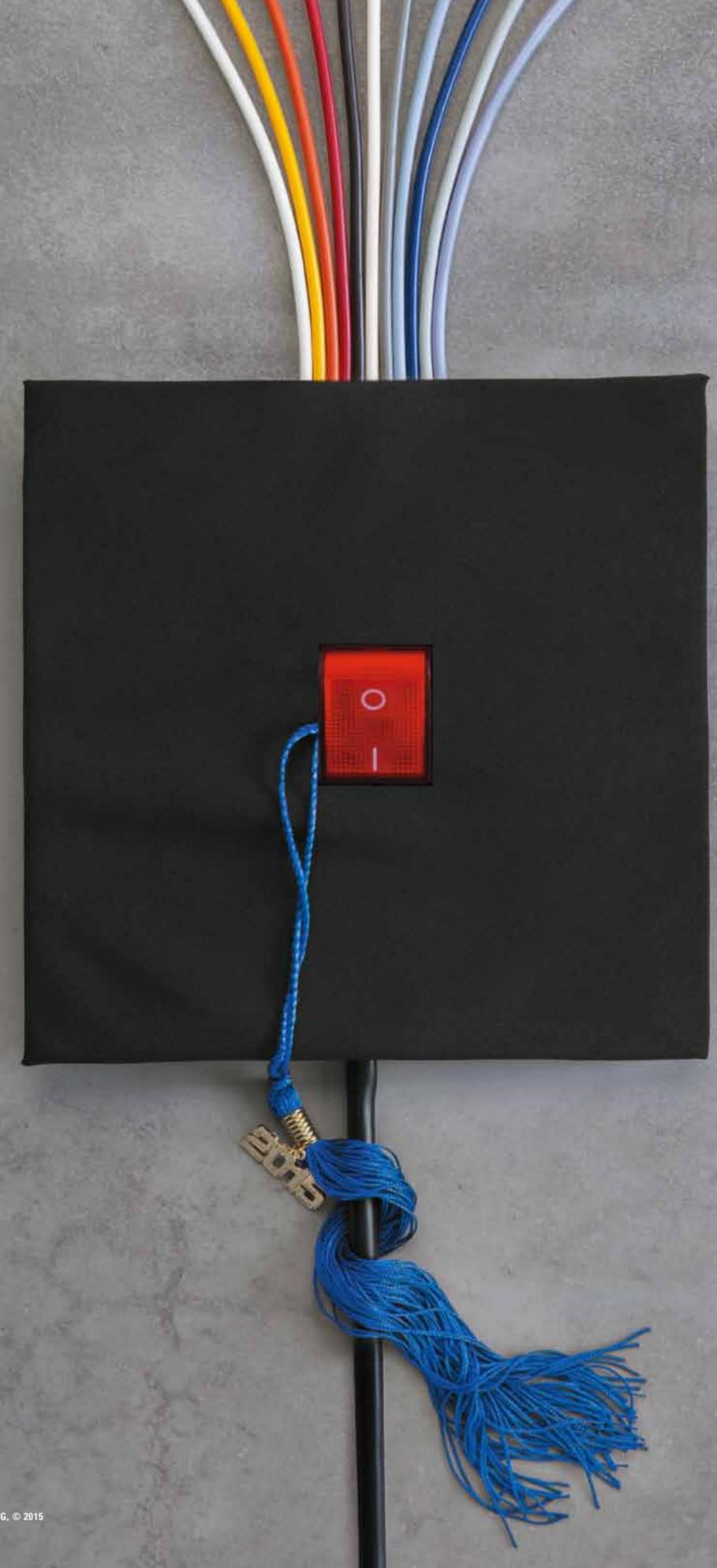
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# Innovating Together

## Collaboration as a Driving Force to Improve Student Success

By Bridget Burns, Michael M. Crow, and Mark P. Becker

**I**n the often-contentious discussions about the future of U.S. higher education, one idea garners wide agreement: our institutions need to innovate. Many college and university administrators have developed and piloted creative solutions to the most pressing problems facing higher education, and many of these interventions are showing promise at individual institutions. We see examples of success nearly everywhere, leaving no question of the commitment to helping more students access higher education and attain a degree to expand opportunity in their lives.





**Developing a successful model for collaborative innovation—for innovating together—is the most sorely needed disruption in higher education.**

Where we need more progress is in sharing these innovations widely across institutions. The notion of an individual “a-ha” moment is as old as Newton’s apple, yet experience tells us that *collaboration* is actually the driving force for most innovation. Developing a successful model for collaborative innovation—for innovating together—is thus the most sorely needed disruption in higher education. More than any particular technological development, improving the way that all technologies and innovations are shared and scaled throughout the sector has the potential to fundamentally change the way colleges and universities serve both students and society. Widely shared innovation can yield new levels of efficiency and productivity to make higher education more affordable and,

therefore, more accessible. At the same time, deeper collaboration can encourage institutions to put their goals in a broader national context.

Collaboration spurs innovation because bringing together groups of people who have different ideas, approaches, experiences, and areas of expertise creates a fertile environment for generating new concepts and methods. Sharing insights allows ideas to be refined and improved. Charging a group with developing a promising idea incentivizes the group—not just a single individual—to commit to its success and paves the way for trusted collaboration.

The challenge for leaders in higher education, then, is to figure out how to incentivize collaborative behavior to drive innovation that meets the needs of the country and of students—namely, by helping more students access opportunities for higher education and attain degrees and skills to advance their own and the nation’s economic success. It’s time to share what we know about how to serve students better, so that the beneficial effects of innovation can multiply rapidly across academic cultures, across regions, and across the diverse student populations striving for a college degree at thousands of postsecondary institutions throughout the United States.

This requires a new kind of collaboration that is intentional, self-forming, and based on shared values and goals, bringing together institutions with limited competitive interaction. Most importantly, this new kind of collaboration necessitates thoughtful coordination to bring more value *to* each institution than is taken *from* each institution.

**Broadening the Reach of Higher Education**

The value of a college degree is as high as it has ever been, and not just for white-collar professionals. More jobs than ever before, across a variety of sectors and at varying levels of experience, now require a postsecondary degree. Yet despite the rising value of higher educa-

tion, the United States no longer has the world’s largest percentage of adults who hold a college degree. This raises serious concerns about the nation’s future prosperity and about the economic mobility of millions of Americans.

By 2018, 63 percent of all U.S. jobs will require some level of postsecondary education, meaning that the nation will need 22 million new college-educated workers.<sup>1</sup> At current rates, by 2025 the United States will have a shortage of 16 million college graduates.<sup>2</sup> The economic problems posed by this shortfall are not merely speculative. Estimates place the costs of the education achievement gap in 2008 at between \$1.3 trillion and \$2.3 trillion in lost gross domestic product because “American workers are, on average, less able to develop, master, and adapt to new productivity-enhancing technologies.”<sup>3</sup>

The consequences are also felt on a personal level. The poverty rate for Americans 25 years and older with no college degree (14.8%) is more than three times higher than the rate for those with at least a bachelor’s degree (4.3%).<sup>4</sup> If we hope to narrow income inequality and reinvigorate economic mobility, we must help more students successfully complete a college degree.

The need is particularly acute for students from low-income families and minorities. Between 1970 and 2011, the percentage of Americans in the top income quartile who had attained a baccalaureate degree by age 24 rose an estimated 31 points: from 40.2 percent to 71.2 percent. In contrast, during the same four decades, baccalaureate attainment rates for the lowest income quartile increased only 4.2 points: from 6.2 percent to 10.4 percent.<sup>5</sup>

In addition, only about one-third of African Americans ages 25–34 and one-quarter of Latinos in the same age range have earned any kind of postsecondary credential.<sup>6</sup> The U.S. population is expected to increase by 49 million between 2015 and 2035, with members of minority groups accounting for all of the net increase.<sup>7</sup> As a whole,

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ethnic minorities are expected to make up the majority of the U.S. population by 2044, and the U.S. Department of Education reports that a majority of students enrolled in K–12 schools today are non-white.<sup>8</sup> If colleges and universities are unable to find a way to increase the rate at which students from minority backgrounds earn postsecondary credentials, many young people will suffer bleak job prospects and lower incomes, and the nation as a whole will see its economic potential shrink. It's time for those of us in higher education to tackle this challenge together.

### Obstacles to Greater Collaboration

We would venture to say that all higher education leaders recognize the value of collaboration. Faculty members regularly collaborate with colleagues from other institutions to make new advances across disciplines, for instance. Yet it remains difficult to collaborate at the *institutional* level to test, grow, and scale new and innovative ways of serving students. Why is this so? We have identified four key, overlapping reasons for the difficulties in working together across institutional boundaries.

1. *Competition discourages collaboration.* The competitive environment of higher education—with institutions in a virtual race for faculty, students, and research funds—works against collaboration. This competition, though healthy, can impede institutions' ability to achieve collective impact, diffuse innovation, and drive needed changes in higher education.

2. *Current structures encourage exclusivity.* Rankings and competitive metrics place a premium on maintaining exclusivity rather than broadening access and prioritizing student success.

3. *Colleges and universities need more effective ways to share ideas.* Higher education tends to share ideas through conferences and publications, but neither format provides the con-

text and the ongoing, tailored support needed to adapt, implement, and/or scale ideas from concept to reality. Nor do these venues encourage the level of trust necessary to learn from both success and failure.

4. *Higher education needs a useful method for scale.* Scaling an innovation from a smaller to a larger institution or duplicating an innovation in a new context is a well-recognized challenge that can hinder broad adoption of successful new ideas.

### Overcoming the Obstacles

Many postsecondary institutions—including community colleges, historically black colleges and universities (HBCUs), and other minority-serving institutions (MSIs)—have been developing effective student success initiatives for decades. Yet much of this innovation in higher education has not spread, due to the obstacles noted above, and as a whole, U.S. higher education has not yet figured out how to significantly increase graduation rates.

We believe this can be achieved in three ways: by leveraging the scale and diversity of U.S. institutions to serve large numbers of low-income students; by modeling the practices and commitment necessary to succeed at scale; and by applying cutting-edge research approaches to the issue of higher education innovation in order to improve these practices over time.

To reach these goals, the leaders of eleven public research universities representing the geographic, economic, and social diversity of the United States formed the University Innovation Alli-

ance (UIA) in September 2014. The UIA's aim is to develop a new, collaborative innovation model for higher education—a model that will overcome the four obstacles:

1. *Competition discourages collaboration.* We are confident that colleges and universities can accelerate the progress of higher education if they combine intellectual resources and learn and innovate together, rather than working alone.<sup>9</sup>

2. *Current structures encourage exclusivity.* We reject the premise that colleges/universities cannot simultaneously expand access and pursue excellence. Although institutions will elect to focus on various specific strategies and interventions, we can commit to working together to increase enrollments of racially and economically diverse student populations while enhancing the excellence of teaching, research, and learning on our campuses. We believe that students benefit from being educated in academically diverse environments. Recent studies show that students who enter UIA institutions with A-level grades perform as well as or better than peers at institutions that accept only A-level students. At the same time, students entering with B-level grades significantly outperform peers at institutions that accept only B-level students.

3. *Colleges and universities need more effective ways to share ideas.* Successful startups and innovative industries demonstrate that learning from failure is central to people's ability to adapt, spread, and scale proven ideas from place to place. Although large associations and affinity organizations can help share word of big ideas, smaller groups (like the eleven



## We Need to Stop Giving Campus Leaders the Wrong Advice

**Bridget Burns**

**W**hile much of the current conversation in higher education is focused toward what college and university presidents need to do differently to prepare for the future, there is not nearly enough focus on the value system imposed upon them or on how the rest of us in higher education can help them to be successful.

It's time to recognize that we're setting up presidents to fail—not necessarily to fail at running their institutions, but to fail at improving U.S. higher education. Students and potential students suffer the consequences, and we need to do better. The only way to reach our higher education goals as a nation—increasing access, raising graduation rates, reducing costs—is to change the environment in which campus leaders operate.

Consider the typical president who, on being hired, is asked to compete to

win, to pursue excellence for his/her institution, and to do whatever it takes to move the institution up in the rankings. Eager to succeed, and committed to the institution, each president sets out to do just what we asked. But then we seem surprised when presidents don't work collaboratively, when they compete in state legislatures, and when they duplicate programs already offered in their state.

Presidents are doing what we ask them to do. It's time for us to ask them to do something different.

I sat on my first presidential hiring committee thirteen years ago, and since then I've reviewed, staffed, advised, and represented many more. I also participated in a very public non-renewal of a high-profile president. In each of these experiences, the focus was on the president. Little attention was paid to the value system imposed on the president by the hiring commit-

tee, the board of directors, and the highly publicized rankings.

We do not incentivize collaboration at the highest levels in higher education. We expect it, we think we like it, and we lament that it doesn't happen, but we don't commit resources to collaboration, it's not stressed in presidential employment contracts, and there is no *US News and World Report* ranking for how well college and university presidents work together to advance broad educational goals.

The extra work required to collaborate—working with completely different cultures, change-management styles, and personalities—can be harder than going it alone. Higher education thus needs a new model for presidents and chancellors to collaborate in a way that improves their daily experience, makes them better at their job, gives them fresh ideas they can apply on their campuses, and offers a way

for them to share those ideas and solutions with others.

Meanwhile, the rest of us in higher education need to have an honest conversation about how difficult it is to be a college/university president, what kinds of leaders we want to step into these jobs, and how we can better support them as they lead during an era of significant transition, disruption, and change. Despite all the difficulties inherent in the job, many presidents have been extraordinarily successful at growing their institutions and guiding their institutions through a technology and information revolution, despite difficult financial realities. We need the next generation of leaders to build on this success and to put a college credential in the hands of more Americans.

Collaboration won't be perfect, and it won't be easy. But if we succeed, we just might change the future of higher education.

UIA institutions) can allow for deeper relationships, trust, and a continuous feedback loop to improve results. Building a network of collaboration can also minimize the likelihood of “innovator fatigue,” which sets in when a successful innovator is besieged by others who want to learn about the innovation and see it in action. By having multiple lead universities offering guidance to collaborating institutions, we hope to reduce

the burden on any one innovator.

4. *Higher education needs a useful method for scale.* We intend to provide valuable insight into how to scale more effectively and thus expand the reach of promising innovations.

### **A Unique Role for Research Universities**

The creation of the UIA is a recognition that research universities have

much to learn about (and a special role to play in) accelerating innovations to improve student success rates and enhance social and economic mobility. We are working to regain the nation's competitive edge by helping more students graduate with a high-quality and affordable college degree. Our efforts start with broadening participation in higher education and implementing proven programs that significantly

## University Innovation Alliance Members

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**Purdue University**, Mitchell E. Daniels, Jr.

**University of California—Riverside**, Kim A. Wilcox

**University of Central Florida**, John C. Hitt

**University of Kansas**, Bernadette Gray-Little

**University of Texas—Austin**, William Powers, Jr.

improve graduation rates for all students, regardless of socioeconomic background.

We believe that public research universities are uniquely suited to this endeavor. It is their nature to experiment, solve problems, and discover new ideas; the large, diverse student enrollments at public research universities provide a context in which innovations in the area of student success can be broadly explored. By working as an innovation cluster—developing, testing, and scaling innovative solutions to shared problems—the UIA will create a playbook of proven innovations to help students from *all* backgrounds to graduate. Our intention is to demonstrate what works across institutions and at scale and to help spread these innovations nationally. For universities, this means that institutions will spend less time and fewer resources on unproven strategies. For students, this means that universities will work even harder and more efficiently to ensure students' success and to lower the costs of a degree.

Each UIA university serves at least 20,000 students, and several UIA universities enroll more than 50,000 students. Together, the institutions span the country geographically and cover the spectrum of U.S. public research universities, from emergent institutions

to land-grant universities and state flagships. We are committed to the belief that a defining element of our public mission is to make high-quality college degrees accessible to a diverse body of students at a cost that working and middle-class families can afford.

As a group, UIA member universities enroll and graduate a higher percentage of underrepresented minority students than do other major research universities. Two minority-serving institu-

tions are UIA members, and the UIA includes the public university that ranks number-one in the nation in conferring bachelor's degrees to African Americans annually, as well as three of the top-fifteen universities conferring bachelor's degrees to Hispanic graduates. Compared with similar research universities, UIA institutions enroll a higher percentage of transfer students, of full-time first-time undergraduates receiving Pell grants, and of students age 25 and over. UIA institutions vary greatly with regard to enrollment characteristics and to graduation rates, which range by institution from 53 percent to 83 percent.<sup>10</sup> Sharing data and implementing innovations across this diverse group of universities will afford the UIA an opportunity to discover strategies adaptable to a broad range of students and institutions.

UIA universities are already engaged in efforts to improve student success rates. The institutions have been recognized for aggressively driving innovations to serve more students with quality programs at sustainable costs.<sup>11</sup> And the universities are experienced in scaling innovations from small pilots to university-wide programs serving large and diverse student populations. Now they will work together to leverage their experience and strengths, share

information across institutions, and maximize their impact by testing and developing strategies that can be implemented by universities nationwide.

This is the first time a group of large public research universities has self-organized across state and conference lines specifically to test and scale solutions to problems of access and graduation in higher education. The vision is that by piloting new interventions, sharing insights about relative costs and effectiveness, and scaling those interventions that are successful, the UIA will significantly increase the number of low-income Americans graduating with quality college degrees and will, over time, catalyze systemic changes in the entire higher education sector.

### UIA: Formation and Practice

In June 2013, the eleven university presidents and chancellors who would ultimately form the UIA began to discuss what might be accomplished if they made a joint, public commitment to address the challenges posed by low college completion rates nationally, especially among low-income students. Although many of the institutions had been individually recognized for innovative practices in this area, the leaders shared a level of frustration with the limits of implementing innovations at only one university. They didn't want successes to remain bottled up at individual institutions but, rather, wanted their successes to be tested and shared so that more students could benefit. How could the collective talents of these institutions be best used to address the broader challenges facing higher education?

Since the first meeting, we have developed a prospectus and operating plan, set broad attainment goals, developed a data-sharing agreement, and raised and agreed to match \$5.7 million from six partner foundations (Ford Foundation, The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, Lumina Foundation, Kresge Foundation, Markle Foundation, and USA Funds). We have named an executive director and are currently searching for eleven



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Innovation Fellows to support our collaboration—one for each campus. We believe it is essential to have dedicated staff members whose top priority is to recognize innovation at each institution and to further collaboration across our institutions. The Fellows program will allow us to build a national pipeline of university leadership trained in developing and sustaining innovation in higher education.

Our collaborative approach was developed through a year-long process of meetings, interviews, and visits to UIA campuses and other universities. In addition, we are using methods put forward by the Carnegie Foundation's Improvement Science model to help structure our collaboration and ensure

its success. In the years ahead, we will continue to refine how we work together, adapting and responding to new lessons we learn along the way.

Currently, the UIA collaboration and sharing model is built around a "lead" and "collaborator" university relationship, in which universities that are using innovative practices to increase low-income students' progression, success, and completion rates serve as mentors ("leads") to universities that would like

to adopt and implement similar practices at their own campuses ("collaborators"). By scaling existing, proven innovations, the UIA will develop a pilot mechanism that enhances universities' ability to collaborate and hastens innovation for less money, with less duplication and fewer wrong turns. The UIA collaboration will test ideas more rapidly and will provide solid data to guide the broader implementation of effective strategies and the elimination of ineffective ones.

Over the next three to five years, the UIA will engage in a series of three structured and distinct categories of work:

- *Identifying New Solutions:* We will identify and verify the effectiveness of new methods of improving student success rates.
- *Scaling Proven Innovations:* We will take innovations that are already showing

good results on one UIA campus and transfer them to other interested campuses, with the goal of developing an innovation-transfer model that can be used throughout higher education.

- *Increasing Communication and Diffusion:* We will bring our experiences, results, and recommendations to the broader higher education sector, to policy leaders, and to the general public as we share and promote good ideas.

We plan to achieve our ambitious goal of increasing graduation rates among low-income students through these streams of work and through rigorous evaluation to study how the UIA functions as an innovation process. We will examine the effectiveness of our collaborative model, the challenges and insights that emerge throughout the process, the barriers to working together, and the solutions for overcoming those barriers.

Individual UIA institutions have already seen success in using predictive analytics, strategic financial interventions, adaptive learning, and other methods to improve retention and graduation rates. Now the UIA institutions are working together to share their information and to scale and diffuse what they have learned in order to help thousands more students each year attain a college degree. We project that annual degree awards will increase by 68,000 students within ten years, over and above current trend projections. At least half of these additional graduates will be from low-income backgrounds. If effective innovations are adopted by universities outside the UIA, the benefits will multiply.

As new solutions are identified and as proven innovations are scaled successfully, we will broadly disseminate the results. We want to give innovative ideas the energy to break through the traditional silos that prevent ideas from being distributed outside of conferences. As a federation of public research universities committed to collective change, the

## Predictive Analytics

The UIA's first large-scaling initiative seeks to transfer lessons learned about predictive analytics from three lead (mentor) institutions to eight collaborator (mentee) institutions.

- Georgia State University has been able to increase semester-to-semester retention rates by five percentage points and reduce time-to-degree for graduating students by almost half a semester. As a result, 1,200 more students are staying in school every year, and Georgia State's graduating Class of 2014 saved \$10 million in tuition and fees compared with graduates in the prior year's class. In addition, Georgia taxpayers saved approximately \$5 million in support costs for public education.
- At Arizona State University, the eAdvisor program helps incoming freshmen more quickly identify a major and plan a course schedule to help them stay on track to graduate on time. The four-year graduation rate of the first eAdvisor cohort improved by more than nine percentage points relative to pre-eAdvisor cohorts, and eAdvisor has generated \$7.3 million in advising cost savings per year at ASU and more than \$6.5 million in instructional cost savings per year.
- The University of Texas–Austin uses predictive analytics to help identify incoming students who might be underprepared for the university. The algorithm compiles more than a decade of comprehensive historical data from tens of thousands of students to provide tools for predicting outcomes for students who enroll at UT-Austin. It also assists academic units in allocating financial aid and assigning students to academic support programs. Predictive analytics data drives UT-Austin's University Leadership Network (ULN), which started in the 2013–2014 academic year and helps develop leadership skills in students with academic and financial need. Compared with a comparison group of students, ULN students achieved higher grade point averages, more credit hours completed, and better persistence rates.

**The shortage of U.S. college/university graduates, together with the limited opportunities that low graduation rates portend, constitutes a national problem that requires continued and concerted action from all sectors of higher education.**

UIA has the potential to balance healthy competition with shared progress. By testing solutions across multiple populations in varied settings, and by carefully measuring results, we hope to talk about what we have learned while encouraging others to adapt, apply, and utilize our experiences on their own campuses—and then to discuss their successes and experiences with still more audiences throughout higher education.

### Conclusion

The UIA aims to develop a higher education innovation model that points the way toward greater collaboration for all colleges and universities. The shortage of U.S. college/university graduates, together with the limited opportunities that low graduation rates portend,



constitutes a national problem that requires continued and concerted action from all sectors of higher education. Every higher education institution recognizes the challenge, and most are trying to address it. Our hope is that the UIA can make a unique contribution by demonstrating for our own members and for all institutions how to work together to achieve lasting and scalable solutions.

Ultimately, at the heart of the UIA is the recognition that higher education institutions have much to learn from each other and that we can better achieve the mission of helping all students by working cooperatively rather than separately. The future of the higher education sector and the futures of the hundreds of thousands of students we serve depend on our ability to innovate together. ■

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## Observers and Affiliates

While the UIA is currently focused on building meaningful collaboration among our eleven universities, we are identifying potential observers and affiliates interested in learning from our work. We also aspire to learn from others: Do you have an innovative initiative or evidence from a successful student intervention that you'd like to share with us? For more information, please go to [www.theuia.org](http://www.theuia.org).



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