Reaching Missouri's Big Goal for Higher Education: Lessons from High School Graduates' College Access and Success

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Key Points

Over the past decade, Missouri has been working to reach its "Big Goal" to have 60% of its working-age adults attain a postsecondary certificate or degree by 2025. This brief describes Missouri's approach to reaching its Big Goal for higher education. We find:

1. Missouri has not clearly articulated milestones for reaching the Big Goal.
2. Immediate college enrollment has declined (7% from 2011 to 2019), especially in community colleges, shrinking the pool of young adults counting toward the 60% goal.
3. Only half of Missouri high school graduates who enrolled in college each year as first-time, full-time (FTFT) students did so at Missouri public IHEs, contributing to "brain drain" with likely implications for Missouri's workforce.
4. A significant proportion of FTFT students fail to persist past the first year or eventually obtain a credential within six years, adding to the ranks of adults with "some college, no degrees."

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Introduction

In 2011, Missouri announced the "Big Goal," joining a growing number of states responding to the Lumina Foundation for Education's (2009) call for the United States (U.S.) to increase postsecondary attainment rates of working-age adults to 60% by 2025.[1] Lumina's call aligned with the Obama administration's challenge to make the U.S. the best-educated country to ensure economic wellbeing and a thriving economy through high-quality degrees and credentials. The 60% goal was based on projections that almost two-thirds of vacant jobs would require a postsecondary credential, but postsecondary preparation was not adequately meeting demand.[2] While the national postsecondary attainment rate has increased from 40% in 2009 to 51.9% in 2019, the Lumina Foundation projects, at the current rate, the U.S. will fall short of the goal.[3] Importantly, the recognition of industry recognized certificates qualifying working adults for middle- and high-skill jobs is a major part of the increase.

Understanding the Big Goal and how we are performing in meeting it is vital to understanding Missouri's postsecondary and workforce development success. Our hope is that highlighting areas where we may be falling short can help further the conversation on how to better prepare students for whatever pathway they choose following high school graduation.

Approaches to Reaching State Attainment Goals

Statewide attainment goals, like the Big Goal, are designed to increase the education levels of working-age adults in alignment with state workforce needs.[4] As of 2021, 46 states (excluding California, Delaware, Nebraska, and New York) have articulated statewide attainment goals, ranging from 55% to 82% of adults holding a credential or degree by 2025–2040.[5] As individual statewide goals are developed to align with workforce needs, each goal varies in strategies and detail to meet the goal. Yet, many of these goals rely on similar approaches including expanded state-funded financial aid programs, improving best practices, reducing enrollment disparities, and increasing connections between educational and workforce systems.

Missouri's Big Goal was first articulated in 2011 and included as Goal 1 of the state's coordinated plan for higher education (Preparing Missourians to Succeed: A Blueprint for Higher Education) in 2015: "Missouri will increase the proportion of working-age adults with high quality, affordable postsecondary credentials to 60 percent by 2025."[6]

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To meet the 60% goal, the coordinating board said the state would need an additional 200,000 working-age adults with a postsecondary credential. Six strategies were identified to meet this goal:[7]

- Shorten the time to degree completion while at a lower cost (e.g., decreasing the use of remediation and expanding transfer agreements);
- Establish a competitive grant program to help institutions transition to proven completion strategies;
- Increase participation rates of traditional students (e.g., encourage completion of college admissions tests and the FAFSA);
- Engage adult learners in postsecondary programs;
- Reduce disparities by increasing completion rates by race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, gender, and disability for students by 50% and recruit more diverse faculty at Missouri colleges;
- Encourage increased collaboration between education and business partners to provide students more opportunities for career exploration.

Missouri's Blueprint outlined four additional goals for higher education: affordability; quality; research and innovation; and investment, advocacy, and partnerships. Efforts across these goals may not explicitly contribute to the Big Goal, but they certainly intersect.

Missouri's Milestones Toward Big Goal Attainment Lack Transparency

According to HCM Strategists, "an effective statewide goal is challenging, quantifiable, addresses achievement gaps for underrepresented populations, includes a target date, is codified in a manner to influence postsecondary education policy and practice, and has broad stakeholder support."[8] Other helpful factors include setting interim milestones and regularly evaluating progress.[9] As evidenced by the language in the Blueprint and annual reports, Missouri's Big Goal meets most of these metrics; however, interim milestones have not been clearly delineated.

While the Missouri Department of Higher Education and Workforce Development (DHEWD) updates progress toward the Big Goal in its annual reports, the lack of interim milestones makes it difficult to gauge where we sit in relation to the 2025 goal. Missouri's Coordinating Board for Higher Education estimated only about 53% of working-age adults (ages 25-64) in Missouri held a postsecondary credential or degree as of 2019, representing a marginal change from 52% in 2015.[10] Lumina estimates Missouri's progress is closer to 47%, ranking 42nd nationally.[11]

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Lessons from Missouri High School Graduates' College Access and Success

In the absence of clear state-articulated interim milestones, we examined[a] progress toward the Big Goal by focusing on the postsecondary outcomes of one key subset of the overall working-age adult population: students who graduate from a Missouri public high school. Because Missouri public high schools are accountable for preparing students for college and careers, high school graduates are a key part of the pipeline to Missouri's adult workforce. Stagnant and declining patterns of postsecondary access and success for Missouri high school graduates highlight critical areas we may be falling short in reaching the Big Goal.

Fewer Missouri high school graduates immediately engage in postsecondary education each year, a decline most evident in community college enrollment

Immediate college enrollment (entering a postsecondary pathway in the fall semester following high school graduation) and graduate-follow-up data do not account for students who may have delayed their decision to pursue postsecondary education. However, delayed college enrollment has been linked to lower college completion,[12, 13, 14, 15] suggesting state attainment goals should include strategies for supporting students' immediate college enrollment. As presented in Figure 1, trends in Missouri high school graduates' postsecondary activities[b] show more graduates from 2011 to 2019 have chosen not to enroll in postsecondary education in the semester immediately following high school graduation. Workforce participation rates increased from 15% in 2011 to 24% in 2019, a rate nearly identical to community college enrollment.

Figure 1 : Trends in Immediate Postsecondary Enrollment, 2011 - 2019
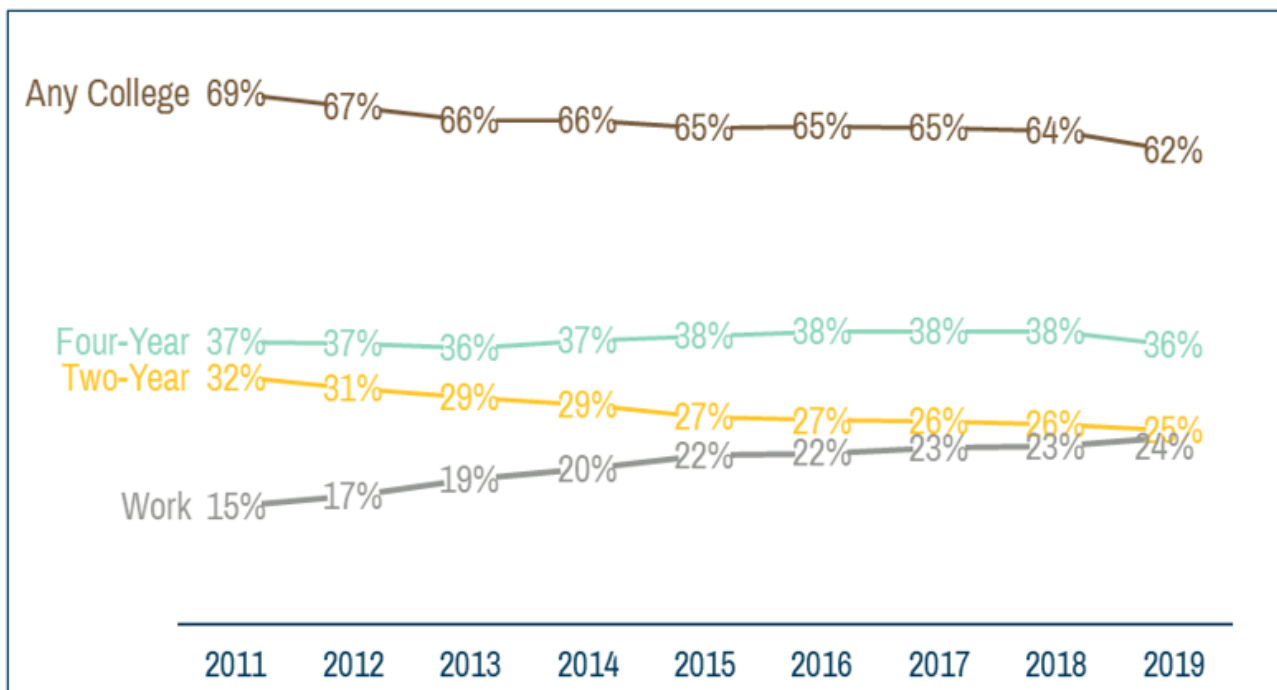
[a] Data for these analyses consist of enrollment trends for the high school graduating classes of 2010–2019 and six-year completion trends for the high school graduating classes of 2010–2015 who subsequently enrolled as a first-time, full-time (FTFT) student at one of Missouri's public postsecondary institutions of higher education.
[b] Overall immediate enrollment excludes technical education and other postsecondary enrollment as sample sizes are typically too low to be included in DESE publicly available data. FTFT in-state enrollment and completion rates from DHEWD includes certificates, associates degrees, and bachelor's degrees.

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Importantly, the number of high school graduates changed only minimally from 2011 to 2019; each year, about 60,700 students graduate from a Missouri public high school (Figure 2). Of all Missouri public high school graduates in 2011 (the same year the Big Goal was announced), 69% immediately enrolled in college. By 2019, the immediate enrollment rate fell to 62%. Of the approximately 60,000 high school graduates each year, Missouri failed to engage over 20,000 students in postsecondary pathways immediately following high school graduation, and almost 5,000 fewer students immediately enrolled in college in 2019 than did in 2011. Declines during this period are particularly troubling given the class of 2019 is the last cohort of graduates that will be counted in six-year postsecondary completion rates by 2025. As fewer students immediately enroll in college each year, fewer are likely to ever obtain a postsecondary credential.

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Most noticeably, declines in community college enrollment accounted for almost all the decline in immediate college enrollment rates. In 2011, 32% of high school graduates enrolled in community college, but only 25% did so in 2019. This decline is concerning because community colleges serve a significant proportion of marginalized college students, and are increasingly seen as an affordable option and a potential avenue for graduates to access industry-aligned credentials.[16, 17] It is especially confounding given the state's reliance on financial aid programs, like the A+ Scholarship, targeting community college enrollment. There seems to be a disconnect between the state's strategy and student outcomes.

Just over 50% of immediate college enrollees leave the state each year, putting Missouri at-risk for "brain drain"

High school graduates who leave their home state for college are less likely to return for work,[18] so high rates of out-of-state college enrollment likely detract from Missouri's workforce pipeline and overall postsecondary attainment metrics. As overall immediate college enrollment declined from 2011 to 2019, just over half of Missouri high school graduates who enrolled in college each year did so as first-time, full-time (FTFT) students at Missouri public IHEs (Figure 2). Meanwhile, about 17,000 students each year chose to attend college out of state. Missouri is not alone in this trend; in fact, public flagship universities in 48 of 50 states increasingly enroll more out-of-state than in-state students.[19]

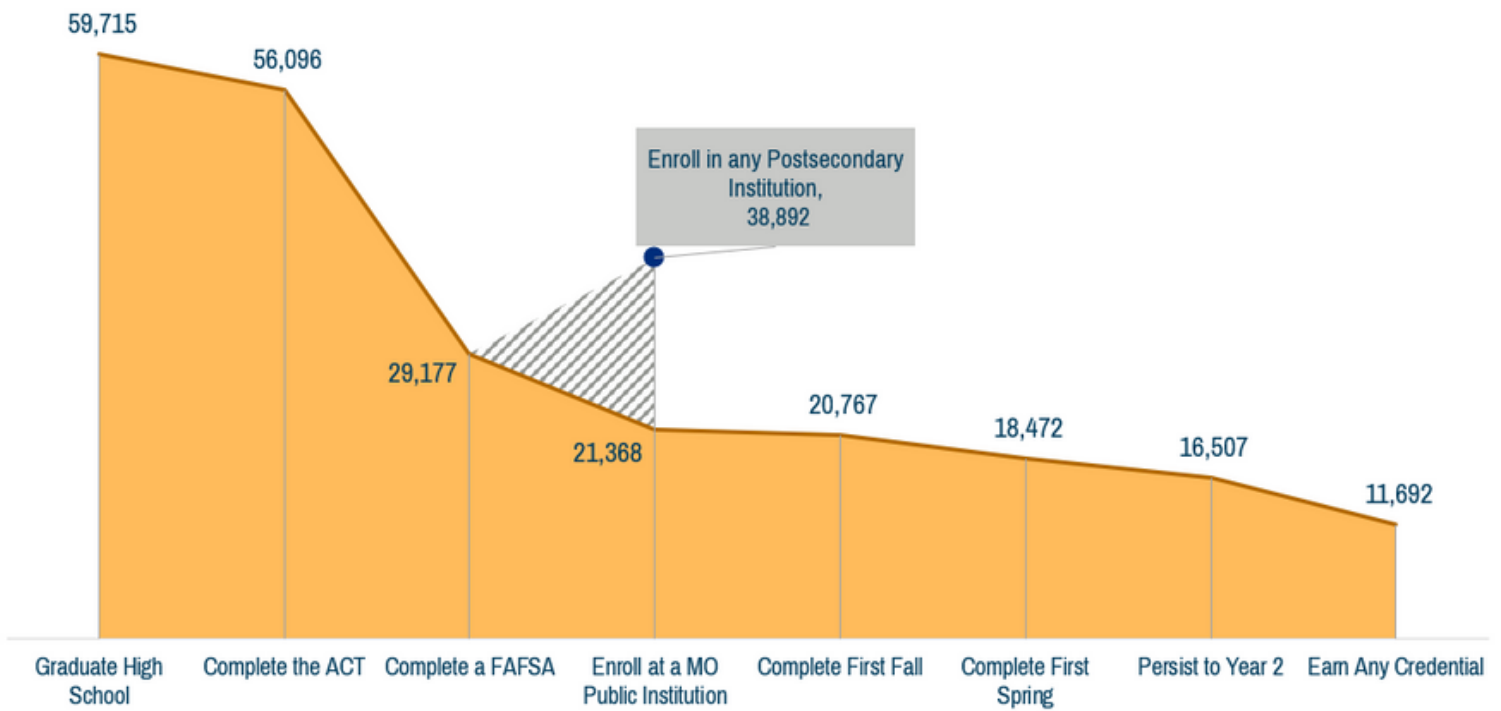Figure 2 : Number of High School Graduates Who Enroll in College and Remain In-State
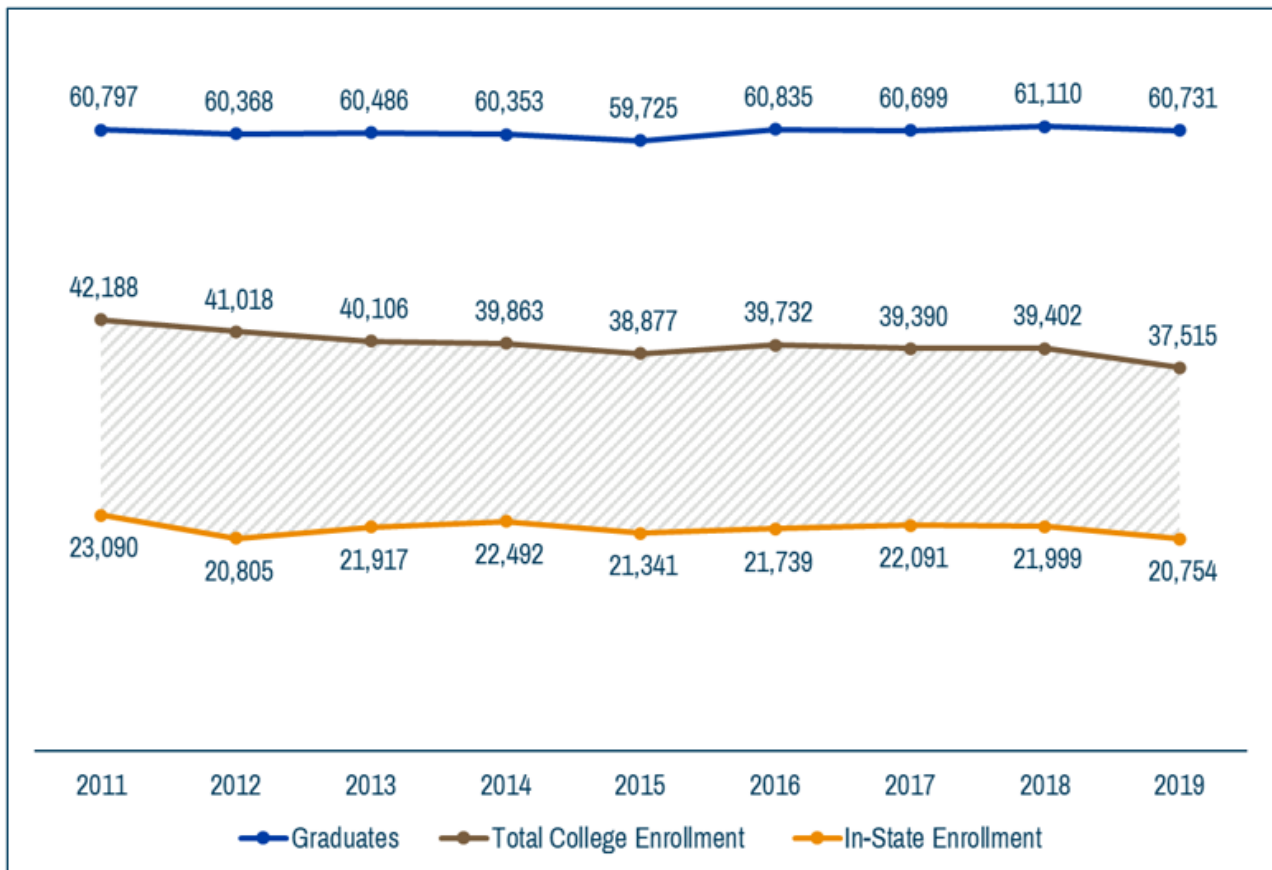
Out-of-state enrollment contributes to the likelihood of "brain drain," a phenomenon in which states fail to retain highly-educated residents born in their borders, potentially leading to economic stagnation within states and social segregation across states.[20] While Missouri is classified as a state that does not have high out-migration overall, adults who do leave are more likely to be highly educated than those who stay.[21] Further, the state does not attract as many highly-educated adults to offset those who leave.[22] This makes it increasingly important to consider the reasons high school graduates leave the state for postsecondary education and how the state could potentially attract these individuals back.

> *Only 55% of in-state, public FTFT students in Missouri earned a postsecondary credential within six years, while the rest join the ranks of working-age adults with "some college, no degrees."*

While the completion rate for in-state, public FTFT students increased from 48% in 2011 to 55% in 2015, the actual number of FTFT students obtaining a credential has remained relatively stagnant over time. In fact, of the almost 60,000 Missouri high school graduates in 2015, about 21,000 enrolled as in-state, public FTFT students, and less than 12,000 subsequently earned a postsecondary credential at a Missouri public IHE within six years (Figure 3). The remaining 9,000 students joined the ranks of working-age adults with "some college, no degrees."

We also see in Figure 3 only 46% of all immediate college enrollees from the class of 2015 completed a FAFSA, indicating many students who enrolled did not have access to financial aid. Likely, many adults with "some college, no degrees" leave college with debt and the inability to earn a higher wage.

One of Missouri's specific strategies to increase postsecondary attainment focuses on re-engaging adult learners, so quantifying the number of adults with "some college, no degrees" is important. Yet, efforts could focus on preventing these students from needing to be re-engaged to begin with. The number of students who start college and leave without a degree over time has stalled, indicating Missouri's Big Goal would benefit from more proactive measures to prevent student exit.

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Conclusion

Despite having an ambitious postsecondary attainment goal, many of Missouri's high school graduates are left out of successful postsecondary education pathways. This suggests we are falling short of reaching the Big Goal. Overall, Missouri's Big Goal would benefit from establishing quantifiable interim measures of progress and identifying high-impact initiatives that align with key priority areas. Given our findings, we identify four areas ripe for state leaders to focus on to potentially help Missouri meet its Big Goal:

- Increase immediate college enrollment, especially in community colleges through improved access and support for the A+ Program;
- Incentivize immediate college enrollees to remain in-state through increased outreach regarding the Bright Flight Program;
- Increase college student persistence (effectively decreasing the proportion of students who enter the "some college, no degree" group) by building on the Guided Pathways to Success Pilot Program;
- Re-engage and support adults with some credits and no degrees to earn credentials by building on the Degrees When Due initiative.

In future publications, the PRiME Center will continue to examine Missouri's progress toward the Big Goal. Specifically, we will more closely explore Missouri's strategies for reaching the goal and highlight how we could learn from other state attainment goals to refine strategies related to the four recommendations outlined in this brief.

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About the Author

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