



The Attainment Agenda: State Policy Leadership in Higher Education

Laura W. Perna, Joni E. Finney

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Although the federal government invests substantial resources into student financial aid, states have the primary responsibility for policies that raise overall higher educational attainment and improve equity across groups. The importance of understanding how states may accomplish these goals has never been greater, as educational attainment is increasingly required for economic and social well-being of individuals and society.

Drawing on data collected from case studies of the relationship between public policy and higher education performance in five states—Georgia, Illinois, Maryland, Texas, and Washington? *The Attainment Agenda* offers a framework for understanding how state public policy can effectively promote educational attainment.

Laura W. Perna and Joni E. Finney argue that there is no silver bullet to improve higher education attainment. Instead, achieving the required levels of attainment demands a comprehensive approach. State leaders must consider how performance in one area (such as degree completion) is connected to performance in other areas (such as preparation or affordability), how particular policies interact to produce expected and unexpected outcomes, and how policy approaches must be adapted to reflect their particular context. The authors call for greater attention to the state role in providing policy leadership to advance a cohesive public agenda for higher education and adopting public policies that not only increase the demand for and supply of higher education but also level the playing field for higher educational opportunity.

The insights offered in *The Attainment Agenda* have important implications for public policymakers, college and university leaders, and educational researchers interested in ensuring sustained higher education attainment.

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