

POSTSECONDARY VALUE COMMISSION

Frequently Asked Questions

Who is on the commission? How were commission members selected?

The commission has 30 [members](#) representing a broad range of expertise and perspective inside and outside higher education. Sue Desmond-Hellmann, former CEO of the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, and [Mildred García](#), president of the American Association of State Colleges and Universities, co-chair the commission and Michelle Asha Cooper at the [Institute for Higher Education Policy](#) serves as the managing partner for its work.

The foundation identified and invited commission members, advised by grantees and partners and experts in the field.

What is the commission's charge?

The commission began its work in April 2019 and will by early 2021:

- *Propose a definition of postsecondary value* to guide institutional improvement efforts and policy conversations about increasing post-college economic success and mobility for students.
- *Create a measurement framework* to gauge how programs at specific colleges and universities create value for students and where gaps exist by race and income.
- *Share an action agenda* with steps that college and university leaders, policymakers, and students and families can take to promote the improvement of value for all students, especially low-income students and students of color.

What does the commission hope to accomplish with its work?

The commission's aim is to provide useful information—and a way of understanding that information—to help colleges and universities take a critical look at *how* and *how well* they are contributing to economic opportunity for today's students; aid policymakers in gauging *what* the public gets for its investment in higher education; and equip students and families as they consider *where* and *what* to study.

What does the commission mean by *value*?

Proposing a definition of value is one of the commission's objectives. The commission will explore a range of options for gauging the economic outcomes for students earning undergraduate certificates and degrees, including (but not limited to):

- Post-college earnings in relation to ability to repay debt.
- Earnings premiums for students earning certificates or degrees over those pursuing education after high school.
- Post-college earnings in relation to ability to repay debt.

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How does defining value benefit colleges and universities? Students and families? Policymakers?

Colleges and universities that are focused on improving outcomes for more of their students will be able to use better data on post-graduation employment, earnings, and debt repayment to design stronger and more reliable paths to certificates and degrees for students – especially low-income students and students of color.

Students and families will get a better sense of the potential returns on their investment in post-high school certificates and degrees, which can guide choices about where and what to study and how to pay for their studies.

Policymakers will be able to see both sides of cost/benefit equation for education after high school, which can help focus policy conversations in areas such as financial aid for students with the greatest need.

Why is the commission only looking at economic returns to education after high school, especially since there are significant and measurable non-economic returns?

While the commission's work will focus on the economic returns of education after high school, members recognize that there are significant non-economic returns such as critical and creative thinking skills and enhanced health and civic participation, many of which are directly related to employment and career outcomes. The commission will acknowledge those benefits in its work and show the connection between a better living and a better life.

How will the commission account for student choices in defining value?

Decisions students make – about where they study, what they study, and how they pay for their studies – certainly affect their post-college outcomes. At the same time, we have learned by working with colleges and universities on initiatives such as [Completion by Design](#) and the [Frontier Set](#) that institutions play an important role in helping students navigate the path to a certificate or degree, especially students without a history of college-going in their families and communities. Defining value is the first step toward making sure students have the information they need to make important decisions about their education.

Why is the commission only focusing on undergraduate certificates and degrees?

The commission recognizes the importance of all education after high school and the need to better understand its value. Undergraduate education will be the primary focus for the commission because it represents the vast majority of student enrollment and presents the most immediate questions when it comes to equity and economic opportunity.

Will the commission include short-term certificates and credentials as part of its review?

The commission will focus on colleges and universities and programs providing undergraduate education and will look at credentials below the associate degree where consistent, reliable data exist.

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How will the commission decide on which data to use in its work?

A research task force comprised of leading academics and analysts will recommend data sources and uses for the commission to consider in creating a value definition and measurement framework. At a minimum, the data will address economic returns such as employment and earnings, debt repayment, and economic mobility, and will be drawn from sources recognized for providing consistent, reliable data.

What will happen after the commission completes its work?

After the commission releases its findings in early 2021, the Institute for Higher Education Policy (managing partner for the commission) will work with a broad range of higher education and policy organizations to raise awareness and identify opportunities to apply the value definition and measurement framework.