

The Chronicle of Higher Education, June 30, 2011

## To Raise College-Completion Rates, Deal With Costs and Transfer Policies, Report Suggests

By Jennifer Gonzalez

Too many college students won't make it to graduation because of rising tuition costs and ineffective transfer policies, says a new report from the National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education.

The students most at risk are those who begin their college education at a two-year institution, usually out of financial necessity, says the report. The problem is likely to worsen because of projected increases in the number of high-school graduates by 2022 in states such as Arizona, California, and Texas, where more than half of all undergraduates are enrolled at two-year institutions.

"If we can't put even an entry-level postsecondary education within reach of those who want it, there's no way we're going to meet our education goals," said Patrick M. Callan, president of the public-policy center.

The report, "Affordability and Transfer: Critical to Increasing Baccalaureate Degree Completion," is available on the center's [Web site](#).

It notes that over the past 20 years, tuition at public two-year colleges has increased much more rapidly than has the rate of inflation. But the nationwide median family income, when adjusted for inflation, has declined over the last decade.

That combination puts pressure on states to make up the difference in financial aid, but their efforts have been insufficient, the report says. The shortfall shifts the burden back to students, who typically respond by working more hours and taking fewer classes, making it less likely for them to complete any kind of degree.

Such economic pressure disproportionately affects low-income, first-generation, and traditionally underserved minority students, who tend to enroll at community colleges.

Mr. Callan said state policy makers need to focus on improving college affordability to ensure better graduation rates. He said the issue is not a lack of state innovation but rather that the ideas are not scaled-up enough to affect large swaths of students.

The report highlights several states that have made significant progress in streamlining transfer policies, including Florida, New Jersey, Rhode Island, and Washington. All of those states now offer "transfer associate degrees," whose credits are fully accepted toward four-year institutions' general-education requirements. California has also created a transfer-degree program, set to begin this fall, that [guarantees junior status](#) to students who complete the degree and transfer to the California State University system.

"None of this matters, of course, if students can't even afford the two-year college classes," Mr. Callan said.

The report offers several suggestions states can follow to keep tuition affordable, including increasing need-based financial aid and ensuring that tuition and student financial-aid policies do not discourage full-time attendance at two- and four-year colleges.

Mr. Callan said the nation can meet the [college-completion goals](#) set by President Obama and others, including states and nonprofit organizations like the [Lumina Foundation for Education](#). But the "clock is ticking," he said.