

The Chronicle of higher Education, May 18, 2011

To raise educational levels, focus on income-based inequality, report urges

By Jennifer Gonzalez
May 18, 2011

Without more students from low-income and working-class families earning bachelor's degrees, the United States won't meet the Obama administration's college-completion goal, says a new report from the Pell Institute for the Study of Opportunity in Higher Education.

President Obama has set a goal for the United States to have the highest proportion of college graduates in the world by 2020.

The report, "Developing 20/20 Vision on the 2020 Degree Attainment Goal: The Threat of Income-Based Inequality in Education," argues that the "nation's failure to keep pace with other countries in educational attainment among 25- to 34-year-old adults can be largely traced to our inability to adequately educate individuals from families in the bottom half of the income distribution."

If all Americans attained bachelor's degree by age 24 at the same rate as do individuals from the top half of the income distribution, the United States would now have the highest share of bachelor's degree recipients in the world, the report says.

An analysis of 2009 data from the U.S. Census Bureau found that among dependent students from the bottom half of the income distribution, only 12 percent earned a bachelor's degree by age 24. By comparison, 59 percent of those in the top half of the income distribution did so.

The report outlines four policy recommendations to improve degree attainment for low-income and working-class students. They include funneling federal dollars, such as Title I money for schools, to low-income, underperforming students; protecting the Pell Grant program against cuts; and increasing the use of federal college-access and support programs, such as Trio and Gear Up.

The report also calls for the setting and tracking of goals on key educational outcomes related to the 2020 effort so more-informed policy decisions can be made.