



South Carolina 
Commission on Higher Education
Access | Affordability | Excellence

Public Agenda Implementation Plan

February 2021

Introduction

The South Carolina Commission on Higher Education (CHE) in 2017 approved a statewide public agenda for higher education. The 2017 Public Agenda built upon previous CHE strategic plans and identified a broad set of goals and objectives to which the state's system of higher education should strive. Circumstances, however, hampered the CHE's efforts to implement the Public Agenda fully between 2017 and 2019. While some progress has been made toward many of the goals in the Public Agenda, there has been neither a coherent, systematic plan for how to reach these goals nor a set of metrics to chart the trajectory of that progress.

Last fall the CHE partnered with The Hunt Institute and the State Higher Education Executive Officers Association (SHEEO) to convene the South Carolina Higher Education Advisory Committee (HEAC), a bipartisan group of 35 leaders from across the state. HEAC included representatives from the governor's office, the legislature, the business community, philanthropic organizations, presidents, students, and faculty from both the two- and four-year public institutions of higher education, representatives from the independent institution sector, and heads of other state agencies and organizations, among other constituencies. Former South Carolina Governor Jim Hodges chaired three meetings at which a broad range of critical issues in postsecondary education were discussed.

While the HEAC was charged with making recommendations to the CHE that would animate the Public Agenda and move it forward, from the HEAC's deliberations there emerged a broad consensus around the Public Agenda and its objectives. That consensus provides legitimacy to the Public Agenda and secured the "buy-in" needed to pursue and achieve the Public Agenda's objectives.

The HEAC completed its work in February 2020 and drafted a set of recommendations for the CHE's review. The CHE was prepared to review those recommendations in April, but the Covid-19 pandemic hit in full force in late March. Plans were put on hold while the CHE addressed the challenges presented by the outbreak.

The CHE in July favorably received the HEAC's recommendations and directed agency staff to merge the Public Agenda goals and the HEAC recommendations into a strategic implementation plan that would advance postsecondary education in South Carolina. The CHE staff worked to identify and establish strategic timelines and milestones, identify necessary staff and fiscal resources, and develop processes for engaging stakeholders in pursuit of the Public Agenda's objectives. CHE staff planning included an assessment of how to make effective and efficient use of the agency's fiscal resources and staff expertise and strengths. CHE senior staff also sought opportunities to consolidate responsibilities or streamline current practices to empower staff to drive efforts on new initiatives.

Initially, agency senior staff enlisted the assistance of an outside facilitator, but soon transitioned to internal workgroups. One group focused on transitions to postsecondary education, headed by Dr. Karen Woodfaulk, Director of Student Affairs. Another group, led by Dr. John Lane, Director of Academic Affairs, concentrated on postsecondary success. Drs. Woodfaulk and Lane led their groups in developing a prioritized list of strategies, an inventory of actions the CHE can take to support those strategies, and a set of metrics to monitor progress. Each workgroup, as well as directors from other offices, developed detailed work strategies for each initiative or project for which they are responsible.

This implementation plan remains faithful to the objectives contained in the 2017 Public Agenda although senior staff made modifications based on the HEAC's recommendations and the current state of

higher education in South Carolina. Senior staff revised several goals, consolidated other similar goals into a single goal, and added specific tactics, strategies, and initiatives to move the work forward.

This is an organic document, one which will require regular review and, if necessary, modification to address changing circumstances and unforeseen issues. It is not a strategic plan in the traditional sense. Instead, it is a strategic blueprint or roadmap to guide the CHE staff in pursuit of these goals. The workplan for each initiative or project includes timelines, milestones, and target metrics to gauge agency progress and to hold staff accountable to achieving the larger goals the CHE established in the Public Agenda.

The Big Goals

The CHE identified two overarching objectives that provide form and structure to the pursuit of the Public Agenda. The first is increasing postsecondary educational attainment. This goal is not new—it is included in the 2017 Public Agenda (60 percent by 2025)—but now it is a primary focus of the CHE’s work. Senior staff modified the goal slightly: Increase the proportion of South Carolinians with *high-quality* postsecondary credentials to 60 percent by 2030 (rather than 2025). *High-quality* credentials are defined as ones that provide clear pathways to further education, employment, or both.

The second significant objective provides the lens through which all progress must be viewed, planned, and pursued: equity. Achieving equitable educational outcomes is fundamental to increasing educational attainment and the only way the CHE and its partners can achieve the 60 percent goal by 2030. Equity in higher education has a simple premise: One’s life circumstances should not dictate one’s chances of success. In higher education, equity is typically measured by looking at “achievement gaps” among learners based on socioeconomic status, race, ethnicity, gender, or geographic location, among others. The ability to close and eliminate these gaps will determine the success in reaching the 60 percent attainment goal.

Why focus on these two goals? From a functional perspective, both attainment and equity are transcendent topics and overlay most—if not all—of the more narrowly focused initiatives or projects contained in the Public Agenda. Additionally, both must be addressed holistically by maximizing the depth and breadth of coordination, collaboration, and cooperation not only within the CHE but also across the entire system of higher education and among all educational sectors and their partners in government and business.

Today’s knowledge-based society and economy demand citizens with education beyond high school. The Georgetown University Center for Education and the Workforce in 2013 forecasted that by 2020 63 percent of all jobs would require some education beyond high school. The Center now predicts that by 2027 that number will rise to 70 percent of all jobs, with a baccalaureate degree or higher required for about 40 percent of the workforce, about the same as it was in 2018.

According to the Lumina Foundation’s 2020 annual report on national educational attainment, *A Stronger Nation*, 46.8 percent of South Carolina’s working-age population hold a workforce-relevant credential or degree, ranking South Carolina 42nd nationally and well below the national average of 51.3 percent. Among the 17 Southern Region Education Board (SREB) states, South Carolina ranks ninth, below the regional average of 47.9 percent. South Carolina’s future depends in large measure on strengthening its workforce by providing students with the knowledge and skills necessary to succeed in a global economy and instill in them a commitment to lifelong learning and social responsibility.

Increased educational attainment means greater earning potential over one's lifetime; college graduates earn on average about \$1 million additional income over the course of their lifetime than those with a high school diploma. Individuals with postsecondary credentials fare better during periods of economic decline or recession. They also are more likely to have health insurance, better access to health care, and lead longer, healthier lives. In addition, they typically have retirement benefits, more leisure time, better opportunities for their children, and a better standard of living.

Higher levels of education accrue real, tangible benefits to the individual but also to the larger community. Greater educational attainment improves the human condition and imparts real benefits beyond the individual. A democratic society relies on educated citizens who are equipped with critical thinking and reasoning skills to make informed decisions. Civic participation is higher among people with postsecondary credentials, including voting and awareness of issues. It also results in reduced social costs, such as reductions in crime, lower rates of incarceration and recidivism, lower poverty rates, and improved health outcomes.

College graduates are more motivated to vote and participate in activities that have a positive impact on their community. They pay more taxes, rely less on government social programs, and are less likely to be incarcerated. They are more likely to appreciate the arts, engage in activities that promote racial understanding, and possess basic values that are common across racial and ethnic categories. Increasing educational attainment can also address inequities in educational outcomes by closing achievement gaps, which have widened significantly over the past several decades.

Reaching the two major goals is critical to the state's future prosperity. This plan calls for critical new policies, programs, and partnerships to prepare South Carolina for the challenges that lie ahead.

Reporting and Accountability

South Carolina's current education attainment rate, according to the Lumina Foundation, is 46.8 percent. The CHE staff will report to the Commission regularly on the state's progress in increasing educational attainment. One of the challenges in assessing progress in higher education, especially attainment goals, is the data needed to make the assessment is reported infrequently. Institutions report data on graduation rates or degrees awarded at most twice annually. Thus, the CHE staff propose making an annual report to the Commission on the state's progress toward increasing educational attainment and reducing achievement gaps. The CHE staff will report to the Commission periodically on the progress of specific initiatives or projects, at designated meetings or at the request of the Commission.

Public Agenda Implementation Plan

The narrative below provides a general description of specific actions the CHE staff will take to implement fully the Public Agenda. Staff with primary responsibility for each project or initiative have designed or are in the process of designing a plan for launching and completing tasks for which they are responsible.

Pan-Agency Functions: Research and Data

Using data and research is essential both to understand the depth and breadth of challenges and to make sound decisions to address them.

The Office of Research – Data and IT will provide timely, accurate, and insightful research and analysis to support various CHE initiatives. It will also liaise with external stakeholders on data-related needs. Immediate priorities are reports on educational equity, the state of transfer and articulation, and dual enrollment.

Pan-Agency Functions: Communication

Clear and persuasive communication is key to our success.

The Office of Governmental Affairs and Communications will develop a clear and targeted Strategic Communication Plan, with the assistance of external vendors, if necessary. The Strategic Communication Plan will be completed by June 2021. At a minimum it will include strategies to address the following:

- The Completion Agenda and necessary efforts to achieve it
- The Equity Project
- Advocating on behalf of postsecondary education while emphasizing the benefits both to the individual and to the state
- Providing clear information about college in high school opportunities
- Building a “college-going culture” across the state
- Encouraging “on-time completion”
- Engaging adult learners

Pan-Agency Functions: Advocacy

Building and sustaining a consensus in support of the Public Agenda requires nurturing and constant attention.

The Office of the President and Executive Director will advocate on behalf of postsecondary education broadly, and specific goals and objectives when appropriate, with external constituents. These include, but are not limited to, the general public; members of the General Assembly; other state agency leaders; local organizations and groups; professional organizations; and institutional representatives, especially executive leaders, students, and the faculty. The primary goal will be to communicate the value of postsecondary education and the need for South Carolina to invest in students, institutions, and research by focusing on several key principles:

- Today’s knowledge-based society demands a highly educated citizenry. Higher education provides students with the knowledge and skills needed to succeed in a global economy.
- Higher education is both a private benefit—one that contributes to personal

enrichment—and a public good, essential to increased economic opportunity, civic engagement, and a better quality of life for all.

- All South Carolinians must have both the means and the access to pursue a postsecondary education at an institution that best meets their educational goals and needs.
- Basic and applied research, the creation of knowledge, and the application of information to solve problems should be recognized and supported as essential functions of South Carolina’s higher education system.
- The path forward rests in genuine collaboration across all higher education entities in South Carolina and cultivating powerful partnerships with education, business, government, and communities.

The South Carolina Opportunity Project for Equity (SCOPE)

Reducing achievement gaps by at least 75 percent by 2030 is essential to achieving 60 percent educational attainment. The CHE will establish a planning committee and undertake a discrete initiative focused on educational equity; achieving equitable outcomes must be fundamental to all our work.

Led by the Office of the President and Executive Director, in early 2021 we will launch the South Carolina Opportunity Project for Equity (SCOPE), a multiyear effort to reduce and eliminate achievement gaps across socioeconomic standing, race, ethnicity, and geography.

The CHE staff will establish a planning committee to guide the CHE’s work in the initial phase of the SCOPE, including development of the equity report, planning the equity summit, and identifying a path forward to achieve the objectives identified above.

Ensuring Accessibility and Affordability

To reach the 60 percent attainment mark, the CHE will collaborate with its partners to ensure all South Carolinians have both access and the means to complete a postsecondary credential.

The Office of Student Affairs will lead efforts to:

- Secure additional state budget appropriations for state-supported need-based financial aid targeted to South Carolinians most in need.

- According to the SREB'S 2020 South Carolina State Progress Report, only 17 percent of state financial aid is need-based.
- Additionally, according to the 2017-18 NASSGAP Annual Survey Report on State- Sponsored Student Financial Aid, South Carolina ranked 23rd nationally in Need-based Undergraduate Grant Dollars per Undergraduate Fulltime Enrollment with an average of \$385.76/Undergraduate FTE—only 57 percent of the national average.
- Increase FAFSA completions by three percentage points over the next five years, and by five percentage points over the next ten years statewide to ensure South Carolinians receive all federal assistance to which they are entitled.
- Increase participation in College Application Month by three percentage points over the next five years, and by five percentage points over the next ten years.
- Explore other efforts and initiatives designed to create a “college-going culture” across the state.
- Apply for a GEAR UP grant from the U.S. Department of Education.
- Implement processes for the CHE to monitor and report the outcomes of institutional strategies to: 1) increase year-to-year conversions of HOPE to LIFE; 2) increase the year-to-year retention of LIFE awards; and 3) increase retention of Lottery Tuition Assistance recipients through program completion over the next five years.
- Develop “College Access Specialists” in regions across the state.

Reducing Costs

While affordability includes state support for students and institutions, it also includes finding ways to reduce the costs students and families pay for postsecondary education.

The Partnership Among South Carolina Academic Libraries (PASCAL) has worked to reduce textbook costs through open educational resources (OER) and other initiatives. PASCAL will continue this work and seek additional ways to reduce costs.

Public colleges and universities have sought and realized cost savings on their own campuses but there are opportunities to find savings across the state's system of higher education. The Office of the President and Executive Director will convene a blue- ribbon task force to study and find savings across the system.

Taking longer to complete a degree adds to the cost of attendance. Reducing time to degree can also reduce housing and other living expenses; it also gets the student into the workforce—and thus earning money—sooner. The CHE will develop an “on-time completion” public relations campaign to encourage two years for completion of an associate degree and four years to complete a baccalaureate degree. In South Carolina the four-year graduation rate among public institutions is 47.1 percent. The CHE and its partners will strive to raise the four-year graduation rate to 60 percent within the next ten years.

Early college opportunities, such as Advanced Placement (AP) and dual enrollment/dual credit, can bring down the cost of obtaining a postsecondary credential, both through lower-cost tuition and by reducing time to degree. The CHE and its partners will work to increase early college opportunities for all South Carolinians by developing a framework that will demonstrate the quality of early college programs. This framework will facilitate one- to-one transfer of early

college academic credits statewide.

Improving Career- and College-Readiness

Students who are well-prepared for postsecondary education, both academically and emotionally, have high completion rates. The Office of Academic Affairs and Licensing will collaborate with the State Department of Education to improve career- and college-readiness.

Comprehensive Statewide Transfer and Articulation Agreement

Ensuring earned academic credits transfer as equivalents promotes student success and reduces time to degree.

Over the next two years, the Office of Academic Affairs and Licensing, in collaboration with the state's institutions of higher education, develop a comprehensive statewide transfer and articulation framework and agreement to ensure transferable credit toward degree completion in programs of study at South Carolina institutions. This work has already begun. The agreement will:

- Establish a system to provide clear information about the quality, learning goals, and skill sets that are associated with transferrable coursework.
- Develop a transfer library of core courses that transfer as equivalents to all institutions in the state and which fulfill both major and degree requirements at the receiving institution.
- Create a common course numbering system to standardize the courses that provide transferable credit.
- Update and enhance the SC TRAC website to provide clear and helpful information about the transferability of courses and ensure the information is widely accessible for students, families, and other stakeholders.

In addition, the Office of Academic Affairs and Licensing, in collaboration with the state's institutions of higher education, will develop and implement:

- Guidelines for awarding credit for prior experience - the previous learning or life experience of incoming transfer students - providing students with additional credit toward completion of a certificate or degree.
- Guidelines to award academic credit for military service and training.
- A statewide reverse transfer agreement, which allows students who transfer from a two-year institution to a four-year institution to receive an associate degree once students earned enough credits across both institutions.
- A framework for competency-based education.

The Office of Academic Affairs and Licensing will also lead an effort to explore other initiatives that have been successful in improving student learning outcomes. Examples of such initiatives include:

- Replace remedial education with co-requisite courses.
- Study student success rates in gateway mathematics courses and consider implementing a Math Pathways initiative.
- Develop and implement clear, well-defined degree maps and degree pathways.

Adult Learners

A major component in obtaining the 60 percent attainment goal is to engage with adult learners. In South Carolina there are nearly 450,000 people who have some college credits but no credential. Also, according to the SREB'S 2020 South Carolina State Progress Report, 41 percent of South Carolina's working age adults have a high school diploma or less. Affordable access to postsecondary education for adult learners can increase credential attainment significantly.

The CHE will launch a statewide effort aimed at motivating adult learners in their pursuit of postsecondary credentials by creating a clearinghouse of best practice strategies for the following initiatives:

- Establish flexible coursework schedules, sequencing, and course options including courses that are offered on nights and weekends as well as online courses.
- Reform financial aid policies to provide forgiveness to adult learners who have outstanding balances.
- Develop a system to accept transfer courses from incoming adult learner transfer students, including the use of prior learning assessments to quantify previous life experiences.
- Develop advising/coaching support (persistence and college completion counseling) and outreach and marketing campaigns to support and re-engage adult learners.
- Establish childcare options on or near higher education institutions' campuses.
- Engage with adult learners in the military community.
- Ensure existing statewide efforts to review higher education policy; initiatives, such as regional advisory committees, address the concerns of adult learners.

Strengthening the Workforce

One purpose of postsecondary education is to drive economic stability by strengthening the state's workforce. A key pillar of the CHE's pursuit of the Public Agenda is to expand on existing work and find new ways to meet this purpose.

Much of the work required for this goal is outside the direct responsibility and purview of the CHE. The approach will focus on collaboration and coordination with external stakeholders, such as the South Carolina Department of Employment and Workforce and the State Technical College System. The work is crucial, however, and the CHE needs to be engaged fully. An initial strategy will be to establish a full-time staff position dedicated solely to workforce-related initiatives and issues.

That individual will rely on the following agenda to engage with stakeholders:

- Ensure postsecondary education course offerings are aligned with workforce needs and requirements.
- Develop a set of best practices for how higher education leaders can serve as intermediaries that drive the development, implementation, and promotion of youth apprenticeship programs.
- Create guidance on how higher education leaders can develop clearly defined pathways for youth apprenticeship programs to help high school students make informed decisions.
- Articulate clearly certain aspects of youth apprenticeship programs—such as length of program, skills and competencies that will be taught, any costs associated with the program, how college coursework would transfer to different institutions, and

employment outcomes of program graduates. This information will allow students and their families to make smart choices about which pathway would best fit their needs.

- Author recommendations to further integrate youth apprenticeship programs into statewide policies regarding the transition between high school and higher education.
- Revise current funding structures for college in high school programs to include incentives for higher education institutions and high school leaders who seek to scale youth apprenticeship programs.
- Seek external grant opportunities focused on the intersection between higher education and the workforce.
- Expand current statewide initiatives, such as the South Carolina Department of Employment and Workforce's "Be Pro, Be Proud" campaign.