

## The State of Post-Secondary Attainment in Iowa

Matt Romkey  
*Mercy College of Health Sciences*

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### ABSTRACT

By 2025, 70% of Iowa’s jobs will require education or training beyond high school. Despite significant attention and commitment of taxpayers’ dollars, the latest reports suggest these efforts will result in a significant shortcoming of qualified workers in the workforce. Post-secondary attainment in Iowa has a disparate impact on non-White students, a disparity that has been compounded by COVID-19. This gap between employer needs and workforce talent could put Iowa at a disadvantage to compete in a new global knowledge economy.

**Keywords:** higher education, Iowa, post-secondary attainment, workforce development

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In 2015, Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce (Georgetown Center), in collaboration with the Office of the Governor of Iowa, published *Iowa: Education and Workforce Trends through 2025* (Carnevale et al., 2015). This pivotal publication built upon workforce growth anticipated in Iowa’s 12 distinct industry clusters identified in *Iowa’s Re-Envisioned Economic Development Roadmap* (Battelle Technology Partnership Practice, 2014). The Georgetown Center report, which was commissioned specifically for the state, was designed to ensure Iowa’s “long-term education goals and workforce development needs align with the state’s economic development goals” and was designed to “inform postsecondary institutions and K-12 schools of the enrollment, completion, and graduation objectives necessary to fill potential job positions” (Carnevale et al., 2015, p. 8).

The outcome of the analysis by the Georgetown Center found that 68% of jobs in Iowa will require education and training beyond high school, three percentage points above the national average of 65% (Carnevale et al., 2015). For comparison,

in 1973, only 28% of U.S. jobs required education beyond a high school diploma (Future Ready Iowa, 2016). In 2016, the Lumina Foundation published *A Stronger Nation, Policy Brief* that was designed to implore policy leaders to respond urgently to the education attainment gap of our nation. At that time, 26 states had responded by setting “attainment goals that meet Lumina’s criteria for and efficacy (i.e., the goal is quantifiable, challenging, long term, addresses gaps, and is in statute and/or a strategic plan)” (Lumina Foundation, 2016, p. 1). However, despite the reports finding that Iowa’s overall postsecondary attainment rate was 47.3% compared to the 68% determined to be needed by 2025, Iowa had not set a goal that met Lumina’s criteria.

In 2016, Iowa Governor Terry Branstad signed Executive Order 88 creating the Future Ready Iowa Alliance, designed to develop a plan to meet Iowa’s goal of having 70% of the workforce obtain education or training beyond high school by the year 2025. The Future Ready Iowa initiative developed out of a 2014 National Governors Association grant to “develop strategies to improve the education and training attainment” (Future Ready Iowa, 2016, p. 1). The Alliance’s strategic plan was presented in October of 2017 and outlined plans to increase postsecondary attainment. Acknowledging that more than two out of three jobs in Iowa are anticipated to require at least some postsecondary education or training by 2025, the Alliance was prepared to “highlight best practices, nurture high-quality partnerships, and ensure hardworking taxpayer dollars were focused on areas that will maximize progress towards the goal” (Future Ready Iowa, 2016, p. 1).

The Alliance outlined benchmarks including targets to reduce the socioeconomic, ethnic, and racial achievement gaps, and completion rates by traditional-age students and adult learners. These targets were designed to align postsecondary degrees, certificates, and other credentials with high-demand jobs. Mirroring other national trends, Iowans with higher post-secondary attainment earn significantly more than those without. Iowans with a high school diploma earned an average \$35,000 annual income between 2013 and 2015. The average jumps to \$42,000 for an associate degree and increases to \$60,015 for a bachelor’s degree (Future Ready Iowa, 2017).

The 2017 *Future Ready Iowa Talent Scorecard* revealed progress was being made between the Lumina Foundation’s report and the presentation of the Alliance’s strategic plan. In 2016, 58.1% of Iowa’s had postsecondary attainment, up from 47.3% in 2014 (Future Ready Iowa, 2017). While this short-term progress is significant, it is worth noting that two different statistical methods were used to calculate the current attainment percentage. The Lumina Foundation (2016) identified an “estimated percentage of state residents who have earned high-value postsecondary certificates... derived from census and the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System and by labor market experts at Georgetown Center” (p. 1).

In 2016, the Alliance elected to use the Laborshed Survey to determine educational and training attainment levels. “The 2016 estimate of the number of Iowans age 25 to 64 in the labor force with education beyond high school is calculated by multiplying the estimated percentage of those 25 to 64 years of age who completed education or training beyond high school based on the 2016 Laborshed Survey (58.1%) and an estimate of the total number of Iowans ages 25 to 64 in the labor force

(1,303,979) based on the 2015 American Community Survey” (Future Ready Iowa, 2017, p. 34). This is the first time these data have been used and they should be considered as a baseline to measure future postsecondary attainment change.

These data points highlight the significant remaining gap of 127,700 Iowans who will need to earn postsecondary degrees or credentials to meet the 70% target by 2025. Those individuals are divided into three categories: 41,200 additional traditional-age students who earn degrees or credentials, 35,200 additional degrees or credentials earned by returning adult students who did not complete a degree or credential, and 51,3000 additional degrees or other credentials earned by adults between the ages of 25 and 64 with no recognized post-secondary education (Future Ready Iowa, 2017). These categories should provide a roadmap for developing post-secondary education offerings targeted to meet these individual learner’s unique characteristics and needs.

In 2019, a less comprehensive *Metrics that Matter Future Ready Iowa* report utilizing the Laborshed baseline was published containing a somber assessment on the current progress of the state’s trajectory towards achieving their goal (Iowa Workforce Development, 2019a). “If Iowans earn postsecondary credentials at current rates, only 60.7% will fall into this category by 2025” (Future Ready Iowa, 2019a, p. 2). As a result of this significant projected shortcoming, on June 3, 2019, Iowa Governor Kim Reynolds signed into law H.F. 758, H.F. 546, and S.F. 608, which, combined, established \$16 million in funding for the Future Ready Iowa Act.

Thirteen million dollars were utilized to establish the Last-Dollar Scholarship Program. This scholarship was deployed to cover the cost of tuition not covered by other federal and state grants or scholarships for eligible Iowa residents seeking post-secondary credentials in high-demand, well-paying jobs that require up to a two-year degree. One million dollars were reserved to establish the Future Ready Iowa Grant program which is designed to support Iowans who left college after earning at least half the credits toward a four-year degree in a high-demand field, and who return to complete their degree with a minimum of \$1,000 for tuition support (Office of the Governor of Iowa, 2019a).

Finally, \$1.2 million was used to establish the Future Ready Iowa Employer Innovation Fund, which is a grant opportunity for employers and other partners to collaborate and carry out innovative, creative initiatives to address local workforce issues (Office of the Governor of Iowa, 2019a). In the fall of 2019, more than 5,800 Iowa students received funding through the Future Ready Iowa Last-Dollar Scholarship, awarding more than half of the \$13 million appropriated by the Iowa Legislature in just its first semester available (Office of the Governor of Iowa, 2019b). This increased commitment by the Iowa Legislature to the Future Ready Iowa goals resulted in an increase in Iowa’s postsecondary educational attainment from 57.6% in 2018 to 60.2% in 2019 (Iowa Workforce Development, 2019b).

While these initiatives show promising progress, nobody was prepared for the fallout on college enrollment from the Coronavirus pandemic and how dramatically it would setback state and national postsecondary education attainment targets. Nationally, first-time freshman enrollment is down 13% and enrollment for adult learners aged 30 or older declined at twice the rate of their traditional age counterparts (23.9% versus 12%), and significant declines occurred in enrollment from minority populations, Native American (29.3%), Black (28.4%), and Hispanic students

(27.5%) (National Student Clearinghouse, 2020). In the fall of 2020, the Midwest's undergraduate enrollment was the hardest hit in the country where total enrollment is down 5.7% (Sedmak, 2020). Iowa alone suffered a decrease of 7.1% of total undergraduates compared to the fall of 2019 (National Student Clearinghouse, 2020). These enrollment declines may never be combatted without significant state and national policies putting not only Iowa's Future Ready Iowa targets in jeopardy, but our entire country at risk of being outpaced in response to the future of a global knowledge economy.

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**Matt Romkey**, serves as the Executive Vice President and Chancellor at a health science college in Iowa. He is currently earning his doctorate in leadership and innovation at Arizona State University. His research centers around deploying alternative learning pathways for adult learners and increasing access to education. Email: [matt.romkey@gmail.com](mailto:matt.romkey@gmail.com)

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