

New England 2025

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This annual “Trends & Indicators” issue of *NEJHE* tracks some long-simmering challenges facing New England higher education, such as high prices, low state investment and still-mighty, but slowed, research funding. Recent economic events have added to the uncertainty. The challenges and uncertainty require leaders of higher education, government and business to forge a strategic and long-term vision for institutional and workforce success.

First, states need specific goals and a more precise definition of success in terms of higher education performance. The New England states have typically exceeded the national average in the percentage of individuals with an associate degree or higher. Yet projections show that the New England states are poised to have shrinking levels of postsecondary attainment, based on very low overall population growth, projected decreases in the number of high school graduates, out-migration and other factors.

Moreover, growth prospects for New England’s workforce will increasingly depend on minorities, working adults, first-generation college-goers and students from low-income families. Yet the opportunity and ability of such groups to access and obtain postsecondary credentials, and to participate meaningfully in the region’s economy is in question. Without significant changes, New England will continue to have the lowest rate of workforce growth in the United States, as it has over the past 15 years.

While the United States ranks first internationally in the percentage of 55- to 64-year-olds holding a college degree, we rank 10th in the percentage of young adults holding a college degree—one of only two industrialized

nations where older adults are more educated than younger ones. To regain its leadership role internationally, the nation would have to increase the number of degrees granted by 14.5 million over the next 15 years.

For New England, that would mean generating 665,000 additional college degrees by 2025, or 41,500 more degrees each year. That increase would have to occur despite having 20,000 fewer high school graduates during the same period due to demographic shifts.

This is not breaking news. New England leaders of education and government frequently talk about the importance of increasing the number of degree holders to remain competitive. Yet only one New England state has set specific statewide targets.

Maine has proposed a measurable statewide goal for increasing the percentage of adults (ages 25 to 64) who have a college degree, which will require an additional 39,500 degree holders beyond the projected or “natural” growth rate by 2019. To its credit, Maine has identified several key policy and programmatic changes to achieve the goal and stands out among the New England states for its leadership and sustained effort.

Each New England state needs specific goals relative to increasing attainment and educating new degree holders. This will require building a shared understanding as to how a state produces degree holders and which aspects of production are most critical. It entails data-driven analysis of K-12 and higher education performance, demographic projections, migration patterns and peer comparisons (regional, national and international) to move from general aspirations to specific plans, strategies and results.

Clearer goals and better data can bring a more realistic assessment of state and institutional capacity for degree production—and at a vital time. With recent and substantial losses in the personal net worth of families, including home values and retirement accounts, the demand for public higher education will continue to grow. Add to that the desperate need to increase participation of adult, low-income and minority students—populations who have typically accessed higher education through low-cost public institutions.

The six New England states must learn to be more innovative, efficient and productive in increasing the number of postsecondary degree holders. New England *must be goal- and data-driven and work smarter* to increase degree attainment, particularly for underrepresented populations.

Technology must play a key role as states look at revised academic calendars, innovative program formats, new course delivery options, investments in distance learning and college programs integrated with the senior year of high school and with adult learning. We’ll also need a significant re-envisioning of the role of the region’s two-year institutions, where an expanded amount of degree production will have to match the current surge in applications.

As a colleague recently reminded me, “Never waste a good crisis.” Despite present and daily challenges, now is the time to more fully define where higher education in New England is going—and find new, bold and realistic avenues to get us there.

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