



AMERICAN
TALENT
INITIATIVE

Five Strategies to Advance Progress

2023 ANNUAL REPORT OF THE AMERICAN TALENT INITIATIVE

Acknowledgments

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Preface

When talent rises, our communities, democracy, economy, and nation thrive. Yet, too often, hard-working and talented young people from low- and moderate-income families do not have the opportunity to fuel their talents to reach their greatest heights.

That's why, in 2016, with the support of Bloomberg Philanthropies, dozens of college and university presidents united to form the American Talent Initiative (ATI). The membership represented many types of institutions—private, public, large, small, rural, and urban—all with strong track records of graduating students and launching them into successful lives. Together, members committed to a shared purpose: substantially increasing the number of low- and moderate-income students enrolled at the institutions with the highest graduation rates. And because rich talent is present in every zip code of our nation, their institutions would be better and stronger for it.

Seven years on, their commitment endures. We see evidence of real success: Many ATI members have increased lower-income student enrollment, and a newly refined set of strategies is showing signs of turning around pandemic losses. In the early years of the initiative, nearly 70 percent of members increased their enrollment of lower-income students, for a cumulative increase of 15,026 students. In 2020, however, the COVID-19 pandemic profoundly disrupted higher education, disproportionately harming lower-income communities and reducing enrollment of lower-income students in high schools and colleges nationwide. While this crisis slowed the cumulative progress of ATI institutions, it also provided valuable lessons we used to inform our strategies and commitments going forward.

As this report describes, we developed five major strategies for the next stage of our work to increase opportunities for lower-income students at leading institutions. First, and most important, as a condition of membership in ATI, we asked each president to commit to specific, aspirational enrollment goals for their institution. Second, we developed a new “high-flier” program to recognize institutions making the greatest progress and to promote replication of their efforts. Third, we are strategizing with institutions about ways to increase their investments in need-based financial aid. Fourth, we are helping institutions increase enrollment of community college transfer students. And fifth, we are supporting institutions as they implement wrap-around services that promote student achievement and success.

We are encouraged by preliminary data from fall 2023 that show a cumulative addition of 18,100 low-income students among 137 member colleges and universities (three have not yet submitted data). This positive direction indicates to our steering committee these strategies are working, and we believe they offer critical accountability and support for ATI's 140 colleges and universities as they work to expand opportunity for thousands more lower-income students.

We thank the member presidents for their enduring commitment to our shared goals. And we are deeply grateful to our partners at Bloomberg Philanthropies, the Wilpon Family Foundation, and the presidents who serve on the ATI Steering Committee for their ongoing support and leadership. We look forward to working together in this next chapter of the American Talent Initiative.

Overview

Early Years of ATI

Since 2016, the American Talent Initiative (ATI) has organized and supported colleges and universities to help them substantially expand opportunity for high-achieving low- and moderate-income students at the institutions with the highest graduation rates.

The colleges and universities that have joined the ATI vary considerably. They are private and public; small, medium, and large; and focus on a variety of educational missions that include research, the liberal arts, and professional education. They span 32 states and serve nearly 1.6 million students.

Several key assumptions informed the launch of ATI in 2016:

- 1. The Talent Is Out There:** A large number of talented students—in high schools, community colleges, and beyond—are prepared to succeed at leading colleges but, for various reasons, do not apply or enroll.¹
- 2. Institutional Change Is Possible:** Colleges and universities with high graduation rates can grow their financial aid budgets to attract, enroll, and support more of these students. Many proved this possible in the years leading up to ATI's formation.
- 3. Institutions Can Accomplish More Together:** It is valuable for college and university leaders to share what is working so they can compete not against each other, but together, to increase opportunity at high-graduation-rate institutions.
- 4. Exemplary Leadership May Create A Multiplier Effect:** Those who joined our project could expand their impact beyond their campuses by influencing leaders of other high-performing institutions to contribute to this national imperative.

Based on these assumptions, ATI launched with a collective goal: By 2025, catalyze the enrollment of at least 50,000 more highly talented, low- and moderate-income students across the 350+ institutions potentially eligible for ATI (those with at least a 70 percent six-year graduation rate). The goal was designed as a call to action—a unifying, measurable expression of our national aspiration and mission. Members were asked to do their part individually and were encouraged—but not required—to set institution-level goals.

Since 2016, 140 colleges and universities have joined ATI. Over the years, members have participated in numerous communities of practice and professional development opportunities. They have tracked their data, researched effective practices, and learned from each other about what gets results and what does not.

During the first few years, we witnessed substantial progress toward the goal among our members. The result: 15,026 additional lower-income students enrolled between 2015 and 2019 at about 137 ATI institutions. In comparison, those eligible colleges and universities that did not join ATI lost ground, with 1,698 fewer lower-income students enrolled across the roughly 200 nonmembers (Appendix I Figure 1).

The Pandemic Years

In 2020, the pandemic led to significant declines in enrollment and retention of lower-income students in high schools and across higher education (see Appendix I Figure 2). The cumulative progress of ATI institutions suffered as a result (see Appendix I

¹ Hoxby, Caroline, and Avery, Christopher. (2013). The Missing “One-Offs”: The Hidden Supply of High-Achieving, Low-Income Students. *Brookings Papers on Economic Activity*.

Figure 1). Yet, even in the face of crisis, a majority of ATI members (74) increased lower-income student enrollment between fall 2019 and fall 2021. Of those institutions, 27 had low Pell shares (below 15 percent) and the most room for improvement. And while many ATI institutions (66) experienced declines in lower-income student enrollment, it slid faster and further at nonmember institutions (see Appendix I Figure 2).

In the wake of these disruptions, ATI's steering committee, co-managing partners The Aspen Institute and Ithaca S+R, and Bloomberg Philanthropies took into consideration lessons from ATI members who continued to make progress during the pandemic. That led us in 2021 to ask the 132 ATI members at the time to recommit to their fundamental goals of substantially increasing opportunities for low- and moderate-income students by making commitments to specific, aspirational enrollment goals. Nearly all—125—did so and remained members. Since then, 15 additional institutions have joined ATI and committed to specific goals as well.

Our single greatest lesson learned through the pandemic was that success comes when college and university presidents: 1) make ATI's core goals among their top priorities and monitor progress toward those goals; and 2) charge their institutions to develop and execute clear plans to strengthen access, success, and affordability for low- and moderate-income students. We also learned both the benefits and limitations of setting a national goal of enrolling more low- and moderate-income students across all high-graduation-rate institutions. For the 140 that joined ATI, the 50,000 goal served initially as a galvanizing focal point, but it probably did not motivate the 200+ institutions that chose not to join. Now, our focus is on our members and helping the institutions that have committed to this work sustain and grow their efforts to serve low-income students.

ATI Today

Preliminary data from 2023 shows member colleges and universities are living up to these commitments. Of 137 members that have submitted data, 90 have met or are making progress towards their ATI goals. Another 19 institutions have experienced declines but continue to maintain Pell shares well above their sector averages, while 28 have not made progress or are declining. After drops in the pandemic years, ATI members added 8,163 additional low-income students from fall 2022 to fall 2023. Of particular note: **Since our 2016 beginning, ATI institutions have enrolled an additional 18,100 Pell students.**

Looking forward, the American Talent Initiative will focus its efforts on member institutions that have made strong and clear commitments to enrolling and supporting more low-income students. We will emphasize five core strategies:

American Talent Initiative: Strategy Roadmap

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I
Expect institutions to commit to individual goals and accountability
- 

II
Celebrate and increase number of institutions that are succeeding
- 

III
Equip institutions with strategies to increase need-based financial aid
- 

IV
Help institutions increase the number and success of community college transfers
- 

V
Support innovative efforts and wrap-around services to increase student success

ATI Members Prove It: Commitment Matters

Even with the disruptions of the pandemic, ATI members have made more progress than ATI-eligible nonmembers.

Figure 1A: Additional Pell Students Across ATI-Eligible Members and Nonmembers Since 2015

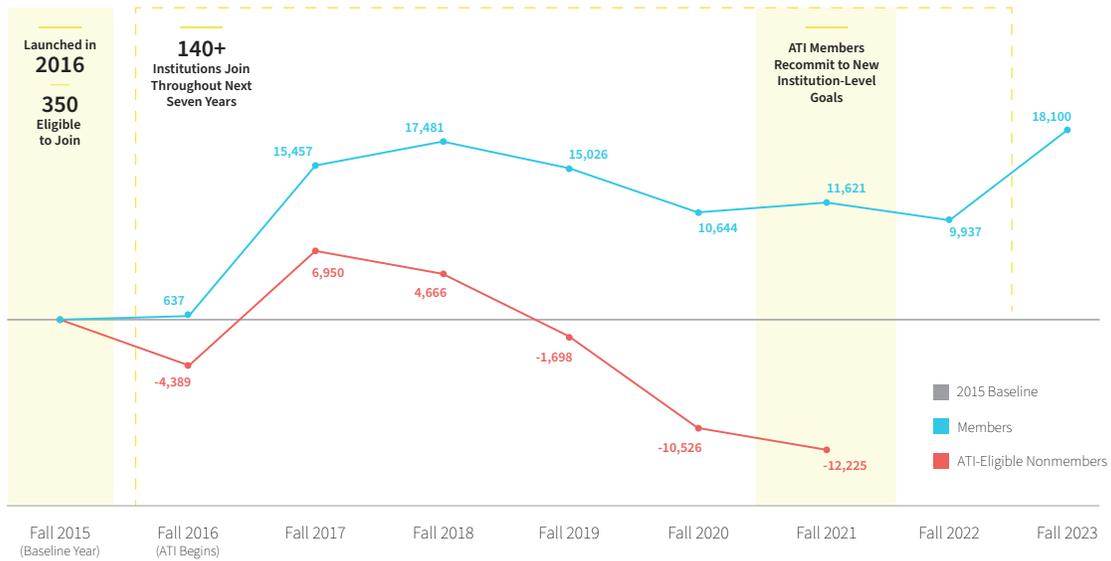
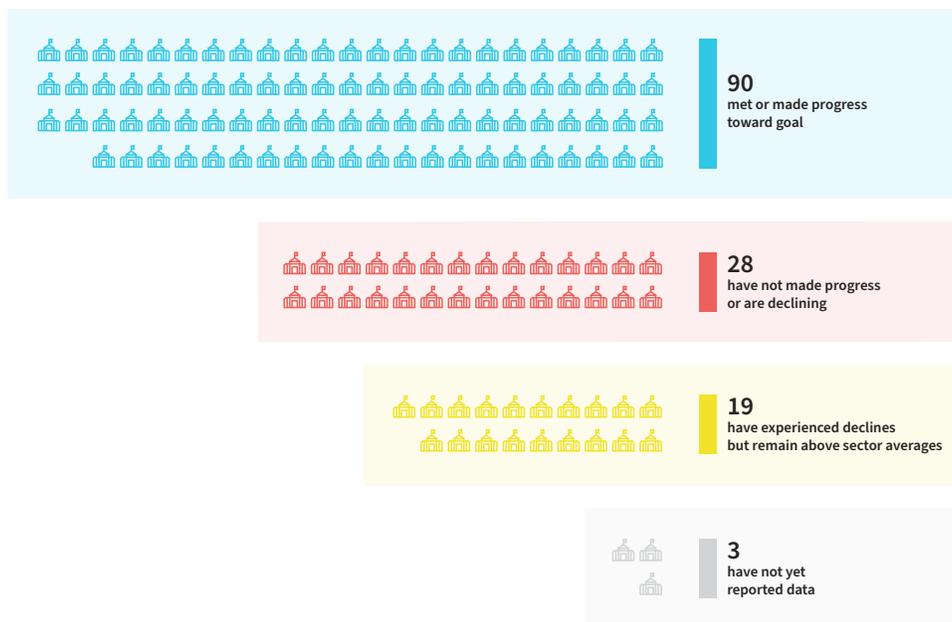


Figure 1B: Most ATI Members Are Meeting The Goal



ATI's Five Core Strategies in Detail



I. Expect institutions to commit to individual goals and accountability

In the summer of 2021, ATI launched the Accelerating Opportunity campaign, which—for the first time—made presidential commitment to institutional goals for lower-income student enrollment a condition of membership. As of January 2024, 140 institutions have committed to the Accelerating Opportunity campaign, which means setting one of three goals based on their pre-pandemic enrollment:

- Institutions with a lower-income student enrollment share below 15 percent are aiming for an ambitious goal between **15 and 20 percent by 2025** or an equally ambitious increase in the number of lower-income students by 2025.
- Institutions with a lower-income student enrollment share between 15 and 20 percent are aiming to make measurable progress toward a **20 percent share of lower-income student enrollment** or an equally ambitious increase in the number of lower-income students by 2025.
- Institutions with a lower-income student enrollment share above 20 percent are aiming to at least **maintain opportunity for lower-income students at current levels**, if not expand enrollment, by 2025.

All members, regardless of lower-income share, aim to minimize disparities in graduation rates for lower-income students. Moving forward, ATI will continue to measure progress based on the gains members make toward their Accelerating Opportunity campaign goals.

Fall 2022 marked the first year ATI could track the impact of our new approach. That year, among ATI's 140 members, **76 either made progress toward or met their goals** (Figure 2A shared

in red and blue, respectively), and **27 continued to outperform their sector's average Pell share** (Figure 2A shaded in light gray). That left 34 members (shaded in dark gray) that had not yet made progress and three members that had not yet reported data.

By fall 2023, when the Accelerating Opportunity goals were in place for enough time that we would expect to see an effect, we saw improvements, with **90 colleges and universities meeting or making progress toward their goals** (Figure 2B shaded in red and blue) and **19 continuing to outperform their sector's average Pell share** (shaded in light gray in 2B). That left 28 members that had not yet made progress (shaded in dark gray) and three members that have yet to report data. Altogether, **137 members added a cumulative 8,163 low-income students over the prior year**. We are most encouraged by the recovery of members with high Pell shares, demonstrating their commitment to being engines of opportunity for those farthest from it.

Each year, ATI provides members with confidential, individual data reports that benchmark progress toward their goals and their performance against that of their peers. ATI uses the data to identify members experiencing persistent declines, with whom we discuss challenges and possible solutions. For some, these conversations have been followed by members exiting the initiative. ATI also uses these data reports to identify institutions that have made notable progress toward their goals or maintained high performance. ATI researches their strategies and incorporates lessons into our communities of practice and professional development opportunities.

Figure 2A: Institutions' Accelerating Opportunity Progress (2019-20 to 2022-23)

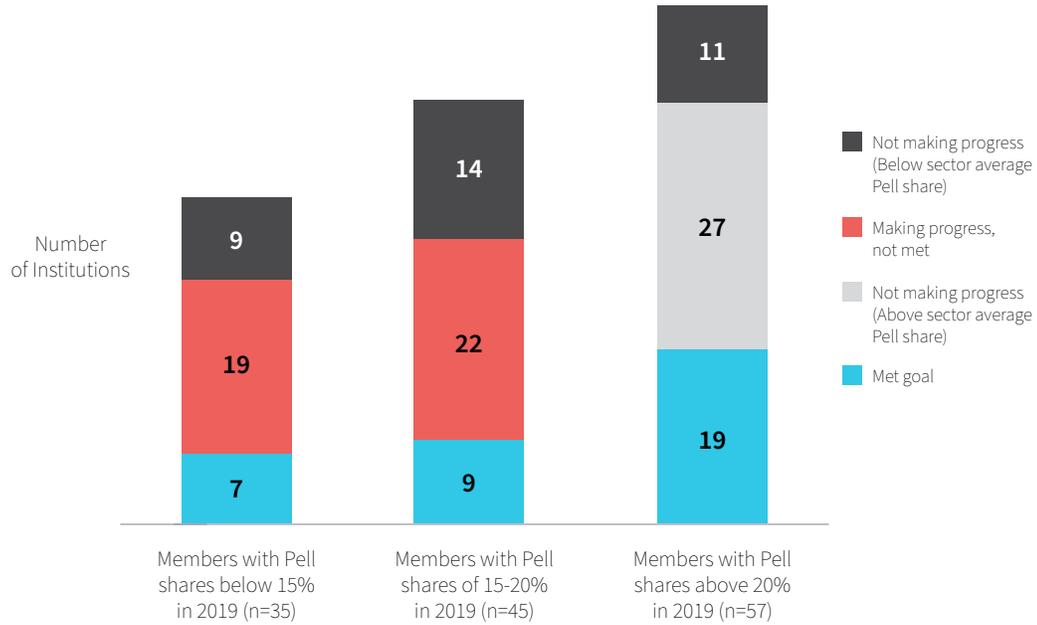


Figure 2B: Institutions' Accelerating Opportunity Progress (2019-20 to 2023-24)

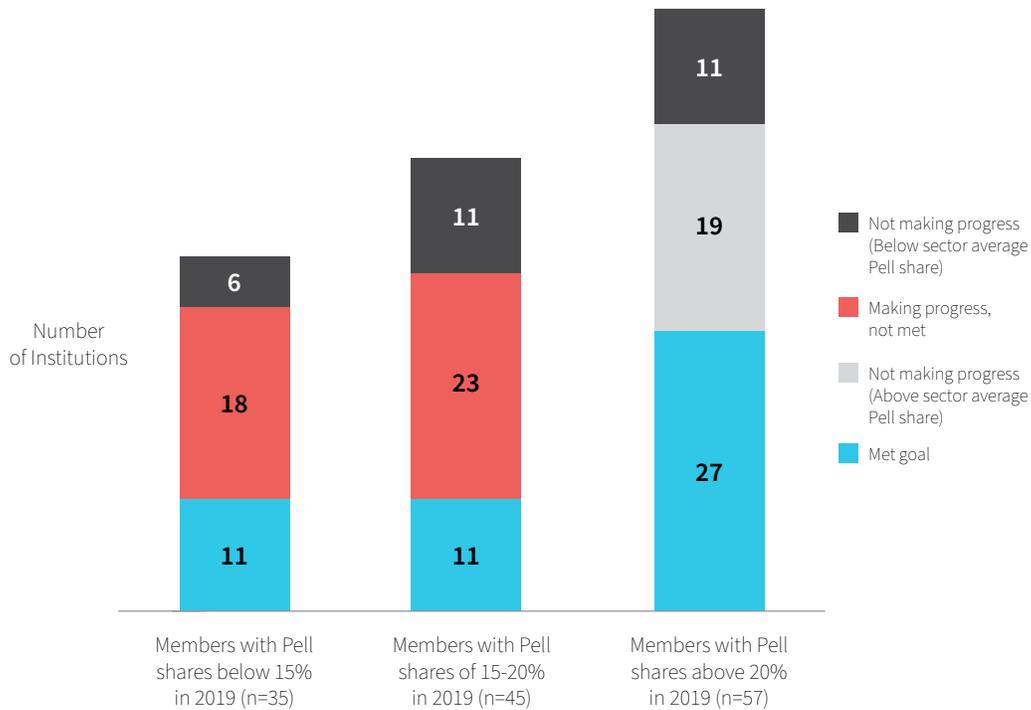




Photo credit:
University of Dayton



II. Celebrate and increase the number of institutions that are succeeding

Of the 76 members that made progress toward or met their goals in fall 2022 (Figure 2A), 28 made exemplary progress, including public and private, large and small, and rural and urban members. Their success was especially notable: At a time when most of higher education was experiencing widespread declines in lower-income student enrollment, these colleges and universities maintained the highest Pell shares in the initiative or demonstrated the fastest rate of growth.

These high-performing ATI members show what can be achieved at all types of institutions with prioritization and targeted approaches. We found their success resulted from substantial investments in need-based financial aid, evidence-based programs to increase student success, and new recruitment approaches and outreach pipelines. Each made ATI goals a priority and invested their time and their institution's resources in the effort.

We recognized these 28 institutions as “high-fliers” in May 2023, and continue to tell their stories (see Appendix II for a list of institutions). We aim to support the presidents of these colleges and universities in sustaining these efforts and in building enthusiasm and support across key constituencies (e.g., students, faculty, staff, alumni, boards of trustees, and community partners) to ensure ATI goals remain institutional priorities.

ATI expects the number of high-fliers to increase as we cultivate more presidential champions and catalyze additional innovations in institutional practice. How? In the last two years, ATI has engaged 26 first-time presidents in a series of intensive convenings to develop and refine a vision for achieving their ATI goals. ATI also hosted 42 presidents across three topic-based presidential communities of practice to identify institutional strategies and practical tools that advance ATI goals. This year, ATI will launch the \$5 million IDEAS (Innovation Driven by Evidence-Based and Advanced Strategies) Fund and support four communities of practice focused on (1) robust transfer partnerships between community colleges and public institutions; (2) transfer pathways and student supports at private institutions; (3) targeted early outreach and admissions to underserved student populations; and (4) recruitment from credit-bearing online courses delivered in low-income, community-serving high schools. Community participants will design initiatives within these four topic areas that would accelerate progress toward their ATI goals, and they will submit their ideas to compete for \$250,000 to \$500,000 grants.

ATI will continue to celebrate the current crop of high-fliers and elevate more in the future.



III. Equip institutions with strategies to increase need-based financial aid

One of the keys to enrolling more lower-income students at ATI colleges and universities is to increase financial aid. While the ATI members with the largest endowments can afford to provide financial aid without loans, most lack the resources to do so.

In response, ATI is supporting members in creating strategies to expand need-based financial aid. One strategy is to shift more financial aid resources to need-based aid. National data show that in very selective and moderately selective institutions—representing the vast majority of ATI institutions—only 3 percent of the students with the highest

financial need have their needs met, and only 24 percent of the students with the next-highest need have their financial needs met (see Appendix I Figure 3). Meanwhile, 27 percent of students from wealthier families are receiving more financial aid than financial-aid calculations suggest they need to afford college.

ATI will conduct additional research on need-based financial aid and strategic finance.² We also will develop practical analytic tools for college presidents to use alongside research to facilitate conversations with their boards of trustees and senior teams about increasing investments in need-based aid on their campuses. All four IDEAS Fund communities of practice will include a focus on affordability.

² Brown, J., & Kurzweil, M. (2017, February 15). Funding Socioeconomic Diversity at High Performing Colleges and Universities. <https://doi.org/10.18665/sr.294278>



Photo credit:
Michelle Hassel
University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign



Photo credit:
University of California, Irvine



IV. Help institutions build new pipelines and success strategies for community college transfers

Community college students are underrepresented at ATI institutions (see Appendix I Figure 4). The absence is especially pronounced among lower-income students, who comprise the majority of community college students.³ This underrepresentation is not due to a lack of talent or achievement. ATI's research shows that at least 50,000 lower-income community college students each year have the academic credentials to transfer and thrive at ATI institutions—but do not make the jump to any four-year college or university. They face challenges of affordability, lost academic credit, and more.

ATI institutions of all stripes are being supported in substantially expanding opportunities for community college transfer students. During the

pandemic, higher education lost 700,000 community college students.⁴ Our analysis suggests nearly 60 percent of them were Pell-eligible (see Appendix I Figure 2 for percent decline in Pell enrollment by sector). Undoubtedly, this decline contributed to the 15.5 percent drop in lower-income transfer students among ATI members between fall 2019 and fall 2023. Yet, even with these historic declines, ATI transfer initiatives prove that talented students are still out there.⁵ The goal of our work is to remove longstanding institutional barriers to transfer and replace them with systems that fully develop the talent of thousands of community college students every year. That is why ATI has elevated transfer in convenings with presidents and senior leaders; invested in members with large transfer populations recovering from the pandemic (see Appendix III for a list of Accelerating Transfer Grants); developed communities of practice on transfer through the IDEAS Fund; and launched the Transfer Scholars Network.

³ Community College FAQs by the Community College Research Center: <https://ccrc.tc.columbia.edu/community-college-faqs.html>

⁴ ATI Analysis of IPEDS data, all undergraduate students in community colleges (n=1040), fall 2019 vs. fall 2021.

⁵ The Transfer Scholars Network has identified hundreds of lower-income community college students—from a small but growing number of community colleges—who have the credentials to thrive at highly competitive private institutions. Read more at: <https://transferscholars.org/>



V. Support innovative efforts and wrap-around services to increase student success.

ATI members demonstrate exceptionally high retention and graduation rates that are well above the national average, especially for Pell students. Nevertheless, our latest data show Pell student graduation rates four percentage points lower than the student body average at ATI institutions. As part of their ATI goals, each member has committed to minimize this gap (if it exists) by raising graduation rates for low-income students. The pandemic made this more challenging, as retention rates overall dipped slightly, from 91.2 percent to 89.7 percent between 2019 and 2021.

In addition, our members have made clear that reaching ATI goals will require placing more emphasis on lower-income student success in the classroom, inclusion in campus communities,

and participation in key high-impact experiences like internships and research. That is why ATI has invested in two major initiatives to increase support for low-income students. First, since 2019, ATI has co-hosted the Institute on Expanding Opportunities for All Students, which supports members in developing teaching and learning strategies that aim to achieve strong outcomes for all students. Second, with support from Bloomberg Philanthropies and the Wilpon Family Foundation, 10 ATI members each received \$1 million in grants to join the Kessler Scholars Collaborative, a network of institutions propelling first-generation students to success through cohort-based programming, dedicated support staff, and peer mentoring. Together, these 10 ATI members will enroll and graduate 400 additional first-generation students from lower-income backgrounds. We will elevate lessons and strategies from the Kessler Scholars Collaborative that the membership can adopt to advance widespread student success.



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Baruch College

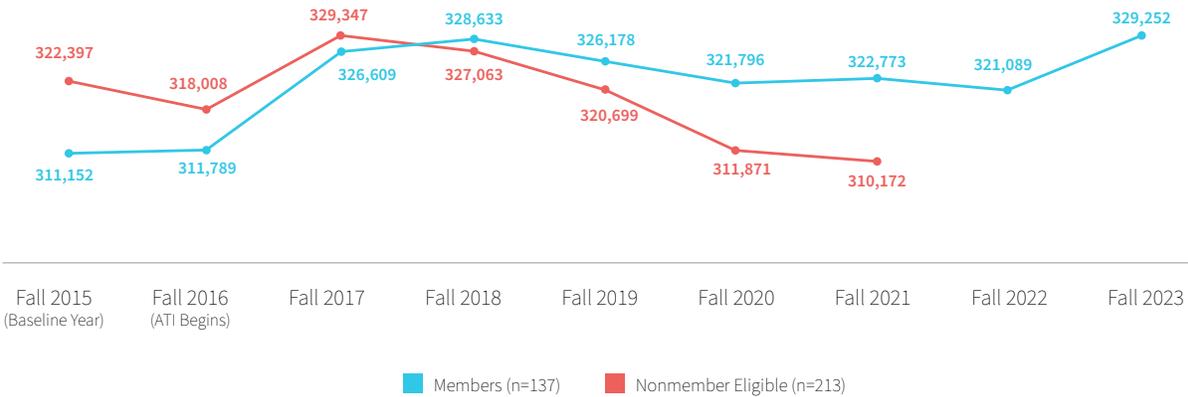
Looking Ahead

When ATI began, we could not have imagined how deeply its mission would resonate: Membership has grown from 30 founding members in 2016 to 140 today. And while not every member has made progress, most have. Today, as colleges and universities grapple with the aftereffects of the pandemic's enormous disruptions to higher education and low-income communities, the recommitment of member college presidents to increasing the number of low-income students at their institutions is working. ATI's mission remains vital, and the resolve of our members is strong.

Each ATI member has committed to specific institutional goals, which ATI will use to assess progress. And ATI's five-part strategy is the means to increase opportunities for low- and moderate-income students. We know great progress can be made because those five strategies animate ATI's high-flier members—they have created pathways to progress, led by committed presidents and guided by strong institutional plans. With their examples in mind, we are hopeful that progress across the entire membership is within reach.

Appendix I

Figure 1: Collective Progress Across ATI Members and ATI-Eligible Nonmembers, Pell Enrollment, 2015–2023*



*Nonmember data is available via IPEDS. The most recent year of published data is for the 2021-2022 academic year.

Figure 2: Percent Decline in Pell Enrollment During the Pandemic by Higher Education Sector, Fall 2019 vs. 2021

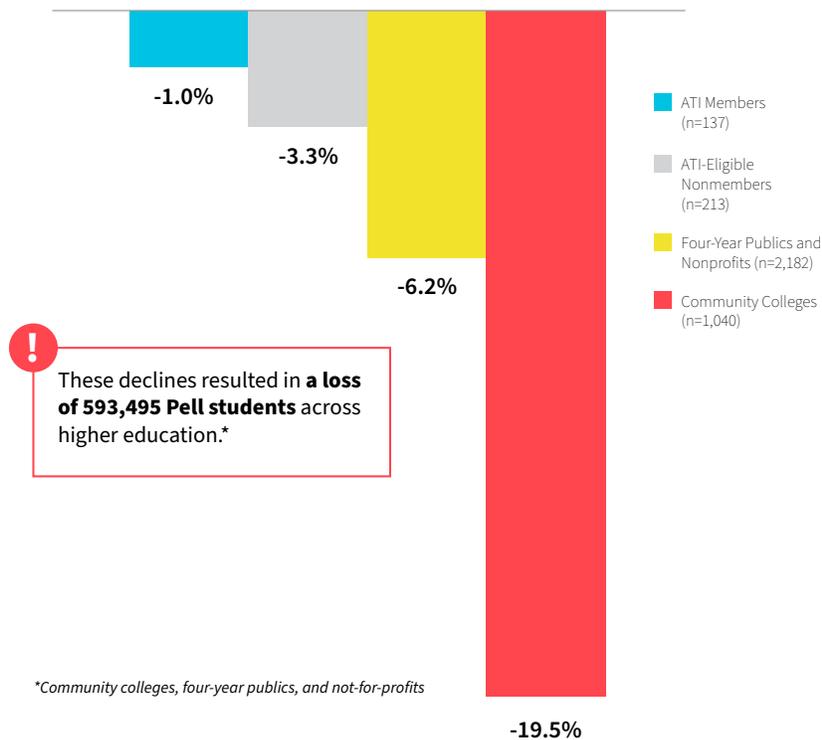


Figure 3: Remaining Financial Need After Aid by Expected Family Contribution
 (i.e., Net price students pay beyond their Expected Family Contribution vs. Expected Family Contribution category, very selective and moderately selective four-year institutions),
 ATI Analysis of National Postsecondary Student Aid Study data (2019-20)

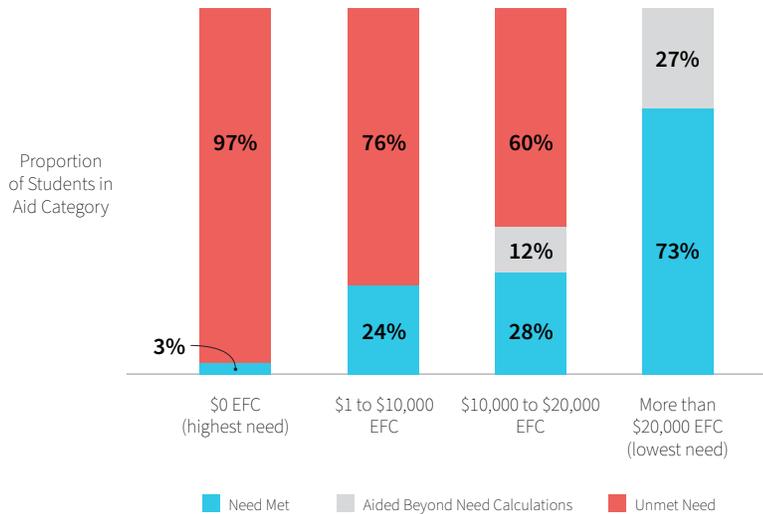
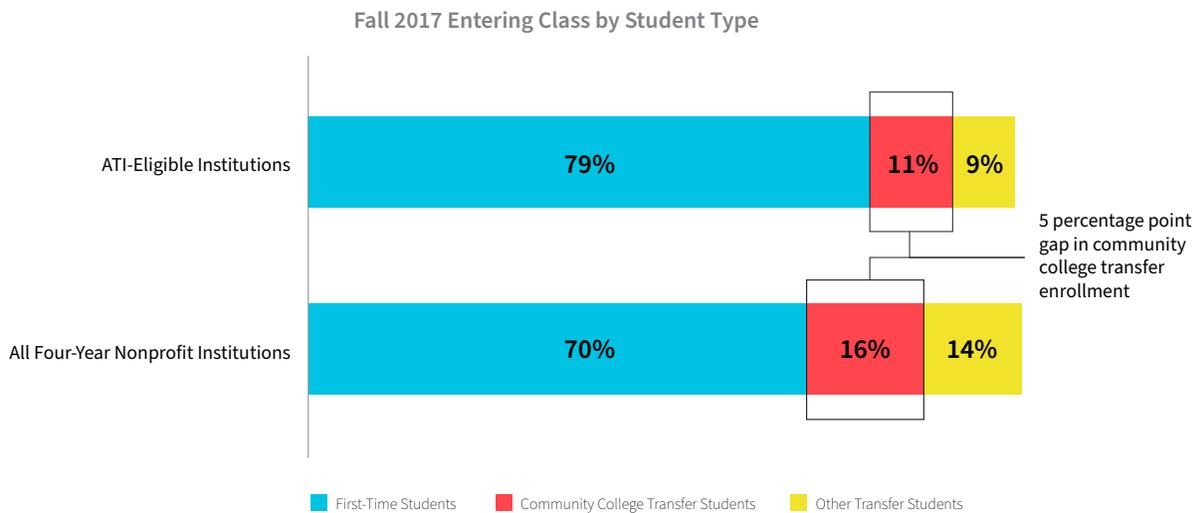


Figure 4: Composition of the Fall 2017 Entering Cohort by ATI Eligibility,
 ATI Analysis of National Student Clearinghouse Data

Community College Transfers Are Underrepresented in the ATI-Eligible Sector



Note: ATI Analysis of data from the National Student Clearinghouse for the fall 2017 cohort

Appendix II: List of 2023 ATI High-Fliers

Baruch College (New York, NY)	University of Dayton (Dayton, OH)
Boston University (Boston, MA)	University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign (Champaign, IL)
Centre College (Danville, KY)	University of Michigan-Ann Arbor (Ann Arbor, MI)
Claremont McKenna College (Claremont, CA)	University of Texas-Austin (Austin, TX)
Colby College (Waterville, ME)	University of Wisconsin-Madison (Madison, WI)
George Mason University (Fairfax, VA)	Washington University in St. Louis (St. Louis, MO)
Gettysburg College (Gettysburg, PA)	Wellesley College (Wellesley, MA)
Illinois Institute of Technology (Chicago, IL)	Yale University (New Haven, CT)
Johns Hopkins University (Baltimore, MD)	
Muhlenberg College (Allentown, PA)	
Northwestern University (Evanston, IL)	
Princeton University (Princeton, NJ)	
Rowan University (Glassboro, NJ)	
State University of New York at Oneonta (Oneonta, NY)	
Stevens Institute of Technology (Hoboken, NJ)	
Stony Brook University (Stony Brook, NY)	
Towson University (Towson, MD)	
University of California, Merced (Merced, CA)	
University of California, San Diego (San Diego, CA)	
University of Chicago (Chicago, IL)	

Appendix III: List of Accelerating Transfer Grants

George Mason University (Building the Mason Virginia Promise):

George Mason launched ADVANCE with Northern Virginia Community College in 2018. This joint admissions program simplifies the transfer process for community college students seeking a bachelor's degree. With co-advising, clear major pathways, and efforts to increase engagement and belonging at Mason, ADVANCE students outpace their non-ADVANCE peers in retention and time-to-degree. In 2020, Mason established the Mason Virginia Promise (MVP) to extend the reach of ADVANCE to community colleges across the state. Mason will use the Accelerating Transfer Grant to bring MVP to five community colleges. Over two years, at least 130 additional lower-income students will benefit from a pathway to transfer.

University of Central Florida (Expanding DirectConnect):

In 2006, the University of Central Florida (UCF) partnered with Valencia College to establish DirectConnect, one of the nation's first joint admissions programs. Through DirectConnect, UCF has enrolled more than 60,000 students from six feeder community colleges. In fall 2021, 17 percent of all UCF undergraduates were DirectConnect students from Valencia College. Now, UCF is focused on ensuring more students enroll in DirectConnect from Valencia's Osceola campus, which is majority-Hispanic and Pell-eligible. UCF aims to connect its program with the beneficiaries of the Osceola Promise program, which provides all high school graduates in the county with a free Valencia College education. With Accelerating Transfer funding, UCF will provide a cohort of 140 Osceola students with the comprehensive support they need to navigate the transfer process.

University of California (Campaign for Transfer Excellence):

More than a third of the University of California (UC) student body is Pell-eligible. However, that figure has slipped from a 38.7 percent high-water mark in 2017. Part of UC's plan to regain Pell enrollment is through community college transfer. Today, over a quarter of students who transfer from California community colleges to UC come from just six of the 113 California community colleges, all in relatively affluent areas of the state. UC will use Accelerating Transfer funds to target 69 California community colleges that serve a majority of students from lower-income backgrounds—but do not have a history of sending transfer students to the UCs. System leadership will identify and engage at least 1,000 high-achieving, lower-income students as early as their junior year of high school. Dedicated counselors will demystify the transfer process and address concerns about affordability, fit, and academic preparation. UC will also create a virtual transfer center to streamline the transfer process and offer clear academic pathways.