



# **Getting Back to the Top**

## **An International Comparison of College Attainment Where the U.S. Stands**

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## Leading the world in college graduates: What will it take?

President Obama has set his sights on regaining America's position as the top producer of college graduates by the year 2020. It appears like a lofty goal considering numerous reports have indicated America has slipped to 16<sup>th</sup> in the world when it comes to the percentage of adults who earn a college degree. Note, however, this ranking includes younger adults with two- and four-year college degrees. The U.S. is still a world leader when looking only at four-year degrees.

But college is not just about Harvard, Stanford or even the local state university. Postsecondary education also includes community colleges and other two-year institutions. And it's in this area, where the U.S. can make up the greatest ground to meet the president's goal, as currently, just 33 percent of younger adults who attend a two-year institution earn a degree within three years. (Knapp et al, 2012).

### U.S. ranks near top in percentage of adults with college degrees

#### ***U.S. is 2<sup>nd</sup> in the world in four-year degree attainment***

When looking specifically at the percentage of American adults with bachelor's degrees or better, the U.S. (32 percent) ranks second behind Norway (35 percent) (Table 1). To the surprise of some, the U.S. actually outranks notably high-performing countries such as South Korea (28 percent), Canada (26 percent), Japan (25 percent), and Finland (23 percent), which have a much lower proportion of adults with four-year degrees. Furthermore, just one percent of Chinese adults have earned four-year degrees. In Brazil, an emerging economic competitor, 11 percent of adults possess at least a four-year degree. College attainment data was not available for India.

#### **Data in this report:**

*The data analyzed for this report are from the [Organisation of Economic Co-operation and Development \(OECD\), Education at a Glance, released September 2012. Unless otherwise noted, the data are for the year 2010.](#)*

Rank**	Country	Percent of population
1	Norway	35
2	<b>United States</b>	<b>32</b>
3	Israel	31
4	Netherlands	30
5	Iceland	29
6	United Kingdom	28
7	South Korea	28
8	Denmark	27
9	Australia	27
10	Canada	26
11	Sweden	25
12	Japan	25
13	Switzerland	24
14	New Zealand	24
15	Finland	23
16	Poland	23
17	Estonia	22
18	Ireland	22
19	Spain	21
20	Russian Federation <sup>3</sup>	21
21	Luxembourg	21
22	Hungary	20
23	France	18
24	Greece	17
25	Belgium	17
26	Germany	17
27	Czech Republic	17
28	Slovak Republic	17
29	Chile	17
30	Mexico	16
31	Portugal	15
32	Italy	14
33	Turkey	13
34	Slovenia	13
35	Austria	12
36	Brazil <sup>1</sup>	11
37	China <sup>2</sup>	1

\* College degree is defined as at least a tertiary-type A degree or higher.  
\*\* Countries are ranked in order of highest to lowest rates. However, rates shown in table have been rounded to the nearest whole number.  
1. Year of Reference 2002.  
2. Year of Reference 2000.  
3. Year of Reference 2009.  
Source: OECD. See Annex 3 for notes ([www.oecd.org/edu/eaag2012](http://www.oecd.org/edu/eaag2012)).

### ***U.S. is outranked by most countries in two-year degree graduates***

The picture for two-year degree holders looks much different. Russia leads the world in the percentage of 25- to 64-year-olds with two-year degrees (33 percent), followed by Canada (24 percent) and Japan (19 percent) (Table 2). The U.S., on the other hand, drops to 18<sup>th</sup> tied with the United Kingdom and Germany, where just 10 percent of adults have a two-year degree. High-performing Finland (15 percent) and South Korea (12 percent) ranked in between. While a higher proportion of Chinese earned two-year degrees over four-year degrees, it was still a miniscule three percent of the adult population.

Rank**	Country	Percent of population	Rank**	Country	Percent of population
1	Russian Federation <sup>2</sup>	33	17	United Kingdom	10
2	Canada	24	18	<b>United States</b>	<b>10</b>
3	Japan	19	19	Germany	10
4	Belgium	18	20	Spain	9
5	New Zealand	16	21	Sweden	9
6	Ireland	16	22	Austria	7
7	Israel	15	23	Greece	7
8	Luxembourg	15	24	Denmark	6
9	Finland	15	25	Iceland	4
10	Estonia	13	26	China <sup>1</sup>	3
11	South Korea	12	27	Netherlands	3
12	France	12	28	Norway	2
13	Switzerland	11	29	Mexico	1
14	Australia	11	30	Slovak Republic	1
15	Slovenia	11	31	Hungary	1
16	Chile	10			

\* 2-year degree is defined as those students who received a tertiary-type B.  
 \*\* Countries are ranked in order of highest to lowest rates. However, rates shown in table have been rounded to the nearest whole number.  
 1. Year of Reference 2000.  
 2. Year of Reference 2009.  
 Source: OECD. See Annex 3 for notes ([www.oecd.org/edu/eag2012](http://www.oecd.org/edu/eag2012)).

### ***U.S. ranks 5<sup>th</sup> in the world in adults with degrees***

America ranks fifth in the world among 25- to 64-year olds who possess degrees, if you don't differentiate between two- and four-year colleges (Table 3). At 42 percent, the U.S. trails the global leader, Russia (54 percent) as well as Canada (51 percent), Israel (46 percent) and Japan (45 percent).

Rank**	Country	Percent of population	Rank**	Country	Percent of population
1	Russian Federation <sup>5</sup>	54	22	France	29
2	Canada	51	23	Chile	27
3	Israel	46	24	Germany	27
4	Japan	45	25	Greece	25
5	<b>United States</b>	<b>42</b>	26	Slovenia	24
6	New Zealand	41	27	Poland	23
7	South Korea	40	28	Hungary	20
8	United Kingdom	38	29	Austria	19
9	Finland	38	30	Mexico	17
10	Australia	38	31	Slovak Republic	17
11	Ireland	37	32	Czech Republic	17
12	Norway	37	33	Portugal	15
13	Luxembourg	35	34	Saudi Arabia <sup>5</sup>	15
14	Estonia	35	35	Italy	15
15	Switzerland	35	36	Argentina <sup>1</sup>	14
16	Belgium	35	37	Turkey	13
17	Sweden	34	38	Brazil <sup>2</sup>	11
18	Denmark	33	39	China <sup>3</sup>	5
19	Iceland	33	40	Indonesia <sup>4</sup>	4
20	Netherlands	32	41	South Africa <sup>4</sup>	4
21	Spain	31			

\* College degree is defined as those students who received either a tertiary-type A and advanced research degree or a tertiary-type B degree.

\*\* Countries are ranked in order of highest to lowest rates. However, rates shown in table have been rounded to the nearest whole number.

1. Year of reference 2003. Source: UNESCO/UIS, educational attainment of the population aged 25 and older.

2. Year of reference 2009.

3. Year of reference 2000. Source: 2000 census, Chinese National Bureau of Statistics, education level (College, University and Master and above) of 25-64 year-olds.

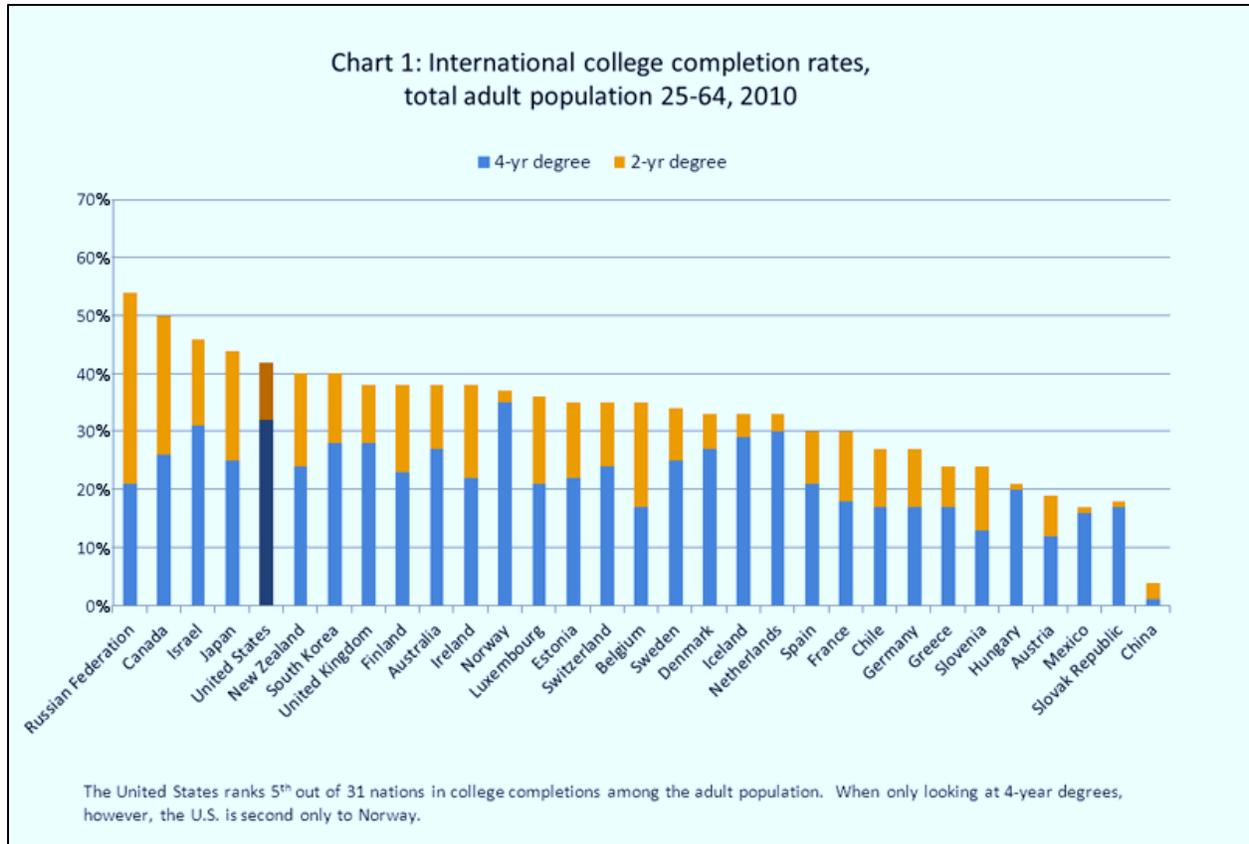
4. Year of reference 2007. Source: UNESCO/UIS, educational attainment of the population aged 25 and older.

5. Year of reference 2002.

6. Year of reference 2004. Source: UNESCO/UIS, educational attainment of the population aged 25 and older.

Source: OECD. See Annex 3 for notes ([www.oecd.org/edu/eag2012](http://www.oecd.org/edu/eag2012)).

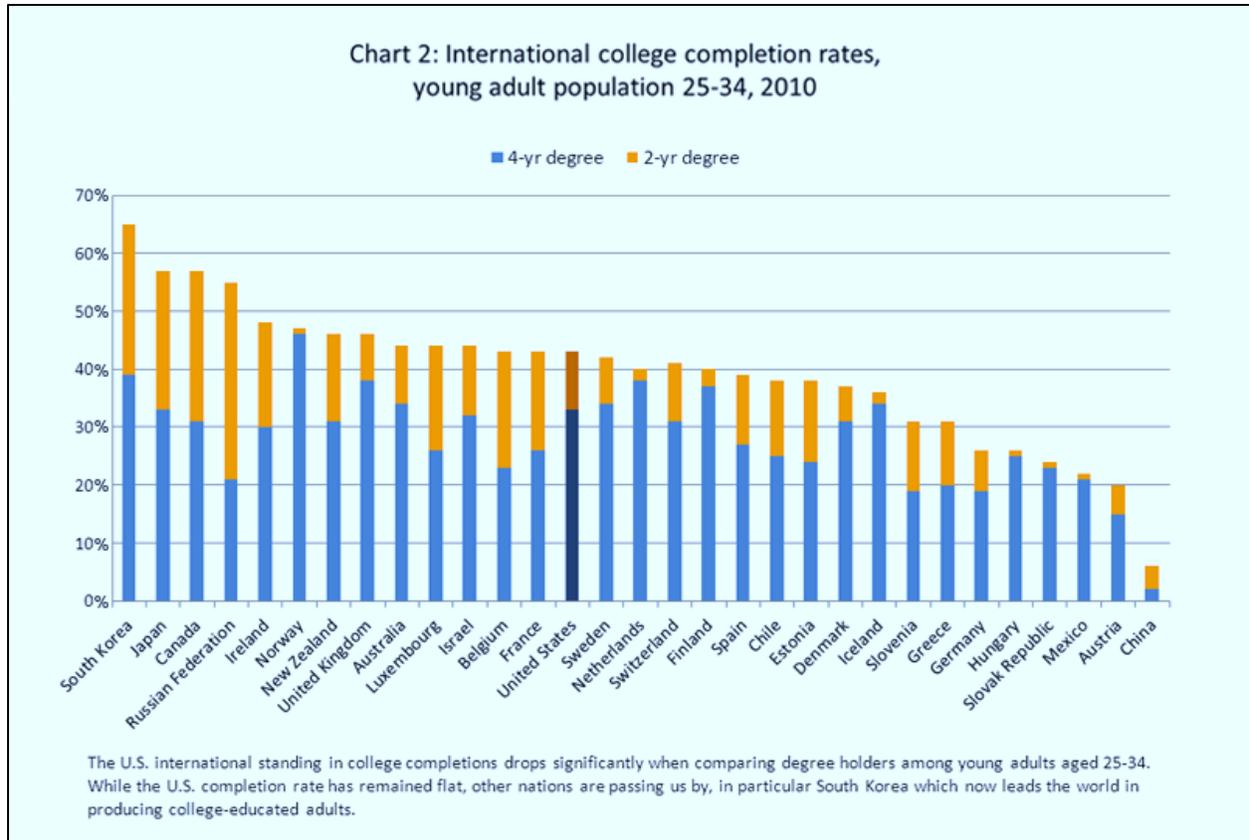
The U.S. outranks such countries as South Korea (40 percent), the United Kingdom (38 percent), Finland (38 percent) and Germany (27 percent). Brazil (11 percent) and China (5 percent) lag all other countries besides Indonesia (4 percent) and South Africa (4 percent).



A quick look at the data suggests the U.S. may not be all that far from meeting President Obama's higher education goals. As a matter of fact, if the aim was solely to lead the world in the percentage of the population who earn four-year degrees, the U.S. would only have to overtake Norway. In addition, the U.S. would only need to increase the number of people who obtain two-year degrees to lead overall internationally. However, a closer look at the data shows the U.S. has a steeper hill to climb.

### ***Other countries are improving faster than the U.S.***

As a whole, Americans hold their own in international rankings of college attainment. But, the U.S. doesn't fare nearly as well when it comes to younger generations of college graduates, which is troubling as the relative standing of this group foreshadows how educated the country will be in the future.



***Younger adults in other countries are more likely to have a 4-year degree than in the U.S.***

As shown, the U.S. ranks second in the percentage of 25- to 64-year-olds who have earned a four-year degree or better. However, America's global standing drops to 11<sup>th</sup> alongside Japan, with 33 percent of 25- to 34-year-olds possessing at least a four-year degree (Table 4). This is in stark contrast to older adults aged 55-64 where the U.S. has a clear lead among graduates of four-year colleges.

Rank**	Country	Percent of population	Rank**	Country	Percent of population
1	Norway	46	20	France	26
2	South Korea	39	21	Chile	25
3	Netherlands	38	22	Portugal	25
4	United Kingdom	38	23	Hungary	25
5	Poland	37	24	Estonia	24
6	Finland	37	25	Slovak Republic	23
7	Australia	34	26	Belgium	23
8	Iceland	34	27	Czech Republic	23
9	Sweden	34	28	Russian Federation <sup>3</sup>	21
10	Japan	33	29	Mexico	21
11	<b>United States</b>	<b>33</b>	30	Italy	20
12	Israel	32	31	Greece	20
13	New Zealand	31	32	Slovenia	19
14	Denmark	31	33	Germany	19
15	Canada	31	34	Turkey	17
16	Switzerland	31	35	Austria	15
17	Ireland	30	36	Brazil <sup>1</sup>	12
18	Spain	27	37	China <sup>2</sup>	2
19	Luxembourg	26	.		

\* College degree is defined as at least a tertiary-type A degree or higher.  
\*\* Countries are ranked in order of highest to lowest rates. However, rates shown in table have been rounded to the nearest whole number.  
1. Year of Reference 2002.  
2. Year of Reference 2000.  
3. Year of Reference 2009.  
Source: OECD. See Annex 3 for notes ([www.oecd.org/edu/aag2012](http://www.oecd.org/edu/aag2012)).

Note that the United States' slide in international rankings is not because of any decline in the proportion of four-year degree holders between the generations. In fact, younger Americans (33 percent) are slightly more likely to have a four-year degree than older adults (32 percent). The reason is simply that other countries are now turning out significantly more young adults with four-year degrees, while the U.S. has remained relatively stagnant--- a pattern that is also seen when comparing international trends in high school completion.

South Korea has made the greatest improvement: 39 percent of its 25- to 34-year-olds have earned at least a four-year degree compared to just 11 percent of 55- to 64-year olds— a 28 percentage point difference. Finland has also made impressive gains with a 23 percentage point difference between younger and older adults. The United Kingdom and Japan made notable increases as well, by 18 and 16 percentage points, respectively. On the other hand, despite all the progress China has made over the past couple of decades, just two percent of both 25- to 34-year-olds and 55- to 64-year-olds have four-year degrees. Keep in mind, however the latest data on China is from 2000, so it does not capture any gains the country may have made since then.

Unless the U.S. begins graduating significantly more students with four-year degrees, the country's ranking will likely continue to drop.

### ***Younger Americans are no more likely to earn a two-year degree than older Americans***

The U.S. is in the middle of the pack when it comes to its two-year degree-holders. But their standing will likely slip even further, as a greater proportion of 25- to 34-year-olds in 17 different countries outpace them (Table 5). Only 10 percent of young Americans hold a two-year degree compared to 34 percent in Russia, the leader in global rankings. South Korea (26 percent), Canada (26 percent), and Japan (24 percent) follow Russia.

Rank**	Country	Percent of population	Rank**	Country	Percent of population
1	Russian Federation <sup>2</sup>	34	17	Switzerland	10
2	South Korea	26	18	<b>United States</b>	<b>10</b>
3	Canada	26	19	Sweden	8
4	Japan	24	20	United Kingdom	8
5	Belgium	20	21	Germany	7
6	Ireland	18	22	Denmark	6
7	Luxembourg	18	23	Austria	5
8	France	17	24	China <sup>1</sup>	4
9	New Zealand	15	25	Finland	3
10	Estonia	14	26	Netherlands	2
11	Chile	13	27	Iceland	2
12	Israel	12	28	Hungary	1
13	Spain	12	29	Mexico	1
14	Slovenia	12	30	Norway	1
15	Greece	11	31	Slovak Republic	1
16	Australia	10			

\* 2-year degree is defined as those students who received a tertiary-type B.  
 \*\* Countries are ranked in order of highest to lowest rates. However, rates shown in table have been rounded to the nearest whole number.  
 1. Year of Reference 2000.  
 2. Year of Reference 2009.  
 Source: OECD. See Annex 3 for notes ([www.oecd.org/edu/eag2012](http://www.oecd.org/edu/eag2012)).

Still, a greater proportion of young Americans hold two-year degrees than their British (8 percent), German (7 percent), Chinese (4 percent), and Finnish (3 percent) peers. Even in Norway, where the greatest concentration of four-year college graduates resides, just one percent of young adults seek a two-year degree. The difference illustrates how some countries place greater emphasis on different higher education paths.

Many of these countries surpassed America because more of its young adults are turning to two-year colleges. In South Korea, for instance, 25- to 34-year-olds not only outpaced their international peers in this area (26 percent), but also surged ahead of its own elders; only two percent of 55- to 64-year-old Koreans have two-year degrees. Japan made the next best improvement with a 12 percentage point difference between its younger (24 percent) and older (12 percent) adults. China showed only modest gains in this area (2 percent).

On the other hand, countries like Finland and the U.K. lost ground. Baby boomers in both countries were more likely to possess two-year degrees than their younger counterparts by 14 and one percentage point, respectively.

Unless current trends reverse, the United States will fall even further behind other nations with respect to two-year degree attainment.

***In most countries, younger adults are more likely to have a college degree than older adults***

Since some countries emphasize one type of degree over the other, it's important to also compare countries based on the combined rate of two- and four-year degrees earned. In the U.S., the proportion of 55- to 64-year-olds who has either degree (41 percent) is enough to place them fourth in the world. But that ranking falls to 14<sup>th</sup> among the 25- to 34-year-old cohort (42 percent), even though they are just as likely as their elders to attend college (Table 6).

Unfortunately, several countries will likely surpass America in the near future as a greater proportion of young adults abroad become college graduates.

Rank**	Country	Percent of population	Rank**	Country	Percent of population
1	South Korea	65	20	Chile	38
2	Japan	57	21	Estonia	38
3	Canada	56	22	Denmark	38
4	Russian Federation <sup>3</sup>	55	23	Poland	37
5	Ireland	48	24	Iceland	36
6	Norway	47	25	Slovenia	31
7	New Zealand	46	26	Greece	31
8	United Kingdom	46	27	Germany	26
9	Australia	44	28	Hungary	26
10	Luxembourg	44	29	Portugal	25
11	Israel	44	30	Slovak Republic	24
12	Belgium	44	31	Czech Republic	23
13	France	43	32	Mexico	22
14	<b>United States</b>	<b>42</b>	33	Austria	21
15	Sweden	42	34	Italy	21
16	Netherlands	41	35	Turkey	17
17	Switzerland	40	36	Brazil <sup>1</sup>	12
18	Finland	39	37	China <sup>2</sup>	6
19	Spain	39			

\* College degree is defined as those students who received either a tertiary-type A and advanced research degree or a tertiary-type B degree.  
\*\* Countries are ranked in order of highest to lowest rates. However, rates shown in table have been rounded to the nearest whole number.  
1. Year of reference 2009.  
2. Year of reference 2000. Source: 2000 census, Chinese National Bureau of Statistics, education level (College, University and Master and above) of 25-64 year-olds.  
3. Year of reference 2002.  
Source: OECD. See Annex 3 for notes ([www.oecd.org/edu/eag2012](http://www.oecd.org/edu/eag2012)).

South Korea is the undisputed leader in this area, with 65 percent of its younger generation holding college degrees. Japan (57 percent) and Canada (56 percent) follow.

Rank**	Country	Ages 25-34	Ages 55-64	Difference	Rank**	Country	Ages 25-34	Ages 55-64	Difference
1	South Korea	65	13	52	20	Switzerland	40	28	13
2	Japan	57	29	28	21	New Zealand	46	34	13
3	Ireland	48	21	27	22	Slovak Republic	24	13	11
4	France	43	18	25	23	Czech Republic	23	12	11
5	Poland	37	13	25	24	Russian Federation <sup>3</sup>	55	44	11
6	Spain	39	18	21	25	Italy	21	11	10
7	Norway	47	27	20	26	Denmark	38	28	10
8	Chile	38	19	20	27	Mexico	22	12	10
9	Luxembourg	44	25	19	28	Hungary	26	16	10
10	Belgium	44	26	18	29	Finland	39	30	9
11	United Kingdom	46	30	16	30	Turkey	17	9	8
12	Portugal	25	9	16	31	Estonia	38	31	7
13	Slovenia	31	16	15	32	Austria	21	16	4
14	Netherlands	41	26	15	33	China <sup>2</sup>	6	3	3
15	Sweden	42	27	15	34	Brazil <sup>1</sup>	12	9	3
16	Australia	44	30	15	35	United States	42	41	1
17	Greece	31	17	14	36	Germany	26	25	1
18	Canada	56	42	14	37	Israel	44	45	0
19	Iceland	36	23	14					

\* College degree is defined as either a tertiary-type B degree or tertiary-type A degree or higher.

\*\* Countries are ranked in order of highest to lowest rates. However, rates shown in table have been rounded to the nearest whole number.

1. Year of reference 2009.

2. Year of reference 2000. Source: 2000 census, Chinese National Bureau of Statistics, education level (College, University and Master and above) of 25-64 year-olds.

3. Year of reference 2002.

Source: OECD. See Annex 3 for notes ([www.oecd.org/edu/eag2012](http://www.oecd.org/edu/eag2012)).

Currently, 42 percent of younger Americans hold a two or four-year degree, beating its older peers by only one percentage point (Table 7). This not only sets the country up for further declines in international rankings, but casts doubt about meeting President Obama's goal since it's the younger generation who must carry the lion share of that ambition. But as it stands, that group is doing only marginally better than its predecessors, when it really needs to be doing substantially better. Interestingly enough, it isn't this way around the rest of the world.

Nearly every one of the 37 countries featured in this report, shows younger adults much more likely to hold a college degree than older adults. While the U.S. currently outranks South Korea in total adults with a college degree, South Korea is likely to take a commanding lead in the coming years because of the concerted efforts they've made in driving more youngsters to pursue postsecondary education. In South Korea, just 13 percent of 55- to 64-year-olds are college graduates but that proportion skyrockets to 65 percent for 25- to 34-year olds--- a whopping 52 percentage point difference.

The disparity between younger and older generations is not as dramatic in other countries as South Korea, but still telling. In Japan, the gap between 25- to 34-year-olds with degrees and 55- to 64-year-olds with degrees is 28 percentage points, followed closely by Ireland (27 percentage points), France and Poland (both 25 percentage points).

Interestingly enough, Finland's impressive gains at the K-12 level are not quite mirrored at the postsecondary level, where the difference between 25- to 34-year-old college attainment (39 percent) and 55- to 64-year-old college attainment (30 percent) is small but still better than the U.S. (1 percent).

Astonishingly, the United States is tied with economic powerhouse Germany, where just 26 percent of its young adults are college grads, a mere one percent more than 55- to 64-year-old Germans.

### **How America can reclaim the lead**

For decades, the U.S. enjoyed lead status in its successful promotion of college degrees. But this is no longer the case. In fact, America's global standing in college attainment levels will further erode if other countries continue to make the kind of dramatic increases they've made in recent years. To reverse this, the U.S. must commit the same amount of focus, particularly at the two-year college level.

Being number one in college attainment is not just about bragging rights; there are significant economic implications as well. Although more college degrees won't substantially boost the U.S. economy on its own, research shows the majority of new jobs will require a college degree. For current K-12 students, going to college will be a necessity to maintain a decent quality of life.

Keep in mind, a college degree doesn't only mean a four-year degree. Many of the new jobs are so-called "middle skill" jobs which require a two-year degree or credential (Center for Public Education, 2009).

According to a recent Michigan State University study, the demand for workers with associate's degrees increased by more than 30 percent compared to a modest three percent growth for bachelor degree-holders (Michigan State University, 2012).

Currently, only 10 percent of adults have two-year degrees. With a national focus on significantly increasing the number of young adults entering and succeeding in community colleges and trade schools, the U.S. can reclaim its previous standing in the world and keep its labor market competitive.

### **The K-12 Role**

The implications in this report for postsecondary education are clear: the U.S. needs to focus on improving access to and success in its two- and four-year institutions. One place to begin is to look at the higher education policies of other countries, especially in terms of affordability. America also needs to examine potential barriers that keep students from finishing college. Nearly two-thirds of recent high school graduates go immediately to two- and four-year colleges, yet only half of them eventually earn a degree (NCHEMS, 2009). Retaining these students would get the country halfway to President Obama's goal (CPE, 2012).

Postsecondary institutions play a major role in whether students earn a college degree or not. College graduation rates range widely from institution to institution, from the low teens to nearly 100 percent ([Washington Monthly, 2012](#)).

As the Center for Public Education found in its report, "[High school rigor and good advice: Setting up students to succeed](#)," colleges can increase the chances their students succeed by encouraging and providing greater opportunities for students to meet regularly with their advisor.

K-12 public schools have an important role to play, too. CPE's analysis showed that when students are well-prepared in high school they are more likely to succeed in college. This is especially true for low-income and low-performing students.

**K-12 leaders can help by doing the following:**

- Provide all K-12 students access to rigorous curriculum (especially at the high school level) and the support they need to succeed.
- Invest in well-trained counselors to help students with their post-graduation plans, including finding a college that best matches their goals.
- Collect data on the postsecondary progress of graduates and view it as an indicator of the quality of high school preparation they received.

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