

LUMINA FOUNDATION

# Strategic Plan

March 2025





## STRATEGIC PLAN

The nation's prosperity depends on the skills of the American workforce. Expanding the share of adults in the United States with quality education and training after high school is essential for ensuring economic competitiveness and expanding individual opportunity. Inspired by the promise of a more dynamic, open, and fair country, Lumina Foundation set a national goal in 2008 for 60 percent of working-age adults to earn college degrees, certificates, or industry-recognized certifications by 2025. Since then, education attainment after high school among adults 25 to 64 years old has increased from 38 percent to 55 percent. Millions of adults furthered their education and training with credentials of value and secured promotions, pay raises, and work in new fields.

Today, the nation faces a fresh set of challenges. Trust in higher education is eroding, prompted by concerns about rising tuition, misalignment with the job market, barriers to college access, the rise of artificial intelligence, and perceived politicization of colleges and universities. As a result, we believe the nation needs a new goal focused on the value of credentials and their tangible benefits for individuals and society: **By 2040, 75 percent of adults in the U.S. labor force will have college degrees or other credentials of value leading to economic prosperity.**

### Lumina will contribute to this better-educated country by focusing on four priorities:

- **Credentials of Value:** We must ensure that the credentials people earn are delivering the value they expect and deserve.
- **Access:** We must significantly expand access to quality education and training programs after high school.
- **Student Success:** We must design solutions to ensure that more students who start quality education and training programs finish within reasonable periods.
- **Redesign:** We must fundamentally redesign how we organize, fund, and govern the education and training systems serving today's students.

These strategies will lead to a more affordable and responsive higher learning system that works for everyone, supports a vibrant and inclusive democracy, and serves as an engine of economic prosperity.



## VALUE AND PROSPERITY

The increase in the number of Americans with credentials beyond a high school diploma has been one of the most significant yet least recognized success stories of the past two decades. Earning these credentials drives both individual and community prosperity. Having more people with valuable credentials increases the nation's economic competitiveness. People have more money to spend. Tax revenues are higher. People are fully employed. Degrees and other valuable credentials can improve financial stability and quality of life, blunting public skepticism while narrowing unjust disparities across race, ethnicity, income, and geography.

National increases in educational attainment mark progress toward social well-being. With all its flaws, higher education has been a fundamental building block of American prosperity. It remains the surest route to prosperity, personal growth, and satisfaction, supporting dreams and aspirations we can build on as a society. Education and training can encourage the discipline, curiosity, and critical thinking that empower people to continue learning, create change in communities, and find meaningful livelihoods. Higher learning equips people with the skills and knowledge to navigate complexity, resolve differences, and adjust to rapid societal changes, all building feelings of security in a time of growing uncertainty.

Despite such obvious benefits for individuals and society, earning these credentials through affordable programs is becoming increasingly difficult. This challenge has led to declining confidence in colleges and universities. Only 36 percent of Americans today express high confidence levels in higher education, down from 57 percent in 2015. College and university leaders must address this precipitous decline head-on and prioritize delivering real value for students, society, and the economy. We must ensure that our education and training systems and the full array of credentials they award offer clear value to individuals, communities, and the nation. Achieving this outcome will require assuring colleges and universities deliver affordable programs that prepare people for life and work.

It is essential to reflect on how we arrived at this moment. For decades, beginning with the GI Bill after World War II—and continuing into the 1960s and 1970s with the Civil Rights Act, the Higher Education Act, and the creation of Pell Grants—the nation's primary objective was creating college opportunities for more Americans. Leaders of the post-war era believed that expanding college access would ensure that women, students from low-income families, students of color, first-generation students, and others would have the opportunity to succeed. Lumina's commitment to fair educational outcomes originates from these efforts to open higher education to many more students.

Over time, college access improved, but not enough to eliminate the disparities within and among student groups. It became clear that opening the opportunity to go to college to more people was insufficient to create real opportunity. While the racial, ethnic, income, and geographic diversity of enrolled students improved, disparities in degree and credential completion rates persisted. Such outcomes led to recognizing the need for a greater focus on increasing education attainment—that is, more people earning degrees and other credentials—along with expanding college access.

When Lumina proposed a national attainment goal in 2008, our ambition was to help create a learning system that would meet the needs of today's students and the nation by helping more people earn degrees and other credentials. The 2025 goal of 60 percent helped coalesce the views of different leaders, individuals, governments, and organizations into a movement that put increasing attainment at the forefront of the discussion while continuing to underscore the urgency of college access.

Today, the nation's education and training systems face an inflection point. College access has broadened, and credential attainment has risen. However, questions about the value of bachelor's degrees and the time, expense, and relevance of these four-year programs threaten progress. As a country, we must do more to transform higher education and workforce systems to meet human talent needs and expand economic prosperity for individuals, families, and communities.

**We believe the best way to address this challenge is through a systemic overhaul that delivers on two critical dimensions of value.**

**First**, we must design college and workforce training programs to meet today's students' needs, especially regarding affordability and academic quality. Colleges and universities must make programs from the arts and humanities to hard sciences and specialized technical programs more affordable and build them to support students' lives. Today, students are more likely to work, care for family members, and experience economic insecurity. Students should have flexibility and clear paths to finishing programs within reasonable periods.

**Second**, we must ensure that college and workforce training programs deliver tangible results for individuals and society. Students enroll in higher education primarily to increase their employability and financial stability. Students should be able to discern whether academic and training programs deliver these outcomes before committing time and scarce economic resources. As a society, the United States must ask whether post-high school education and training prepare students to participate in their communities and strengthen our democracy.

Concerns about the value of higher education are nothing new. But today, it is evident that we need to prioritize this rising concern alongside the continued emphasis on college access and increasing credential attainment nationally. Ensuring such improvements benefit individuals and society will increase prosperity at every level.

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## GOAL 2040

The cornerstone of Lumina’s vision for education and training after high school is higher learning that ensures a prosperous future for everyone. By 2040, 75 percent of adults in the U.S. labor force will have college degrees or other credentials of value leading to economic prosperity. Achieving this ambitious target, aligning with the nation’s future talent needs, will require fundamental shifts in the nation’s higher education and workforce training systems. Programs must lead to a better-educated country, align with labor-market needs, and create real value for everyone.

Education and training systems should prioritize helping us achieve economic prosperity. Knowledge and innovation increasingly fuel American competitiveness, with projections indicating that by 2031, 72 percent of U.S. jobs will require education or training after high school, including more people with bachelor’s degrees that signify higher-level critical thinking skills. If the country fails to increase the number of adults with credentials of value, it risks failing to prepare enough people to meet future challenges. Personal financial stability also significantly increases from pursuing higher education, as indicated by the substantial increase nationally in net lifetime earnings across the U.S. population since 2010, estimated to be at least \$14.2 trillion through 2020 alone. We believe the nation can achieve prosperity if three-fourths of Americans have a degree or other credential of value by 2040.

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## STRATEGIC PRIORITIES

Lumina must collaborate with partners in education, training, government, business, and other fields to achieve Goal 2040. We will focus the foundation's efforts and look to leaders and partners within and outside of education and training systems to develop innovative, scalable ideas. At Lumina, we focus on the parts of the higher learning ecosystem most often ignored and poorly resourced by local, state, and federal governments. Lumina values community colleges because they disproportionately educate and train today's students, especially older adults, who need to gain new skills that can help expand the American economy. Equally, we value public colleges and universities and the higher education systems that support them, particularly regional public universities with teaching and learning missions, minority-serving institutions such as historically Black colleges, and other schools that serve high numbers of today's college students. Among students from low-income families, especially students who are Black, Hispanic, Latino, and Native American, these institutions provide affordable pathways to bachelor's degrees.

**Over the next five years, we will organize Lumina's work around four priorities that boost the value of college, support today's students, and contribute to the nation's shared prosperity.**

**Credentials of Value:** At the heart of questions regarding whether college is worth the time and expense is the real and perceived alignment of academic programs, labor-market outcomes, and education's contributions to people's well-being. In recent years, there have been changes in how colleges design programs that connect graduates with jobs and careers. However, there is still a need to better balance what students learn, ranging from general skills such as critical thinking to more specialized skills with direct application to work. Meanwhile, the nation's rapidly shifting demographics have pushed businesses to adopt new practices and collaborate with education and training institutions to develop people's talent. Our priority will be to increase the number of quality degree and credentialing programs that help students realize their life and career goals.

**Access:** Unfortunately, concerns about affordability and debt can deter prospective students from pursuing college. Some people question whether they are suited for college or fear that institutions will fail to provide accessible, supportive, and enriching experiences. The admissions process often frustrates those trying to enroll or return after time away. These concerns are valid—we pay too little attention to designing college and training experiences that engage students with lives outside of college. Addressing these challenges requires transforming college admissions and enrollment processes by emphasizing students' choices and ease of mobility while diminishing the institutional prestige that arises from turning away students through selective admissions.

**Student Success:** Ensuring students remain continuously enrolled and complete their degrees or credentialing programs on time is a significant challenge. Many legacy systems within community colleges and bachelor’s-granting colleges and universities were designed for different eras and no longer align with the realities of today’s students. Modernizing processes and practices to support educational journeys is an urgent priority. Today’s students live in a world heavily shaped by technology, face greater financial pressures, and are deeply affected and influenced by environmental, political, and social upheaval—all of which take a toll on their mental and emotional health.

**Redesign:** For decades, efforts to improve the nation’s education and training after high school have focused on refining legacy systems at the margins. The country has reached a point where it must rethink the fundamentals and accelerate progress toward something new and better for students and society. To restore public confidence, Lumina will focus on addressing affordability, public financing, the economic value created by credentialing programs, and on empowering people to live healthy lives in strong communities within a thriving democratic nation. Accomplishing all this will require a dramatic overhaul that recasts how we pay for and structure institutions and the systems that support them.

Lumina and the field have learned a lot over the past 15 years. Through 2029, we will refine a long-term vision for Goal 2040 and launch strategic initiatives that address immediate barriers and challenges.

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## LUMINA'S LEADERSHIP MODEL

Lumina believes that a philanthropic foundation must be a leadership organization. It must set an agenda for change and work purposefully and consistently with its partners to produce results. We recognize that innovation and change come from many sources, so we work directly with systems and institutions to improve students' lives and with state and federal policy leaders to highlight scalable solutions backed by nonpartisan research and analyses. Our communication efforts build awareness and deepen public understanding of opportunities and challenges, equipping the field for change. We strengthen and expand the use of data to inform outcomes and address unjust disparities in education. We fund independent research and evaluation to understand challenges better and craft effective solutions. We encourage and facilitate open dialogue by acting as a convener. We seek solutions to longstanding and emerging problems by investing in innovation and discovery. We further support technology and tools benefiting today's students through impact investing. We place achieving fair outcomes—across race, ethnicity, income, and geography—at the heart of our work to ensure more individuals earn degrees and other credentials of value. We collaborate with partners to ensure that colleges, universities, and other education and training providers do everything possible to make opportunities real for all students, especially among populations not benefiting as they should from learning after high school.

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## CONCLUSION

Pursuing the goal of 75 percent by 2040 represents a bold and necessary step toward ensuring higher education and workforce training fulfill the promise of contributing to individual success and societal well-being. By focusing on increasing the share of adults in the workforce with credentials of value, expanding access to education and training, rethinking student success, and recasting how institutions and systems are funded and structured, we believe the nation can achieve an affordable, responsive higher learning system that works for everyone, supports a vibrant and inclusive democracy, and serves as an engine of economic prosperity.

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