

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

# Advancing Postsecondary Value:

Promising Practices and Policy Priorities  
From AASCU Member Institutions

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**Leticia Maldonado**  
*Director of Postsecondary  
Value Initiatives, AASCU*

**Prateek Basavaraj**  
*Senior Research Analyst,  
Student Success, AASCU*



Credit: Nevada State University

# Executive Summary

The American Association of State Colleges and Universities (AASCU) has been a leader in the postsecondary value movement from the start. AASCU's efforts began with the Postsecondary Value Commission (PVC), co-chaired by Sue Desmond-Hellmann, former CEO of the Gates Foundation, and Mildred García, former AASCU president and CEO, who helped shape its vision and direction. When the PVC concluded its work, AASCU remained committed to developing a targeted strategy to engage member presidents and chancellors in a coordinated effort to further postsecondary value efforts by amplifying the PVC's [action agenda](#). Since 2021, AASCU has received generous support from several philanthropic partners to support these efforts. As a result, AASCU launched the Presidential Postsecondary Value Task Force, a group of presidents and chancellors from member institutions nationwide, to advance the commission's findings and recommendations, by spotlighting campuses already implementing promising practices enhancing postsecondary value.

*Advancing Postsecondary Value: Promising Practices and Policy Priorities From AASCU Member Institutions* is the culmination of an 11-month initiative made possible through a generous investment from Strada Education Foundation and The Joyce Foundation. This initiative builds on the AASCU's longstanding commitment to strengthening postsecondary value across regional public universities (RPUs) and was guided by two central questions:

1. What lessons or promising practices from RPUs can be adapted to enhance postsecondary value?
2. How can institutional, state, or federal policymakers help more public colleges and universities scale these practices?

To address these questions, AASCU pursued two core objectives. The first objective was to conduct a comprehensive analysis of promising practices collected from 2022 to 2025 through online submissions and interviews with senior campus executives. The second objective was to engage presidents and chancellors through a survey and structured interviews, to identify the policies that help scale promising practices while providing insights for policymakers who wish to be supportive of value-centered efforts. This project offered a comprehensive view of the innovations driving value at RPUs and the policy conditions that enable or limit their reach, resulting in six main findings.



Credit: Colorado State University Pueblo

# The Six Main Findings

## FINDING 1

### **AASCU members' promising practices are directly aligned with the five focus areas outlined in the 2021 PVC [action agenda](#).**

One of the motivating factors in continuing the work of the PVC for AASCU was the understanding that AASCU member institutions were already championing many of the PVC's findings and recommendations, which are organized into the following five focus areas:

1. Expanding access to increase postsecondary value
2. Removing affordability as an impediment to postsecondary value
3. Eliminating completion gaps and strengthening postcollege outcomes to ensure postsecondary value
4. Improving data to expose and address postsecondary value
5. Providing postsecondary value

The findings of this project confirm this alignment, further highlighting the commitment of AASCU member institutions to center postsecondary value in their efforts. Specifically:

- 38% of promising practices focused on eliminating completion gaps and strengthening postcollege outcomes to ensure postsecondary value
- 21% focused on access to increase postsecondary value
- 17% focused on providing postsecondary value
- 12% focused on removing affordability as an impediment to postsecondary value
- 12% focused on improving data to expose and address postsecondary value

## FINDING 2

### **Successful implementation of promising practices that enhance value, and prioritize students, workforce development, and community needs.**

- Engaging in intentional student-centered design emerged as the tactic most frequently highlighted by university leaders and staff during interviews. Participants emphasized that getting to know students, through data, listening sessions, and ongoing engagement, is the foundation for developing effective initiatives that work for students.



Credit: Nevada State University



- Fostering campuswide shared responsibility for student success was the second most frequently mentioned tactic, with leaders noting that collaboration and shared responsibility for student success across student affairs, academic affairs, and other campus departments is critical to breaking down silos, aligning efforts, and delivering effective support.
- Securing industry partnerships and prioritizing workforce-ready programs was also strongly emphasized, with campus teams highlighting the importance of demonstrating postsecondary value by aligning academic programs with local industry partners, such as military bases, healthcare and insurance companies, and government agencies, to prepare students for high-demand roles and provide employers with a reliable talent pipeline.



Credit: Murray State University (KY)

Other key implementation tactics highlighted include strengthening college-going pathways through K–12 partnerships, setting data-informed goals to ensure institutional accountability, removing financial obstacles for students, and putting community needs first through partnerships and service.

### FINDING 3

#### **Policies that support the scaling of value-centered promising practices are student-centered and found primarily at the institutional and university system levels.**

The findings indicated that local institutional and system-wide policies were perceived by participating campus leaders as the most effective in supporting student success. By contrast, state and federal policies were described as having the potential to contribute to student success initiatives and value-centered practices, but fell short of the impact that institution and system-wide policies had on enabling scale and sustainability. Leaders emphasized that the policies most helpful for scaling promising practices share several common characteristics:

- **Affordability and Financial Access:** Policies that expand need-based financial aid (such as federal and state grants, Pell, and McNair programs) and reduce the cost burden for low-income and rural students.
- **Resource Access:** Policies that ensure all students, including rural students and adult learners over the age of 25, can access the resources, technology, and support needed to enroll and succeed.
- **Flexibility and Local Control:** Policies that set broad state-wide goals, in admissions requirements, for example, while allowing institutions the flexibility to tailor implementation to the unique needs of their student populations.
- **Seamless Transfer Pathways:** Policies that establish clear, enforceable articulation agreements between two- and four-year institutions, ensuring students do not lose credits and can complete bachelor's degrees on time.

#### FINDING 4

### State and federal policies play a supporting role in advancing student success.

Many leaders highlighted that policies providing financial support to students at the state and federal levels can be transformative by removing affordability barriers, expanding access, and influencing student success. However, policy was not always the first lever they associated with driving and scaling promising practices that enhance value. Beyond financial aid, some leaders expressed difficulty identifying specific policies, particularly at the state and federal levels, that directly and positively impact student success and enhance value. In addition, state and federal policies were described by some as overly complex, rapidly changing, or misaligned with the realities faced on the ground by institutional leaders. Several presidents and chancellors noted the challenge of keeping up with a constantly shifting policy landscape at the state and federal levels, which frequently demands operational changes and diverts attention from core student-centered work. While state and federal policy can support student success, leaders emphasized that lasting progress is rooted in a student-centered institutional culture, institutional values, and what one chancellor described as “the ethic of students first.”



Credit: Elizabeth City State University (NC)

#### FINDING 5

### Before developing solutions, campus leaders advise their peers in similar roles to invest resources in understanding students and the needs of the local community, while recognizing that institutional transformation takes time.

Participating leaders and campus teams emphasized the importance of gaining a thorough and accurate understanding of the challenges and unique needs of their students before developing solutions. In addition, leaders mentioned the importance of serving surrounding communities, fostering campuswide collaboration in student success initiatives, developing goals based on data, and ensuring executive leadership endorsement before launching student success initiatives. Leaders also highlighted the value of partnering closely with faculty, building capacity and infrastructure before scaling initiatives, and starting small with the understanding that progress is gradual.

#### FINDING 6

### Policy must align with the needs of today's students, recognize the distinct role of RPUs, and expand investment in student aid to support lasting student success.

In order for state and federal policies to support value-centered efforts at scale, leaders emphasized that policy must align with the realities and needs of today's students. They stressed the importance of expanding student aid, ensuring consistent and stable policy environments, and increasing public investment in higher education. Participants emphasized that policymakers must develop a deeper understanding of higher education and work in partnership with campus leaders to ensure policies reflect the real needs of students. In addition, participating leaders highlighted the importance of policymakers recognizing that RPUs are distinct in mission and play a critical role in meeting regional and statewide workforce demands while contributing to the economy of their respective regions.

# Path Forward

When the proposal for this project was developed, AASCU anticipated that the 2024 presidential election could impact higher education. This expectation proved accurate, as 2025 has brought significant federal legislative shifts with direct implications for RPUs. Several participating leaders noted that their responses might have been different only months earlier, reflecting how policy changes continually shape leaders' experiences, perceptions, and priorities, while surfacing the critical role of institutional, system, and state policies in sustaining and advancing postsecondary value efforts.

The message from RPU leaders is clear. Improving postsecondary value at scale requires higher education leaders and policymakers to place students at the center of every decision, policy, and practice. While policies are important, campus culture, collaboration, and a commitment to putting students first are even more critical. As policymakers and institutional leaders consider the path forward, the call to action is to align decisions with the lived realities of today's students, invest in understanding the challenges they face, and ensure solutions remove barriers, expand opportunity, and sustain the conditions that allow RPUs to deliver value to their students.



Credit: Murray State University (KY)



## About the American Association of State Colleges and Universities


The American Association of State Colleges and Universities (AASCU) is a Washington, D.C.-based higher education association that represents the sector of over 500 regional public colleges, universities, and systems whose members share a learning- and teaching-centered culture, a historic commitment to serving today's students, and a dedication to research and creativity that advances their regions' economic progress and cultural development. These are institutions delivering America's promise. Visit AASCU's [website](#).

## About Strada Education Foundation

Funding for this paper was provided in part by Strada Education Foundation, a nonprofit organization committed to bridging the gap between education and employment. Strada focuses on ensuring that postsecondary learning leads to meaningful careers through employer alignment and systemic change. Through research, grantmaking, policy solutions, and strategic investments, Strada supports accessible, affordable education-to-employment pathways, especially for students facing the greatest barriers to opportunity. Visit Strada's [website](#).

## About The Joyce Foundation

This publication was also made possible by funding from The Joyce Foundation, a private, nonpartisan philanthropy that invests in public policies and strategies to advance racial equity and economic mobility, through policy research, development, and advocacy, while also exploring evidence-informed solutions at the national and federal levels. The Joyce Foundation supports strategies that remove barriers for young people with a focus on students of color and those who disproportionately face structural barriers to social and economic progress. Visit The Joyce Foundation's [website](#).



## About the Postsecondary Value Commission

This paper builds on the [action agenda](#) of the Postsecondary Value Commission (PVC), a group of 30 diverse leaders brought together to answer the question "what is college worth?" The action agenda seeks to help institutional leaders, policymakers, students, and families answer key questions about postsecondary value and introduce a valued-centered lens to approach postsecondary decisions. Visit the PVC's [action agenda](#).

## Suggested Citation

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Credit: Elizabeth City State University (NC)

**AASCU** American Association  
of State Colleges and  
Universities

1717 Rhode Island Avenue NW, Suite 700 Washington, DC 20036  
phone: 202.293.7070 | [aascu.org](http://aascu.org)

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