



**EMBARGOED UNTIL 4 P.M. (EDT), FEBRUARY 11, 2020**

**2020 State of Higher Education Address**  
*“Reaching Higher in a State of Change”*

Thank you, Al, for your service to the Commission – our state – and the nation. Your clear focus on improving opportunity for everyone – especially those who are at risk of being left behind – has influenced the way we approach our work to help Hoosiers adapt and achieve in a changing economy. You remind us often of the power of higher education to improve lives but also of the need for innovation to ensure the life-improving benefits for those who pursue higher learning.

Joining you in this important work are the members of the Indiana Commission for Higher Education – many who are here with us today. Would Commission members please stand and be recognized for the service you provide to students and our state.

Others who are critical to the Commission’s success have joined us today, too, including policymakers, students, employers, college partners and community leaders. We’re grateful for your partnership and your engagement in the development of Indiana’s new strategic plan – a plan focused on the alignment of education and workforce from early childhood education through careers and lifelong learning.

As we gather today to consider the State of Higher Education in Indiana, we are reminded of an often used and consistently true phrase: the only thing that is certain is change. That saying is unequivocally true about higher education as we enter a new decade that will be marked by dramatic demographic, economic and technological changes.

Indiana’s students are increasingly diverse, and more are coming from low-income households. While in the past, those with a high school diploma fueled our economy, we now find ourselves in an environment where education beyond high school is essential to economic mobility.

Indiana’s race for talent is shaped by this evolving economy and technology advancements – factors that are at work in other states, as well. How Indiana tackles those challenges will move us forward or leave us behind in this new decade. In that spirit, the Commission’s new strategic plan seeks to align these realities with strategies for building a stronger state through a more responsive higher education system. The plan’s title, *Reaching Higher in a State of Change*, is meant to address both the changes taking place in our state and in higher education – and how they are inextricably linked.

Organized around three action priorities and five strategies, we bring these elements together through the stories of people who changed their lives through new educational journeys. Their successes contribute to Indiana’s Big Goal for at least 60% of Hoosiers to have a quality credential beyond a high school diploma by 2025. And this strategic plan will be our blueprint to get there.



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Let's start with the three action priorities – completion, equity and talent. Considered separately, each one is essential to ensuring higher education is preparing Hoosiers for constant change. Considered collectively, they provide a pathway for a stronger Indiana economy and a better quality of life for more Hoosiers.

The call to increase student completion rates has been a foundational goal for the Commission and was central in our previous strategic plans. Not surprisingly, there are new dimensions to the imperative to improve completion rates. No longer can we assume that completion is tied to a singular credential. The new economy will demand educational upgrades throughout life, and higher education must be more agile and relevant to meet this need.

New avenues for completion – multiple credentials and different delivery modes – as well as more diverse higher education consumers provide additional ways for the state to reach its Big 60 percent Goal. When learners complete meaningful and quality credentials, the state benefits as the individual benefits.

Tiffany Steele's story is an example of how relevance in learning increases the value of an educational pathway and the likelihood of completing. As a young girl, she spent much of her childhood visiting her father in a nursing home. He was injured in a car accident that occurred when she was a baby. She gained a love for the residents and admired the nurses who cared for them. "Being around the nurses made me want to make a difference in the lives of other people," Tiffany said. At 18, she started out as a Certified Nursing Assistant and moved up to be a Qualified Medical Assistant, but she wanted to continue her education. Using state financial aid, she earned her Licensed Practical Nurse certificate without any debt. She has plans to continue her education and become a Registered Nurse.

Tiffany's completion journey shows the power of personal aspiration and persistence – and the importance of ensuring the stackability of credentials gained along the way. Tiffany is here with us today. Please join me in thanking her for making a difference in the lives of those she cares for and for her determination to get the education she needed to do this important work.

While we remain sharply focused on college completion, we also know gaining a credential of value is necessary for ALL Hoosiers—not some. Life's circumstances or obstacles should not dictate the opportunity to succeed. That's what we mean by equity in Reaching Higher in a State of Change. All learners deserve access to higher education opportunities and the support needed to ensure success. The Commission's Equity Report, the first of its kind in the nation, includes information on socioeconomic status, race and ethnicity, along with gender and geography.

Our strategic plan goes further and includes populations that reflect the demographics of our state, including veteran status, those with disabilities, foster youth, incarcerated Hoosiers, the unemployed and residents of rural communities. Also of primary importance will be reaching the diverse population of adult learners who must gain the skills necessary in a new economy.

There is good news already on this front. Nearly 11,000 Hoosiers are realizing the benefits of skilling up or changing careers by completing a tuition-free, quality credential with a Workforce Ready Grant certificate.



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Our numbers continue to grow. But we must drive completion gains for all populations. We know for many first-generation students, especially from underrepresented populations, it's not enough for the government to offer programs.

It's critical for us to partner with community organizations, churches and families – to knit our goals into the cultures of our state. One example of how we're trying to do this is the recent creation of Padres Estrellas, or "Star Parents," which we launched at the end of last year.

The initiative reaches into Indiana's Latino communities to increase higher education access and attainment for students and their families.

Padres Estrellas identifies stellar parents who already have effective community networks to work with local schools and organizations focused on empowering Indiana's Latino community. These star parents will be personal ambassadors to help students and families enroll in 21st Century Scholars and the Next Level Jobs Workforce Ready Grant.

We invited these star parents to join us today. Help me recognize them for the very important work they're doing in their communities.

2020 marks the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the 21st Century Scholars program – Indiana's promise to students that college is affordable and attainable if they prepare and commit to a scholar success program in high school. Throughout the year we will shine a light on the difference the program is making in the lives of low-income students in our state. Senate and House members have been highly supportive of 21st Century Scholars and today, they honored the program with resolutions in both Chambers. Scholars and alumni met with legislators to share their stories and the return on investment in their lives.

While there is no one way to guarantee equity in higher education, the Scholars program comes as close as we can to an answer. 86% of Scholars who meet the high school requirements are attending college. This is more than 20% higher than the overall college going rate. And, by every measure of college success, Scholars are exceeding their low-income, non-Scholar peers.

James Yates understands this very well. In his words – "Due to my participation in the 21st Century Scholars program, behind me is infinite power, before me is endless possibility and around me is boundless opportunity." Raised in South Bend, James had strong personal and professional goals. He graduated with a bachelor's degree in biology and ecology in 2010. He earned five certifications throughout his early career and is now pursuing a master's degree.

James is on his way to meeting his career aspiration to practice medicine in an underserved, urban community as a physician's assistant. He and his wife launched The Yates Family Project in 2016 to provide service to underprivileged groups in their community. Clearly, James understands the value of the 21st Century Scholars Program. It changed his life and he is now working to improve the lives of those around him. James, please stand and let us acknowledge your educational journey and contributions to our state.



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The third priority of the strategic plan – talent – is about developing and unleashing human potential to drive the state’s workforce and economy. Measured by Indiana’s College Value Report, we know that quality higher education has both quantitative and qualitative value.

Higher levels of education are associated with more economic security and provide a solid foundation for overall well-being. But we also know, that Indiana’s economy demands well prepared, agile learners – the kind of well-rounded, creative thinkers that postsecondary experiences should provide.

Measuring talent is taking on new dimensions, too. It’s not enough to produce more degrees and credentials; we must do a better job ensuring the competencies students have acquired by attaining those credentials. Indiana is leading in this regard – bringing together higher education leaders, employers and community organizations to better connect learning and the application of learning. And, we have set a bold goal to make career relevance and work-based learning a part of every postsecondary program.

An internship provides the opportunity to learn and grow. Kameron Utter understood the benefit of an internship but had a hard time finding a good fit; none of the psychology internships he pursued for his major were paid. He moved into a different pathway and accepted an internship at Indianapolis-based Quest Safety Products. It was the company’s first time to offer an internship. The good news is that Kameron qualified for the state’s work study program, EARN, which provided the company a 50 percent match for his salary. During his first of three total internships, he helped set up the company’s internship program, which he now runs as the company’s E-Commerce Sales Manager. He changed his course, but still relies on the psychology education he received. “It’s amazing to me how much my psychology background has benefitted me in the business world,” he said.

“In getting the most out of an internship, it’s not just having the internship on the resume or earning the course credit, it’s about having the work experience.” Today, he is pursuing a master’s degree in business administration and helping to guide other interns in their future pursuits. Kameron was unable to join us today, but I want to recognize both Kameron and his boss and mentor, Sam Yadav, president and CEO of Quest Safety Products. Join me in acknowledging both Kameron and Sam and their understanding of the importance of quality internships and the ability to adapt and learn in the classroom and on the job.

Thank you to Tiffany, James and Kameron for allowing us to share your stories. We are inspired by your commitment to education and this influences the work we are doing at the Commission.

*Reaching Higher in a State of Change*, provides the vision to get us to our goals by 2025. But there are two important pieces I have yet to outline: how we will implement the plan, and how we will track our progress.

We have outlined key strategies and policies in what we are calling our “Blueprint for Change,” which are aggressive and essential to our success. These strategies have been selected to support our priorities of completion, equity and talent. We focus on quality, affordability, community engagement, finding the right path for every learner and strengthening the educator pipeline.



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But our strategies must be measured regularly using the metrics that matter most. Developed in coordination with Hoosiers throughout the state, our Commission members unanimously endorsed these three key metrics.

Our first metric centers on the state's progress toward the 60% attainment goal. We will assess and measure college-going rates, on-time and extended-time completion rates, the completion rates of our adult learners, as well as the progress we're making to close achievement gaps.

Career relevance in coursework increases student success and the likelihood that they graduate prepared for meaningful careers. Redesigning academic programs to include career preparation in all postsecondary programs – including internships, research projects, and work-based learning options that offer career relevance – will be key to this measurement. Some programs have long required work experience, such as teaching and engineering. The Commission is advocating for that benefit to be available for all students, including those pursuing a liberal arts field.

Speaking of relevance, how is our progress toward these first two metrics impacting the daily lives of Hoosiers? A third goal is to increase median household income to at least the average of Midwestern states.

Moving the needle on this metric, which measures personal well-being, will not be easy and our progress won't be reflected overnight. And while there are many factors that influence this economic metric other than educational attainment – including market factors, population and demographic shifts – we must focus on what we *can* impact.

These are ambitious goals but they're the right ones for Hoosiers and our state.

We know that the Commission cannot meet these ambitious goals alone. We need strong partners inside state government and our institutions, along with employers and community leaders.

One new partner whose work complements ours is the Governor's Workforce Cabinet. Like the Commission, the Governor's Workforce Cabinet is committed to meeting Hoosiers where they are and helping them move forward. With that in mind, the Cabinet is pivoting our state's approach to government service away from "programs and agencies" to focus more on the "people" we all serve.

So, whether a person walks into a WorkOne office, through the doors of their local Family and Social Services Administration office, or a college campus, they have access to all of the resources they might need to improve their lives and circumstances. This includes a personalized pathway through postsecondary education to a better job and a more secure future.

Recently, a Hoosier by the name of José Gómez Márquez shared his powerful story through the Ivy Tech Community College blog, about his journey of coming to this country, and specifically to Indiana. José authored a poem chronicling his path and how his dreams for a better life – and the encouragement of his children – moved him to pursue a Next Level Jobs certificate. I was moved by his words and wanted to share an excerpt from his poem, titled, "Virtual Reality Becomes Reality."



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*“Stuck in a dead-end job  
no light at the end of the tunnel  
aspirations, creativity stifled  
a dump truck full of ambition  
poured through a small plastic funnel.  
My time and my sweat daily wrung from me  
hardly a moment, a drop left for my family.  
Is this why I left Perú, to live in a snowy city?  
Then an ad comes my way, by heavenly algorithm sent  
Level up your job with Next Level  
See? Your tax dollars are well spent!  
I’m nervous, I’m worried  
Can I handle work, school, more stress?  
My kids push me towards the goal  
I say “maybe,” they chorus “yes!”  
Distance learning is the key, the internet is my friend  
my mind catches fire, though my posture suffers,  
hours with a book and a laptop I spend.  
The pieces fit together, good grades come my way  
my confidence rises  
I can finally put all my skills into play.”*

José completed his certificate in supply chain management and is continuing his education to attain an associate degree.

His heartfelt words embody the dedication it takes for adults to skill themselves up and pursue a new pathway.

The work we are doing across our state is impacting real lives. Real Hoosiers – Tiffany, James, Kameron, José – and so many others are making the decisions to pursue education and new skills to the betterment of their families, their communities and their futures.

And the Commission is getting straight to work, implementing its new strategic plan – putting action behind the words and stories we’ve heard today.

This year, the Commission is supporting legislation to make the Free Application for Federal Student Aid – or FAFSA – a requirement for all high school seniors. Over a third of high school seniors fail to file the FAFSA each year. And the students who are most in need of financial aid are the ones least likely to complete the FAFSA. The proposed bill includes reasonable opt-out provisions, and it will help ensure more eligible students can access state and federal financial aid—whether it’s for a short-term certificate or a four-year degree.





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Additionally, this year, we will work to advocate more strongly for the value and benefit of early college credit in Indiana—particularly for dual credit.

Students who earn college credits in high school that are aligned to their plans after graduation save time and money when they get to college. The Commission’s priorities for the year ahead include helping more students and families understand the benefit of early college credit, and giving high school teachers and counselors better resources to help students navigate their options.

We’ll also take a closer look at best practices around student success. How can Indiana’s campuses use data to identify students most at risk of struggling to complete? How can we use that information to target support and wrap-around services that will help more students cross the finish line—even if life circumstances threaten to get in their way? And, how can the Commission help scale the most innovative and promising strategies that will drive success for Hoosiers statewide?

Finally, we’ll keep score. Beginning this year, the Commission will release an annual report card highlighting progress on each of the three metrics outlined in our new plan, as well as stories about the people and organizations helping us move the needle.

Indiana and higher education are at a crossroads. It’s a motto we’re already known for, dating back to 1937 when Indiana designated – Crossroads of America – as the official state motto. Let’s make it more than a motto.

Let’s commit to the kind of innovation that attacks the persistent challenges and new realities in higher education in demonstrably effective and creative ways – making Indiana the hub for opportunity, economic growth and personal well-being.

The Commission is focused on creating a talent system that affords all Hoosiers the benefits associated with higher learning – learning that can be attained in multiple ways to respond to a changing world of work. Indiana’s willingness to embrace this new higher education compact with a collective sense of urgency and optimism will determine our state’s readiness and prosperity for decades to come.

Please join us in this noble mission.