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College Completion Effort Should Leverage Institutions with High Success Rates

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The Washington Post headline "U.S. Falls in Global Ranking of Young Adults Who Finish College" is getting a lot of play. But as we lament the fact that 15 other developed nations have a higher percentage of young adults with college degrees (see figure), we should take note of the fact that in the previous report, which relied on 2006 data, the attainment rate for US young adults was 39%; in this new report, based on 2009 data, the attainment rate for young adults is 41%. Marginal progress? Maybe. But still progress.

Not **enough** progress, for sure. As the Washington Post story notes, one of the primary solutions to this issue has been to invest in programs to improve community colleges and expand their capacity. That is a worthy pursuit. However, systematic improvements like that require time to take hold and to result in substantially increased completion rates.

As we think about the blend of strategies to improve access to quality higher education, why not target initiatives that will make it possible for more underserved students to attend institutions that **already** produce high retention rates, albeit with a different student body mix? With scholarship support, the students can gain access, and with grant support, the institutions can expand their retention programs to embrace increases in the underserved population at their institutions.

Perhaps groups or consortia of institutions with relatively high student success rates should work together toward this goal, but we need the government and granting organizations to recognize that we can be part of the solution.