As members of the Arizona community, we all understand the significant connection between a highly educated workforce and improving the state’s economy. As an essential strategy of that effort, the idea of increasing our state’s postsecondary attainment rate (the percentage of adults who hold a high-quality credential, certificate or degree) is gaining steam among a number of state education and business leaders.

As part of College Success Arizona’s mission to build public will for college completion and support an increase in degree earners, especially among low-income and first-generation students across the state, we are committed to produce needed data on college success rates and economic impact in the state and to create dialogue on the findings.

In the past few months, we’ve released the first two in a series of non-partisan and evidence-based policy briefs and reports focused on the value of increasing the attainment rate in Arizona. The first brief, Advancing the Economy Through Attainment: What Arizona Can Learn From States With Higher Education Attainment Goals takes a deep look at how Arizona compares to other states that share political and economic similarities but that, unlike Arizona, have set statewide attainment goals. The brief presents educational indicators from Arizona, and five selected states that have already set strong postsecondary attainment goals, to provide a comparative snapshot and examples of current strategies that are improving attainment across the country and the economic and social benefits they are receiving from doing so.

We think there is the potential to learn from what other states have done, as Arizona looks to strengthen policies that will affect students and the state for years to come. We hope our first report raises awareness around the urgent need to close the attainment gap between Arizona and states we compete with, and to provide to state education leaders, lawmakers, and policy makers the essential information to understand the importance of increasing the number of degree and certificate earners in the state.

The second report “Doubling Arizona’s Economic Growth – The Potential Fiscal and Social Gains From Increasing Postsecondary Attainment” was designed to provide state education leaders, legislators and government leaders—as well as business leaders and citizens—with essential information they need to advance the conversation around setting a strong statewide postsecondary education attainment goal for Arizona.

Drawing on commissioned research from leading scholars in the fields of education policy and education economics, the report highlights the tremendous economic gains that Arizona stands to benefit from if it raises its postsecondary attainment rate, and provides potential pathways toward achieving the goal of higher attainment and greater prosperity in our state.

Arizona’s economy is a model of innovation and potential. Across the state, entrepreneurs, technology start-ups and advanced industries are laying the groundwork for exceptional growth.
However, Arizona’s relatively low education levels indicate that our workforce will not be prepared to meet the needs of employers in an economy that increasingly relies on skilled workers. We have too many high school dropouts and too many adults without a postsecondary credential, meaning that businesses in Arizona often struggle to find the skilled workers they need.

Raising Arizona’s education attainment across all levels will be key to our continued economic competitiveness. Research shows that education is one of the most important drivers of economic development and growth. In Arizona, the social and fiscal gains associated with simply increasing postsecondary attainment to meet national norms has the potential to, at a minimum, double our annual economic growth rate. These gains equate to $660,000 per college graduate, an excellent return on investment, as most reforms designed to increase attainment will likely cost significantly less.

But just as increased attainment can lead to significant economic gains, a failure to raise education levels may result in economic stagnation and decline. In areas where educational attainment lags, economic growth is slower as a result of lower consumer spending and higher government expenditures on factors such as crime and health care. This creates an economic environment that is inhospitable to businesses and new investment. With low education levels, and without robust business investment creating high skill jobs, Arizona will be less attractive to highly educated and skilled workers, including those who earned their credentials at Arizona’s postsecondary institutions. The resulting exodus of our state’s top talent to other states will, in turn, make our economy less competitive.

Reports: