Chapter 12
The Impact of Global Competition

“I can never explain the wonder of this experience. I am a different person who sees the world through new eyes.”¹ Boku is from Mongolia, and he participated in an ESL program for one semester at an American community college. His statement reveals the power of his international experience and how much he valued the time he spent living and learning in the United States. In an interview with one of the authors, Boku went on to articulate how much American higher education is valued in his home country, how all his classmates vied for the rare opportunity to attend an American college. Traditionally, the United States has been the destination of choice for students seeking to study outside their home country. In fact, during the 2007–2008 academic year, the United States captured 20 percent of the global educational market.² The United Kingdom ranked second, attracting 13 percent; France 8 percent; and Germany, Australia, and China each 7 percent.³ As of 2005, 2.5 million students were pursuing higher education outside their home countries, a number estimated to increase to 8 million by 2025.⁴

Enrolling international students in American colleges and universities yields benefits not only for international students, but also for American students, higher education institutions, and the United States as a whole. The economic impact alone of international students studying in the United States amounts to $13.3 billion annually.⁵ Given the projected increase in the number of students studying outside their home countries, from purely an economic standpoint, it is therefore important that the United States maintain its world lead in enrolling postsecondary international students. However, what Boku, and millions of international students—both current and those hoping to study here—perhaps do not know or do not question is why other countries are increasingly outpacing the United States in terms of college completion.

The National Commission on Excellence in A Nation at Risk warned the public that unless American academic achievement improved, “individuals in our society who (did) not possess the level of skills, literacy, and training essential to this new era (would) be effectively disenfranchised, not simply

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from the material rewards that accompany competent performance, but from the change to participate fully in our national life.”6 This dire prediction was based in part on a concern that while little progress was being made in improving student performance and graduation rates in the United States at the time, other nations were showing steady improvement in both areas and would soon surpass us.

In 2000, McCabe predicted 80 percent of new jobs in the new millennium would require some kind of postsecondary education.7 Additionally, The Spellings Commission Report, formally entitled A Test of Leadership: Charting the Future of Higher Education, found that “ninety percent of the fastest-growing jobs in the new information and service economy (would) require some postsecondary education.”8 In short, formal education beyond high school in the new millennium is no longer viewed as a socioeconomic accoutrement for those with the greatest reserves of intelligence and/or money, but by many as necessity for anyone who wishes to live comfortably in America.

By the time the Spellings Commission, a panel of national experts assembled during the second Bush administration, issued A Test of Leadership in 2006, the United States had slipped internationally to twelfth in the percentage of its population with a college degree, and to sixteenth in high school graduation rates.9 In successive national studies, experts warned that in an emerging global economy where work could easily be moved from one nation to another, as other countries with lower wage scales passed us by in educational attainment, jobs would inevitably move elsewhere in the world. The New Commission on the Skills of the American Workforce wrote in its 2007 report entitled Tough Choices or Tough Times:

If we continue on our current course, and the number of nations outpacing us in the education race continues to grow at its current rate, the American standard of living will steadily fall relative to those nations, rich and poor, that are doing a better job.10

It is in this climate that many policymakers are seeking ways to restore America’s preeminent position as the most admired education system in the world. Unfortunately, a confluence of factors has effectively forced or pushed many higher education sectors to adopt lower performance standards for students. Making it a more difficult decision to deny higher education admission is the irrefutable evidence that a college degree directly correlates with financial solvency, independence, and prosperity in America now more than ever before. And the ill-fated solution pertinent to this discussion about open admission is that if more students enroll, postsecondary completion and academic competence will rise in kind.

**Competence vs. Completion**

At the 2012 Council of State Governments conference, CCA’s Michael Baumgartner was right to impress upon legislators that they were already