

Jamie Merisotis: Working to Educate America



By Tom Schuman

The Lumina Foundation for Education has one aptly named Big Goal – that by 2025, 60% of Americans will have high-quality two-year or four-year degrees. The current national average is slightly below 40%.

Jamie Merisotis, president and CEO of the Indianapolis-based national organization for the past three years, embraces the challenge. A Connecticut native (Manchester), Maine student (Bates College) and long-time Washington, D.C. education researcher and advocate, he also values his current position in Indiana.

BizVoice®: You spent 15 years at the Institute for Higher Education Policy after co-founding the organization. What are you most proud of concerning its work?

Jamie Merisotis: “One of my core observations was that there needed to be an independent source of credible information that was going to bridge the gap in terms of understanding what we were calling, even then, the access and success agenda in higher education. So the Institute was established as this nonpartisan think tank.

“One of the things I’m most proud of over those 15 years is we maintained that nonpartisan reputation in an increasingly partisan context. I really believe that good public policy does not have a party label. I still remember in 2004 I was asked to testify on the higher education reauthorization act by the leadership of the Republican House. Two years later, the Democrats come back and take the House. They started their own process and asked me to be the lead witness on their hearing on the topic. It was a good moment for us at the Institute. We were perceived to be this credible source of nonpartisan information.

“The second thing I’m really proud of is that we were nonpartisan, but we were not without opinion. And our opinion was that to increase the number of people with high-quality degrees, you had to take chances. We focused on significant change in opportunities for minority students, focused on ways you could demand that higher education produce more – we didn’t use the term ‘productivity’ at that point; it was a more challenging term to use – but it was about a result-oriented outcome for higher education.”

BV: You have the Big Goal that drives what Lumina does. What are the advantages and disadvantages, if any, of focusing many, many efforts toward this one main initiative?

JM: “I just had a meeting with somebody recently who said I can’t think of any major foundation in America that is trying to do what Lumina is doing – which is being both quantitatively specific about what you are trying to achieve (the 60% of Americans with high-quality degrees) and to have a time limitation to it, saying that we want to achieve that goal in a certain period of time.

“The challenge is that we’ve set the bar high because the national level is 38% right now; it’s 33% in Indiana. Getting to 60% is a big hurdle, and we’ve set that time limit. But I also think that is our greatest asset – we’ve (Merisotis credits predecessor Martha Lamkin and the board) decided to focus the foundation exclusively on college access and success. The opportunity to be very goal-oriented in a quantitative way with a time limitation was something that I believe moves us from a grantmaking organization to being a leadership organization – and that’s exactly the role we’ve tried to play over the last couple of years. We can provide leadership without being politically partisan in the policy context – in terms of building public will for change, in terms of being able to support real innovating, taking some risks that might be more difficult for others to take.”

BV: The goal includes the term “high-quality” degrees. How do we best determine the quality of degrees and credentials?

JM: “It’s a great discussion. Part of the challenge is we have neither a general nor a specific understanding of what quality is in higher education right now. We’ve decided that the overwhelming measure of quality should be the learning that’s represented in a degree. How do you define learning? That is the critical question.

“What Lumina is trying to do now is establish a common understanding about what students should know and be able to do with a degree or credential from any college or university in this country. And we’re doing that through a variety of measures. We’re just about to release what we’re calling a degree profile – a description of competencies that should be demonstrated at the associate degree, bachelor degree and master degree levels for everyone who gets one of those credentials from a college or university.

“From our perspective that discussion is really important to have with employers, with the colleges and universities, and with students and families. If we can create a common understanding that quality is, in fact, represented by learning and that learning can be articulated in a specific way, we can raise the bar in ensuring that as you get the increasing number of credentials, that they are relevant in the workplace and have value to the lives of the students – they demonstrate competencies that students can think critically, they can solve problems, they can

communicate, they can be analytical.”

BV: You use the term “21st century students” in your speeches. Talk about the importance of that and how it describes today’s student population.

JM: “We were struggling with our own ability to characterize who we were trying to target. Much of the language is deficit language ... we use terms like ‘nontraditional’ or ‘underserved.’ In fact, what we are talking about is the majority of students, representing those who are the mainstream of our K-12 system, increasingly the mainstream of our colleges and universities and who ultimately our workforce needs to have. So those 21st century students – the adults, the minority students, the low-income populations, the first generation students – those populations encompass what we’re getting at.”

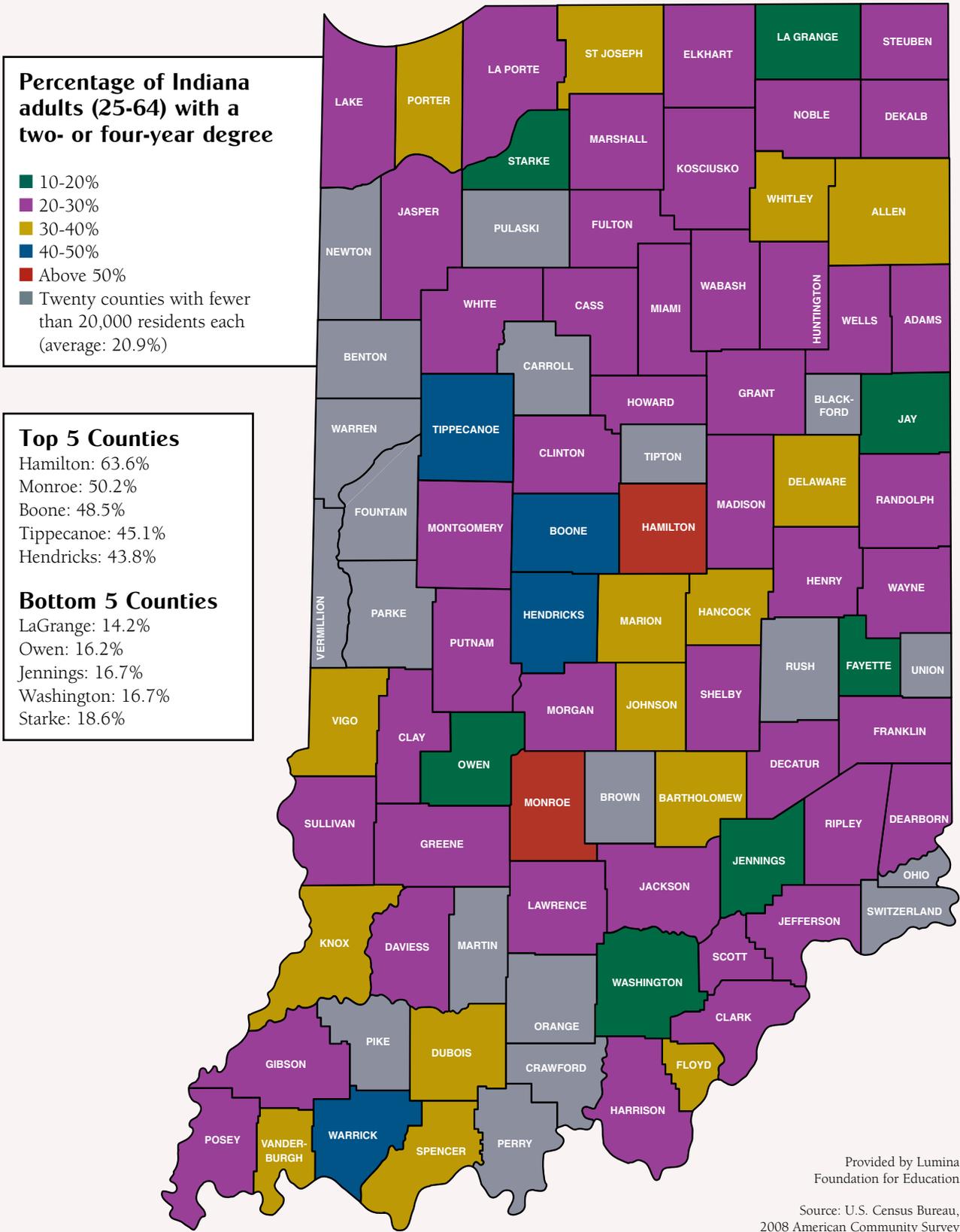
BV: There are 700,000 working-age adults in Indiana with some college credit. While degree attainment may not be realistic for all, has the system somehow let those people down?

JM: “It has. The good news – I’m an optimist by nature – is that these individuals actually expressed a desire for higher education and did something about it. The tragedy is they have nothing



Jamie Merisotis participates (top) in a Berlin, Germany conference titled “Crossing Borders: Diversity in Higher Education.” In early February, he presented a top honor at the Achieving the Dream Strategy Institute in Indianapolis.

College Degrees – by County



Provided by Lumina Foundation for Education

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2008 American Community Survey

to show for it; they have no credential to show as a result of that experience. It's incumbent on us as education leaders – as business leaders, as policy leaders – to engage them, to bring them back into the system because we collectively benefit from their successes.

“And given the economic challenges, I don't think we have a lot of choice. Many of those individuals that we're talking about probably made a living wage in the old economy without that credential; they're not going to be able to make a living wage in the new economy because, for the most part, the jobs that have been lost, or are going away, are not the jobs of the future – clearly not!”

BV: Lumina's work is on a national basis, but the foundation home is here. What about Indiana – the challenges and opportunities this state has?

JM: “We've got a leg up on some of our peers, which is good. First is we've got a pro-business environment in this state, which is helpful because if business leaders demand from the education system, that can translate into the sort of changes we need at the policy level and the institutional level that will make a difference. We also have done a lot of work in Indiana over the last decade and a half or so to get more people ready for college (21st Century Scholars, Core 40, some other things) in order to recognize that preparation for college is a critical part of our success. I think those are good things.

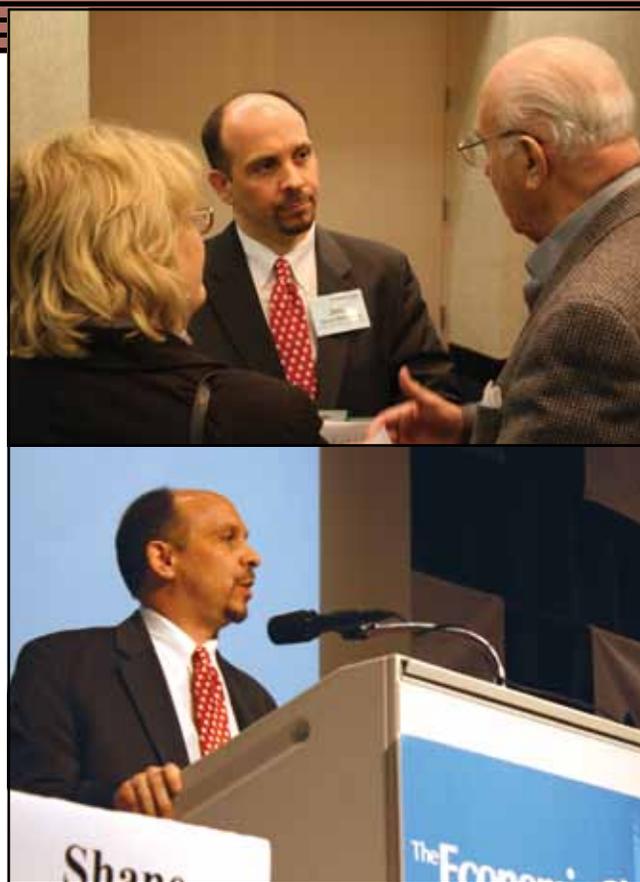
“The problem is that we are far short, in terms not only of the national average but what we really see as our own future workforce in the state, in terms of our capacity to educate people at a fast enough rate in order to fill the jobs that are already available right now in the current economy – and more importantly the jobs that are going to be created.

“We've got to go a lot faster. We either have to train our own residents better or become one of those net importing states in terms of talent, and I would much rather train Hoosiers and retain them here than what we've seen other states try to do, which is bring in the talent, because that has long-term consequences that are not good for the state.”

BV: You and Stan Jones (former Indiana higher education commissioner) emphasized accelerated associate degrees in a proposal this past summer. Can you elaborate on that?

JM: “One of the biggest challenges that individuals have with getting any kind of college degree, but particularly getting associate degrees, is time. Time is their enemy. It takes a long time to get a college degree; the average time it takes to get an associate degree in this country is five years for what's supposed to be a two-year credential. The thing we don't take into account for students is that life gets in the way.

“Efforts to accelerate progress are to essentially tell students we



Prior to and during his Economic Club of Indiana speech in January, Merisotis emphasized the need for a more productive higher education system.

want you to treat your education like a job; that means you go to school in a block schedule like you're going to work; that you limit the number of options that you have in terms of fulfilling your requirements to get the credential. It is avoiding what Stan calls 'excessive choice'; it's not to eliminate choice, but eliminate the excessive choice that confuses people, creates a disincentive to success. And it's finding opportunities to accelerate degree attainment much more rapidly in areas where there is already high demand for people in fields where there is likelihood for higher wage jobs.”

BV: Can you tell us a little about your family and adjusting to life in Indiana?

JM: “I tell people all the time that after two decades in Washington, I did not know what to expect coming to Indiana. I had no opinion as someone who had spent his entire life on the East Coast, although I occasionally joked with my wife, a native of Chicago, that I thought the Midwest started in Albany. But what has really impressed us about Indiana is both the receptiveness we've gotten as new residents of this state but also this sort of can-do attitude that exists here. This is an environment where people want to get things done.

“I see that in terms of our capacity as a state to be clear about what we want in terms of Hoosier well-being, which is a higher quality of life but also a willingness to recognize we are all in this collectively as Hoosiers – and our collective future



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depends on our ability to come together and solve our problems.

“It is a great vantage point to be running a national organization, from a place that is not New York or Washington or Los Angeles. I think being in Indiana has been a real asset to the Lumina Foundation.”

BV: When not on an airplane, making speeches, working out of the office here, what are some of the things you like to do?

JM: “I spend a lot of time with my children, a 7-year-old and an almost 3-year-old, and that’s really important to me. I call my 7-year-old an instant Hoosier; he’s really, really sports obsessed. I read a lot and I actually like to read things in my free time that have nothing to do with higher education. I collect antique maps. I’m not exactly sure how I got into that, but I’ve always been interested in geography.

“I have a map that doesn’t qualify as an antique, but it’s a map that I love. It’s from the 1940s and it’s a map of the Moscow subway system. It is marvelous to see what was then, and now even more so, a major city and to see the vision from a transportation perspective. They viewed transportation as being so important to the success of that city. I can’t help but think as a resident of Central Indiana why we haven’t ever articulated that vision for our transportation plan here. It’s an issue that I think is going to impede our economic development; and you look at a city like Moscow and they figured this out 70, 80 years ago, and it’s inspiring that they had the foresight to do this.”

BV: What type of books might we find next to your bed?

JM: “I’m in the middle of re-reading Nelson Mandela’s autobiography, *A Long Walk to Freedom*, and I just finished a fascinating popular science book by an astronomer named Mike Brown. It’s called *How I Killed Pluto and Why It Had It Coming*. He’s the Cal Tech astronomer who figured out that Pluto is not a planet. He actually could have been known as the only living person to have discovered a planet. He discovered three entities that originally people thought were going to be described as planets, and describes how he came to the conclusion from a scientific perspective that it was not appropriate to call them planets. And what the book really told me was the importance of being truly intellectually honest about what you’re trying to achieve. I love reading things about people defying their own self-interests to achieve some greater good.”

BV: You have a great deal of international experience, working in different countries on their education initiatives. Are there some lessons learned that apply today?

JM: “I spent a lot of time in southern Africa and former Soviet states. One of the countries I learned from the most was actually one of the poorest countries in the world and that’s Mozambique.”

Merisotis helped developed a one-page form with basic questions (Do you own an automobile? Do you have farm animals?) to serve as the needs analysis process.

“What I realized was that in the United States we have a very complicated process for analyzing need in order to determine the allocation of student financial aid. Why do we have a form with 140 questions that have worksheets for some of those ... that are 10 or 12 questions long? The difference (in Mozambique) was that they had no choice; they had to innovate ... and what that taught me was there are things we can learn, even from very different contexts, that we should be able to apply. And the interesting thing is that we are now going through this very important discussion about simplifying the financial aid process because we recognize that the process is actually a barrier for low-income and first-generation populations.”

INFORMATION LINK

Resource: Lumina Foundation at www.luminafoundation.org