AT ISSUE

Challenging the Completion Agenda

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How did we get here?

One of the founding principles of community colleges in the early twentieth century was the desire for "social equality and greater access to higher education" (Cohen, Brawer, & Kiser, 2014, p. 1). For over 100 years, access was the "driving force and single most important goal of the community college movement" (O'Banion, 2010). From the founding of community colleges to the present, one fact has remained constant: At the community college, there is opportunity. There is opportunity to learn a new skill, earn a certificate or degree that leads to a job, or complete a series of classes and transfer to a prestigious four year university that may have previously been out of reach.

This open door philosophy has been the cornerstone of the community college: "This goal   to provide an opportunity for any high school graduate or 18 year old (or older) to enroll in college   permeates every niche of the community college enterprise" (O'Banion, 2010). For many years, access seemed to be working, as more and more students took advantage of the opportunity to attend college. In the past twenty five years, according to Tinto (2012), "…access has more than doubled from nearly 9 million students in 1980 to almost 20 million in 2011" (p. 2). Community colleges were lauded by the public, by politicians, and by the government for the access and opportunity they provided.

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Then the rules changed. In the past few years, community colleges have "attracted unprecedented levels of public attention" (Lau, 2014) for a variety of reasons. Citing community colleges as the vehicle to keeping America competitive, President Obama has highlighted the role of community colleges and has positioned them to play a primary role in economic recovery and expansion. Furthermore, the President set two goals for academic attainment in his first State of the Union address: "By 2020, America will once again have the highest proportion of college graduates in the world, and community colleges will produce an additional 5 million graduates" (Baldwin, 2014).

Unfortunately, "at the very time that global competitiveness depends on a well-educated citizenry, we find ourselves losing ground in relative educational attainment" (AACC, 2012). In recent years, then, the access agenda morphed into the student success agenda and then morphed again into the "completion agenda, as the … goal that has become an imperative for the nation" (O'Banion, 2010). Today, access is no longer the focal point. Completion is.

The Community College Population

Any discussion of the completion agenda begins with a somber recitation of the bleak community college graduation and completion numbers. Pusser and Levin (2009) acknowledge that, "Perhaps no statistic has brought more negative publicity to community colleges over the years than the percentage of students who transfer to four-year colleges and complete baccalaureate degrees" (p. 8). Reclaiming the American Dream: Community Colleges and the Nation's Future (AACC, 2012) calls for a total transformation of the sector, including a dire need for improved completion rates. "Usually praised for their open admissions policy and commitment to serving minorities and low-income populations," says Jennifer Gonzalez, "community colleges are shown in a harsher light in this report" (2012). The report cites dismal statistics: Only 46% of students who enter community colleges with the goal of earning a degree or certificate have attained that goal, have transferred to a baccalaureate institution, or are still enrolled after six years (2012).

Unfortunately, the national IPEDS (Integrated Postsecondary Educational Data System) data are frequently cited regarding community college completion rates comes from a report that was specifically designed to measure the graduation rates of four-year college and university students; the report does not accurately reflect the differing needs, abilities, and levels of

preparation of the community college student. This is because many students use the community college on an as-needed basis, and "the traditional definition of success (associate's degree within three years) would classify these students as dropouts—a failure on the part of the institution—when in fact the community college served exactly their needs at a specific point in time" (Bontrager & Rhodes, 2009).

Specifically, the students included in the federally required IPEDS statistics are first-time, full-time, degree-seeking students who begin their studies in the fall semester and graduate within 150% of normal program time. In other words, students who transfer to the community college from another institution, change majors, have a "pre-program" designation, take a longer span of time to complete their program, or begin in the winter, spring, or summer terms are not counted (see Figure 1).

Unfortunately, critics of community colleges frequently point to poor completion rates to justify the charge that community colleges are not effectively educating students. Cohen et al. (2014) state that, in reality, "these rates do little except reflect high numbers of part-time and swirling students" (p. 401). While most students entering a four-year baccalaureate institution are pursuing a degree, the varying pursuits of community college students are all perfectly acceptable. For example, students may be efficiently taking a class or two during the summer to shorten their time to degree, starting at a community college for either one or two years (or semesters) to defray tuition costs, or simply taking classes for personal interest. Due to the diversity of student goals, attendance patterns that often reflect swirling and stopping out, and goal attainment that is not always linear, the challenge of defining and measuring student success at the community college is considerable (Bontrager & Rhodes, 2009).

Interestingly, Becky Supiano, in an October 2014 article in *The Chronicle of Higher Education* analyzed data from the Indiana University system, comparing graduation rates at the flagship institution versus the branch campuses. Noting a wide disparity in these numbers, Supiano posits that there are two reasons for this: "First, the regional campuses serve a different student population than Bloomington does…. Second, the regional campuses serve a different purpose than the flagship does" (2014). When students enter Indiana University in Bloomington, "it's reasonable to assume most of them aim to graduate from it" (2014). However, "[m]any students at the regional campuses have other responsibilities, like jobs or raising a family, on top of their academic work" (2014).
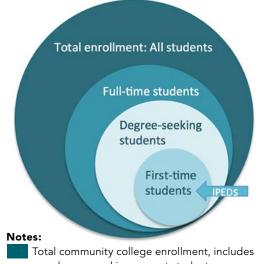
The regional campuses also note that enrollment declines when the economy improves, since students tend to choose jobs over school. With competing priorities, the intent to transfer out at some point, and family responsibilities that factor into the college experience, the student population at the branch campuses sounds much like the students served by community colleges. This illustrates the fact that comparing community college completion rates with traditional baccalaureate institutions is essentially a flawed model due to the significant differences in population served and the broader mission of the community college.

What is Completion?

Measuring completion seems simple. How many students enter an institution? How many graduate from it? In fact, the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) measures the percentage of new students who have not previously enrolled in college (FTIACs, First Time In Any College) who have graduated from a community college after three years and after five years (National Center for Education Statistics, n.d.). However, this metric accounts for only a small fraction of the students who enter a community college, and for this reason these statistics cannot accurately represent the success of a community college. In an article in the *Community College Daily*, the author quotes Craig Clagett as having "… listed

Figure 1

Who is included in the IPEDS graduation rate data?

Notes:

Total community college enrollment, includes part-time, non degree-seeking, repeat students

IPEDS graduation data includes only first-time, degree seeking, full-time students

several flaws with the current federal data-collection system: It excludes part-time students; it includes people who are not seeking an associate degree; it makes no allowance for developmental education; and it doesn't take into account people who take more than three years to earn a degree" (Ashford, 2011).

Other proposed metrics include transfer rates and certificate achievement, but even these attempts fail to account for what is happening on the ground in community colleges. In reality, the majority of the population served by community colleges is not counted. Additionally, the public debate misunderstands the metrics because it elides the difference between completion rate, which refers to how many students who enter an institution complete a degree there, and attainment rate, which is what President Obama actually describes in the address, which refers to the percentage of the adult population that has earned an academic credential (Hauptman, 2012, p. 18).

Hauptman (2012) points out that most of those in the public debate fret about losing the lead over other nations in completion rates, but this is a lead the United States never appears to have had. Instead, the United States has led more clearly in the broadness of access to matriculation, which, of course, contributes to a lack of timely completion. He states, "I can't remember another time when the facts were so mangled in the effort to make the case for needed changes or improvement" (2012, p. 40).

Quality and the Completion Agenda

The very first goal of the report, *Empowering Community Colleges to Build the Nation's Future* (AACC, 2014) is to "increase completion rates of students earning community college credentials (certificates and associate degrees) by 50% by 2020" (p. 8). Specifically, the report recommends that institutions, "publicly commit to explicit goals for college completion. At the institution and state levels, articulate aggressive numeric goals, time frames, and the commitment to achieve equity in outcomes for a diverse student population" (p. 8).

The problem with setting numeric goals for completion rates is that there may be unintended consequences. As noted by Baldwin (2014), Terry O'Banion, President Emeritus of the League for Innovation in the Community College, warns that the completion agenda "signifies a tectonic shift in the community college zeitgeist" (p. 4). Baldwin adds that "the implications for governmental expectations and funding,

program offerings, staffing, the type of students admitted, and the kinds of interventions employed to help students could be profound" (p. 4). Some consequences may have to do with quality issues; for example, the focus may shift to offering more short-term certificates in order to claim a higher number of completions.

Andrew P. Kelly and Mark Schneider, in their 2012 interview with Paul Fain of *Inside Higher Ed* caution against this development, stating that, "At heart, the push to boost degree completion must be about building human capital, not just increasing the number of paper credentials" (n.p.). Another concern is that the pressure for completion will actually result in curricular changes that may negatively impact students. For example, when Anne Arundel Community College in Maryland set a goal of doubling the number of credentials it awards by 2020, the English department was asked to eliminate the required research paper in order to increase students' likelihood of graduating (Humphreys, 2012).

Developmental Education and Limiting Factors

Federal Financial Aid policies are already beginning to reflect the completion agenda. According to those policies, students must choose an eligible program within one year of enrolling in a college; "undecided" is no longer an option. Federal Financial Aid will pay only for courses necessary to complete that program (Department of Education, 2014, p. 4). Additionally, students must complete coursework for their program within 150% of the time of enrollment though the regulations provide some flexibility in defining whether a student is full or part time, and students have the option to stop out if necessary without losing financial aid eligibility (Department of Education, 2013).

While relieving the student from the burden of unnecessary expense is laudable, the completion agenda tends to focus coursework narrowly on career and technical programs, particularly in community colleges (Cohen et al., 2014, p. 286). In fact, in Barack Obama's State of the Union Address in 2011, he stated: "Because people need to be able to train for new jobs and careers in today's fast-changing economy, we're also revitalizing America's community colleges" (Obama, 2011). Non-profit organizations that have taken up the mantle of the completion agenda emphasize this preference for vocational education and job preparation (2014, p. 294).

Complete College America (2011), an organization endorsed by nearly every governor in the United States, chastises

community colleges for allowing students to exceed the 60 credit associate's degree by, on average, 19 credits (p. 12). The report states, "Being able to engage in an extended period of self-discovery or sample multiple courses out of catalogues the size of phone books might work for students who have the luxury of unlimited time and money" (p. 13). The organization endorses a plan to severely limit offering general education credits in all public institutions of higher learning to a strictly defined set of core courses that would lay the foundation for technical training (p. 13).

This intense focus on occupational education seems to short change classic liberal intents of higher education, notably the goal to become a more flexible and critical thinker with exposure to a variety of different disciplines and perspectives. Debra Humphreys (2012), argues, "Instead of exploring ways to increase students' exposure to deep learning and research, and real-world applications of learning, colleges and universities are facing strong pressure to move in the opposite direction" (n.p.). She points in particular to the reduction of general education credits and options for students outside of their immediate programs. No longer will students be permitted to take a class in an unfamiliar discipline simply because it sounds interesting or broadens their horizons. Humphreys (2012) points to this curricular narrowing as actually counterproductive because globalization and other elements of contemporary employment "require a broader set of skills and higher learning than ever before." The pursuit of liberal education and a broad range of skills potentially may become a purview of the wealthy and privileged (n.p.).

Meeting the Challenge

Despite flaws in the completion agenda and its applicability to community college, most community college leaders are well aware that there is considerable room for improvement in student success. Too many students fail to complete their programs, too many students get bogged down in developmental classes, and too many students have no clear pathway to a degree or credential. Even a cursory look at other data sources on community college student success rates (e.g., Voluntary Framework of Accountability, National Community College Benchmarking Project) indicates that there is much work to be done. Rather than focusing on completion per se, the authors looked at several promising initiatives that focus on process rather than outcome, on student success rather than completion rates, and on student learning rather than student goal attainment.

Degree Qualifications Profile

In order to meet the challenge to dramatically increase the number and quality of certificates and degrees awarded in the United States, strategic plans that focus on increasing student success are critical. Strategic planning is an institutional initiative that will encourage stakeholders to talk directly and more openly, to create a shared vision, and take collective ownership of the initiative or need (Hanover Research, 2013).

Pressing toward increased degree production has not been approached with a consistent public understanding of not only reporting degree and certificate completion numbers, but what these degrees ought to demand and mean. Considering the drive to increase college attainment, it is not enough to simply count the number of those who have attained credentials; the credentials themselves must count. Jamie P. Merisotis, President and CEO, Lumina Foundation says, "The nation's need for skills and abilities of individuals who are well equipped to succeed in the modern, global workforce, is huge and growing" (Lumina, *The degree qualifications profile*, 2014, p. 2).

Jamie P. Merisotis also says, "Employers continually express the lack of specialized technical expertise, but also the lack of vital 'soft skills' such as critical thinking, communication and teamwork" (Lumina, *The degree qualifications profile*, 2014, p. 2). In today's world, employees need both, and higher education must be the major resource for developing talented, willing, and able citizens.

While higher education institutions have been under increasing pressure to be accountable for the quality of their degrees, colleges and universities have frequently responded by assessing samples of students in ways that say too little about learning. Some colleges and universities have defined their own expected student learning outcomes, yet what they have done has been largely invisible to students, policy leaders, the public, and employers (Lumina, *The degree qualifications profile*, 2014, p. 12). *The Degree Qualifications Profile* (DQP) responds to these concerns by describing concretely what is meant by each of the degrees addressed and what college graduates should know and be able to do to earn the associate, bachelor's, or master's degree. The DQP's learning outcomes will engage faculty members in the course/program improvement process, clarify and help realize educational pathways for students, and help streamline the accreditation process (NILOA, 2014).

Because the DQP defines performance standards at progressively more challenging levels, demonstrated

performance at these ascending levels becomes the basis on which students earn credentials. Many institutions have used the DQP in some manner since its introduction in 2011, including large and small public and independent colleges and universities in urban, suburban, and rural locations (Lumina, *Official launch*, 2014). In terms of specific learning outcomes, the DQP organizes the learning outcomes (proficiencies) of degrees among five broad, interrelated categories: specialized knowledge, broad and integrative knowledge, intellectual skills, applied and collaborative learning, and civic and global learning.

Higher learning is becoming ever more critical in the 21st century. To succeed in the workplace, students must prepare for jobs that are rapidly changing, use technologies and knowledge in areas that still are emerging, and work with colleagues from (and often in) all parts of the world. The complex challenges that graduates must address as citizens are increasingly global (Lumina, *Official launch*, 2014). Through focusing on broad areas of learning and the application of that learning, the DQP illustrates progressively challenging performance expectations for all students and are presented in several discrete categories: review of learning outcomes, curriculum mapping, review of degree proficiencies, transfer and articulation, assessment of student learning, accreditation, and strategic planning.

In a Lumina Foundation news release (Lumina, *The degree qualifications profile*, 2014), George Kuh, director of the National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment (NILOA), which is partnering with Lumina to provide ongoing support for institutions that use the DQP, says, "Faculty and staff at several hundred institutions around the country have field-tested the DQP, and we now have a framework that supports and advances their work while ensuring that students get what they need from postsecondary education" (p. 2). George Kuh also said in the Lumina Foundation news release (2014), "It's imperative for us to move beyond relying so heavily on seat time to declare that students have acquired the proficiencies that will enable them to live productive, self-sufficient, and civically responsible lives" (n.p.).

Guided Pathways

Students may feel lost and become frustrated trying to navigate their way through college, often self-advising in lieu of visiting an academic advisor. Community colleges have begun to take notice of studies that show students who choose a program of study in their first year are much more likely to complete a degree or transfer than those students who wait

until their second year or later (Cho & Jenkins, 2013). Instead of letting students become frustrated trying to navigate their own paths, colleges are creating "guided pathways" for their students. This approach includes three key features:

1. On-Ramps to Programs of Study: Colleges are realizing they now need to rethink the mechanisms in place to assist new students to develop and clarify their educational goals. Students will develop an academic plan where they will choose a field of study, and students who cannot be placed in college-level courses will be guided through remediation as quickly as possible.

2. Clear Roadmaps to Student Goals: Faculty will clearly map out academic programs to create easily decipherable pathways with clear learning outcomes aligned with requirements needed for career advancement.

3. Embedded Advising, Progress Tracking, Feedback, and Support: Advising will be redesigned to ensure that students are indeed making progress towards degree completion or transferability. Collaboration between faculty and professional advising staff is necessary to help students transition between general to program advising. Included are identified critical courses that should be taken early and serve as a great predictor to predict a student's performance in a particular major (Cho & Jenkins, 2013, p. 4).

The Indiana Commissioner for Higher Education, Teresa Lubbers, stated that proactive college advising should help to guide students to a program of study to boost success rates (Jacobs, 2014). Currently, fewer than one third of the state's college students graduate on time and many finish with debt and no degree (Lubbers, as cited in Jacobs, 2014). A guided pathway allows for clear degree maps, proactive advising, and helps to empower students to make better decisions, which will, in turn, save them time and money. The key is to simplify choices for the students and add more structured support.

A new Indiana state study, *Guided Pathways to Success*, recommends the following:

1. Supplement college advising with structured degree maps that help simplify the course-selection process to provide students with a clear path to graduate on time.

2. Encourage students to up their semester credits from 12 to 15, or 30 per academic year, to complete on time.

3. Provide proactive or intrusive advising that will intervene when students fail to complete key courses, or to make satisfactory academic progress.

4. Expand block schedule options for greater consistency, making it easier for students to balance their school, work, and personal lives (Jacobs, 2014).

Although colleges have begun to undertake these reforms, they still lack a clear way to measure the costs and efficiencies involved. A method was developed to measure the pathways costs; however, it will take longer than a single year for best results (Belfield & Jenkins, 2014). This method models college completion based on a student's course-taking patterns. The process corresponds with how students actually progress through college (2014). By applying this method, undoubtedly we will begin to see systematic changes in programs and other services due to increased costs. As more instruction is provided for students to be successful, costs increase. However, the recent studies show that more students are persisting, which also increased completion rates; therefore, efficiency has also increased (2014).

Conclusion

As a movement full of flawed data, impassioned political rhetoric, and reactionary reforms, the completion agenda has produced mixed results. However, that does not mean it is not addressing some important questions about student success in higher education. Tinto (2012) states, "Less than one-third of community college students earn an associate's degree or certificate from their initial institution over a six-year period" (p. 2). Moreover, African-American and Hispanic students as well as first-generation and low-income students lag especially far behind their counterparts in the completion of degrees (Bailey, 2012; Tinto, 2012). Access is not enough. If these students, who are predominantly served by community colleges, are not reaching their goals, then access is not translating into opportunity.

As stated earlier, "Counting everyone who registers, even those who take no classes or who drop out after the first couple of sessions, distorts the data on student success" (Cohen et al., 2014, p. 77). If community colleges truly want to better serve their students and provide educational

opportunities, leaders need to better define and count completion. This definition should include certificate programs and apprenticeships since both of those options produce tangible benefits in the job market, and counting them allows colleges to better inform and measure their interventions (Bailey, 2012). It should also take into account the goals of individual students since many students attend community college with the intention of taking only a few courses to update skills.

Additionally, community college leaders must change the way the public thinks about these numbers. Metrics should be a powerful tool to help an individual college decide how well it responds to students' needs, instead of becoming a punitive measure that impacts budgets. This use of a completion rate, however it is defined, risks choking off access, which also isn't opportunity.

Finally, rather than reacting to the completion agenda, community colleges must respond to their students' needs in a thoughtful, holistic way. Responding requires that leaders have carefully measured student needs and described their objectives. Currently, "[s]ome recommendations are the result of sound research; others are based on anecdotal evidence; and still others are claims made by various organizations, groups, and individuals, including the increasing number of retention consultants who offer the 'secret' of student retention" (Tinto, 2012, p. 114). Alternatively, effective programs for student success "address systematically each of the conditions shaping student success and do so over the full course of student progression through the institution" (p. 117).

Community college leaders must determine how their individual colleges will respond and do so in a way that is scalable to the entire institution. Bailey (2012) notes that the goals President Obama set forth and the public has demanded will be difficult to achieve. She states, "Improvements will have to be sustained and expanded and incorporated into an organization that support students and faculty in comprehensive ways that go beyond the current experience of most colleges" (p. 95). However, this is the minimum requirement to turn access into opportunity, and community college leaders must meet this challenge.

Non-Completion, Not Lack of Success

Note: The following success stories were shared with administrators by Henry Ford and Schoolcraft College students; they illustrate just a few of the reasons why students can achieve an important academic or personal milestone at the community college without necessarily completing a credential or earning a degree in the "average" time frame.

Non-Completer Success Story #1:
Andrea indicated that, after two semesters at the community college, she would not be returning in the fall semester. Why? "I was at Western last year and bombed out. Too much partying, cutting classes, you know? But living at home, I cleaned up my act and did really well here, so Western is letting me come back!"

Non-Completer Success Story #2:
Jamal took a class in Fall 2014 but did not return for winter [semester]. "I just needed an Excel class for work. I got a new job and my Excel was pretty rusty, because I haven't used it for a while. I took an online class and did just fine! "

Non-Completer Success Story #3:
Janna shared her story about why she was moving on from the community college without finishing a degree. "My high school transcript was really not good at all. So I needed 30 credits with good grades in order to transfer to Michigan State. At the end of this semester, I'll have exactly what I need – 30 credits with a 3.75 GPA."

Non-Completer Success Story #4:
Kim is a full-time student at a four-year university, but instead of taking the summer off, she takes classes at her local community college and transfers those credits back to her university. "It's less expensive, and I'm going to finish my degree early!"

Non-Completer Success Story #5
Martin tells us, "My parents wanted me to come here for the industrial program, but I didn't know what I wanted to do. Nobody in my family ever went to college before. I found myself in an English class last semester where we were talking about really cool stuff. That was a lot more interesting than my industrial classes, and I wanted to change my major to something that made me think. I know it might take a long time because I have to re-do some credits and take some remedial classes, but I would much rather work with my mind than with my hands." Martin is currently a Philosophy major.

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