

# Perspectives

Community College Leadership for the 21st Century

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## Open Access and the Completion Agenda: Are They Compatible?

**Christopher Baldwin, Ph.D.**, Executive Director, Michigan Center for Student Success

In January, President Barack Obama convened a gathering for a summit on college access. To be invited, attendees were obliged to make formal commitments to improve access for low-income and underrepresented students. For proponents of community colleges, the focus of this summit likely has a familiar ring. Historically, the defining traits of these two-year institutions have been accessibility with low tuition, open admissions, diverse programming with convenient scheduling, and relatively small class sizes.

Over the past several decades, community colleges have become the affordable access point for millions of Americans entering postsecondary education. The renewed focus on access

is critical, yet it comes after an intense decade of reform efforts fixated on success. Community colleges have been under increased scrutiny from the Obama Administration, major foundations, and state policymakers about how their students ultimately fare. The focus on student progression and completion has challenged fundamental assumptions about how these colleges operate, what their mission is, and how to realize improved outcomes. The growing emphasis on success has also been accompanied by increased accountability in the form of outcomes-based funding. As a result, colleges are being pushed to make strategic choices that may limit access. To understand the tension between access and success it is useful to briefly retrace the last decade of the completion agenda.

The underlying factor contributing to the emergence of the completion agenda has been the changing domestic economy and increased global competition. Economic realities have led to a near consensus that at least some education beyond high school is required for individuals to find family-sustaining employment and realize a reasonable quality of life. Analyses by Georgetown University bolsters this view, pointing out that more than 60 percent of all jobs by 2018 will require some postsecondary education and many will require at least an associate's degree. When these projections are compared to current education attainment levels — only 38.7% of the working-age

population (25-64) nationally had at least an associate degree in 2011, according to Carnevale, Smith, and Stohl (2010)—the impetus behind the completion agenda becomes clear.

Major foundations have served as catalysts for considerable action on the attainment gap and have partnered with several other national and regional funders to push for significant reforms nationally.

Their efforts were reinforced when President Barack Obama strongly embraced the completion agenda early in his administration. The President signaled an unprecedented commitment to community colleges, viewing these institutions as critical to reaching national attainment goals. The President set two goals for education attainment: "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."

The focus on degree completion has also played out in state capitals across the country with policymakers pressing for many of the same reforms. The U. S. Department of Education's College Completion Toolkit draws on policy innovations in leading states and articulates seven strategies governors should consider when promoting college completion. Governors were urged to set goals and develop an action plan; embrace performance-based funding; align high school standards with college entrance and placement standards; make transfer easier for students; use data to drive decision-making; accelerate learning and reduce costs; and target adults, especially those with some college, but no degree.

The philanthropic investments and policy pressures have also spurred a considerable increase in rigorous research about the challenges facing community college students and the institutional characteristics and practices that contribute to improved outcomes. In 2011, the Community College Research Center (CCRC) published The Assessment of Evidence Series to document community college efforts to improve

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*Creating the conditions that foster student success in college has never been more important. . . First and foremost, focus everyone's attention on student success.*

- George D. Kuh

*To be serious about student success, institutions would recognize that the roots of attrition lie not only in their students and the situations they face, but also in the very character of the educational settings.*

- Vincent Tinto

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## EMERGING LEADERS' PERSPECTIVES

To remain competitive in the global economy, a greater percentage of our college-age population must enroll in postsecondary education and complete a degree in a timely fashion. Community colleges are essential to achieving gains in U. S. educational attainment, but face challenges when determining how to increase student success, whether defined in terms of graduating with a degree or certificate, transferring, or retaining a job. We posed the following question to emerging and national leaders; their answers appear below.

### Kathryn Flewelling, Ed.D.

Director, Laramie County Community College  
Cheyenne, Wyoming

Though there are many approaches community colleges can take to ensure the success of their students at various points in their education, what we do at the front door for students can set the tone for their entire college experience. We still send mixed messages to our students by allowing them to enroll without being prepared, and by doing so, we are not ensuring their success from day one.

In all our efforts to make college accessible for students, we are not doing them any favors by allowing them to begin courses late, without orientation, and without fiscal resources in place. One of the most effective practices I have seen that allows community colleges to better ensure the success of their students is the elimination of late registration, while providing options of various class starting dates.

For many students, the traditional 16-week course schedule works well. However, for other students who are often juggling multiple jobs and family responsibilities, committing to such a period of time doesn't work. Circumstances can change quickly for many of our students and what was planned originally can no longer be completed.

Rather than trying to force our non-traditional students into a traditional model, we have the ability to become more adaptable to their needs. Instead of rushing and cutting corners to get underprepared students into a traditional 16-week course, offering various start dates eliminates that need. Those students who decide to start at the last minute, without completed enrollment steps and beneficial preparation such as mandatory orientation and advising, are simply deferred to later start dates. This way, we are not turning away students and risking them never returning.

This practice doesn't come without significant investment and adjustment by a college, including a potential recreation of philosophy and culture, but is it not what we want to and should do if we intend to fulfill our mission of student success? If today's environment is changing the needs of our students, we need to be just as willing to change our practices to accommodate those needs.

### QUESTION OF THE MONTH:

**Given the challenges, how can community colleges best help ensure that students who gain access to college successfully graduate?**

.....  
**...there is a disconnect related to understanding expected academic behaviors.**

~ Lesley Frederick

### Lesley Frederick, M.S.

Vice President, Lincoln Land Community College  
Springfield, Illinois

Community colleges are facing a daunting challenge. Preparedness of entering students, or lack thereof, is one of the most complex issues confronting community college leaders. Students are coming to the community college not only with academic deficiencies, but also a lack of understanding about college processes, resources, and the skills necessary to be a successful student. Students deficient in this

essential preparation are often unable to understand college processes such as admission and registration; financial aid, college cost, and affordability are foreign concepts; and there is a disconnect related to understanding expected academic behaviors. For example, adult students find various college processes challenging as many of

these require an understanding of technology and these students may not be proficient or comfortable with this technology. Another example commonly found in traditional age students is the tendency to spend inadequate amounts of time preparing for exams, expecting that the exams will be multiple choice tests, requiring little thought or preparation.

Community colleges are devising numerous strategies to combat these preparedness issues. Focusing on intrusive advising strategies and creating guided academic pathways for students are two approaches. Financial literacy programs are being created to help students understand how the financial decisions they are making now will impact them in the future. Learning communities are creating intentional opportunities for students to be more fully engaged in their learning experience and apply what they are studying across multiple subjects. Career exploration and career development initiatives are being front-loaded so that students can identify and get on a path to success sooner. However, no single strategy is a panacea for student success-related issues. Implementation of multiple student success strategies has the most promise to advance retention and graduation rates and also to improve student outcomes. Institutional leaders must review student success and retention related data and make data-informed decisions to guide design and development of promising practices that have the most potential to impact student success within their respective organizations.

Kathryn Flewelling recently assumed the position of Director of Student Planning and Success at Laramie County Community College in Cheyenne, WY. She earned her MFA from Ohio State University and her Ed.D. in Community College Leadership from Ferris State University's DCCL program. She previously served as a college faculty member and as Director of Learning Support Services at North Central Michigan College in Petoskey.



Lesley Frederick serves as Vice President of Student Services at Lincoln Land Community College, located in Springfield, Illinois, and has worked exclusively at community colleges during her 16+ years as a student services professional. She is a community college graduate and earned her Master of Science in College Student Personnel Administration from the University of Central Missouri in Warrensburg, Missouri. Currently, she is a student in the DCCL program at Ferris State University.



## NATIONAL LEADER PERSPECTIVE

To remain competitive in the global economy, a greater percentage of our college-age population must enroll in postsecondary education and complete a degree in a timely fashion. Community colleges are essential to achieving gains in U. S. educational attainment, but face challenges when determining how to increase student success, whether defined in terms of graduating with a degree or certificate, transferring, or retaining a job. We posed the following question to emerging and national leaders; their answers appear below.

### Arleen Arnsperger

Project Manager, Initiative on Student Success,  
Center for Community College Student  
Engagement, The University of Texas at Austin

Ninety percent of entering community college students who have responded to the Center for Community College Student Engagement’s Survey of Entering Student Engagement (SENSE) say they have the motivation needed to succeed in college. Nearly 80% of more than a quarter million students surveyed say they intend to earn an associate degree; almost 75% say they plan to transfer to a four-year college or university; and almost 60% say they want to earn a certificate. Yet, almost half the students who begin their postsecondary education in a community college leave before the start of their second year.

When new students indicate that they can do whatever it takes to succeed in college, do they know what will be expected of them? When they tell us their academic goal, do they know what courses they’ll be required to take and how long it will take them to complete? And, perhaps more importantly, do they have any idea what their college coursework will prepare them to do?

Through more than 200 focus groups with community college students throughout the country, we have learned that the answer is a resounding “No!” Most students do not enter college knowing what they need to know to succeed. They rely on us to provide the information they need, guide them in the right direction, and create a learning environment that will help them achieve their goals.

Yet students are quick to discover which experiences help them. In fact, the practices students identify as valuable are the same practices that research and institutional data confirm have a positive impact on student success:

*“Orientation should be required... as soon as I walked out I knew exactly what I needed to go do.” “When new students first come in, I think they should have a mandatory one-on-one sit-down with a counselor to really discuss in detail their degree plan.” “The [student success class] gives you test-taking strategies, study skills, managing time, money... a structured idea of getting organized. It’s helpful.”*

Students are consistent in their descriptions of beneficial learning and teaching practices. They talk about the qualities of instructors who “wrap me in;” they make distinctions between those who help students “not just learn about something, but actually do it” versus those who “read it pretty much verbatim off the slide”.

Students give high marks to teachers who “interact with the students” and connect students with each other from the first day of class. “We were exchanging numbers, and then we started having

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***If community colleges are to contribute powerfully to meeting the needs of 21st-century students and the 21st-century economy, education leaders must reimagine what these institutions are – and are capable of becoming.***

***Reclaiming the American Dream – Community Colleges and the Nation’s Future, AACCC***

study groups, and then we were hanging out outside of class...I don’t even call them classmates. They’re more like family.” Students also see the value in class assignments that relate to what’s important to them: “I started researching the career I’m looking at...and I discovered it was completely different from the job I thought it was. I wouldn’t have known that if I didn’t have that assigned to me.”

Students praise colleges that have “a tremendous atmosphere” and explain what helps them persist:

*“It’s really, really like a community. The old saying is ‘it takes a village to raise a child.’ Everybody in the village is helping out, and it goes from deans, president, to career services, people in student life, and I think that they do just a phenomenal job of making you feel like you want to be a part of this.”*

In its reports on high-impact practices, the Center for Community College Student Engagement highlights practices that are improving student outcomes. More students succeed when they navigate successfully through the college’s “front door”; when faculty and staff have high expectations and provide the support students need to meet those expectations; when there are clear, coherent pathways to academic and career goals; and when faculty and staff require high-impact learning experiences inside and outside the classroom.

Research, institutional data, and student voices tell the same undeniable story about what matters most for student success. Leaders at colleges that are increasing course completion, graduation and transfer rates see that taking the steps needed to help community college students finish what they start is less about the challenges inherent in today’s environment than it is about changing college culture and strengthening practice. They are making a commitment to target resources to ensure that student engagement in high-impact practices is inescapable. As the report *Reclaiming the American Dream – Community Colleges and the Nation’s Future* reminds us: “The development of human potential is what community colleges are all about.”

Arleen Arnsperger is project manager of the Initiative on Student Success, Student Success BY THE NUMBERS (SSBTN), and Strengthening the Role of Part-Time Faculty at the Center for Community College Student Engagement (CCCSE) at The University of Texas at Austin. Arleen works with community colleges, conducting focus groups and interviews with students to learn about their college experiences. She is also co-author and producer of the book and companion video, *Students Speak – Are We Listening?*





**QUICK TAKES**  
**Highlights**  
**from the Field**

**Get with the Program ... and Finish it, by Davis Jenkins and Sung-Woo Cho:**

The authors of this CRCC Working Paper observe that community colleges fail to help new students choose a program of study and develop a completion plan. A growing number of colleges are redesigning academic programs and support services to create "guided pathways" designed to increase program completion rates. Read the complete article at: <http://bit.ly/1dTZ2Ke>

**The Power of the Program: How the Academic Program Can Improve Community College Student Success, by Elena M. Nitecki:**

In spite of community colleges attempts at solutions to address disappointing student success rates, for many colleges, low transfer and graduation rates persist. Examined here are two successful career-focused programs at an urban community college struggling with retention and relatively low success rates. Career-focused programs can be a positive arena for student engagement and retention. Read the complete article at: <http://bit.ly/1hYWvkG>

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student outcomes. Based on an exhaustive review of the literature on promising college practices and policies, CCRC highlighted four broad steps institutions can take to improve the likelihood of student success:

1. Work to simplify the structures and bureaucracies that students must navigate
2. Engage faculty in dialogues about policies and practices to increase student success
3. Align course curricula, define common learning outcomes and assessments, and set high standards for those outcomes
4. Collect and use data to inform a continuous improvement process.

One of the most important "innovations" advanced in the CCRC series is the explicit statement that community colleges, on the whole, have not been student-friendly. College policies and practices are often too confusing and leave too much discretion to students who are not familiar with the college-going experience. A 2010 study of California institutions by Levin et. al. suggests four criteria colleges need to adopt to better support students—more cohesion in programming, better cooperation between departments, improved connections with students, and greater consistency in policy and practice. The community college reform efforts of the past decade have sought to address these issues on individual campuses. Some innovative strategies have focused specifically on improving student supports or integrating these services with academic affairs through such practices as intrusive advising, learning communities, supplemental instruction, and student success courses. Others have emphasized substantial redesign in the delivery of developmental education. Still others have focused on college-wide efforts to build commitment for student success through strategic planning and greater use of data.

*The open question is whether or not the changes colleges (and states) are embracing will limit access for those less likely to succeed.*

~ Christopher Baldwin

As a result of these innovations, colleges have examined the progression of their students more closely than ever before. This deeper dive into the data has led to inevitable questions about the sustainability of the open access mission. With policymakers, foundations, and others expecting community colleges to produce more graduates, institutions are changing the way they operate. The open question is whether or not the changes colleges (and states) are embracing will limit access for those less likely to succeed.

Norton Grubb (2004) suggests that the "education gospel" that calls for higher educational attainment as

*...the implications in terms of governmental expectations and funding, program offerings, staffing, the type of students admitted, and the kinds of interventions employed to help students could be profound.*

~ Christopher Baldwin

a solution to a wide range of societal issues creates a dilemma that is particularly acute for community colleges. He argues that because community colleges are more accessible and affordable than other segments of higher education, they are a logical entry point for many students. The challenge is that an open door admissions policy results in a significant portion of students enrolling who are first generation students, with little or no knowledge of the college-going experience and expectations. Further complicating the situation is that a large number of community college students are academically unprepared for college-level work as well.

Terry O'Banion, president emeritus of the League for Innovation in Community Colleges, suggests that the completion agenda signifies a "tectonic shift in the community college zeitgeist." He argues that, while improving student success is an important endeavor, there should be more consideration given to the unintended consequences of this national push. On the surface, a shift in focus from student access to success may seem minor. However, the implications in terms of governmental expectations and funding, program offerings, staffing, the type of students admitted, and the kinds of interventions employed to help students could be profound.

The Obama Administration is right to shine a light on questions about student access. It was equally appropriate for the President to push student success early in his administration. In an era of constrained resources and increased expectations for outcomes, it will be incumbent on current and future community college leaders to balance these competing priorities.

*Dr. Christopher Baldwin is the Executive Director of the Michigan Center for Student Success which is funded by the Kresge Foundation and operates under the umbrella of the Michigan Community College Association. Chris holds a Ph.D. from The University of Michigan and is the author of a forthcoming book entitled: The Completion Agenda in Community Colleges: What It Is, Why It Matters, and Where It's Going. He previously served as a program director at Jobs for the Future (JFF) in Boston, MA, where he worked with departments of higher education, community college system offices, and associations in 16 states, promoting the adoption of state policies that support and encourage improved outcomes for community college students.*

