

The Community College Completion Agenda: Our Andy Warhol Moment

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In January 2012, AAC&U published a special issue of its journal, [Liberal Education](#), featuring a series of articles about implications—intended and unintended—of [the Completion Agenda](#). We have invited a [series](#) of national educational leaders and practitioners to comment on the issues raised. This second posting is by [Terry O'Banion](#), president emeritus of the League for Innovation in the Community College and senior advisor on programs in higher education at Walden University

The Completion Agenda has emerged as the overarching mission of the community college in this decade. Never in the history of the community college movement has an idea so galvanized stakeholders—from the White House to the state house to hundreds of community colleges. Never has so much funding from philanthropic groups, such as the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation and Lumina Foundation, been more generously funneled into our colleges.

The Completion Agenda is the community college's Andy Warhol fifteen minutes of fame; our future as a reputable member of the higher education community and as an instrument of social and economic change for the nation will depend, in great part, on how well we perform in achieving what Lumina calls the "Big Goal" reflected in the Completion Agenda. Community colleges face almost insurmountable challenges in achieving this goal:

1. Our enrollments are going through the roof while our funding is going into the tank. "Doing more with less" is beginning to have a hollow ring.
2. The Open Door of access—one of the hallmarks of the American community college—is beginning to close: Pell grants are being reduced; in California approximately 250,000 students have been denied admission because there are no classes available; some states are terminating remedial education, and some colleges are making plans not to admit those who score at the lowest level of preparation. What future institution will address the needs of the underprepared, commuting, and part-time students Sandy Astin pegged correctly in his [April 5 blog](#) as our most challenging constituency?
3. The community college's greatest success is in workforce training and development where we produce well-prepared workers for the economy. But we sell these students short when it comes to liberal and general education. Without a "common core of knowledge for the common person," Earl

McGrath's finely honed definition of general education, our career students are not prepared for the complex world they will face, and they will not have the skills and knowledge to change jobs half a dozen times. That challenge is not limited to our career and technical students. Without a well-rounded general education none of our students will be prepared to think critically, solve problems, embrace change, engage as citizens, and contribute to the general welfare of others. The cafeteria offerings of our current distributed general education programs are impotent to provide the common core of knowledge. And if we cannot create sound programs of general education we have very little chance of embracing the tenets of liberal education in any substantive way except in a few boutique programs scattered in the nooks and crannies of the curriculum.

4. Even with all the emphasis on reform in every new decade, and with the breakthroughs in technology, higher education is still mired in a historical and traditional architecture of education that limits what can actually be done to place learning first and make student success our priority. We continue to operate within the structures of time-limited semesters and fifty-minute classes and three-credit courses with one teacher responsible for thirty students in a class. Even though Paul Dressel told us in 1983 that "the course grade is an inadequate report of an inaccurate judgment by a biased and variable judge of the extent to which a student has attained an undefined level of mastery of an unknown proportion of an indefinite material," we still use this primitive system of A through F to brand a student for life.
5. Many of the full-time faculty who created the current levels of success for community colleges are retiring in hordes, with only a few graduate programs to prepare their replacements. And as the number of full-time faculty declines, we increasingly rely on adjunct faculty who—dedicated though they might be—are not provided with offices, long-term departmental/institutional training, or basic incentives to provide for students outside the classroom.

These are just a few of the challenges community colleges face in achieving the goals of the Completion Agenda. Let's hope they perform well enough in their fifteen minutes of fame to earn an encore.

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