Change and the Completion Agenda

by Terry O'Banion

Community colleges live and thrive in the crucible of change—always have, always will. Built on the streets far from the Ivory Tower, they daily confront and embrace an ever-changing community, an ever-changing student body, an ever-changing societal demand for new workers and new citizens, an ever-changing technology, an ever-changing demand for accountability. And now community colleges are being asked to change their core focus to create learning environments and student success pathways that can, in the next two decades, double the number of students who complete, with marketplace value, a certificate or an associate's degree or who transfer to earn a bachelor's degree. They are being asked to transform their mission, their organizational structure, their strategic planning, their facilities, their curriculum—all their systems—to ensure the success of what has become a national imperative. As difficult as this transformation will be, hundreds of community colleges have embraced the compelling idea and goals of the Completion Agenda. Community colleges live and thrive in the crucible of change.

As community colleges begin this journey they can capitalize on some of the experience we have accumulated in more than a century of constantly coping with change. Following are 10 observations about the challenges and 10 observations about the opportunities community colleges face as they respond to and prepare for change related to the Completion Agenda. Community college leaders might find it useful to study these observations and assess the extent to which they apply in their own institutions.

Change Challenges

1. We are always telling our story positively—to legislators, to the community, to prospective students, to area high schools and colleges, to our own trustees, and to ourselves—usually in the form of anecdotes about the success of an individual student. There isn't much room left for critical analysis of our shortcomings. In the community college movement, we have yet to create and value a critical perspective. Our verbal commitments to creating a "culture of evidence" are proving difficult to implement on the ground.
2. We need a common vocabulary about our work and about the Completion Agenda so that key stakeholders really understand one another. Language is very important as a factor in the change process. Education tends to borrow its change language from business, and every consultant group has a specialized language. Community college faculty, staff, administrators, and trustees need to find their own voices in the babble of change and develop their own language indigenous to the culture of the community college.
3. Vested interests in educational institutions often prevail and provide islands of comfort for many. Power struggles among divisions and campuses and between

individual leaders increase the tension. The sounds from the turf wars drown out attempts to hold reasoned conversations about anything—especially about learning, teaching, and completion.

4. Even when individuals recognize the need for change, they are often overwhelmed about how to articulate the framework for change that will be required, and they are often cynical about their ability and the ability of their colleagues to undertake such grand tasks. Some fall back on old positions: "We tried that before, and it didn't work." "What's new about that?" "We have been working on the Completion Agenda for decades."

5. Many faculty doubt the ability of their leaders to manage the transformation, and many leaders doubt the ability of their faculty to make the change happen. At some point, because of the overwhelming nature of the task, everyone doubts his or her own ability.

6. Everyone complains about the time required to continue the present structure while involved in creating a new structure. In times of major change we must continue to serve three meals a day while the kitchen is being completely remodeled.

7. Many attempts at substantive change fail because administrators, faculty, and staff have had few opportunities to develop the skills and knowledge required for major change. A massive in-house training program is required if the stakeholders are going to manage the change process. Adjunct faculty, who teach the majority of our developmental and gateway courses, must be included as key partners.

8. Many college leaders are trying to change the way they operate and communicate with each other and with the faculty and staff at the same time they launch major initiatives to change the way they educate their students. They want to use the principles of Senge's "learning organization" to become a more learning-centered institution committed to completion. Creating a new system of communication and a new initiative to ensure student success can be complementary or very separate goals; both require an extraordinary amount of time, effort, and new learning.

9. There will always be a vocal group who believe that additional resources will solve all problems. It is difficult for educators to consider eliminating some of the things they do and hard to reallocate the use of current resources. Stakeholders have not yet faced the reality that there will be no additional resources to support the Completion Agenda.

10. Once the change initiative begins to infiltrate the culture of the college, it is exceedingly difficult for any one individual to understand and articulate the big picture of what is going on. Presidents retire or move on; chairs of committees, faculty senates, unions, and trustees serve one-year terms; a new student body enrolls every term. How do we know where we are going and how we are doing on the journey? Who will serve as the historians and knowledge managers to remind us of our vision, our failures, our successes?

Change Opportunities

On the other hand, community colleges have a great deal going for them as they embrace and engage in the change process. Over the last 100-plus years we have learned some things about our institutions, our colleagues, and ourselves that encourage us to move forward in our continuing quest for quality. In our journey to implement the Completion Agenda we can build on the opportunities at hand.

1. A significant number of college stakeholders recognizes the need for change. College stakeholders are generally well-read, up-to-date, and rational; they have a pretty

good understanding that the world in general and education in particular are going through a significant period of change.

2. Staff members like being part of a college culture where the need for change and an emerging vision for that change have begun to be articulated by its leaders. What faculty or staff member wants to be part of a community college that proclaims, "There is no need for change here"?

3. Community college faculty are strongly committed to the basic values that undergird a learning-centered open-door institution committed to student success. At the same time, they are rightly cynical about quick fixes and simplistic solutions. At the core of their being, however, every faculty member in a community college wants to be a better teacher; every faculty member in a community college wants his or her students to learn; every faculty member in a community college wants his or her students to complete programs that lead to good jobs and productive lives. These beliefs and commitments provide a strong foundation upon which to build an enterprise committed to the Completion Agenda.

4. The teaching versus learning construct is a red herring. Community colleges take great pride in their commitment to teaching, but not as an end in itself. Community college teachers have always understood that the purpose of teaching is to improve and expand learning. Because of its historical commitment to quality teaching, the community college is the ideal crucible in which to create opportunities for students to successfully achieve their goals. Given the tools and the leadership, community college faculty will take a substantive step forward in the continuing evolution of improving completion rates for their students.

5. Community college faculty members have struggled for decades to teach the most diverse and most underprepared students ever to attend college. In the right circumstances they will welcome any improvement and support in which they can perform their tasks more effectively.

6. Classified staff, non-teaching faculty, students, and community volunteers provide untapped resources for achieving the goals of the Completion Agenda. Human beings gravitate to goal-centered environments and appreciate it when their commitments and contributions are recognized. Classified staff can easily articulate the contributions they make to student completion on the campus. Research has suggested that students often learn more from each other than they do from faculty.

7. New tools have emerged in the last decade in the forms of improved assessment practices, better understanding of learning outcomes, new research on learning, and an expanding application of information technology that creative community college faculty members have been experimenting with for years. When leaders support and unleash these creative pioneers, community colleges will make giant leaps forward.

8. It is not enough, however, to create and support a wide variety of innovations. Almost all community colleges support innovative practices, but in most cases the champions of innovation work in isolation from each other. In most community colleges there are many islands of innovation, each struggling to make a dent in the overall scheme of things. If substantive and broad-based change is to occur in the institution, leaders need to corral these innovators into a common force and focus their energy and common interest on the larger picture—which is to double the number of students who complete certificates and degrees with marketplace and social space value.

9. Technology can support the status quo or become a driving force in bringing about change. Managed appropriately, technology can release faculty and staff from performing primitive tasks, can substantively deepen and expand opportunities for student learning, and can help orchestrate systems and processes that manage change.

10. Community colleges have matured as institutions of higher education and are not as defensive as they were in earlier decades. Holding a well-deserved seat at the table of higher education, they are now positioned to take on tougher tasks including the continuing transformation of their culture toward a more learning-centered system focused on completion. Of all the institutions of higher education, community colleges are in the vanguard—because of their philosophy, because of their faculty and staff, because of their students' needs—to become the leading champions of the Completion Agenda.

There are certainly other challenges and opportunities community colleges face as they continue to cope with change and especially as they struggle to begin or continue their journey to become the national champions of the Completion Agenda. For colleges well along on the journey, these 20 observations regarding change can provide a basis for review and examination of the progress they have made. For colleges contemplating the journey, these observations can be used to assess readiness. All community colleges should find the observations useful as a catalyst for creating campus conversations about change and about completion.

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