

# Planning Pathways for Completion

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The Completion Agenda has emerged as the overarching mission of community colleges. Never in the history of the community college movement has an idea so galvanized stakeholders—from the White House to the state house. Never has so much funding from philanthropic groups, such as the [Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation](#) and [Lumina Foundation](#), been more generously funneled into a cause. Even as states struggle to survive in the face of sharply declining financial resources, the notion that community colleges can play a significant role in doubling the number of college completers is championed by virtually every community college leader.

Community colleges are the right institutions to take on completion; they have the right philosophy, the right programs and the right students, and they are strategically located in the right places. The challenge is clear: Create student success pathways that can, in the next two decades, double the number of students who obtain a certificate or an associate degree, or who transfer to earn a bachelor's degree that has marketplace value. And ensure that these pathways work for all students, including underprepared, first-generation college students, and those from poorer socioeconomic backgrounds.

## Finding our way

Though the challenge is clear, the strategic plan to meet it has yet to be effectively mapped. To create successful student pathways, community colleges will have to redesign existing policies, programs, practices and the way they use personnel in order to form a new seamless, integrated system that begins in our high schools, or at the points where ABE/GED/ESL and returning adults enter the pipeline and follows through to completion. High impact or promising practices must be connected along a series of milestones with enough support to create momentum that will propel students to successful completion.

The need for meaningful institutional change is well documented. Our past efforts have failed to focus on an overarching goal to transform the college. Instead, our efforts have been piecemeal, disconnected and of short duration. We have allowed faculty and staff to champion boutique innovations without providing the leadership framework for connecting and embedding their good work in the overall design of the college. We have joined reform efforts to increase productivity, to apply practices of total quality management and to make the community an extension of the campus—efforts abandoned when the going got tough or when a new president arrived on the scene with a new agenda. We cannot continue to tweak the current system by simply adopting a promising practice—contextual learning, for example—or by grafting on a prosthetic technology to provide online advising; this kind of reform is akin to trimming the branches of a dying tree. Piecemeal reform will not bring about the transformation required to

double the number of students who complete a certificate, degree or transfer in the next 10 to 15 years.

## **Getting there**

Guidelines for implementing the Completion Agenda have slowly begun to emerge, mostly from reports and from the experiences of community college leaders. These guidelines are framed here as a set of institutional conditions that must exist if community colleges are to create pathways to student success that actually work. As initiatives unfold, these guidelines will be modified by experience and data, but community college leaders should find them helpful as they build on the pioneering work of those who are already deeply engaged.

With the Completion Agenda, community colleges have taken on the most formidable and visible challenge in their history—at a time when they face overwhelming problems that seem insurmountable. Despite these problems, community colleges will take on this challenge and will do their best to double the number of degree and certificate holders by 2020. These guidelines, still being developed, will provide some direction and some ideas, but they cannot substitute for courageous leadership, innovative structures, evidence-based decisions and the willingness to set aside differences in order to place the needs of students first. The task ahead for community colleges is to put these guidelines into practice, guided by the can-do and innovative spirit that is our hallmark. If the community college does not succeed in meeting the goals of the Completion Agenda, we will lose our hard-earned credibility with the federal government, state governments, foundations, the rest of higher education—and with our students.

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