

Guidelines to boosting student success

Pathways To Completion

BY TERRY O'BANION

The Completion Agenda has emerged as the overarching mission of the community college. 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. At the 91st annual meeting of the American Association of Community Colleges in New Orleans in April, President and CEO Walter Bumphus said, "Completion is not as embedded in our community college culture as access is. That is something we need to change."

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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. As Glenn DuBois, chancellor of the Virginia Community College System, said of Virginia's community colleges in an interview in *Crosstalk* last year, "Systemic failure is coming for the 40-year-old

collection of colleges unless major changes are made. If we don't acknowledge the size of this thing, we are going down. We cannot nibble at the edges."

Davis Jenkins, a senior researcher at the Community College Research Center (CCRC), warns that "the approach community colleges have typically taken in the past of adopting discrete 'best practices' and trying to bring them to scale will not work to improve student completion on a substantial scale." Davis recommends that colleges implement a "best process" approach rather than a "best practices" approach. In other words, completion should be the overarching goal of the college with all faculty, staff, and administrators working to redesign current policies, programs, and practices. The goal: to create a systemic, integrated, and connected student success pathway.

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.

Taking On the Challenge

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 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.

Failure is not an option. (*See Guidelines for Completion beginning on next page.*) >>

Guidelines For the COMPLETION Agenda

1. Establish a core leadership team representing all stakeholders in a minimum five-year effort to create and sustain pathways to completion for all students.

From trustees to the college president and top administrators to senate and union leaders to chief influencers among faculty, staff, and students, it will take a sustained, collaborative effort to achieve success. Five years is a starting point; the institutional change called for in achieving the goals of the Completion Agenda will require intentional, continuous improvement for the next 10 to 15 years.

How to get the leading stakeholders to agree on this agenda and to collaborate on making it successful is the major challenge. The historical architecture of education that many community colleges adopted from their four-year counterparts encourages “silos,” not collaboration: faculty members divide into departments around disciplines; staff in student affairs and academic affairs hardly communicate on some campuses; and curriculum is halved into career/technical education and liberal arts/transfer education. Such isolation has not gone unnoticed. As part of the U.S. Department of Labor’s recently announced but as yet unfunded \$122 million Career Pathways Innovation Fund, organizers cautioned applicants, saying, “Ideally, career pathways are not a separate program, weaving together adult education, training, and college programs that are currently separated into silos and connecting those services to employers’ workforce needs.”

Though every member of the college community has a stake in the Completion

Agenda, faculty—full- and part-time—must be strongly committed and deeply involved. In the first major evaluation of Achieving the Dream (ATD), researchers at MDRC and the CCRC recommend in *Turning the Tide* that colleges do more to involve adjunct and full-time faculty in reform efforts and concentrate on teaching and learning in the classroom.

Mark Milliron, formerly of the Gates Foundation, and Vincent Tinto, a well-known educational researcher from Syracuse University, recently drew attention to the importance of faculty involvement during their “Taking Student Success Seriously: Focusing on the College Classroom” series of talks, where they pointed out what most faculty already know: Teaching matters most.

The American Federation of Teachers (AFT) weighed in on this topic in March with its *Student Success in Higher Education* report. “Student success is what AFT Higher Education members are all about,” the union said. “The AFT believes that academic unions, working with other stakeholders, can play a central role in promoting student success. Making lasting progress, however, will have to begin at tables where faculty and staff members hold a position of respect and leadership.” The report is an important statement about the critical role of faculty in the Completion Agenda.

And it’s not alone.

Reflections on Leadership for Student Success, a 2010 report by community college researchers and recent AACC Leadership Award winners Byron and Kay McClenney, addresses the issue in the

context of their experience with ATD and the Community College Survey of Student Engagement. Referencing the Completion Agenda, they write, “Significant change will not occur—and stick—without visible, persistent leadership from the college president or chancellor.”

Ed Hughes, president of Gateway Community and Technical College in Kentucky, is one such leader. In March and April of this year, Hughes held a series of sessions designed to help college employees better embrace an institutional shift from access to success. “We need 100 percent participation in this critical dialogue because what we decide to do will impact our lives and our students for a long time,” wrote Hughes. “Each of us must embrace this unique opportunity to transform student learning and success through a collective effort of the college community.”

2. Develop the capacity to collect, organize, and interpret data and make evidence-based decisions to support meaningful change and increase student completion.

In the first major evaluation of ATD, four out of five of the first 26 colleges—the Round 1 colleges—created student success pathways that were, in large part, based on evidence. A goal of ATD is to help colleges learn better how to use student records and other data to identify where students are dropping out and to pinpoint barriers to student success. These colleges were selected based on their commitment to creating a culture of evidence; they benefited from top-level consultants that included a data facilitator

and association for five years with a selected peer group of 26 colleges. They received millions in funding to develop this capacity. Despite all the resources at their disposal, one-fifth of these Round 1 colleges found it difficult to implement promising practices “hindered primarily by weak institutional research capacity.” This finding raises a troubling question: How will other community colleges outside this special group of colleges achieve such capacity?

Many community colleges have recently embraced this “culture of evidence.” Though anecdotes about individual student and faculty success still grace the pages of community college research reports and marketing materials, leaders acknowledge the importance of data-driven decision making. The reality of the state of institutional research, however, indicates that community colleges still lack the resources and capacity to make proper use of data. A 2007 Vanessa Smith Morest and Davis Jenkins study for the CCRC estimated that one-fifth of community colleges have little or no institutional research capacity beyond basic reporting. The most common use of research at community colleges is for “compliance reporting” to the federal and state government, accreditation agencies, and funding agencies. There is a general consensus that this research is almost useless for assessing student learning and improving programs and practices. Except for follow-up on transfer students, the researchers say, “studies of student progression [are] rare at community colleges.”

It’s reasonable to assume presidents and other administrators would use data to improve programs and defend decisions regarding the allocation of dwindling resources, but Morest and Jenkins say that’s not always the case. While leaders use enrollment data—which is related to funding—they usually do not have access to the data needed for making important decisions about the institution. Even if they did, experts say, many are not prepared to use such data in making decisions. As Morest and Jenkins point out, “Few colleges systematically track student progress and outcomes over time, and

even fewer use this information to improve programs and services.”

The Completion Agenda involves a great deal more than creating capacity to collect and analyze data. Top administrators must be taught how to incorporate data into their decision making, and this might be the greater challenge.

3. Create programs of study with “instructional program coherence” that provide students with opportunities for deeper learning.

First-generation college students, the majority of whom enter college unprepared, have far too many options. Community colleges are justly criticized for trying to be “too many things to too many people.” The comprehensive community college offers a big-tent curriculum: vocational and technical education, developmental education, transfer education, general education, adult education, and community education with licenses, certificates, and degrees attached and sometimes divided into credit and noncredit units. Jenkins says a lack of instructional program coherence is “one reason for low community college completion rates.”

I underscored this point in my 2010 article, *The Completion Agenda: To What End?* “As we create new pathways to success for our students, we need to review

how we can infuse our programs with core values and concepts from liberal education—what the Association of American Colleges and Universities calls ‘Essential Learning Outcomes’—to ensure that our graduates and certificate holders will be able to make informed decisions and use clear judgment about how they invest and spend their resources and their lives.

“We should take a lesson from our past and engage students from the very first day of college in a structured, required, and interrelated series of learning experiences. These can be constructed as learning communities combining a student success course, a developmental or college-level English course, and a psychology course required of all entering students.

“If we are going to be serious about the Completion Agenda, we must offer fewer options so as not to deluge our students with too many choices; the options we do offer must be structured and substantive to deepen and broaden students’ life experience—experience that can be measured in ‘life space value’ in addition to ‘marketplace value.’”

In these structured programs, and, indeed, in all courses, we can keep the focus on success if every instructor in every course, every term, begins with a

Amount provided by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation toward EDUCAUSE’s Next Generation Learning Challenges (NGLC) for using technology to improve completion.

\$20M

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30-minute or full-class review focused on “how to be successful in this course.” Many of our students do not know how to navigate the collegiate culture. Helping students understand from day one what is required to be successful in every course could make a huge difference. If every instructor in every course, every term, let students in on the secrets of success, the entire institution might experience a shift in culture toward making success a priority.

4. Prepare all employees through a strategic staff development program for their role in creating and sustaining student pathways to completion.

Community colleges have tinkered with staff development for decades, always referencing its value in studies and strategic plans, but few colleges have created models of systemic staff development that make a meaningful, documented difference. In a 2001 study of faculty development programs in community colleges, J.P. Murray pegged the problem universally understood by community college leaders: “Faculty development at most community colleges is...a randomly grouped collection of activities lacking intentional coordination with the mission of the college or the needs of the faculty members.” In most cases, staff development programs are created by faculty members with no expertise in staff development. They are released from a course or two and rotate responsibilities with other faculty on an annual basis. The programs created by these faculty members and their committees often have no overall goals connected to institutional priorities and are usually no more than a series of one-time workshops cobbled together for opening-day conferences. Indeed, one institution offered workshops for faculty in astrology and handwriting analysis.

The success of the Completion Agenda depends on strategic staff development programs that target doubling the number of completers in the next 10 to 15 years—programs that are built into the organizational and reward structure of the college on a continuous basis and that are



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of U.S. community colleges have little or no institutional research capacity beyond basic reporting.

Source: Morest, Jenkins, 2007

required of all employees of the college. Adjunct faculty must be included with incentives such as continuing employment, first choice of classes and schedules, and stipends. Richland College in Dallas, for example, has created an outstanding staff development program for adjunct faculty using these and other incentives.

Strategic staff plays a significant role in developing the skills and abilities required for community colleges to improve and expand retention, achievement, and completion. Recognizing that such skills were not included in the graduate programs of faculty and administrators, researchers in *Turning the Tide* state that “Achieving the Dream encourages colleges to invest in improving the skills of their faculty and staff through professional development opportunities that reinforce their efforts to strengthen students’ performance.” The authors of another report, 2010’s *Student Success in Community Colleges: A Practical Guide to Developmental Education*, recommend strategic program and staff development. “The importance of comprehensive training and professional development opportunities for faculty and staff cannot be overestimated,” said the authors of that report.

5. Apply appropriate technological innovations to create, implement, and monitor the student success pathways to optimize efficiency and effectiveness. With technology, colleges can do much more than in years past and do it better than before.

Colleges can better “manage” learning, track a student’s navigation through the system, provide services, and help students make connections with faculty and with other students—faster, smarter, better. Technology expands and improves the reach of the teacher and enriches the learning environment with more efficient and effective inclusion of curriculum support materials. And, with the emerging emphasis on open-source systems, colleges, faculty, and students alike can benefit from technological innovations at little or no cost.

A recent explosion of technology-based innovations will likely play a central role in supporting the Completion Agenda. Consider, for example, EDUCAUSE’s Next Generation Learning Challenges (NGLC). NGLC is intended to “dramatically improve college readiness and completion in the United States through the applied use of technology, particularly among low-income individuals.” With more than \$20 million from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, the initiative is designed to fund technological solutions with proven potential and disseminate these for scaling up in other colleges and universities.

Projects will be funded in waves. The first wave, announced April 7, focused on the “sustainable adoption-at-scale of successful technology-enabled product, project, or service-based solutions,” including learner analytics, blended learning models, interactive technologies, and modular courseware in high-enrollment

developmental and general education courses.

One such project is the Student Success Plan (SSP) led by Russ Little at Sinclair Community College in Ohio. The SSP is a holistic counseling and intervention software application designed to increase the persistence, success, and graduation rates of at-risk students. Through holistic counseling, Web-based support systems, and intervention techniques, students who are at greatest risk of failing in college are identified, supported, and monitored.

The software and process have a proven track record of success improving student outcomes: At-risk students who participated in the SSP reportedly had a 51 percent higher rate of retention than did those who qualified but did not participate. They had an average GPA of 3.06, compared with an average of 1.65 for students who qualified but did not participate. Through the grant from NGLC, the SSP will be made available to all colleges in the United States.

6. Implement guidelines for rapid, expansive “scaling up” of successful programs and practices. The lack of programs that scale up was highlighted in the initial evaluation of ATD. According to the report, “While colleges instituted a wide range of strategies to improve student achievement under the auspices of Achieving the Dream, a majority of these reforms reached less than 10 percent of their intended target populations—likely too few to make demonstrable progress on improving student achievement overall.”

Scaling up innovations and promising practices in education is a lot more challenging than scaling up successful outcomes in business. If a creative worker at a McDonald’s franchise figures out a faster and more cost-effective way to add pickles to a hamburger, for example, the infrastructure, the reward system, and the culture at McDonald’s are in place to test the innovation and scale it up rapidly across thousands of other outlets. Community colleges are often challenged to scale up a proven practice in a single department.

In a 2005 interview, Chris Dede, a thought leader and endowed professor at Harvard University, summarized the challenge of scaling up innovations in education: “Scaling up involves closing gaps that exist between the innovation’s demands and an organization’s capacity.” Successful scaling occurs when innovations or promising practices can be applied to large numbers of students and faculty and if the proven innovations are not too costly. Case management, for example, is an effective practice, but it is too costly to apply to large numbers of students and should be reserved for students who require more special attention. Other programs require extensive collaboration; scaling up learning communities, for example, requires a change in curriculum structures, interest and involvement of faculty leaders, support from the registrar’s office, and revisions in the college catalog and other documents, among many other changes. Colleges need to analyze what will be required to scale up a specific program or practice, and whether the college has the capacity to do so—and that analysis needs to occur well before colleges decide which programs or practices they are going to implement.

Community colleges that have been successful in scaling up innovations and promising practices first pilot the practice and gather data supporting its effectiveness. Champions of the practice then herd it through institutional pastures and gain support from key leaders. Too often, scaling up is something that receives attention after an innovation has been proven effective. Guidelines for scaling up need to be applied from the beginning of any initiative to improve and expand student success and completion.

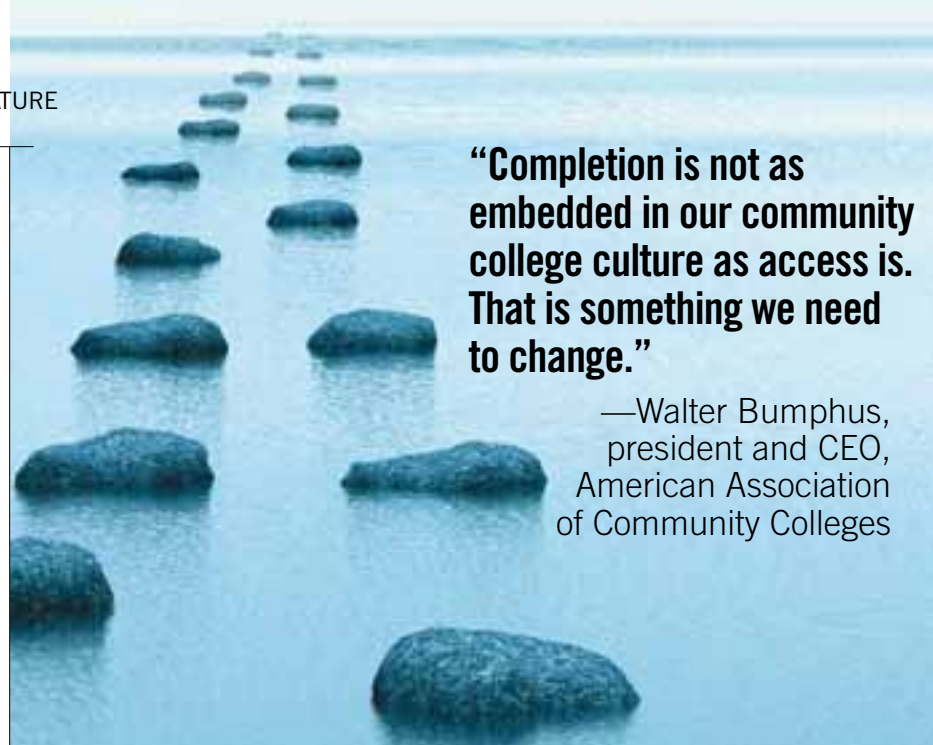
7. Realign current resources and identify potential new resources—funding, personnel, facilities, and community support—to double the number of students who successfully complete a credential with life space and marketplace value. It is ironic that community colleges have been called on by the nation’s leaders to play a key role in reviving the economy. Never in its 100-year-plus history has the community

college experienced such a dramatic decline in resources coupled with such a dramatic increase in enrollments. This is not the best of times for community colleges to take on a mandate to double the number of completers in the next decade and a half. Hilary Pennington, who heads up the postsecondary agenda at the Gates Foundation, says, “Dramatically improving the nation’s completion rate can seem daunting and impossible. It’s understandably hard to consider retrofitting the airplane you are flying when two of its engines are aflame.”

To make the best use of the resources we do have, we are going to have to stop and do some restructuring. “Higher education systems and campuses are going to have to be smarter with the resources they have,” says Pennington. “No more nibbling at the edges in an attempt to wring efficiencies out of a higher education model built in a different era. We are nearing a watershed moment in American higher education. We can either keep doing things the way we’ve always done them, with less money and diminishing success, or we can make the bigger structural reforms we need—strategically and smartly. Realistically, this is our best option for long-term success.” She cites Valencia Community College (VCC) in Florida, which, with the same resources as other Florida community colleges, posts graduation rates that are 15 percentage points higher than its peers. President Sandy Shugart explains VCC’s success: “We stopped spending so much money and energy trying to get butts in the seats and instead began seeing the college through the eyes of the student.”

In addition to using current resources more wisely, community colleges must exercise entrepreneurial skills to create more resources to support student success and completion. There are a number of promising practices for better realigning or garnering more resources:

- Establish income-producing programs and services for the community: catering, rental facilities, weekend flea markets, athletic facilities, consulting services, assessment programs, specialized training, and more.



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—Walter Bumphus, president and CEO, American Association of Community Colleges

- Expand partnerships with business and industry to include customized training programs beyond the current slate of programs (Humber College in Toronto offers customized training in more than 35 countries) and engage business and industry in directly supporting high-demand job programs with funds for program development, staff training, equipment, internships, and scholarships.
- Earmark portions of current state and federal funds for the Completion Agenda.
- Explore the Economics of Innovation model created in California that demonstrates a good return on investment through increasing the number of full-time enrollments by improving support services and other elements of the student success pathway in developmental education programs.
- Since education is a labor-intensive enterprise, audit the numbers of potential volunteers in the local community and consider how to use them to supplement current personnel. Many faculty, classified staff, students, and citizens will volunteer if called on to help with tutoring, advising, coaching, and teaching. At Alverno College in

Wisconsin, hundreds of local citizens are trained as external assessors to give students feedback about their progress. An audit at Tidewater Community College in Virginia revealed 1,956 college employees, 32,808 students, 45,117 associate degree graduates, and a population in the college's service area of 1,090,400, not including service clubs, churches, nonprofit agencies, and business and industry. The United States has a strong culture of volunteerism that colleges have not yet fully tapped into.

8. Create a transparent and user-friendly campuswide communication system to keep stakeholders informed and engaged and use it to celebrate student success and institutional progress. To help bring focus to the Completion Agenda and to make it the overarching transformative goal of the college, brand the existing communication system around the goal of completion. Work with marketing staff to apply their skills to “marketing” the agenda internally and externally; assume this agenda is as important as preparing for a major bond issue. Create special events to report often on the progress of the agenda.

A campuswide communication system should serve as a vehicle to celebrate

student success and institutional progress in a systematic way. When students achieve milestones on the student success pathway—first gateway course passed, 15 hours of college credit, 30 hours of college credit—they should be recognized in a host of ways: a congratulatory letter from the president; a featured spot on the college's website; a “milestone” certificate; a gift certificate for four from a local restaurant so they can celebrate with family and friends; an invitation to membership in the Tipping Point Club; or any combination of low-cost, high-impact recognition strategies. Recognition is a powerful motivator—particularly for students not used to such recognition—and helps create the momentum students need to persist.

Celebrating success should not be limited to students; recognize and reward college employees and provide opportunities to participate in celebrating institutional progress. Institutional success depends on collaboration—collaboration and celebration lead to building community. College leaders and institutional researchers need to identify key points of institutional success in moving more students to completion. These achievements need to be celebrated collegewide with articles, announcements, award ceremonies, reports in the local and national press, and special conferences and commencements. Bring in local sponsors from business and industry, the chamber of commerce, service clubs, families, friends, and other groups. It takes a village to build a culture of completion, and business and community partners like these can be key leaders in the college's efforts to celebrate achievement.

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The Completion Agenda: A Call to Action (AACCC)
http://www.aacc.nche.edu/Publications/Reports/Documents/CompletionAgenda_report.pdf

The College Completion Agenda (the College Board)
<http://completionagenda.collegeboard.org>

Technology's Role in College Completion Agenda (EDUCAUSE)
<http://www.educause.edu/Resources/TechnologysRoleintheCollegeCom/219203>