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Completion Begins and Ends in the Classroom

By Terry O'Banion, Published May 13, 2013

The goals of the Completion Agenda in the community college—to double the number of students who complete a one-year certificate, an associate degree or who transfer to another college or university to complete a credential—is the reform movement of this decade and perhaps the next.

Never in the history of the community college have so many stakeholders, from the White House to the State House to major foundations, championed such a focused goal including hundreds of community colleges deeply engaged in initiatives to address completion goals.

As community colleges launched completion initiatives, sometimes statewide, the emphasis has been on services and programs outside the classroom. There is no quarrel about the importance of efficient and effective services such as admissions, assessment, orientation, advising, placement, financial aid and registration; students cannot be successful in the classroom without successful preparation for the classroom.

O'Banion will be a featured speaker at the AACC John E. Roueche Future Leaders Institute and Future Presidents Institute June 23-28 in Baltimore. The application deadline is June 3.

The tendency of most community colleges that have launched initiatives, however, is to focus almost exclusively on these services—at least in the beginning. Maybe we find it easier to redesign and restructure these programs and services, or maybe we find it too difficult to redesign what happens in the classroom. In any case, if we are to improve on our record of student success the role of the teacher in creating learning, primarily through the classroom, online or face-to-face, must become the primary focus of the Completion Agenda.

In the community college, the classroom is the only place we have access to students in any kind of organized and continuing way.

Key leaders concur

Key leaders involved in the Completion Agenda recognize the need to focus more attention on teaching and learning and classroom instruction. Jamie Merisotis, president of Lumina Foundation has noted: “Oddly enough, the concept of learning—a subject that seems critical to every discussion about higher education—is often overlooked in the modern era. For us, learning doesn't just matter. It matters most of all. It's the learning, stupid.”

For community college students, the laboratory for learning is the classroom.

Kay McClenney and her colleagues at the Center for Community College Student Engagement (CCCSE) also weigh in on this conversation: “Student success matters. College completion matters. And teaching and learning—the heart of student success—matter.”

Excerpt from *Academic Advising: The Key to Student Success*, edited by Terry O'Banion (published by the American Association of Community Colleges).

CCCSE leaders champion active and collaborative classroom learning experiences through intensive student engagement.

"Research shows that the more actively engaged students are, the more likely they are to learn, to persist in college, and to attain their academic goals," according to CCCSE. "Student engagement, therefore, is an important metric for assessing the quality of colleges' educational practices and identifying ways colleges can help more students succeed."

Another key leader involved in the student success agenda, Vincent Tinto, suggests: "If we are to substantially increase college completion, especially among low-income students, we must focus on improving success in the classroom, particularly during a student's first year. We must be sensitive to the supports low-income students need to be successful in college, and lead efforts to dramatically improve their classroom experience."

Principles still hold up

These are just a few selected viewpoints about the importance of classroom instruction from leaders currently involved in the Completion Agenda. There is an enormous literature on classroom instruction for all levels of education with an overwhelming amount of advice and research about what constitutes successful teaching and learning.

For higher education, the best advice and research has been captured in the "Seven Principles for Good Practice in Undergraduate Education" created in 1987 by an assembled group of leading researchers and reported by Art Chickering and Zelda Gamson:

The principles of good practice include:

1. Encourage student-faculty contact.
2. Encourage cooperation among students.
3. Encourage active learning.
4. Give prompt feedback.
5. Emphasize time on task.
6. Communicate high expectations.
7. Respect diverse talents and ways of learning.

After 25 years, these practices still hold up and have been supported by an ever-expanding body of research. They should be embedded as the core content of faculty development programs; they should become the primary focus for the next step in institution-wide student success initiatives.

If we cannot guarantee that students will engage with the most effective teaching and learning experiences in the classroom, we will fail to meet the goals of the Completion Agenda.

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This essay is an excerpt from "Access, Success, and Completion" by Terry O'Banion published in 2013 by the League for Innovation in the Community College.

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