



## **Terry O'Banion**

**Ten Questions to Terry O'Banion  
President Emeritus, League for Innovation  
and Chair, Graduate Faculty  
National American University**



Terry O'Banion was President of the League for Innovation in the Community College for 23 years until his retirement. Under his leadership, the League became an international organization serving over 700 colleges and recognized by *Change* magazine as “the most dynamic organization in the community college world.” Since retirement, O'Banion has worked on special projects for the League for Innovation, MetLife Foundation, The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, The Chauncey Group International, Walden University, and National American University.

In honor of his decades of service to education, five national awards have been established in his name: the Terry O'Banion Student Technology Award, created by Microsoft; the Terry O'Banion Prize for Teaching and Learning, created by Educational Testing Service; the Terry O'Banion Shared Journey Award, created by the National Council on Student Development; the O'Banion Leadership Scholarship, created by Walden University; and the John E. Roueche and Terry O'Banion International Leadership Award created by the League for Innovation.

In a survey of 11,000 higher education leaders reported in *Change* magazine in January 1998, Terry O'Banion was named one of eleven “Idea Champions” who set the agenda for all of higher education—and the only community college leader on the list.

O'Banion has consulted in more than 800 community colleges in the United States and Canada. He is one of the leading spokespersons in the country on the Learning College, Student Success Pathways, and the Completion Agenda. He has keynoted conferences on these issues in dozens of states and Canadian provinces, and in Australia, the United Arab Emirates, and Japan.

Author of 15 books and over 190 monographs, chapters, and articles on the community college, his current works include a monograph titled *Access, Success, and Completion: A Primer for Community College Faculty, Administrators, Staff, and Trustees* and a book titled *Academic Advising: The Key to Student Success*, both published in early 2013.

O'Banion has served as a Dean of Students at Central Florida Community College, founding Dean at Santa Fe Community College (FL), and Vice Chancellor for Education for the Dallas County Community College District. He has been a Professor of Higher Education at the University of Illinois; Distinguished Visiting Professor at The University of Texas; Visiting Professor at Berkeley, Florida State, Hawaii, and Toronto; the Marie Y. Roberts Endowed Professor of Higher Education at the University of North Texas; and a Distinguished Scholar-in-Residence at Antioch University McGregor School of Management.

**1. In your most recent work, *Access, Success, and Completion*, you define two distinct agendas: What is the Access Agenda in community colleges? What is the Student Success Agenda in community colleges?**

The Access Agenda has been a key pillar of the community college for the last 100 years and has had great impact on our policies, programs, and practices. The community college is the only form of higher education created in this country, and it reflects our basic values of equity and opportunity; it is truly Democracy's College. Community colleges have opened the door to generations of citizens who never dreamed of attending college. They provide *access* by admitting any high school graduate or applicant generally over 18 years of age, by making the colleges geographically accessible, by creating programs designed specifically for underprepared students, and by keeping tuition low. **No other country in the history of the world has attempted such a heretical departure from tradition until the American community college was created in the early 1900s.** The Access Agenda is deeply embedded in community college culture, philosophy, and practice and is strongly defended by present day leaders who are concerned that contemporary challenges may chip away at its foundation.

The Student Success Agenda is the second key pillar of the community college and will be the overarching mission of this institution for the next 100 years. Our record of success for the kinds of students we serve has not met expectations from any group of stakeholders, and in the past ten to fifteen years a national initiative has emerged focused on student success. The initiative often goes under the name of the Completion Agenda which has a targeted goal of success: The goal of the Completion Agenda is to, by the year 2020, double the number of students who complete a certificate, associate's degree, or who transfer to a university. Never in the history of the community college have so many stakeholders signed on to a goal like this; never in our history have so many foundations provided so many resources to fund this effort; never in our history have we seen so much research to help us improve our programs and practices. Opportunities for success are significantly increased because these efforts are supported by a growing commitment to (a) place improving and expanding student learning as the core business of the educational enterprise, and to (b) ensure that decisions, experiments, and changes are based on evidence of improved and expanded student learning.

The major challenge for community college leaders in the coming decade or two is to make sure that we maintain an appropriate balance between the Access Agenda and the Student Success Agenda to ensure that both are sustained and supported as the two key pillars of the community college.

## **2. What is the Student Success Pathway, and how should colleges be using it?**

The Student Success Pathway (SSP) is simply a framework or picture of what colleges do or should be doing to help students navigate their way through the college experience. We usually frame it as a series of components in which students engage such as high school connections, admission, assessment, placement, orientation, financial aid counseling, academic advising, and registration. These are very complex processes that every student experiences at the beginning of college; and for first-time students, underprepared students, and older returning students these processes and activities can be a considerable challenge. These functions were the first addressed by most foundations in their early initiatives supporting the Completion Agenda. If these functions are not designed with considerable efficiency and effectiveness, student success in courses and classrooms is likely to be greatly diminished.

Using the Student Success Pathway as a guide, colleges can integrate the various practices, and milestones can be established to indicate progress on the pathway. Some colleges have designated completion of developmental education, passing gateway courses with a C or better, and accumulating 15 or 30 credit hours as milestones which provide momentum for students moving toward completion. And when colleges and students celebrate reaching a milestone, momentum is likely to increase.

The real value of the concept of the Student Success Pathway accrues both to the individual student and to the college. For students, the SSP is a contract and a visible guide of goals and tasks that lead to success. For colleges, the SSP is a visible framework for the college's strategic plan that requires the plan to focus on students and their success. Everything the college does should lead to improved and expanded learning for students.

## **3. What are some of the exemplary models and pathways that support the Completion Agenda?**

The rapidly emerging literature on completion and success is filled with references to the Student Success Pathway as a key concept. High schools create Individual Educational Plans (IEPs) for their students; community colleges have been experimenting with Career Pathways as a component of Tech Prep for decades. Both were precursors to the SSP.

Some of the best models have been identified by the Roadmap Project, sponsored by the American Association of Colleges & Universities and funded by the MetLife Foundation. Here are a few of the best in which the names of the projects suggest the creativity and scope of the SSP:

- a. Roadmap Action Plan—Salt Lake Community College
- b. Road to Success—Prince George's Community College
- c. GPS/Guide to Personal Success—Lane Community College
- d. Roadmap to Completion—Miami-Dade College
- e. Digital Roadmap—Mt. San Antonio Community College
- f. LifeMap—Valencia College
- g. Student Lifecycle—Harper College
- h. Individual Advising Plan—Indian River State College

#### **4. How do faculty impact the Completion Agenda?**

In the final analysis, faculty make it work or it fails. In the beginning of these efforts 10 to 15 years ago, leaders failed to involve the faculty in substantive ways. In the first major study of Achieving the Dream, *Turning the Tide*, researchers noted the lack of faculty involvement as one of the barriers to success. Additionally, the American Federation of Teachers published a report pointing out that faculty needed to be invited to the table or the Completion Agenda would not succeed.

Faculty are in charge of courses, curriculum, and classrooms; in our current structure of education, these are the places where learning takes place and is measured and cobbled together to create rates of retention and completion. Unless improvements occur in courses, curriculum, and classrooms—with leadership and involvement from faculty—nothing changes. The real challenge of the Completion Agenda is to engage the faculty in a substantive and serious way as key stakeholders. Unfortunately, they have not been involved at some colleges; they are cynical and worn out by initiative fatigue; as Sandy Shugart suggests, it is difficult to get the faculty to rally around the idea of completion. He recommends featuring learning as the key concept around which faculty will rally. Jamie Merisotis, President of the Lumina Foundation, has warned, “It’s the learning stupid!”

#### **5. What are the top three actions community colleges can take to increase their chances for achieving the goals of the Completion Agenda?**

Community colleges need to take many, many actions to increase their chances of achieving the goals of the Completion Agenda, but the following three actions will be at the top of the list for most of them:

- a. Make sure the president and the board are strongly committed and understand the scope and challenge of what they are getting into. Resources must be realigned; trust and collaboration must be the hallmarks of the culture; and the president must stay on board long enough to see the goals achieved.
- b. The first order of business is for leaders to determine how to deeply engage and involve faculty in the initiative and to identify faculty leaders who can ensure that involvement. What will motivate the faculty to engage? What incentives will encourage their participation? If faculty make the effort, will the leaders provide the resources?
- c. The easiest place to begin is to get the list of high impact practices and begin to implement those that are most needed or most appealing—but this approach allows silos of champions to implement learning communities or create systems of dual enrollment or offer student success courses without integrating or coordinating these various practices. The right place to begin is with a strategic plan organized around the components of a Student Success Pathway based on a series of student success guidelines or principles that all faculty and staff can rally around. For example, we know from research by CCCSE on 500,000 students that the most important factor related to students staying in college is that someone knows their name. That is sad and profound and should lead us to a guideline that suggests: Every student will make a significant connection to someone at the college at the earliest possible time. We need to create and implement these kinds of student success guidelines (in addition to the high impact practices) to help us rally faculty, adjuncts, administrators, and classified staff around a set of common values. In this way, we begin to create a special culture at the college that all can commit to and participate in and that will provide the foundation for the long haul to completion.

**6. In the final analysis, it is the student who must be retained or who must complete the pathway. If you were designing a Student Success Pathway to improve completion, what are some of the actions you would suggest to involve students more directly?**

I would take a leaf from the playbook of Phi Theta Kappa (PTK) and its Gates-funded project on the student completion corps by encouraging the local PTK to bring that program to campus. The program involves many activities, but its feature is a program that encourages students to sign a commitment statement that they will complete. Another opportunity is offered to faculty to sign a similar commitment statement to help students complete. Such actions encourage motivation and group support of an idea.

I might create such a program idiosyncratic to the college that includes clearly stated high expectations developed by the faculty (as one way to involve faculty) that could become the highly visible expectations the college has for all its students. These can be monitored, reviewed from time to time, and celebrated with appropriate ceremony. They can become the focus of orientation and academic advising, and marketed across the college and the community. Students can hold rallies where such statements are signed. They can become discussion points in the first few days of classes. They will reflect the values of the college and will contribute to creating a college culture in which learning is first.

The second action I would suggest is that faculty and staff agree on the specific milestones that indicate student achievement and progress along the pathway. These could include completion of developmental education, passing gateway courses with a C or better, accumulating 15 hours of college credit, accumulating 30 hours of college credit, obtaining a 3.5 or higher GPA, etc. There would be some celebration for each milestone. The celebrations could include a letter from the president congratulating the student on completing the developmental education sequence, recognition in a class from a teacher that a student has accumulated 15 college credit hours, membership in the Tipping Point Club for the student who accumulates 30 college credit hours, and a certificate from a local restaurant for a meal for four for the student who accumulates 45 college credit hours—local leaders are quite willing to participate in this and other ways to celebrate student progress.

**7. In your view, will we meet the goals of the Completion Agenda?**

I have been participating in and observing reform efforts in education for the last 50 years, and in my experience none fully achieve all of their goals. Progressive Education, Humanistic Education, the Accountability Movement, Total Quality Management, Back to Basics, etc., etc.—all ended with a whimper rather than a bang. It is the original report that gets all the attention. The final report, if compiled at all, gets lost in the shuffle and the excitement about the next blistering report and the reform movement it launches.

Even with massive support from many stakeholders, unheard of funds from foundations, and robust research from the centers and the institutes, the successful outcome of the Completion Agenda cannot be guaranteed. Some progress will occur, and some sound changes will be put in place, but we will fall short of “doubling the number of students, who by 2020, achieve a certificate, an associate’s degree, or who transfer to a university.” The socio-economic conditions are against us, the political climate is toxic, the goals and the tracking of the progress are a bit fuzzy (e.g., In this context what does “double” mean?), the faculty are not fully engaged, and we have tried to do all

this work without overhauling the traditional architecture of education, which is a permanent barrier to any change and reform.

In education, we have been tagged as a group for whom it would be easier to move a cemetery than it would be to change the curriculum; in either case there is no help from the residents. Roger Moe, former majority leader of the Minnesota State Senate and education reformer, has remarked, "Higher education is a thousand years of tradition wrapped in a hundred years of bureaucracy." In spite of our locust-like launching of a reform movement every ten years, we change very little. Each reform movement confronts the eternal barriers of an educational architecture created in response to an agricultural society and an industrial economy. In the exciting and creative information society of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, we still retain the traditional architecture of schooling: ABC grading systems, three-hour credit courses, the 50-minute class, 30 students per teacher, summer break, 16-week semesters, one teacher/one course/one class, seat-time funding formulas, busy homework, etc. Until we change the traditional architecture of education which we have inherited, and which we keep alive with federal, state, and local policies, our very best efforts at reform and change will fall far short of our laudable goals. Before we launch another major reform effort following the partial failure of the Completion Agenda, we need a national commission—well-funded by foundations—to study the barriers indigenous to the traditional architecture of the educational enterprise with plans for an architecture based on the information age in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. If we can change the playing field, future reform efforts may have a chance at more substantive success.

#### **8. Who were the major influences in your educational achievement and completion of college?**

My teachers who saw much more in me than I did myself. In the first grade, Miss Butler let me and Jimmie Jack Conn sing Come All Ye Faithful for the Christmas pageant and sat patiently as we repeated three of the verses at the top of our lungs. In the 5<sup>th</sup> grade, Miss Helms admonished me that gentlemen did not send notes like that to a girl they admired and kept me after school to drive home the social lesson. In the 6<sup>th</sup> grade, Miss Blount let me practice spelling in the clothes closet several hours a day with another student, and I was the runner up in the Miami Herald Spelling Bee for Hendry County; when the winner could not go to Miami for the state final Miss Blount took me there on a Greyhound bus, and I was the first person in the state contest to be eliminated. In the 9<sup>th</sup> grade, Miss Magill taught me the love of words and demonstrated a model of a caring and wonderful teacher. My high school principal, John Perdue, drove me 200 miles to the University of Florida and got me a job in the cafeteria and gave me his tuxedo, which I thought was required for college and which I never had an opportunity to wear. In my freshman year, my speech teacher, Alma Johnson Sarret, widow of Northwestern poet, Lew Sarret, took me into her home and gave me private speech lessons because my Southern accent was so pronounced; she later introduced me to Carl Sandburg in person; he had been best friends with her husband. In my sophomore year, Joe Fordyce hired me as a student assistant in the College of Education and encouraged me in many ways to excel; he later hired me as a 25 year old dean of students at Central Florida Junior College in 1960, which launched my community college career. Arthur Combs was my Master's and Doctoral Advisor and mentor when I completed all the doctoral work to become a psychotherapist, a process that was initiated one day when we were walking down the hall and he put his arm around my shoulders and asked, "When are we going to start on your doctorate?" It was a question that I could not fathom and that placed me in a state of shock. Combs mentored me well and hosted a dinner at his house one evening for me, him, and Carl Rogers, and another time with me, him, and Abraham Maslow. I had absolutely great and wonderful mentors and teachers who made all the difference; I owe them my life, for each of them saw in me much more than I saw in myself.

**9. What were your favorite courses in college?**

I loved the two 4-credit required courses in Humanities in my general education program because they opened a window into philosophy, psychology, poetry, fine arts, etc., that I had never been exposed to before in my life. I wish every community college student could have the eye-opening experience I had with courses in the Humanities.

My other favorite courses were American Novels, Romantic Literature, and Russian Literature. I was an avid reader from a young age and to have an opportunity to read the great literature and to examine it with some of the best professors in the profession was a great pleasure.

**10. What book(s) are you currently reading or you have recently finished?**

I recently completed Sandy Shugart's book on authentic leadership published by the League, and thought it one of the most honest and best books on leadership I have ever read.