

The Completion Agenda

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ETS on helping students graduate

College students across the United States envision walking across a stage in cap and gown to receive their diploma on graduation day. Yet too many never realize that vision. Only 56 percent of students who start a four-year degree graduate within six years. Success rates are lower at two-year institutions, where only 29 percent earn their degree within three years.*

Given these troubling statistics, improving student success and graduation rates are emphasized today more than ever. Colleges and universities face increasing accountability for ensuring student success. And higher education advocates including the American Association of Colleges and Universities, the Gates Foundation and President Obama are now focusing on the “completion agenda.”

But what does this completion agenda mean to college administrators, whose focus has always been on student success? A one-size-fits-all approach isn't the answer. Improving graduation rates takes a holistic approach as standard admissions and placement tests don't paint a full picture. Colleges must first understand each student's strengths and challenges and identify those at risk. Only then can they effectively provide resources that fit students' individualized needs and help them on their pathway to graduation.

Educational Testing Service (ETS), a leader in higher education assessment, has developed the ETS *SuccessNavigator™* assessment — a new way of identifying at-risk students and providing them with tailored action plans to help them succeed. This research-based online tool measures critical noncognitive factors that most directly influence student success: academic skills, commitment, self-management and social support. By understanding where students are vulnerable and the specific resources they require, colleges can target intervention efforts through *SuccessNavigator* Action Plans to ensure their success.

We have collaborated with *Inside Higher Ed* to bring you articles and essays about the important issue of student success. We support you in your efforts to help students achieve their goals and attain their degree.

Sincerely,



David Payne

Vice President and Chief Operating Officer
Global Education Division
ETS

* Source: Pathways to Prosperity: *Meeting the Challenge of Preparing Young Americans for the 21st Century*, Pathways to Prosperity Project, Harvard Graduate School of Education, February 2011.

For more information on the *SuccessNavigator* assessment, visit ets.org/successnavigator or call 1-800-745-0269.

INTRODUCTION

In the last 10 years, completion has become a central issue to American higher education in a way that was never the case previously. To be sure, there have always been colleges and universities that graduated most of those they enrolled. These institutions typically serve those who have had outstanding high school educations (and who, on average, are better off economically than are most Americans). That many other institutions had low completion rates was largely accepted, or at least not the subject of intense focus.

That has changed. Increasingly, policy makers, educators and foundations believe that a key goal for American society is to increase the percentage of adults with college credentials. One way to do that, of course, is to attract more students into higher education. But making sure that more of those who already enroll actually finish is seen by many as a more logical and more efficient approach. And the reality is that the United States won't reach ambitious college attainment goals based only on the success of those who come to college well prepared and destined for success, especially given shifts in the demographics of the U.S. population.

In discussions about the completion agenda, it's hard to find anyone who is anti-completion, but that doesn't mean that the policy questions are easy or uncontroversial. A policy or program that strikes one expert as a logical incentive to promote completion may strike another as potentially limiting access. And money of course also comes into play, given that, at many colleges, the completion agenda needs to be advanced in cost-effective ways in an era marked by frugality.

The *Inside Higher Ed* news articles and essays in this booklet reflect some of the programs, aspirations and ideas in play right now. We welcome your thoughts on these pieces, and on topics we should cover in the future.

--The Editors (editor@insidehighered.com)

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News Articles



Better Late Than Never?

By Paul Fain

Ending late registration for courses may help more community college students graduate, but it also challenges deeply held views about student access, and can hurt enrollment levels.

One way community colleges can help more students graduate is by eliminating the option of registering late for courses, research has found. But this move, which is a key part of college completion reforms, can also stir up controversy and hurt enrollment numbers.

In February 2014, the College of Southern Nevada began requiring that students sign up for a course no later than the night before it begins. The two-year college included a few exceptions to the revised policy and also added new, short-term courses to avoid shutting out late-arriving students.

Previously, students could join an in-progress course for up to three

weeks. By ending that relatively liberal registration policy, experts said the college should see improved retention and graduation rates.

“Retention is far lower for students who register late,” said Rhonda Glover, national director of data coaching and data strategy for Achieving the Dream, a completion-oriented nonprofit group that works with the College of Southern Nevada and many other community colleges.

By preventing students from entering a class they’re unlikely to complete, Glover said “you’re actually supporting those students in more positive ways than you’re hurting them.”

A committee of Southern Nevada’s Faculty Senate oversaw the drafting

of the new course registration policy, which the full senate later approved. Dennis Soukup, who chairs the college’s applied technology department, said faculty members in his department cheered when they heard about the end of late registration.

The reason, he said, was that during the first few days of a term, instructors were often overwhelmed by students trying to get into courses. “I felt like an auctioneer,” Soukup said of trying to teach during the first few days of a course. “It was very intrusive.”

The flood of late registrations caused other problems, too, such as making it tough for administrators to hire the right number of adjunct professors for course sections. “Students would wait until the last minute,” said Soukup. “We couldn’t plan our faculty.”

Not all instructors are sold on the new policy, however. Several have argued that the elimination of late registration takes a disproportionate toll on the neediest, least-prepared students.

“The policy is going to block low-income students from enrolling,” said Sondra Cosgrove, a history professor at the college. “They’re the students who have the most problems. They’re the poorest students. They don’t have family support.”

Soukup, however, said the policy is already helping students – including those from underserved populations.

In the past many students would wait until the last minute to register, he

said. And those who start late “never finish.”

But in 2014, however, Soukup said students are “well ahead of the game.” **‘ENABLING STUDENTS?’**

Eliminating late registration isn’t easy. It can go against the philosophical grain for “open access” institutions that pride themselves on taking all comers.

The main reason institutions like the College of Southern Nevada have been able to buck that tradition is the national college completion “agenda.” Officials from powerful foundations and the Obama administration are pushing hard for community colleges to focus on both student access and completion.

But when colleges try to draw from the completion agenda playbook, they sometimes encounter faculty resistance. And the strategies that groups like Achieving the Dream encourage can also impact enrollment and the bottom line, because many states provide community colleges with appropriations based on enrollments.

Klamath Community College, for example, saw its enrollment decline by 20 percent in 2012 after college officials put in place a number of completion-oriented policies. One key change at the college was the elimination of late registration.

Yet Achieving the Dream argues that late registration ends up hurting students in the long run. And Glover

said colleges typically see a 2-3 percentage point retention gain from eliminating the option.

For example, her former employer, Florida’s Valencia College, saw strong retention gains after nixing late registration (among other completion-oriented shifts). And students got the message quickly.

“Once you make the rules, they abide by it,” she said.

Officials at the College of Southern Nevada said they studied the issue before moving ahead. That included looking at studies from peer institutions, as well as gathering national and local completion data. They also conducted focus groups with students, faculty and staff members, said James McCoy, associate vice president of academic success at the college.

The goal was to ask if the college was “enabling our students” with late registration, McCoy said. And the research said yes.

Once the policy was changed, the college added to its more than 150 shorter-term courses, many of which are eight weeks long. College officials also began a marketing campaign to get the word out to students.

The campaign featured a widely distributed flier that read “R.I.P. Late Registration” and included a picture of a tombstone.

“Research shows that students that register before the start of the semester are more likely to succeed,” the flier said. “Starting Spring Semester 2014,

students must register by 11:59 p.m. the night before the semester begins. Some classes may be offered in a late-starting, short-term format.”

The word apparently got out. At the beginning of the most recent term, only 332 students sought to get into courses after the deadline, McCoy said. That’s a small number for an institution with a total enrollment of roughly 35,000 students.

For her part, Cosgrove said students often aren’t fully to blame for being late to register for a course. Many can’t figure out their plans until they know how much financial aid they will receive, and that can be a challenge to do on schedule.

Instead of eliminating late registration, Cosgrove said, she would have preferred to provide more resources for students to such as advising, tutoring and child care.

Southern Nevada is, said McCoy. The college has ramped up counseling and advising for students, helping them plan their course schedules well before a term begins.

It’s too early to say if the policy has resulted in lower overall enrollment. But McCoy predicted it would be flat or only slightly down.

The college plans to continue investigating other ways to improve retention. McCoy said officials are looking at other forms of student interventions as part of a broad strategic enrollment planning effort.

“We’re not done yet,” he said. ■

Scorecard for Scorecards

By Paul Fain

Complete College America talks up performance-based funding at its annual meeting, releasing a report that rates the 16 states that have tried it so far.

SALT LAKE CITY -- In the last few years, 16 states have begun funding public colleges based at least partially on student outcomes like degree production and completion rates. That number soon will grow, according to Complete College America, bringing the total to 25 states.

"It's sweeping across the country," said Stan Jones, president of the nonprofit group, which hosted its fourth annual meeting in October 2013.

Supporters of performance-based funding now include President Obama, who wants to link his planned college ratings system to federal financial aid.

Complete College America, which receives significant funding from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, is a prominent and effective proponent of linking state funding to student outcomes. Attendees at this week's meeting include representatives from 33 states and the District of Columbia, all of which have signed on to elements of the group's take on the national college completion "agenda."

In October 2013, Complete College America and the National Center for Higher Education Management Systems (NCHEMS) released a report that tracks how states are moving

forward with performance-based funding.

There is huge variability in the proportion of funding that states funnel toward performance formulas. Less than 1 percent of state support in Illinois comes with performance strings, while virtually all of Tennessee's support does. But the report said even those on the low end are headed toward 25 percent performance-based.

Dennis P. Jones, NCHEMS' president, wrote the new report. It builds on a previous paper, which sought to establish preferred principles for states to use while designing their performance-funding formulas.

The new report updates and expands on those 16 strategies. It also includes score cards showing whether states are using them.

States get credit in the report for trying to design formulas that reward colleges for serving underrepresented student populations. That can help prevent gaming of the system.

"One of the major concerns voiced about outcomes-based funding, especially when the goal is to produce more graduates," the report said, "is that institutions will seek to enroll only those students most likely to succeed and ignore students who are at risk academically, economically or

otherwise."

Most states are trying to account for differences among students, according to the report. Of the 16 states with active performance funding formulas, 13 to some extent weigh the different missions of colleges. And 13 include measures based on institutional performance with underserved student populations.

Some are ahead of the curve, however.

Tennessee and Ohio get high marks for models that reward colleges for serving lower-income students. Others, like Tennessee and West Virginia, factor in the number of adult students colleges serve.

With those approaches, "institutions of all types can win without changing their missions," said Jones of NCHEMS.

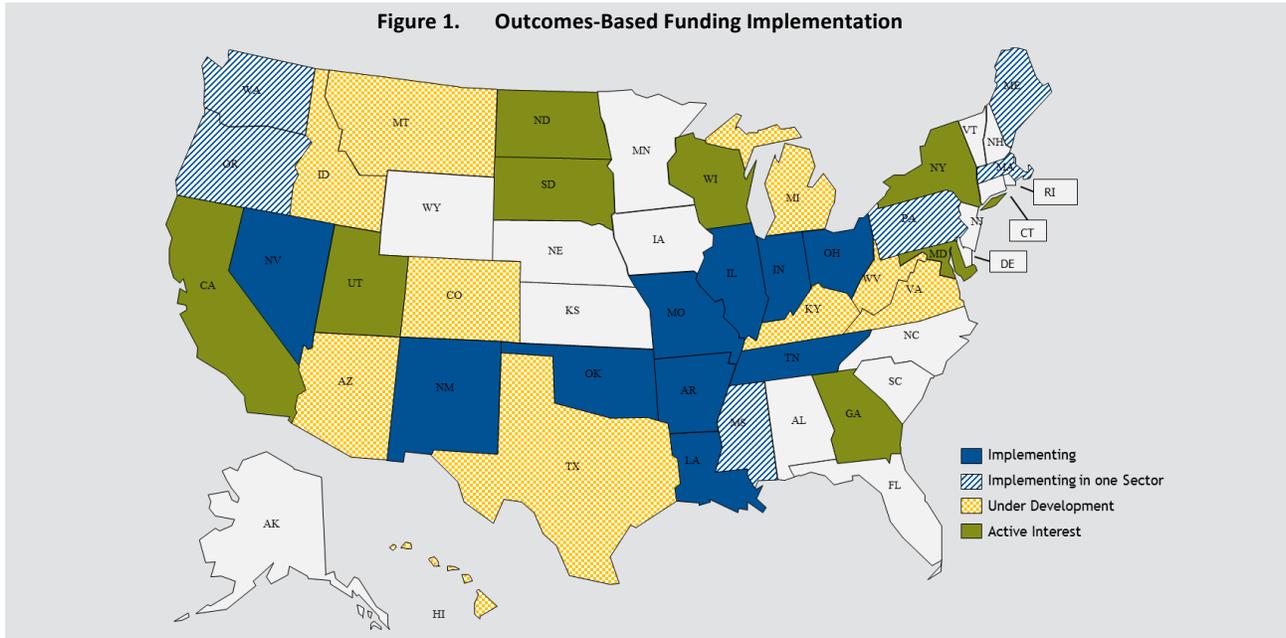
ACADEMIC QUALITY?

Tennessee scored the highest in the report. The state used 15 of 16 of the encouraged strategies, with the one exception being the lack of a "stop-loss" provision that would limit the amount of funding hits colleges can take based on their performance. The state is one of the first to get into performance-based funding, and currently allocates 95 percent of state support based on student outcomes.

Faculty groups and others, like the Association of American Colleges and Universities, have expressed concerns about the completion agenda and its focus on performance funding.

Gary Rhoades said the NCHEMS report confirms worries that the completion agenda is incomplete and

Figure 1. Outcomes-Based Funding Implementation



Source: Complete College America and NCHEMS

even counterproductive. Rhoades, a professor of higher education at the University of Arizona, also directs a virtual think tank, the Center for the Future of Higher Education.

He said the report places “throughput” – the production of graduates and degrees – over academic quality.

The report acknowledges that the lack of measures of academic quality in state-funding formulas is a weakness.

“The concern about quality is real and should be addressed head-on,” it said.

Some movement has begun, according to the report. Nevada and a few other states have created faculty-led processes that are intended to “produce a set of metrics to track quality levels over time and potentially be incorporated into the funding model.”

Missouri and Tennessee are the first

to include measures of student learning into their funding mechanisms, the report said. And more states will likely follow.

Performance funding shouldn’t be all about graduation, according to Complete College America. The group pushes states to include shorter-term measures, including “momentum points” based on the number of students who complete remedial courses or a certain number of credits.

For example, Tennessee uses incentives based on the number of students at an institution who complete 24, 48 or 72 credits. And community colleges in Washington are measured in part by the number of students who complete 15 or 30 credits.

Rhoades remains skeptical, however. “The fixation on narrow, reductionist measures of (undergraduate) completion underemphasizes professional and

graduate education, knowledge creation and the preparation of citizens for a democratic knowledge-based society,” he said in an email.

“That does not augur well for society, employers or for the students.”

Not so, according to the report. In the past funding formulas rewarded colleges based on student access, creating an incentive for colleges to just enroll more students. Student success and completion were not priorities. But that has changed, the report said.

Furthermore, it argues that performance-based funding is now ready for primetime.

“The field has advanced to the point that the knowledge base regarding ‘how’ to develop such systems is now in place,” the report said. “The issue now is one of political will, not technical know-how.” ■

Influence incoming STUDENT SUCCESS With the ETS SuccessNavigator™ Advisor Report

Gives advisors a complete understanding of each student and specific guidance, tools and action plans to ensure their success

Student Name: Jacob Minor
Student ID: 5698736
Institution: SN University
Test Date: 07/16/2013

The Student's Background

- Gender: Male
- Race: White (non-Hispanic)
- Age: 19
- Is English your best language? Yes

COURSE ACCELERATION*

MATH: YES

ENGLISH: CAUTION

RECOMMENDATION

ACADEMIC SUCCESS INDEX*

HIGH

RETENTION SUCCESS INDEX*

MODERATE

Skill Report

Academic Skills- Tools and strategies to succeed in the classroom

A student with similar skills:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Rarely uses strategies to manage time and assignments • Often misses class or comes unprepared 	<div style="display: flex; justify-content: space-between; width: 100%;"> <div style="width: 20px; height: 10px; background-color: red;"></div> <div style="width: 20px; height: 10px; background-color: white;"></div> <div style="width: 20px; height: 10px; background-color: white;"></div> </div>
Tools/Tips	The Tutoring Center can provide strategies to help you set goals and organize your time. See your Advisor for more information, or click here for helpful tips and tools.	LOW

Commitment- Active pursuit toward an academic goal

A student with similar skills:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sees little value in a college degree • Does not feel attached to the college 	<div style="display: flex; justify-content: space-between; width: 100%;"> <div style="width: 20px; height: 10px; background-color: red;"></div> <div style="width: 20px; height: 10px; background-color: white;"></div> <div style="width: 20px; height: 10px; background-color: white;"></div> </div>
Tools/Tips	The Career Center can provide strategies to help you set goals and plan your academic career. See your Advisor for more information, or click here for helpful tips and tools.	LOW

Self-Management- Reactions to academic and other stressors

A student with similar skills:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Manages stress in a positive and productive manner • Demonstrates confidence in personal skills and abilities 	<div style="display: flex; justify-content: space-around; width: 100%;"> <div style="width: 10px; height: 10px; background-color: green;"></div> <div style="width: 10px; height: 10px; background-color: green;"></div> <div style="width: 10px; height: 10px; background-color: green;"></div> </div>
Tools/Tips	The Counseling Center can help you manage stress that arises from college life. See your Advisor for more information, or click here for helpful tips and tools.	HIGH

Social Support- Connecting with people and resources for student success

A student with similar skills:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Holds some connections to people and resources • Has occasional difficulty balancing the demands of college and personal life 	<div style="display: flex; justify-content: space-between; width: 100%;"> <div style="width: 20px; height: 10px; background-color: yellow;"></div> <div style="width: 20px; height: 10px; background-color: white;"></div> <div style="width: 20px; height: 10px; background-color: white;"></div> </div>
Tools/Tips	The Office of Student Life can connect you with important student groups on campus. See your Advisor for more information, or click here for helpful tips and tools.	MODERATE

*Acceleration: Please see Technical Users Guide to fully understand how to make an informed course placement.
*Academic Success Index: Weighted composite of student's SuccessNavigator™ profile and other academic indicators of student preparedness, such as self or institution reported high school GPA, SAT/ACT, etc.
*Retention Success Index: Projected likelihood that student will return for a second semester or year at the institution.

Note: Advisor Report also includes a Detailed Skill Report and additional information on the student's background.

Report Date: 07/17/2013 01:01 PM

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Aggregates key student information from both SuccessNavigator™ and the student information system so advisors have a handy snapshot.

DETAILED ACTION PLANS

Suggested interaction with programs and services on campus based on domain scores — so advisors can easily guide the student to the resources that will help ensure success.

SUCCESS INDICES

The Academic Success Index helps advisors identify at-risk students and make acceleration decisions. The Retention Success Index indicates the likelihood that a student will return for a second semester or second year at the same institution. Both are based on background, cognitive and psychosocial information and supported by statistical relationships with success.

DOMAIN SCORES

Four general areas — academic skills, commitment, self-management and social support — give advisors a holistic understanding of the student's strengths and vulnerabilities.

To learn more about the Advisor Report, as well as the Student and Institutional Reports, please email highered@ets.org, call 1-800-745-0269 or visit www.ets.org/successnavigator.

Success in the States

By Paul Fain

New student success centers take the completion agenda to the states, with a faculty-driven feel. More could be on the way.

Keeping up with the national college completion “agenda” can be tough. Foundations have created a messy mélange of strategies and organizations, often under the watchful eye of policy-minded state lawmakers, with the goal of getting more students to graduation.

To try to pull together some of those threads in a coherent way, community college leaders in five states have created statewide “student success centers.” And that approach may soon spread.

The Kresge Foundation has provided start-up cash with three-year grants for the success centers in Michigan, Arkansas, Ohio, Texas and New Jersey. The foundation is now looking to fund three more, having recently released a request for proposals jointly with Jobs for the Future, a nonprofit group that receives funding from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, among others.

Caroline Altman Smith, a senior program officer for Kresge, said the goal is to knit together viable completion strategies in a central place in each state. The new hubs become places for both administrators and faculty members to share intelligence and bring ideas back to their campuses.

Kresge didn’t come up with the concept for student success centers. Smith said the idea was “bubbling up organically” in several states.

A policy paper from Jobs for the Future tracks the genesis of the centers. The first step came when a “critical mass” of community colleges signed on to the completion-oriented reforms led by Achieving the Dream, a national organization, according to the paper.

“The colleges and their supporting associations came to believe that their hard work could be strengthened and amplified if there were some statewide, cross-college supports in place,” the paper said, including common data sets and professional development opportunities.

That works for Achieving the Dream, said Carol Lincoln, a senior vice president for the group. The centers make up for a “missing structure” in each state, she said, and help to “spread lessons more deeply.”

The Ohio center got off the ground in 2012. Ruth Silon, who taught English at Cuyahoga Community College for 34 years, is its director. “You have 23 separate cultures” at Ohio’s 23 community colleges, Silon said. The center is trying to help create a “state culture” around college completion.

The five existing centers are all in states with relatively decentralized community college systems. Arkansas and Michigan were the first ones created. They’re also the most extensive.

California could soon be in the mix. The state’s 112 community colleges are somewhat autonomous. Observers said a state student success center in California could play a role in helping to coordinate the growing number of completion-oriented strategies that are occurring around the huge system.

Scott Lay, president and CEO of the Community College League of California, said community college officials in the state are discussing whether to apply for the Kresge grant.

“Our goal would be to set this up so that it’s a resource for faculty,” Lay said. There would be a payoff for administrators, too, he said. “We need attention to metrics by senior leadership.”

THE FRONT LINES

The five success centers all have relationships with their states’ community college associations. But they also have separate budgets, per Kresge’s design, which keeps them independent. Small staffs of one or two full-time employees run the centers. They also have advisory boards.

Ideally, the centers will find more money through fund raising and government grants. In Arkansas, for example, the center helped the state win a \$15 million grant from the U.S. Department of Labor in 2011.

They also help foundations spot promising ideas within each state.



Smith said the Michigan-based Kresge has leaned on the that state's center as an "intermediary" between foundation staff and community colleges.

"We can't have a relationship with all 28 of the colleges," she said.

Kay McClenney is a fan of the centers. McClenney, director of the Center for Community College Student Engagement, said they can take completion strategies from Achieving the Dream or similar groups, like Completion by Design, and both broaden and deepen the impact of those approaches at the state level.

"The fact that they are close to home helps," she said.

There are critics of certain tenets of the college completion agenda. Performance-based state funding in particular tends to rankle some professors.

The student success centers, however, feature a prominent role for

faculty members, more so than have some national conversations about student success.

The centers all "place special emphasis on engaging faculty in the leadership of reform efforts," said the Jobs for the Future paper, "so that reforms gain support and traction on the ground."

Ohio's success center has a particularly strong faculty focus. The center, like those in other states, hosts meetings for faculty members to trade notes and hear from outside experts.

Kathy Pittman, an English professor at Hocking College, a two-year institution in rural Ohio, has attended workshops hosted by the state's center. Speakers who made an impact on her included officials from the Community College of Baltimore and Patrick Henry Community College, which is located in Virginia.

"We compare notes," she said. "It

saves other colleges from having to jump through all the hoops."

Pittman also led a discussion at a center-sponsored symposium. She described for her peers how she teaches remedial English to fire science students. Many of her students already work in the field. So one way to increase their engagement, Pittman said, is by using reading material that relates to their work -- so-called "high-interest material."

That lesson can apply to instructors at other two-year colleges around the state, she said, even if they aren't teaching fire science students.

Pittman said the center has gotten a boost from Silon herself being well-steeped in teaching practices.

"She totally understands where faculty are coming from," Pittman said. "She's really done a good job of provoking conversations around the state." ■

The centers all "place special emphasis on engaging faculty in the leadership of reform efforts, so that reforms gain support and traction on the ground."

Scorecards Get an A

By Paul Fain

California's community colleges get graded with new completion scorecards. Experts say the data are among the best provided by a public college system.

California's community college system in April 2013 unveiled Web-based "scorecards" on student performance at its 112 colleges. The new data tool is user-friendly and often sobering, with graduation, retention and transfer rates for each of the colleges and for the overall system, which enrolls 2.4 million students.

The scorecards include breakdowns by race, ethnicity, gender and age. They also feature more than just simple graduation rates, with measures like the percentage of students who complete 30 credits and data on how students who placed into remedial coursework fared in comparison to students who were prepared to do college work when they enrolled.

For example, about half (49.2 percent) of students across the system earned a degree or certificate or transferred over the six years they were tracked. But 71 percent of those who were prepared for college successfully completed, compared to 41 percent of students who needed remediation.

Also included in the scorecards are retention rates, which are based on the proportion of students who remained enrolled for their first three consecutive terms, and a section on career technical education as well.

System officials cautioned that the

results should not be used to weigh colleges against each other. After all, rural campuses like the College of the Siskiyous serve different student populations than does Long Beach City College, an urban institution.

"The system was not designed as a method of ranking institutions," said Brice W. Harris, chancellor of the community college system.

However, colleges will be scrutinized by how they perform over time on the scorecards, which will be updated each year. And the baseline established for an institution during the most recent academic year, 2011-12, can be compared to data from the previous four years, showing whether colleges are improving or not.

Some students and their families will no doubt use the scorecards, which are available on a central website and on the sites of local colleges. But observers said the primary audiences for the data are college leaders and state policy makers, some of whom have pushed performance-based funding for the two-year system.

"It has already created considerable conversations on our campuses and in our communities," Linda Thor, chancellor of the Foothill-De Anza Community College District, said in a phone call with reporters. And importantly, Thor said, those are

conversations "based on data" rather than anecdotes.

JUST THE FACTS

Experts on higher education data and proponents of the college completion agenda praised the new scorecards, saying they are both meaty and easy to understand.

Daniel Greenstein, director of postsecondary success strategy at the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, said the community college system had done a good job selecting a handful of the most important measures of completion. And he said he liked the Web tool's simplicity.

"It's not trying to spin," he said, with an approach he described as "here's the data."

The academy has long bemoaned the shortcomings of federal graduation rates, which typically focus on first-time, full-time students. Community colleges in particular enroll many students who fail to show up on standard measures, like those featured in the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS).

California's two-year system, however, deserves credit for advancing that conversation in a productive way, said Nate Johnson, a higher education data expert and a senior consultant for HCM Strategists, a health and education public policy and advocacy firm.

"They've actually proposed something different and put it out there," Johnson said, "rather than just throwing stones at IPEDS."

The colleges didn't need to provide much new information for

the scorecards, system officials said. Much of it is currently collected under a process dubbed the Accountability Reporting for the Community Colleges (ARCC), the creation of which the state's legislature required in 2004.

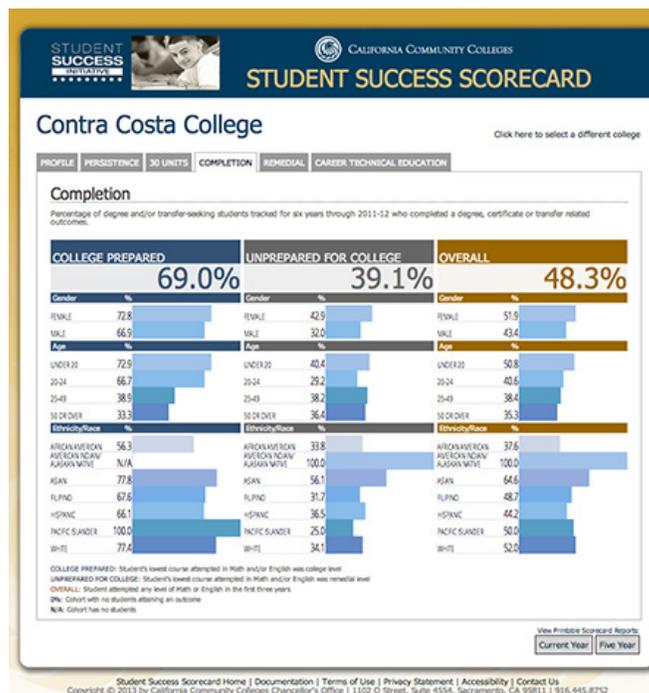
But the scorecards do include some new information, and plenty of additional ways to disaggregate and analyze it. Several additional layers will be available, system officials said, with some of that information available only to colleges.

Employment figures are not featured in the scorecards. But the system is working on an earnings tracking tool that should be publicly available next month, according to a spokesman, with median annual wages for students two and five years after they enter an academic program.

One data point that several experts praised was the measure of how many students complete 30 credits toward a degree or certificate. Research shows that students are more likely to graduate and earn more in wages if they clear this "momentum point," according to system officials.

Colleges will be able to use the 30-credit statistic and other, similar measures to identify promising practices that will help more students complete, said Jan Friedel, an associate professor of educational policy at Iowa State University.

Friedel said the scorecards are perhaps the most detailed that a state



system makes publicly available.

"They're at the forefront of the completion agenda," she said. "I'm impressed."

BROADER REFORMS

The scorecards grew out of a broad series of reforms to the California community college system. Central to that effort has been a report by a state task force, which recommended several shifts for the colleges, some of them controversial.

For example, the state's community colleges have long been fiercely protective about their open-door admission policies. But the report has successfully pushed for the two-year institutions to make tough choices about giving priority to students who are most likely to earn a credential.

The report also called for the creation of scorecards based on bulked-up data sets. The system made good on that request this week.

The release of the scorecards

"represents an important step forward in making the colleges more transparent and accountable for institutional and student performance, and hopefully will provide some momentum for other changes to be made at the campus level," said Lande Ajose, associate director of California Competes, a group that has been critical of the colleges' governance.

Amid years of deep budget cuts, California's community colleges were forced to turn away 600,000 students. The task force

was created in part to come up with ways for the colleges to cope. The financial crisis has eased a bit for the colleges, thanks largely to a tax hike proposed by Gov. Jerry Brown that voters approved in 2012.

Harris has vowed to continue pushing the task force's recommendations, even if the budget situation continues to improve.

The overarching goal of the scorecards is to "help more students achieve their educational goals on time," the chancellor said. And he said the public data will encourage colleges to work harder to improve themselves.

"This level of transparency is in the best interests of the citizens of the state," said Harris.

Plenty of people are already taking a look at the scorecards. System officials said the site had received 17,000 clicks by the afternoon of the day it was released.

Public Universities Join Team Completion

By Doug Lederman

Associations of four-year state institutions commit to turning out 3.8 million more bachelor's degrees by 2025 -- if governments hold up their end.

Given that they enroll more than a third of all undergraduates in the United States, public four-year colleges and universities will have to pick up their game in a big way if the country has any chance at all of meeting the ambitious goals that President Obama and his co-conspirators in the “completion agenda” have set for increasing postsecondary attainment.

And in October 2012, nearly 500 of them -- and their associations -- pledged to do just that, vowing to increase by 3.8 million the number of bachelor's degrees they award by 2025. They asserted, however, that doing so would be difficult if not impossible unless federal and state governments restore their historically strong financial support for the institutions.

The American Association of State Colleges and Universities and the Association of Public and Land-Grant Universities, whose members together make up virtually all of the four-year public institutions in the United States, said their “Project Degree Completion” would be an “unprecedented initiative that will drive the instructional agenda of public universities and colleges in the

years ahead,” as M. Peter McPherson, president of the land-grant group, said in typically understated fashion.

Under the plan, to which 490 colleges and universities have so far committed, American public four-year institutions would raise the number of bachelor's degrees they award a year from an expected 1.075 million this year to 1.578 million in 2025, with much of the gain coming by reaching out to former students who left without a degree.

The institutions would do this, the associations said, both by “constraining” the amount that they spend per student and assuring “that educational quality is enhanced, not compromised.”

FISCAL CHALLENGES

Doing that will be difficult, though, they concede. While institutions have kept per-student expenditures essentially flat, many of them have had to raise tuition “to compensate for the significant loss of state dollars,” the signers of the commitment said in a statement.

If enrollments (and completions) are to continue to grow, they said, “states must provide sufficient appropriations



Peter McPherson

to support students and the discovery of new knowledge,” while the federal government must maintain its “commitment to student financial aid; support for research and innovation; and encouragement of states to continue their support for public colleges and universities.”

Public colleges and universities themselves must be “more innovative in the performance of their essential roles,” they add.

“There has been significant dialogue lately about the decline of the middle class,” said Muriel Howard, president of the American Association of State Colleges and Universities.

“Improving degree completion and enhancing earning power is an important component to rebuilding the middle class in this country. Public higher education has a responsibility to be part of the solution.” ■

'Getting to Graduation'

By Paul Fain

A new book of essays takes stock of where "completion agenda" stands. The volume's editors talk about key lessons from the still nascent college completion push.

The "completion agenda" has succeeded in its goal of creating urgency around the production of college credentials, and that awareness among policy makers and higher education's big thinkers is momentum in itself. But with lofty completion targets set by foundations and President Obama, the agenda's advocates have a long row to hoe.

To take stock of where the college completion effort stands, the American Enterprise Institute pulled together essays from 11 researchers and policy analysts. The final product is the book *Getting to Graduation: The Completion Agenda in Higher Education* (Johns Hopkins University Press). Editing the volume were Andrew P. Kelly, a research fellow at AEI, and Mark Schneider, vice president for the American Institutes for Research and a former commissioner of education statistics at the U.S. Department of Education.

In an e-mail interview, they jointly answer questions about what they see as key takeaways and common themes from the book.

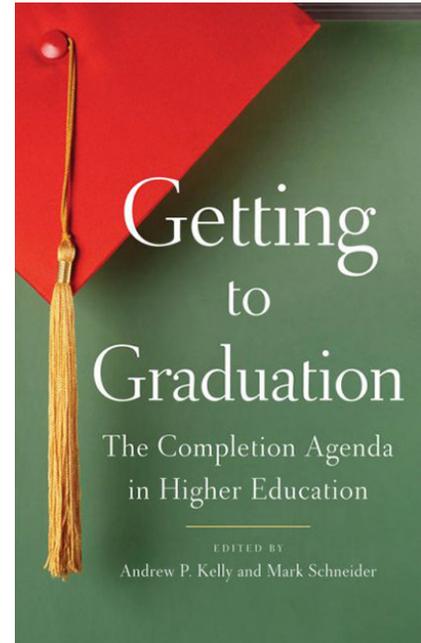
Q. Many people still define "college" as bachelor's degree programs. How can federal and state policies encourage the

production of sub-baccalaureate credentials?

A. If we're to make progress on national attainment goals, we need to broaden our definition of "higher education." A narrow definition not only excludes much of postsecondary education, it also ignores trends in labor market demand. The growth in middle-skill jobs, particularly in fields like health care and information technology, means that we are going to need more workers with sub-baccalaureate credentials.

The book highlights two particular approaches to boosting sub-baccalaureate productivity. First, several states have invested in one or two-year occupational certificate programs that have shown promising results. For instance, Tennessee's Technology Centers boast high completion rates, low costs-per-degree, and strong labor market returns, providing the state with a high return on its investment. Other states should not simply import Tennessee's model, and certificate programs have their own drawbacks (credits do not often transfer for further study). But there is much to learn from successful certificate programs.

Second, federal and state



governments should expand formal apprenticeship programs, where students learn on the job and complete academic coursework, all while earning a wage from a participating employer. Compared to other education and work force programs, the Department of Labor's federal apprenticeship program is woefully underdeveloped despite having a track record of success.

There's a reticence on the part of traditional higher education to accept such "occupational" education as part of our postsecondary portfolio; indeed, faculty often use "training" as a term of derision and disrespect. Even some community college proponents have taken to disparaging certificate programs. However, to the extent that these pathways continue to provide cost-effective paths to labor market success, their success should help

to overcome such backward-looking attitudes.

Q. Should short-term certificate programs, earned in less than a year, be part of the completion push -- particularly if they lead to better-paying jobs?

A. At heart, the push to boost degree completion must be about building human capital, not just increasing the number of paper credentials. When it comes to short-term certificates, this cuts in two directions. On the one hand, the easiest way to pump up completion numbers would be to churn out short-term certificates, regardless of their labor market value.

unit records with unemployment insurance wage data to provide precise estimates of the outcomes for graduates from various programs. At the federal level, the Department of Education should salvage the “gainful employment” mess to provide information about the value of different programs. With objective measures in hand, we can make informed judgments about what credentials should be part of the completion agenda.

Q. Community colleges will have to dramatically boost degree production for the completion agenda to succeed. Can they do

organizational changes that would raise productivity, the response has typically been to layer new student success initiatives onto existing structures and call for more funding.

Paths forward are emerging, as entrepreneurial community college leaders around the country are asking important questions. How can colleges shift some of their instruction from brick and mortar classrooms into quality online models that lower costs and build capacity? How can they leverage a competency-based approach to reduce the time and money spent on remediation? Campuses and systems that are experimenting

“Like the rest of public higher education, the budget crises that community colleges face are real. But rather than battenning down the hatches and waiting for public funding to return, reform-minded leaders have to adapt to this new normal if they wish to maintain access and improve student success.”

This would add to our tally but do little for the country’s stock of skilled graduates. (This challenge applies across all types of credentials.)

On the other hand, dismissing certificates of less than one year simply because they are shorter than other programs equates seat-time with quality instead of actually measuring it. We believe that the value-proposition of these short-term certificates is clear: increased labor market opportunity for a smaller investment of time and money than longer-term programs. But we need to develop objective indicators of the extent to which this proposition is true.

States can do so by linking student

that while most are struggling with serious budget crises?

A. Like the rest of public higher education, the budget crises that community colleges face are real. But rather than battenning down the hatches and waiting for public funding to return, reform-minded leaders have to adapt to this new normal if they wish to maintain access and improve student success.

It is important to remember that although community colleges are cheap for consumers, they can be expensive for taxpayers. High rates of remediation and student attrition often translate to high costs per student outcome. But rather than exploring

with these innovations are still the exception rather than the rule, and the book suggests that taking these innovations to scale across institutions has proven difficult. State and federal policies should aim to encourage this kind of experimentation and, where necessary, knock down the rules and regulations that prevent it.

Q. What role should for-profit colleges play? Can traditional colleges learn some lessons from the sector, as one chapter in the book suggests?

A. For-profit colleges have been the brunt of much criticism, some of it valid, much of it driven by some visceral suspicion of their very role



Mark Schneider and Andrew Kelly

in providing education. That said, many for-profit systems enroll large numbers of students and have invested significant amounts of money in learning management systems to track the engagement and the progress of their students. And these same systems can measure and track the “value added” that faculty provide in helping students master competencies. This leads to two paths in which traditional colleges could learn from these efforts by for-profits.

First, online education must be built around individualized learning through adaptive testing and adaptive learning. In order to do so, colleges use new approaches to the delivery of educational material, the assessment of student progress and the feedback provided to students and faculty. Many for-profit colleges are far ahead of traditional colleges in the development of these platforms.

Second, and more controversial, is redefining the role of the faculty. Many professors bridle at the concept of “unbundling” their role into component parts (curriculum development, choosing learning materials, test

development and so on); faculty are even more resistant to the idea of any kind of standardized assessments of student competencies. Yet the learning management platforms that the large for-profit companies have developed are pushing the frontiers of assessing learning. With the absence of tenured faculty, promotion and renewal decisions can be made on the basis of value-added assessments of student learning.

The pioneering work that for-profits are doing on unbundling education and re-defining faculty roles can provide valuable insights for traditional campuses that are looking to reinvent themselves.

Q. The book discusses whether the completion agenda’s goals are realistic, with some arguments for setting the bar a little lower. Will we be in a better place for trying in a decade or so, even if the target is out of reach?

A. For decades the country has focused on promoting higher education access, and this focus has paid off. More students than ever will head off to college this fall. But as the

completion agenda has made clear, far too many of those students will fail to cross the finish line. Moreover, the completion agenda has also begun to morph into a “productivity agenda” -- not only do we need to improve student success, but we have to do it in a more cost-effective manner.

While the various goals of this new agenda are ambitious, making progress is essential. The nation’s success will depend on how willing leaders are to reinvent the existing system, often over the objection of powerful, established players. As the contributors to the book make clear, tweaks to student aid programs, more articulation agreements and even replication of particular “disruptive” innovations will not be sufficient to achieve new goals. Instead, policies must encourage providers -- new and established, public, nonprofit or for-profit -- to compete with one another on the value they deliver to their students.

If we wish to make dramatic improvements in student success and productivity, policies should cultivate a market that rewards those things. ■

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Views Articles

Rethinking the Completion Agenda

By Sanford C. Shugart

With pressure intensifying on colleges to increase the number of Americans with college credentials, Sandy Shugart shares principles that can help move the needle -- and some potential pitfalls.

Not long ago, a good friend and outstanding college president moved from El Paso Community College, where for a decade he had led a complete transformation of the college and the results its students achieved, to Austin Community College, a college ready for much the same kind of transformational leadership.

Within the first few weeks in Austin, on his drive to work, he encountered a large billboard that said “Austin Community College, Graduation Rate 4% -- Is this a good use of taxpayers dollars?”

Welcome to Austin. The billboard was sponsored by a business leader with a variety of concerns over higher education in the Lone Star state. My friend contacted the newspaper and asked for an opportunity to respond. At the press conference that resulted, he strode to the microphone and announced that the graduation rate quoted on the billboard was categorically incorrect – the actual graduation rate was 3.9 percent. The

group assembled chuckled nervously. My friend went on to provide some context for these results and address the ways the college was moving to improve them.

What lessons can we draw from this story for the future of our work, especially as it touches on the remarkable attention now being focused on how our students complete what they have started: Who earns a degree or other credential? How long it takes them to do so? How much debt they graduate with? And how their education’s value in the marketplace justifies both this debt and the state’s investment in their education?

The “completion agenda” represents just one set of questions that have defined national and state policy discussions in higher education recently. Others include: How competitive is our workforce? How do we rank in percentage of adults with a college education? What about the STEM fields? And why don’t governors think more highly of psychology majors?

There are questions around financing: In the public sector, a long-term trend to defunding colleges and universities was greatly accelerated by the recession, resulting in substantial unfunded growth and cost shifting to students, even as some boards and governors challenge the moves to increase tuition to offset some of the losses. (At Valencia, we have taken 25 percent of the cost per FTE in constant dollars out of the college in just five years. And the percentages of funds coming from students and the state have virtually reversed, with nearly two-thirds coming from tuition, only a third from the state of Florida. Yet our governor stood in front of us recently and said with all sincerity that he didn’t understand why our colleges wanted to raise tuition on the poor working families of Florida.)

And these long-term funding challenges are exacerbated by the fact that we are competing for state revenue with voracious entitlement programs consuming an extraordinary share of total state revenues that won’t recover to 2007 levels until sometime in 2015 or 2016, if then.

At the national level we have deep partisan differences over financial aid policy and deep concern over mounting student debt, yet no consensus on meaningful solutions that could protect students from the more unsavory edges of the industry and allow for rational pricing

and positioning by colleges and universities in 50 states.

But with all of this to worry and whine about, few of us have been welcomed to work as negatively as my good friend Richard. Note that the big Texas “howdy” from the business leadership of the state was about completions – or rather the lack of them.

This concern with completion has real legs. As the feds measure our work (something that has never been done well, for which we share in the blame), even the most selective colleges complete barely three in four of their students; state universities closer to one in two, and community colleges, one in three. Not much to brag about.

And given that the national goal of increasing the percentage of working Americans with a degree depends very heavily on enrolling and graduating many more nontraditional students, we might draw special attention to the challenges of the community colleges, where more than half of all college students begin their educations, and where 80 percent of the underrepresented, the poor, and the first-generation students are served. If they are to be enfranchised at all (and we need them to be, since, as was once said, demographics is destiny), we need them to experience pathways to deep learning, progression, graduation, and further education. Everyone, from the White House to the major foundations, to the associations and the policy mavens around Dupont Circle, is talking about this.

So here is the challenge we face as

an industry: We are being asked to achieve much better results with fewer resources to engage a needier student population in an atmosphere of serious skepticism where all journalism is yellow and our larger society no longer exempts our institutions (nor us) from the deep distrust that has grown toward all institutions.

If we don’t produce, we’re all going to have toxic billboards to deal with.

But this brings us back to our story. This particular story played out in Austin, Texas, a place that is a tremendous success story precisely because of the connection of higher education to an innovation economy, a place of extraordinary talent and extraordinary tools for developing that talent. Austin is a place that has everything in the world to celebrate about its higher education community and where a good percentage of the households are deeply connected to higher education in one way or another. The harsh criticism came from a place of deep affection for higher education, from our friends and supporters, and is therefore even harder to dismiss or ignore.

As I looked deeper into the story, I discovered a few important themes for our ongoing work, principles that can inform our work toward improving our results and help us to move the needle on student completion.

The first principle is this:

1. Be careful what and how you are measuring -- it is sure to be misused.

My friend Richard’s answer was subtle and clever, disarming the

reporters who were surely expecting a defensive response. And he would be the last to tell you he was satisfied with their current completion rates. But the fact is, if one defines completion at Austin Community College to mean graduation OR successful transfer, the rate goes from under four percent to 43 percent -- still not as high as ACC aspires to achieve, but hardly worthy of a nasty billboard.

The fact is, “completion” remains a largely undefined term, especially in the minds of the press and the public. Current practice identifies first-time, full-time students as they enter the higher education system and tracks them through a single institution for a specified period of time. We can all name the many deficiencies in the measure. Consider a student who comes to a community college, enrolls full-time, and after a year of successful study is encouraged to transfer to another college. This student is considered a noncompleter at the community college and isn’t considered in the measure of the receiving institution at all. This is, in fact, the way Richard himself attended college, and doubtless many others.

Is there any good reason to exclude part-time students from the measures? How about early transfers? Should non-degree-seeking students be in the measure? When is a student considered to be degree-seeking? How are the measures, inevitably used to compare institutions with very different missions, calibrated to those missions? How can transfer be included in the assessment and

reporting when students swirl among so many institutions, many of which don't share student unit record information easily? And once a student transfers, who owns baccalaureate completion as an outcome for transfers? Is it really just the receiving institution? Should the mission of helping the 30 million adults in America, with some college but no degree, be represented in the measures? We could all name many other measurement issues.

So here are some further principles in the area of metrics:

2. Measure for improvement.

Performance measures like completion, at their best, should be designed and published primarily for the purpose of improving performance – pointing to alterable variables, measuring in ways that account for varying missions. For this reason, they will have to be much more granular. What's the point of telling a college-ready student that the total completion rate at a college is 30 percent, when it is actually 60 percent for students like her? And how much more helpful to the college it is to calculate completions for different groups depending on their starting points as they plan their interventions.

3. College outcomes measures should be based on college-ready students.

Including both those who came out of high school performing on college level and those who required some or even substantial preparation after arriving at college in a single measure conflates the data in ways

that obscure the real opportunities for improvement. Outcomes for “developmental students” should be separately reported as a pre-college program of the college. The two are connected, of course, but downstream performance of developmental completers, especially when compared to college ready students, is primarily a measure of developmental program performance, not the collegiate program.

The whole area of developmental education or remediation is deeply misunderstood, largely caused by further conflating data from very different student groups – those who need very little attention to brush up lost skills, typically in math (about a third of our developmental students) with those who need very deep remediation for skills never acquired (about a fifth of our developmental students), and a large group of those in between.

Further, the challenge is sensationalized by naïve or perverted use of the numbers – the truth is, at Valencia and other large urban colleges like us, only 8 percent of our total effort, our total credit hours, is in developmental education (down from 12 percent just a few years ago.) This is important work, but needs to be measured and understood in context.

4. Align accountability measures to the proper level of analysis.

We need informed policy makers who will understand the difference in accountability at the institutional, programmatic, course, and faculty levels. It is difficult to explain to a

policy maker just how boneheaded the idea of measuring individual faculty performance based on employer feedback really is without also being overtly insulting. Some days I vote for insulting.

5. Performance measures should primarily be value-added.

We should embrace the movement toward value-added measures of institutional performance. Continuing to perpetuate the myth that excellence equals exclusivity has always been a thoughtless maneuver, no better than suggesting that the best way to improve our prisons is to incarcerate a higher level of inmate. This alone would constitute a major step toward aligning institutional measures with mission, and can be successfully replicated at the program level.

But let us get back to our story. The low graduation rates for AA students at Austin Community College were real and deeply troubling to Richard and the whole college, in spite of the very strong transfer numbers.

Here's the rest of the story.

In the greater Austin area, the economic region that is the envy of so many other medium-sized cities, I am familiar with a large number of other colleges of virtually every type: large public universities, small, extremely selective and expensive independents, moderately selective and moderately affordable colleges, both public and private, and so on. I looked at the websites of more than a dozen of these colleges and universities. Here is what I found: if they gave any indication at all of being

willing to accept transfer students, they were quite clear in this: no degree is required for transfer. No degree is required for transfer. Further, the majority clearly discouraged students from taking more than a few courses before transferring – and for good reasons. The whole chaotic jumble of articulation agreements, many of them at the department-to-department level rather than college to college, leave students with the rational preference of transferring before taking courses that may not apply to their major, depending on the department and college and university to which they may want to transfer.

Finally, on this, let me say that nearly every college president I know underestimates the importance of transfer in her own institution, both transfer out and in, four-year to four-year, two-year to four-year, and even four-year to two-year. So our sixth principle is this:

6. Think educational ecosystem, not just institution.

Our students are not experiencing us just as single institutions, but as ecosystems or networks of higher education institutions, generally in a reasonably well-defined region. They swirl in and among, stop out, start back, change majors, change departments, change colleges. And because this was exceptional 50 years ago, when we were in college, we continue to think it is the exception. It is now the norm and likely to remain so. For policy makers, decisions on the outcomes of investing in higher education will need to be framed around the ecosystems.



Texas Association of Business

Governing boards and institutional leaders have to move past antiquated notions of competition in higher education – especially competition for resources based on deeply flawed metrics – toward collaborative design of the systems and their multiple interactions. Articulation of credit will have to give way to carefully designed pathways that deepen student learning and accelerate their progression to completion.

If we are to improve what students experience, what students achieve, we need to begin to think ecosystems, design ecosystems, and measure results as ecosystems. This is very difficult to do, as there is scarcely any institution in the universe as self-absorbed as a college or university. (Not mine, of course, but yours is!)

Even accreditation works against this kind of thinking. Heaven forbid that we study the pathways students are creating for themselves and smooth the way with curricular

decisions that make sense for them over the objections of a committee, or even blur the organizational lines, contract for parts of the instruction, or share faculty in new ways. These things will certainly raise questions of institutional control of instruction, and we can't have that now, can we?

Finally, let me draw out one more principle on completion:

7. The most important person to care about completion is the student.

When we send messages through narrow institutional habit, or untested bias, or just ordinary inertia that tell students not to bother to graduate, they actually hear us. Perhaps the history and politics of educational competition in Austin, into which I won't go for the moment, contributes to this situation. But even in the best of situations for transfer, arguably Florida, the messages aren't all that much better.

In Florida, we have the country's

strongest 2+2 system of higher education. Several of the state universities were started as upper-division only (though they didn't stay that way for very long). We have a common course numbering system that greatly aids in the transfer of credit; we have, in statute and practice, a statewide articulation coordination council with representatives of all the sectors; we have statewide articulation agreements that work; and we have a long history of successful transfer of students with rich data on their success after transfer.

Yet, as once nearly open-door universities grew to a scale that is almost mind-boggling and began to shift their strategies toward selectivity, this is the value proposition our students were beginning to hear:

"Enroll in your local community college; it's cheap and convenient and classes are small. And when you are ready, apply to the state universities – somewhere in Florida there is one that should take you and your credits."

Notice, the value proposition to the student – the one who needs to care about completion – says nothing about graduating.

Several years ago, this situation began to create real challenges for us in central Florida. Fortunately, we had a very healthy higher education ecosystem, with already established communications channels that were effective and working on behalf of our students and the regional economy. Out of that kind of thinking, we were able to design a new model that goes way beyond articulation of credit.

Called "Direct Connect," it is an ironclad guarantee to the students of the four community colleges in the region that our graduates MUST be accepted at UCF. If you have an AA degree from Valencia or Seminole State, or Brevard, or Lake Sumter, you are guaranteed admission to UCF – a highly selective university. This model is unprecedented. This changed the value proposition to the students rather dramatically. It isn't a "maybe," or a "we'll see." It is something they can count on, plan for, and commit to. Earn the degree and you are in.

It gives students a reason to graduate. Over the last four years for which we have complete data, our enrollment grew about 40 percent. Our completions in AS and certificate programs grew about 60 percent. And our graduations with AA degrees grew 97 percent.

Our students experience their higher educations, not as alma mater, but as an ecosystem of programs, learning environments and collaborative institutions through which we have created pathways they can more clearly navigate to their real goals. Our metrics, our strategic plans, our inter-institutional agreements, our policies, and our staff relationships need to reflect this.

One final word on the "Completion Agenda," and this is for those who are already committed to moving the needle: See a reason and a need to move the needle, no matter what sector you are in.

8. Learning comes before completion.

Why is this important? Because we need our faculty to engage if we are really going to move the needle. Completion really doesn't engage faculty. Learning does. But more importantly, the country has got the wrong working theory about completion. It seems to go like this: "If more students completed college, they will have learned more, will contribute more to the local economy and community, and that would be a good thing."

The theory is subtly, but clearly incorrect. It should go like this:

"If more students learned deeply and effectively in a systematic program of study, with a clearer sense of purpose in their studies and their lives, more would graduate and contribute to the local economy and community, and that would be a good thing."

The degree is a means to an end. Relevant, deep learning is the end. This requires a curriculum that is a coherent program of learning, not just a collection of articulated credits. It requires well structured, easily communicated pathways that students can follow to the ultimate end. And it requires genuine collaboration across institutional boundaries that will change the focus from institutional self-absorption to a learner-centered strategy. In short, this requires ecosystems thinking.

My friend, Richard, is already practicing this kind of thinking and relationship-building in his area of service. It will dramatically alter the results for the better at Austin Community College. I have reason

to hope that opinion leaders in the national conversation on completion will follow suit, if we, higher education leaders and practitioners, will lead the way. Let's engage our state leaders, our accrediting bodies, our trustees and governors, our foundation partners, and, most importantly our institutions and students, in ecosystems thinking.

Here are just a few concrete suggestions:

- Add to the old model of articulation of credit the much more powerful model of intelligent design of degree pathways across institutional boundaries.
- Within these pathways, encourage students to make earlier, more grounded choices of major long before

transfer looms.

- Require completion of the associate degree prior to transfer and provide a meaningful value proposition to students who do graduate before transfer – a guarantee, if you can.
 - Federate our data on student performance across institutional boundaries and develop ecosystem-level research agendas with collaborating institutional research teams that will lead to improved student learning and performance.
 - Rethink the metrics used for measuring institutional performance as components of a larger ecosystem and develop measures of the larger ecosystem performance, as well.
- Finally, use as your design principle

for all of this work a touchstone that has served us well as we have achieved dramatic improvements in student learning and completion: The college is what the students experience. It is how they experience us that counts, not how we experience them. If we design our programs, systems, and ecosystems to what we want students to experience – deep, relevant, coherent learning and completion – they and we have a much better chance of achieving our goals.

Sanford C. Shugart is president of Valencia College, in Florida. This essay is adapted from a speech he gave at the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools' Commission on Colleges. ■

Through the Learning Lens

By George Boggs

If they are to avoid the fate of Eastman Kodak and Swiss watch makers, colleges need to abandon outdated and idiosyncratic policies and practices that don't put student learning front and center, George Boggs argues.

When institutions and organizations begin to identify with processes instead of intended outcomes, they become vulnerable. They lose sight of their real missions and, when faced with challenges or disruptive innovation, often struggle to survive.

Eastman Kodak, once the dominant brand in photography, identified too closely with the chemical processes it used and failed to recognize that its overarching mission was photography

rather than film and film processing. Swiss watch manufacturers likewise identified too closely with the mechanical workings of their watches and lost market share to companies that understood that the real mission was the production of reliable and wearable instruments to tell time. If railroads had viewed their mission as transportation of people and goods rather than moving trains on tracks, we might have some different brand names on airplanes and vehicles

today.

In retrospect, it seems that the decisions made by these industries defied common sense. Although the leaders were experienced and capable, they were blinded by tradition, and they confused established processes with the real mission of their enterprises.

Higher education today identifies closely with its processes. In open-access public institutions, we recruit, admit and enroll students; assess them for college readiness; place or advise those who are not adequately prepared into remedial classes; give others access to a bewildering variety of course options, often without adequate orientation and advising; provide instruction, often in a passive lecture format; offer services to those who seek and find their way to them;

The Completion Agenda

grade students on how well they can navigate our systems and how well they perform on assignments and tests; and issue degrees and certificates based upon the number of credits the students accumulate in required and elective courses.

We need to fund our institutions, so we concentrate on enrollment targets and make sure classroom seats are filled in accordance with regulations that specify when we count our students for revenue purposes.

At the same time that American higher education is so focused on and protective of its processes, it is also facing both significant challenges and potentially disruptive innovation. Challenges include responding to calls from federal and state policy makers for higher education to increase completion rates and to keep costs down, finding ways that are more effective to help students who are unprepared for college to become successful students, making college information more accessible and processes more transparent for prospective students and their parents, explaining new college rating systems and public score cards, coordinating across institutional boundaries to help an increasingly mobile student population to transfer more seamlessly and successfully from one institution to another and to graduate, dealing with the threat to shift from peer-based institutional accreditation to a federal system of quality assurance, and responding to new funding systems that are based upon institutional performance.

Potentially disruptive innovations include the increasing use of social media such as YouTube and other open education resources (OER) for learning, the advent of massive online open courses (MOOCs), the quick access to information made possible by advances in technology, and the potential for a shift from the Carnegie unit to documented competencies as the primary way to measure student progression.

One of today's most significant challenges to higher education is the increased focus on student success.



In response to calls and sometimes financial incentives from policy makers -- and with the assistance provided by major foundations -- colleges and universities are shifting their focus from student access and opportunity to student access and success. Higher education associations have committed themselves to helping institutions improve college completion rates. The terminology used is that we are shifting from an "access agenda" to a "success agenda" or a "completion agenda."

This identification with outcomes is positive, but it raises concerns about both loss of access to higher education for those students who are less likely to succeed, and the potential for decreased academic rigor. The real mission of higher education is student learning; degrees and certificates must be the institution's certification of identified student learning outcomes rather than just accumulated credits.

Faculty and academic administrators, perhaps working with appropriate representatives from business and industry, need to identify the learner competencies that should be developed by the curriculum. The curriculum should be designed or modified to ensure that those competencies are appropriately addressed. Students should be challenged to rise to the high expectations required to master the identified competencies and should be provided the support they need to become successful. Finally, learners should be assessed in order to ensure that a degree or certificate is a certification of acquired competencies.

What would we do differently if, rather than identifying with our processes, we identified with our overarching mission -- student learning? When viewed through the lens of student learning, many of the processes that we currently rely upon and the decisions we make (or fail to make) seem to defy common sense. The institution itself controls some of these policies and practices; others are policies (or the lack of policies)

“Too often, students leave high school unprepared for college, and they almost always face barriers when transferring from one higher education institution to another. The only solution to these problems is for educators to agree on expectations and learning outcome standards. However, institutional autonomy and sometimes prejudice act as barriers to faculty dialogue across institutional boundaries.”

between and among educational institutions; and some are the result of state or federal legislation.

A prime example of a detrimental institutional process is late registration, the practice of allowing students to register after orientation activities -- and often after classes have begun. Can we really expect students to be successful if they enter a class after it is under way? Research consistently shows that students who register late are at a significant disadvantage and, most often, fail or drop out.

Yet, many institutions continue this practice, perhaps in the belief that they are providing opportunity -- but it is opportunity that most often leads to discouragement and failure. Some institutional leaders may worry about the potential negative impact on budgets of not having seats filled. However, the enrollment consequences to eliminating late registration have almost always been temporary or negligible.

Sometimes institutional policies are developed in isolation and create unintended roadblocks for students. When I assumed the presidency of Palomar College, the college had a policy that students could not repeat a course in which they received a

passing grade (C or above). But another policy prohibited students who had not received a grade of B or higher in the highest-level developmental writing class from progressing to freshman composition. Students who passed the developmental class with a grade of C were out of luck and had to transfer to another institution if they were to proceed with their education. The English faculty likely wanted only the best-performing students from developmental writing in their freshman composition classes, but this same objective could be accomplished by raising the standards for a C grade in the developmental writing class.

Higher education institutions rely on their faculty and staff to accomplish their missions, so it is important for everyone to understand it in the same way. A faculty member I once met told me that he was proud of the high rate of failure in his classes. He believed that it demonstrated both the rigor of his classes and his excellence as a teacher. If we measured the excellence of medical doctors by the percentage of their patients who die, it would make as much sense. Everyone at the institution has a role in promoting student learning, and everyone needs to understand that the job is

to inspire students and help them to be successful rather than sorting out those who have challenges.

It is important for faculty and staff to enjoy their work, to feel valued by trustees, administrators, peers, and students -- and for them to feel free to innovate and secure in their employment. As important as our people are to accomplishing our mission, their special interests are not the mission. Periodic discussions about revising general education requirements are often influenced by faculty biases about the importance of their disciplines or even by concerns about job security rather than what students need to learn as part of a degree or certificate program. Before these discussions begin, ground rules should be established so that the determinations are based upon desired skills and knowledge of graduates.

Too often, students leave high school unprepared for college, and they almost always face barriers when transferring from one higher education institution to another. The only solution to these problems is for educators to agree on expectations and learning outcome standards. However, institutional autonomy and

sometimes prejudice act as barriers to faculty dialogue across institutional boundaries. It is rare for community college faculty and administrators to interact with their colleagues in high schools -- and interaction between university and community college faculty is just as rare.

Why should we be surprised when students leaving high school are often not ready to succeed in college or when the transition between community college and university is not as seamless as it should be for students? If we are serious about increasing the rates of success for students, educators will need to come together to begin important discussions about standards for curriculums and expectations for students.

Despite the best intentions of legislators, government policies often force the focus of institutions away from the mission of student learning. In California, legislation requires community colleges to spend at least 50 percent of their revenue on classroom faculty. Librarians, counselors, student advisers, and financial aid officers are “on the other side of the Fifty Percent Law.” The ratio of student advisers or counselors is most often greater than a thousand to one. Research clearly demonstrates that investments in student guidance pay off in increased student learning and success. Despite the fact that community college students are the most financially disadvantaged students in higher education, they are less likely to receive the financial aid they deserve. Yet, the Fifty Percent

Law severely limits what local college faculty and academic administrators can do on their campuses to meet the needs of students in these areas. Clearly, this law is a barrier to increasing student learning and success. Perhaps state legislators and the faculty unions that lobby them do not trust local trustees and administrators to spend resources appropriately, but this law, in its current form, defies common sense if our mission is student learning.

At the federal level, systems of accountability that track only students who are first-time, full-time freshmen to an institution do not make sense in an era when college students are more mobile than ever and in an environment in which most community college students attend part-time. A few years ago, I met with a group of presidents of historically black universities and encouraged them to work with community colleges to increase the number of students who transfer to their institutions. The presidents told me that doing so could lower their measured student success rates because transfers are not first-time freshmen, and the presidents were not willing to take that risk. Fortunately, officials in the U.S. Department of Education are aware of this issue and are working to correct data systems.

There are many other examples of policies and procedures that seem senseless when viewed through the lens of student learning rather than cherished processes and tradition, just as it seems silly that Eastman

Kodak did not recognize that its business was photography or that the Swiss watch manufacturers did not understand that their business was to manufacture accurate and affordable wristwatches.

American higher education today is increasingly criticized for increasing costs and low completion rates. Higher education costs have risen at an even faster rate than those of health care; student indebtedness has skyrocketed to nearly \$1 trillion; and college completion rates in the United States have fallen to 16th in the world. In addition, new technologies and innovations may soon threaten established practices.

Challenging the status quo and confronting those with special interests that are not aligned with the mission of higher education can be risky for both elected officials and educational leaders. But given the challenges that we face today, “muddling through” brings even greater risks. Every decision that is made and every policy that is proposed must be data-informed, and policy makers and leaders need the courage to ask how the changes will affect student learning, student success, and college costs. Existing policies and practices should be examined with the same questions in mind. Faculty and staff need to be free of restraining practices so they can experiment with strategies to engage students and to help them to learn.

Colleges and universities are too important for educators to deny the challenges and demands of today

and too important for policy makers to pass laws because of pressure from special interests or based on their recollection of what college used

to be. Decisions cannot be based on past practices when the world is changing so rapidly. The mission of higher education is student learning,

and all of our policies, procedures and practices must be aligned with that mission if our institutions are to remain relevant. ■

Success That Doesn't Count

By Susan Bernadzikowski and Jennifer Levi

Government officials -- without talking to faculty members on the front lines -- are evaluating community colleges with measures that exclude many students, write Susan Bernadzikowski and Jennifer Levi.

Jayne was a bright high school student with high aspirations and limited resources. Unwilling to take on debt to go to college, she chipped away at her bachelor's degree one course at a time while working full time at a local grocery store and raising her family. Jayne, who has given us permission to tell her story, traveled to whichever branch of the state university offered the course she needed at a time she could schedule. After 13 years, she earned her bachelor's degree, as did her husband, who had adopted a similar slow but steady strategy. They both went on to earn master's degrees and become educators in rural Ohio. For the subsequent 20 years, they have been guiding students -- often in their own difficult circumstances -- down their own educational paths. Isn't Jayne's disciplined pursuit, fiscal responsibility, and devotion to community a success story -- not only for her, but for a system of higher education that supported her values and respected her ability to map her

own journey?

Apparently not. By the parameters of "success" being discussed in many states in response to the national completion agenda, Jayne's successes would not "count," largely because of the length of time that she took to get her degree.

The proposed markers of success require more students to complete more degrees in the shortest amount of time feasible. In many ways, these goals are laudable. However, these markers do not measure the financial stability, maturity, and perspective Jayne gained along the way -- although surely her 5th-grade students benefit from them daily. Instead, colleges could lose funding for allowing the Jaynes of the world to take their time and mark their own paths. Depending on how states and institutions attempt to meet completion percentages, even if students in difficult circumstances had Jayne's drive and ability (and that's a big if), they may not be able to receive grant money or get access to classes needed to graduate because

those on faster career paths could receive priority.

We fully embrace reforming higher education to increase student access, to distribute resources equitably, and to maximize student success. We don't deny that many students are wandering around college campuses lacking motivation and wasting resources. As educators in a two-year college, we teach 15 credits per semester, meet with all students individually, grade these students' work, serve on multiple committees, and engage in constant assessment. Thus, we are intensely aware that our time, and that of our colleagues across the disciplines, is one of the most important resources being exhausted.

However, we also have the daily, profound experience of knowing not just one but many Jaynes. We personally have classrooms full of individuals whose life circumstances, like Jayne's, don't afford them the luxury of attending college in the "ideal" way, as full-time students expending the majority of their emotional and intellectual energy on school work. When standing at the front of the class room, we don't have to look beyond the first row of students to encounter the combat veteran who juggles two jobs just to pay for housing in the projects; a so-called traditional-age college student who at

17 is struggling to raise a child of his own; a bright, multilingual immigrant who is in the U.S. for political asylum; a young woman who, since her youth, has been the sole caregiver of a parent disabled by an accident.

Thankfully, for their long-term health, the majority of our students' lives aren't quite so severe. Commonly, though, financial needs necessarily trump educational ones as they struggle to fill their tanks with gas to get to campus. They skip class to attend job interviews, they pick up extra shifts at the expense of homework, and they disappear mid-semester to take a temp job because they have to.

This student profile certainly isn't limited to our student body, or even to two-year colleges. As the gap between the upper and middle classes widens, fewer and fewer students can follow the "ideal" path. Many students who go to four-year residential campuses are also working at least part time. Like their two-year counterparts, they may be one life event -- a divorce, a parent's job loss, or a personal illness -- away from dropping out, or withdrawing temporarily until their circumstances improve. Yet amazingly enough, some of them make it through anyway, on their own terms. As one colleague in the Midwest put it, she could instantly think of numerous students who defied traditional definitions of success, but whose success should be honored and even encouraged.

So we don't believe that the nation should rush to definitions of "success" and make the corresponding changes to mission and policy at the expense

of Jayne and, as importantly, without consultation with Jayne. And Jayne is on the chopping block because she doesn't stand out in statistical analyses of efficiency; she presses on completing a bachelor's degree in 13 years instead of 6. She may also be on the chopping block because the competing demands in her life prevent her from joining the decision-making discussion — or from even being aware of it.

Jayne does stand out to the faculty and possibly advisers who get to know her as an individual, marvel at the work she produces, and witness firsthand her passion and dedication. The faculty know she will achieve great things if the system just stays out of her way.

But in many instances across the nation, the faculty who know Jayne aren't being included in the conversation either. As we informally surveyed faculty from two- and four-year institutions across the nation to put our own experiences in context, several important common themes emerged.

First, there are many faculty members across the nation who are not even aware that the completion agenda exists. Granted there are likely myriad reasons for this, including the uninterest of some faculty in the politics of education, but at the top



of the list is that information isn't consistently being shared from the top down. Those of us fortunate enough to be in the loop are being included in the "how do we achieve this" part of the conversation, not the "what" or the "why" of goals creation, which is often happening in the upper tiers of the national and state governing bodies.

Second, among those who do know of the completion agenda, there is a pervasive feeling of fear. What if the rush to accelerate completion waters down curricula and generates a population of people with credentials, but no real education? What if faculty jobs, government funding, student aid, and so forth are tied to the number of students we get through, rather than the number we educate? And as Jonathan Lightman of the California Community College system asked in *Inside Higher Ed*, what if acceleration comes at the expense of bright students who need "time with exploration ... before they know what their talents are."

Further, in an economic climate that allows for the prioritizing of fiscal over human capital, faculty are constantly reminded that they are, in

many ways, expendable. As in any other profession, there are hundreds of people waiting for their jobs. The “no grumbling” policy added to the new faculty discipline policy in one community college system justifies the fear that should faculty voice their opinions too assertively, no matter what their motivation or expertise, they risk being not just censured, but unemployed.

Third, the higher ed representatives in completion agenda conversations are most commonly administrators who, however perceptive and well-intentioned, may not have recent firsthand experience with the populations they are representing,

particularly at larger institutions where their paths don’t often cross in hallways. Consider, for example, who was actually invited to attend Obama’s Summit on Community College education.

The U.S. needs a well-educated, socially aware workforce — not just a credentialed one. In order to make national reform meaningful and lasting, we need to open the discussion of what higher education success means to all of those invested, not just those who make the big decisions. We know that the people we hope will participate in the discussion have the least amount of time to do so, so we are trying to make it as easy as possible for them

to tell their stories.

We are inviting students, college graduates, faculty, advisors — or anyone on the front lines — to share short stories of student successes and struggles that should inform the completion agenda discussion. We intend to collect these stories in a book entitled *Why My Story Matters*. Because it does matter to us, and it should matter to anyone committed to making our system of higher education work for individual students and for the nation. ■

Professors of English at Cecil College, Susan Bernadzikowski and Jennifer Levi co-chaired their department for five years.

What Do I Tell My Students?

By Shawn E. Fisher

As an adviser to adults in English-language and GED programs, Shawn Fisher wrestles every day, on the ground, with the vocational vs. liberal education divide.

“Now bear with me, Gentlemen, if what I am about to say has at first sight a fanciful appearance.”

--John Henry Cardinal Newman, from “*The Idea of a University*”

Imagine your job is to help students get into college, and one of the students you’re advising says to you, “It has always been my dream to study philosophy at Harvard.”

Let’s say that this student is graduating from a private prep school

and you know that money will not be a major worry for her either during or after the college years. She has a deep hunger for knowledge, connections who can help her figure out a career path after graduation, and a family safety net that will catch her if she slips. How would you respond?

Now let’s say that, instead of graduating from an elite high school, this student is graduating from a local ESOL program, where she has been a student in night classes for the past

three years, working her way up from near illiteracy to a decent command of spoken and written English. Let’s say that she came to the U.S. alone as a refugee from a war-torn part of the world, and she worked with an employment counselor upon arrival to land a job in the fast-food industry before her tiny assistance allowance from the government ran out.

Let’s say her counselor also helped her to find a room in a small apartment in a cheap part of town that she shares with two women she’d never met before she moved in. Let’s say she works nearly full-time on an irregular schedule and sends money back to family members in her home country, hoping that her husband and young child will soon be able to join her in the U.S. She, too, has a deep hunger for



knowledge.

How do you respond now?

Or let's say that your prep-school student comes to you and says she wants to enroll in a patient care technician certificate program at a nearby community college. What do you say? How about if your ESOL student says the same thing?

If studying philosophy at Harvard seems like an extreme example, what if we changed it to studying international relations at a state university? Or what if both students wanted to start out studying history at a community college, with dreams of law school down the line? Would you encourage one and not the other? How different should advising be for different populations of students?

This is the question I struggle with every day, the dilemma that makes my head ache with an ethical clench. The idealist in me wants so badly to say that the students I advise – adult students in ESOL classes and alternative high school programs – deserve to be taken seriously when they express the same dreams and desires as those in more privileged positions, that they should

be challenged to consider educational programs that may not, on the surface, seem to be appropriate for their life circumstances.

After all, I got into the education game because I believe it to be a great equalizer – it opens up opportunities of all kinds, and everyone gets a place at the table where the ideas that shape the world are being discussed, debated, and refined. If we start selecting who gets to sit at that table, however well-intentioned we may be in doing so, what are we really doing? And what are the consequences?

I understand why, within the adult basic education world in which I operate, advisers, administrators, instructors, our national and state governments, even the students themselves tend to consider only those educational pathways that offer near-immediate payoffs: job-training programs; short certificate programs at public colleges; anything that bears the label “work force development,” the pragmatic antithesis to a highfalutin “liberal arts education.”

Older students, students with children, students with jobs, students

with bills, commuting students, students who have already spent years sacrificing to acquire language skills and high school credentials ... none of them have time or money to waste, so they need to know that an investment of their time and money will yield a very concrete, very quick return.

They need to earn above the minimum wage, and since college is really the only way to reach that end these days, we help them get to college. Or at least, we help them get to those colleges and those programs that serve specific vocational goals. Get ‘em in, get ‘em out, get ‘em to work. We score one for the completion agenda, and we’ve done our jobs.

But have we? Or are we diminishing the students we claim to care about as well as the concept of higher education itself?

This is a source of internal tension for me, because I’m sold on John Henry Newman’s idea of the university as the place where the primacy of a liberal education is upheld, over and above technical training.

He does not deny, and I do not deny,

“I understand why, within the adult basic education world in which I operate, advisers, administrators, instructors, our national and state governments, even the students themselves tend to consider only those educational pathways that offer near-immediate payoffs.”

that a college education can (and probably even should) result in a good career. What he does deny, and what I also deny, is that this should be the only and principal result, for, as he argues, “education is a higher word; it implies an action upon our mental nature, and the formation of a character; it is something individual and permanent” which is truly useful, not “in any low, mechanical, mercantile sense, but as diffusing good, or as a blessing, or a gift, or power, or a treasure, first to the owner, then through him to the world.”

Education, if done right, confers a treasure – first to the student, then to the world.

Newman likens this educational treasure to physical health. No one would dispute that maintaining physical health is a good unto itself, which may even be worth a sacrifice of time and money. We can easily identify the innumerable things we are able to do when our bodies are healthy, even though we cannot pinpoint an exact, specific use of good health. So, too, with a liberal education. Its practicality lies in the infinite unpredictable ways in which it will enhance all of our endeavors. “A cultivated intellect,

because it is a good in itself,” writes Newman, “brings with it a power and a grace to every work and occupation which it undertakes, and enables us to be more useful, and to a greater number.”

I’m hooked on this kind of higher, deeper, broader understanding of education that cannot, cannot be an elitist model, for it’s this type of education that yields a stronger, more useful citizenry. Engineers, paralegals, lab technicians, phlebotomists, all need to be considering and questioning their roles, as professionals and human beings. We all need to understand systems and question authorities. We all need to critically consider our world. The opportunity to do just that is what a college education should provide. To learn, to listen, to reason, to speak, to contribute and be heard. To flatten social hierarchies, to gain and to give social capital. To be equal. To develop marketable job skills in tandem – sure, absolutely – but not at the expense of the greater good to be gained.

I do not want to decide, and I do not want superficial circumstances to decide, which students can pursue a quality liberal arts education and

which ones are shunted toward job-training programs. If the immigrants, high school dropouts, refugees, older students, single parents, ex-offenders, and full-time workers who come to see me wish to enroll in college, I want to encourage them to consider programs that go beyond pure skills instruction. They need to be at the table where the big, meta concepts are laid out for ingestion, or we risk filling these positions of power exclusively with people of privilege. We risk losing nontraditional students’ input and perspective within entire branches of knowledge, within countless spheres of influence.

I will admit, though, that I have a hard time advising adult students from this viewpoint when what they need in the short term is preparation for a job that pays the grocery bill. It is awfully hard to say, “Study philosophy!” when they’re desperate for relief from the burden of poverty.

Knowledge may be power, but a paycheck is survival.

I get it, I really do. But I sure do hate it. ■

Shawn E. Fisher is a pre-college adviser with JVS in Boston.

Research to Improve Retention

By Robert J. Sternberg

Colleges can identify those at risk of dropping out, and then provide services and adopt policies to keep these students enrolled, writes Robert J. Sternberg.

One of the most serious problems facing colleges and universities today is that so many students leave before finishing their studies. When students drop out, it is bad for them because they lose huge future career and income potential; bad for the institution they leave because of lost reputation, revenue, and opportunity to make a difference in the students' lives; and bad for society because of the need for an educated work force that is able to compete in the global marketplace.

Although there are many reasons students drop out, 12 research-validated risk factors, often in various combinations, help account for why most students drop out. These risk factors apply at a wide variety of institutions of higher education. Here are the risk factors and the means to mitigate them.

1. Uneven formal academic knowledge and skills. The most obvious and frequently addressed issue behind dropout is academic background. At many institutions, large numbers of students enter with spotty academic backgrounds, especially in science and mathematics (STEM) disciplines and in writing. Institutions of higher learning need counselors and tutors who seek to remediate

deficiencies but also to enrich areas of strength. To pinpoint deficiencies and ensure proper placement, institutions need to move toward tests measuring specific skills and content knowledge and away from reliance on general aptitude tests, which are not very helpful in identifying specific strengths and deficiencies in knowledge and skills. Tests of general academic aptitudes only account, at most, for 25 percent of the variation in academic success in college. It therefore is a mistake to rely on them heavily for placement (or even admissions) decisions in college. In studies my collaborators and I did while I was at Yale University and then at Tufts University, studying diverse students around the country, we found that tests of broader aptitudes (creative and practical as well as analytical) could as much as double prediction of first-year college success.

Neal Schmitt and his colleagues at Michigan State University have found that biographical data significantly enhance prediction of college success. If colleges rely too heavily on general academic aptitude scores in making placement decisions, they risk creating self-fulfilling prophecies dooming students to lesser success.

2. Lack of informal knowledge

about being a college student. In any new environment, whether an academic environment or a work environment, one needs to acquire “tacit” knowledge — the informal and often unspoken keys for achieving success in that environment. For example, toward or away from which courses and advisers should one gravitate? Which kinds of student activities become unrewarding time sinks that prevent one from spending adequate time studying? How does one decide upon people with whom to hang out? How do you study for a multiple-choice versus an essay test? In research on college students, Wendy Williams and I found that acquiring informal knowledge -- “learning the ropes” -- is at least as important as learning specific formal content knowledge for success in college. Rick Wagner and I found that those with high academic abilities are not necessarily the ones with high levels of informal knowledge, and vice versa. (Put another way, academic skills are no guarantee of common sense.) Unfortunately, in many cases, the informal knowledge with which one enters college from high school actually transfers negatively to the college environment: For example, a student may believe that the meager amount of studying he did in high school will be adequate in college, when in fact it is not.

3. Inadequate development of self-regulation skills. In high school, one often has a support network to help regulate one's time and energy. Most important for many students

is close supervision by parents or concerned individuals at one's high school. In college, students often find themselves largely "on their own" for the first time in their lives. Some are able to channel their newly found freedom effectively, but others are not. They may spend too much time on extracurricular activities and too little time on studying, or they simply may channel their study time in ways that are less than effective. Edward Deci and Richard Ryan of the University of Rochester have found that those who lack an autonomous style of self-regulation — who have trouble managing themselves independently — are at risk for lack of success in a number of different kinds of environments. Moreover, Teresa Amabile of Harvard has found that students and others who have been pushed very hard by their parents, teachers, or employers, and who have become used to extrinsic rewards for success, may have trouble motivating themselves intrinsically when immediate extrinsic rewards (parental approval, reward money, extra praise) are no longer readily available. A sufficient intervention should include a detailed analysis of how students spend (and do not spend) their time in order to determine whether their self-regulation is adequate to their needs as a college student. As an example, a tendency toward procrastination can lead students to underperform simply because they did not allow themselves enough time adequately to perform the assignments at hand.

4. Impaired self-efficacy and

resilience. Some students come to college uncertain as to whether they have the ability to succeed in their college work. Other students come expecting to succeed, and then receive one or more low marks on college assignments or tests that lead them to question whether they are able to compete, after all. As their self-efficacy fails, their drive to succeed in college goes with it. Studies by Albert Bandura and his colleagues of Stanford University have found that self-efficacy is one of the best positive predictors of success in any working environment. Counselors thus need to ensure not only that students have the knowledge and skills to succeed, but also a mindset whereby they believe in their own potential to succeed. The students need further to understand that many of their peers who have an initial failure end up successful in their fields.

In my own case, I ignominiously failed my first psychology test freshman year (with a score of 3 out of 10 points); nevertheless, 35 years later I served as president of the American Psychological Association. The resilience to get beyond disappointing setbacks is key not only in college but also in work and in life, in general. In my long career as a psychology professor, dean, and provost, I have noticed that many of my graduate-school classmates and later colleagues who never achieved the success for which they hoped lacked not ability to achieve, but rather the resilience to believe in their ability to succeed in the face of disappointing setbacks.

5. A mindset believing in fixed rather than flexible abilities. Carol Dweck of Stanford University has found that students (and others) typically have one of two mindsets — or folk conceptions — regarding their abilities. What she calls "entity theorists" believe that abilities are largely fixed; on this view, when a student makes a mistake, the student shows a lack of abilities that is potentially very embarrassing. What Dweck calls "incremental theorists," in contrast, believe that abilities are modifiable and flexible and that making mistakes is useful because it helps one to learn and, in general, to grow. Dweck has found that although both kinds of students perform roughly equally well in easy or modestly difficult courses, incremental theorists excel in challenging courses because they are unafraid of extending their skills and making mistakes along the way. Students therefore need to understand that abilities are modifiable, that people learn through their mistakes, and that difficult but manageable challenges are good because they enable one to move ahead in one's learning.

6. Inability to delay gratification. In many college courses, students do not find out until the end whether they have achieved the level of success for which they hoped. They do not find out for four or even more years whether they will indeed get the diploma they hope for. Often, success in a particular course or in college generally seems far off, whereas there are many gratifications to be had instantly, especially in the social domain.

Some students just cannot wait that long. Walter Mischel of Columbia University, when he was at Stanford, performed experiments with young children on their ability to delay gratification — to wait for a larger reward instead of receiving an immediate smaller reward. He found that those individuals who were able to delay gratification performed better academically, many years later when they were of college age, than did children who were unable to delay gratification. In other words, parents and teachers need to work with students to help them realize that many of the best rewards in life are not immediate.

7. Impaired ethical judgment. Many students today do not have the ethical judgment that we who teach in institutions of higher learning would have hoped we would have been able to take for granted. In my own work on ethical reasoning, I have found that many of today's students do not even view as ethical issues such behaviors as cheating on tests or plagiarizing in papers. For many students, it just has become too easy to take the low road, and given the temptation, they do so. They get caught, with disastrous results for their success and sometimes longevity in college. It therefore is essential that students learn, as soon as they arrive in college, the ethical expectations of the institution. It should not be assumed that they have been taught, or at least, have learned these expectations.

8. Disengagement from the university environment. For many

students, a precursor to dropping out is a progressive disengagement from, or failure ever to become engaged in, the university environment. The students simply never connect with, or become disconnected from, the environment, and hence become more and more psychologically distant and even alienated from it. Disengagement, or a failure to engage in the first place, may result from what French sociologist Emile Durkheim and later Harvard sociologist David Reisman referred to as anomie, or a breakdown in the social bonds between the individual

“Although there are many reasons students drop out, 12 research-validated risk factors, often in various combinations, help account for why most students drop out.”

and the community. Anomie can be a particular challenge for students whose sociocultural background is distant from that of many others in the college or university. When anomie develops, students may become more and more withdrawn until they literally withdraw from the college or university. Students should be strongly urged to actively engage in at least one extracurricular activity in order to enhance engagement with the university at large. Advisers also need to try to make sure that students

stay “connected” and do not start to withdraw from the life of the university.

9. Lack of interest in courses. Often, students enter college and are eager to get on with their required courses. They may load up on distribution requirements or other courses that they need to get out of their way. But Richard Light of Harvard University has found that one of the best predictors of academic adjustment is taking, during the freshman year, at least one course solely because it is interesting, regardless of whether it is required. Students who load up too much on courses that are required but that do not interest them are at greater risk of dropping out simply because they are bored and find no relief.

10. Issues in academic trajectory. Issues in academic trajectory include either uncertain trajectory or a trajectory that is ill-matched to one's interests or skills. The late Paul Pintrich of the University of Michigan pointed out how important conscious, well-chosen goals are to motivating students to succeed. Students are likely to perform at a higher level when they feel they have some kind of academic “destination” in mind — or at least when they feel that what they are doing will lead to such a trajectory. In some cases, students simply made a poor choice, perhaps because their interests do not match their skills, or perhaps because parents or other authority figures have pushed them into a direction that does not well fit them.

11. Psychological issues. Psychological issues include a



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diverse range of challenges, such as substance-abuse problems, interpersonal problems with important others, and untreated or nonaccommodated psychological problems, such as learning disabilities, attentional/hyperactivity disorders, autism-spectrum disorders, and so forth. Students entering with such problems should immediately be referred to appropriate counselors and programs. Appropriate programs work. Waiting can be fatal. Such problems are always best handled, obviously, by individuals trained in the diagnosis and treatment of the problems at hand.

12. Financial concerns. I have saved for last the most challenging of the problems we all face when students are at risk for nonretention, namely, financial concerns or anxieties about financial concerns. In the end, some students drop out just because they cannot make college work for themselves financially. The financial needs of students make it imperative that colleges and universities calculate aid needs correctly. Although we know

that student debt is a major problem in our society, students who graduate from college will earn, on average, 84 percent more than students who do not, so sometimes avoiding debt is penny-wise but pound-foolish.

At Oklahoma State University, we have attempted systematically to address the problem of dropping out, especially after the first year of college, and to devise solutions that would keep students on track to earn their degrees. We have created a new center — the Learning and Student Success Opportunity (LASSO) Center — which targets students who are at risk for dropping out. All students are eligible for LASSO services, although our particular focus is on students in the first year, where the risk of nonretention is greatest.

Students are identified for LASSO services in one of several ways: (a) self-referral; (b) referral by a professor (easily done through electronic means); or (c) automatic referral either through low G.P.A., uncertainty about career trajectory, or an at-risk admissions profile. We also have other

resources, such as a Mathematics Learning Success Center, a Writing Center, and college-based student-success centers, which seek to help students reach their maximum potential. Research-based efforts such as ours can help large numbers of students stay in college who might otherwise drop out.

For the most part, colleges do and should try to retain students rather than usher them out. But there truly are some students who are better counseled out. It may be that college is not, in the end, a good match for them, or that their particular college does not offer them the academic or extracurricular programs they need in order to be a good fit. In my “theory of successful intelligence,” I argue that people who are successfully intelligent in their lives often first try to adapt to the environments in which they find themselves; that failing, they may try to shape the environments better to meet their needs; but if that fails as well, they may find their best option is to select another environment that is a better fit to their interests, skills,

values, or needs. In the end, whatever our goals as an institution of higher learning, we ought always to be serving the students who entrust their academic careers to us.

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