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

Finding Our Way

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

The need for meaningful institutional change is well documented. Our past efforts have failed to focus on an overarching goal to transform the college. Instead, our efforts have been piecemeal, disconnected, and of short duration. We have allowed faculty and staff to champion boutique innovations without providing the leadership framework for connecting and embedding their good work in the overall design of the college. We have joined reform efforts to increase productivity, to apply practices of total quality management, and to make the community an extension of the campus—efforts abandoned when the going got tough or when a new president arrived on the scene with a new agenda.

We cannot continue to tweak the current system by simply adopting a promising practice—contextual learning, for example—or by grafting on a prosthetic technology to provide online advising; this kind of reform is akin to trimming the branches of a dying tree. Piecemeal reform will not bring about the transformation required to double the number of students who complete a certificate, degree, or transfer in the next 10 to 15 years. As Glenn DuBois, chancellor of the Virginia Community College System, said of Virginia’s community colleges in an interview in CrossTalk last year, “Systemic failure is coming for the 40-year-old collection of colleges unless major changes are made. If we don’t acknowledge the size of this thing, we are going down. We cannot nibble at the edges.”

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

Getting There

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

Tackling the Challenge

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

Guidelines to boosting student success

BY TERRY O’BANION

The Completion Agenda has emerged as the overarching mission of the community college. Never in the history of the community college movement has an idea so galvanized stakeholders—from the White House to the state house. Never has so much funding from philanthropic groups, such as the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation and Lumina Foundation, been more generously funneled into a cause. Even as states struggle to survive in the face of sharply declining financial resources, the notion that community colleges can play a significant role in doubling the number of college completers is championed by virtually every community college leader. At the 91st annual meeting of the American Association of Community Colleges in New Orleans in April, President and CEO Walter Bumphus said, “Completion is not as embedded in our community college culture as access is. That is something we need to change.”

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

1. Establish a core leadership team representing all stakeholders in a minimum five-year effort to create and sustain pathways to completion for all students. From trustees to the college president and top administrators to senate and union leaders to chief influencers among faculty, staff, and students, it will take a sustained, collaborative effort to achieve success.

Five years is a starting point; the institutional change called for in achieving the goals of the Completion Agenda will require institutional continuous improvement for the next 10 to 15 years.

How to get the leading stakeholders to agree on this agenda and to collaborate on making it successful is the major challenge. The historical architecture of education that many community colleges adopted from their four-year counterparts encourages “silos,” not collaboration. Faculty members divide into departments around disciplines, staff in student affairs and academic affairs hardly communicate on some campuses, and curriculum is hoarded into career/technical education and liberal arts/transfer education. Such an isolation has not gone unnoticed. As Morest and Jenkins point out, “studies of student progression [are] rare at community colleges.”

Many community colleges have recently received millions in funding to develop programs and services. However, one-fifth of these Round 1 colleges found it difficult to implement promising practices “hindered primarily by weak institutional research capacity.” This finding raises a troubling question: How will other community colleges outside this special group of colleges achieve such capacity?

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

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

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

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

I underscored this point in my 2010 article, “The Completion Agenda: To What End?” As we create new pathways to success for our students, we need to review how we can infuse our programs with core values and concepts from liberal education—what the Association of American Colleges and Universities is an “Essential Learning Outcomes”—to ensure that our graduates and certificate holders will be able to make informed decisions and use clear judgment about how they invest and spend their resources and their lives.

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

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

In these structured programs, and, indeed, in all courses, we can keep the focus on success if every instructor in every course, every term, begins with a
Community colleges have tinkered with staff development for decades, always referencing its value in studies and strategic plans, but few colleges have created models of systemic staff development that make a meaningful, documented difference. In a 2001 study of faculty development programs in community colleges, J.P. Murray pegged the number of community college faculty and administrators as “absurdly large,” while commending the faculty development efforts of the “few brilliant community college leaders.” “Faculty development at most community colleges is...a randomly grouped collection of activities lacking meaningful coordination with the mission of the college or the needs of the faculty members.” In most cases, staff development programs are created by faculty and staff—often without consultation from the college administration. They are released from a course or two and rotate responsibilities with other faculty on an annual basis. The programs created by these faculty members and their committees often have no overall goals connected to institutional priorities and are usually no more than a series of one-time workshops put together for opening-day conferences. Indeed, one institution offered workshops on emotional intelligence and handwriting analysis.

The success of the Completion Agenda depends on strategic staff development programs that can increase the number of completers in the next 10 to 15 years—programs that are built into the college on a continuous basis and that are required of all employees of the college. Adjunct faculty must be included with incentives such as continuing employment, first choice of classes and schedules, and stipends. Richland College in Dallas, for example, has created an outstanding staff development program for adjunct faculty using these and other incentives.

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

5. Apply appropriate technological innovations to create, implement, and monitor the student success pathways to optimize efficiency and effectiveness. With technology, colleges can do much more than in years past and do it better than before. Colleges can better “manage” learning, track a student’s navigation through the system, provide services, and help students make connections with faculty and with other students—faster, smarter, better. Technology expands and improves the reach of the teacher and enriches the learning environment with more efficient and effective inclusion of curriculum support materials. And, with the emerging emphasis on open-source systems, colleges, faculty, and students alike can benefit from technological innovations at little or no cost.

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

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

One such project is the Student Success Plan (SSP) led by Rus Little at Sinclair Community College in Ohio. The SSP is a holistic counseling and intervention software application designed to increase the persistence and graduation rates of at-risk students. Through holistic counseling, Web-based support systems, and intervention techniques, students who are at greatest risk of failing in college are identified, supported, and monitored. The software and process have a proven track record of success improving student outcomes. At-risk students who participated in the SSP reportedly had a 51 percent higher rate of retention than those who qualified but did not participate. They had an average GPA of 3.06, compared with an average of 1.65 for students who qualified but did not participate. Through the grant from NGLC, the SSP will be made available to all colleges in the United States.

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

Scaling up innovations and promising practices in education is a lot more challenging than scaling up successful outcomes in business. If a creative worker at a McDonald’s franchise figures out a faster way to make a Big Mac, it can spread to the whole chain. In education, however, it is much more difficult to scale quickly and effectively. In the Bursting with Burning Bush study, which compared six community colleges, the average rate of replication was about 15 percent. The Easter Island Paradox suggests that community colleges have been called by the nation’s leaders to play a key role in revising the economy. Never in its 100-year-plus history has the community college experienced such a dramatic decline in resources coupled with such a dramatic increase in enrollments. This is not the best time for community colleges to take on a mandate to double the number of completers in the next decade and a half. Hilary Pennington, who has led the postsecondary agenda at the Gates Foundation, says, “Dramatically improving the nation’s completion rate can seem daunting and impossible. It’s underestimating the capacity to consider rethinking the airplane you are flying when two of its engines are aflame.” To make the best use of the resources we do have, we are going to have to stop and do some restructuring. “Higher education systems and campuses are going to have to be smarter with the resources they have,” says Pennington. “No more nibbling at the edges in an attempt to wring efficiencies out of a higher education model built in a different era. We are never going to improve student achievements by trying to improve success, or we can make the bigger structural reforms we need—strategically and smartly. Realistically, this is our best option.”

In Valencia Community College (VCC) in Florida, which, with the same resources as other Florida community colleges, posts graduation rates for its students that are points higher than its peers. President Sandy Shugart explains VCC’s success: “We stopped spending so much money and energy trying to get bums in the seats and instead began seeing the college through the eyes of the student.” In addition to using current resources more wisely, community colleges must exercise entrepreneurial skills to create more resources to support student success. President Shugart continues, “There are no lack of promising practices for better realigning and garnering more resources: • Establish income-producing programs or garnering more resources: • Establish income-producing programs or garnering more resources: • Establish income-producing programs or garnering more resources: • Establish income-producing programs or garnering more resources: • Establish income-producing programs or garnering more resources: • Establish income-producing programs or garnering more resources: • Establish income-producing programs or garnering more resources: • Establish income-producing programs or garnering more resources: • Establish income-producing programs or garnering more resources: • Establish income-producing programs or garnering more resources: • Establish income-producing programs or garnering more resources: • Establish income-producing programs or garnering more resources: • Establish income-producing programs or garnering more resources: • 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• Expand partnerships with business and industry to include customized training programs beyond the current slate of programs (Humber College in Toronto offers customized training in more than 35 countries) and engage business and industry in directly supporting high-demand job programs with funds for program development, staff training, equipment, internships, and scholarships.

• Earmark portions of current state and federal funds for the Completion Agenda.

• Explore the Economics of Innovation model created in California that demonstrates a good return on investment in the intelligent application of information technology in community and technical colleges.

• Since education is a labor-intensive enterprise, audit the numbers of potential volunteers in the local community and consider how to use them to supplement current personnel. Many faculty, classified staff, students, and citizens will volunteer if called on to help with tutoring, advising, coaching, and teaching. At Alverno College in Wisconsin, hundreds of local citizens are trained as external assessors to give students feedback about their progress. An audit at Tidewater Community College in Virginia revealed 1,956 college employees, 30,808 students, 45,117 associate degree graduates, and a population in the college’s service area of 1,000,400, not including service clubs, churches, nonprofit agencies, and business and industry. The United States has a strong culture of volunteerism that colleges have not yet fully tapped into.

8. Create a transparent and user-friendly campuswide communication system to keep stakeholders informed and engaged and use it to celebrate student success and institutional progress. To help bring focus to the Completion Agenda and to make it the overarching transformative goal of the college, brand the existing communication system around the goal of completion. Work with marketing staff to apply their skills to “marketing” the agenda internally and externally; assume this agenda is as important as preparing for a major bond issue. Create special events to report often on the progress of the agenda. A campuswide communication system should serve as a vehicle to celebrate student success and institutional progress in a systematic way. When students achieve milestones on the student success pathway—first gateway course passed, 15 hours of college credit, 30 hours of college credit—they should be recognized in a host of ways: a congratulatory letter from the president; a featured spot on the college’s website; a “milestone” certificate; a gift certificate for four from a local restaurant so they can celebrate with family and friends; an invitation to membership in the Tipping Point Club; or any combination of low-cost, high-impact recognition strategies. Recognition is a powerful motivator—particularly for students not used to such recognition—and helps create the momentum students need to persist.

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

Terry O’Bannon is president emeritus of the League for Innovation in the Community College and a senior adviser of the League’s Conference on Information Technology as the place to explore the intelligent application of information technology in community and technical colleges.

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