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For more than 100 years, the Student Access Agenda has been the driving force of the community college movement. In the past two decades, the Student Success Agenda has emerged and become the single most important goal for community colleges. As it has evolved, it has morphed into the Completion Agenda, a more sharply focused goal of student success that has become a national imperative.

The federal government, nonprofit foundations, states, and many colleges have attempted to carve out a piece of this emerging completion agenda. There are more than a dozen major national initiatives—some supported with millions of dollars unheard of in the community college world and some supported by key national partnerships that recognize the community college as a major player in American society. This fairly recent focus on the completion agenda represents a tectonic shift in the community college zeitgeist extending from the White House to

- Anne Arundel Community College in Maryland launched an initiative to double the number of degree, certificate, and workforce credential recipients by 2020.

It is unlikely that any community college or educational institution will be untouched by the completion agenda. All these initiatives are designed to scale up across other institutions and across states; all are designed to influence colleges and policymakers to support the goal of improved completion rates. There has never been

the pitfalls; they fully understand that cynicism is the sidekick of failed promises. They know our limitations, yet they persevere—because the cause is good and the cause is right.

Great movements, however, often have unintended consequences, and it would be wise for all of us to consider what these consequences might be for the completion agenda. We must ask the question: To what end? The savvy leaders of these initiatives are not unaware of the larger perspective such a question raises. They ask this question every day of their efforts. They worry

THE COMPLETION

AGENDA: To What End?



EMERGING PHILOSOPHY SHIFTS FOCUS FROM STUDENT ACCESS TO SUCCESS

national organizations and foundations, states, and individual community colleges.

- President Obama has challenged community colleges to produce an additional 5 million graduates by 2020.
- Six national community college organizations, led by the American Association of Community Colleges and the Association of Community College Trustees, signed “A Call to Action,” charging community colleges with producing 50 percent more students with high-quality degrees and certificates by 2020.
- Lumina Foundation established its Big Goal of increasing the proportion of Americans with high-quality degrees and credentials to 60 percent by 2025.
- The Virginia State Board for Community Colleges approved a strategic plan that calls for a 50 percent boost in the number of students graduating, transferring to four-year institutions, or completing a workforce credential.

a movement in the community college world so widely joined and supported by such deep pockets. The completion agenda is, indeed, a tectonic shift.

In almost all cases, the focus is on students who are underprepared, underrepresented, or from low economic backgrounds. There is an urgency—an imperative—to move students through the system with increased speed and efficiency.

To What End?

If these and other completion-agenda initiatives prove successful, the outcome will be significant for our students and society; the survival of our democracy might well depend on them.

We’re fortunate in that these initiatives are led by some of the most able community college leaders in the nation, men and women who are deeply committed to the core values of the community college. They have been well seasoned by years of herding reform efforts through community college pastures. They are aware of

if the agenda is too narrowly focused, if there are sufficient resources, if college leaders are willing and able to deliver. They wrestle with the following issues:

The Terminal Degree—Complete can mean finished, ended, concluded; the *completion* agenda carries the connotation of an endpoint. With the completion agenda, are we in danger of resurrecting the terminal-degree idea from the 1940s by placing too much emphasis on the degree or certificate as the primary goal—the endpoint of a student’s education? It took years to purge the idea of the terminal degree from the community college lexicon and years more to embed the principles of lifelong learning into our programs and practices.

We must prepare today’s students for the challenges of changing careers and jobs five or six times in their lives. Students need the skills to succeed in an initial job, but they also need the skills to cope with shifts in our economy and culture—skills to transition into new jobs or places of employment.

MATTHIAS KUIKA/CORBIS

Though the community college leaders who orchestrate various completion-agenda initiatives understand and support core concepts of lifelong learning and would never refer to degree and certificate outcomes as “terminal,” we must make sure federal and state agencies that champion the goals of completion do not assume our (and their) work is finished once a student receives his or her initial degree or certificate.

A Liberal Education—As we create new pathways to success for our students, we need to consider how to infuse our programs with core values and concepts from liberal education—what the Association of American Colleges and Universities calls Essential

philosophy by which to live and contribute to the general welfare.

General education is a corollary of liberal education, but both have suffered in application throughout the community college curriculum. Are we giving sufficient attention to incorporating liberal and general education in the new pathways to degree completion? Can we take the time to address “quality of life” issues for these students to help them succeed in fulfilling careers and contribute to the betterment of society rather than become, for example, skilled government bureaucrats who fail to grasp the impact of their actions or Wall Street analysts motivated primarily by greed?

ments have expanded while resources have been reduced; our faculty and leaders are retiring in record numbers; leadership and staff development programs so far cannot keep up with the demand for replacements; our colleges are primarily staffed by part-time faculty who instruct a student body that is primarily parttime—not exactly the best conditions for taking on a mandate to change the world.

Community colleges nevertheless will take on this job and do their best to boost the number of degree and certificate holders in the next several decades. As we engage the completion agenda, we should consider several key questions: What to do when foundation

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Learning Outcomes—to ensure that our graduates and certificate holders are able to make informed decisions and use clear judgment about how they invest and spend their resources and their lives.

A sound liberal education is designed to liberate students from ignorance; in our current society, ignorance has many champions, with seductive spokespersons in the national press and among well-known political leaders. We need to resuscitate Earl McGrath’s early definition of general education—a common core of knowledge for the common person—to help our students develop coping skills, life skills, and team skills so they can create a satisfying philoso-

A Very Big Deal—The completion agenda, as Lumina Foundation says, is a Big Goal. The promise is no less than making certain the United States remains globally competitive. Community colleges have always had, as Frank Newman once said, the toughest tasks of higher education; with the completion agenda, community colleges now must confront perhaps *the* toughest task *ever* in higher education.

In many ways, community colleges are up to the challenge: They have the right philosophies and the right programs, and are strategically located in all the right places. But obstacles remain: Community college success rates in the past have been dismal; enroll-

funds eventually dry up? How can community colleges balance the needs of other programs and students not connected to or interested in the completion agenda? As leaders, can we use the completion agenda as leverage for reforming other key components of the college? How will community colleges adapt when a new administration in the White House changes its course? If the community college does not meet the goals of this agenda, how will it be perceived by the federal government, state governments, foundations, and the rest of higher education the next time society comes calling?

An Opportunity for Reform—Highly visible as a national imperative,

strongly supported by the movers and shakers from the White House to the state house, the completion agenda is a formidable spearhead for reform efforts brewing for decades. Thoughtful community college leaders will recognize the completion agenda as an opportunity to leverage change and will capitalize on the energy and the resources to reform the traditional architecture of education.

Most reform efforts tinker around the edges of tradition, but the completion agenda has the potential to open wide the doors of change—to place on the table for examination the core structures, programs, policies, and practices that contribute to or stand in the way of student completion. This is the moment to follow the recommendations of the Wingspread Group on Higher Education: “Putting learning at the heart of the academic enterprise will mean overhauling the conceptual, procedural, curricular, and other architecture of postsecondary education on most campuses.”

There is, however, another side to the potential for reform ushered in by the completion agenda; we must avoid creating streamlined pathways to completion by applying the old industrial models of education by which a turnkey process moves students through the system.

As advocates of the completion agenda begin to chant “farther, faster” as their mantra, they may settle for piecemeal change, creating an island of reform for pathway completion that will be ingested by the traditional bureaucracy of education when the goal no longer seems an “imperative,” or when funds run out. The completion agenda may, alas, prove to be the enemy of reform rather than its champion.

A Sound Purpose

Our colleges have engaged these and similar issues many times in the past, and we always seem to come out on the other side by hanging onto a pendulum that has swung too far in one direction. With the completion agenda, we are

once again swinging in a direction that threatens to put us off balance. We can choose to balance that swing in mid-air now, or we can mount another offensive a decade from now and undo all this good work to again balance the pendulum. It would be uncharacteristic of us to delay this rush to course, program, certificate, or degree completion simply to engage and explore in more depth our purpose as educators. We don’t have to delay these efforts to increase the number of certificates and degrees we award. But we should expand the discussion to ensure that if we succeed at meeting the goal of again making the United States the world’s No. 1 producer of college graduates, we will have accomplished a goal worthy of our role in changing the lives of our students and contributing to the continuing development of our democracy.

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