Guidelines for Pathways to Completion

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In the last few years 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 have such large amounts of funding from philanthropic groups, such as the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation and the Lumina Foundation for Education, 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 the nation's community college leaders. Walter Bumphus, the new president and CEO of the American Association of Community Colleges said in his keynote speech at the Association's convention in New Orleans on April 9, 2011 "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 the task of completion; they have the right philosophy, the right programs, 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 complete a certificate or an Associate's degree, or who transfer to earn a Bachelor's degree that has *market-place value*. And ensure that these pathways work for the large number of students who are underprepared, from lower socio-economic backgrounds, and first-generation college students.

While the challenge is clear, the strategic plan to meet this challenge still needs mapping. 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 the high schools, or at the points ABE/GED/ESL and returning adults enter the pipeline, to the final points of completion. High impact or promising practices will have to 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 at reform 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 adding on a promising practice such as Contextual Learning or grafting on a prosthetic technology to provide online advising; this kind of disconnected reform is nothing more than trimming the branches of a dying tree. Piecemeal reform is impotent to bring about the kind of transformation required for us to be successful in doubling the number of students who complete a certificate, degree, or transfer in the next ten to fifteen years. As Glenn DuBois, Chancellor of the Virginia Community College System, said about Virginia's community colleges in an interview in *Crosstalk* in December, 2010: "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 us 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." (April 2011) Davis recommends 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 together to redesign current policies, programs, and practices to create a systemic, integrated, and connected student success pathway.

At this stage of development in this new "national imperative" there are emerging guidelines gleaned from the documents and from the experiences of community college leaders who are on the cutting edge trying to plan and implement the Completion Agenda. These guidelines are framed here as a set of institutional conditions that must exist if community colleges are to create student success pathways that work. As initiatives unfold, these guidelines will be modified by experience and data; however, at the moment community college leaders should find them helpful as they build on the pioneering work of those who are already deeply engaged.

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 the trustees, president, top administrators, and senate/union leaders to the influential leaders 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 intentional continuous improvement for the next ten to fifteen 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 the community colleges adopted from four-year colleges and universities encourages "silos" that discourage collaboration: faculty members divide into departments around disciplines; staff in student affairs and academic affairs barely communicate on some campuses; the curriculum is chopped into career/technical education and liberal arts/transfer education. This entrenched structure has

not gone unnoticed. Most recently, the U. S. Department of Labor announced a new $122 million Career Pathways Innovation Fund in February 2011 (since cut from the budget) and cautioned applicants, "Ideally, career pathways are not a separate program, weaving together adult education, training, and college programs that are currently *separated into silos* (italics added) and connecting those services to employers' workforce needs."

While every member of the college community has a stake in the Completion Agenda, it is the faculty—both full-time and part-time—who must be strongly committed and deeply involved. In the first major evaluation of Achieving the Dream (ATD), researchers at MDRC and the Community College Research Center in a report titled *Turning the Tide* (February 2011) recommend that colleges needed to do more to involve adjunct and full-time faculty in the reform efforts and to concentrate more on teaching and learning in the classroom. Mark Milliron of the Gates Foundation and Vincent Tinto, a well-known educational researcher from Syracuse University, have been drawing attention to the importance of the role of faculty through a series of special sessions at national conferences titled "Taking Student Success Seriously: Focusing on the College Classroom" where they point out what most faculty already know "Teaching matters most."

The American Federation of Teachers has added its voice to this discussion in a new report *Student Success in Higher Education* issued in March 2011. Declaring that "student success is what AFT Higher Education members are all about," the union association acknowledges that this is the first public voice of the organization on this issue: "…the AFT believes that academic unions, working with other stakeholders, can play a central role in promoting student success. Making lasting progress, however, will have to begin at tables where faculty and staff members hold a position of respect and leadership. This student success report is scarcely the last word on the subject—it is, in fact, the union's first word on the subject, and we expect many ideas presented here to be refined in conversations all over the country. The important thing is that those conversations about student success start taking place in many more places than they are today." The report is a strong and important statement of the role faculty must play in the Completion Agenda.

A 2010 report by Byron and Kay McClenney, *Reflections on Leadership for Student Success,* addresses the central issue based on their extensive experience with Achieving the Dream and the Community College Survey of Student Engagement: "Leadership matters." Referencing the Completion Agenda, they say "…significant change will not occur—and stick—without visible, persistent leadership from the college president or chancellor." In the highly successful colleges in Achieving the Dream the president has played the leading role communicating a vision and rallying the troops around that vision to place student success first by overhauling the existing policies, programs, and practices to create pathways leading to completion.

Ed Hughes, the president of Gateway Community and Technical College in Kentucky, is one example of a collaborative leader who is rallying the troops. In March and April, 2011, he held a series of dialogue sessions for groups of 10 to 12 participants for all college employees to orient them to issues of student success and to engage them in the college-wide effort. In a March 4 memo he wrote, "We need 100% participation in this critical dialogue because what we decide to do will impact our lives and our students for a long time.   Each of us must embrace this unique

opportunity to transform student learning and success through a collective effort of the college community."

2. Develop the capacity to collect, organize, and interpret data and make evidence-based decisions to effect meaningful change and increase student completion. In the first major evaluation of Achieving the Dream colleges noted above, four out of five of the first 26 colleges—the Round 1 colleges—created student success pathways that were, in great part, based on evidence. A key goal of ATD is to help colleges learn better how to use student records and other data to identify where students are dropping out and to identify the barriers to student success. These colleges were selected to participate based on their commitment to operate on a culture of evidence; they benefited from top-level consultants that included a "data facilitator" and association for five years with a selected peer group of 26 colleges; and they received millions in funding to develop this capacity. Despite all the resources at their disposal, about one-fifth of these Round 1 colleges encountered difficulty in implementing promising practices "hindered primarily by weak institutional research capacity." This finding raises a troubling question: how will other community colleges not privy to such special resources achieve such capacity?

In the last decade, community colleges have embraced the idea that they must operate on a "culture of evidence." While anecdotes about the success of individual students and faculty and student testimonials still grace the research reports and marketing documents issued by community colleges, most leaders acknowledge the importance of collecting data and using it to make decisions. The reality of the state of institutional research, however, is far from ideal. In a 2007 study by Morest and Jenkins for CCRC of directors of institutional research that included case studies and interviews with presidents and key administrators at 28 community colleges in 15 states, the researchers estimated that one fifth of community colleges have little or no 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 indicated that "studies of student progression is rare at community colleges."

It seems reasonable to assume that presidents and other key administrators would gladly use data to make program improvements and to defend their decisions regarding the allocation of dwindling resources, but Morest and Jenkins suggest that is not the case. While leaders use data on enrollments—which is related to funding—they usually do not have access to the data needed for making important decisions about the institution, and even if they did, many are not prepared to use such data in making decisions. As Morest and Jenkins summarized, "Few colleges systematically track student progress and outcomes over time, and even fewer use this information to improve programs and services."

The challenge for community colleges that embrace the Completion Agenda involves a great deal more that creating the capacity to collect and analyze data. Top administrators must be taught how to incorporate data into their decision making; that may be the greater challenge of the two.

3. Create programs of study with "instructional program coherence" that provide students with opportunities for structured deeper learning. For first-generation college students unprepared for college, the community college offers too many options. Indeed, in this case the community college can be rightly criticized for trying to be "Too many things to too many people." The comprehensive community college offers a big-tent curriculum: 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 non-credit units. No wonder many students fail to enter a program of study which Davis Jenkins (2011) notes is "one reason for low community college completion rates."

Davis cites a number of studies to support his observation that "Research on K-12 education finds that schools that are able to achieve greater gains in student outcomes are characterized by higher levels of 'instructional program coherence,' which involves "a set of interrelated programs for students and staff that are guided by a common framework for curriculum, instruction, assessment, and learning climate and that are pursued over a sustained period of time." Every student should be anchored in a defined program of study with a high degree of "instructional program coherence;" and there should be a program of study for students who are unclear or undecided about their goals.

In a 2010 article, *The Completion Agenda: To What End?,* I argued for instructional program coherence focused on deeper learning: "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 calls "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. On May 3, 2010, the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation announced a new effort titled Expanding the Focus on the Education Program which will focus on "deeper learning." The Foundation's definition of deeper learning "brings together five key elements that work in concert: core academic content; critical thinking and complex problem solving; effective communication; working in collaboration; and learning how to learn." The architects of Lumina's Strategic Plan also recognize the connections between the career completion goals and the need for deeper learning: "By increasing the attainment level to 60 percent, we can expect significant increases in volunteerism, voting, philanthropic giving and education levels for future generations as well as significant reductions in crime rates, poverty and health care costs.

Simply stated, 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 philosophy by which to live and by which to contribute to the general welfare. General education is a corollary of liberal education, but both have suffered in application in the community college curriculum."

We need to take a lesson from the past and engage students from the very first day of college in a structured, required, and inter-related 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. Or the learning experiences can be captured in 5 or 6 core courses in general education modeled on the very successful general education programs at Santa Fe Community College (FL) and Miami Dade College in the 1960s and 70s. If we are going to be serious about the Completion Agenda we must offer fewer options so as not to confuse our students with too many choices; and the options we do offer must be structured and substantive to deepen and broaden the student's life experience—experience that can be measured in "life space value" in addition to "market place 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, would begin the course with a 30 minute or full class review focused on "How to be successful in this course." As first-generation and unsuccessful college students, our students do not know how to navigate the collegiate culture. Helping students understand from day one what is required to be successful in every course in which they are enrolled could make a difference. If every instructor in every course, every term, let students in on the secret of success for their courses the entire institution might experience a shift in culture toward making success a priority.

4. Prepare all employees through a strategic staff development program for their role in creating and sustaining student pathways to completion. 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 problem universally understood by community college leaders: "faculty development at most community colleges is…a randomly grouped collection of activities lacking intentional coordination with the mission of the college or the needs of the faculty members." In most cases the staff development program is created by faculty members with no expertise in staff development. They are released from a course or two and rotate responsibilities with other faculty on an annual basis. The programs of staff development 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 cobbled together for opening-day conferences on the campus. Indeed, one community college offered workshops for faculty in astrology and hand-writing analysis.

The success of the Completion Agenda depends on strategic staff development programs that target doubling the number of completers in the next 10 to 15 years, that are built into the organizational and reward structure of the college as a continuous process, 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, Texas has created an outstanding staff development program for adjunct faculty using these and other incentives.

Strategic staff development programs can play a significant role in developing the skills and abilities that are required if community colleges are going to improve and expand retention, achievement, and completion. Recognizing that such skills were not included in the graduate programs of faculty and administrators, researchers in *Turning the Tide* recommend the following: "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 the 2010 publication *Student Success in Community Colleges: A Practical Guide to Developmental Education* also recommend strategic staff development, saying "The importance of comprehensive training and professional development opportunities for faculty and staff cannot be overestimated."

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 then ever 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.

There has been an explosion of technology-based innovations that will play a major role in supporting the Completion Agenda. Consider, for example, the new initiative Next Generation Learning Challenges (NGLC) orchestrated by EDUCAUSE, the leading national association for information technology professionals, with partners from leading foundations and national educational organizations. The intent of NGLC is to "dramatically improve college readiness and completion in the United States through the applied use of technology, particularly among low-income individuals." With over $20 million from the Bill and 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 on April 7, 2011, focused on the "sustainable adoption-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 of the projects approved in the First Wave of the NGLC is the Student Success Plan (SSP) led by Russ Little at Sinclair Community College in Ohio; it is an example of the kind of technology application that will soon be available to all educational institutions. The SSP is a powerful example of technological innovations that will help us achieve the goals of the Completion Agenda—a holistic counseling and intervention software designed to increase the persistence, success, and graduation rates of the at-risk student. 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 and documented track record of success in improving student outcomes: at-risk students who participated in the Student Success Plan had a 51% higher rate of retention than those who qualified but did not participate and an average GPA of 3.06 compared to 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 scaling up programs was highlighted as one of the major findings in the first evaluation of Achieving the Dream. According to the report, "While colleges instituted a wide range of strategies to improve student achievement under the auspices of Achieving 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 and more cost effective way to add pickles to a hamburger, the infrastructure, the reward system, and the culture at McDonald's are all in place to test the innovation and scale it up rapidly across thousands of other outlets. Community colleges are often challenged to scale up a proven practice in a single department.

In a 2005 interview, Chris Dede, a thought leader and endowed professor at Harvard, summarized the challenge of scaling up innovations in education. "Scaling up involves closing gaps that exist between the innovation's demands and an organization's capacity." Successful scaling occurs when innovations or promising practices can be applied to large numbers of students and faculty and if the proven innovations are not too costly. Case management, for example, is an effective practice but it is too costly to apply to large numbers of students and should be reserved for students who require more special attention. Other programs require extensive collaboration; scaling up learning communities, for example, requires a change in curriculum structures, interest and involvement of faculty leaders, support from the registrar's office, and revisions in the college catalog and other documents, among many other changes. Colleges need to analyze what will be required to scale up a specific program or practice and whether or not the college has the capacity to do so—and that analysis needs to occur well before colleges decide which programs or practices they are going to implement.

Community colleges that have been successful in scaling up innovations and promising practices have, first, piloted the practice and gathered data supporting its effectiveness. Second, champions of the practice have helped herd it through institutional pastures and have gained support from key leaders. Too often, scaling up is something that receives attention after an innovation has been proven effective; guidelines for scaling up need to be applied from the beginning of any initiative to improve and expand student success and completion.

7. Realign current resources and identify potential new resources—funding, personnel, facilities, and community support—to double the number of students who successfully complete a credential with life space and marketplace value. It is ironic that community colleges have finally been called on by the nation's leaders to play the key role in turning around

the economy at a time when the economy has turned community colleges upside down. 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 of times for the community college to take on a mandate to double the number of completers in the next decade and a half. This challenge is widely recognized. Hilary Pennington who heads up the postsecondary agenda at the Gates Foundation, one of the driving forces behind much of the Completion Agenda, says "Dramatically improving the nation's completion rate can seem daunting and impossible. It's understandably hard to consider retrofitting the airplane you are flying when two of its engines are aflame." (February 2011)

To make the best use of the resources we do have we are going to have to stop doing some things, and we are going to have to restructure some things. Pennington notes "Higher education systems and campuses are going to have to be smarter with the resources they have. No more nibbling at the edges in an attempt to wring efficiencies out of a higher education model built in a different era. I believe we are nearing a watershed moment in American higher education. We can either keep doing things the way we've always done them, with less money and diminishing success. Or, we can make the bigger structural reforms we need – strategically and smartly. Realistically, this is our best option for long-term success."   She cites Valencia Community College in Florida which, with the same resources as other Florida community colleges, posts graduation rates that are 15 percentage points above its peer colleges. President Sandy Shugart explains Valencia's success "…we stopped spending so much money and energy trying to get 'butts 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 capitalize on their entrepreneurial skills to create and align more resources to support student success and completion. There are a number of promising practices for better realigning or garnering more resources:

- Establish income-producing programs and services for the community: catering, rental facilities, athletic facilities, flea markets, event and entertainment contracts, consulting services, assessment programs, specialized training, etc.
- 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 over 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.
- Align state, federal, and foundation grants with college agendas and program planning processes. 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 through increasing the number of FTEs by improving support services and other elements of the student success pathway in developmental education programs.
- 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 a huge pool of potential volunteers: 1,956 college employees, 32,808 students, 45,117 Associate Degree graduates, and a population in the college's service area of 1,090,400 not including service clubs, churches, non-profit agencies, and business and industry. The United States has a strong culture of volunteerism which colleges have not yet fully tapped.

8 Create a transparent and user-friendly campus-wide communication system to keep all stakeholders informed and engaged and use 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 Completion Agenda. 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.

Beyond keeping employees informed, focused, and connected around the Completion Agenda; the campus-wide 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, etc.) 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 provided by a local restaurant to 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 for accomplishment is a powerful motivator—particularly for students not used to such recognition—and helps to 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, and 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, and these achievements need to be celebrated college-wide 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 these can be key sponsors in the college's efforts to celebrate achievement.

Conclusion

With the Completion Agenda community colleges have taken on the most formidable and the most visible challenge in their history—at a time when they face overwhelming problems that seem insurmountable. Despite those problems, community colleges will take on this job, and they will do their best to achieve the goals of doubling the number of degree and certificate holders in the next several decades.

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 set aside differences in order to place the needs of students first. The task ahead for community colleges is to put these guidelines into practice with 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.