

AMERICA'S *Community Colleges:*

The Key to the College Completion Challenge?

By Bob Templin

Last August, President Obama challenged the nation and American higher education to produce 8 million more college graduates by 2020, listing this as “the single most important step we can take” to ensure the nation succeeds in the 21st century. For their part, community colleges were asked to increase the number of associate degrees and certificates they award by 5 million, making these institutions responsible for over 60 percent of the graduates needed to reach the goal.

It makes sense to call upon community colleges to do much of the heavy lifting. Community colleges already enroll nearly half of all undergraduates today and represent the fastest growing sector of public higher education, even in the face of government budget cuts. They are America's on-ramp to higher education and provide economic opportunity for the majority of immigrant, minority, and first-generation college goers. These are the very populations who will need to be reached in large numbers if the nation is to achieve the president's goal. But more importantly, community colleges are where the greatest opportunity lies to achieve the most significant college comple-



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tion gains. Relatively modest but continuous improvements in community college graduation rates over the decade could result in very large increases in additional graduates for the nation and the economy. If, during the next 10 years, community colleges can also find ways to continue enrolling greater numbers of students, then the president's college completion challenge is one that could be within reach and America might once again have the world's best-educated workforce and citizenry.

So far, a blueprint hasn't been published to guide community colleges in producing the needed 5 million additional graduates. But there are five innovations showing promising results that could be woven into an integrated strategy and used by community colleges to help answer the college completion challenge.

Five Actions for Increasing the Number of Community College Graduates

1. Confront the issues around low student success and make data-driven decisions to improve graduation rates.

A national organization called Achieving the Dream: Community Colleges Count is assisting 130 community colleges in achieving greater student success, especially among students of color and low-income students, by using data about college student persistence and completion to drive institutional change. Encouraging courageous conversations around what institutional data are revealing about student achievement, Achieving the Dream teaches colleges how to develop a culture of evidence that drives institutional changes toward greater student achievement and graduation. A number of Achieving the Dream colleges are showing impressive outcomes. Valencia Community College and El Paso Community College both have graduation rates now that are more than twice the national average. But more community colleges need to join the initiative and learn how to adopt data-driven reforms to improve their graduation rates.

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2. Bring more college-ready students into the system through local school partnerships.

Though community college enrollments are at record levels, more college students—especially those from underrepresented minorities and first-generation college goers—are needed if the president's graduation goals are to be met. If these students attend college at all they are likely to start at a community college, but most will come unprepared for college-level work. Several of the nation's community colleges have created partnerships with their local school systems not only to increase the percentage of high school graduates going to college, but also to increase the number of high school graduates who are college ready. Northern Virginia Community College (NOVA) partners with 39 high schools in an initiative called Pathway to the Baccalaureate that works with at-risk high school students who are not likely to attend college: first-generation college goers and low-income, minority, and immigrant students.

Through this program, college counselors are embedded in the high schools to work with students during their senior year, providing a structured system of support services to help them navigate the complexities of college admission, assessment, financial aid, and program selection as they prepare for the transition from high school to college. Over one-third of the Pathway seniors are dual-enrolled in college classes while still in high school. For those who are not college ready, remediation services are offered through the school system and a summer bridge program before the college's fall semester begins. As students transition to NOVA, there is a counselor handoff and students are assigned a Pathway college retention counselor who provides another set of structured interventions designed to improve student chances of college success: mandatory orientation, required class attendance, regularly scheduled advising, and enrollment in a college success course. With the retention counselor's assistance, students map out the sequence and timing of courses needed for graduation. Financial aid grants in addition to government aid are provided so that Pathway students can attend college full time. From the beginning, students are in continuous preparation for transfer to George Mason University, where they are guaranteed admission if they complete the Pathway program and graduate from NOVA with a minimum 2.5 grade point average.

The early results of the Pathway program are encouraging. Today, there are over 5,000 students involved in the program, with 93 percent meeting the federal definition of an at-risk student. Eighty-four percent of the students who join the Pathway program graduate from high school and attend NOVA or another college. Once at NOVA, their persistence and graduation rates are nearly twice those of the rest of the college's student population. It is still too early to tell what impact the Pathway program will have on increasing the number of bachelor's degrees earned, but clearly the program demonstrates that by working together with school systems and university partners, community colleges can increase the number of underrepresented students who attend and complete college to levels never previously achieved.

3. Increase the number of students receiving financial aid.

Financial barriers represent the single greatest obstacle to enrolling and persisting in college for moderate- and low-income college students. Yet among community college students who have the greatest financial need, we find the lowest percentage of students applying for and receiving financial assistance. Last May, the College Board reported that nearly half of the Pell Grant-eligible students

at community colleges do not even apply for financial aid. Some community colleges are redesigning how they work with students in awarding aid, ensuring that students who most need financial support receive it. For example, the Connecticut community college system has developed a web-based, statewide approach of reaching out and providing aid to its students, with customer service units located at the 12 colleges and a centralized back-office operation that efficiently does the processing. Connecticut reports that nearly two-thirds of its students now apply for aid, compared with an average of only 42 percent at most of the nation's community colleges. In the process, the state estimates that it has saved over \$2 million in operating costs thanks to the reengineered system.

4. **Redesign remedial education.**

Historically, less than half of the students who begin their education at community colleges eventually graduate. Among the leading reasons for non-completion is that most new students are not prepared for college-level studies. These students are required to take remedial courses in math, English, or both. Typically, fewer than 20 percent pass these courses, go on to college-level coursework, and make it to graduation. Fundamental changes are needed in how community colleges remediate students' basic skills deficiencies if there is to be any hope of achieving the president's college completion agenda.

The National Center for Academic Transformation (NCAT) is working with community colleges in redesigning how developmental studies are taught. In one initiative called Changing the Equation, NCAT is teaming with 38 community colleges to redesign their developmental math programs through streamlined course delivery and technology-assisted instruction. Colleges create small course units or modules that allow students to take only the segments needed to correct specific deficiencies and to accelerate the completion of their remediation. So far, developmental math redesigns at NCAT partner institutions have increased the percentage of students who successfully complete a developmental math course by an average of 51 percent, while reducing the cost of instruction by an average of 30 percent.

5. **Partner with community-based nonprofits in job training and college completion programs.**

Other promising efforts to increase the number of college completers involve partnerships between community-based nonprofit organizations and community colleges. Goodwill Industries International, the nation's largest nonprofit job-training provider among low-income adults, has launched an initiative called the Community College Career Collaboration project. Using different partnership models that have documented

success, Goodwill and the American Association of Community Colleges are launching 30 pairs of Goodwill-community college pilots to provide job training that seeks to result in employment with family-sustaining wages and a community college credential. The potential impact of such collaboration is significant. Through its 166 local offices, Goodwill Industries reaches over 2 million low-income adults annually in training programs. Even if only a fraction of these learners complete a Goodwill-community college program, hundreds of thousands more adults can be added to the workforce with a postsecondary credential.

Another promising example is a program targeting young adults aged 18 to 24 who have graduated from high school, but are not attending college and have no marketable skill for achieving livable-wage employment. Year Up, a national nonprofit organization with community-based branches in eight cities, provides intensive, year-long job training for thousands of youth who have no immediate plans to attend college. Working in collaboration with over 100 different employers (including some Fortune 500 companies), Year Up provides paid corporate internships in fields such as financial services and information technology. More than 90 percent of Year Up trainees complete the program and three-quarters of them gain full-time employment with an average wage of \$15 per hour. Year Up is piloting efforts with several community colleges in which the trainees receive academic credit and a structured pathway to college completion integrated into the Year Up experience. Students who would otherwise be lost to postsecondary education find themselves experiencing success in employment and college through partnerships between community-based nonprofits and community colleges.

A Word Regarding Resources

The nation cannot achieve the goals of the president's college completion agenda without community colleges reaching into traditionally underserved populations and increasing both the number of college students enrolled and their graduation rates. Community colleges are the most likely sector of higher education to expand, especially among low-income and minority populations, but they cannot achieve our national goals unless significant reforms are adopted to improve student achievement. And community colleges cannot adopt the needed institutional reforms, develop the needed capacity, and produce the required results if government funding continues to crumble. America's community colleges are prepared to do the heavy lifting—if America's will to succeed backs them up with the resources to get the job done. ■