

Completion begins and ends in the classroom

By Terry O'Banion, Published May 13, 2013

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The goals of the Completion Agenda in the community college—to double the number of students who complete a one-year certificate, an associate degree or who transfer to another college or university to complete a credential—is the reform movement of this decade and perhaps the next.

Never in the history of the community college have so many stakeholders, from the White House to the State House to major foundations, championed such a focused goal including hundreds of community colleges deeply engaged in initiatives to address completion goals.

As community colleges launched completion initiatives, sometimes statewide, the emphasis has been on services and programs outside the classroom. There is no quarrel about the importance of efficient and effective services such as admissions, assessment, orientation, advising, placement, financial aid and registration; **students cannot be successful in the classroom without successful preparation for the classroom.**

O'Banion will be a featured speaker at the AACC John E. Roueche Future Leaders Institute and Future Presidents Institute June 23-28 in Baltimore. The application deadline is June 3.

The tendency of most community colleges that have launched initiatives, however, is to focus almost exclusively on these services—at least in the beginning. Maybe we find it easier to redesign and restructure these programs and services, or **maybe we find it too difficult to redesign what happens in the classroom. In any case, if we are to improve on our record of student success the role of the teacher in creating learning, primarily through the classroom, online or face-to-face, must become the primary focus of the Completion Agenda.** This is the primary focus of our I-CAN initiative.....improving learning with more *effective* instruction.

In the community college, the classroom is the only place we have access to students in any kind of organized and continuing way.

Key leaders concur

Key leaders involved in the Completion Agenda recognize the need to focus more attention on teaching and learning and classroom instruction. Jamie Merisotis, president of Lumina Foundation has noted: **"Oddly enough, the concept of learning—a subject that seems critical to every discussion about higher education—is often overlooked in the modern era.** For us, learning doesn't just matter. It matters most of all. It's the learning, stupid." *'Content tyranny' can stifle intellectual growth by overwhelming students with details that hinder their ability to focus on understanding the basics. When focusing too much on content or teaching to a test, there is very little time to develop deeper order thinking skills and academic survival skills, which are crucial to a student's success in their first year courses.*

For community college students, the laboratory for learning is the classroom.

Kay McClenney and her colleagues at the Center for Community College Student Engagement (CCCSE) also weigh in on this conversation: "Student success matters. College completion matters. And teaching and learning—the heart of student success—matter."

CCCSE leaders champion **active and collaborative classroom learning experiences through intensive student engagement.** I-CAN initiative focuses on providing **maximum engagement with relevant instruction and supportive relationships.**

“Research shows that the more actively engaged students are, the more likely they are to learn, to persist in college, and to attain their academic goals,” according to CCCSE. “Student engagement, therefore, is an important metric for assessing the quality of colleges’ educational practices and identifying ways colleges can help more students succeed.”

Another key leader involved in the student success agenda, Vincent Tinto, suggests: **“If we are to substantially increase college completion, especially among low-income students, we must focus on improving success in the classroom, particularly during a student’s first year. We must be sensitive to the supports low-income students need to be successful in college, and lead efforts to dramatically improve their classroom experience.”**

Principles still hold up

These are just a few selected viewpoints about the **importance of classroom instruction** from leaders currently involved in the Completion Agenda. There is an enormous literature on classroom instruction for all levels of education with an overwhelming amount of advice and research about what constitutes successful teaching and learning.

For higher education, the best advice and research has been captured in the “Seven Principles for Good Practice in Undergraduate Education” created in 1987 by an assembled group of leading researchers and reported by Art Chickering and Zelda Gamson:

The principles of good practice include:

- 1. Encourage student-faculty contact.**
- 2. Encourage cooperation among students.**
- 3. Encourage active learning.**
- 4. Give prompt feedback.**
- 5. Emphasize time on task.**
- 6. Communicate high expectations.**
- 7. Respect diverse talents and ways of learning.**

After 25 years, these practices still hold up and have been supported by an ever-expanding body of research. **They should be embedded as the core content of faculty development programs; they should become the primary focus for the next step in institution-wide student success initiatives.** To assist our adjunct instructors it is imperative we provide them with **as much structure and standardization as possible.** We do not want to overwhelm them with options so much that they resort to the most comfortable way of

presenting the course, which may not be as the 'WCC course'. This will save time, relieve stress, and help maintain the integrity of the WCC course.

If we cannot guarantee that students will **engage with the most effective teaching and learning experiences** in the classroom, we will fail to meet the goals of the Completion Agenda. Key words are 'most effective', which is like trying to reach perfection. However, this does not preclude us from constantly striving to improve upon the past. Sometimes this adjustment must be made from minute to minute, class to class, or term to term. This is the epitome of the I-CAN initiative...to constantly improve based on data and observations.

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This essay is an excerpt from "Access, Success, and Completion" by Terry O'Banion published in 2013 by the League for Innovation in the Community College.

<http://www.communitycollegetimes.com/Pages/Campus-Issues/Completion-begins-and-ends-in-the-classroom.aspx>

Thank you for all you do to constantly improve instructional strategies!! It IS making a difference! TH