

Can community colleges double the number of grads by 2020? By Stacy Collett, Published May 16, 2013

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For administrators at Harper College in Illinois, 10,604 is the magic number—it's the college's share of the 5 million additional community college graduates President Obama challenged the nation's two-year career and technical institutions to contribute to the economy by 2020. (That's in addition to the college's current trajectory of 21,000 credentialed students by 2020.) **WCC would need to go from our 14% graduation rate to 28% to reach this goal.**

Guided by a new strategic plan to improve student completion and success, the college got off to a strong start. As of 2012, the administrators had awarded 4,487 degrees and certificates, recording the highest number of college completers in the institution's history for two years running. The current figures put Harper College 2,866 credentials ahead of its annual goal.

Those are impressive numbers. Surprisingly, Harper College President Kenneth Ender says the feat was not especially difficult. Many of those graduates were three to nine credits shy of earning a degree and didn't know it.

"We reached out to them and either brought credits from other institutions back to their transcript, or we got them back into classes" to help them complete their degrees, Ender says.

Having picked the low-hanging fruit, Ender says the real challenge now is how the college will sustain that momentum going forward. He is cautiously optimistic. **The low hanging fruit are the above average students, which are much easier to teach (reach).** However, if one has **success rates 50% or less...they have 0% effectiveness with the below average WCC students.** They are *only* effective with those *above average* WCC students. What does this say about the effectiveness of that teacher's instructional and motivational strategies? At a 75% success rate one would be 50% effective with the *below average* WCC student. It would not be in the best interest of any community college to hire those *only* effective with the above average student, unless they are willing to provide the attention, training, and accountability needed to ensure improvement.

"It will get harder," Ender says. **"We've created some energy around the idea that access by itself is not enough and that we have to be accountable for students finishing. Folks have to continually accept that as the goal.** So continuing that momentum over time is going to be difficult." This change **from accountability for teaching to accountability for learning (results),** is a **major paradigm shift** for colleges and universities, especially faculty. Improved student learning and success cannot be *maximized* as long as there are faculty/staff/leaders yet to accept this fact. Educators in this nation are at the point where they either **accept it or move on to another career.**

The major problem across the nation is the inability to successfully improve the effectiveness of the bottom third (in terms of success rates) of instructors. This is precisely why systems are constantly changing from one program to another in an attempt to reach this group. The easiest part is providing the training, accountability, and attention needed for this group whereas the most difficult (and most important) aspect to change is the archaic mentality that hinders their effectiveness. Fourteen of the fifteen nations exceeding the U.S. in education have a system for addressing this group of teachers, whereas the U.S. does not.

WCC success rate data for Top Ten Enrollment courses: (SP '13 enrollment = 3476) Annual enrollment > 10,000

- **AVG success rate for ten courses = 69.4%** (just below *standard* of 70.0%)
- If those faculty below average were operating **at** the course AVG, the avg rate for these Top Ten courses would = **73.4% (202 more successful students)**

- If all faculty were operating at a level of effectiveness equal to the **AVG for the top third** of instructors for that course, the avg rate for these Top Ten courses would = **81.7%!! (615 more successful students!)**
- Lowest success rates....MUS 101 (#10), ENG 101, CIS 146
- Highest success rates...HIS 101 (#1), SPH 107, PSY 200
- Largest range... MTH 100 (**40.0% – 96.0%**)...taught by 12 different instructors (Avg. = **67.9%!!**)
- Highest success rates for top third of instructors teaching the course... MTH 100 (**88.9%**).. bottom third = 48.5%)

Being accountable for results is something coaches are accustomed to, especially when their record (results) is posted all over the news. I have never heard a coach say, *“It’s not my fault **my** players did not play hard. After all, I told them to.”*...or *“It’s not my fault **my** players did not know the plays. After all, I told them to learn the plays, and I even provided them with the handouts and pwrpts needed to learn them.”* However, sadly enough, I have heard these very statements made all across the state regarding education in the community college system. The change is upon us. **Our job is to shorten the learning curve as much as possible by encouraging a positive, can-do mentality focused on constant and never-ending improvement.**

Excerpt from previous article... *A study which compared training alone to ‘coaching’ and training found that training alone increased productivity by 22.4% & training plus coaching increased productivity by 88% (almost 300% more effective). Just as ‘training’ suggests a more active role than simply ‘teaching’, coaching infers a degree of personal involvement in the success of students that may not be present when focusing on delivery of content (teaching). Coaching encompasses every facet of the **affective domain**, realizing that **maximum success is only possible by addressing both the emotional and logical aspects of student performance.** It also **conveys a sense of personal responsibility for the results** of that training by the ‘coach’.*

Can we reach 5 million more graduates by 2020?

“There is momentum. I am hopeful. But I still think that **one of the biggest challenges we face is ourselves (mentality),**” says Angela Oriano, associate director at the Center for Community College Student Engagement (CCCSE), a research and service initiative at the University of Texas at Austin that provides information about effective educational practice in community colleges. **“Many people working in community colleges still do not understand how abysmal our graduation rates or our student retention rates or course completion rates are.”** The reason for this is simple if one looks at human nature. **When a group of folks are allowed to set their own standards for ‘excellence’, without any form of personal reward or consequence for the results, they will simply define ‘excellence’ as the very level they are currently operating. This relieves the group of any responsibility to change or improve their current comfort level.** However, this mentality does not hold true for the ‘top performers’... which is exactly why they are ‘top performers’. You will notice these same tendencies for the students in your classes. This very issue is addressed by setting **quantitative** standards to gauge our level of effectiveness, just as we do with our grading scale for students.

The completion (graduation) rate of our students hinges directly on developmental coursework and the top ten enrollment courses on campus. The standards and goals for effectiveness of instruction and quality of learning have been clearly established. We will be focusing more effort on training, accountability, and attention for those with success rates below 60%, while continuing to monitor those below the standard of 70%.

****There are two options for achieving this standard: a) give grades (*breach of academic integrity*) OR b) work to improve student learning with three simple strategies....**maximum engagement, relevant instruction** (*requires innovation and creativity to connect your content with student interests*) and **supportive relationships**. Which do you think our college expects from you??** For all those who chose 'B', thank you for your positive proactive attitude! For any others ('A' choosers), you need an immediate mentality (attitude) change in order to have any chance of success in the community college over this next decade. This may mean spending more time incorporating successful strategies from the most effective instructors as opposed to criticizing these strategies. The only question about ANY strategy is..."Does it lead to an increase in student learning and student success?" In other words, "Is it **effective** or not?"

Defining completion

For many community colleges, just the word "completion" stirs up controversy. Colleges must settle on a definition before they can achieve their goals.

"We spent three and a half years at the cabinet level arguing back and forth on this issue—is our primary mission to transfer or to get a degree here before they transfer?" recalls Robert Exley, president of Snead State Community College (SSCC) in Alabama.

But it wasn't until the economic downturn that faculty and staff recognized the value of earning a degree.

"Our admissions staff was just bombarded with folks who just lost their jobs and didn't know their future. It was kind of serendipitous. We had a chance then to see internally that it does really matter that a student graduates because they may not be able to afford the universities," Exley says. "Once we got on the same page with two-year graduation, that made all the difference."

SSCC started a public relations campaign that encourages students to "**finish what you start.**" Completion rates at the college are up **125%**. The college's 2011 freshman class was its largest in a decade, and Exley is committed to helping each member achieve completion.

When Cindy Miles became chancellor at California's Grossmont-Cuyamaca Community College District (GCCCD) in 2009, a dismal 3 percent of the 4,000 freshmen who entered the college in 2006 had earned a degree, yet 1,900 had successfully transferred to a four-year university by 2009.

"High numbers of transfer students who come to us don't care if they get that degree," Miles explains. "We're trying to ascertain what the student's version of success is, and we're **now trying to show value in the associate degree before they transfer.**" EVERY faculty member is responsible for conveying this message as clear as possible. Only having 'some' college indicates to many employers that one cannot finish what they start...not a good first impression trait.

Removing barriers

Community college presidents have a better understanding of why students drop out—from life changes, such as pregnancy or illness, to financial issues to overly ambitious course loads to inadequate preparation for college. The challenge is to foresee and help students overcome these barriers before they reach them.

"It is incumbent upon the college that students get started on the right foot with the right classes and the right number of classes, in the correct sequence," Oriano says. **Most important day of the semester?...the FIRST day. The most**

important week?...the FIRST week. What would **your students say** about you and your class after the first day? First week? Hopefully, a caring and enthusiastic attitude would be at the top of the list. If you do not know, then ask them!

Some colleges are making changes to their orientation programs. At SSCC, for example, administrators deduced that its **traditional orientation program, which was intended to acclimate students to the college, had in some ways become an unintended barrier to completion.** Our ORI courses have gone through extensive evaluations and are constantly implementing successful changes form term to term. This is a wonderful program that will continue to be the key to a successful start for our students.

The college has since redesigned its orientation experience. Today, students schedule **face time with an adviser**, which helps them secure a better class schedule.

The changes didn't stop at orientation. SSCC also struck basic speech and computer-training classes from its required list, both of which students had avoided. The college even threw out its \$15 "graduation fee" for caps and gowns, which reportedly deterred hundreds of students from attending graduation ceremonies.

Go strong from Day 1

Keeping students on track for completion requires a **team effort (100% of the folks doing 100% of the work)**, especially during the **critical first year.** Top Ten Enrollment Courses will have a complete set of instructional video lectures for all core course objectives by the end of next Fall term. BIO 103 has had this for years, and PSY 200 has also recently completed their set. These will be available for all faculty to use, including (and especially) adjunct faculty.

"It sounds so simple, but students need to belong to someone, and we as a sector of education haven't always done a great job of making sure our students belong," Oriano says. Increased engagement in the classroom learning environment, as well as campus activities, is critical in this area. Exposure to diverse ideas and cultures develops a tolerance that is conducive for a feeling of 'belonging', as well as improving critical thinking skills. What good is our content if students are not trained to critically think, solve problems, and analyze both sides of an issue? The most growth can occur by listening to those you do NOT agree with.

Colleges must **make sure that students start with realistic expectations and help them develop a written academic plan**, "literally a roadmap," she adds. **Short-term goals** help the student experience the satisfaction of success, as opposed to the disappointment of failure. The first and most formidable roadblock for our students is completing their developmental coursework. We must create an environment for these students that continuously provide very **short-term goals with early low-stakes assessments**, backed by **maximum engagement, relevant instruction and supportive relationships.** The second goal is completing the first year of college courses (~30 credit hours). This is where our efforts with the Top Ten Enrollment Courses will pay big dividends.

Through the Roadmap Project, the Community College of Allegheny County (CCAC) in Pennsylvania has attempted to do just that. The program helps students "connect the dots" between the various support programs available to them at community college campuses.

The college developed a comprehensive first-year experience initiative that includes attending a **mandatory introduction-to-college course**, partnering students with a **success coach**, enrolling students in mandatory student **success seminars**, and providing access to the college's "math cafés"—walk-in centers where students can get math help from **faculty volunteers.** The Nursing program does a wonderful job with this in their study/tutorial room assignments. Faculty serve 2-3 hours/wk monitoring this center. This follows the saying..."**If you want to be more effective than the average teacher is, you must be willing to do more than the average teaching is willing to do.**"

“We found that if an individual takes responsibility to get this extra attention, [his or her] math grade can improve by 10 percent to 15 percent,” says CCAC President Alex Johnson.

At the epicenter of CCAC’s new programs is **its faculty**, Johnson says. **“They take a look at data we provide them, and they [suggest] what we can do collectively to support our students.** Both the math cafés and learning commons were **their recommendations.”** Ideas and strategies are more easily accepted by faculty when it is their idea. Make your own proactive changes so someone else does not have to do it for you. This is the entire concept behind the I-CAN initiative...to **empower faculty to provide their own self-evaluation based on data, and then implement changes in instructional strategies in response to this student data.** Your Division Director’s responsibility is to make sure you are held accountable for performing this assessment effectively. There are no intermediate steps between knowing what to do (plan) and doing it (action). If you **want 100% freedom** to make your own choices, you must be willing to **accept 100% responsibility** for the results. In education this applies to individual faculty members, as well as departments, divisions, and entire colleges.