

Learning, Teaching, and College Completion

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Executive Summary

The national college completion agenda has focused funders, communities, and government on community colleges and the goal to double the number of students who complete, with market-place value, a certificate or an associate degree, or who transfer to earn a bachelor's degree in the next two decades. Achievement of this completion agenda requires:

- A systematic transformation of community colleges to create a new seamless and integrated system that begins in high school or at points where adults enter the community college pipeline and extends to college completion.
- A commitment to support staff development and engage adjunct faculty because every community college employee facilitates learning and moving students towards completion.
- A program of study with “instructional program coherence” that includes general education and liberal education, in addition to career training, to provide students the common core knowledge, skills, and attitudes to be successful.

Introduction

In *Building Communities: A Vision for a New Century* (1988), the first Commission on the Future of Community Colleges recognized that “teaching and learning are central to all of the issues considered”, and the language of teaching and learning appears throughout the report. A careful reading of the report, however, reveals a clear bias for teaching over learning:

- “At the center of building community there is teaching. Teaching is the heartbeat of the educational enterprise...”
- “Building community through dedicated teaching is the vision and inspiration of this report.”
- “The community college should be the nation’s premier teaching institution”

For centuries, teaching has been “the heartbeat of the educational enterprise” and continues today as the essence of the college for many educators. Robert Barr confirmed this preference in his 1994 study of the mission statements of California community colleges, “It is revealing that virtually every mission statement contained in the catalogs in California’s 107 community colleges fails to use the word ‘learning’ in a statement of purpose,” but always uses the word “teaching.”

In early 1992, Barr initiated a sea change with respect to the pervasive focus on teaching, describing a new paradigm for education that suggests the purpose of community colleges is learning, not teaching. Barr shared his insight and the outline of the new learning paradigm with Palomar College colleagues, John Tagg and George Boggs, and together and individually they spoke, wrote, and promoted the new learning paradigm throughout higher education. Barr and Tagg’s seminal article in *Change* magazine in 1995 is the most widely read article in the history of *Change*. “In the Instruction Paradigm, the mission of the college is to provide instruction, to teach....In the Learning Paradigm the mission of the college is to produce learning.”

This early work promoted an emerging learning revolution in higher education that would find its most ardent champions in the community college. In 1996, the first national conference on “The Learning Paradigm” was held in San Diego, California; and the Association of Community College Trustees released a special issue of the *Trustee Quarterly* devoted entirely to *The Learning Revolution: A Guide for Community College Trustees* (O’Banion, 1996). In 1997, the American Council on Education and the American Association of Community Colleges jointly published *A Learning College for the 21st Century* by Terry O’Banion, which provided a framework for creating learning-centered institutions. In 1997 and 1998, the League for Innovation and PBS held three national teleconferences on the learning college.

In the last decade, the commitment to learning-centered education has continued to evolve. The League launched a new publication, *Learning Abstracts*, sponsored an annual conference called “The Learning Summit,” and orchestrated two multimillion dollar national projects—the Vanguard Learning College Project and the Learning Outcomes Project. John Tagg (2003) wrote a key book on *The Learning Paradigm College*. Learning-centered programs and practices multiplied and found supporters in hundreds of community colleges: learning communities, learning objects, collaborative learning, project-based learning, accelerated learning, contextual learning, service learning, and many others. Learning outcomes were embedded in the growing culture of learning-centered colleges by the accrediting associations. The president of the Lumina Foundation for Education capped the ideas and energy of the learning revolution at the end of the decade in his Howard Bowen Lecture at Claremont Graduate School: “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*” (Merisotis, 2009).

In a few decades, the educational landscape has changed to reflect the idea that learning rather than teaching is the core business of the higher education enterprise. In terms of the dialectic of Georg Hegel, the 19th century German philosopher, we have moved from a *thesis* that favors teaching to an *antithesis* that favors learning—a false dichotomy that will not serve us well in our current commitment to student success. It is time to lay this divide to rest and embrace a new *synthesis* that recognizes the historic symbiotic relationship between teaching and learning.

The new synthesis suggests: The purpose of teaching is improved and expanded learning. Improved and expanded learning is the outcome of effective teaching.

Leaving behind the wars and silos of teaching versus learning, community college educators can now capitalize on this new synthesis to address a looming national imperative—the college completion agenda. Recently, the completion agenda has emerged as the overarching goal 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 major philanthropies been funneled into a higher education cause.

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 learning environments and student success pathways that can, in the next two decades, double the number of students who complete, with market-place value, a certificate or an associate’s degree, or who transfer to earn a bachelor’s degree. And ensure that these pathways work for the large number of students who are underprepared, from lower socio-economic backgrounds, and are first-generation college students (O’Banion, 2011).

“Student success matters. College completion matters. And teaching and learning—the heart of student success—matter” (Center for Community College Student Engagement, 2010). Teaching and learning designed to increase student success and college completion work best when incorporating a foundational concept: intensive student engagement, a key component of which is active and collaborative classroom learning experiences.

- “Research shows that more actively engaged students are, the more likely they are to learn, to persist in college, and to attain their academic goals. Student engagement, therefore, is an important metric for assessing the quality of colleges’ educational practices and identifying ways colleges can help more students succeed” (Center for Community College Student Engagement, 2010).
- “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: (Tinto, 2011).

Students can enjoy elegant and modern educational facilities. They can access the very latest in technological innovation. They can navigate educational pathways crafted from the most promising and high-impact practices. Financial support can at least partially free them from the limitations of poverty. National and state policies can create conditions that provide opportunities typically available only to the most fortunate. But 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 Issues for the Future of Community Colleges

Reform and transformation. The need for meaningful institutional change is well documented. Past efforts to improve student success have failed to focus on the systemic transformation of the college itself. 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 for connecting and embedding their good work in overall re-design of the college.

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. 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 10 to 15 years.

Davis Jenkins notes: “Because the problem of low community college completion rates is systemic, 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. Rather, colleges need to implement a ‘best process’ approach in which faculty, staff, and administrators from across the college work together to review programs, processes, and services at each stage of students’ experience with the college and rethink and better align their practices to accelerate entry into and completion of programs of study that lead to credentials of value” (2011).

There is great promise in meeting the goals of the completion agenda if college faculty and staff can make the changes necessary to double the number of students who complete. 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 where ABE/GED/ESL and returning adults enter the pipeline—and extends 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.

Selecting and developing staff. Every employee of the college, including the president and senior administrators, middle managers, full-time and adjunct faculty, professional staff, support staff, and community volunteers, plays an important role in facilitating learning and helping move students toward completion. As Yarrington writes, “The staff of a college is its single greatest resource. In economic terms, the staff is the college’s most significant and largest capital investment. In these terms alone, we affirm that it is only good sense that the investment should be helped to appreciate in value and not be allowed to wear itself out or slide into obsolescence by inattention or neglect” (1974). Hiring a full-time faculty member who works at the college for two decades is an investment of over one million dollars; that investment deserves continuing maintenance, support, and development to ensure capacity for ever higher levels of performance and learning results.

For every category of employee, leaders must create substantive criteria and processes for selecting and hiring that reflect the core mission and values of the community college. Most colleges are too casual about this process and rely on traditional criteria inappropriate for today’s challenges. Unfortunately, departments, with their vested interests, dominate the selection process rather than the college at large.

While graduate programs generally provide faculty members with sound preparation in the content of their disciplines, they do not usually prepare faculty in pedagogy and for the particular challenges of working with community college students. “We must focus on hiring and developing faculty members who enjoy working with students even more than they enjoy their discipline, who are convinced that students are capable of learning, and who have the skills to engage students actively in the learning process” (Roueche, 2010). Regardless of how much staff development is provided in-house by community colleges, faculty and administrators will continue to obtain master’s and doctoral degrees from the university. The learning outcomes in these degrees need to be better aligned with the needs of community colleges outlined in AACC’s Core Competencies for Effective Leadership and Doctoral Education.

Basic Principle: Improved staff development leads to improved program and organizational development, which leads to improved student development.

Adjunct faculty. Community college instructors employed part-time are the workhorses of the institutions. Originally employed to provide special expertise not available from full-time faculty, adjuncts have now become an economic necessity and are employed in great numbers throughout the curriculum. It is not a formula for success when a majority constituted of disenfranchised faculty members teaches the majority of disenfranchised students. “Part-time faculty make critical contributions to teaching and learning in the higher education enterprise—educationally, socially, and economically. For the contributions and the extraordinary potential they bring, part-timers should be acknowledged and treated as valuable citizens of the academic community. Part-time faculty are sleeping giants; their sheer numbers and their impact on college instruction cannot and should not be ignored” (Roueche, Roueche, & Milliron, 1995).

In 2008, 58% of all courses in the community college were taught by adjuncts; 53% of all students were taught by adjuncts; and, an average of 2.09 courses was taught each term by adjuncts (JBL, 2008). At the College of Southern Nevada, adjunct faculty teach approximately half of the 5000 + credit sections each semester. In 2009-10, 55% of all developmental education courses in California's 112 community colleges were taught by adjunct faculty (California Community Colleges). Since adjuncts teach so many of the developmental and introductory courses, they staff a key milestone arena. However, they often are casually screened and hired, excluded from staff meetings and staff development programs, and generally treated as the cheap labor, which they are.

If the completion agenda is to succeed, **adjunct faculty must be engaged more fully and treated more respectfully.** While it is a desired goal, in this economic climate colleges are not likely to provide pay equal to that for full-time faculty. Colleges can, however, create policies and practices to enhance the involvement and contributions of adjuncts including:

- Improved criteria and processes for hiring.
- **Participation in staff development as a requisite of employment.**
- **Mentoring by full-time faculty.**
- A program of service points for volunteering to assist with advising, tutoring, registration, etc. as incentives for first choice of courses to be taught, class meeting times, and numbers of courses assigned. Service points can also be calculated as one of the criteria in selecting full-time faculty.
- Recognition for their contributions similar to such programs for full-time faculty.
- Space to meet and work with students, directory listings, and basic clerical support.

Role of the faculty in the completion agenda. A major report on the five-year progress of the first 26 colleges to join Achieving the Dream (Rutschow, 2011) strongly recommends that more faculty should be involved in reform efforts to increase student success. Given the primary role that faculty and staff play in teaching and supporting students' learning, the initiative is working to broaden the engagement of faculty in colleges' student success strategies.

Recent action by one of the nation's leading teachers' unions also suggests that faculty should be involved in the completion agenda. The American Federation of Teachers (2011) has declared 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: "...[T]he 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" (pp. 5). Presidents and other leaders are inclined to work with a coalition of the willing when it comes to major reform and change, but **faculty who are suffering from initiative fatigue or who are just reluctant to change or who disagree with the proposed change can block any efforts they choose—by creating barriers or by doing nothing.** The success of the completion agenda depends entirely on whether or not a critical mass of faculty from *across the disciplines* will agree to be involved and do the hard work to achieve the goals of completion.

Programs of coherence. In their attempts to increase access for students by offering many program options, community colleges may be unintentionally contributing to low rates of success; for underprepared, first-generation college students, there are too many options from which to choose. Community college students will be more likely to persist and succeed in programs that are tightly and consciously structured, with relatively little room for individuals to

deviate on a whim—or even unintentionally—from paths toward completion, and with limited bureaucratic obstacles for students to circumnavigate (Scott-Clayton, 2011).

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 (Newmann, Smith, Allensworth, & Bryk, 2001).

At the college level, general education programs with curriculum integrity, designed as a common core of knowledge for the common person, are ideal models of “instructional program coherence.” Required of all entering students, such general education programs eliminate the confusion of too many choices. As an alternative, a foundational learning community required of all undecided students and consisting of a student success course, an introduction to psychology, and a college writing course also exemplifies an experience with “instructional program coherence.” In any case, on their entry into college, every community college student should be enrolled in a program of study with “instructional program coherence.”

Deeper learning and certificates and degrees with market place value. Early documents published on the completion agenda made the case that increased college completion rates were necessary to keep the U. S. globally competitive, and much of the language reflected the values of training workers for gainful employment. Several key statements indicated that the agenda was all about increasing certificates and degrees with “market place value.”

At the same time, several groups supported another agenda to reform current programs to revitalize liberal education and to ensure “deeper learning.” The Association of American Colleges and Universities has championed “Essential Learning Outcomes” to ensure that 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. In spring 2010, the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation announced a new effort, “Expanding the Focus on Education Program,” which also champions “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.

Just as we cannot allow the false divide between teaching and learning to deflect attention, neither can we allow the unnecessary divide between workforce training and liberal or general education to obfuscate our commitment to increasing student success and completion. The simple truth is that no parent, no educator, no government defines or desires a quality education that is too skewed toward either workforce training or liberal education. The 1988 Future’s Commission clearly recognized the need for balance: “The aim of a community college education must be not only to prepare students for productive careers, but also to take them beyond their narrow interests, broaden their perspectives, and enable them to live lives of dignity and purpose” (pp. 17-18). We must have certificates and degrees that have market place value and *social space value*.

Community colleges excel in career training, but general education and liberal education have suffered in application in the community college curriculum. We need to resuscitate Earl McGrath’s early definition of general education—a common core of knowledge, skills, and attitudes 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. The educated citizen thinks more deeply, feels more keenly, views more broadly, and understands that individual success is inextricably tied to the general welfare of others. Earning a living wage makes that kind of self-actualization possible.

Recommendations for the Commission

1. Community colleges should embrace a new *synthesis* that recognizes the symbiotic relationship between teaching and learning and realign their policies, programs, and practices to reflect this synthesis: **The purpose of teaching is improved and expanded learning. Improved and expanded learning is the outcome of effective teaching.**
2. AACC should once again become a strong advocate to urge and assist community colleges in creating substantive criteria and processes for selecting and orienting employees and in organizing and requiring continuing staff development for all employees as a condition of employment.
3. The heart of the staff development program should be designed to help every college employee develop the skills and knowledge necessary to enhance student engagement, involvement, and connection—the synapses that spark learning—in the classroom and in the support services from intake to completion.
4. AACC, in cooperation with the Council for the Study of Community Colleges and the Association for the Study of Higher Education, should continue efforts to influence graduate education programs to better address the needs of community college educators. Some of the emerging online and for-profit universities such as Walden, Kaplan, and the National American University may be more amenable than traditional universities to working with community colleges toward this goal.
5. **Student success and completion may improve considerably if every faculty member in every course at the beginning of every term on the first day reviewed for students “How to succeed in this course.”**
6. **College leaders must involve a critical mass of faculty members across the disciplines in taking on the hard work of redesigning student success pathways based on evidence.**
7. **Magic bullets, promising practices, and boutique innovations are, by themselves, impotent to bring about the kind of change and reform required for community colleges to double the number of completers in the next decade and a half.** Community colleges that engage the goals of the completion agenda must create an effective process and design with the support of key stakeholders to reach their goals. The concept of the student success pathway provides a model framework for this initiative.
8. Community colleges should limit the number and variety of programs offered—particularly to underprepared and first-generation college students, creating more relevant options that have “instructional program coherence.” There should be only one or two program options for students who are undecided or unsure about their goals.
9. On their entry into college, *all* community college students should be enrolled in a program of study with “instructional program coherence.”

10. The unnecessary divide between workforce training and general or liberal education needs to be bridged so that educators can get on with the very hard work of creating programs, practices, and policies for a balanced education worthy of our citizens and of our society. Mr./Ms. Education Leader, tear down this wall!
11. We need a major rebirth of general education as a common core of learning (not a distributed and disconnected series of courses) to reconnect faculty with each other, to reconnect the disciplines, and to make connections for students. Workforce training and general education, appropriately designed, combine to create citizens who can earn a decent income and who know how to use that income to enrich the lives of their children and themselves and who can contribute to the general welfare of others.

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