

FROM ACCESS TO COMPLETION:

A New Focus for Community Colleges



For the vast majority of the roughly 8 million students enrolled in community colleges in the U.S., earning a certificate or associate degree after two or three years is little more than an elusive dream. Consider the numbers: Only 21 percent of students who enrolled in a community college in 2005 had earned such a credential three years later. Among black and Hispanic students, the figures were even more dismal: 12 and 16 percent, respectively.

"Traditionally, community colleges have focused heavily on providing access to students, especially those who have been underrepresented on college campuses," says Kathy Bracco, Senior Policy Analyst at WestEd. "And, while that's been great, it is increasingly clear that an emphasis on access alone is not enough and that we also need to be more focused on supporting students so that they *complete* their intended plans, such as earning a certificate or degree."

Completion by Design (CBD), a five-year, \$35-million project funded by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, aims to increase the odds that community college students — who constitute nearly half of all U.S. undergraduates — complete a program of study. Accomplishing this may require revamping the way community colleges operate. Andrea Venezia, a WestEd Project Director, describes CBD as engaging colleges in "systemic and structural change" around policies and practices on everything from developmental education and advising to program requirements and costs. "CBD colleges are redesigning the core of what students experience, including their programs of study and student supports," she says.

MULTIPLE POINTS TO GO OFF TRACK

Bracco notes that there is no one-size-fits-all approach to boosting community college completion rates. Instead,

each individual CBD college is designing and implementing its own "completion pathway," a set of policies, practices, and programs addressing the specific reasons why more of its students are not graduating. "The reasons differ from college to college and system to system," says Bracco, "and you have to look at your own context and determine where you can make the greatest impact."

One of CBD's early steps was to create an online Knowledge Center — <http://knowledgecenter.completionbydesign.org> — a database of relevant research materials and tools. The Knowledge Center houses research-based materials and tools from across the field, including from a group of organizations called the National Assistance Team, charged with providing technical assistance for CBD colleges.

WestEd oversees the Knowledge Center and has contributed publications such as the "Changing Course" planning guide and planning tool that provide information about CBD's main principles, examples of reforms that meet those principles, and self-reflection questions to help colleges develop and implement reforms.

The planning guide, "Changing Course: A Guide to Increasing Student Completion in Community Colleges," notes that there are several points in students' college careers at which they are most likely to be "slowed



down or sidetracked.” The first is their initial semester on campus, when due to poor academic preparation many students are placed in developmental, or remedial, education classes.

“They can get easily discouraged,” says Bracco, pointing out that according to the research, “having to take two or more courses in developmental education significantly reduces the likelihood that students will complete a course of study.” Even many students who don’t require developmental education or who manage to successfully complete it sometimes get tripped up by the next hurdle: so-called “gatekeeper” courses such as entry-level English and math.

Bracco points out that most community college students are older, have greater financial need, and are more likely to be juggling classes, jobs, and family obligations than their peers at four-year institutions. As a result, it’s not uncommon for even those students more than halfway through a program to drop out of school because of the “complexities of their lives.” Yet another problem: long waiting lists for required classes. “That means delays, that it’s going to take students longer to finish school,” she says. “And we know that the longer it takes, the less likely they are to do so.”

A FRAMEWORK AND PRINCIPLES TO PLAN FOR SUCCESS

CBD’s Changing Course Guide includes a Loss and Momentum Framework, developed by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, that spells out these and other situations likely to derail community college students

and offers ideas on how they can be counteracted. The colleges have been asked to use the framework to help them determine when and why they were most likely to lose students and to specify, in their implementation plans, steps they might take to help students maintain momentum.

Guiding their efforts are CBD’s “Design Pathway Principles,” developed by the Gates Foundation, WestEd, the Community College Research Center, and the Research & Planning Group for California Community Colleges (RP Group). Drawn from research, practice, and the colleges’ own experiences during the project’s planning phase, the principles call on community colleges to:

- » Accelerate students’ entry into coherent, sequential programs of study by establishing clear program prerequisites, eliminating nonessential requirements, and ensuring that student progress is aligned with learning outcomes and field competencies
- » Minimize the time it takes to get students college-ready by helping them avoid developmental education or complete such requirements while they work simultaneously in college-level classes
- » Ensure that students understand exactly what they have to do to fulfill the requirements for a certificate or degree
- » Customize instruction, making it program-specific, relevant, experiential, and engaging
- » Integrate student support services, such as advising and study skills lessons, into the instructional program
- » Monitor student progress and provide feedback, using data to inform program planning and staff professional development

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- » Create monetary and nonmonetary incentives to motivate students
- » Increase the use of technology to customize instruction, monitor student progress, improve student motivation, and reduce costs

Through a competitive grant process, the Completion by Design initiative has chosen teams of community colleges in three states to receive technical assistance and funding to put the Design Pathway Principles in place. Located in Florida, North Carolina, and Ohio, the participating colleges have demonstrated interest in and the capacity to make innovative changes to boost their completion rates. They are working together in three state cadres that receive technical assistance from members of the National Assistance Team, which includes experts from a number of organizations, including WestEd, the Community College Research Center, the RP Group, Public Agenda, and Jobs for the Future.

According to Venezia, the wide scope of CBD — the fact that it is attempting to "change the community college experience across the board" — is what makes it most significant. She describes the effort as a huge challenge, and one that cannot be met with a "silver bullet" or "magic list." The solution, she says, involves "looking at all the different pieces and thinking about how you rework them to create a coherent whole, with the focus on students' experiences and supporting them through to completion."

She likens the process to ongoing attempts at systemic reform in K–12 education, where educators are struggling with issues such as "trying to figure out the key leverage

points, determining which aspects of change are leadership-driven and which are structural or can be changed in other ways, and identifying what's replicable, and in what context."

Although it is still early in the life of the project, and therefore impossible to draw definitive conclusions, Venezia urges others in the community college field to study the CBD Loss and Momentum Framework and Design Pathway Principles, which are discussed in great detail in the "Changing Course" guide and planning tool, both available online from the Knowledge Center website and from WestEd.org.

"The focus on systemic redesign, integrating academics and student supports, creating coherent programs of study with developmental education as an onramp into those programs, creating opportunities for students to take compressed or accelerated developmental education, and contextualizing coursework — those are all reforms that other colleges can take away from CBD's work so far and apply to their own situation," she says.

While many colleges across the country are experimenting with such reforms, CBD is unique in trying to knit all of those elements together as it redesigns the college experience for students.



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