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February 2, 2012

Multiyear Study of Community-College Practices Asks: What Helps Students Graduate?

By Jennifer Gonzalez

Community colleges are brimming with programs and policies designed to help students complete their studies. Practices like requiring orientation and establishing early-academic-warning systems have sprouted since 2009, when President Obama announced that he wanted to make the United States the best-educated country in the world by 2020.

Now the questions for the nation's community colleges are: Which of the practices work and why? And perhaps most important, how do colleges expand them to cover all students?

A new, multiyear project led by the Center for Community College Student Engagement will attempt to get some answers. The research organization plans to analyze data from four different but related surveys and produce reports annually for the next three years. The surveys represent responses from the perspective of entering and experienced students, faculty members, and institutions.

Kay M. McClenney, the center's director and a senior lecturer in the Community College Leadership Program at the University of Texas at Austin, says the project will allow community colleges to make more-informed decisions about how they spend money and about the type of policies and programs they want to emphasize.

The [first of three reports](#), "A Matter of Degrees: Promising Practices for Community College Student Success" was released last week. It draws attention to 13 strategies for increasing retention and graduation rates, including fast-tracking remedial education, providing students with experiential learning, and requiring students to attend orientation.

The strategies specified in the report are not new. In fact, many of them can be found at two-year colleges right now. But how well those strategies are working to help students stay in college and graduate is another matter. The report found peculiarities among responses on similar topics, suggesting a disconnect between institutions and students, while also raising questions about how committed institutions are to their own policies and programs.

For example, 74 percent of students said they were required to take academic-placement tests, but only 28 percent said they used materials or resources provided by the college to prepare for those tests. While 44 percent of participating colleges report offering some sort of test preparation, only 13 percent make test preparation mandatory, the report said.

Also, 42 percent of part-time students and 19 percent of full-time students work more than 30 hours per week. More than half care for dependents. But only 26 percent of entering students reported that a college staff member counseled them about how many courses to take while balancing commitments outside of class.

Colleges need to figure out a way to better align their programs and policies with the needs and realities of their students, Ms. McClenney says. The report found a sizable gap between the percentage of students who plan to graduate and those who actually do, suggesting that what colleges think works may not be helping retain and graduate students. In fact, fewer than half (45 percent) of entering community-college students actually graduate with either a certificate or associate degree within six years after enrolling at an institution, according to the report.

"Colleges all over the country need to have serious conversations about their mission," she says. "It may mean thinking about who we are going to serve and who we say no to."

Requiring Success

This is the first time that the research organization has analyzed data from four surveys and combined the results into a multiyear project. The responses came from the Community College Survey of Student Engagement, the Survey of Entering Student Engagement, the Community College Faculty Survey of Student Engagement, and the newly created Community College Institutional Survey.

Many of the practices outlined in the new report work well, it says, but institutions weaken their effectiveness by not making them mandatory. Bringing effective programs to scale is imperative to improving college-completion rates among students, Ms. McClenney says.

A major stumbling block for community-college students is remedial education. Many students languish in those reading, writing, or math classes and eventually drop out, curtailing their transfer or graduation plans. The problem is especially acute among minorities and low-income students.

But the report says that among institutions that have accelerated or fast-tracked remedial courses, only 13 percent require students to enroll in those courses. That's a missed opportunity, because earlier

research suggests that students who take those intensive classes perform equally as well as, or better than, students in traditional remedial education.

The report found similar results regarding orientation services, which include providing students with information on navigating the library and finding support services such as academic and mental-health counseling. Previous research shows that participation in orientation leads to greater use of support services and improved retention of at-risk students, the report says. However, among colleges that offer orientation programs, only 38 percent report that they require it for all first-time students.

Some institutions do require students to participate in specific programs—and they've seen positive results. For instance, Brazosport College, in Lake Jackson, Tex., began to require first-time students to take a student-success course in 2007. It teaches time-management skills and proper study habits. As a result, the fall-to-spring retention rate for students who completed the course jumped to 89 percent, compared with the baseline rate of 66 percent. Those students passed remedial courses at a higher rate than before, and as a result were more likely to stay enrolled in college, the report says.


Scaling up programs at community colleges continues to be a challenge, especially because of financial constraints. That has led to what the report calls "pockets of success rather than widespread improvement." Community colleges around the country are stuck and need to find a way to "re-engineer the college experience," Ms. McClenney says, from one that is seen as exceptional for some students to one that becomes typical for all students.

"That is where the ingenuity needs to come in," she says. "Scaling up usually means having to cut something else. Colleges need to have the courage to do that."

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3224243

3 days ago

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The Chronicle of Higher Education

The best way to help a student graduate is to admit only students who are college-ready and motivated. Students who need remediation or are late admits/enrolls fail to be retained at much higher rates. Studies also show that if willing and able students are able to meet 50% of their financial needs either via savings or scholarships, they are retained at a higher rate than those who have to fund their education completely via loans.

21 people liked this. Like Reply**whynotevolve** 3 days ago in reply to 3224243

3224243- I thought one of the major missions of community college is to offer education to those that may not be prepared for college. How do you screen incoming students as being 'college-ready'? Grades? Test scores? Essays? This is what keeps these students out of other schools. It may be true that people who are not 'college-ready' (how ever you measure that) are retained at lower rates, but the point is that some of them ARE retained. Many of these students are in very hard financial situations, this is the motivation to get an education. Having them fund half of their education out of pocket (which is not the case at 4 year institutions) would be enough to keep them from pursuing anything. Maybe I am missing something, but it sounds like you are blaming the student population for the issues at CCs. I think that there can be changes made at the institution itself to better prepare and retain students that are being enrolled.

29 people liked this. Like Reply**paheidi** 3 days ago in reply to whynotevolve

Preparing underprepared students is true about ccs to some degree, but you can't spend the first two years of college providing a high school education and then expect the student to succeed at the next level. They will remain deficient. Many enter cc for financial reasons rather than because of academic deficiencies, spending less for the first 2 years so that they can better afford the next 2-3. Won't they lose out when CCs dummy-down courses to focus on those with deficiencies? Yes, they will and do.

20 people liked this. Like Reply**whynotevolve** 3 days ago in reply to paheidi

I am not sure that dummy-down courses are a solution that anyone is offering. What about additional support to help under-prepared students? Or, better yet, support that would benefit all students such as orientation, providing or requiring preparation for placement tests, intensive remedial classes. These are what the article suggests, and I tend to agree.

7 people liked this. Like**scottcatledge** 2 days ago in reply to paheidi

Community colleges traditionally serve three functions: they provide close-by, less expensive freshman and sophomore courses; business and skilled trade courses, and remedial courses. If one passes the freshman and sophomore level remedial courses, in English and math, one should have acquired the equivalent knowledge and skills of a freshman and sophomore. It may take more CC-level courses to do so, but it is both a lie and a theft unless the students can end up with the equivalent skills and knowledge that the university would have provided in freshman and sophomore Eng and math courses. I was erroneously placed into a non-credit remedial class in English at my university. I have often blessed my advisor for his carelessness (my English test scores warranted advanced placement) because my remedial class in English gave me a better handle on English composition than my three required English comp courses.

Dumbed-down courses are dishonest: remedial ones can be excellent adjuncts but very replacements--Professor Eubanks was an unusual professor indeed.

1 person liked this. Like**Socratease2** 2 days ago in reply to paheidi



Well, then, that just pushes this conversation back to the K-12 level, that is where the "deficiencies" happen. If the K-12 system fails students what choice do community colleges have except to remediate that? We can't just focus on one part of the system, the whole chain needs an overhaul.

8 people liked this. Like



chattahoochee 1 day ago in reply to paheidi

Let me guess, paheidi. You do not work with community college students. You read about them.

Like



sciinstructor 3 days ago in reply to 3224243

"Studies also show that if willing and able students are able to meet 50% of their financial needs either via savings or scholarships, they are retained at a higher rate than those who have to fund their education completely via loans."

What studies? Can you provide references/links?

6 people liked this. Like Reply



davidbinder 3 days ago in reply to sciinstructor

The study discussed in the article ("A Matter of Degrees: Promising Practices for Community College Student Success") is the first of an intended 3 study series and is available at <http://www.ccsse.org/>. It can be downloaded as an Adobe Acrobat file.

5 people liked this. Like Reply



chattahoochee 1 day ago in reply to sciinstructor

sciinstructor: Don't you know that 61% of statistics are made up on the spot?Haha.

Like Reply



Socratease2 2 days ago in reply to 3224243

That is not a solution it is a class war. Why not test babies and based on some IQ measure track them into technical programs or college-bound programs. Or just let white people into college, perhaps that is a consideration. And how are you going to test "motivation" and who is going to pay for that testing? You want to take the people with the least money/resources and the worst academic backgrounds and then exclude them from college, prevent them from rising up in society, furthering their education, helping their families? Unbelievable. Yeah, let's take people who have been kicked and beaten down by societies' inequalities, racism, etc. and hurt them some more. Great idea.

5 people liked this. Like Reply



indiaone 3 days ago

A "collaborative effort" to address the graduation rate has been developed by the Campus Community Partnership Foundation in Georgia. This program called the "Mentor Walk" engages college students, school children, parents and the community. It places an emphasis for children to complete their education by exposing them to a "school is cool" environment.

2 people liked this. Like Reply

**nfmorg** 3 days ago

Community college faculty are overwhelmingly (50% to 80%) adjunct/contingent, the majority part-time. The faculty most likely to be teaching remedial classes get the least institutional support and are least likely to be consulted about what works and doesn't work for students, as last year's Achieving the Dream evaluation noted. Faculty working conditions are student learning conditions.

Reports such as these must include better data about the contingent faculty working on these campuses and the degree to which these faculty get the support they need to do their jobs to the best of their abilities.

When contingent faculty are able to teach effectively at community colleges, it is usually in spite of, not because of, the available institutional support. This suggests that these faculty are a tremendous resource but constantly in danger of burning out or moving on. Colleges should be investing in them rather than exploiting them. Administrators and faculty need to work together (rather than continuing to blame each other) and make the case to policymakers and the public for better investment in faculty.

36 people liked this. Like Reply**11239383** 3 days ago

It is ever so interesting that we have reached a stage where technical reports outweigh or have greater influence than scholarly work appearing in high impact journals that required rigorous peer review.

2 people liked this. Like Reply**badger74** 3 days ago *in reply to 11239383*

People have learned that most academics share a particular political point of view and those outside that set are not welcome. Most social/educational research is seen as designed to reach a pre-determined conclusion.

6 people liked this. Like Reply**davidbinder** 3 days ago *in reply to 11239383*

This particular study was done at the University of Texas, Austin, through its Center for Community College Student Engagement and is funded by grants from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, Houston Endowment Inc., Lumina Foundation for Education, and MetLife Foundation.

2 people liked this. Like Reply**Babagranny** 3 days ago

Commenter 3224243 is among those who are certain that the problem is the students. If you don't admit people who aren't ready for college work, then you will cut the failure rate to nothing. The premise is correct if that failure only refers to college but it ignores the problem that our country needs more people who have actually completed college work at least through a two-year degree, and leaving the "bottom" half out of college also will leave the "bottom" half out of the living wages. Exclusivity is not an option any more. There are solutions, but they are not easy or cheap.

12 people liked this. Like Reply**Steve Mahoney** 3 days ago

Great insight.

3 people liked this. Like Reply**rjw74** 3 days ago

Our Community Colleges have suffered from the worst case scenario of mission creep. Well-intentioned but poorly conceived, the systems need to be rebooted starting with a far more collaborative approach engaging both full-time and adjunct faculty with administrators to recast the mission into down-scaled, workable constructs that can then be subject to thoughtful strategic planning and quality control measures.

Kay McClenney's statements: "Colleges all over the country need to have serious conversations about their mission," and that "It may mean thinking about who we are going to serve and who we say no to", in conjunction with the observation that "many of the practices outlined in the new report work well, but institutions weaken their effectiveness by not making them mandatory" are well stated as a call to action.

8 people liked this. Like Reply



yellow1 2 days ago *in reply to rjw74*

It has been many years now, but the two year college I work for used to accept students with GED in progress/no high school transcript. To me, this was a mistake, and I am glad we have not done so in about 10 years. Luckily, my college has GED and Adult Ed/Literacy programs. Students are "accepted" into these programs, not for credit/no financial aid. In my opinion, forcing two year students to have a GED in hand or high school transcript in hand before entry has helped. It has at least given direction.

It has not solved our issues with Learning Support, but many our students in LS classes are returning to college after being laid off or after raising children. I don't expect someone who hasn't been to school in 10-30 years to test directly into College Algebra. Those students who just finished high school who need LS classes pose a very different set of challenges and questions about the lack of college readiness taught in K-12.

1 person liked this. Like Reply



Paul Wangsvick 3 days ago

Much like a failing student that comes up to me before the last week of class asking what they could do to earn a passing grade, my answer would equally apply to the question of graduating, too: regularly showing up to class would be a good start.

5 people liked this. Like Reply



archman 3 days ago

Another vote for improving teaching conditions at 2-year schools. These schools are losing funding, gaining students, and relying more and more heavily on adjunct instructors. Restoring full time faculty ratios and capping classroom size and faculty teaching loads is a no-brainer. Unfortunately, our leaders still strive to find "magic bullets" that promise quick and cheap solutions. The majority of these panaceas fail to ever materialize, and end up costing us more in the long run.

6 people liked this. Like Reply



scottcatledge 2 days ago *in reply to archman*

One magic bullet that has been proposed is the elimination of cell-phones from the classroom; another is basing the quizzes and examination on the lectures and reading assignments. Both sound excellent; however, I have used only the latter: the cell phone was after my active career.

2 people liked this. Like Reply



hvaline 2 days ago

Required placements tests are not enough. We need to develop better placement tests in order to ensure accurate assessment. True or false/objective tests are not a good indication of students' competency on a subject matter. Many students score high in placement tests because they are good at taking tests, but often they cannot put a complete sentence together. The combination of support/remediation and better tests may produce better outcomes.

2 people liked this. Like Reply**teachfordamasses** 2 days ago

I strongly suspect that all of these data are correlational and also that the evaluation of support/orientation programs may delete students who fail to complete the program (standard practice in educational assessment). The students who choose to and do attend support programs are the same students who succeed in college...no surprise and NOT evidence that the program was the cause of the success. The critical variables are usually within-student characteristics that jointly predict attending/finishing both support services and classes.

And why don't advisors discuss work/course loads? Two reasons: 1) they are under major direct pressure to make students take heavier loads to get them through faster (in institution just upped the maximum number of hours, despite have a commuter clientele who almost all work >30 hours) and 2) no one dares to counter the statement (appearing several times in this thread) that students are working because they have to.

Perhaps they DO have to, in which case they should not be full-time students. But this is a forbidden area of inquiry, as it runs the danger of appearing to disadvantage poor students. How unfeeling we are to suggest that a student either reduce credit hours or reduce work hours...don't we understand the reality of the students' situations (needing both degree and income immediately)? We are not naive about this; we are specifically discouraged from addressing this issue, in the (short-sighted) interest of increasing throughput.

2 people liked this. Like Reply**thehotrod416** 2 days ago

Try to think of it this way – if a bright, creative, and energetic new faculty member were to look at the work they were doing on campus and decided to change career paths and seek a new direction, they might be better off for having done so, but we might not. Now change the words “faculty member”, to “student”.

Like Reply**John Frary** 2 days ago

When I was hired for an administrative job at Middlesex County College (Edison, NJ) in 1972 one of my duties was to keep abreast of discussions about how to reduce the 40% attrition rate. The discussion was till going on when I retired in 2004. By that time the 32 years of discussion, articles, books, and projects had reduced the attrition rate to 40%. The biggest change? The most popular solution in the 1970s was to get the students to commit to a major; when I retired the most popular solution seemed to be to get them into L.A. General.

In the interim I often asked older students coming back after various intervals, what their institution could have done to retain them. All told me that they simply weren't ready at the younger age.

This explanation should at least be considered.

Like Reply**Iaran8** 1 day ago

Scaling up usually means having to cut something else. Colleges need to have the courage to do that.


Like Reply**chattahoochee** 1 day ago

Community colleges are open admissions institutions. We cannot admit only students who are college-ready and motivated. Our mission is to serve our respective communities, not to become the Harvard or Stanford of our area. So we seek to improve the ways we serve students who, in many cases, cannot be admitted to selective colleges or universities. And we seek to improve our services and our students' odds of success AND with less money than selective colleges or universities. Quite a challenge.

2 people liked this.

Like

Reply



Julie Ann Brown

5 minutes ago

Community colleges create winners. Universities select them.

Like

Reply