

Perspectives

Community College
Leadership for the
21st Century

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Community colleges are the most likely sector of higher education to expand, especially among low-income and minority populations, but they cannot achieve our national goals unless significant reforms are adopted to improve student achievement.

- Robert G. Templin

[As] we search for ways to improve U.S. postsecondary outcomes, open access is almost never questioned as a policy that brings anything but opportunity and positivity to students' lives.

- Juliet Lilledahl Scherer
Mirra Leigh Anson

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Balancing Access & Completion: Really, Did You Just Say That?

Allen Goben, EdD

President, Tarrant County College District
Northeast Campus, Hurst, Texas

A handful of years back, a colleague said to me proudly, "I start all of my classes by telling students that half of them won't make it to the end of the semester." I just cringed. Having worked in education for nearly 30 years, it still fills me with disbelief when I hear these comments. As we experience an increased focus on completion amidst our time-honored tradition of open access and hard-earned respect for academic excellence, it causes some people pause. Many do not see how these concepts can coexist without simply watering down the curriculum and passing everyone through. I beg to differ. It can be done, and concepts of success and access are wholly compatible.

I wanted to say so many things to my colleague and ask him how he could be so callous, so arrogant. I wanted to ask him if he even knew the purpose or intent of American community colleges, to democratize education and empower our country at the personal, family, community, and societal levels. Instead, my response was something along the lines of, "Really? Don't you enjoy the challenge of teaching a broad range of students and helping them learn?" Or something like that – it was really a bit of a blur as my emotions surged. As the college's president, I wondered how he would like it if I started every semester by telling the employees that half of them wouldn't make it to the end of the semester. Would that make me a great leader? If only I could just lead the best and brightest of employees, surely we would get better results. Of course this is not true, nor would I ever do such a thing. A good leader is just like a good teacher, bringing everyone along and helping the entire group learn and transform. It doesn't take much teaching talent to teach only the top half of the class and disregard the rest. Anyone with a very basic level of classroom management could do that. Great teachers are like great leaders; they bring everyone along.

A culture where thinking that "survival of the fittest" strategies are somehow appropriate as a measure of "good" teaching is problematic at best, and devastatingly counter-productive at the worst. Great teachers know how to reach learners and ignite a passion for learning. The very best teachers know how to *uniquely* ignite a passion for learning in each *unique* learner. My friend and colleague Dr. Sandy Shugart likes to say that, "Under the right circumstances, anyone can learn anything." It is our job in community colleges to co-create those right circumstances with each learner. I have shamelessly stolen another of Sandy and the Valencia College team's mantras that the secret formula is: High Expectations + High Support = Learner Success.

You see, my colleague who promised half the class that they wouldn't finish understood only about half of his job. He understood *High Expectations*. He just didn't

comprehend that he had arguably THE most important role in providing *High Support*. Perhaps he thought that was someone else's job. Maybe he envisioned a world where all students simply provided their own support, motivation, and grit. Personally, I have never been to that place in the universe. Here in the reality of daily life at an American community college, we teach all kinds of learners. Some are ridiculously talented. Others are ridiculously challenged. In either case, and in all cases in between, we help people learn and grow. We help learners uncover aspects inside themselves they never knew were there, and we help transform their lives. Educators are like magicians – we create magical moments of transformational learning in people, and their lives are never the same again. You can't do that if you scare them all out of your classroom at the start of the semester to make it easier to teach. *High Expectations are only half of the equation.*

Really, what is the point of open door access if success and completion do not follow?

More than ever, today's students need *High Support* to achieve those justifiably *High Expectations*. That's when the formula works. Really, what is the point of open door access if success and completion do not follow? Isn't limiting success just limiting access in a different way? And, if this is so, then are we true to the intent of American community colleges – that of democratizing education? We can have both initial access along with ongoing access fueled by success. We are that talented. However, we have to understand our students better and adapt a few typical practices so a better model emerges.

Thirty years ago I was a community college student on a wing and a prayer – and very little budget or understanding of the higher education bureaucracy. My high school grades and ACT score were excellent. I had my choice of colleges, and selected a small, private liberal arts school to study and play football. Then my car engine blew up. Do you know the rest of the story? It's so common among our students as to be blasé – first generation college student has no money and no idea how to "go to college." A financial catastrophe occurs, then he decides he can afford the local community college. This student has no idea what kind of real quality or nurturing environment he will encounter (*though it was all that*). He just knows it is attainable to enroll and might someday lead to a better life. He does not quite know what to major in, though he generally understands the concept. Credit hours? What are those? He thinks, "You mean if I sign up

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EMERGING LEADERS' PERSPECTIVES

The AACC asserts that our community colleges “have an obligation to meet the [completion] challenge while holding firmly to traditional values of access, opportunity, and quality.” Yet today’s colleges are forced to juggle the myriad challenges to this goal, including a growing focus on access and completion, a drive to ensure students rise to high expectations around learning outcomes, and changing learning models that are forcing adaptations at the very core of community college work. We posed the following question to emerging and national leaders. Their answers appear below:

Heidi Athey, MEd

Completion Project Manager
Cuyahoga Community College
Cleveland, Ohio

Balancing Access & Completion: Food for thought.

As community colleges strive to increase the number of students that complete a certificate or degree, maintaining a commitment to access may be a challenge. However, by providing a new kind of service, I believe we can keep our doors open and help more students to reach graduation. Perhaps, we can gain inspiration from an unlikely source.

Clear Pathways. Think of your favorite restaurant. You return there because you like the menu, you know what to expect. On the contrary, students enroll at our colleges and are unsure of when and if they will ever graduate. Choosing a program is confusing. With a myriad of options offered at the community college, we should be making it easy for students to make a choice and stick to a plan. By creating distinct pathways, students can easily navigate our enormous menu of choices.

Extending timely, friendly, and helpful customer service is what will keep students retained and on path to graduation.

Clear Outcomes. During a New Student Orientation last year, I was talking with a student about her major. She told me she wanted to be a nurse because she would make “a lot of money”. As the conversation about her career progressed, she told me that she was afraid of blood. She faints at the sight. I think of this conversation often. There is something we need to be doing to help students not only choose the right career path, but also know exactly what they will be doing once they graduate. Perhaps, we can do a better job of illustrating what the future looks like for our students. Like a restaurant menu – they have pictures of the food and pages full of tantalizing descriptions. As a patron, you can envision yourself with a particular meal. You follow through and place an order.

Anticipating Student Needs. Back to my restaurant, the staff is the best. My water is filled before it is empty, extra napkins are brought to the table just in case, and I get the sense that they love what they do. This premise works well in higher education. By aligning cross-functional campus teams to support students and integrating support services, we can not only deliver just in time service, but also make students feel cared for. Often times, our services can be cumbersome and with time at a deficit for many students, it can be difficult to provide the support they need. Extending timely, friendly, and helpful customer service is what will keep students retained and on path to graduation.

QUESTION OF THE MONTH:

What strategies might college leaders adopt to balance the mission of open door access with the goal of completion?

Tracy Dace, MA

Assistant Professor,
English and Developmental Reading
Parkland College, Champaign, Illinois

Investing focused energy in a balance between open access and college completion is all-important to the future of community colleges. One of the most challenging issues in our American educational system is the high rate of underprepared students entering college classrooms. Community colleges are oases of educational opportunities, especially for

under-represented students who also are often under-resourced. Hundreds of thousands of these “under” students actualize their dreams of attending college due to the community college’s commitment to provide open access. Unfortunately, many of these underprepared and under-resourced students do not complete degree programs due to a number of obstacles, such as inadequate college preparation or low self-efficacy.

The myriad challenges community colleges face are interconnected with similar challenges K-12 public schools grapple with daily. Implementing seamless educational systems, such as P-16 or cradle to career councils, is a promising model of system-level collaboration, educational reform, and data sharing to impact the challenges of poor academic performance and college readiness. Community college and public school leaders should form collaborative P-16 councils within their local communities. These local councils would serve in advisory roles and strengthen communication, measuring progression toward college success along the P-16 continuum, initially through data - driven methods.

It is essential to include community leaders from the ground floor up –government, faith-based, workforce, social services, etc. – in order to construct successful collaborative completion strategies. Closing the communication and strategic planning gaps can improve postsecondary outcomes. However, formation of such councils and realizing significant outcomes involves relatively enormous wait times. In contrast, a more radical approach which could yield more immediate results involves the dismantling of developmental education courses with the shifting of funds, resources, and efforts towards targeted interventions. For example, targeted interventions may include specialized first-year experience classes for non-traditional students, emergency assistance funds for students, pre-college programs for under-represented students, and curriculum re-design to embed academic skills-building in first-year courses. In short, these efforts can incorporate intensive educational planning with a focus on students’ strengths and reduce the stigma of remediation and multiple levels of developmental educational completion.

Finally, focused energy is needed to maintain the community college’s open door mission and achieve the critical goal of higher completion rates. Community college leaders working collectively with imagination can yield concrete strategies. Most important, leaders situating the conversation within a social-justice leadership framework would ensure that “under” students will have both access and the opportunity to complete.

Heidi Athey serves as the Completion Project Manager at Cuyahoga Community College in Cleveland, Ohio. Heidi’s expertise lies in student success and completion initiatives, earning the League of Innovation’s, 2013 Innovation of the Year Award, for her contributions to Cuyahoga Community College’s Success Week programming. Currently, she is a student in the DCCL program at Ferris State University and earned her Masters of Education in Adult Learning and Development at Cleveland State University.



Tracy D. Dace is an Assistant Professor at Parkland College, teaching developmental reading and English courses. He is an emerging leader-activist who builds bridges between campus and community to achieve deeper community impact. He is designing an educational justice initiative, DREAAM House, a school to college pipeline program for at-risk African American boys. Tracy earned his MA at the University of Mississippi and is a doctoral student in the FSU DCCL Program.



NATIONAL LEADER PERSPECTIVE

The AACC asserts that our community colleges “have an obligation to meet the [completion] challenge while holding firmly to traditional values of access, opportunity, and quality.” Yet today’s colleges are forced to juggle the myriad challenges to this goal, including a growing focus on access and completion, a drive to ensure students rise to high expectations around learning outcomes, and changing learning models that are forcing adaptations at the very core of community college work. We posed the following question to emerging and national leaders. Their answers appear below:

Brian Durham, MA

Deputy Director of Academic Affairs
Illinois Community College Board
Springfield, Illinois

The focus on college completion that now pervades all that we do in higher education requires that we work more vigorously than ever to protect the democratic, open-access mission of community colleges. Though there are many strategies that should be considered to maintain this focus, in this brief piece I offer three that I believe are essential to an equity-focused completion agenda that respects the core value of open access. First, a focus on disaggregated data that examines the completion of the hardest-to-serve populations, including minorities, first generation students, low-income students, and others, through an equity lens, is foundational. Second, qualitative student engagement and a critical examination of student services are important elements to an equity focus. Finally, no real reform is possible without authentic faculty engagement.

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Analyzing Completion Data Through an Equity Lens. The use of student-centered disaggregated data absolutely must be an institutional priority for the adoption and implementation of an equity-focused approach to the completion agenda. This strategy also must occur beyond the requirements of policy initiatives and funder requirements, of which there is certainly no shortage. Instead, this stance should include the examination and use of disaggregated data amongst core institutional and academic functions—strategic planning, curriculum committees, program development and review, and more. The data cannot consist solely of the enrollment data that has driven higher education decision-making for decades; while important, it is only part of the picture.

Disaggregated short-term milestones and program specific outcomes, alongside the typical completion metrics like graduation rate and retention, must also be considered. The cultivation amongst campus staff of the skills necessary to use that data effectively is a necessary component of this strategy. The data is most valuable when used to inform decisions and to incentivize change. Finally, progress must be measured explicitly. This measurement must be appropriate to the mission, the population, and the effort involved and it must transcend the typical completion metrics. Measurement strategies must acknowledge the core values of equity and open access in order for community colleges to effectively serve their core student population. By adopting this strategy, campus leaders can ensure equity is a central part of the completion conversation.

Student Engagement and Services. By engaging historically underrepresented populations directly through qualitative methodologies (e.g. focus groups, interviews, etc.), institutions can learn a considerable amount about what these students experience as barriers to academic success, and in turn, work to address them. This engagement should accompany profound changes in the methods by which services are

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delivered to students, and an acknowledgement of the fact that certain student populations may respond to institutional outreach and advising in different ways, or rely on different networks for information. This may require that college advising offices invest in advisors, either through hiring or staff development, with the requisite cultural competencies to better assess the needs of diverse students and fully engage in cross-cultural discussions about student success, both with students and colleagues. In some cases, student services departments might need to operate more

like organizations that offer – and seek out – a multitude of services beyond those that are typical. Overall, an individualized approach to student need is necessary.

Authentic Faculty Engagement. Administrators are often guilty of implementing reform strategies without considering faculty input early enough in the process. Engaging faculty early in an institution’s equity-focused completion efforts will help ensure educational quality as well as faculty buy-in and satisfaction, and ensure that those who have the most interaction with students value and lead the conversation about equity and access. This will promote cultural competency among the faculty and raise the value of those that already exhibit such competencies. Absent this, faculty may view any reform efforts as compromising their academic freedom and curricular independence, or as a watering down of standards. Any change strategy requires explicit and early faculty engagement.

Success lies in adopting more than a philosophical acknowledgement of the importance of equity and open access in the complex space of the completion agenda. Success requires action. Fortunately, institutions do not need to start from scratch. Multiple equity-focused tools exist that can help move an institution to action. Examples include Illinois’ own Pathways to Results work, the work of the Center for Urban Education, the National Alliance for Partnerships in Equity, and tools designed by the Center for Law and Social Policy, just to name a few. Ultimately, protecting access in the completion environment requires recognition that student success goals are essential, but that equity considerations must be a part of how these goals are developed.

Success lies in adopting more than a philosophical acknowledgement of the importance of equity and open access in the complex space of the completion agenda.



Brian Durham is the Deputy Director for Academic Affairs at the Illinois Community College Board (ICCB), where he has served for nearly 15 years. In his current role, he has spearheaded the ICCB’s remedial reform agenda, worked to implement quality career pathways for students, engaged Illinois’ universities to assure better articulation for community college students, and expanded engagement with the K-12 sector. He holds an MA from Southern Illinois University at Carbondale and is graduating with an EdD from the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign in May, 2016.



QUICK TAKES
Highlights
from the Field

Community Colleges and the Access Effect: Why Open Admissions Suppresses Achievement

By Juliet Lilledahl Scherer and Mirra Leigh Anson

The authors of this book argue that the open-door policy continues to accomplish positive outcomes for some students while at the same time, delivers devastating injuries to others. They urge a national conversation about the link between sufficient academic preparation and postsecondary completion, and suggest that programs be developed and offered to meet diverse student needs. Access the book here: <http://amzn.to/1w3Ejvt>

Expanded Pathways for Access and Success

by Hobsons, AASA, & AACC

This report from a 2015 convening of community colleges leaders and k-12 administrators stresses the necessity for k-12 and community colleges to work more closely together to help students graduate from high school college-ready, and then to succeed in college. Case studies highlight best practices and success stories to advance effective practice in bridging K-12 and higher education. Read the complete study here: <http://bit.ly/1olwpxX>



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Balancing Access & Completion: Really, Did You Just Say That? (continued from page 1)

for these five classes, you consider 15 hours a full load? I can work 15 hours easily and then about 25-35 more at work to make ends meet. This will be a piece of cake." He didn't study much in high school to get those good grades. I could go on and on. Does this sound familiar?

Now in my own story, I was just too stubborn to listen to pompous and self-righteous faculty members who said half of us wouldn't make it. I tuned in to caring and supportive faculty members who challenged me academically but were also cheerleaders, and I defied the others. How dare they say many of us wouldn't make it? I would show them. Then the reality of school and life hit. Studying for college was necessary after all, and it was hard work. When I backed off paid hours at my job, I ran out of funds. When I worked too many hours, my grades suffered. I was a college's worst "retention" nightmare, stopping out multiple semesters to make money, then get back in school. Finally, after far too much time plugging away, I earned a bachelor's degree after 150.5 credit hours. For non-educators reading this, that's a full extra year of unnecessary classes. There were no readily defined Pathways back then, at least not in liberal arts areas. There was no need to take 30 extra credit hours; I just did it because I didn't know any better. My goals were too nebulous, and my planning too vague. I had too many options of "cool" sounding classes and took them, sliding by well-meaning advisors who would rather not wrestle me to the ground to get me into classes that actually mattered for my goals. I am not proud of the meandering route I took to earn that credential, and take full responsibility for not making better decisions back then.

As family and friends who know me will attest, though, I am one of the most stubborn and resilient people you might meet. The student of "hard head" entered the school of "hard knocks" and eventually found a way to a meaningful credential. I earned another with a master's degree in school counseling, and finally a doctorate in educational administration. The funny part is, I was the lucky one. As so many other students fulfilled the prophecy of "half of you won't be here," I just kept coming back, because the supportive faculty and staff members let me know clearly that this was their expectation. They expected me to succeed even when I did not feel that I had it within myself and wanted to stop. They supported my efforts unselfishly, reminding me of resources and sharing their time and energy. That's education. It's what we do in community colleges when we do it right. We expect success, and we provide support so that students just can't fall through the cracks.

Why do we do it? Because we love learning and that transformational moment when someone will never be the same again and is better for it. However, we can't make those moments happen if we usher students to the "chicken exit" like a scary roller coaster, before they even get on the ride. Access and success are not some sort of juxtaposed agendas. They are one in the same, and the outcome is never so sweet as when a student finds his or her way through life starting at a community college. The outcome is never so wonderful as the displaced worker who finds employment; the mid-life person who "always wanted to go to college"; or the single mom with so much potential who finds her niche.

Author Ron Roth says that everything boils down to one of two things, Love or Fear. Negative emotions such as hate, anger, jealousy, and prejudice are just Fear in disguise. Positive emotions such as caring, nurturing, supporting, and honoring are Love-based. When I hear people beat the "erosion of quality" drum as they try

to battle "success/completion" efforts, without ever actually defining quality beyond a take-my-word-for-it statement, I hear Fear in disguise. This Fear is driven by an unreasoned and antiquated agenda among those who propose to create learning, but are unwilling or unable to learn themselves. It is Fear of a rapidly-changing world where colleges must respond faster than ever before and in ways previously unimagined. It is Fear that in creating something new, things we love will somehow be taken away. It is Fear.

Love and caring light the way to high achievement as students learn that expectations and support are equally high, and that everyone understands not only how to challenge them, but also how to help them rise to the challenges.

Then I hear voices of Love and support. Rigorous academic challenges are coupled with great planning and goal-setting support, outstanding instruction and instructional support, and tangible life-goal outcomes, including relevant careers and transfer options leading to other relevant careers. Love echoes through hallways, classrooms, labs, and even online learning environments as caring educators create learning magic. Love and caring light the way to high achievement as students learn that expectations and support are equally high, and that everyone understands not only how to challenge them, but also how to help them rise to the challenges.

We transform lives in community colleges – real lives. If you want to work or live in someplace other than the "real world," you need to go someplace else. Community colleges are the real world. We are the education and training part of the real world, and we know that the most important formula is not found in any one classroom. It is found in all of our classrooms.

Access + High Expectations + High Support = Success & Completion

Really, did I just say that? Yes I did, because somebody needed to.



Dr. Allen Goben is President at Tarrant County College District's Northeast Campus. Prior presidential work included service at Heartland Community College in Illinois, where he helped double the college foundation's endowment and created Heartland GPS: Guided Path to Success-- a framework for improved student planning and success. Dr. Goben also served as President of Hazard Community and Technical College (HCTC) in Kentucky. He was named to the 21st Century Commission on the Future of Community Colleges in 2011 by the AACC, complementing his service on AACC's Voluntary Framework of Accountability Steering Committee. In 2009, he was honored as a Distinguished Graduate at The University of Texas at Austin for doctoral and career work in community college leadership. Dr. Goben has devoted over twenty-five years to collaborative leadership and learning excellence as a faculty member, coach, college recruiter, counselor, and administrator. A first generation college student, Allen earned a master's degree in School Counseling from Drake University, and a doctoral degree in Educational Administration from The University of Texas at Austin.