This chapter examines why typical reforms at community colleges in recent years have not improved institutional graduation rates. It argues that substantially increasing college completion requires comprehensive institutional reform with a focus on measurable student success, an intentional and cohesive package of programmatic components, and a culture of evidence.

The Need for Comprehensive Reform: From Access to Completion

Thomas Bailey

Over the last few decades, the importance of a college education has grown both for society and for individuals. This is reflected in the large earnings gap between individuals with a high school degree and those with a post-secondary credential (Belfield & Bailey, 2011). However, most students who start in community colleges never complete a degree or certificate. This constitutes a failure for those students to achieve their goals and represents a loss of potential earning power and economic growth and activity for the economy as a whole. Although students experience earnings gains by accumulating credits without graduating, they get a significant additional increase upon completing a credential (Belfield & Bailey, 2011).

This chapter considers what types of reform and innovation are most likely to increase the chances that community college students will complete their credentials. It first discusses the shift from a reform focus on college access to one emphasizing college completion; it then reviews the barriers to improvement in college completion, arguing that community colleges have been organized to expand enrollment to a greater part of the population, but that organization is not well suited to promote completion of credentials. The chapter also reviews the types of reforms that have been introduced to improve completion and shows that these interventions have had limited effects. Significant improvements in college completion will require more comprehensive reforms that address the organizational barriers to student success. The editors of this volume have emphasized three elements of such reform: a focus on measurable student success, an intentional and cohesive package of programmatic components, and a culture of
evidence. In addition, to have an impact on college completion rates, reforms must be scaled to include most of the target student population, and they must address the entire student experience in college.

The Growing Focus on College Completion

Public higher education policy in the latter half of the 20th century was designed to open college to the large majority of the U.S. population. The Servicemen’s Readjustment Act of 1944 (also known as the GI Bill); the California Master Plan for Higher Education of 1960; the Higher Education Act of 1965, which established the Pell Grant; and the rapid growth of community colleges were all designed to make college accessible for all students. They focused on reducing the cost of college to the student and, in the case of community colleges, established open access, and flexible, convenient colleges in reasonable proximity to a large majority of the population, including especially groups traditionally underrepresented in postsecondary education. At the same time, technology and the characteristics of work were also changing, resulting in increasing demand for a more educated workforce. These factors contributed to increases in college enrollment, such that by the turn of the century, over 75% of high school graduates had attended some postsecondary institution by their mid-20s (author’s calculations using data from the Education Longitudinal Study of 2002, National Center for Education Statistics 2002).

But over the last 20 years, educators and policy makers have turned their attention to college completion. Although progress on enrollment cast community college performance in a positive light, the more recent focus on completion yields a much more negative image. In 2000, the U.S. Department of Education began publishing 3-year graduation rates for most colleges that tracked cohorts of first-time, full-time college students who started in community college. Graduation rates for many colleges were in the single digits and teens. The overall 3-year completion rate for community college students nationwide was 24% for the 2000 cohort and 20% for the 2010 cohort (National Center for Education Statistics, 2014, Table 326.20). Researchers, college representatives, and policy makers have criticized this rate as incomplete and misleading (Bailey, Jenkins, & Leinbach, 2005). But more comprehensive measures from the 1990s showed that less than 40% of entering community college students completed any degree or certificate from any college within 6 years (author’s calculation from the National Education Longitudinal Study of 1988, National Center for Education Statistics [1988]).

In response to low completion rates, educators, reformers, policy makers, and foundations called for a concerted effort to increase the number of individuals with college degrees and certificates, which has come to be called the “completion agenda.” The Obama administration, Lumina Foundation, and the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation all called for ambitious
increases in the number of college graduates by the middle of the 2020s (Bailey, 2012; Lumina Foundation, 2010). Many states have set goals designed to contribute proportionately to the national goals (Complete College America, 2015). In addition, the federal government and multiple foundations have funded extensive research and reform portfolios.

Barriers to College Completion

Students and colleges will need to overcome a number of challenges to achieve the ambitious goals of the completion agenda. Community college students tend to face many serious barriers to success: low-income students are significantly overrepresented in community colleges (Carnevale & Strohl, 2010) and most need to strengthen both academic and nonacademic skills.

Despite the substantial needs of their student populations, community colleges are given comparatively few resources. In 2011, public 2-year institutions spent about $8,100 (in 2011 dollars) per student; in contrast, institutions in the public master’s sector spent just over $12,000 (College Board, 2014, Figure 19A). Thus, the colleges whose students have the greatest needs have the fewest resources to address those needs.

In addition, community colleges are not well organized to promote completion. The features that have allowed community colleges to expand access may not be optimal to promote completion of programs that support deep student learning and that prepare students for success. Bailey, Jaggars, and Jenkins, 2015 refer to the traditional community college model as the “cafeteria” or “self-service” college. In this model, colleges provide many options and services, but students must find their own way through often complex or ill-defined programs. Such cafeteria organization creates problems in three areas: the structure of college-level programs, the intake process and student supports, and developmental education.

Structure of Programs. Community colleges are designed to facilitate enrollment for a heterogeneous student population with a wide variety of goals. Most offer an extensive array of courses and programs, and students have broad flexibility to decide when to enroll and at what intensity, what programs to pursue, and which courses to take within those programs. Students can easily stop out and presumably return to college when it is convenient. The potential for transfer to many different 4-year colleges further complicates students’ choices. Research in behavioral economics demonstrates that individuals do not do a good job of making decisions when faced with such large sets of complex and ill-defined choices (Bailey et al., 2015; Scott-Clayton, 2011).

Intake and Supports. With limited resources, community colleges are unable to provide comprehensive advising to all students to help them navigate these complex institutions. There are often many hundreds of students for every counselor or advisor. As a result, college intake and
advising often consist of a brief face-to-face or online orientation and a short meeting (not always mandatory) with an advisor, focused on registering for the first semester’s courses. Most colleges do not provide an organized process to help students form long-term goals and design an academic program to achieve those goals. Rather, students must recognize when they need help and seek it out on their own (Bailey et al., 2015; Grubb, 2006; Jaggars & Fletcher, 2014; Jaggars & Karp, Chapter 5 in this volume). Moreover, most colleges do not closely monitor students’ progress toward their goals or through programs.

Developmental Education. Students’ progress is often stalled by lengthy developmental course sequences. All community colleges assess students’ academic skills at entry and, based on these assessments, college staff advise the majority of students to enroll in developmental education courses (Bailey, Jeong, & Cho, 2010). Yet traditional developmental education is often not able to prepare students to succeed in college-level courses (Jaggars & Stacey, 2014). Most students do not complete their assigned sequences, and enrolling in developmental education courses does not, on average, increase the probability that students will complete college-level courses or achieve other desired outcomes (Bailey, Jaggars, & Scott-Clayton, 2013).

In short, community college students face many barriers to completion, and the funding, structure, and organization of the colleges make it difficult to help students overcome those barriers. These issues will have to be addressed if colleges are to increase their completion rates and overall performance substantially.

The Limitations of Traditional Reform

During the last 2 decades, community colleges have attempted many reforms to improve student success (Bailey & Morest, 2006). The Achieving the Dream: Community Colleges Count (ATD) initiative illustrates the fundamental characteristics of the types of reforms that have predominated in this period. (Brock, Mayer, & Rutschow, Chapter 2 of this volume, discuss ATD in detail.) In 2004, Lumina Foundation for Education and its partners initiated ATD and funded 27 colleges to carry out a series of reforms with the explicit goal of improving student outcomes. Subsequently, several hundred colleges participated in ATD. The developers articulated an underlying theory of action urging colleges to use their longitudinal data to identify barriers to student success and apply evidence-based reforms to correct those barriers, leading to increased completions. In addition to financial support, ATD colleges benefited from technical assistance by coaches and researchers and participated in workshops and conferences sponsored by ATD. Emblematic of the completion agenda, ATD represented an ambitious and well-funded initiative designed to introduce reforms that would lead to increases in college completion (Achieving the Dream, n.d.).
In 2011, MDRC, in partnership with the Community College Research Center, published a report, describing the interventions and the first 5 years of ATD experience among 26 of the 27 initial college participants (Rutschow et al., 2011). The colleges introduced reforms in three broad areas: student support services, instructional support (such as tutoring), and changes in classroom instruction. Every college had some intervention devoted to improving outcomes for developmental students and the majority of ATD reforms focused on helping students during the early stages of their college experience.

In general, the early ATD experience illustrates the dominant characteristics of community college reform during the completion agenda era. Colleges have been willing, and are often enthusiastic, to experiment with new practices and strategies but have frequently directed them at one segment of the student experience (usually the beginning); and they have generally reached a relatively small number of students (although “light-touch” efforts have sometimes reached larger groups of students). The ATD evaluation (Rutschow et al., 2011) found that despite enthusiastic reform activity, completion rates on average had not increased for participating colleges at the end of 5 years. Outcomes from a 2009 follow-up program, the Developmental Education Initiative funded by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation and designed to scale up promising practices introduced by ATD, were similarly disappointing (Quint, Jaggars, Byndloss, & Magazinnik, 2013).

Evaluations of targeted reforms of the type implemented by the ATD colleges show that even when they have positive effects on short-term outcomes—such as enrollment and success in entry-level college courses—the benefits to student participants tend to fade over subsequent semesters. This was the case in a rigorous evaluation of learning communities in six community colleges conducted by the National Center for Postsecondary Research (Visher, Weiss, Weissman, Rudd, & Wathington, 2012).

The Accelerated Learning Program (ALP) developed at the Community College of Baltimore County provides another example of an intervention with short-term positive outcomes but no effect on graduation rates. ALP is a remediation model in which students referred to developmental reading are placed into a college-level English course with an additional academic support section. An evaluation showed that ALP students were 32% more likely to complete the first college-level English course within 1 year than similar students in standard developmental reading (Cho, Kopko, Jenkins, & Jaggars, 2012). But despite the encouraging success of ALP, the 3-year graduation rate for first-time, full-time students for the college in the years following its introduction did not improve (National Center for Education Statistics, n.d.). Although the student body at the college changed over this period, and the 3-year completion rate is not an ideal measure, these data suggest that the college has not been able to convert success in remedial reforms into broad institutional improvement.
These examples suggest that isolated interventions, even when they yield positive outcomes for participants, do not generally improve institutional graduation rates. National trends in graduation rates support this conclusion. As noted previously, data from the 1990s showed that less than 40% of entering community college students graduated from any institutions within 6 years. Data from the National Student Clearinghouse for the cohort of students who entered in 2007 showed that 38% had completed a degree or certificate within 6 years (Shapiro et al., 2015).

Two broad reasons help explain why institutional aggregates and broad measures of college performance have been immune to focused reforms and the college completion agenda. First, pilot projects rarely scale. Initiatives usually start by testing a practice using a small number of students, with the expectation that a successful practice will be used on all students in the target population. Pilot implementation makes sense in theory but rarely works in practice. Sometimes initial grant funding runs out, and the initiative fades away. Small pilots can rely on a small group of activist faculty, administrators, and stakeholders who are enthusiastic about reform, and they can be carried out without disrupting normal practices at an institution. But scaling requires engagement of a much larger segment of the faculty and may require budgeting, schedule, personnel, and administrative changes.

The ATD evaluation (Rutschow et al., 2011) showed that 52% of the interventions reached less than 10% of their target populations, and only about one third reached a quarter of them. The larger scale interventions tended to be what the authors referred to as “light touch,” providing services for 5 or fewer hours. Such limited penetration cannot be expected to increase the overall institutional performance numbers. And, as noted, the explicit and funded effort to scale apparently successful interventions through the Developmental Education Initiative was similarly disappointing (Quint et al., 2013).

The second reason why discrete interventions might not move institutional performance measures is that in most cases, they address only one segment of a student’s experience in college, rather than touching each progressive phase of the student experience. This is known as the problem of vertical scaling. For example, as was the case with ATD, many reforms focus on developmental education, the first stage of many students’ college careers. But if a student’s college-level program is difficult to follow, and if the student does not continue to get support and guidance, any early benefit from the reform is likely to dissipate as the student progresses. Belfield, Crosta, and Jenkins 2013 conducted a simulation to test the effect of specific reforms on overall graduation rates. They found that a 20% increase in the share of students who complete a first college-level math course would generate only a 2.5% increase in the graduation rate.

This simulation and the research cited earlier suggest that substantially improving rates of student progression and completion requires changes in
practice throughout students’ college experience, not just at the front end or any one segment. Indeed, although students deemed college-ready upon entry are more successful than those referred to developmental courses, the majority of each group do not end up earning a college credential, suggesting that even students judged to be academically prepared face barriers to success in college-level coursework. To state the problem differently, many of the initial reforms motivated by the completion agenda were in effect not designed to promote completion but rather to improve an intermediate step. Improving the intermediate outcomes only had modest effects on overall completion. Thus although these colleges may have had measurable student success goals (as the comprehensive model suggests), they were the wrong goals.

The Need for Comprehensive Reform

To make significant institution-wide increases in completion, colleges must first focus on the appropriate measures of student success. It is important not just to measure the outcomes for the small number of students in a pilot program or intermediate outcomes that do not necessarily lead to institutional change. Second, colleges must have a culture of evidence that leads them to act on the measurable student outcomes. Substantial improvement requires a continuous process of reform and assessment of evidence of improvement that must become embedded in the college culture. Finally, reform cannot be limited to a small group of students or one segment of the student experience. In summary, comprehensive reform requires the three elements that form the conceptual foundation of this volume: a focus on measurable student success, a culture of evidence, and an intentional and cohesive package of programmatic components.

The guided pathways model is one example of a comprehensive reform that combines these three elements (Bailey et al., 2015; Bragg & Kismer, Chapter 6 of this volume). It is composed of an intentional and cohesive package of components, built around the development of simplified, well-organized, and easy-to-understand college-level programs of study. In this model, the college intake process is organized first to help students choose a program of study and then to address academic weaknesses that would prevent students from succeeding in their chosen program. The model is explicitly designed to support students throughout their college career by helping them choose a program, enter the program, complete the program, and make a successful transition to subsequent education or employment, and it emphasizes the need to monitor students’ progress, giving frequent feedback and support as needed.

There are a growing number of examples of comprehensive reforms that incorporate many elements of the guided pathways model. Perhaps the most complete example is Guttman Community College, which is part of the City University of New York (CUNY). Guttman was created to use
research-based reforms to improve measurable student outcomes. The college developed a comprehensive design that combines enhanced advising, expanded services to help students choose majors, significant instructional reform, and profound curricular redesign and simplification. Students take a common first-year curriculum and choose from a small selection of programs during their second year. The college’s designers selected the fields for these programs of study based on an analysis of the needs of the local labor market. One purpose of the common first-year curriculum is to guide students through the process of choosing an appropriate program of study. This includes exposure to workplaces in related fields, and visits to bachelor’s degree programs at 4-year CUNY colleges (Weinbaum, Rodriguez, & Bauer-Maglin, 2013). Each associate degree program is also designed to allow students to transfer to any of CUNY’s many nearby 4-year colleges. Guttman is relatively new, so it has not been rigorously evaluated, but the 3-year graduation rate was 48% for the college’s first cohort, which is more than twice the graduation rate for CUNY community college students overall. Although Guttman students are similar demographically to CUNY students, there may be unmeasured student characteristics that account for some of this difference. Nevertheless, initial results are encouraging and the college faculty and administrators are committed to continuing to improve their services based on evolving evidence on student outcomes.

City Colleges of Chicago (CCC) provides another example of a scaled comprehensive reform using guided pathways. In 2013, CCC leadership developed a 5-year strategic plan designed to double graduation rates and further increase awards and 4-year transfers. The reform created clearly structured programmatic pathways that are aligned with requirements for success in careers and further education and that have integrated supports to help students enter and complete a program of study as quickly as possible. Starting in fall 2014, all degree-seeking students were required to choose 1 of 10 focus areas (each aligned with a major area of occupational demand in Chicago) and to follow a default full-program plan created by faculty and advisors for each program. CCC advisors monitor students’ progress along their program pathways, providing regular feedback to all students and support for those not adequately progressing. Since 2013, the CCC 3-year graduation rate has increased from 7% to 15%.

The Accelerated Study in Associate Programs (ASAP) is another CUNY reform that follows the student from registration to graduation. This program combines extensive advising, some financial assistance, curricular reform, and a requirement to attend full time. The program puts a strong emphasis on frequent counseling, both to help students choose their programs and to keep them on track toward completion. A random assignment evaluation by MDRC found that over a 3-year period, 40% of all ASAP students had earned a degree from any college, compared to only 22% of the control group (Scrivener et al., 2015). Although ASAP includes all three elements of the comprehensive model articulated in this volume, by 2015, ASAP had
not enrolled enough students for outcomes to be reflected in overall college graduation rates, but the positive evaluation results prompted the New York State and City governments to allocate $77 million in new money for 4 years to expand ASAP to 25,000 students by 2019. One college, Bronx Community College, will enroll all of their students in ASAP.

Conclusion

The current volume articulates a model of comprehensive change that includes a focus on measurable student success, an intentional and cohesive package of programmatic components, and a culture of evidence. All of these elements are clearly present in the three examples described in the previous section. In all of these cases, the colleges and districts are focused primarily on student completion, the underlying theories of change are based on combining programmatic practices that support and guide students throughout their college careers, and the institutions are committed to tracking student progress and using evidence on student progress and program effectiveness to improve graduation rates.

A theme running through all of the chapters in this volume is the limited effect on student completion of narrowly targeted reforms that either treat too few people or are limited to one segment of the student experience. In contrast, the comprehensive models discussed here and in the rest of this volume, as exemplified by the guided pathways model, are fundamentally based on the integration of a set of coordinated reforms.

But whether a college chooses to develop guided pathways or other comprehensive models of reform, the college will face a variety of barriers to successful implementation. If reforms are to comprise a cohesive package of coordinated reforms that work with students throughout their college careers, faculty must be willing to work collectively within and across programs and departments. This may come into conflict with a culture of faculty autonomy. Similarly, advisors must also work closely with faculty; a collaboration that is weak in many colleges. Ultimately, comprehensive reform will require 2- and 4-year colleges to better coordinate their programs so that coherent pathways can be developed that span the transfer process. Such collaborations and broad institutional policy changes typically have been missing from higher education. The chapters in the volume present many suggestions about how to overcome those barriers.

References


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Thomas Bailey is the director of the Community College Research Center and the George and Abby O’Neill Professor of Economics and Education at Teachers College, Columbia University.