

## Rethinking the Completion Agenda

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Not long ago, a good friend and outstanding college president moved from El Paso Community College, where for a decade he had led a complete transformation of the college and the results its students achieved, to Austin Community College, a college ready for much the same kind of transformational leadership.

Within the first few weeks in Austin, on his drive to work, he encountered a large billboard that said “Austin Community College, Graduation Rate 4% -- Is this a good use of taxpayers dollars?”

Welcome to Austin. The billboard was sponsored by a business leader with a variety of concerns over higher education in the Lone Star state. My friend contacted the newspaper and asked for an opportunity to respond. At the press conference that resulted, he strode to the microphone and announced that the graduation rate quoted on the billboard was categorically incorrect – the actual graduation rate was 3.9 percent. The group assembled chuckled nervously. My friend went on to provide some context for these results and address the ways the college was moving to improve them.

What lessons can we draw from this story for the future of our work, especially as it touches on the remarkable attention now being focused on how our students complete what they have started: Who earns a degree or other credential? How long it takes them to do so? How much debt they graduate with? And how their education’s value in the marketplace justifies both this debt and the state’s investment in their education?

The “completion agenda” represents just one set of questions that have defined national and state policy discussions in higher education recently. Others include: How competitive is our workforce? How do we rank in percentage of adults with a college education? What about the STEM fields? And why don’t governors think more highly of psychology majors?

There are questions around financing: In the public sector, a long-term trend to defunding colleges and universities was greatly accelerated by the recession, resulting in substantial unfunded growth and cost shifting to students, even as some boards and governors challenge the moves to increase tuition to offset some of the losses. (At Valencia, we have taken 25 percent of the cost per FTE in constant dollars out of the college in just five years. And the percentages of

funds coming from students and the state have virtually reversed, with nearly two-thirds coming from tuition, only a third from the state of Florida. Yet our governor stood in front of us recently and said with all sincerity that he didn't understand why our colleges wanted to raise tuition on the poor working families of Florida.)

And these long-term funding challenges are exacerbated by the fact that we are competing for state revenue with voracious entitlement programs consuming an extraordinary share of total state revenues that won't recover to 2007 levels until sometime in 2015 or 2016, if then.

At the national level we have deep partisan differences over financial aid policy and deep concern over mounting student debt, yet no consensus on meaningful solutions that could protect students from the more unsavory edges of the industry and allow for rational pricing and positioning by colleges and universities in 50 states.

But with all of this to worry and whine about, few of us have been welcomed to work as negatively as my good friend Richard. Note that the big Texas "howdy" from the business leadership of the state was about completions – or rather the lack of them.

This concern with completion has real legs. As the feds measure our work (something that has never been done well, for which we share in the blame), even the most selective colleges complete barely three in four of their students; state universities closer to one in two, and community colleges, one in three. Not much to brag about.

And given that the national goal of increasing the percentage of working Americans with a degree depends very heavily on enrolling and graduating many more nontraditional students, we might draw special attention to the challenges of the community colleges, where more than half of all college students begin their educations, and where 80 percent of the underrepresented, the poor, and the first-generation students are served. If they are to be enfranchised at all (and we need them to be, since, as was once said, demographics is destiny), we need them to experience pathways to deep learning, progression, graduation, and further education. Everyone, from the White House to the major foundations, to the associations and the policy mavens around Dupont Circle, is talking about this.

So here is the challenge we face as an industry: We are being asked to achieve much better results with fewer resources to engage a needier student population in an atmosphere of serious skepticism where all journalism is yellow and our larger society no longer exempts our institutions (nor us) from the deep distrust that has grown toward all institutions.

If we don't produce, we're all going to have toxic billboards to deal with.

But this brings us back to our story. This particular story played out in Austin, Texas, a place that is a tremendous success story precisely because of the connection of higher education to an innovation economy, a place of extraordinary talent and extraordinary tools for developing that talent. Austin is a place that has everything in the world to celebrate about its higher education community and where a good percentage of the households are deeply connected to higher education in one way or another. The harsh criticism came from a place of deep affection for

higher education, from our friends and supporters, and is therefore even harder to dismiss or ignore.

As I looked deeper into the story, I discovered a few important themes for our ongoing work, principles that can inform our work toward improving our results and help us to move the needle on student completion.

The first principle is this:

### **1. Be careful what and how you are measuring -- it is sure to be misused.**

My friend Richard's answer was subtle and clever, disarming the reporters who were surely expecting a defensive response. And he would be the last to tell you he was satisfied with their current completion rates. But the fact is, if one defines completion at Austin Community College to mean graduation OR successful transfer, the rate goes from under four percent to 43 percent - still not as high as ACC aspires to achieve, but hardly worthy of a nasty billboard.

The fact is, "completion" remains a largely undefined term, especially in the minds of the press and the public. Current practice identifies first-time, full-time students as they enter the higher education system and tracks them through a single institution for a specified period of time. We can all name the many deficiencies in the measure. Consider a student who comes to a community college, enrolls full-time, and after a year of successful study is encouraged to transfer to another college. This student is considered a noncompleter at the community college and isn't considered in the measure of the receiving institution at all. This is, in fact, the way Richard himself attended college, and doubtless many others.

Is there any good reason to exclude part-time students from the measures? How about early transfers? Should non-degree-seeking students be in the measure? When is a student considered to be degree-seeking? How are the measures, inevitably used to compare institutions with very different missions, calibrated to those missions? How can transfer be included in the assessment and reporting when students swirl among so many institutions, many of which don't share student unit record information easily? And once a student transfers, who owns baccalaureate completion as an outcome for transfers? Is it really just the receiving institution? Should the mission of helping the 30 million adults in America, with some college but no degree, be represented in the measures? We could all name many other measurement issues.

So here are some further principles in the area of metrics:

### **2. Measure for improvement.**

Performance measures like completion, at their best, should be designed and published primarily for the purpose of improving performance – pointing to alterable variables, measuring in ways that account for varying missions. For this reason, they will have to be much more granular. What's the point of telling a college-ready student that the total completion rate at a college is 30 percent, when it is actually 60 percent for students like her? And how much more helpful to the

college it is to calculate completions for different groups depending on their starting points as they plan their interventions.

### **3. College outcomes measures should be based on college-ready students.**

Including both those who came out of high school performing on college level and those who required some or even substantial preparation after arriving at college in a single measure conflates the data in ways that obscures the real opportunities for improvement. Outcomes for “developmental students” should be separately reported as a pre-college program of the college. The two are connected, of course, but downstream performance of developmental completers, especially when compared to college ready students, is primarily a measure of developmental program performance, not the collegiate program.

The whole area of developmental education or remediation is deeply misunderstood, largely caused by further conflating data from very different student groups – those who need very little attention to brush up lost skills, typically in math (about a third of our developmental students) with those who need very deep remediation for skills never acquired (about a fifth of our developmental students), and a large group of those in between.

Further, the challenge is sensationalized by naïve or perverted use of the numbers – the truth is, at Valencia and other large urban colleges like us, only 8 percent of our total effort, our total credit hours, is in developmental education (down from 12 percent just a few years ago.) This is important work, but needs to be measured and understood in context.

### **4. Align accountability measures to the proper level of analysis.**

We need informed policy makers who will understand the difference in accountability at the institutional, programmatic, course, and faculty levels. It is difficult to explain to a policy maker just how boneheaded the idea of measuring individual faculty performance based on employer feedback really is without also being overtly insulting. Some days I vote for insulting.

### **5. Performance measures should primarily be value-added.**

We should embrace the movement toward value-added measures of institutional performance. Continuing to perpetuate the myth that excellence equals exclusivity has always been a thoughtless maneuver, no better than suggesting that the best way to improve our prisons is to incarcerate a higher level of inmate. This alone would constitute a major step toward aligning institutional measures with mission, and can be successfully replicated at the program level. But let us get back to our story. The low graduation rates for AA students at Austin Community College were real and deeply troubling to Richard and the whole college, in spite of the very strong transfer numbers.

Here’s the rest of the story.

In the greater Austin area, the economic region that is the envy of so many other medium-sized cities, I am familiar with a large number of other colleges of virtually every type: large public

universities, small, extremely selective and expensive independents, moderately selective and moderately affordable colleges, both public and private, and so on. I looked at the websites of more than a dozen of these colleges and universities. Here is what I found: if they gave any indication at all of being willing to accept transfer students, they were quite clear in this: no degree is required for transfer. *No degree is required for transfer.* Further, the majority clearly discouraged students from taking more than a few courses before transferring – and for good reasons. The whole chaotic jumble of articulation agreements, many of them at the department-to-department level rather than college to college, leave students with the rational preference of transferring before taking courses that may not apply to their major, depending on the department and college and university to which they may want to transfer.

Finally, on this, let me say that nearly every college president I know underestimates the importance of transfer in her own institution, both transfer out and in, four-year to four-year, two-year to four-year, and even four-year to two-year. So our sixth principle is this:

#### **6. Think educational ecosystem, not just institution.**

Our students are not experiencing us just as single institutions, but as ecosystems or networks of higher education institutions, generally in a reasonably well-defined region. They swirl in and among, stop out, start back, change majors, change departments, change colleges. And because this was exceptional 50 years ago, when we were in college, we continue to think it is the exception. It is now the norm and likely to remain so. For policy makers, decisions on the outcomes of investing in higher education will need to be framed around the ecosystems. Governing boards and institutional leaders have to move past antiquated notions of competition in higher education – especially competition for resources based on deeply flawed metrics – toward collaborative design of the systems and their multiple interactions. Articulation of credit will have to give way to carefully designed pathways that deepen student learning and accelerate their progression to completion.

If we are to improve what students experience, what students achieve, we need to begin to think ecosystems, design ecosystems, and measure results as ecosystems. This is very difficult to do, as there is scarcely any institution in the universe as self-absorbed as a college or university. (Not mine, of course, but yours is!)

Even accreditation works against this kind of thinking. Heaven forbid that we study the pathways students are creating for themselves and smooth the way with curricular decisions that make sense for them over the objections of a committee, or even blur the organizational lines, contract for parts of the instruction, or share faculty in new ways. These things will certainly raise questions of institutional control of instruction, and we can't have that now, can we?

Finally, let me draw out one more principle on completion:

#### **7. The most important person to care about completion is the student.**

When we send messages through narrow institutional habit, or untested bias, or just ordinary inertia that tell students not to bother to graduate, they actually hear us. Perhaps the history and politics of educational competition in Austin, into which I won't go for the moment, contributes

to this situation. But even in the best of situations for transfer, arguably Florida, the messages aren't all that much better.

In Florida, we have the country's strongest 2+2 system of higher education. Several of the state universities were started as upper-division only (though they didn't stay that way for very long). We have a common course numbering system that greatly aids in the transfer of credit; we have, in statute and practice, a statewide articulation coordination council with representatives of all the sectors; we have statewide articulation agreements that work; and we have a long history of successful transfer of students with rich data on their success after transfer.

Yet, as once nearly open-door universities grew to a scale that is almost mind-boggling and began to shift their strategies toward selectivity, this is the value proposition our students were beginning to hear: "Enroll in your local community college; it's cheap and convenient and classes are small. And when you are ready, apply to the state universities – somewhere in Florida there is one that should take you and your credits." Notice, the value proposition to the student – the one who needs to care about completion – says nothing about graduating.

Several years ago, this situation began to create real challenges for us in central Florida. Fortunately, we had a very healthy higher education ecosystem, with already-established communications channels that were effective and working on behalf of our students and the regional economy. Out of that kind of thinking, we were able to design a new model that goes way beyond articulation of credit.

Called "Direct Connect," it is an ironclad guarantee to the students of the four community colleges in the region that our graduates **MUST** be accepted at UCF. If you have an AA degree from Valencia or Seminole State, or Brevard, or Lake Sumter, you are guaranteed admission to UCF -- a highly selective university. This model is unprecedented. This changed the value proposition to the students rather dramatically. It isn't a "maybe," or a "we'll see." "It is something they can count on, plan for, and commit to. Earn the degree and you are in. It gives students a reason to graduate. Over the last four years for which we have complete data, our enrollment grew about 40 percent. Our completions in AS and certificate programs grew about 60 percent. And our graduations with AA degrees grew 97 percent.

Our students experience their higher educations, not as *alma mater*, but as an ecosystem of programs, learning environments and collaborative institutions through which we have created pathways they can more clearly navigate to their real goals. Our metrics, our strategic plans, our inter-institutional agreements, our policies, and our staff relationships need to reflect this. One final word on the "Completion Agenda," and this is for those who are already committed to moving the needle: See a reason and a need to move the needle, no matter what sector you are in.

## **8. Learning comes before completion.**

Why is this important? Because we need our faculty to engage if we are really going to move the needle. Completion really doesn't engage faculty. Learning does. But more importantly, the country has got the wrong working theory about completion. It seems to go like this: "If more

students completed college, they will have learned more, will contribute more to the local economy and community, and that would be a good thing.”

The theory is subtly, but clearly incorrect. It should go like this: “If more students learned deeply and effectively in a systematic program of study, with a clearer sense of purpose in their studies and their lives, more would graduate and contribute to the local economy and community, and that would be a good thing.”

The degree is a means to an end. Relevant, deep learning is the end. This requires curriculum that is a coherent program of learning, not just a collection of articulated credits. It requires well structured, easily communicated pathways that students can follow to the ultimate end. And it requires genuine collaboration across institutional boundaries that will change the focus from institutional self-absorption to a learner-centered strategy. In short, this requires ecosystems thinking.

My friend, Richard, is already practicing this kind of thinking and relationship-building in his area of service. It will dramatically alter the results for the better at Austin Community College. I have reason to hope that opinion leaders in the national conversation on completion will follow suit, if we, higher education leaders and practitioners, will lead the way. Let’s engage our state leaders, our accrediting bodies, our trustees and governors, our foundation partners, and, most importantly our institutions and students, in ecosystems thinking.

Here are just a few concrete suggestions:

- Add to the old model of articulation of credit the much more powerful model of intelligent design of degree pathways across institutional boundaries.
- Within these pathways, encourage students to make earlier, more grounded choices of major long before transfer looms.
- Require completion of the associates degree prior to transfer and provide a meaningful value proposition to students who do graduate before transfer – a guarantee, if you can.
- Federate our data on student performance across institutional boundaries and develop ecosystem-level research agendas with collaborating institutional research teams that will lead to improved student learning and performance.
- Rethink the metrics used for measuring institutional performance as components of a larger ecosystem and develop measures of the larger ecosystem performance, as well.

Finally, use as your design principle for all of this work a touchstone that has served us well as we have achieved dramatic improvements in student learning and completion: *The college is what the students experience*. It is how they experience us that counts, not how we experience them. If we design our programs, systems, and ecosystems to what we want students to experience – deep, relevant, coherent learning and completion – they and we have a much better chance of achieving our goals.

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