

National Completion Agenda Is Local Work



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Categories

- [Leadership Abstracts](#) *By Laurance J. Warford and Marsha VanNahmen*

Monthly Archives

[October 2010](#) (7)
[September 2010](#) (15)
[August 2010](#) (4)
[July 2010](#) (8)
[June 2010](#) (4)
[May 2010](#) (10)
[April 2010](#) (19)
[March 2010](#) (7)
[February 2010](#) (14)
[January 2010](#) (8)
[December 2009](#) (12)
[November 2009](#) (13)
[October 2009](#) (10)
[September 2009](#) (8)
[August 2009](#) (9)
[July 2009](#) (8)
[June 2009](#) (6)
[May 2009](#) (8)
[April 2009](#) (9)
[March 2009](#) (4)
[February 2009](#) (13)
[January 2009](#) (10)

Syndication

[Feeds](#)

Community colleges are in the national spotlight today due to President Obama's agenda calling for a 50 percent increase in student completion rates at community colleges. Major educational foundations are embracing the completion agenda, with countless state and national initiatives mobilizing to advance the agenda nationwide. This spotlight on community colleges, while mostly positive, does present challenges that may underscore chronic concerns the community colleges share with employers and other segments of education across the country.

The most serious impediment to increasing the number of people who complete a degree, certificate, or some other credential is that the postsecondary school enrollees often are unprepared to do college-level work. A 2004 Stanford Institute for Higher Education Research study found that collaboration, accountability, and articulation among our systems of education—secondary and postsecondary—is relatively nonexistent. Thus, students in many cases graduate from high school and soon find they are not well prepared for college.

This secondary/postsecondary disconnect means that most students entering community colleges need remedial coursework. Community colleges typically are equipped to help students prepare for college-level work while they are in college, but the catch-up work occurs at a high cost to students, their parents, and the supporting taxpayers. According to the Alliance for Excellent Education's *Paying Double: Inadequate High Schools and Community College Remediation*, community colleges spend \$1.4 billion per year providing remedial education to recent high school graduates.

The goal of increasing completion rates becomes harder to achieve when students require remedial work upon entering community college and perform at a lower level in college courses than do adequately prepared students. Without question, the high rate of remediation helps to explain national statistics showing low retention rates from the first to second year of community college. According to National Center for Education Statistics data (2006), slightly more than half of entering community college freshmen return as sophomores.

The Search for Solutions

Given these challenges, it is imperative to search for and develop ways to make secondary and postsecondary student success the norm. The spotlight on completion goals originates at the national level, but the work necessary to make needed changes must occur at the local level.

For this reason, the League for Innovation in the Community College, with generous support from MetLife Foundation, led a year-long action research project that produced the *Significant Discussions Guide*. Local educators, well positioned to guide a grassroots movement to increase student success, can use the *Guide's* insights and materials to improve student transitions from one education system to another.

Insights and practical advice came from participants convening at the nine community colleges who led *Significant Discussion* groups:

- Anne Arundel Community College, Maryland
- Central Piedmont Community College, North Carolina
- Lehigh Carbon Community College, Pennsylvania
- Maricopa Community Colleges, Arizona
- Miami Dade College, Florida
- San Diego Community College District, California
- Southwestern Oregon Community College, Oregon
- Sinclair Community College, Ohio
- St. Louis Community College, Missouri

In addition, a national review panel of six prominent secondary and postsecondary education experts served as advisors to the project.

The culmination of the nine community college discussion groups is the *Significant Discussions Guide*, drawing upon the expertise of over 150 secondary and postsecondary faculty and administrators, together with business and community partners.

Components of the Guide

The *Guide* is designed to help local partnerships collaborate to improve curriculum alignment between their secondary and postsecondary education systems and improve student success leading to employment.

The major components of the *Guide* are described below.

- *Getting Started*. This section describes how to identify and select the right people for this important work. These collaborative groups must understand the issues and challenges and have the support of high-level leaders to establish and achieve goals.
- *Gap Analysis*. This section explains how, during the gap analysis phase, partners review curricula to identify when and where—secondary or postsecondary level—the key knowledge, skills, and standards are delivered. This process exposes gaps when critical elements are missed along the instructional continuum.
- *Curriculum Alignment*. This section covers how gap analysis results are examined so that curricula are revised to close gaps in knowledge, skills, and standards. Overlaps or duplications in curriculum are acceptable as long as students gain deeper knowledge or higher orders of thinking as a result.

- *Assessment.* This section explains the phase when a curriculum is evaluated to determine whether the revisions produced the intended outcomes and closed the curriculum gaps. Results of this assessment phase inform subsequent gap analyses and curriculum alignment work, creating a continuous improvement cycle.
- *Next Steps.* This section offers recommendations at a systems level as well as action steps for institutions and individual stakeholders.

The Positive Impact of Collaborative Partnerships

The League's College and Career Transitions Initiative (CCTI), a multiyear project (2002-2008) funded by the United States Department of Education Office of Vocational and Adult Education, involved fifteen community colleges in creating career pathways in five occupational areas. Outcomes for CCTI included

- Decreased need for remediation at the postsecondary level;
- Increased enrollment and persistence in postsecondary education;
- Increased academic and skill achievement at secondary and postsecondary levels;
- Increased attainment of postsecondary degrees, certificates, or other recognized credentials; and
- Increased entry into employment or further education.

During the CCTI project, misalignments of curriculum were discovered among secondary schools, community colleges, universities, and employers, and these misalignments created barriers to student success and completion. Further, it became apparent that collaborative discussions about curriculum alignment across educational systems were often random and voluntary. Few systems are in place to institutionalize collaborative work to improve alignment, but collaboration emerged as one of the most promising practices to support successful student transitions across systems and into employment. This discovery generated the need for a guide to encourage, shape, and nurture significant discussions that proved effective in improving curriculum alignment and enhancing student success.

No Quick Fix

Successful improvement of the current conditions will take the work of many people, ranging from instruction professionals to policy makers. Additionally, business and industry representatives must increase their investment in and engagement with educational systems.

Accountability across systems cannot be left to volunteer or ad hoc committee work. Hard work by dedicated faculty members and curriculum specialists is needed to achieve the goals, most often through incremental steps that produce noticeable improvements over time.

None of this can occur without support from the highest levels of college leadership. Such high-level support sends the message that this work is important and deserves the dedication of time and resources.

The Need for Strong Leadership

Strong leadership at the community college level can and should make this important work a top priority in college strategic planning. Remediation costs and lost revenue due to nonretention are measureable and substantial. If cross-institutional collaborative work focuses on reducing the number of students

requiring remediation, then more funds will be liberated for other purposes. Reducing remediation means increasing retention. And revenues increase when more students return for subsequent semesters and progress toward completion.

Professional patience is needed to dedicate funding to start and sustain this work until the savings and additional revenue are realized. Community college leaders ready to begin *Significant Discussions* as a strategy to increase student completion rates can take the following steps:

- Inform internal and external colleagues and other stakeholders about the current troubling circumstances and their devastating consequences. Share strategies proven effective in improving the situation.
- Actively lead discussions to examine and improve curriculum alignment leading to college and career readiness.
- Advocate for developing accountability across education systems.
- Initiate cross-institutional collaboration and partnerships with secondary, university, and business and community partners.
- Make cross-institutional collaboration a criterion for promotion and tenure.
- Provide time for administrators, faculty, counselors, and advisors to engage in collaborative partnership work to better align curriculum.

We need to increase the completion rates and success stories of students moving through our education systems. An important first step is to help students understand more about career pathways by developing information guides outlining broad career choices and the learning required to achieve career success. Going beyond basic career education, the significance of aligning math, reading, science, and other general education components across educational systems is even more compelling. The integration of academic and career education curricula is paramount if students are going to view learning as relevant and then use it to succeed in school and beyond.

Community colleges are ideally situated to lead these efforts. Strategically located between secondary school and higher education or work, community college leaders with vision and foresight should clearly see the value of having fewer students come to their institutions needing remedial education. As progress is made toward this vision, students will come to college prepared to do college-level work, enroll in credit courses, and be more successful. With more students continuing their college career through to completion, colleges and society can avoid the devastating costs of dropouts.

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Note: Significant Discussions will be available November 1, 2010, for download on the League website.

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