To What End?

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For over 100 years the “Student Access Agenda” has been the driving force and single most important goal of the community college movement. This goal — to provide an opportunity for any high school graduate or 18-year-old (or older) to enroll in college — permeates every niche of the community college enterprise.

In the last two decades, and with incredible intensity in the last 18 months, a second major agenda has been emerging: the “student success agenda,” which has become the single most important goal for community colleges. As that agenda has evolved, it has morphed into the "completion agenda” as the more sharply focused goal of student success and the goal that has become an imperative for the nation.

The federal government, leading foundations, various states and individual colleges are all carving out a piece of this emerging completion agenda. There are over a dozen major national initiatives — some supported with millions of dollars unheard of in the community college world, and some supported by key national partnerships that recognize the community college as a major player in American society. This fairly recent focus — highlighted by major proposals from the Obama administration, which is also focused on completion — is a tectonic shift in the community college zeitgeist.

Community college leaders have responded enthusiastically to the president’s charge. In April, at the annual convention of the American Association of Community Colleges in Seattle, six leaders representing some of the most influential community college organizations in the nation signed a “Call to Action.” The statement called for a “dramatic increase” in student completion rates and promised to “produce 50 percent more students with high quality degrees and certificates by 2020.” The goal was described as a “national imperative.”

Dozens of national initiatives, projects, reports and organizations are already at work on the completion agenda, including the Developmental Education Initiative, Complete
College America, Voluntary Framework of Accountability, High Impact Practices, Survey of Student Engagement, Pre-College Math Project, Making Achievement Possible, National Articulation and Transfer Network, Project Win-Win, Effective Pathways in Developmental Education, and the Community College Consortium for Immigrant Education. These are only a few examples of the rich ferment in this arena; most are funded by foundations.

Like the foundations, most states are also responding to the call, with many planning or already carrying out the completion agenda. So are many individual colleges. It is unlikely than any community college, or any educational institution, will be untouched by the completion agenda. There has never been a “movement” in the community college world so widely joined and supported by such deep pockets. The completion agenda is, indeed, a tectonic shift.

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If this completion agenda proves to be successful, the outcome will be a significant accomplishment for our students and for our society. No sensible person will argue with these goals or outcomes.

Fortunately, these initiatives are led by some of the most able community college leaders in the nation, leaders who are deeply committed to the core values of the community college. They are well aware of the pitfalls and the skeletons in the closets of the nation’s community colleges; they fully understand that cynicism is the sidekick of failed promises. They know our limitations yet they persevere — because the cause is good and the cause is right.

Great movements, however — especially those cast as “urgent imperatives” — often have unintended consequences, and it would be wise for all of us to consider what some of these consequences might be for the completion agenda. We must ask the question: To what end? The savvy leaders of these initiatives, of course, have not been unaware of the larger perspective raised by the question: To what end? They ask this question every day of their efforts. They worry over whether the agenda is too narrowly focused, if there are sufficient resources, if college leaders are willing and able to deliver. They wrestle, and we all need to wrestle, with all of the following issues:

**The Terminal Degree.** Complete can mean finished, ended, concluded; the completion agenda carries the connotation of an end point. With the completion agenda, are we in danger of resurrecting the “terminal” degree idea from the 1940s by placing so much emphasis on the degree or certificate as the primary goal — the end point of a student’s education? It took years to purge the idea of the “terminal” degree from the community college lexicon and years more to embed the principles of lifelong learning into our programs and practices. Modern society has evolved significantly in the last few decades. Today we must prepare students for the challenges of changing careers and jobs five or six times in their lives. Of course students need the skills to succeed in an initial job, but
they also need the skills to cope with changes in the economy and the culture — skills to transition into their next job. While the community college leaders who orchestrate the various projects of the completion agenda understand and support core concepts of lifelong learning and would never describe the degree and certificate outcomes as “terminal,” we must make sure the federal and state agencies that champion the goals of completion do not make the assumption that our (and their) work is finished when the students receive these initial degrees and certificates.

A Liberal Education. As we create new pathways to success for our students, we need to review how we can infuse our programs with core values and concepts from liberal education — what the Association of American Colleges and Universities calls “Essential Learning Outcomes” — to ensure that our graduates and certificate holders will be able to make informed decisions and use clear judgment about how they invest and spend their resources and their lives.

Simply stated, a sound liberal education is designed to liberate students from ignorance; in our current society ignorance has many champions with seductive spokespersons in the national press and among well-known political leaders. We need to resuscitate Earl McGrath’s early definition of general education — a common core of knowledge for the common person — to help our students develop coping skills, life skills, and team skills so they can create a satisfying philosophy by which to live and by which to contribute to the general welfare. General education is a corollary of liberal education, but both have suffered in application in the community college curriculum. Are we giving sufficient attention to incorporating liberal and general education in the new pathways to degree completion? Can we take the time to address “quality of life” issues for these students to help them succeed in fulfilling careers and contribute to the betterment of society rather than becoming, for example, skilled government bureaucrats who fail to grasp the impact of their actions or Wall Street analysts motivated primarily by greed?

A Very Big Deal. The completion agenda, as the Lumina Foundation says, is a “Big Goal.” The promise is no less than making sure the U.S. remains “globally competitive” and reinvigorates the “middle class” so that it, once again, plays a pivotal role in American culture. Community colleges have always been assigned, as Frank Newman once said, the toughest tasks of higher education; with the completion agenda community colleges have been assigned perhaps the toughest task ever in higher education.

No question but that the community colleges are the right institutions to be assigned this task; they have the right philosophy, the right programs, and they are strategically located in the right places. But everything is not quite right: at many institutions, success rates in the past have been dismal; enrollments have greatly expanded while resources have been greatly reduced; the faculty and the leaders who made the community colleges great have been retiring in record numbers, and the leadership and staff development programs cannot keep up with the demand for replacements; the colleges are still primarily staffed by part-time faculty who instruct a study body that is primarily part-time. These are not the best conditions for taking on a mandate to change the world.
But the community colleges will take on this job, and they will do their best to achieve the goals of doubling the number of degree and certificate holders in the next several decades. As they engage the completion agenda, the leaders of community colleges should consider several key questions: What will they do when the foundation funds dry up, as they surely will? How will they balance the needs of other programs and other students not connected to or interested in the completion agenda? Will the leaders use the completion agenda as leverage for reforming other key components of the college? How will community colleges adapt when the next administration in the White House changes course? If the community college does not succeed in meeting the goals of this agenda, how will it be viewed by the federal government, state governments, foundations, and the rest of higher education when it volunteers to step up to the plate the next time society comes calling?

A Chance for Reform. When the social order is rumbling with change, when new movements are afoot, when fear stalks the land, when money flows from the heavens — when there is a tectonic shift in the community college zeitgeist — there is great opportunity to change our routine; there is opportunity for significant reform. The completion agenda opens the door for reform, serves as a trigger moment that can unleash pent-up frustrations with resistance and propel champions of reform to the forefront.

Highly visible as a national imperative, strongly supported by the movers and shakers from the White House to the state houses, the completion agenda is a formidable spearhead for reform efforts that have been brewing over the past several decades. Thoughtful community college leaders will recognize the completion agenda as an opportunity to leverage change and will capitalize on the energy and the resources to bring about changes in the traditional architecture of education. Roger Moe, a state legislator in Minnesota, described the challenge of reform when he said “Higher education is a thousand years of tradition wrapped in a hundred years of bureaucracy.” Most reform efforts tinker around the edges of tradition, but the completion agenda has the potential to open wide the doors to reform — of placing on the table for examination the core structures, programs, policies, and practices that contribute to or stand in the way of student completion. This is the moment to follow the recommendations of the Wingspread Group on Higher Education: “Putting learning at the heart of the academic enterprise will mean overhauling the conceptual, procedural, curricular, and other architecture of postsecondary education on most campuses.” This is a powerful game-changing recommendation if we mean that “learning” is the same thing, or at least is deeply reflected, in what we mean by degree and certificate completion.

But there is another side to this potential of reform created by the completion agenda; there is the danger of a collective momentum to create streamlined pathways to completion by applying the industrial and factory models of education in which a turnkey process moves our students efficiently through the system. As the advocates of the completion agenda chant “Farther, faster” as their mantra, they may settle for piecemeal reform, creating an island of reform for pathway completion which will be ingested by the traditional bureaucracy of education when the goal no longer seems an “imperative”
or when funds run out. The completion agenda may alas prove to be the enemy of reform rather than its champion.

We have engaged these and similar issues many times in the past, and we always seem to come out the other side by hanging onto a pendulum that swings too far in one direction or another. With the completion agenda, we are this time clearly swinging in a direction that could prove to be off balance. We can help balance that swing in mid air now, or we can mount another movement in a decade or so and undo all this good work as we push the pendulum in the opposite direction. It would be uncharacteristic of us — some might even say un-American — to delay this rush to course/program/certificate/degree completion in order to engage and explore in more depth the issues of our overall purpose and what we mean by a truly educated person. We don’t have to delay these numerous efforts to increase the number of certificates and degrees, and we should not, but we should expand the discussion and the plans to make sure that if we are successful in doubling the number of completers we have accomplished a goal worthy of our role in changing the lives of our students and contributing to the continuing development of our democracy.

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