

EXPANDING OPPORTUNITY FOR ALL

A Choicework
Discussion Starter
from Public Agenda
February 2015

How Can We Increase Community College Student Completion?



EXPANDING OPPORTUNITY FOR ALL

How Can We Increase Community College Student Completion?

Although over 80 percent of the 1.5 million students who enter community colleges each year indicate they intend to attain a bachelor's degree or higher, less than 40 percent earn any form of college credential within six years.¹ Low student completion rates coincide with economic forces that have made a postsecondary degree more important than ever. Increasingly, the many new jobs that offer family-sustaining wages require two- or four-year college degrees, and by giving students the chance to pursue them, community colleges provide vital opportunities to those seeking social and economic mobility.

Many colleges are aware of the problem of low completion rates and are working to address it. This Choicework Discussion Starter aims to help by encouraging faculty and staff to reflect on these questions:

“What approach or combination of approaches would best serve our college’s students, and why?”

“What are our strengths and weaknesses in this area?”

“What steps should we take next to better engage students, help them learn and support their progress toward obtaining the credentials they seek?”

Please keep these questions in mind as we review the following three approaches to tackling the challenge of low student completion rates.

¹ Community College Research Center, 2014.

APPROACH A

EMPOWER STUDENTS AND HOLD THEM ACCOUNTABLE FOR COMPLETING THEIR DEGREES

The primary responsibility for student completion rests with the student. Without a student's commitment to do what it takes to complete a college degree, no amount of help will make a difference. Our college's role is to provide students with the tools they need to be successful and hold them accountable for reaching their goals.

Therefore, we should do things like the following:

- Establish a meaningful **goal-setting process** for all incoming students to make sure they have a clear sense of their objectives and how to achieve them.
- Encourage students to serve as **tutors** and **peer mentors** so they can connect with and learn from one another.
- Develop a **mandatory orientation** to ensure all students have the information they need to obtain college degrees.
- **Eliminate late registration** to stop setting up students for failure.

Those who like this approach may say,

"Too often when we talk about student completion we leave out the most important variable: the students. At the end of the day, the responsibility for completion rests with them, not us."

Those who don't like this approach may say,

"We won't improve completion rates until we stop blaming our students for their lack of success. These are good ideas, but they don't go far enough. To really help more of our students, we need to think about what we can do to improve their experience at our college."

APPROACH B

BEGIN BY IMPROVING TEACHING AND LEARNING, AND COMPLETION WILL FOLLOW

A growing body of research suggests traditional approaches to postsecondary instruction are not particularly effective, especially in developmental and introductory courses. Students who experience alternative methods of teaching demonstrate greater learning and engagement. Improving teaching and learning is the best way to help more students complete degrees at our college.

Therefore, we should do things like the following:

- **Restructure developmental education** to provide streamlined and customized courses that demonstrate the relevance of foundational math and English skills to students' academic and professional goals.
- Capitalize on advances in cognitive science by using new pedagogical approaches, such as **flipped classrooms**, which have shown promise in increasing student learning.
- Provide high-quality **professional development** opportunities to all faculty to support them in adopting the latest, research-based advances in teaching and learning.
- Provide **release time and other incentives** to faculty who experiment with new teaching methods to encourage innovation aimed at increasing student completion.

Those who like this approach may say,

"Most of us were trained as experts in our disciplines, not as educators. If we want and expect our students to be lifelong learners, we have to set an example by adapting our teaching methods to the twenty-first century."

Those who don't like this approach may say,

"We are already doing everything we can to help students succeed. The last thing we need is to be blamed for the sad fact that many students aren't prepared or motivated enough to complete a degree."

APPROACH C

CREATE CLEAR PATHWAYS TO GUIDE STUDENTS TO COMPLETION

Many students experience community college as just another complex institution they struggle to navigate effectively. Unclear programs of study, overflowing course catalogs, confusing transfer requirements and conflicting sources of information often combine to discourage students, and many drop out of college altogether. To mitigate this, we must develop coherent pathways for our students to help them find their way through our college and complete their degrees.

Therefore, we should do things like the following:

- Establish **coherent program requirements and sequences** and simplify students' choices to provide a clear roadmap to completion.
- **Accelerate student entry** into academic pathways to prevent them from spending time, money and financial aid on courses that won't help them obtain college degrees.
- **Strengthen academic and career advising** to help students complete their degrees as quickly as possible.
- **Monitor student progress** and provide students with customized feedback to help them stay on track with their goals.

Those who like this approach may say,

"The colleges that have made the biggest strides in increasing student completion have created clear pathways to help their students succeed; we owe it to our students to explore this approach at our college."

Those who don't like this approach may say,

"These changes sound expensive and unrealistic for our college. More importantly, college is about finding your own path, not following someone else's."

APPROACHES IN BRIEF

APPROACH A

Empower Students and Hold Them Accountable for Completing Their Degrees

The primary responsibility for student completion rests with the student. Without a student's commitment to do what it takes to complete a college degree, no amount of help will make a difference. Our college's role is to provide students with the tools they need to be successful and hold them accountable for reaching their goals.

APPROACH B

Begin by Improving Teaching and Learning, and Completion Will Follow

A growing body of research suggests traditional approaches to postsecondary instruction are not particularly effective, especially in developmental and introductory courses. Students exposed to alternative methods of teaching demonstrate greater learning and engagement. Improving teaching and learning is the best way to help more students complete degrees at our college.

APPROACH C

Create Clear Pathways to Guide Students to Completion

Many students experience the community college as just another complex institution they struggle to navigate effectively. Unclear programs of study, overflowing course catalogs, confusing transfer requirements and conflicting sources of information often combine to discourage students, and many drop out of college altogether. To mitigate this, we must develop coherent pathways for our students to help them find their way through our college and complete their degrees.

USING THIS GUIDE IN COMMUNITY CONVERSATION, DISCUSSION GROUP OR CLASSROOM SETTING

After a discussion of the choices, it can be helpful to first summarize the conversation and then bridge to action-oriented deliberations, as follows:

Summarizing a Choicework Conversation

These questions are a good way to summarize a Choicework conversation, prior to considering more action-oriented questions.

1. In our conversation so far, have we discovered any common ground? What do we agree on or have in common?
2. What were our important areas of disagreement, the issues we may have to keep talking about in the future?
3. What are the questions and concerns that need more attention? Are there things we need more information about?

Bridging Dialogue to Action

These questions can help you move from dialogue about the issue at hand to actions that can help address the issue.

1. How can we work together to make a difference in our community on the issues we discussed today? This is a brainstorming phase of the discussion.
2. Among the action ideas we've discussed, how should we prioritize them?
3. How should we follow up on today's conversation? Are there individual steps we can take? Are there things we can do collectively?

ABOUT CHOICEWORK DISCUSSION STARTERS

Public Agenda's Choicework Discussion Starters support dialogue and deliberation on a wide variety of issues. They have been used in thousands of community conversations, discussion groups and classrooms and by journalists, researchers, policymakers, community leaders and individuals looking to better understand and discuss solutions to a variety of public and community issues.

Each guide is organized around several alternative ways of thinking about an issue, each with its own set of values, priorities, pros, cons and trade-offs. The different perspectives are drawn both from how the public thinks about an issue and from what experts and leaders say about it in policy debates. Users of the guides should be encouraged to put additional ideas on the table or consider combining elements from different choices in unique ways. They are designed as a starting point for constructive dialogue and problem solving.



About Public Agenda

Public Agenda is a nonprofit organization that helps diverse leaders and citizens navigate divisive, complex issues. Through nonpartisan research and engagement, it provides people with the insights and support they need to arrive at workable solutions on critical issues, regardless of their differences. Since 1975, Public Agenda has helped foster progress on higher education affordability, achievement gaps, community college completion, use of technology and innovation, and other higher education issues.

Find Public Agenda online at PublicAgenda.org,
on Facebook at facebook.com/PublicAgenda and
on Twitter at [@PublicAgenda](https://twitter.com/PublicAgenda).