

EXPANDING OPPORTUNITY FOR ALL

A Choicework
Discussion Starter
from Public Agenda
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How Can We Increase Community College Student Success?



**Expanding Opportunity For All:
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College Student Success?**

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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 challenges their students face and are working to address it. This Choicework Discussion Starter aims to help by encouraging faculty and staff to reflect on these questions:

“How are our many student success initiatives adding up? Where are we making progress? Where does progress remain slow?”

“What are our greatest strengths as a college? Where do we struggle to meet the needs of our students?”

“What are the most important things we can be doing or working on to ensure that more of our students are able to reach their goals?”

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.

Bailey, Thomas R., Shanna Smith Jaggars, and David Jenkins. *Redesigning America's Community Colleges: A Clearer Path to Student Success*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015.

Jepsen, Christopher, Kenneth Troske and Paul Coomes. “The Labor-Market Returns to Community College Degrees, Diplomas, and Certificates.” *Journal of Labor Economics* 32, no. 1 (2014): 95-121. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1086/671809>

APPROACH A

Empower Students and Hold Them Accountable for Achieving Their Credentials in a Timely Fashion

The primary responsibility for student completion rests with the student. Without a student's commitment to do what it takes to complete a credential, 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. Only with high expectations, backed up by a refusal to engage in excessive "hand-holding," are we truly serving our students well.

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 **education and career objectives**, and understand **how long it will take** and **how much it will cost** to achieve those objectives.
- **Eliminate late registration** to stop setting up students for failure.
- Implement **mandatory orientation and require students to see an advisor before registering for class**. Ensure all students get the information and support they need to succeed.
- Encourage students to **join study groups** and serve as **tutors** or **peer mentors** so they can connect with and learn from one another

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. If we want to give them the best shot of success, we must have high expectations and focus on providing only those supports that are truly needed for success. Our students won't get their hands held in the world of work, so we shouldn't be doing that here."

Those who don't like this approach may say,

"These are good ideas, but we won't improve completion rates until we stop blaming our students for their lack of success, and begin to take responsibility for the ways our institution throws obstacles in our students' paths. This isn't about hand-holding, this is about leveling the playing field so that community college students get the same level of programmatic coherence and supports that students of privilege at selective four-year colleges get as a matter of course."

Shriner, Kevin N. "Late Registration: Continued Impact on Student Success." *Community College Journal of Research and Practice* 38, no. 6 (2014): 588-591. <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/10668926.2013.790857>

Phillips, Brad C., and Jordan E. Horowitz, eds. *The College Completion Agenda: Practical Approaches for Reaching the Big Goal: New Directions for Community Colleges, Number 164*. San Francisco: John Wiley & Sons, 2014.

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:

- **Redesign developmental education** to ensure that it is a legitimate onramp to a program of study by providing contextualized, modular and accelerated approaches such as different math pathways for different programs, and by adopting high-quality co-requisite models for more students.
- Capitalize on advances in cognitive science by using new pedagogical approaches, such as **flipped classrooms**, which have shown promise in increasing student learning, and build the capacity of more faculty members to serve as advisors to students.
- Provide high-quality **professional development** opportunities to all faculty to support them in adopting the latest, research-based advances in teaching and learning.
- Encourage innovation by providing provide **release time, incentives and formal recognition** to faculty who experiment with new evidence-based teaching methods 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. Helping more of us better meet the needs of today's learners should be a top priority for this college. If we want and expect our students to be lifelong learners, we have to set an example by adapting our approaches 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. If anything needs to be redesigned it's advising because that's where students are getting tripped up."

Crisp, Gloria, and Chryssa Delgado. "The Impact of Developmental Education on Community College Persistence and Vertical Transfer." *Community College Review* 42, no. 2 (2014): 99-117. <http://crw.sagepub.com/content/42/2/99.short>

Clotfelter, Charles T., Helen F. Ladd, Clara Muschkin, and Jacob L. Vigdor. "Developmental Education in North Carolina Community Colleges." *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis* 37, no. 3 (2015): 354-375. <http://epa.sagepub.com/content/37/3/354.abstract>

Hern, Katie, and Myra Snell. "The California Acceleration Project: Reforming Developmental Education to Increase Student Completion of College-Level Math and English." *New Directions for Community Colleges* 2014, no. 167 (2014): 27-39. doi: 10.1002/cc.20108

Harrington, Susan Ann, Melodee Vanden Bosch, Nancy Schoofs, Cynthia Beel-Bates, and Kirk Anderson. "Quantitative Outcomes for Nursing Students in a Flipped Classroom." *Nursing Education Perspectives* 36, no. 3 (2015): 179-181. <http://dx.doi.org/10.5480/13-1255>

Chen, Mingxuan, and Shu Chen. "Empirical Study on Flipped Classroom Based on Understanding." In *Educational Innovation through Technology (EITT), 2014 International Conference of*, pp. 92-98. IEEE, 2014. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1109/EITT.2014.24>

Deschacht, Nick and Katie Goeman. "The Effect of Blended Learning on Course Persistence and Performance of Adult Learners: A Difference-in-differences Analysis." *Computers & Education* 87 (2015): 83-89. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.compedu.2015.03.020>.

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, and provide strong advising throughout the student's career.

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, advancement in the labor market and further education.
- **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."

Crosta, Peter M. "Intensity and Attachment: How the Chaotic Enrollment Patterns of Community College Students Relate to Educational Outcomes." *Community College Review* 42, no. 2 (2014): 118-142. doi: 10.1177/0091552113518233

Fisher, Mercedes, and Derek E. Baird. "Utilizing Career Pathways, Digital Tools and Social Technologies for Transforming Student Advising, Enrollment, Retention and Job Placement." *Review Pub Administration Manag* 2, no. 149 (2014): 2. <http://dx.doi.org/10.4172/2315-7844.1000149>

Wyner, Joshua S. *What Excellent Community Colleges Do: Preparing All Students for Success*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press, 2014.

Rodicio, Lenore, Susan Mayer, and Davis Jenkins. "Strengthening Program Pathways Through Transformative Change." *New Directions for Community Colleges*, no. 167 (2014): 63-72. doi: 10.1002/cc.20111

Approaches in Brief

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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.



Public Agenda helps build a democracy that works for everyone. By elevating a diversity of voices, forging common ground, and improving dialogue and collaboration among leaders and communities, Public Agenda fuels progress on critical issues, including education, health care and community engagement. Founded in 1975, Public Agenda is a nonpartisan, nonprofit organization based in New York City.

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