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Community-College Association Issues Guide to Transform the Sector

By Katherine Mangan
Washington

Two years ago, the American Association of Community Colleges provided a stark assessment of its members' shortcomings, calling for a broad transformation to meet the evolving needs of students and the economy. On Sunday, as thousands of educators gathered here for the group's annual meeting, they got a guide for how to go about attaining that goal.

When the association took stock in 2012, its message was blunt: "As they currently function, community colleges are not up to the task before them." Enrolling about 13 million students each year, the nation's community colleges face growing expectations to raise graduation rates and to prepare workers for high-demand jobs.

The new guide outlines specific strategies to achieve objectives the association has set forth: by 2020, to reduce by half the number of students who come to college unprepared, to double the number who finish remedial courses and make it through introductory college-level courses, and to close achievement gaps across diverse populations of students.

"It is time for community colleges to reimagine and redesign their students' experiences," Walter G. Bumphus, the association's president, said in a written statement. Students, he said, need "a clear pathway to college completion and success in the work force."

To improve completion rates, colleges can start with "low-hanging fruit," the guide says, like automatically awarding credentials to students who have earned them and reaching out to dropouts who need only a few more credits to graduate.

Longer-term strategies include using technology to strengthen advising and better aligning curricula from high school through remediation, community college, and transfer to a four-year institution.

The 48-page manual, "Empowering Community Colleges to Build the Nation's Future," zeroes in on each of seven recommendations in the 2012 report, which was published with support from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, the Kresge Foundation, ACT, and the Educational Testing Service. More than 100 community-college leaders contributed to the new guide.

Its ambitious marching orders come as the two-year sector is under unprecedented scrutiny. Five years ago, President Obama made community colleges the centerpiece of his higher-education agenda, challenging them to produce five million more graduates by 2020. State lawmakers, who for years have been chipping away at public support for two-year colleges, are threatening to reduce appropriations further for colleges that graduate too few students.

Readiness, Completion, Skills

The guide starts with some sobering statistics. Less than half of students who enter community college hoping to earn a degree or certificate do so, transfer to a four-year institution, or remain enrolled six years later.

And after generations of leading the world in college-attainment rates, the United States has fallen to 16th in the proportion of 25- to 34-year-olds with degrees.

The guide also directs readers to a that offers examples of programs that colleges and professional associations are already pursuing to improve student success. Beyond examples from peer institutions, the guide urges campus leaders to consider input from students.

Following are the association's goals, with one among several strategies the guide offers to accomplish each:

- Increase completion rates by 50 percent by 2020. Publicly commit to aggressive, explicit goals, the guide advises, with time frames for

completion numbers and smaller gaps in the achievement of low-income and minority students relative to the overall enrollment.

- Significantly improve college readiness. Establish strong connections with local public-school systems, using clear metrics and assessments to define what it means to be prepared for college. Collect baseline data, and track students' progress.

- Close the American skills gap. Understand labor-market trends and local employers' needs, and communicate them to students. Establish clear pathways for students to build up industry-recognized credentials in high-demand fields.

- Refocus the community-college mission and redefine institutional roles. Become "brokers of educational opportunities," the guide advises, not just "direct providers of instruction." By creating a consortium, for instance, colleges could share a curriculum, letting students draw from several campuses and delivery models.

- Invest in collaborative support structures. Build alliances with other colleges and community-based or national nonprofit groups to pool resources and streamline operations. Small rural colleges, for instance, could create a purchasing cooperative. A national consortium could provide more-affordable access to tools for tracking students across sectors and states, from kindergarten to their first job.

- Pursue public and private investment strategically. Keep seeking creative ways to diversify revenue streams. Meanwhile, join national groups advocating for expanded support for Pell Grants and clearer systems for transfer between two- and four-year colleges.

- Introduce policies and practices that promote rigor and accountability. Adopt the Voluntary Framework for Accountability, a national tool developed by and for community colleges to broaden criteria for measuring success.

Difficult Questions

The changes called for will be expensive, controversial, and require a significant reshuffling of dwindling dollars, speakers noted on Sunday. "We're not going to achieve our mission unless we all decide we're ready to lose our jobs over this," said Eloy Ortiz Oakley, superintendent and president of Long Beach City College, in California. On his campus, one risky but ultimately successful strategy involved ditching a standardized placement test that funneled 90 percent of incoming students into noncredit remedial courses. Instead, many more students are placed into college-level courses based on their high-school grades and transcripts.

At Miami Dade College, banning late registration cut enrollment numbers, reducing tuition revenue. But it was necessary, the

college's president, Eduardo J. Padrón said, because students who started late too often dropped out.

Colleges will also have to grapple with difficult questions about "traditions and structures that serve faculty and staff better than they serve students," Kay M. McClenney, director of the Center for Community College Student Engagement at the University of Texas at Austin, wrote in an email. Those tough questions will also involve "racial equity and institutional racism," she said, and "allocation and reallocation of limited resources."

The guide's concrete suggestions can help colleges tailor solutions to their needs, Rey Garcia, president of the Texas Association of Community Colleges, added in an email.

"While the challenges are daunting and there will always be more work to be done," he said, "the implementation guide sets community colleges on a path to take on this difficult work."

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aanderson28 · a day ago
"Increase completion rates 50%": how? Does anyone think that faculty fail students just because and that increasing the goal will magically make the goal attainable?

"Significantly increase college readiness": not under control of the college. Since the primary goal of K12 is completion, not competence, this won't happen as much as politicians pretend they are working on it.

"Pursue public and private investment strategically and seek creative ways to diverse revenue streams": what college doesn't do this? They are always trying to find alternative revenue sources since state governments have been cutting back.

What are "brokers of educational opportunities"?

This list is so full of vague educational doublespeak that it might as well be made of rainbows and unicorns.
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>> **amlithist** → aanderson28 · a day ago
>> Exactly as your final paragraph says: this is the guiding framework for many CCs today. "If you build it, they will come," made for a great book and movie, but this isn't a game. These are real people's lives on the line, not to mention the intellectual and economic future of this country. Applying magical thinking to these problems--a trend that I've seen emerge and take hold with a vengeance within the past decade that I've been in the field, by the way--is criminal. Some day in the not-too-distant future, people are going to look back with shock and amazement and