

The Revitalization of American Community Colleges: A Synthesis of Current Initiatives, Programs, Issues & Challenges

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Renewed Interest in Community Colleges Taking Shape

President Obama visited 29 community colleges on the campaign trail in 2008. Since taking office in 2009, his administration has been giving community colleges more than their fair share of recognition and publicity. In June 2009, at the Democratic Leadership Council, then White House Chief of Staff Rahm Emmanuel called community colleges essential to our economy's growth and a competitive advantage for the U.S. On October 5, 2010, a White House Summit on Community Colleges was held specifically to create awareness about the value of a community college education. Community college Professor Jill Biden, wife of the vice president and the administration's newly appointed cheerleader for community colleges, hosted more than 11 guest speakers, including President Obama. The audience was made up of more than 150 people, including students, community college leaders from across the country, high-level representatives from the business community and philanthropic organizations, along with federal and state policymakers.

It was emphasized at the Summit that community colleges have always been key generators of workforce and economic development, creating degree and training programs tailored to meet the economic needs of numerous industries, and, in the process, helping students meet their career goals. Today, some of the more prominent industries collaborating with community colleges include health care, biomedicine, information technology, advanced manufacturing, energy, and the green sectors of our economy. ¹

Summit Papers Reveal Variety of Solutions

A number of interesting papers were released in conjunction with the Summit that helped to contribute to many of the themes addressed by the speakers, such as community college and industry partnerships, suggestions for

enhancing the skills and careers for community college students, strategies for increasing community college student achievement, using technology to create effective teaching and learning, and more. ²

For example, the director of the Postsecondary Education Program for the Center for American Progress wrote about "The New Vocationalism," a term that goes back to 2001 calling for "a more well-rounded education that satisfies both the demand for skilled employees as well as the need for a knowledgeable and engaged citizenry by integrating the three historic missions of community colleges: university transfer education, vocational education and, more recently, developmental education." ³

In another Summit paper, a senior fellow at the Urban Institute promoted an increase of apprenticeship programs at community colleges, writing that "apprenticeships open interactions with businesses and insure that the occupational training provided by community colleges is up-to-date." ⁴

The president of the Institute for Higher Education Policy wrote about student support services at community colleges, noting that such services as academic guidance and advising, the increased availability of learning communities, structuring more effective developmental courses, encouraging students to create educational plans, and financial aid advising all need to be increased and made more effective. ⁵



The senior vice president of Complete College America wrote a paper that advocated the development of more clearly defined educational pathways to quality degrees and certificates.

Students seek the quickest and most affordable educational pathway to accomplish their career goals, and community colleges need to do a better job of scheduling accelerated classes and paths to graduation.⁶

Now is the Time to Revitalize Community Colleges

There is no shortage of solutions and advice for community colleges to be successful on numerous fronts. Plus, during a down economy, the importance of reigniting the economic drivers of America's community colleges looms large.

As President Obama's suggested in the January 26, 2011 State of the Union Address: "We know what it takes to compete for jobs and industries of our time. We need to out-innovate, out-educate, and out-build the rest of the world. . ." And furthermore, "because people need to be able to train for new jobs and careers in today's fast-changing economy, we are also revitalizing America's community colleges."⁷

Organizations, foundations, administrators, faculty and students throughout the post-secondary education sector across the nation promote this kind of community-college-revitalization mindset. Some were introduced at the Summit, including the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation's [Next Generation Learning Challenges](#) initiative; the Aspen Institute [Skills for America's Future](#) project; and an Aspen Institute, Joyce Foundation, Lumina Foundation, Bank of America and JP Morgan Chase partnership for an annual \$1 million [Aspen Prize for Community College Excellence](#) award. Other notable initiatives that have a strong emphasis on helping community colleges bring about positive change include [Achieving the Dream](#), the [Lumina Foundation's Adult Degree Completion Commitment](#) and [Jobs for the Future](#).

Learn and Earn

Another community college initiative that is getting strong encouragement from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, and was also mentioned at the Summit, is known as "Learn and Earn." Guest speaker at the Summit, Melinda Gates, said "I think we can develop Learn and Earn programs so students can make progress toward their credential while they are holding



down a job." As its name suggests, Learn and Earn programs enable students to earn a living, through paid jobs, while taking courses toward a degree, certificate, or credential. Learn and Earn programs include paid internships, cooperative education, apprenticeships, federal work study, and practicums. They are meant to be provided in the student's field of study, and be flexible, accelerated, competency-based programs that include a livable wage that ultimately helps students survive both financially and academically.⁸

According to a Public Agenda survey that was underwritten by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, 75% of low-income students enrolled in postsecondary institutions struggle with balancing their academic responsibilities with their livelihoods and financial responsibilities. Many drop out in their freshman year, and more than half of all drop outs from the survey (200 out of 600 students surveyed did not complete their program of study) said that the overriding need to work and earn money while attending classes was the primary reason why they dropped out.⁹

The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation has been highly supportive of Learn and Earn initiatives and programs, particularly those that

help low-income students, age 16 to 26 and are consistent with the Foundation's overarching education goal to double the number of low-income adults earning a postsecondary credential. The Foundation has partnered with a variety of non-profit educational organizations to identify the link between postsecondary education and the labor market. A partial list of these organizations includes [Corporate Voices for Working Families](#), [The Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce](#), [The Workforce Strategy Center](#), [The Center For Energy Workforce Development](#), [The National Association for Manufacturing/Manufacturing Institute](#), [The Teaching Institute for Excellence in STEM](#), [The Business Higher Education Forum](#), and [The Collegiate Employment Research Institute at Michigan State University](#).¹⁰ All these initiatives are moving forward the overall revitalization of community colleges, helping students remain in college and stay on an educational pathway that enables them to succeed.

Technology as a Revitalization Driver

Another prominent backdrop relative to the success and revitalization of community colleges well into the future deals with the adoption of education technologies. The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation's Next Generation Learning Challenges initiative is a good example of where education technology is heading at community colleges.

As noted on the Next Generation Learning Challenges web site:

Recognizing the untapped potential of technology to drive dramatic gains in both college readiness and completion, Next Generation Learning Challenges will identify, improve, and scale solutions and will stimulate adoption of the many ways technology can deepen, accelerate, and support learning.¹¹

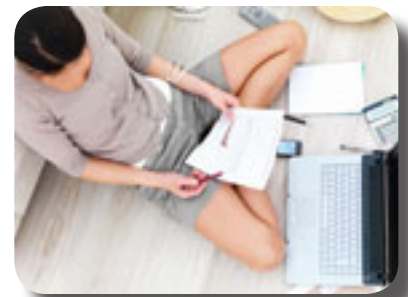
The Next Generation Learning Challenges initiative is in partnership with [EDUCAUSE](#), [The League for Innovation in the Community College](#), [The International Association for K-12 Online Learning](#), [Council of Chief State School Officers](#), and [The William and Flora Hewlett Foundation](#). The first wave of the initiative announced during the fall of 2010 focused on ways that technology can be used to dramatically improve college completion at the postsecondary level and requested proposals for transformative educational technology solutions in one or more of the following areas: Open Core Courseware, Blended Learning, Deeper Learning and Learning Analytics.¹²

A Good Starting Point

Another place to get a feel for where education technology may be heading in the postsecondary sector can be found in The National Education Technology Plan (NETP) 2010, by the U.S. Department of Education Office of Educational Technology.

This is an excellent starting point for meaningful discussions about how to adopt such initiatives as

the Next Generation Learning Challenges' rallying cry for transformative educational technology solutions. Inside the opening pages of the plan, the Secretary of Education writes in a letter to Congress how the model of learning being encouraged for development into the future by our entire education system, and for learners of all ages, is one that "calls for leveraging the power of technology to support continuous and lifelong learning."¹³



What Students Need to Learn

The section of NETP 2010 titled “Learning: Engage and Empower” introduces the role of technology as being dramatically varied and dependent upon state, district and school funding priorities, as well individual educators’ understanding of how to leverage technology in meaningful ways. In a what-learning-should-look-like model, NTEP 2010 expresses how technology provides access to a larger array of learning resources than what is typically available in a bricks-and-mortar environment “to a wider and more flexible set of educators, including teachers, parents, experts, and mentors outside the classroom.”¹⁴



The NTEP 2010’s what-learning-should-look-like model features a list of what 21st learners should know and be able to do that includes the following:

- 21st students should be capable of thinking critically, solving complex problems, and collaborating and communicating with multimedia.
- 21st century students need to increase their skills in three primary categories:
 - Information Literacy: Learn how to identify valid and trustworthy information, retrieve it and use it for a variety of information-sharing purposes
 - Media: Learn how to consume and understand media and how to communicate effectively using a growing variety of media types

- Digital Citizenry: Learn how to evaluate and use technologies appropriately, behave properly in online communities, and understand online privacy and safety issues¹⁵

NTEP 2010 is a thorough resource that addresses a good number of important topics that should be of interest to community colleges, such as how to reach the underserved, low-income and minority learners, English language learners, learners with disabilities, and adult workers who do not have a postsecondary credential. In addition, it advocates enabling all learners to excel in STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics):

New technologies for representing, manipulating, and communicating data, information and ideas have changed professional practices in STEM fields and what students need to learn to be prepared for STEM professions. Technology should be used to support student interaction with STEM content in ways that promote deeper understanding of complex ideas, engage students in solving complex problems, and create new opportunities for STEM learning throughout our education system.¹⁶

The Mainstreaming of Fully Online and Blended/Hybrid Courses and Programs

Within all the discussions and research concerning educational technologies, in general, one frequently and highly acclaimed transformative educational technology-oriented solution is the increased adoption of fully online and blended/hybrid courses and programs at community colleges across the nation. An interesting study conducted by the National Center for Career and Technical Education, for instance, found that although online community college certificate programs have declined since 1990, there is good reason to believe that a resurgence of such online programs “can provide students from weaker economic

and academic backgrounds with the most opportunity for economic mobility compared to other degree options.” Additionally, the report noted that “online education will play an increasingly central role in the nation’s workforce development efforts.”¹⁷

An annual survey about online teaching and learning at community colleges has been conducted since



2005 by the Instructional Technology Council (ITC), an affiliate of the American Association of Community College (AACC). Its most recent survey garnered responses from 226 AACC-member institutions. The final report on the survey’s results was based on a wide variety of data gathered at community colleges from 2007 through 2009. A sampling of the report’s findings includes:

- 75% of respondents offer fully online courses.
- 67% of respondents reported that the demand for online courses is exceeding their offerings, and 28% reported that the demand is being met.
- Most online programs are realizing double-digit enrollment increases, but at the same time respondents reported that they were struggling to recruit faculty and offer more sections to adequately meet the demand.
- As online teaching and learning continues to mature at community colleges, administrators are increasingly addressing issues and challenges related to course quality and design, faculty training and preparation, course assessment, and improving student readiness and retention.¹⁸

Such data are really no surprise as online education has been ramping up quickly since the early 1990s. According to the director of special initiatives for the Sloan Consortium, an institutional and professional leadership organization dedicated to integrating online education into the mainstream of higher education, “we will see full scale adoption of online higher education within five to ten years.” Full-scale means that “practically all higher education students will experience online education in some form during their collegiate career, and college students will be able to take online or blended degree programs and certificates in almost any subject.” The [San Diego County Community College District](#) was noted as a system-wide implementation of online education that is in the process of attaining full scale. [Colorado Community Colleges Online](#) was noted as a state-wide implementation that was also in the process of attaining full scale.¹⁹

Benefits Realized Through Online Education

In a report by the Association for Career and Technical Education (ACTE) it is explained that online learning, particularly at the postsecondary level, is beneficial to “citizen-students” who pay taxes, purchase homes, support families, etc., by providing them with the flexibility of anytime/anyplace courses and programs that enable such students to sustain their working careers while also getting more educated. In addition, the report notes that online learning courses and programs are of great benefit to rural students who typically do not have access to courses and programs that can enhance their careers. “Many people only associate online learning with providing academic skills, but as technology has advanced, the connection to technical and employability skills sets is also growing, especially through CTE (career and technical education) programs.”²⁰

At Northern Virginia Community College a wide variety of fully online and blended/hybrid courses are provided through its Extended Learning Institute, including courses in engineering, basic electric circuits, health information systems, pharmacology, web design, database management, veterinary technology and nursing. Northern Virginia Community College claims that such online and blended/hybrid courses have brought in a diverse group of student enrollments, in addition to rural students and working professionals, that includes military personnel who can continue earning credits online regardless of reassignments and deployments, and stay-at-home parents who can't afford child care.²¹



Cost Savings Realized Through Online Education

A California Legislative Analyst's Office report features numerous reasons why community colleges should place a keener focus on offering more online learning courses and programs, including cost-savings scenarios for both students and the institutions themselves. For example, students save on transportation and parking costs when attending online courses. Institutions offering online courses and programs could experience lower net costs than site-based instruction due in part to savings on physical plant-related expenses. Online learning also creates opportunities for institutions to collaborate on the design and delivery of instruction, bringing about cost savings.²²

The New World of Open Education Resources

Another area that shows great promise – and ties directly into online and blended/hybrid education – is in the further development and adoption of Open Educational Resources (OER). The EDUCAUSE Learning Initiative defines OER as follows:

Open educational resources (OER) are any resources available at little or no cost that can be used for teaching, learning, or research. The term can include textbooks, course readings, and other learning content; simulations, games, and other learning applications; syllabi, quizzes, and assessment tools; and virtually any other material that can be used for educational purposes. OER typically refers to electronic resources, including those in multimedia formats, and such materials are generally released under a Creative Commons or similar license that supports open or nearly open use of the content.²³

There are many OER initiatives in higher education on numerous levels, including some of the early innovators such as [MIT's OpenCourseWare Project](#), [Carnegie Mellon University's Open Learning Initiative](#), and [Rice University's Connexions](#). OER are about 10 years old and not as widely known as they perhaps should be, because they have not garnered a great deal of press. Nonetheless, OER are:

Gaining in scope and quality and are supported by an increasingly robust community that includes many of the most distinguished scholars and educators around the globe. Academic policy makers and government officials at all levels, national, state and local, have a unique – and still largely untapped – opportunity to improve learning outcomes, reduce costs, and improve the quality of teaching by making modest additional investments in OER.²⁴

OER in Community Colleges

Four prominent OER initiatives happening at the community college level—and which all community college educators and administrators should be following closely—are [The Open Course Library](#), [the Community College Consortium for Open Educational Resources](#), [the Community College Open Textbooks Collaborative](#), and [the Community College Open Learning Initiative](#). All of these have a strong focus on creating cost savings and better teaching and learning opportunities for community colleges and their students.

The Open Course Library project, which includes an open-source textbook drive, is being developed by Washington State Community and Technical Colleges through a start-up grant from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation and funding from the State of Washington. The funds are currently being used to convert 81 of the system's most commonly offered on-campus courses, such as General Psychology and Introduction to Chemistry, into complete packages of high quality online course materials that can be accessed by anyone at anytime for free. In addition, any assignment of additional course materials that teachers will apply to these commonly offered online course packages, such as textbooks, cannot exceed a cost of \$30 per student. One of the primary objectives of this project is to reduce the cost of going to college, which could also become a catalyst for improving student retention rates. ^{25, 26, 27}

The Community College Consortium for Open Educational Resources (CCCOER) was established in July 2007 by the Foothill-De Anza Community College District and is a joint effort with the League for Innovation in the Community College and many other community colleges and university partners to develop and use OER, and especially open textbooks, in community college courses. The Community College Open Textbooks Collab-

orative (CCOT) is a two-year project by the CCCOER. The project is funded by The William and Flora Hewlett Foundation from July 2009 through June 2011. CCOT is estimated to save students millions of dollars by increasing the number of free high-quality textbooks available online as alternatives to the typically expensive printed textbooks that students are often required to purchase. The goal of the Community College Open Learning Initiative (CC-OLI), which is based out of Carnegie Mellon University, is to demonstrate a 25% higher rate of course completion for students from vulnerable populations, with a focus on open gatekeeper courses critical to graduation success. CC-OLI estimates that within three years they will scale to 40 community college partners and reach 50-100 classrooms. ^{28, 29, 30, 31, 32}

OER development and adoption is geared toward making education less expensive, more accessible, and more effective. The Carnegie Mellon researchers, for instance, created an open learning statistics course modified for community colleges that is not only free but also very sophisticated. It enables instructors to choose topics to include or exclude from their courses while still maintaining the overall coherence of the course. The course also features a streamlined “Learning Dashboard” that gives instructors the ability to quickly and easily run detailed reports about what students have mastered and which concepts and skills need more attention. ³³



Beneath the Surface

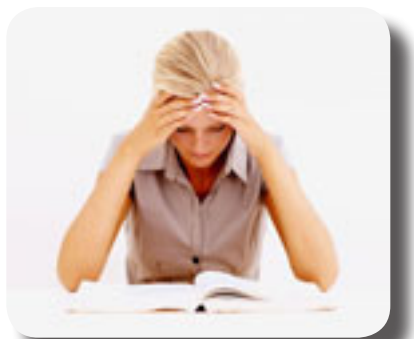
Beneath all the innovative and exciting developments occurring in the worlds of online education, OER, and in the ongoing support being provided in the workforce development sector, there lies seemingly insurmountable

problems and challenges that community colleges continually face.

These following stats on completion rates and remediation alone, for instance, are frequently cited in the literature and in the popular press on community colleges: Only one-third of community college students earn a credential of any kind within six years of enrollment.³⁴ About 60 percent of community college students must take remedial courses. These same students run a high risk of dropping out. In California, with 2.8 million community college students on 112 campuses, 84% of incoming students don't qualify to take college-level math classes that can count toward a four-year degree.³⁵ Fewer than three students out of ten pursuing associate's degrees graduate in three years, and that rate is lower for part-time students.³⁶

Students Simply Not Engaged

The 2009 Community College Survey of Student Engagement (CCSSE) pointed out that close to two-thirds of community college students attend part-time and are far less engaged than full-time students. In addition, about four in ten part-time faculty members – whom collectively are used extensively at community colleges due to economic realities – spend very little, if any, of their time advising students. Not surprisingly, the CCSSE strongly advised that community colleges need to increase their efforts to reach out to students through more face-to-face exchanges, classroom experiences, online services, and social media. Plus, community colleges need to use data to understand which students need to be better engaged.³⁷



Students Simply Not Ready

A Massachusetts Board of Higher Education study on retention and completion rates at community colleges found that more than 60 percent of first-time, full-time, degree-seeking students enrolled in community colleges are not college ready. The Massachusetts study also observed that early completion of developmental coursework is essential, and that there are significant achievement gaps among students based on income levels, ethnicity and gender. Plus, there is not enough data or assessment results concerning the effectiveness of programs and services available to help students succeed.³⁸

The study provides a long list of recommendations for improving student success, one of which is to expand program offerings, “including courses in multiple formats and at a variety of times; courses delivered in accelerated timeframes, including weekends; online and hybrid courses; and cohort models.”³⁹

Unprepared and Unresolved

Regardless of the many sound recommendations offered by highly knowledgeable educators, the overabundance of unprepared students entering community colleges remains a burning, unresolved issue. In the foreword of the 2010 Center for Community College Student Engagement (CCCSE) findings, the Director of the Community College Leadership Program at The University of Texas Austin explains how deep concerns, calls for actions, and extensive amounts of research focused on student unpreparedness for college have been going on for almost four decades and have seen little improvement.

Not only are many students still alarmingly underprepared for college, but they too often have developed an active aversion to mathematics, English, and the educational process more generally. This poses a double whammy challenge for instructors, who must then address not

only skill deficits but students' lack of confidence in themselves as learners and a pervasive sense that what students are asked to learn — particularly in developmental and introductory college courses — has little to do with what really matters to them in their lives. ⁴⁰

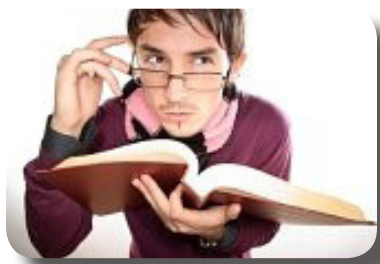
Similar to this alarmist point of view, the 2010 CCCSE findings also noted how the U.S. has been losing ground in educational attainment globally as well as when compared to past U.S. generations.

Overall, the 2010 CCCSE findings cover a lot of ground, such as the characteristics of community college students and important strategies for community college leaders and faculty concerning how to strengthen student engagement, integrate student support into learning, expand faculty professional development and to focus institutional policies that create better conditions for learning. ⁴¹

Big Need for a Clear Definition of What It Really Means to be Ready for College

Ironically, some of the research on the topic of remediation/college readiness claims that educators still cannot pinpoint what constitutes college entry-level work, with no agreement across institutions concerning where the

actual academic cut-off is for clearly identifying whether or not students must enroll in



remedial education (also often referred to as developmental education). Even within single institutions there are differing expectations for student readiness. ⁴² As explicitly stated in a Community College Research Brief: “There is no national consensus about what level of skills is needed to be college ready or how to assess that level.” ⁴³

Advice for States, Systems and Institutions Regarding College Readiness

A relatively new non-profit national organization – Complete College America – was established in 2009 to help the U.S. educational system clarify and address college readiness issues and challenges. Complete College America advises that states, systems and institutions need to:

- Standardize placement policies and develop better tools that have greater diagnostic capabilities.
- Place students who score just below college level on placement tests directly into college-level courses instead of in non-credit-bearing remedial courses, and help them succeed by providing them with academic support, such as through tutoring, computer labs and extended instruction.
- Place students who score one or two levels below college level on placement tests in self-paced, subject-needs-specific modules where they can demonstrate their competencies and move from one module to the next prior to being admitted into non-remedial college courses.
- Place students who score two or three levels below college level on placement tests in multiple subjects, who tend to be unsuccessful in traditional developmental education programs and who are frequently deficient in English language, into career certificate programs or other career-related credentials that embed basic skills and ESL instruction. ⁴⁴

“Mainstreaming”

Maryland Community College of Baltimore County’s (MCCBC) Accelerated Learning Project (ALP) was noted by Complete College of America as a successful model with a track record for boosting the academic success of students in credit-bearing courses who would have normally been placed in non-credit-bearing remedial courses – a practice known as “mainstreaming.”

MCCBC’s English Department wanted to do something about the low success rates and high attrition rates in its ENG 101 remedial writing course. Using the mainstreaming approach, groups of eight students who were assessed as needing to take a remedial writing course were designated as ALP students and placed inside traditional ENG 101 sections alongside 12 students who were not designated as needing to enroll in a remedial course, for a total of 20 students in each section. The eight ALP students were also required to enroll in a linked ALP section taught by the same instructor, where they received more individualized attention. The ALP students in the smaller linked sections typically bonded with each other, increasing their motivation. In addition, the non ALP students in the traditional section often served as role models. Since piloting this program in fall 2006, the success rate of these ALP students has been twice that of those students who were enrolled in the remedial course that had been offered for years. Due to the success of the ALP program, MCCBC offered 40 sections of ALP in the 2009-2010 academic year and is planning to double that number to 80 sections in 2010-2011. Plus, four partner schools from across the country—El Paso Community College, Patrick Henry Community College, Kingsborough Community College, and Gateway Community College—piloted ALP in 2009-2010.⁴⁵

The Assessment Puzzle

While such practices as mainstreaming, and many other unique initiatives not cov-



ered in this report, have started to make great strides in improving the college readiness and remedial challenges being faced by community colleges today, the effective assessment of entering students that determines whether or not they need remedial assistance in the first place is a thorny issue. Placement exam results in reading, writing and math are the primary factors for determining whether or not a student gets slotted into a non-credit-bearing remedial course or program, but what happens beyond these results is where things get complicated.

Ninety-two percent of all two-year institutions use either the ACCUPLACER or COMPASS placement exams. Some institutions may mix and match these two exams, and other institutions have developed their own exams. The research on these exams shows them “to be reasonably valid predictors of students’ grades in college-level coursework, but the placement recommendations that result from the use of these test scores do not clearly improve student outcomes.”⁴⁶

Even when institutions use the same assessments, different cutoff scores are set, making it next to impossible to come up with a standard identification/predictor process across the community college sector.

Moreover, students who are referred to developmental courses through assessments face many different problems. Again taking math as an example, some students may have had difficulty learn-

ing math in high school, some may have taken very little math, some older students may have done well in math but forgotten much of what they learned, and others may have language problems and may thus experience trouble understanding the placement tests. These different groups of students need different types services, but the assessments do not differentiate among them, and the colleges do not provide different classes or other interventions to address the varied reasons for the skills deficiencies.⁴⁷

Nonetheless, promising improvements to identification/predictor conditions in the overall remedial education realm are in early-stage development. In particular, the Common Core State Standards Initiative coordinated by the National Governors Association for Best Practices and the Council of Chief State School Officers, as a means to provide “a clear and consistent framework to prepare our children for college and the workforce,” have been adopted by 34 states.⁴⁸ Additionally, assessment companies continue to develop better diagnostic tools, and states such as Florida and California are “implementing early college readiness testing along with opportunities for remediation for students while they are still in high school.”⁴⁹

Looking at Multiple Measures

Regardless of the issues surrounding placement exams and remedial education processes and solutions, educators consistently claim that data generated from these exams, as well as through data collected within other electronic environments, can definitely aid in decision-making processes at the individual, course, program and institutional levels.

Most community colleges rely only on data collected from placement exam scores. However, some of the research shows that gathering results from a more holistic assessment process, in which the definition of college readiness is

expanded to include multiple measures of a student’s cognitive characteristics, would be a much better alternative. In a book based on an extensive three-year project sponsored by the Association of American Universities in partnership with The Pew Charitable Trusts, the definition of college readiness includes four major areas:

1. Cognitive strategies, such as inquisitiveness, and analytic and problem-solving abilities
2. Key content knowledge
3. Academic behaviors, such as self-awareness and self-control, as well as study and communication skills
4. Contextual skills and awareness, which covers an understanding of the norms and conventions of the postsecondary system⁵⁰

Unfortunately, such holistic assessment practices have yet to be effectively incorporated at community colleges or are only in early developmental phases at best. In the meantime, however, there are several important initiatives being funded by non-profit organizations that show great potential for improving student assessment, remediation and graduation rates.

Achieving the Dream

Achieving the Dream: Community Colleges Count (ATD) and the Developmental Education Initiative (DEI) are two very important initiatives that have key components relative to data issues and challenges—and how they intersect with college readiness, remediation and



college completion—that community college leaders should be watching with keen interest.

ATD started in 2004 through funding from the Lumina Foundation, with additional funding from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation and 18 additional funders. It currently has 130 member colleges in 24 states and the District of Columbia, with 29 institutions designated as leader colleges. Part of the ATD strategic approach includes having member colleges “build knowledge” by compiling and analyzing data “on student outcomes and college characteristics to enhance data-driven decision-making by colleges and states.” The ATD approach is meant “to identify problems preventing students from succeeding and in developing programs to help them stay in school and earn a degree.”^{51, 52}

Interviews with Students Reveal How to Engage Them

For example, at ATD-member Sinclair Community College, a “data retreat” was organized and attended by staff from its institutional research department, along with faculty and administrators that ultimately helped to determine an approach for collecting qualitative data in order to design better strategies for helping at-risk students. It was decided that data be collected from interviews with students enrolled in developmental math and English courses.⁵³

Faculty members interviewed students from all sections of developmental English and those enrolled in first-credit-bearing English courses, for a total of 30 courses. Student responses to interview questions



revealed some practical ways for improving student engagement, such as that students be allowed to work in the computer lab and that faculty utilize an online environment for posting course notes and worksheets. For faculty, a web site of best practices was also created where English instructors could share what they learned from the student interviews with the larger teaching community. Plus, a “learning challenge grant” was created that enabled the English department to hire an expert to conduct professional development sessions on how to teach grammar.⁵⁴

For math, data was collected relative to an “Introduction to College Algebra” MAT 101 course that had a high failure rate. Interviews were conducted with students at mid quarter in 25 sections of MAT 101. Based on an analysis of data collected from the interviews, “the course was substantially reworked, and faculty designed a pilot course to improve student success by using computer software, tutors, lab time and other student engagement activities.”⁵⁵

Shifting Focus at State Levels

Under the policy framework area of ATD, the focus is on helping participating states shift toward new policies that have been identified to improve student outcomes.

States have made the greatest progress in strengthening their data systems for use in driving improvements (i.e., creating robust data warehouses, increased capacity for collecting and using data, and performance measures that align with improvement goals). A second area of significant policy change has been developmental education assessment and placement policies (including more consistent statewide policies, such as common assessments and placement cut scores and consistent test-taking policies).⁵⁶

Although improving student outcomes ultimately depends on the day-to-day interactions between students, faculty and staff, ATD can claim significant success, driven by data, for strengthening student-success-oriented collaborations between states and their colleges, ultimately making the future for more deep and lasting transformation look promising.⁵⁷

The Developmental Education Initiative (DEI), for instance, is a corollary of ATD to identify developmental education innovations within the ATD initiative that show the most promise for helping mostly low-income students and students of color complete a certificate or degree. It is noted on the DEI web site that DEI-member efforts must be supported by institutional and student data that show early results or justify proposed targets. “Colleges will continue to contribute to the national knowledge base about community college student outcomes for analysis and comparison by regular submissions of student data to the Achieving the Dream database.” In addition, “participating states will demonstrate the effectiveness of a state-level, data-driven approach for improving outcomes for students who place into developmental education.”⁵⁸

Need for Dollars Never Ends

Despite such positive influences and impacts, community colleges have historically never obtained the resources they need from federal and state governments to carry out their missions as much as four-year institutions. Two-year institutions on average receive 30% of federal dollars provided to state universities, even though they educate close to the same number of students. Plus, two year institutions have seen a sevenfold increase in enrollments since 1963, while four-year institutions have seen a threefold increase. Over the past 20 years, however, federal funding for community colleges has remained the same while it has increased for four-year institutions.⁵⁹

Taking the current poor economy into consideration, community colleges are still being asked to do more than ever with not enough resources. Obviously a strong step in the right direction is the new 4-year, \$2 billion Department of Labor Employment and Training Administration’s Trade Adjustment Assistance Community College and Career Training grants program (TAACCCT), which at the time of this writing had posted its solicitation for grant applications with a deadline of April 21, 2011. However, it is important to note that the Obama Administration was initially seeking \$12 billion in direct aid to community colleges through the American Graduation Initiative that was ultimately cut out of the legislative process.

As we move through the second decade of the 21st century, community colleges are most definitely entering an era of revitalization and change like never seen before. As noted by the Chronicle of Higher Education Research Services unit, the average age of college students will continue to trend higher, and minority student enrollments will start an ascent that will eventually outnumber whites in the third decade of the 21st century. All these trends, and more, will be great catalysts for transformational processes and policies and new technological adoptions at community colleges everywhere.⁶⁰

As President Obama said at the January 26, 2011 State of the Union Address, investments in education, as well as in innovation and infrastructure, “will make America a better place to do business and create jobs.” He added that we need to “knock down barriers that stand in the way of success” and that reforming of our education system will take time, and that includes the revitalization of America’s community colleges.

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About the SOURCE on Community College Issues, Trends & Strategies: the SOURCE is the early fruition of a project that initially started in late 2009. Its aim is to provide timely, accurate and highly informative resources to community college students, faculty, staff and administrators. SOURCE reports are based on the latest scholarly literature and through interviews with individuals who have been identified as reliable and intelligent sources of information about the issues, trends, and strategies concerning the growth and development of community colleges on numerous levels. SOURCE reports are designed to be graphically pleasing and highly readable, with clear typefaces and images. In addition, SOURCE reports include numerous live links (highlighted in light blue), giving readers the ability to easily and quickly go right to the SOURCE of information cited in these documents. The SOURCE website includes a variety of special sections, segmented into SILOS, where visitors can link to numerous other reports, news and other information resources concerning community colleges. To learn more, please visit <http://www.edpath.com/thesource.html>.

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