

Boosting College Completion at Community Colleges: Time, Choice, Structure and the Significant Role of States

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Executive Summary

- A new American majority of students is emerging on campuses, especially at community colleges. These students must delicately balance long hours at jobs they must have with the higher education they desire.
- Even though this emerging majority has fundamentally different needs, American higher education in general has been slow to change, continuing to deliver courses and programs designed decades ago and best suited for full-time, residential students.
- Time, choice and structure are the essential optics through which all higher education reforms must be viewed in order to maximize the likelihood of graduating more of today's students.
- Successful, large-scale programs and systems around the country have proven that by utilizing informed choice and structured delivery, students can successfully balance jobs and school – and are much more likely to graduate.
- To achieve the substantial gains in college completion America must have to compete, we must reinvent American higher education. To do so, requires significant shared responsibility by all stakeholders, including government. More of the same will not do.
- States, as the leading investors in higher education, have the power and authority to demand more from higher education – and they have a moral obligation to do so.
- Complete College America's *Essential Steps for States* make clear that states can utilize powerful policy levers now to remove unnecessary obstacles and speed student success.
- By utilizing the NGA/CCA Common College Completion Metrics, yawning gaps in current data collection will be filled and states will be empowered with new tools to hold higher education accountable and inform reform design.
- The Administration can seize key opportunities to encourage states, incent needed reforms, and signal its clear interest in more college graduates, not just enrollments.

Introduction

Measured on opening day, community colleges in America appear to be a roaring success. Often bursting at the seams, they now educate nearly half of all of our country's college students, a fivefold increase in the past 40 years. More importantly, community colleges have nearly erased racial gaps in enrollment: According to a 2003 US Department of Education report, 83% of whites pursue higher education in the first eight years after high

school – and 80% of blacks and Hispanics do the same.

We have clearly convinced almost all of our young people that for good jobs and a brighter future there is one irrefutable fact: high school isn't high enough. And it's our community colleges that provide most of the open doors and essential ladders to the greater opportunities and higher achievement they desire.

There's no disputing that a generation or more of sustained efforts – while unfinished – have yielded impressive gains in access. But, access without success is an empty promise – and a missed opportunity with severe economic consequences for students, states and our country.

While barely more than half of full-time students graduate with 4-year Bachelor's degrees in *six years*, fewer than three in ten pursuing 2-year associate degrees at our community colleges graduate in *three years!* Sadly, part-time students graduate at even lower rates.

To make matters worse, a closer look on graduation day reveals that those eventually receiving degrees look very different than the student body on the first day of class: the hopes raised by nearly equitable enrollments are crushed by long persistent gaps in achievement and completion.

Given projections that two-thirds of all jobs in 2020 will require advanced training or education, we simply have no choice: We must get more of our students – from all walks of life – to graduation day. And it is community colleges that hold the greatest potential to do so.

A New Reality for an Emerging Majority on Campus: Time is the Enemy

Why does America have such abysmal completion rates? Of the many reasons offered, one compelling fact stands above all others: Today, most students balance the jobs they must have with the higher education they desire. Today's college student is a far cry from the American archetype of the 19 year-old college kid who lives on campus, attends full-time,

doesn't work, and gets most of his bills paid by Mom and Dad. In fact, only 25% of college students in our country today attend residential schools.

What's the new reality? According to a recent study by Public Agenda, nearly half of students at 4-year schools work more than 20 hours a week. At community colleges, 60% are at jobs more than 20 hours a week, and a quarter of these stressed out students are working more than 35 hours. Nearly 40% of all of our college kids attend part-time. Roughly a quarter of them have children of their own to support. And yet they still find a way to come to college to pursue better lives.

With so much at stake, today's students need to finish their studies as soon as possible to get on with life. They need clear pathways to quality degrees and career certificates in order to land the good jobs they desperately want. And they must have predictable schedules they can count on in order to balance jobs and school. Why is this so important? Because the more time college takes, the more life intrudes. And when more life intrudes, fewer students complete college.

The Completion Cornerstones: Time, Choice and Structure

For years, adding time and choices has been our answer. Semester long, multiple-level remediation courses, limitless periods of exploration before declaring a major, and midnight courses are all examples of well-intended efforts to try and meet student needs. When coupled with other policies like additional credit requirements or transfer rules that don't readily recognize credits earned at multiple campuses, the result has been to lengthen the time to degree for many students—or hinder degree completion altogether.

The numbers make it clear: When it comes to college graduation, time is the enemy. According to federally collected data in 2008, only 29% of full-time students at public 4-year institutions graduated on time. After the fifth year of pursuing a Bachelor's degree, 19% more graduated.

Now consider the sixth and eighth years after enrollment: Only 6% then 3% more students made it to graduation day, respectively. Giving students more time to graduate does not yield many more graduates. Why? Simply put, life gets in the way.

Today's students need less time on campus, fewer confusing choices and more structured schedules. Time, choice and structure are the key issues to address the needs of today's students and the optics through which efforts to boost completion must be viewed.

Directed Choice Yields More Graduates

More time and uninformed choice work against college completion. To understand why, we must again consider the nature of today's college students – and human nature, in general.

Respected researcher and educator, James Rosenbaum, of Northwestern University, and his colleagues have found that students at 2-year colleges in America, which now make up nearly half of all college kids today, often lack the know-how to direct their own progress. Further, their work revealed that although students “are assumed to be capable of making informed choices, of knowing their abilities and preferences, of understanding the full range of college and career alternatives, and of weighing the costs and benefits associated with different college programs, our analyses show that many students have great difficulty with such choices.” The fact that on average one college guidance counselor is matched with 700 students in this country doesn't help the situation.

While public 2-year colleges design their programs and procedures based on faulty assumptions about the capability of their students to make informed choices, Rosenbaum found that their private counterparts often do not. According to him and his fellow researchers, many private 2-year colleges – with identical student bodies containing large numbers of low-income and minority students who did poorly in high school– shift academic planning responsibilities to themselves, “devising procedures to help students succeed even if they lack the traditional social prerequisites of college.” And it works: Rosenbaum found that the private 2-year schools

in his study graduate significantly more students than their public peers.

How do they do it? The private 2-year colleges in the study offered students “package deal” plans for accomplishing their specific academic and career goals in a clear length of time. Instead of charting their own paths by navigating daunting catalogs overflowing with choices, students make the “big choice” of a desired career or academic discipline and then the colleges make all of the “little choices” for them by utilizing structured programs that move students to degrees in the shortest time possible. (See Appendix A to review Rosenbaum's findings.)

Before assuming that only private colleges can accomplish this, consider the tremendous success of the past twenty years at the public Tennessee Technology Centers. Part of the Tennessee Board of Regents system, the statewide Technology Centers have been regularly accomplishing graduation rates of 75% or higher and job placement rates above 85%.

Their approach shares many common elements with private schools: Students sign up for whole programs, not individual courses. They are clearly told how long the program will take to complete, the likelihood of success, and the total “all in” costs. There are plenty of “big choices,” but the “small choices” are directed, streamlined and packaged to cut down on confusion and the chance of mistake.

So, this isn't about public versus private 2-year schools. It's about divining an uncharted course through a catalog of undirected choices on one's own versus fully informed choices with clear expectations and benefits.

Nor is it just about community college students—it's about what the abundance of choice does to the human brain. In one famous study, subjects became nearly paralyzed when presented with 24 choices of fruit jams. While 60% helped themselves to samples, only 3% could ever decide which jam to buy. By reducing the choices to just 6, researchers observed that nearly a third of the 40% who sampled the jams made a purchase. Whether choosing jams, bath soaps, investment plans, or

college courses, directed choice can be a great benefit to consumers.

As important as direction, the best choices are those most closely aligned with intentions: Students come to college in pursuit of better lives, higher-paying jobs and clearer paths to accomplish their goals. They simply seek the fastest, most affordable route to do so – and most don't enjoy the luxuries of endless time and resources to get there.

Add Structure to Achieve the Full Potential of Reforms

By choosing to think differently about choice, colleges can meet the needs of more of today's students and share in the success that comes with more graduates. But, combining directed choice with new structures for academic delivery unleashes the full potential of reforms to boost college completions.

To understand why, return again to what it's all supposed to be about: students. It's clear that too many students work too many hours. That's unlikely to change unless college suddenly becomes a lot more affordable. Without significant improvements in productivity on campuses, there seems little chance of that.

So, let's consider again the lives of young adults who try to keep it all going. At almost all colleges, courses are scheduled all over the weekly calendar. In a student-centered culture, would programs be designed that required an 8:00 a.m. class on Monday, a 2:00 p.m. class on Tuesday, 11:00 a.m. on Wednesday, etc.? Of course not.

Instead, what if programs were designed utilizing more structured scheduling? Students could attend classes every day, five days a week, from 8:00 a.m. to 2:00 p.m. Full-time attendance would now be possible for many more, dramatically shortening the time it takes to graduate. And finding time for jobs in such a predictable daily routine is no longer a challenge.

When presented with this concept, students are incredulous. "That would be a dream come

true," they have told us. Here again, the dream is actually a tried-and-true reality.

Not only do the hugely successful Tennessee Technology Centers help direct student choices, they also structure academic delivery in just this way. Three-quarters or more of their students earn career certificates in twelve to eighteen months going full-time, five days a week, from 8:00 until 2:00. Every year over 12,000 students move through the multiple Technology Center campuses and nearly all of them head straight into jobs.

Structure also produces some added bonuses that should not be overlooked. Compressed class schedules create stronger linkages between faculty members – and cohort-like connections between students. Professors not only interact more often, they also tend to create team approaches to teaching the students they share. And students often move through programs as a group, strengthening their ties and support of one another.

But, structured scheduling only works for vocational education and career certificate programs, right? Wrong. New York City's community college, known as CUNY, has a program (ASAP) for accelerated completion of associate degrees that is so successful the system will soon open an entire campus designed to utilize block scheduling, student cohorts, directed choice, embedded remediation and reinvented supports. Why make this kind of significant investment in the midst of a budget crisis? Because it works so well: ASAP students graduate on-time at more than twice the rate of their peers.

Time, choice and structure: to significantly boost college completions, turn the broken dreams of dropouts into the bright futures of graduates, fully seize the opportunities for our country that overflowing campuses provide, and make America the world leader again in college attainment, we must keep our collective focus on these three touchstones. They are universal truths arrived at in the best way: by seeing the true nature of our college students today – and opening our minds to accept that to help them succeed – a success that America is counting on – we must reinvent American higher education.

States Must Lead the Way

The stakes are high. That's why we must recognize that higher education institutions themselves are not the only players. One key participant that has too long been on the sideline of higher education reform is state government.

Given that our country has suffered these low graduation rates for a generation or more, it is clear that – in spite of our best intentions – doing more of the same will just get us more of the same. Higher education now must have the committed and shared partnership of all key stakeholders. America – now 12th in the world in college attainment and falling – does not have the luxury of time to wait. States must step forward and help lead the way.

There are many compelling reasons for governors, state legislatures and higher education system leaders to assume leadership on this agenda:

- **State Authority**
While state-appointed or elected citizen boards directly govern public institutions, ultimately states are responsible for all public colleges and universities. State goals and state leadership created community college systems and expanded open access four-year institutions over the past 50 years; state leadership and support will be necessary to enhance and sustain their effectiveness in improving college completion in the 21st century.
- **Majority Investor**
By a wide measure, state taxpayers provide the greatest funding for institutions, especially community colleges and open access four-year institutions. No other stakeholder is better positioned than state governments to ensure that public investments are wisely utilized to maximize opportunities for the future economic success of their states.
- **Systemic, Scalable Change**
States are the best positioned to ensure reform across systems and campuses by

setting goals, establishing uniform measures, and monitoring progress. They can also serve as the most efficient clearinghouses of best practices, allowing for rapid scaling of successful reforms.

- **Accountability**
With so much at stake economically, states must hold themselves, students, and institutions accountable for success. States have leverage over both governance and the funding mechanisms needed to achieve higher levels of completion.
- **Transparency**
Institutions have strong incentives to shape reporting to mask failure and avoid confronting problems. States are much more likely than individual institutions to share and publish data to drive reform.
- **Economic Development**
Higher education attainment is inextricably linked to future economic success. State leadership will ensure stronger linkages between each state's economic needs and higher education delivery.
- **Mobility of Students**
Today's students move across campuses and systems to attain credentials. Coherent state policy and integrated state strategies are essential for assuring ease of transfer and efficient completion of academic programs.

States in Action: Complete College America's Alliance of States

When it comes to state leadership, there is great reason for optimism. Today, nearly half of the states have joined Complete College America's Alliance of States. To do so, Governors and their higher education leadership had to make four key commitments:

- 1) Establish statewide and campus-level college completion goals,

- 2) Adopt the NGA/Complete College America Common Completion Metrics in order to measure progress and hold institutions accountable for results (see Appendix B),
- 3) Create comprehensive statewide and campus-level college completion plans, and
- 4) Move significant legislation and policies to remove unnecessary obstacles and speed student success.

As of this writing, 23 states have made these commitments and are now working as members of the Alliance of States to design and implement strategies that will significantly boost the number of their citizens with college degrees or other credentials of value.

Essential Steps for States

Complete College America recommends several significant policy levers that states can utilize to enhance the likelihood of student success and college completion, including shifting to performance funding, reducing time-to-degree, transforming remediation, restructuring academic delivery, and making career certificates count, among others. Please see Complete College America's *Essential Steps for States* documents for more specifics on what states can do today (Appendix C).

Leading States

In your request for information, you asked that Complete College America identify those states at the forefront of college completion reform. While all 23 of our Alliance States have made significant commitments and deserve recognition for doing so, three stand out: Indiana, Ohio and Tennessee.

Indiana established one of the country's first comprehensive college completion plans, setting a course for significant reform that now includes creation of a statewide community college system and performance funding of institutions. Currently, the state is in the process of reinventing academic delivery at its community college system by utilizing new scheduling and support structures to accelerate degree

completion by helping students balance school and jobs.

Ohio has taken significant steps since 2007 to comprehensively address the college completion challenge. Governor Strickland has called for a 20% increase in college graduates, established the University System of Ohio, and created a 10-year *Strategic Plan for Higher Education*. The statewide strategy utilizes one of the nation's most comprehensive credit transfer policies and sophisticated performance funding of institutions to accelerate student success and incent course and degree completion.

Tennessee became a national leader in the spring of 2010 when Governor Bredesen successfully steered the Complete College Tennessee Act to passage during a special session of the Tennessee legislature. With nearly unanimous support, the new law is the most comprehensive higher education reform in the country, including performance funding, a statewide community college system, common course numbering combined with a comprehensive credit transfer policy, restructured academic delivery utilizing block scheduling and student cohorts, among other measures. (See Appendix D for a synopsis of the legislation.)

Actions the Administration Can Take Now

- 1) Leverage the \$2 billion Community College and Career Training Grants program to incent states with unified community college systems and/or community college consortia to utilize new academic delivery structures to inform choice and shorten time-to-degree. As shown above, proven models exist that can be replicated and scaled by states and consortia. (See Appendix E: CCA Recommendations to Department of Labor)
- 2) Encourage all states to adopt the NGA/CCA Common College Completion Metrics. These comprehensive metrics will allow for accurate state-by-state comparisons and fill in yawning gaps in current data collection, enhancing opportunities for

accountability and empowering all stakeholders with new tools to inform reform design.

- 3) Embed completion metrics in all federal higher education policies and statutes. It's long past time that the federal government clearly signals its interest in college graduates, not just enrollments.

Conclusion

Commitments like those made by our Alliance States give us great reason for optimism –and a clear path forward. With a little more help – and a lot of common sense – students, their families, taxpayers, and all Americans will share in the benefits of more individuals completing college.

Complete College America applauds the President for his leadership and his historic commitment to making America first in the world again in college completion. And we stand ready to assist Dr. Biden, Secretaries Duncan and Solis and the entire Administration in efforts to reinvent higher education to meet the needs of the new emerging American majority of college students. Thank you for this opportunity to be of assistance in this vital effort.

Contact Information

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Index of Appendices

Provided by hyperlink:

A *Community College: The Unfinished Revolution* by James Rosenbaum, et.al.
<http://www.issues.org/23.4/rosenbaum.html>

B NGA/CCA Common College Completion Metrics

http://www.completecollege.org/pathforward/common_metrics/

C Complete College America's *Essential Steps for States*
http://www.completecollege.org/pathforward/essential_steps_for_states/

Provided as an attachment:

D Complete College Tennessee
A synopsis of the legislation prepared by Complete College America

E Community College and Career Training Grants Complete College America's Recommendations to the Administration

Appendix D

The Tennessee Higher Education Reform Initiative

On January 26, 2010, the State of Tennessee made an extraordinary commitment to its future: with the nearly unanimous support of its legislature, Governor Phil Bredesen signed into law The Complete College Tennessee Act. Troubled by abysmal graduation rates and impatient for transformational change, the governor boldly called for a special session of the state's General Assembly, demanding a laser focus on a single goal: *faster progress and smoother pathways for more college degrees.*

Comprehensive in its scope, the new law seeks to improve all aspects of higher education in Tennessee, from simplifying course selection, to designing accelerated programs to graduate students faster, to simplifying credit transfers, to establishing a new statewide community college system. More importantly, the law's sweeping breadth is matched by its brass tacks boldness.

Fully embracing Complete College America's demand for paying for completions, not enrollments, Governor Bredesen declared from the House rostrum, **"The number of warm bodies in a seat in the fall is what drives the dollars. But that's not what we actually want: We want students still there in the spring, and especially, more than anything else, we want students who leave the institution with the degree that they came for in the first place."**

The Governor and the Legislature backed up their words and intentions with significant actions, establishing a process to end state support based on head counts within five years. Instead, schools will be paid based on student success and graduations, as they should be.

The Complete College Tennessee Act vaults the state to the forefront of an essential paradigm shift in our country where higher education aligns to meet the needs of modern students and the modern workplace, producing more student success and graduations – and in the process, ensuring higher incomes for our families, more

bang for the buck for taxpayers, and American leadership in the world once again.

States would do well to closely study this approach:

The Complete College Tennessee Act

Establishing a Statewide Master Plan

The new law requires the development of a statewide master plan to increase educational attainment, create improved linkages with K-12 to ensure student preparedness for college, and improve teacher preparation to better prepare students for the college classroom. The plan must ensure increased degree production, utilizing institutional mission differentiation to accomplish more degrees, while holding colleges and universities accountable for progress.

Paying for Completions

The state funding model will be based on outcomes, emphasizing those across a range of variables that will be weighted to reinforce each institution's mission and provide incentives for productivity improvements consistent with the state's higher education master plan. The outcomes will include end of term enrollment for each term, student retention, timely progress toward degree completion and degree production and may also include, among other things, student transfer activity, research and student success, as well as compliance with transfer and articulation principles.

Associates Degrees Guarantee Junior Status

A common core Associates degree curriculum will be established consisting of 41 hours of general education courses and 19 hours of pre-major courses instruction. An associate of science or associate of arts degree graduate from a Tennessee community college will be deemed to have met all general education and university parallel core requirements for transfer to any Tennessee public university as a junior.

Common Course Numbering and Clear Transfer Eligibility

A common course numbering system within the community colleges will be established, including clearly designating courses based on their eligibility for transfer to 4-year institutions.

Dual Admission Across All Systems

Any person who satisfies the admissions requirements of any two-year institution and any four-year institution may be admitted simultaneously to both institutions and take advantage of campus resources of both institutions.

Ending Remediation at 4-year Schools

To encourage students to better utilize community colleges as higher education gateways, remediation will no longer be provided by 4-year schools; however, those institutions may coordinate efforts with two-year schools in order to address student needs.

Establishing a Statewide Community College System

To increase their stature and to unlock their full, untapped potential as affordable and effective gateways to higher skills and further education, the Tennessee Community College System will

be established, merging the thirteen independently managed schools into a comprehensive statewide system. Not only will students enjoy the benefits of a seamless system, taxpayers will realize savings and efficiencies found through consolidation of services and overhead.

New, Accelerated Paths to Associate Degrees and Certificates

The new law commits Tennessee to design streamlined approaches to move students more quickly and efficiently through structured programs that will produce faster, accelerated technical certificates and associates degrees. Utilizing block scheduling and cohort learning – and modeled on a successful program that produced on average 70% completion rates at the state’s Technology Centers – this approach promises to give students more of what they want: clear, direct paths to graduation and to good-paying jobs.

Appendix E

Community College and Career Training Grants

Complete College America (CCA) offers the following suggestions for the Department of Labor to consider as you structure the Community College and Career Training Grants (CCCTG) to significantly advance the President's goal of increasing college completion.

CCA is currently working with an alliance of 23 states that have committed to taking bold actions to significantly increase the number of students earning degrees and credentials with value in the labor market and close attainment gaps for traditionally underrepresented populations.

While the Department faces some statutory restrictions, the opportunity still exists to **substantially leverage change** through these grants by setting a series of conditions or assurances that all grant recipients must be willing to meet in order to be eligible for funding. Two billion dollars for CCCTG could produce more than **ten times the impact of the Race to Top** funds considering the funding set aside for each program compared to national expenditures for community colleges and K 12.

The overarching goal of the program should be for individuals to **achieve a degree or credential of economic value consistent with the President's goal.**

The Department could set the following conditions for the CCCTG program:

- 1) A community college receiving this funding must show how it will **produce much higher completion rates.** Current completion rates for full time students average 25% at the end of three years and part time graduation rates rarely exceed 10%. More of the same programs will yield more of the same results.
- 2) A community college receiving this funding must show how it will **produce degrees in much shorter time frames.** Several studies have indicated that it

often takes as long as 5 years to achieve a 2 year associate degree and 4 years for a one year certificate.

- 3) A community college receiving this funding should **offer an array of technical certificate programs** (one year or more) in addition to 2 year degrees. The certificates should be articulated with 2 year degrees, embed industry credentials of demonstrated economic value, and utilize external third party oversight and exit exams.
- 4) A community college receiving this funding must demonstrate that **remediation will not be a major hurdle** to program completion. This is typically achieved by embedding remediation in technical programs, offering accelerated module based remediation, bridge programs, or extra support offered to students taking regular classes.
- 5) A community college receiving this funding must demonstrate that its **proposals are based on evidence of success.** Programs that are highly structured with block schedules (i.e. M-F 8am to 2pm), cohort based, embed remediation, require attendance, are competency based, and build strong relationships with faculty have remarkable returns. Three examples are the CUNY ASAP program (doubled three year completion rates to 50%), Tennessee Tech Centers (75% completion rates for certificate programs) and Indiana Wesleyan's evening and weekend program (65% completion rates for part time students).
- 6) Community colleges receiving this funding must provide **transparency for students by publishing graduation rates, cost, time to degree, student debt and placement information (SRTK, Student Right to Know)** in printed materials and make readily available to the public on their website.

- 7) Require applicants to submit baseline data on **common completion metrics showing progression and outcomes for students**. There is growing consensus about what these metrics should be. Twenty three states in the CCA Alliance have already agreed to collect a common set of metrics. Last month, the National Governors Association adopted these same metrics and recommended they be collected and reported publicly by all fifty states. In addition to requiring baseline data, the Department can **make funding for out-years dependent on making progress on one or more of these metrics**.
- 8) A community college receiving this funding should demonstrate that students would receive **certificates or degrees with value in the labor market**.
- 9) To the extent possible, the Department should fund proposals that could be **implemented at scale or later replicated at scale when proven successful**. As part of this scalability, applicants should be able to demonstrate state or system-level support and/or how their efforts fit in broader (state or system-wide efforts). This means that strategies are supported by state and system-level policies, and will ultimately affect the majority of students within existing structures or resources. This could also include a consortium of colleges.
- 10) Applicants should be able to demonstrate **long-term sustainability** of their programs. Sustainability could be proven through the demonstrated support of governors and legislatures and higher education leadership, and support from business, labor or philanthropy organization.