Enhancing the Faculty Role in Fostering the Community College Completion Agenda

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Across the country, community colleges are pursuing strategies to increase the numbers of students who graduate with associate degrees. These strategies are typically greeted with a great deal of excitement. However, their impact at the classroom level is very questionable. The purpose of this practice brief is to bring the spotlight on faculty and the community college classroom for improving graduation rates. Faculty roles in graduation of students are presented within the framework of lagging and leading indicators of performance. Graduation is a lagging indicator. Faculty have no direct control over this indicator. Faculty do control the leading indicators of retention, success, and persistence. They can take direct actions to influence these indicators, which ultimately impact completion. To improve completion, faculty must work to close the achievement gaps that exist for groups of students. Culturally relevant teaching practices are an avenue to accomplish this important task.

Keywords: completion agenda; leading and lagging indicators; retention; success and persistence

Across the country, community colleges are, to varying degrees, pursuing strategies to increase the numbers of students who graduate with associate degrees. Since at least 2009 when President Barrack Obama announced the American Graduation Initiative (AGI), community colleges have responded to his call. The results over a decade later have been disappointing to say the least. President Obama challenged the colleges to increase the number of graduates by over five million in 10 years. Today we are far from reaching that goal (Boggs & McPhail, 2016).

Significance of the Completion Agenda

There have been innumerable initiatives, programs and strategies designed to increase college graduations even before the AGI. Some of the more notable ones include Achieving the Dream (ATD) begun by the Lumina Foundation in

2004. Its mission is to lead and support a national network of community colleges to achieve sustainable institutional transformation leading to improved outcomes for all students through improving student success and eliminating achievement gaps (ATD, 2020). Another major national initiative has been Complete College America (CCA), begun in 2009. CCA (2020) has suggested a number of strategies for colleges to improve graduation rates, among them are 15 to Finish and Academic Maps with Proactive Advising. A very recent movement to improve community college graduation rates is the Guided Pathways (GP) initiative. Guided Pathways rests on the four pillars of (a) Clarify the Path, (b) Enter the Path, (c) Stay on the Path, and (d) Ensure Learning (Bailey et al., 2015). These major reform initiatives, which attempt to increase graduation rates, are typically greeted with a great deal of excitement and noise in the field. However, their impact at the classroom level is very questionable (Price & Esau, 2014).

Purpose and Scope

The purpose of this practice brief is to bring the spotlight on faculty and the community college classroom for improving graduation rates. Too often, strategies to enhance graduation are aimed at student services divisions and programs. While they have an important role to play, faculty certainly should not be left out of the major initiatives to improve completion rates. In this practice brief, faculty roles in graduation of students are presented within the framework of lagging and leading indicators of performance.

Lagging and Leading Performance Indicators

Student graduation is a lagging indicator. That is, a multitude of events need to occur between the time students enroll in a college and they graduate with an associate degree. Lagging indicators are summative measures with little power to directly influence outcomes because they are collected at the end of students' college experiences (Phillips & Horowitz, 2017). College planning committees, offices of institutional effectiveness, and college leadership teams typically set graduation goals. These graduation goals are far removed from the day-to-day activities of classroom teachers. In fact, if faculty are even aware of the graduation goals—let alone current graduation rates—they surely must wonder, "How can I directly impact something that may not occur for years?" These goals have very little real meaning to faculty on the front line of teaching and learning. Yet from a treatment-effectiveness perspective, faculty are the key players in the student success agenda, if for no other reason that they spend, by far, more time with their students than do any other agents in the college.

Leading indicators identify what is within a college's control and they describe what is happening along the way, so there is still time for improvement (Phillips & Horowitz, 2017) and they are actionable. Faculty can have direct influence on leading indicators such as retention in courses, success in

courses, and persistence from one term to the next. Figure 1 illustrates the relationship between lagging and leading indicators to support student completion.

Retention

Within the community college literature, and in the field, there is much confusion about what retention is. The term is often used when "persistence" is more appropriate. For this practice brief, retention is operationalized at the course level by "those students who enroll in a class, stay in the class beyond census date, and complete the course without dropping out, being dropped by the instructor or the college, and earn a final grade other than a W (withdraw) or Inc (incomplete)." Students may earn an F (failing) grade and still be retained.

Nationally, course retention rates can vary from below 50% to above 90% (NSC Research Center, 2018). One national study showed course retention rates of 74% for face-to-face courses and 69% for on-line courses, on average (Jaggers, 2011). Faculty can have an immediate and substantial impact on student retention in their courses.

Faculty Role in Retention

Table 1 identifies some strategies that can improve course retention. Some of the ideas listed in Table 1 are self-explanatory. However, a few could use some clarification. The idea of a "buddy system" is that each student will have at least one other student to bond with in the class. Many colleges have some type of formal Early Alert system. Often the notification period is too late and action needs to be taken earlier to intervene so students continue to come to class and keep up with the work. Faculty need to be proactive and take the initiative to notify student services, tutoring, or other types of assistance centers early on to help students be retained in class. Finally, meeting with students in a one-on-one session is important for faculty to get to know each individual student and for the student to know the faculty member better. It is amazing how many students enter community college scared they will not be successful or clueless as to the ways of college (Lopez, 2016). An informal, ice-breaker meeting between faculty and student can go a long way in dispelling some student fears. Faculty members need to be flexible in choice of meeting places and times, and can resort to on-line discussions, if needed.

An outstanding example of a commitment to retention can be found at Odessa Community College in Texas. The college's

Figure 1
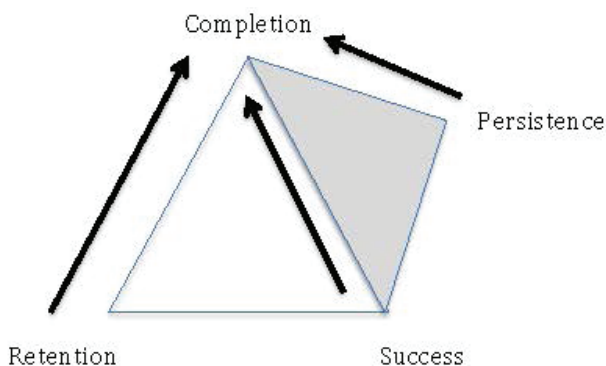
Leading Indicators to Support Completion

Table 1

Strategies to Improve Course Retention Rates

1. Learn and use all students' names by 2nd class meeting.
2. Mandatory conference with each student during the first 2-3 weeks of class.
3. Institute a "buddy system" in class.
4. Text students or have the buddy do it if they miss a class.
5. Be proactive with Early Alert system.

Drop Rate Improvement Program (DRIP) utilizes many of the items found in Table 1. Before the DRIP, the college's overall retention rate was 83%. After the program was introduced, the rate shot up to 95%. Most importantly, over a five-year period graduation rates improved from 15% to 32% (Kistner & Henderson, 2014). In 2017 and 2019, Odessa Community College won the Rising Star award from the Aspen Institute primarily based on the results of the DRIP.

Student Success

One of the most important leading indicators is that of student success in their courses. Success is determined by earning a passing grade for a course. If students are not passing their courses and maintaining at least a 2.0 GPA, they will not be graduating. This is an indicator exclusively under the control of faculty. In California for fall 2019, the average student success rate in all courses was 71%. (California Community College Chancellor's Office, 2020). It is important to recognize that this figure is an average; the range of student success in courses varies widely within a single college, within a discipline, and even within a course. The variable of individual faculty grades is a powerful one.

Faculty Role in Student Success

Success in college courses is frequently dependent upon two actors: the student and the faculty member. Too often faculty downplay their role in the teaching-learning paradigm and place the overwhelming expectation on the student. If faculty perceive their role as that of disseminators of information, they are not proactive in student learning. The community college teaching and learning literature is full of ideas to help students learn. A few of these are presented in Table 2. The idea of validating prior student learning is a powerful one that pays dividends in setting the tone for the class during the entire term. This one is especially important for non-traditional learners as they begin to navigate the college experience (Rendon, 1994). Mandatory study groups reflect the power of group learning. Some faculty are resistant to assigning study groups because they recognize many students don't stay on campus beyond class time because of family, work, and other commitments. With the use of social media, on-line study groups can provide a

Table 2

Strategies to Improve Student Success

1. Validate student prior learning.
2. Use praise orally and in writing frequently
3. Mandatory study groups.
4. Multiple ways to demonstrate learning.
5. Mandatory conference with each student who is struggling with the class after the initial conference.
6. Walk the students over to the tutoring center and have them learn what goes on there.
7. Have explicit, high expectations but be flexible with them.

useful alternative to face-to-face meetings. Alternative ways of demonstrating learning takes advantage of students' multiple intelligences (Gardner, 2006) and allow them to use their strengths when demonstrating knowledge and skills acquired in courses they complete. While students must meet the learning outcomes of a course, the instructor can be flexible with time, work products, student involvement in courses, and other attributes associated with expectations. Faculty need to divest themselves of the notion that they "treat all the students the same." Each student is an individual and must be treated individually.

Many colleges have taken to identifying "gatekeeper courses," typically identified as courses with relatively high enrollments and low pass rates. These courses are roadblocks for too many students moving through the pipeline toward graduation. Hawaii Community Colleges undertook an effort to move gatekeeper courses to "gateway courses" in Liberal Arts (LA). A faculty member in a LA discipline who had high pass rates in his courses worked with faculty who

taught courses in other disciplines with low pass rates. He worked with them on course learning outcomes, pedagogy, grading systems, assessments of learning, and the course syllabi. He helped get these courses off of the gatekeeper list because the faculty he worked with began to change what they were doing in their courses and take responsibility for student learning.

Persistence

The concept of persistence is a critical one for improving student graduation rates. It is a bit far removed from the classroom for faculty compared to retention and success. However, faculty can impact student persistence. Persistence means the term-to-term re-enrollment of students. If students are not returning to the college after each term, they will never hit the finish line.

Persistence rates for most community colleges are abysmal, especially fall-to-fall terms. Nationally the fall-to-fall same college persistence rate was 48.9% in 2016-17 (NSC Research Center,

2018). The fall-to-spring persistence rate nationally was 62.2% in 2017 (NSC Research Center, 2018). It appears that colleges are constantly chasing new students rather than attempting to hold on to the ones they have.

Faculty Role in Persistence

Faculty often do not see themselves having a direct role in student persistence. After all, once the student leaves the faculty member's class, their connection is often not maintained. Yet, faculty can perform some up-front work to help students develop the commitment to return to the college for the next term. The key is to focus on the students' future. Let them know how successfully completing their current course will help them achieve their educational, personal and career goals. Providing some incentive to return to the college the next term during the current term also can be effective. Table 3 presents some ideas for faculty to help improve persistence rates.

At Central New Mexico Community College, faculty receive and use data that show how their students perform in advanced courses within the discipline. These data are disaggregated by faculty member. One long-time faculty member who teaches developmental English courses, within the confines of assigning points to assignments which go toward a final grade, provides a few extra-credit points for students who, at some point during the semester, show her that they have registered for the next semester AND for the next course in the English sequence. This extra-credit opportunity is built into her syllabus so all students know of its existence. This approach provides a direct incentive for increasing persistence.

Influence of Equity on Leading and Lagging Indicators

If graduation rates are to substantially improve, the achievement gaps between groups of students need to be eliminated. Latinx and African-American males, first-generation college students, and low-income students are substantial groups of students who have suffered from the achievement gap for decades. According to the American Association of Community Colleges (AACC, 2020) in 2019, 38% of students were Latinx or African-American, 59% of students were on financial aid, and about 30% were first-generation students. Many of the suggestions provided

Table 3

Strategies to Improve Persistence

1. Ask students for proof of registration in following semester for extra credit.
2. Discuss student motivation for going to college in conferences and tie in continuing education to that motivation.
3. Discuss student's education plan and pathway as they relate to student's goal.
4. Preview follow-on course in the discipline for students.

above should prove beneficial to students from these groups, especially for students of color.

Culturally Responsive Teaching (CRT) uses the cultural knowledge, prior experiences, and frames of reference of culturally diverse students, and should assist in making learning more relevant and effective for these students (Gay, 2000). There are many approaches to CRT in the community college classroom. Some common themes are (a) understand students' values and experiences to inform teaching, (b) select content with students' backgrounds in mind, (c) use student-centered learning techniques, and (d) create a supportive environment (Baumgartner et al., 2015). Since the teaching faculty in community colleges are overwhelming White (according to an AACC 2020 study 75% of faculty nationally were White), becoming proponents of CRT means faculty need to reflect on their own cultural beliefs and values and how these shape their teaching. Faculty need to ask themselves questions like, "How do I believe students learn?" "Who do I believe makes a good student?" and "What are my true feelings about members of groups other than my own?" This reflection cannot be superficial. It needs to be deep and thought provoking.

CRT goes well beyond pedagogy. It forms the basis of how faculty interact with students within and outside of the classroom. It influences curriculum, teaching and learning, expectations, student-teacher interactions, and introspection on the part of students and teachers. The ideas presented within the leading indicators discussion above are all compatible with the tenets of CRT.

Implementation Challenges

Creating an environment where faculty are focused on moving the needle on the leading indicators of retention, success and persistence is fraught with potential potholes. For some colleges, this movement will require change and, in some situations, large changes. Implementation is critical to ultimately improving graduation rates and numbers. Here are some common implementation challenges that can be expected.

Faculty Teach—Students Learn

Many community college faculty view their role as presenters of information. It is incumbent on students to process that information and do something with it. Faculty are the subject matter experts and what students make of that expertise is up to them. This narrow and traditional view of the teaching-learning paradigm has not served community college students well in the past.

Part of this equation is the notion that the students are why the success rates are low, not the faculty or the college. This "blame the victim mentality" shifts the responsibility on learning wholly to the student. Faculty don't acknowledge that students have multiple priories in their lives, with school being just one of them.

Lowering Standards

Unfortunately, too often, some faculty have a knee-jerk reaction when confronted with initiatives to improve

student success and, hence, completion. That reaction is "you want me to lower my standards." This claim is, of course, a red herring, which runs counter to the current thinking on student success. High expectations for students are a cornerstone of the latest student success initiatives. Any discussion of academic standards must address four fundamental questions:

1. In what reality are the standards based?
2. What, specifically, are the standards?
3. How are the standards communicated to students?
4. How are the students' attainment of the standards assessed?

Lack of Commitment to Equity

Wood and Harris (2015) have identified from between 15%-25% of intransigent faculty who do not have a commitment to equity. Many of these faculty are so resistant to equity efforts that they will either not participate in them or will try and sabotage them. It would be naïve to think that these faculty do not exist in every community college. At times they are senior faculty with some standing among other faculty and administrators.

Colleges are encouraged to have "courageous conversations" about race, inequity, prejudice, and micro-aggressions. Leaders of these conversations should expect some pushback from primarily White faculty, administrators, and support staff. However, the real and attitudinal barriers to equity must be addressed head-on if colleges are to increase graduation rates.

Conclusion

Community college leaders must put student success as priority one for the institution. This means that attention needs to be directed to improving the college's leading indicators of retention, success, and persistence in order to ultimately improve graduation rates. Improving leading indicators will not happen automatically. A comprehensive professional development effort for faculty is required. No more one-shot, drive-by, half-hearted efforts. For example, the Community College of Baltimore County has trained over 500 professionals in CRT. The college made a commitment to CRT as the primary way for faculty to improve student success in the diverse setting that is Baltimore County.

Every instructional division, department, and faculty member at the college needs to understand what the current leading indicators metrics are. A baseline for each of these entities needs to be established. Then, once everyone learns what the situation is, a professional development plan can be created at each of these levels, right down to the individual faculty member. Realistic statistical goals for improvement within a short time frame need to be identified for each of the leading indicators.

Behavior and attitudinal changes will need to occur for all parties involved. A way to begin the process and, hopefully, create an encouraging tone for the professional development effort, might

be to begin with a college-wide endeavor such as playing the Finish Line game created by ATD or viewing the film *No Greater Odds*, created by the College of Southern Nevada. The Finish Line game helps faculty understand the barriers, first hand, that prevent students from succeeding. The film follows the lives of five students as they struggle with complicated family issues, financial difficulties, and personal obstacles as they seek to better their futures. These two possible kick-off activities should bring equity to the forefront of discussions to underpin the professional development plans.

With disaggregated data to support the leading indicators, especially presented by ethnicity, financial aid, and first-generation students, among other possibilities, equity should be an integral part of the professional development plans. Eliminating the achievement gaps and producing more graduates for community colleges, hopefully, will become a reality rather than an amorphous goal that is never achieved.

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