

GARY RHOADES

The Incomplete Completion Agenda

Implications for Academe and the Academy

FROM ONE STATE TO ANOTHER, boards of trustees, legislatures, and governors are implementing policies designed to increase output and efficiency in public colleges and universities. Many such policies reflect the agenda of the National Governors Association's (2010)

Complete to Compete initiative, which seeks to increase completion rates without increasing public investment. This state-level agenda is often linked to the broader goal of dramatically enlarging the proportion of the US population that is college educated. Nationally, these productivity objectives are articulated in a policy discourse focused on international competitiveness—as in the Obama administration's "race to the top" and the Lumina Foundation's "big goal" agendas, both of which are designed to ensure that the United States will once again have the highest proportion of college graduates in the world. Despite a highly partisan political environment, governors of both parties support the completion agenda, which at its core combines efforts to enhance production efficiencies with an anti-government-spending austerity agenda of cut, cut, cut.

Yet, the completion agenda is incomplete. It is an unfunded mandate to do more with less. Moreover, the agenda does not address the key educational, social, and economic challenges we face. It offers no mechanisms for enhancing quality, reducing non-meritocratic social stratification, or building a new economy.

GARY RHOADES is professor of higher education at the University of Arizona.

Worse still, the completion agenda is counterproductive. In regard to educational quality, the completion agenda is compromising the learning agenda. Many college students are currently experiencing only limited gains in some areas of learning (Arum and Roksa 2011). Therefore the challenge is not simply to crank out more graduates, but to enhance their learning. In response, a separate policy agenda has emerged to increase educational effectiveness by concentrating on student learning outcomes rather than cost efficiencies. In theory, these two policy streams need not be at odds; in practice, completion measures are trumping and undermining educational effectiveness.

In regard to the challenges of social stratification, the completion agenda has translated into an agenda of counting credentials as the productive equivalent of degrees. This has meant promoting a narrow conception of community colleges, which have long been the principal destination of working-class, first-generation, and Latino students. Educational policy at both the federal and state levels has been emphasizing workforce development, credentials, and the terminal tracks of community colleges. The result is that these institutions, which have long been instruments of upward social mobility, are being turned into dead ends for students who seek ultimately to obtain baccalaureate degrees. The completion agenda will increase already substantial college achievement gaps between social classes and ethnic groups.

In regard to economic challenges, much of the policy discourse speaks to the need for

In practice, completion measures are trumping and undermining educational effectiveness



University of Arizona

higher education to play a role in building a knowledge-based economy. The political parties differ as to whether this means strategically investing in the current generation of students and in the production of knowledge (e.g., funding science). Yet, neither party—and few entities or leaders in the policy world—is focused on mechanisms for developing the next generation of professors to educate knowledge workers and create new knowledge.

In analyzing the completion agenda's implications for academe and the academy, I write from three perspectives. I write as the former general secretary of the American Association of University Professors (AAUP). I also write as a professor whose research focuses on higher education policy and restructuring academic institutions/professions, and whose university, the University of Arizona, is a relatively open-access public land-grant research university—a university and a state that have become markers for the country in accommodating (or not) the growth demographic of traditional-age students. Finally, I write as the father of two daughters, each of whom is a doctoral student in a high-demand field, which gives me insight into and particular concern about the effects of current policies on the future of academe (the professoriate) and the academy (higher education).

Foregrounding the wrong finish, missing the right foundation

The completion agenda foregrounds the wrong finish lines. It also misses the right foundation for ensuring educational quality. In both regards it augurs ill for the integrity of education, for professors who develop the curricula and teach and mentor the students, and for other professionals involved in enhancing the quality of college education.

At one level, the completion agenda simply calls for much more of the same output—more credit hours and more graduates—with no additional input of public money. The push is for greater efficiency through higher credit-hour generation per professor and higher graduation numbers or rates per college. But are those the right goals given the current concerns expressed about college graduates by policy makers, scholars, and employers, and given what we know about what

There is an inverse correlation between student success and the proportion of contingent faculty

works in enhancing learning and increasing the number of graduates? Despite recent surveys demonstrating that college graduates are very satisfied with their education

and with how well it has prepared them for work, policy makers offer a different assessment, one that is more in line with research—such as that of Arum and Roksa (2011)—and with employer surveys (Hart Research Associates 2010). This assessment calls for greater attention to and investment in what is learned in college, for we are currently producing many credit hours and many graduates without sufficiently preparing students for employment or for graduate or professional school. A major concern of students and policy makers is whether college leads to (better) employment. The completion agenda ignores this goal, and indeed undermines it.

At another level, the completion agenda is shifting the goal from attainment of college degrees to completion of some college—i.e., to credentials. This shift to include short-cycle output as part of higher education attainment effectively abandons any commitment to liberal education, which is central to professional employment. Few short-cycle degree certificates currently advance liberal education outcomes, and almost none are designed to get students on a pathway leading to higher levels of learning.

The completion agenda misses the opportunity to build the right foundation for enhancing the quality of college education. Indeed, it undermines our ability to do so. Studies of student learning and success have yielded consistent evidence that the academic engagement of students by faculty (and other professionals) is fundamental. One proxy measure of the professional working conditions that facilitate student engagement is instructors' employment status. There is an inverse correlation between student success and the proportion of contingent faculty. The problem is that the working conditions of these faculty—not having offices, not knowing from one semester to the next whether they will remain employed, not knowing what they will be teaching more than a few days before classes start—undercut the opportunity for the “new faculty majority” (an empirical description and the name of a new advocacy

organization) to engage students, and for students to engage them. Each of the major faculty unions and associations (the AAUP, the American Federation of Teachers, and the National Education Association) has policies and campaigns to enhance the working conditions of contingent faculty and to expand the numbers and proportions of tenure-track faculty. This issue is all the more significant because engagement is especially key for low-income, first-generation students. Faculty working conditions are student learning conditions. Any agenda that overlooks the former shortchanges the latter.

The goals of the completion agenda refer exclusively to cost efficiencies at colleges and universities and to either cost containment at the state level or cuts to state budgets. The associated policies foreground simple metrics such as credit hours and graduation rates. For example, an October 2011 proposal from the Arizona Board of Regents calls for state funding of Arizona's three public universities to be

based on increases (or decreases) in the production of credit hours and graduates (and grant monies). No reference is made to increasing or even replacing departing/retiring faculty in order to achieve that output; quite the contrary, the premise is that faculty need to become more productive and that institutions need to become more efficient.

Consider the incentives these policies provide. If the goal is simply greater output with fewer production employees (faculty), the quickest paths are to drop standards, to replace full-time faculty with yet more part-time faculty, and to serve more and wealthier out-of-state students who are able to pay more and are more likely to succeed. Ironically, a completion agenda that promotes performance-based funding but that pays little attention to an important aspect of that performance (i.e., quality) encourages institutions to reduce quality or to reduce service to in-state, low-income students.

At the national level, this irony is evident in the 2010 McKinsey and Company report,



University of Arizona

Winning by Degrees (Auguste et al. 2010). Although the report does not address the need to increase educational quality or to prepare students for work or for graduate or professional school, it does at least speak to the need to maintain quality. Yet the report encourages “transition to heavy use of part-time faculty” (53), a remarkable proposal for a system in which three-quarters of the academic workforce is contingent, and a little less than half is already employed on a part-time basis. Increasing those numbers—and ignoring the number of student support professionals—does not offer a recipe for enhancing engagement, educational quality, and student success. *Winning by Degrees* offers a path of decline through disengagement and disinvestment in what we know works.

Increasing non-meritocratic social stratification

The completion agenda will likely increase non-meritocratic social stratification. Low-income, first-generation, and immigrant students and students of color are the fastest growing demographics in US higher education. Analysts of prospective student populations agree on this point. The disagreement lies in what sorts of educational opportunities these students should be afforded. Over the last several decades, low-income students have enhanced their educational qualifications but have not realized gains in access to the best colleges (Bastedo and Jaquette 2011). The question is, should we continue to build retaining walls, or should we ride the demographic wave?

The policy disagreement, both nationally and in the states, centers on how policy makers who are overwhelmingly white, college educated, and economically privileged view and construct the educational prospects of other peoples’ children who increasingly are not white, college educated, or economically privileged. One troubling sign of the perceptions is the shift in the goal of realizing greater postsecondary educational achievement. As a result of an ongoing policy push to recognize nondegree educational attainment as success, our focus has, in a very short time, shifted away from college degrees alone to include credentials as well.

This shift can be attributed, in part, to the economic recession, which continues to affect funding for higher education. But it also reflects

a political regression, not to the proverbial mean (middle ground), but rather to the early decades of the last century. At that time, the educational debate was over whether an academic high school education was appropriate for all students, or whether some—i.e., immigrants and low-income students—should instead be tracked into a terminal vocational curriculum. Substitute “community college” for “high school” and you have much the same discourse and assumptions today about the capacities and natural place of those same groups of students.

In the first year of the Obama administration, more funding was allocated to community colleges. But the funding was shifted from the Department of Education to the Department of Labor, and focused entirely on workforce development. Narrowing what a community college can be, and what a community college education can lead to, restricts and rations educational opportunities by class and by race/ethnicity. It violates the history of community colleges in the United States, and it violates our commitment to a system in which opportunity is defined by merit and talent trumps all.

Most first-generation, low-income, and Latino students start their postsecondary education at community colleges. National and state policies, including the defunding of public four-year institutions, will increase that pattern; more students who might have started at a low-tuition university will now start at a community college. To the extent that community colleges become primarily terminal credential providers, such policies will ensure that community colleges are not only where most students start, but also where most of them finish. Rather than instruments of upward social mobility, community colleges will become instruments for reproducing and heightening non-meritocratic social stratification.

In four-year colleges and universities the policy mechanisms are different, but there too national and state policies are likely to increase non-meritocratic social stratification. Defunding public higher education at the state level, and shifting the cost burden to students and their families, encourages colleges and universities to generate more revenue by recruiting higher-paying, higher-income—and often lower-scoring, out-of-state—students. It also discourages them from recruiting low-income in-state students who pay less tuition,

require more financial aid, and are defined as “expensive.” In a system defined not only by prestige maximization but also by academic capitalism (Slaughter and Rhoades 2004), there is a heightened focus on money (tuition revenue) over merit (quality).

The University of Arizona, where I have been a professor for twenty-five years, expresses these dynamics. And the newly proposed “results-based funding” formula in Arizona will only make the situation worse. The university has been a relatively open-access, low-tuition public research university, which makes sense in a low-income state with only three public universities and a tiny independent sector. But in the last decade, the University of Arizona has more aggressively “managed” its enrollments to maximize net tuition revenues, recruiting students from California with average household incomes that are over 50 percent higher than those of Arizona residents. On average, these students

Rather than instruments of upward social mobility, community colleges will become instruments for reproducing and heightening non-meritocratic social stratification

have lower SAT scores than do Arizona residents, but the university has increasingly utilized non-need-based aid to recruit them—which, due to the out-of-state tuition, still results in a net gain in tuition revenue. Non-need-based aid is also non-meritocratic: the aid is allocated based neither on need nor on merit. This is

a major growth segment of financial aid, and it helps heighten non-meritocratic social stratification. Performance-based funding in Arizona promises to accelerate this pattern, providing a financial incentive for universities to turn away from local students—especially first-generation, low-income, Latino, and immigrant students—leaving them to start and finish at community colleges.

In short, just as we are building walls on the US-Mexican border to keep out the influx of people seeking opportunity, so we are building retaining walls in the academy that will keep out the growth demographics in our population.



University of Arizona

Sadly, the walls in higher education are more effective and less permeable than those on the border.

Who will be our country's knowledge creators?

Colleges and universities do more than graduate students. They do more than enhance students' learning outcomes. They do more than conduct research and community service. Colleges and universities also prepare the next generation of professors, a key segment of our country's intellectual workforce.

State policy ignores the role of higher education in preparing future faculty. To state policy makers, professors are either a labor cost to be minimized or an insufficiently productive labor force to be speeded up. The mechanisms for ramping up productivity undermine the system's capacity to educate graduate students and, thereby, to create the next generation of knowledge producers. Consider the Arizona proposal for funding public universities, which combines performance-based allocations with the same allocation for three quite different universities—a land-grant university, a research university, and a doctoral-granting university. Equalized funding ignores the differential costs that derive from these institutions' different fields and functions, such as preparing future faculty.

Federal higher education policy also overlooks the future professoriate. Science funding is provided to current professors, graduate students, and postdocs to apprentice for future professorial positions. Yet, the lack of any corresponding investment in those positions leaves many postdocs languishing in “postdoc purgatory” or as “permdocs.”

In our short-term fixation on organizational efficiency and budget cuts, we are failing to invest in the future professoriate and to provide the foundation for future innovation. Who will undertake academic initiatives and create new knowledge, and where is the pool of future academic administrators? Given the large proportion of contingent faculty (over two-thirds), and given that the average professor in a four-year institution is in his or her mid- to late-fifties, we need a national focus on the project of investing in new faculty.

Moreover, the nature of existing academic positions and pressures is such that many graduate students who once aspired to be

professors are reconsidering. I have seen this in my own daughters, both of whom were undergraduate biology majors. One is now a doctoral student in public health at Johns Hopkins, and the other is a doctoral student in population biology at the University of California–Davis. Both have been working through the possibilities of professional careers in science, public health, and academe; both have been observing the lives of young professors at research universities. Neither particularly likes what she sees in the academy, especially in terms of the opportunities for women. And my daughters are not alone. A study of doctoral students at the University of California revealed a significant decline over time in the number of men and, especially, women who want to become professors (Mason, Goulden, and Frasch 2009). The messages we are sending through our policies and our own work lives are off-putting to many potential faculty members. We are undercutting the future creative potential of our knowledge workforce.

Completing the completion agenda

Although the completion agenda undermines the educational effectiveness agenda, the reverse would not hold true. What if policy makers were to prioritize quality by promoting student engagement with larger numbers of tenure-track professors and with better-resourced contingent professors? The performance of colleges and universities would be enhanced: graduation rates would improve, the growth populations of students would be better served, and graduates would be better prepared to move into the workforce or into graduate or professional education.

If you care about enhancing quality in college, then you should also care about enhancing the working conditions of the professoriate. Whether faculty have offices and are assigned classes far enough in advance to enable adequate course preparation; whether they are part of developing, refining, and coordinating the curriculum; whether they have the academic freedom and job security to challenge students academically and to explore controversial ideas—all these issues are integral to educational quality and student success (Hamilton and Gaff 2009). This is particularly true for the growth segments of the traditional-aged student population. Caring about educational quality means investing in the human infrastructure

and capacity to provide a first-rate education. It means models of educational delivery that involve faculty and students in relationships over time, not just in brief encounters of the educationally inconsequential and not-so-very-close kind.

Similarly, what if policymakers were to prioritize tapping into the enormous potential energy and talent of the demographic wave? If you care about the American dream and America's promise, then you should be troubled by policies that increase non-meritocratic social stratification. We are cheating our demographic future by closing the door to so many students and preventing them from educationally pursuing their talents to the fullest. In the process, we are also threatening our democracy. As evidenced in England, increasing divides in the wealth of the population, combined with public policies that blame and punish the middle and working classes for the economic woes of the day, are a combustible mix. Those are the international data we should learn from. Our current generation of leaders is failing our future generations of students.

In the late 1950s, California was faced with a tidal wave of demand for college. In response, educational leaders and policy makers developed a "master plan" to ensure that all prospective students would have access to affordable, high-quality higher education. Our educational and social responsibilities are no less pressing today. Do we thrive together, or do we further divide our population by social class, race/ethnicity, and immigrant status—regardless of merit?

Finally, what if policymakers were to prioritize investing in the academy's innovation workforce? If you care about America's ability to create, innovate, and compete, then you should care about the professoriate, which produces value. Professors enrich our communities through teaching, research, and outreach/service. Today the aging boomer generation of faculty is nearing retirement, and over two-thirds of faculty are employed on contingent appointments. Meanwhile, we are losing generations of talent among graduate students and postdocs. Our nation's creative workforce is at risk.

The completion agenda will leave the United States behind educationally. As we

If you care about enhancing quality in college, then you should also care about enhancing the working conditions of the professoriate

count credit hours and graduation numbers, wondering what happened to quality, we will find ourselves further down the path of non-meritocratic division between haves and have-nots. And as the number of have-nots continues to grow, American colleges and

universities will become places where money counts far more than it should in educational attainment. In the end, the completion agenda will leave us without the strong and innovative intellectual workforce our knowledge-based society needs.

It is time, therefore, to complete the completion agenda. It is time to head off this country's decline by a thousand cuts. It is time to prioritize quality, equitable educational opportunity, and the creation of a strong intellectual workforce. It is time to invest in expanding the promise of higher education and, thereby, to extend the American dream. □

To respond to this article, e-mail liberaled@aacu.org, with the author's name on the subject line.

REFERENCES

- Arum, R., and J. Roksa. 2011. *Academically Adrift: Limited Learning in Colleges and Universities*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Auguste, B. G., A. Cota, K. Jayaram, and M. C. A. Laboissière. 2010. *Winning by Degrees: The Strategies of Highly Productive Higher-Education Institutions*. Washington, DC: McKinsey and Company.
- Bastedo, M. N., and O. Jaquette. 2011. "Running in Place: Low-Income Students and the Dynamics of Higher Education Stratification." *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis* 33 (3): 318–39.
- Hamilton, N. W., and J. G. Gaff. 2009. *The Future of the Professoriate: Academic Freedom, Peer Review, and Shared Governance*. Washington, DC: Association of American Colleges and Universities.
- Hart Research Associates. 2010. *Raising the Bar: Employers' Views on College Learning in the Wake of the Economic Downturn*. Washington, DC: Association of American Colleges and Universities.
- Mason, M. A., M. Goulden, and K. Frasch. 2009. "Why Graduate Students Reject the Fast Track." *Academe* 95 (1): 11–16.
- National Governors Association. 2010. *Complete to Compete: Common College Completion Metrics*. Washington, DC: National Governors Association.
- Slaughter, S., and G. Rhoades. 2004. *Academic Capitalism and the New Economy: Markets, State, and Higher Education*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.

Copyright of Liberal Education is the property of Association of American Colleges & Universities and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.