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What's Wrong with the Completion Agenda— And What We Can Do About It

THIS ARTICLE addresses the broad-based reform movement led by state and federal policy makers and designed to increase dramatically the number of students graduating from our nation's colleges and universities. This movement—known as “the completion agenda”—aims to collect more and better data about students' educational progress toward degrees, to enact new policies that incentivize increased graduation rates and improve the efficiency of degree production, and to tie funding to increased completion rates.

It is up to educators and college and university leaders themselves to push back against the completion-only agenda and to take the lead in recommending and implementing policies that put the quality of learning first

Rooted in the increasingly tight linkage between educational attainment and success in the global economy, external pressure on higher education to increase the numbers of college graduates has been building for decades. As part of this pressure, President Obama (2009) set an ambitious goal in his very first State of the Union address: “By 2020, America will once again have the highest proportion of college graduates in the world.” The president noted that, “in a global economy where the most valuable skill you can sell is your knowledge, a good education is no longer just a pathway to opportunity—it is a prerequisite” and that “every American will need to get more than a high school diploma.”

The Department of Education, many leading foundations, and many policy organizations have taken up President Obama's challenge. Unfortunately, the ensuing completion reform movement was launched in the midst of a severe economic downturn and after years of demographic shifts and educational shortfalls at both the K-12 and higher education levels. College access and completion have been stunningly stratified by income and by community of origin for many years. At least three out of four students who make it to campus are underprepared to succeed there (ACT 2011), and many need serious remediation to bring their skills and knowledge up to college levels. A significant number of these students are working, often carrying the kind of workload that studies show is correlated with high levels of failure to complete. And due to weaknesses in data tracking, far too little is known about transfer students; graduation rates, therefore, are only approximations. Turning this ship around will be challenging indeed.

The enormity of the challenge posed by these obstacles would seem to call for greater investment in both K-12 schooling and, especially, public higher education in order to increase the numbers of students prepared for *and* graduating from college. Yet funding for higher education has been trending in just the opposite direction for many years, and

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the recent economic contraction has only accelerated the plummeting of public subsidies. As a result, the actual costs of college are rising inexorably for students. The cost shifting—from the public to individual students and their families—has made cost, rather than either completion or the quality of learning, the dominant public concern. Elected officials at the state level also are faced with increasingly tough budget choices, and thus the completion agenda has morphed into a more-completion-at-less-cost agenda. This movement is poised to have a profound effect on how colleges and universities throughout the country operate. Unfortunately, it has become too narrowly focused; whereas society and the economy need “more and *better*,” policy leaders are trying to deliver “more and *cheaper*.”

Completion initiatives

All the current completion initiatives are responding to a larger environment characterized by the globalization of the knowledge economy. Members of the public understand the broad trends and are flocking to colleges and universities in order to increase their chances of succeeding in a rapidly changing economy. Too few of them, however, are completing college and, unfortunately, the United States is currently projected to be, by 2018, at least three million college-educated workers short to meet projected demand (Carnevale, Smith, Strohl 2010). While the challenge of educating an additional three million students *well* is complex, most completion reform efforts are focused simplistically on only *one* issue based on *one* data set that demonstrates that many students—especially those attending two-year institutions, for-profit institutions, and some state colleges and universities—do not “cross the finish line” in a reasonable amount of time (i.e., six years). This is actually true both for students who enter college clearly underprepared for its rigors *and* for those who have the appropriate levels of preparation but, for a variety of reasons, never complete their degrees. In response, an enormous part of the completion agenda has been directed exclusively at increasing “on-time” completion rates.

For example, the Complete to Compete initiative launched by the National Governors Association (NGA) Center for Best Practices in 2010 focuses primarily on promoting better

data collection to track student progress through state higher education systems. One of the theories of change underlying this initiative holds that if institutions and states better understood how students are making their way through public systems, educational and policy leaders could and would improve the efficiency of those systems. Accordingly, the NGA is urging states to implement new performance funding systems that tie institutional funding to completion rates rather than initial enrollment figures alone. This approach, which has been tried with limited success in some states, is intended to incentivize institutions to graduate more of the students they admit (Lederman 2011). Better data are indeed important, but we need an even fuller set of data on both graduation rates and student achievement in order to meet the needs of the twenty-first-century economy.

Complete College America (CCA), an independent initiative currently involving twenty-nine states, is providing new models for data collection—and, thereby, informing the NGA effort. Yet, thus far, these models still focus only on “time to degree” rather than on completion with assurance of demonstrated achievement. In the CCA, participating states are required to commit to a comprehensive set of reforms that include streamlining curricular offerings and implementing strict performance funding strategies tied to completion rates.

Several large foundations—most notably the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation and the Lumina Foundation for Education—are also funding dozens of initiatives designed to increase productivity and completion rates through projects to improve data collection, streamline requirements, increase the effectiveness of remedial or developmental education programs, expand the use of various student success strategies, increase the use of online learning, and test strategies to increase the rates by which students in two-year institutions transfer successfully to four-year institutions. Of course, all these initiatives depend on other efforts to increase the number of high school graduates who are prepared to succeed in college. Yet, many of them rest on the simplistic assumption that the *causes* of low graduation rates are primarily a matter of neglect, lack of awareness, misplaced priorities, or incompetent leadership. The assumption that underlies specifically the proposed performance

funding policies is that, if money isn't explicitly tied to graduation, educators and leaders won't focus on the issue because they just won't pay attention or they just don't care whether their students actually graduate. The problem is more complex than these assumptions suggest.

It *should* be a national priority to pursue productive approaches that help different groups of students stay in college and graduate on time, and we absolutely should make policy changes and devote more resources to support them. We should not, however, underestimate the challenges to reaching these ambitious goals. Data and leadership matter, but so do resources—both financial and human. At present, private foundations are the only source of additional resources for these efforts. Funding for higher education is being reduced in

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most states. It is safe to assume that funding levels will remain low, at least in the short term, and probably will continue to decline, especially at public colleges and universities (AASCU 2011). Under these circumstances, we do indeed

have to tackle these issues with the same or fewer resources. But we also must attend simultaneously to the serious quality of learning shortfall that threatens to get even worse if we maintain an *exclusive* focus on completion and efficiency.

The quality shortfall

Many policy makers are missing the fact that the projected shortfall in college-educated workers is a result of today's workplace requiring a broader set of skills and higher levels of learning than ever before. The Board of Directors of the Association of American



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Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) recognized this broad trend in its 2010 statement, *The Quality Imperative*, noting that “the quality shortfall is just as urgent as the attainment shortfall” (1). There are, in fact, two dimensions to the quality shortfall. First, too many students are making little or no progress on important learning outcomes while in college; second, the increasing complexity of our world is adding to what a well-educated person must know and be able to do. Drawing on the findings from recent research commissioned by AAC&U, Carol Geary Schneider (2010) has noted that “success in today’s workplace requires achievement in at least six new areas of knowledge and skill development, which have been added to the already ambitious learning portfolio required in earlier eras.” Employers themselves are, for instance, asking for greater emphasis on such traditional outcomes as “communications, analytic reasoning, quantitative literacy, broad knowledge of science and society, and field-specific knowledge and skills.” They are also asking for graduates with high levels of “global knowledge and competence; intercultural knowledge and skills; creativity and innovation; teamwork and problem-solving skills in diverse settings; information literacy

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and fluency; and ethical reasoning and decision making.”

Even as the list of expected areas of knowledge and skill development expands, evidence is mounting that many college students are graduating without appropriate levels of achievement in these essential areas of learning. Only between 5 and 10 percent of college graduates have experienced even minimal global learning (Adelman 2004), for example, and more than 35 percent of college students are making minimal or no gains in their critical thinking and writing skills over their four years in college (Arum, Roksa, and Cho 2011). Employers’ overall assessment of higher education reflects these data: only about a quarter believe that colleges and universities are effectively preparing students for the challenges of today’s global economy (Hart Research Associates 2010). Ignoring these realities of the new knowledge economy has caused a dangerous distortion of priorities in education policy making. Many policy makers, for instance, are focused so exclusively on increasing the numbers of degrees or certificates that they are shifting resources to existing short-term training programs that lead to narrowly focused certificates. This focus misses the fact that although these narrow



training programs may be cheaper to provide initially, they actually depreciate in value to the student and the economy.

While the economy may need more workers with the sort of technical skills that are potentially provided by well-crafted two-year programs, evidence suggests that even these workers need a fuller set of skills and abilities than traditional vocational training programs provide. A recent study by the National Bureau of Economic Research, for instance, documents that, “while the skills students learn from a vocational education may ease their transition into the labor market . . . those initial labor-market advantages fade as workers age. The study found that individuals with a general education are more likely to be employed at age 50 than are those with a vocational education. A general education was particularly helpful in countries that experienced faster economic growth and larger technological change” (*Inside Higher Ed* 2011). At all levels, then, the economy may be demanding more workers with higher education degrees or certificates, but it is also demanding that *all* workers have broader knowledge and skills as well.

On its own, remedying this quality shortfall is a significant challenge. Getting the large number of students who are at risk of dropping out of college to increase their achievement levels *and* graduate on time presents a still greater challenge. Rather than addressing both of these challenges, however, policy makers seem to assume that all students who cross some “finish line” have actually learned what they need to compete successfully in the global economy and contribute to rebuilding our democratic society. Abundant data suggest that this assumption is simply false (Arum and Roksa 2011; Pascarella et al. 2011; AAC&U 2005; Hart Research Associates 2010). The truth is that colleges and universities are struggling to educate a larger population of students, many of whom are underprepared for and unmotivated to work hard at college-level learning at exactly the moment when society and the global economy are demanding even higher levels of learning from everyone.

The dangers of a completion-only approach

Why shouldn't we focus our efforts on creating incentives to increase the number of students prepared for college *and* the number who ultimately “cross the finish line”? Clearly,

we *should* do this. But it is not the only thing we should do.

As an illustration of the dangers of a completion-only agenda, consider the so-called STEM fields (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics), which represent one area of the economy where the shortages of well-educated college graduates are most acute. President Obama focused specifically on these fields in his 2011 State of the Union address, noting that “the first step in winning the future is encouraging American innovation.” As he put it, “we need to out-innovate, out-educate, and out-build the rest of the world.” Comparing the United States to other nations, the president focused on how “nations like China and India [have] started educating their children earlier and longer, with greater emphasis on math and science,” and he then called for “100,000 new teachers in the fields of science and technology and engineering and math.”

In a blog posting published on the website of the *Atlantic Monthly* a week after Obama's speech, Lane Wallace (2011) made the important point that, as he put it, “Innovation Isn't About Math.” We could respond to the STEM shortfall *just* by pushing more and more students into math and science fields—creating, for instance, incentives that encourage them to major in those fields. We could even streamline the requirements in those fields and reduce the requirement that STEM majors take general education courses in other areas, such as history, art, literature, and global studies. Yet, these approaches miss an essential piece of the puzzle. As Wallace pointed out, “innovation experts and consultants stress repeatedly that innovation isn't a matter of subject knowledge. It's about thinking in flexible, integrative, and multidisciplinary ways, across many fields and types of knowledge. It's about being able to synthesize and integrate different perspectives and models; of understanding and taking into account different human, cultural and economic needs, desires, values, and factors, and, from all that, glimpsing a new way forward that nobody else managed to see.” We need to go beyond just helping more students make their way through the same old STEM curricula, or through more streamlined curricula. Instead, we need radically to change how STEM fields are taught, and we need to connect learning in those fields with a

wider array of subjects taught through more integrated general education and major programs.

Employers are calling on colleges and universities to focus on educational practices that require students to do research projects and apply what they are learning in real-world settings. Eighty-four percent of employers believe that expecting students to complete a significant project that demonstrates their depth of knowledge in their major and their acquisition of analytical, problem-solving, and communication skills would help prepare them for success in the global economy. Eighty-one percent of employers believe that expecting students to complete an internship or community-based field project to connect classroom learning with real-world experiences would also help (Hart Research Associates 2010). These kinds of practices have the potential to increase students' achievement of essential learning outcomes, but they are not necessarily consistent with calls to reduce requirements or streamline curricula. And to focus exclusively on the *number* of courses or credits required or available to students is likely to miss completely the need for more students to experience more integrative and engaged forms of college learning.

Instead of exploring ways to increase students' exposure to deep learning, research, and real-world applications of learning, colleges and universities are facing strong pressure to move in the opposite direction. Instead of reinventing their general education programs to make them more integrated and inclusive of real-world and applied learning, institutions are seeking to increase graduation rates by "outsourcing" general education to high schools or are encouraging their students to "get general education out of the way" by picking up a course here or there on the Internet. Individual institutions and state systems are reverting back to Cold War-era general education curricula focused on broad but shallow exposure to different disciplines.

Two further examples illustrate this troubling potential downside to a completion-only agenda. As anyone who has followed the various institutional ranking systems based on limited data can attest, any system that uses simplistic data (e.g., completion rates or alumni giving rates) and attaches high stakes to the

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publication of those data invites manipulation of the data. A recent case illustrates this danger. An internal investigation at Edison State College in Florida recently found that about 75 percent of students in three programs were allowed to substitute elective credits for

required courses in order to ensure that these students graduated on time and were able to transfer into bachelor's degree programs. The *Inside Higher Ed* article reporting on this investigation notes, rightly, that "with policy makers in Washington and foundation officials placing so much emphasis on improving college completion and graduation rates, observers worry that what happened at Edison State College could become more common in the future if quality controls aren't enacted" (Kiley 2011).

Scott Jaschik recently reported on a set of presentations made by community college faculty members at the 2011 meeting of the Modern Language Association. In the session, "English professors talked about their concerns that . . . standards may be eroded in the push under the national 'completion agenda' to get more students through." Jaschik reported the particular concerns of Steven Canaday of Anne Arundel Community College in Maryland, who noted that, like many community colleges, Anne Arundel "recently announced a commitment to double by 2020 the number of degrees and certificates it awards. English instruction is viewed as key because everyone must pass first-year composition to earn an associate degree." One idea being discussed in Canaday's English department is "that the composition course end its requirement of a research paper." Canaday acknowledged that "ending the requirement would probably result in more people passing" (Jaschik 2011). Given what employers have said about how useful it is for students to do research projects in order to prepare for success in the workplace, this potential shift in teaching practice and classroom assignments could significantly reduce students' skills and abilities while simultaneously increasing their likelihood of graduating.

Obviously, no one involved in advancing the completion agenda is deliberately seeking to improve completion rates by lowering student achievement. Yet this is the likely

outcome of many of the completion-only proposals, which raises the question: Is it really possible simultaneously to improve college completion rates *and* student achievement of essential learning outcomes? The contours of a promising new “completion-plus” agenda suggest that it is.

What does a completion-plus-quality approach require?

The completion agenda is driving states and institutions toward more comprehensive and nuanced frameworks for collecting data—college readiness and remediation rates, transfer rates, graduation rates, and so forth. Policy makers are devising systems to hold institutions accountable for reaching new targets on the basis of these metrics. Rather than hastily implementing untested high-stakes accountability systems based on limited data, however, we should couple these more comprehensive data-collection frameworks with more comprehensive frameworks for defining—and collecting data on—the quality of student learning. Only then, using both sets of data together, will it truly be productive to hold institutions accountable for needed improvements. Funding should only be shifted in order to invest in proven strategies that increase both student achievement and rates of completion. How can this be done?

Start with clarity about learning outcomes. Many colleges and universities now have a common set of expected learning outcomes for all students (Hart Research Associates 2009). Colleges and universities must continue to calibrate these learning outcomes to their missions and to twenty-first-century needs, clarify what specifically is required of every student in order to earn a degree, and communicate clearly to students what is expected of them. Many institutions and state systems are using a set of “essential learning outcomes” developed as part of AAC&U’s Liberal Education and America’s Promise (LEAP) initiative to advance this work much more systemically than ever before (Carey 2011). The recently released Degree Qualifications Profile developed by the Lumina Foundation for Education (2011) will also help institutions refine their definitions of required learning outcomes and specify demonstrated accomplishments at different levels of learning. With greater clarity about outcomes

and levels of learning, institutions can more confidently and efficiently facilitate student mobility and progress both within and across institutions.

Without inappropriately prescribing outcomes or requirements, policy makers should insist that institutions operating in a given state or receiving state or federal funding actually have clearly defined learning outcomes that are well calibrated to institutional missions and twenty-first-century demands.

Ensure that all students experience “high-impact” educational practices. Defining outcomes is only the first step toward increasing achievement. Policy change ought to be guided by new knowledge about how people learn and which specific practices really work. Several “high-impact” educational practices have been proven to increase levels of student achievement and to increase the chances that students will graduate on time. This emerging body of research, moreover, demonstrates that these practices produce positive results for students from a wide array of backgrounds, including first-generation and underrepresented minority students. High-impact practices such as first-year seminars, learning communities, undergraduate research, service learning, and capstone courses appear to increase retention rates, graduation rates, and the achievement of important learning outcomes (Kuh 2008; Brownell and Swaner 2009). Unfortunately, only a fraction of students actually participate in one or more of these practices as part of their undergraduate programs of study (Kuh 2008).

Institutions should be encouraged not only to collect and disaggregate data on the progress students are making in accumulating credits, but also to collect data on how many and which students have access to these kinds of practices. Institutions with high levels of participation in high-impact educational practices should be rewarded with additional funding. A portion of this funding could be allocated to expand the use of these kinds of practices or to provide faculty development opportunities through which faculty members can learn how to implement these practices effectively within the required curricula for all students.

Develop and require the use of meaningful and authentic assessments. Beyond simply calculating grade point averages, colleges and universities are making significant progress in refining how they assess the achievement of

common learning outcomes across students' educational careers. Many are now using sophisticated and nationally tested rubrics to assess the achievement of outcomes that everyone deems essential for success in the twenty-first century (Rhodes 2010). Others are refining their use of multiple assessment tools to gather data on student achievement levels (Sternberg et al. 2011). Policy makers could incentivize implementation of meaningful assessment programs by providing additional funding to institutions with particularly robust assessment systems or by conditioning funding on the presence of assessment systems with a set of quality criteria (e.g., clearly defined outcomes, use of multiple assessment measures, disaggregation of assessment data, and use of both qualitative and quantitative data). The New Leadership Alliance for Student Learning and Accountability is currently developing an "Excellent Practices in Student Learning Assessment" institutional certification program that will provide important new frameworks through which new accountability and funding systems could be developed.

The accrediting community is also moving in productive directions with regard to quality assurance and assessment of student learning outcomes. For example, several regional accrediting agencies are beginning to work with their institutional members to test the use of the Degree Qualifications Profile developed by the Lumina Foundation. The federal government could assist in this effort by shifting the standards that authorize accrediting organizations to serve as gatekeepers for federal funding. The government could reduce certain requirements in order to allow accreditors to devote more resources to evaluating assessment approaches and results. Doing so would help ensure that institutions are collecting data that can be used to improve the quality of learning.

How can policy help (or at least not hurt)?

Policy at the national and state levels can certainly help advance important educational goals. Policy makers, however, must be vigilant in avoiding policies that create perverse incentives (e.g., incentives that increase selectivity or lower standards). And before any policy is implemented, its likely effect on the quality of learning should be considered carefully.

The most recent report from the NGA's

Steps to Increase Completion and Quality in Higher Education

1. Clearly articulate learning outcomes calibrated to today's challenges in work, life, and citizenship.
2. Map curricular options and requirements to those outcomes.
3. Collect disaggregated data on students' access to and achievement in high-impact educational practices.
4. Incentivize through funding the expansion of access to and use of high-impact practice in classrooms, programs, institutions, and systems.
5. Collect data on students' progress through programs and their levels of successful remediation, transfer, and degree completion.
6. Collect and report on both qualitative and quantitative assessments of student learning—focusing on assessments of students' ability to apply their learning to complex real-world problems.

Complete to Compete initiative takes a small but important step in this direction by recommending that governors "require public colleges and universities to provide evidence that improvements in completion and attainment are not occurring at the expense of learning" (Reindl and Reyna 2011, 9). The report encourages states to work with higher education institutions to gather and make publicly available the findings from various student learning assessments. Unfortunately, however, the NGA report recommends a very narrow set of assessment approaches, few of which measure the complex and integrative skills students need. The Department of Education's work on completion is moving in a promising direction as well. In a recent presentation at the department's offices in Washington, DC, Under Secretary Martha Kanter noted that the department's strategic objectives are to increase access to college and workforce training, *foster institutional quality with accountability and transparency*, and increase degree and certificate completion rates.

While these steps are laudable, it is up to educators and college and university leaders themselves to push back against the completion-only agenda and to take the lead in recommending and implementing policies that

put the quality of learning first. (For a list of specific steps the higher education community can take to increase both completion and quality, see the sidebar on p. 16.) Most importantly, the higher education community must resist implementing policies that would incentivize curricular designs that will lead to declining levels of learning and, instead, chart a course to develop and support designs that lead to excellence for all. We need the kinds of educational practices and policies that lead to a significant increase in the number of students who graduate on time and well prepared for the challenges they will face. Only by doing this will we increase the intellectual capital so desperately needed to rebuild our economy and strengthen our democratic society. □

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