



# Balancing Access with Success: A New Paradigm for Community Colleges

By J. Noah Brown

Education policy is shifting in America. Today, a new paradigm is emerging for the nation's community and technical colleges, and for all of education.

While educational access has historically been both a defining feature and an imperative for community and technical college boards and CEOs, increasing emphasis is being placed on moving from enrollment-driven policy to policies that emphasize student success and achievement.

In short, community and technical college leaders increasingly are being called upon to focus on balancing access with success.

On July 14, President Obama announced an ambitious federal initiative aimed at increasing the number of Americans with a college degree by 5 million by the year 2020 — the American Graduation Initiative.

The President's goal cannot be accomplished without community and technical colleges. This is no easy proposition, to be sure. This call to action comes flat up against the rising tide of enrollments and cuts in state and local funding, while community college boards and CEOs struggle to maintain access and quality.

Education Secretary Arne Duncan perhaps best captured the situation in September when he spoke of the conundrum confronting higher education leaders. "Every college president and every governing board wants to simultaneously improve quality, increase access — and yet constrain costs," Duncan told the 2009 National Historically Black Colleges and Universities Conference on Sept. 2. "To college executives, [these goals] — quality, access, and cost — often seem like mutually conflicting choices."



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## Crossing the Finish Line

Increasing graduation rates and student success will require multiple strategies and realignment within institutions, which must be led by their boards in partnership with CEOs.

The new book *Crossing the Finish Line* (William G. Bowen, Matthew M. Chingos & Michael S. McPherson, Princeton Press) explores a number of issues relating to college completion, particularly for most at-risk students — a population that overwhelmingly attends community and technical colleges. It recommends creating a better system for matching students to institutions — an imperative if we want to increase the number of students who complete their degrees or certificates. We must do more in this regard.

This recommendation is most important, in my opinion. It suggests that success is a function of directing students initially to the institution best suited to their needs, which in many cases is a community or technical college. To fail in this regard creates economic waste and inefficiencies and, worse, represents

a disservice to students and parents.

Boards and college administrators can address student success and improve completion rates in a number of ways. Remedial education, for example, must be made more intensive and better targeted to give students the best chance of succeeding, persisting, and graduating or transferring. We must end the practice of relegating the teaching of remedial courses to newer faculty or adjuncts with little classroom experience or pedagogical skills with such courses and students. Remedial students need as much psychological triage as they do basic skills instruction. Colleges should also look at realigning adult and remedial education programs in order to eliminate duplication and create more seamless pathways leading to student success.

Colleges can do a number of other things to improve student success rates. To begin with, they should create simplified education plans that focus on student success and lessen barriers whenever possible. Additionally, students who have completed a significant number of credits should be identified and encouraged to complete a degree or certificate. Colleges should not ignore the "low-hanging fruit" that will help boost graduation and transfer rates, and which will leverage students' educations to gain the greatest long-term benefits possible. Students also need to know that increased financial aid might supplement or even supplant part-time work in some cases, allowing students to pursue more credit hours and boosting persistence and the likelihood of completing.

Boards and administrators need to reach out and engage their high school and middle school peers to create greater

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understanding of what it takes to succeed at a community or technical college. For example, colleges have academic standards — but to what extent do boards and administrators communicate to students and parents what courses to take and why? In the same vein, colleges should create more concurrent enrollment programs that have the twin benefits of preparing and accelerating student success and completion.

## Realigning and Reprioritizing

With the Obama Administration's American Graduation Initiative expected to provide significant new federal resources to community colleges and states to improve student completion and graduation rates, the Association of Community College Trustees has an opportunity and a responsibility to help prepare community college trustees to lead their institutions to increase student success and completion.

This will require ACCT to strategically realign its advocacy, education, and services agenda and programs to create a more cohesive message to its member boards around an increased culture of student success and completion.

To assist member boards effectively, the ACCT Board's six new strategic priorities emphasize:

1. Advocating for federal funding and programmatic priorities that balance promoting access while improving community and technical college student persistence and completion;
2. Helping community college boards and administrators define relevant benchmarks for student success that ensure both accountability and transparency;
3. Partnering with relevant stakeholder organizations to refine and expand the practice of effective governance through targeted educational opportunities and specialized publications;
4. Helping community and technical college boards and administrators identify and use relevant data that facilitate shifting from enrollment-driven policies to student success and completion policies;
5. Advancing the public policy environment in support of a more holistic approach to education, including greater alignment between K-12 schools and community and technical colleges; and
6. Assisting community and technical college boards communicate effectively with their communities and policymakers to enhance understanding of the community and technical college mission and support for programs and efforts focusing on increasing student success and completion.

In short, ACCT is standing with its member boards and CEOs to strengthen community and technical colleges to meet the challenges of the new imperative — student success and completion.



*J. Noah Brown is ACCT's President and CEO. He welcomes your comments and feedback as ACCT continues to strive to serve you better. Contact*

*ACCT at [publicpolicy@acct.org](mailto:publicpolicy@acct.org) with your thoughts on this article.*