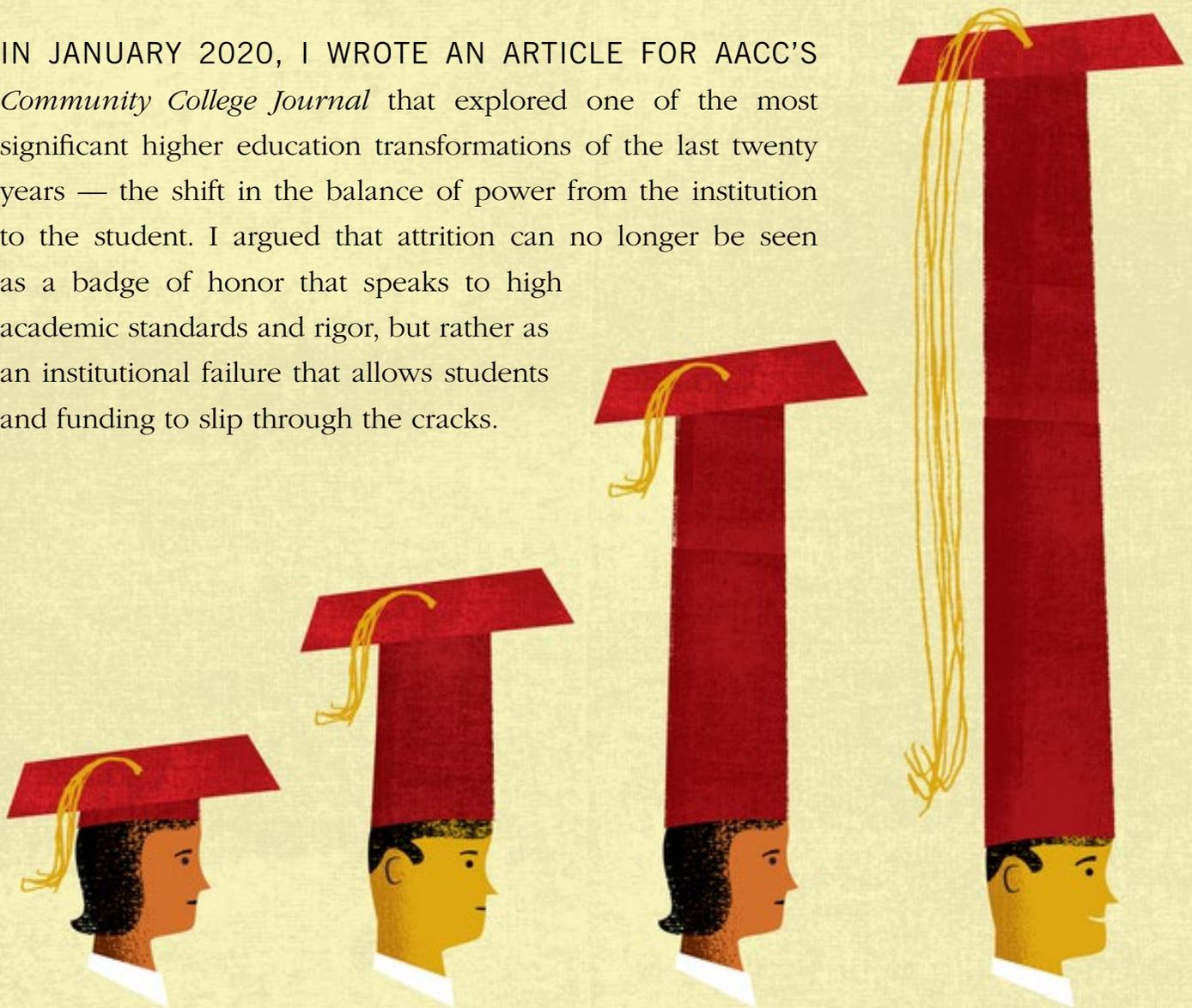


WANT TO IMPROVE GRADUATION RATES? MAKE IT EASIER TO GRADUATE

Automatically awarding degrees shifts the balance from institutions to students in ways that benefit both.

BY MARCIA DANIEL

IN JANUARY 2020, I WROTE AN ARTICLE FOR AACC'S *Community College Journal* that explored one of the most significant higher education transformations of the last twenty years — the shift in the balance of power from the institution to the student. I argued that attrition can no longer be seen as a badge of honor that speaks to high academic standards and rigor, but rather as an institutional failure that allows students and funding to slip through the cracks.



I also argued that community colleges are especially well positioned to leverage this new dynamic, because they have always strived to create the more nurturing atmosphere that today's students desire. There were already myriad examples of innovative steps community colleges had taken to better serve students who have different goals, want a different experience, and require different levels of support.

Here in 2021, we have yet another example of a technology-based initiative that is yielding big results in these critical areas — and it comes at a time when such reforms are essential in reversing the diminished enrollments that accompanied the COVID-19 pandemic. Why? Because it's a change that will see more students cross the stage with degrees and certificates in hand — and ultimately convince more people that there's something to be gained from investments in higher education.

Eliminating the Final Hurdle to Graduation and Completion

In the spring of 2019, California's Allan Hancock College had made great strides in improving its graduation and completion rates. With the state board's Student-Centered Funding Formula in place, the college had committed to improving outcomes by doubling down on its advising and student services programs. As a result, it had increased the number of degrees and certificates awarded each year by about 30 percent since 2011.

Still, there was a need to do even better. When examining the biggest impediments to graduation and completion, an often-overlooked area for improvement revealed itself: the longstanding practice of forcing students to submit an official petition to receive a degree or certificate. It turns out that many students didn't know that this requirement existed. Some didn't even know when they had accrued enough credits to fulfill it.

Hancock College implemented a system to remove this administrative task from students' shoulders and put it on the institution. Even better, it did so without adversely impacting the advisors, counselors, and degree evaluators who had found their rhythm and were already making big gains. By leveraging the data already in its enterprise resource planning (ERP) and student information systems (SIS), it automated the petition process and is already seeing staggering results.

470 Degrees Automatically Awarded in Year One

In Fall 2019, Hancock College began sending auto-generated alerts to students when they were nearing completion of a degree or certificate. It began offering students the option to opt out if that outcome is not part of their academic plan. And it began proactively awarding degrees and certificates to eligible students, and even sending an electronic version of their diploma that can be shared with prospective employers or on social media profiles.

By Summer 2020, 470 degrees and certificates had been automatically awarded to students who may never have received

them otherwise. Nearly 60 percent of those awards went to Latinx students at a time when equity is paramount. All in all, these figures contributed to a 20 percent completion increase year-over-year and a nearly 50 percent increase since 2011.

"The results speak for themselves," says Dr. Kevin Walthers, president of Allan Hancock College. "Where eight years ago we were graduating, on average, around 740 students per year, today we are graduating 1,300 students per year; more than a third of them through the auto-award process."

Once the program is expanded to include external credits from the military and other institutions, these figures are expected to climb even higher.

"We were missing those students who didn't understand the process or didn't realize they'd earned a credential," continues Walthers. "Now those students are receiving the benefits of their hard work — and you can't overstate the impacts on equity, on first-generation students, and on our local economy. When our graduates earn on average \$9,200 more than their peers with just a high school diploma, that's another \$15 million in wages for our community each year."

A Template for Success

Dr. Walthers hits the nail on the head at a time when the six-year completion rate for students starting in fall 2012 was just 40 percent; at a time when those figures drop to 35.7 percent and 27.5 percent for Latinx and black students, respectively; and at a time when state funding for community colleges is increasingly tied to improved graduation rates and their associated economic impacts.

But where programs like these might have the greatest impact of all is in the community college enrollment declines we've seen since the pandemic began. Those declines are further evidence that the balance of power has indeed shifted — and that institutions need students just as badly as students need institutions (if not more).

As such, it is incumbent on community colleges to engage students in new ways, support students in new ways, and do more to clear the path to academic success and all it brings. By eliminating an outdated barrier to graduation and completion, Allan Hancock College and other institutions like it are doing just that. In the process, they are showing people everywhere that they are just as committed to student success as the students themselves.



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