MEETING THE CHALLENGE

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BY COREY MURRAY AND ELLEN ULLMAN

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According to oft-published statistics cited by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, only about 53 percent of Americans go on to earn a degree or credential after high school; that figure dips to less than 25 percent among low-income and disadvantaged students. At community colleges, the foundation says, only about 38 percent of students leave with a credential. That’s compared with 55 percent in Canada and 54 percent in Japan, according to 2008 data cited by the international Organization for Cooperation and Development.

If America is to meet the challenge and become the world’s top producer of college- and career-ready graduates, the key will be the contributions of the nation’s 1,173 community colleges.

“Community colleges are an essential part of our recovery in the present—and our prosperity in the future,” said Obama during July 2009 remarks at Michigan’s Macomb Community College, where he announced his American Graduation Initiative (AGI), a sweeping proposal that would have provided more than $12 billion over 10 years to community colleges for improved education, job training, and student grants.

Obama and his lieutenants touted AGI as a higher education game changer, but Congressional lawmakers in March dropped the bill from its compromise on health care and education reform.

The move, coupled with rising enrollments and a rash of state budget cutbacks—some 36 states have reported cuts to their higher education budgets—make the prospect of meeting the president’s challenge tougher still.

But not impossible. Though it dropped AGI, Congress did put up $2 billion in education and training funds for community colleges to develop programs suitable for workers impacted by the economy and other factors, as well as additional continued support for the federal Pell Grant program.

“The Obama administration faced some hard choices in advancing health care reform, and we are grateful that substantial support for the Pell Grant program and the $2 billion in training funds for community colleges were included in reconciliation,” says American Association of Community Colleges President and CEO George R. Boggs, who adds, “Our colleges still face tough challenges, including an unprecedented enrollment surge, but their central role in meeting national completion goals is widely acknowledged and respected.”

Shared Burden
Community colleges, fortunately, have not been asked to shoulder the burden alone. Philanthropic heavyweights such as the Gates Foundation and Lumina Foundation for Education, among others, have donated millions to the cause.

“If we want to aspire to higher success rates, focusing on incremental change won’t do it,” says Josh Jarrett, senior program officer, postsecondary success at the Gates Foundation. “We must focus on that and on innovation.”

Gates says it, too, is committed to doubling the nation’s college graduation rate over the next 10 years, with a focus on improving completion rates for low-income students, starting with those enrolled in community colleges.

Lumina, which in 2008 launched an ambitious 11-state, $45.5 million grant program to improve access to college education, part of its Making Opportunity Affordable initiative, has stepped up yet again, this time joining forces with the Gates Foundation, the Association of Community College Trustees, and the American Association of Community Colleges to launch a Voluntary Framework of Accountability. The $1 million, two-year program aims to establish a set of common performance measurements that will increase college completion rates in tandem with institutional quality. The project, currently being piloted at eight community colleges, is expected

**Table: Education is a Key Driver of Employment and Income**

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to expand to 20 sites by 2011.

“We’re laying the groundwork in understanding what it takes to address this culture and up the ante on success,” says Jim Applegate, senior vice president for program development at Lumina.

The project builds off the success of another data-driven reform: Achieving the Dream (ATD). ATD, which applies student data to improve outcomes for disadvantaged learners, boasts a national network of more than 100 institutions in 22 states. Though data have been collected to make reforms at individual institutions, never has a system existed to take reforms on a national scale. Experts say this latest framework represents a step in that direction.

“A significant change over the last six years, aided by ATD and other initiatives, is that colleges are far more serious about using data to see who succeeds and who doesn’t, and using that information to target their strategies,” says Kay McClenney, director of the Center for Community College Student Engagement (CCCSE) at the University of Texas at Austin.

**Making Strides**

As the national focus shifts from access to success, community colleges are doing their part, testing new programs intended to see students through to completion.

Using money from its first ATD grant, El Paso Community College (EPCC) in Texas conducted an analysis that revealed that 98 percent of its students placed into developmental math. “That was a real eye-opener to us,” says EPCC President Richard Rhodes, who says he had no idea the numbers were so high.

Armed with that data, EPCC partnered with 12 area high schools to create a new college-readiness consortium. The first step was to define college readiness and how it is measured. Then the group figured out how to help students improve upon standardized test scores so that they could test out of developmental classes and into college-ready options.

Today, Texas high school students take Accuplacer (the state’s placement test) in 11th grade so that there is ample time for intervention. Local school districts share best practices and strategies to help students improve their scores.

“Rather than focus on how to help students while they’re here, we went backward to prevent them from needing to do any developmental work,” explains Rhodes.

Last spring, EPCC piloted a math emporium at one of its campuses that allowed students to finish developmental math in six weeks instead of a year. A grant from the Gates Foundation will help the college expand the emporium to all EPCC campuses this year.

From 2001 to 2009, EPCC’s enrollment grew by more than 50 percent, and the number of graduates grew by more than 100 percent. The school had a 24 percent decrease in students needing developmental reading and a 37 percent decrease in developmental writing.

“These improvements have everything to do with the programs we’ve started,” says Rhodes.

**Help for First-Timers**

Key to getting students to stay in school is finding a way to guide them successfully through the first year of classes, a key watermark for completion.

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Administrators at Houston Community College (HCC) in Texas knew the local community was teeming with students interested in attending college. But many of these potential students had no idea what classes to take or why. “We had a very high proportion of students with undeclared majors—as many as 70 percent of first-time students,” says Charles Cook, vice chancellor for instruction at HCC. Administrators also discovered that many students were accumulating as many as 50 semester credit hours without declaring a major. “These students were in significant danger of taking many courses that would not count for a degree once they decided on one,” says Cook.

To better guide these students, the school created four freshman success courses—three for those who knew what they wanted, such as Introduction to Engineering, and one, College and Career Exploration, for the undecided. The courses outline student expectations, teach proper study and note-taking skills, and provide an overview of the college’s services. Students in College and Career Exploration take aptitude tests and personal-interest surveys and learn about different fields from guest speakers.

HCC reported a 20 percent increase in persistence rates among students who took the success course versus those who did not; such success prompted administrators to make the program a requirement for first-time students. HCC is tailoring a version of the class to the various needs of special-interest groups, including minority males and veterans.

**Straight to the Source**

One of the best ways to learn what students need to succeed might be the simplest: ask.

After a two-day data retreat in which administrative teams worked their way through 4-inch binders, educators
at Sinclair Community College (SCC) in Dayton, Ohio, ditched data in favor of focus groups: real students talking about their educations.

“Data and surveys don’t tell you everything,” says SCC Provost Helen Grove. “We asked about what has helped, what hasn’t, and what would help.”

Grove’s staff discovered something that might seem obvious, but is crucial: First-time college students often don’t know a lot of basic information, such as the fact that college students have to buy their own books.

The staff also learned they had to improve scheduling so students could get seats in the classes they needed.

SCC administrators reorganized the college’s advising program after realizing students received different information from different advisers, and that some students got no help at all.

The college also implemented a process to review student records in time to notify students when they are approaching graduation and address steps necessary to complete their degrees.

“We might say, ‘Do you know you are 15 credits from completing your degree? We have a finish-line scholarship if you need extra help,’” explains Grove.

Beyond that, the college launched a series of mid-quarter interviews during which a pair of faculty members visit a colleague’s classroom to talk with students about their experiences. The faculty members then share that feedback with the instructor, so he or she better understands how students view the course.

The faculty has responded favorably, calling the process helpful and enlightening. As a result, elementary-algebra professors began incorporating software into their lesson plans, introduced new homework approaches, and developed resource labs. Administrators say these and other changes led to a 20-percentage-point increase in student scores. Instructors in other disciplines have made similar reforms.

**Different Learning Styles**

At Patrick Henry Community College (PHCC) in Martinsville, Va., small groups of students work in teams to conduct research, solve problems, and complete assignments. “It is not just group work,” says Megan Tillery, a biology professor and chair of cooperative learning at the college. “It is structured group work. People have individual accountability and shared goals.”

The thinking is simple, says Tillery: When you put A students together with C students, the A students take on the role of teacher. As a result, the C students’ scores improve. “Anxious students are more likely to come back next semester if they develop peers and a support system,” she says.

All PHCC faculty members are trained to incorporate the cooperative method; the college even has trapezoid-shaped desks that can be moved, allowing students to face each other during team-oriented discussions.

Results so far have been encouraging. In a fall 2005 study of the program, administrators found that students with no cooperative learning experience had a 26 percent attrition rate. Those enrolled in one cooperative learning course had an attrition rate of 19 percent.
“Access without success is a hollow promise.”
—Nan Poppe, PCC

19 percent. Students enrolled in two or more cooperative learning classes had a 5 percent attrition rate.

“It’s changed our whole environment,” says Tillery of PHCC’s program. “Students love it.”

Keep Focused
At Portland Community College (PCC) in Oregon, administrators have employed another strategy to keep students on the path to graduation: fundraising.

In four years’ time, the college’s foundation has drastically increased the amount of money available for student scholarships, making it possible for more students to attend college without worrying about the cost.

Data show that 96 percent of PCC students who complete a degree or certificate in four years enroll full time for two or more terms. “Any state- or institution-based aid we can give to help students get closer to full time has a big impact on academic momentum,” says Nan Poppe, president of PCC’s extended learning campus.

Data also show that students who take college success courses focused on study skills, time management, and career development perform better. To increase the number of students taking such courses, PCC gives away 2,000 seats for free annually. To date, nearly 4,000 students have taken the college up on its offer.

“Access without success is a hollow promise,” says Poppe. “We are all trying to not lose focus on access as we pay attention to completion.”

Change Across the Board
As community colleges step up to meet the challenge of improving the national graduation rate, experts say, these and other pockets of innovation only go so far. To implement wholesale reforms, programs and best practices must be replicable across the board, from state to state, campus to campus.

“It is no longer enough to do great things for a small number of learners,” says CCCSE’s McClenney. “Community colleges have always done that. The really tough challenges are bringing to scale the things that work so well that they become the typical—rather than the exceptional—experience for students.”

Corey Murray is managing editor of Community College Journal. Ellen Ullman is an education writer based outside Washington, D.C.