Community Colleges Accept the Completion Challenge

Community college leaders affirm the need for a dramatic increase in the number of Americans with postsecondary degrees and certifications to fulfill critical state and national goals. AACC and five other national organizations—together representing the nation’s 1,200 community colleges, their governing boards, their faculty and their 11.8 million students—released a national call to action in April 2010. They pledged to promote the development and implementation of policies, practices and institutional cultures that will produce 50% more students with high-quality degrees and certificates by 2020, while also increasing access and quality. AACC is making completion a major focus of its annual meeting and other events and has urged member colleges to accept the completion challenge at individual institutions and has created a template for that purpose. These and other activities respond to President Obama’s goal to have our nation once again lead in the numbers of college-educated citizens to ensure U.S. global competitiveness.

Community colleges aim to meet the completion challenge while holding firmly to traditional values of access and inclusion, opportunity and quality. Community colleges are not only gateways to the middle class and beyond for millions of Americans, they are also the economic engine driving the nation toward renewed and sustained economic prosperity. Community colleges have long been committed to access for students from diverse backgrounds and underrepresented groups. They serve a wide range of students, including active duty service members and veterans, dislocated workers, older learners and students of all ages with disabilities.

The completion challenge emphasizes the importance of commitment to a change in institutional culture, from emphasis on access only to an emphasis on access and success for diverse populations. Community colleges recognize that the open door must not be a revolving door and that institutions as well as students must take responsibility for student success. Achieving success for all requires courageous conversations and openness regarding diversity, equity and evidence about performance at both the student and institutional levels. That means paying attention to, and eliminating, the attainment gaps that separate student groups on the basis of race, ethnicity and family income.

Data-informed decision-making at community colleges is helping students progress and persist to completion. Many community colleges are focusing more attention on evidence that sheds light on what works and what does not to promote student success. Nearly 130 community colleges participating in Achieving the Dream are collecting, analyzing and using data to make positive changes in the interest of student success and college completion. Achieving the Dream assists with data collection and analysis and provides access to information on innovative and successful practices as well as networking opportunities to address barriers.

Professional development opportunities and resources are being developed for community college leaders and rising leaders to increase knowledge and skills for improving student success. Leadership institutes such as those offered by AACC’s Future Leaders Institute and others provide training and networking that encourage best-practice sharing and collaborative problem solving. National community college organizations—AACC, the Association of Community College Trustees, the Center for Community College Student Engagement, the League for Innovation in the Community College, the National Institute for Staff and Organizational Development and Phi Theta Kappa—are helping to expand the emerging body of knowledge regarding evidence-based effective educational practice that can lead to dramatically higher completion rates for community college students.

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