President Barack Obama has set forth an ambitious agenda for U.S. postsecondary education: by 2020, to once again have the highest proportion of college graduates in the world. In April 2010, the American Association of Community Colleges and five other community college organizations responded by reaffirming their commitment to completion while maintaining their commitment to increasing access and quality by issuing a joint statement, Democracy’s Colleges: Call to Action. The partnering organizations were the Association of Community College Trustees, the Center for Community College Student Engagement, the League for Innovation in the Community College, the National Organization for Staff and Organizational Development, and Phi Theta Kappa.

With this commitment to completion articulated, Rebalancing the Mission: The Community College Completion Challenge addresses what it means for community colleges to embrace completion in the same way that they have historically embraced access. Because community colleges are, first and foremost, oriented toward their communities, they may need to modify their traditional ways of fulfilling their individual missions, specifically in three areas: course enrollment, course completion, and certificate and degree completion.

In terms of the enrollment mission, community colleges provide access to, and opportunity for, education through courses that serve as the foundation for a career, a new life, or a new perspective. The belief in democratizing education by maintaining opportunity is paramount to the continuance of an educated citizenry. Support of the open-access philosophy by policymakers has resulted in strong student demand at community colleges, where enrollment has been increasing dramatically. Meeting increased demand for more noncredit and online courses is one challenge facing community colleges.

Another challenge for community colleges is to help some kinds of students to successfully complete courses, especially high school students, swirlers, and retoolers. For high school students, community colleges provide opportunities not only for the academically advanced but also for those who need to further develop their potential. Earning college credit while in high school has been shown to increase the likelihood that a student will enroll and persist in a postsecondary education institution. The demand for community college courses is apparent in the substantial growth of dual-credit programs in high schools. Community colleges also assist students in completing high school or its equivalent, which is essential to increasing earnings and future workplace, postsecondary, and military opportunities.

Swirlers—students who attend 4-year institutions and enroll at a community college for just one course—also reap economic benefits by earning credit that transfers at a much lower cost. The ability to take courses while enrolled concurrently in a 4-year institution can also decrease time-to-degree. Community colleges also represent a means of increasing workplace productivity for retoolers—students who enroll in courses to expand their knowledge or skills. Examples include learning a new welding technique, a new computer program, or the most recent changes in the Internal Revenue Code. Retoolers can also earn continuing education units, which may be essential to maintaining licensure in a profession.

The credentials primarily awarded by community colleges—certificates and associate degrees—play a unique role in advancing college completion rates. Given the current economic climate and high unemployment rates, there exists a clear demand for, and focus on, quickly returning people to a changing work environment through education and training. In community colleges, this demand manifests itself in heightened interest in short-term, work-related certificates in specific programs. Community college leaders are faced with focusing either on (a) increasing completion rates using the traditional measures (i.e., attainment of associate and bachelor's degrees) used in international comparisons or (b) getting people back to work with certificates and industry credentials that are not counted as a success measure in those comparisons. Focusing solely on the former narrowly defines success while overlooking the needs and achievements of a significant number of people, whereas focusing solely on the latter will not increase the international ranking of the United States. Community colleges are therefore in the difficult position of balancing two completion agendas: the person's need to return to work and the nation's desire to be a world leader in terms of a narrowly defined set of outcomes.

Aligning student success with future opportunities for continued career success should be part of any completion agenda. Within the community college, courses generally relate well to each other, but when graduates look to study at other institutions, they often face unanticipated difficulties. Thus, one challenge is to more clearly define and facilitate future education paths for students. Stackable credentials, career pathways, and applied associate and bachelor's degrees have emerged as ways to provide opportunity for continued academic progression for those who might otherwise have enrolled in terminal training programs.

Community colleges are committed to improving completion rates while maintaining their commitment to access and quality. This brief highlights some of the issues that community college leaders, working with their community partners, will have to navigate as they focus more squarely on improving completion rates, however they are defined. How each college addresses these issues will vary, but a consistent factor is that fiscal conditions will undoubtedly continue to influence policy and administrative decisions. Community colleges will have difficulty embracing the practices and perspectives needed to increase completion rates without additional fiscal resources, especially at a time when they are facing double-digit enrollment growth.