



**Editors' Note:** This edition of *UPDATE* addresses national concerns regarding college completion, beginning with an interview with Dr. Martha Kanter, Under Secretary of the U.S. Department of Education. Dr. Kanter shares with us her view on the importance of addressing the achievement gap, academic preparation, and the financial cost of higher education. This volume includes two invited articles. Alene Russel, from the American Association of State Colleges and Universities, provides an introduction to the major national and regional college completion initiatives that have emerged in the U.S. in recent years. Leesa Wheelahan, from the University of Melbourne, provides OCCRL readers with an international perspective on college completion in the context of vocationally-oriented postsecondary education programs and institutions. The remaining articles are contributed by OCCRL researchers, who examine college completion from a variety of perspectives, including those provided by high school, community college, baccalaureate degree-granting institutions, and contributions that cross the boundaries between these institutions. We appreciate the efforts of the many authors who contributed to this edition of *UPDATE*, and hope that our readers are informed by this multifaceted discussion of college completion.

## The Unsung Sector: An Interview with Under Secretary Martha J. Kanter about America's College Completion Agenda and Community Colleges

by Debra D. Bragg, OCCRL

On Monday, April 30, 2012, Dr. Debra Bragg, Professor of Higher Education and Director of the [Office of Community College Research and Leadership](#) (OCCRL) interviewed [Under Secretary of Education Martha J. Kanter](#). Under Secretary Kanter was nominated by President Barack Obama on April 29, 2009 and confirmed by the Senate in June 2009. She reports to [Secretary of Education Arne Duncan](#) and oversees federal policies, programs, and activities related to postsecondary education, adult and career-technical education, federal student aid, and five White House Initiatives: Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders, Educational Excellence for Hispanics, Historically Black Colleges and Universities, American Indian Education, and Faith-Based and Neighborhood Partnerships. Kanter sees her mission as one of strengthening the education system, fostering economic growth, social prosperity, and civic engagement. She is charged with planning and policy responsibilities to implement President Obama's goal that the U.S. should once again have the highest college attainment rate in the world and "[the best educated, most competitive workforce in the world](#)" by 2020.

**Dr. Bragg:** Given the national focus on enrolling more students in postsecondary education, college completion is an obvious choice for our newsletter this spring. We couldn't think of anybody better to speak about college completion than you, Under Secretary Kanter. Would you please share a little bit about how your unusually diverse background prepared you for your current post in Washington DC?

**Under Secretary Kanter:** Well, thank you, but first thank you for being a professor. We need to hire a million or so professors and K-12 teachers over the next 10 years. We have an urgent need to attract more college graduates to the teaching profession.

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**Dr. Bragg:** I appreciate your kind words. Please share with our readers what makes your background especially fitting for your current post.

**Under Secretary Kanter:** I think one of the reasons Arne Duncan, the Secretary of Education, and President Obama invited someone with my background to join the administration is because I bridged the pipeline between K-12 and postsecondary education. I shared their vision of what it's going to take for the current generation of students to succeed in college and in life, not only for today but for generations to come. I taught at-risk youth in high school which included serving as a deputy probation officer; I spent many years as a professor and administrator in three community colleges; I taught graduate students over the years at several universities; and I worked as a vice chancellor for policy and research for the community college system. In joining the Administration, I wanted to share my experience and appreciation of the contributions of the various education sectors to the work of increasing the education levels of Americans throughout our nation. The President, the Secretary, and I are convinced that the need to strengthen and elevate the significance of education in America is urgent--and that will require bold ideas and the participation of everyone.

**Dr. Bragg:** The experience you bring to your position is extremely valuable to our nation. It's amazing, really. Turning to the main theme of our spring OCCRL newsletter, what do you consider to be the most important points in the college completion agenda that you want OCCRL's readers to know about?

**Under Secretary Kanter:** In March 2011, we published the *College Completion Tool Kit*. It presents seven strategies that states can use to improve college completion. This work is critical because on average 50 percent of our nation's students don't finish college in six years. Now, I am referring to a cohort of first-time, full-time freshman who we are tracking over a six-year period. But even if you add part-time students and transfer students, we still have a major completion gap. With our unprecedented investment in the [Pell grant program](#), I also looked at whether Pell-grant recipients graduate at the same rate as non-Pell eligible students. The good news is their completion rate is close to the national average, so they are not lagging far behind nationwide. It's also good news that in just three years, we've increased the number of Pell grant recipients enrolled in colleges and universities across the U.S. from 6 million to 9.8 million today. That means we've boosted the enrollment of low-income students in higher education by almost 60 percent in a very short time!

The bad news is that when you look across our 50 states and territories, we have tremendous variation in completion rates. And if you look college-by-college or system-by-system, we have tremendous variation. We must do much better in getting students to the finish line, starting now. The other piece of bad news is the persistent achievement and college attainment gaps. Why is that Hispanic and African American students

aren't completing their degrees and certificates at the same rates as White and Asian students? Poverty and lack of academic preparation are obviously a big part of the problem. But I firmly believe that once students are admitted to college, states and institutions need to do everything they can to help students of color succeed and complete their programs of study. If they need tutoring, if they need mentoring, if they need freshman experience programs in the first year, if they need learning communities, if they need high impact practices, we have a responsibility to provide what will help them persist to earn their certificates and degrees. That's our challenge. Are we going to get these students through at the same rate--or better yet, to reach the 2020 goal, at dramatically higher rates than we have in decades past?

Given these challenges going forward, everyone has to do their part, sharing responsibility for student success and reaching the 2020 Goal. States fund public higher education, and we must incentivize states to help keep college affordable so that the middle class and low-income families know that their students will have the opportunity to enroll in and complete college. We need to ensure that students who need Pell grants can get them and have the right policies in place to remove the barriers that get in the way of completing their programs. Let me give some concrete examples. Our institutions of higher education need to streamline articulation between community colleges and universities so students know if the courses that they take meet university transfer requirements.

We need to dramatically fix remedial programs and all of the testing that accompanies them. This is a tremendous opportunity for faculty leadership. Students are taking classes they don't need, getting stuck in the revolving door of remediation, and taking too long to reach their educational goals. If you look at the research of [Dr. Tom Bailey](#) and others, you will see that 20<sup>th</sup> century basic skills entrance testing is a barrier to student success. If community colleges and universities can redesign the basic skills curriculum in language arts and math, use modern learning science analytics for assessments, and implement evidence-based labs and courses like those pioneered by [Carol Twigg](#) and described in numerous [Lumina Foundation](#) reports, students can advance faster than they have in the last 50 years. Those groundbreaking course redesigns and related evidence-based practices have been shown to increase student achievement, while reducing costs. If students can start with what they know, and get credit for prior learning and spend their time on what they don't know, students can accelerate their education. Again, it's the responsibility of higher education institutions to remove unnecessary barriers and apply research to increase persistence and graduation rates while closing the achievement gap.

Part of improving remediation entails strengthening partnerships between high schools and higher education and between adult education and community colleges. One of the great role models in this field is Dr. Ralph Rogers, Provost at Purdue University-Calumet. Ralph has spent the last several years

articulating a new structure between his university and the five high schools in his region. He has a Ph.D. in Industrial Engineering, and has used his training to architect a way for high school faculty to partner with college professors in English and mathematics to better prepare high school students to be college-ready and meet the requirements for entering freshmen. In Northwest Indiana, high school teachers and college professors worked together to redesign the curriculum. They have built trust and respect--and they are tracking the results to build the evidence base for student success.

That's a beautiful illustration of how we can drive change. It's researchers and practitioners working together, it's high school partners working with university partners, it's community colleges and universities supporting the redesign, and it's leveraging new technologies and high impact practices where they make sense. Both states and the federal government should support these efforts, with our postsecondary institutions, faculty and students doing their part in this equation. This is what shared responsibility means.

It's also essential that the public have better information about our colleges and universities. We have proposed that postsecondary institutions publish a [College Scorecard](#) because we want students and families to have better information and make better choices about attending institutions that provide good value and are affordable. This proposal has sparked a national conversation and we are now seeking comments on it. Why would you go to a school that has a low graduation rate and a very high default rate? If part of completion is being able to afford a living once you graduate, then we don't want students loaded up with so much debt that they can't afford to pay it back. So, another important piece of the completion agenda is for students to be more responsible themselves, to be financially literate about the pros, cons, and consequences of choosing which college to attend. We want more students completing college. Why would a student choose a college with only a 10 percent chance of graduating in six years when a college next door has a high graduation rate? Providing information to help students and families choose a good value college or university is where the federal government can play a catalytic role.

**Dr. Bragg:** You didn't mention community colleges very much. Could you talk about the role of community colleges in the completion agenda?

**Under Secretary Kanter:** Yes, we need to elevate the national conversation about the community college mission and the critical role that community colleges play in supporting an economy that is built to last. Many students enter a community college to earn a 1-year certificate to gain entry or move up in the workforce, but we have no way to document their progress or value to the nation. We don't account for certificates in the US Census. We don't collect certificate information. Certificates are all over the map. Some are industry-recognized credentials; some are short-term training programs. A community college like a [Tennessee Technology Center](#) is very different

than a comprehensive community college that may offer 30-40 percent occupational courses and 30-50 percent or more transfer general education and majors courses. We need students and families to understand these differences so they can make good choices about where to enroll.

We are investing in states that are improving their data systems and gathering better longitudinal data on student and institutional performance. Higher education leaders and policymakers have a desperate need for common indicators, so that as a nation, we can better understand who is going to college, what courses they are taking, whether students are earning certificates and degrees, who's graduating, who's entering or advancing in the workforce, and who's contributing to public service professions and the civic life of our communities. We should not penalize community colleges for low graduation rates if the students are earning certificates that are industry-recognized credentials. On the other hand, community colleges aren't transferring enough students to the universities.

The good news is that we're going to shift to counting part-time and transfer students. We've got that underway. We're hoping to do that in the next few years. It's not going to be easy to change these data systems but community colleges educate a huge share of the nation's students and they provide tremendous diversity for higher education, a significant pipeline both to the workforce and advanced degrees in their mission of transferring students to four-year colleges and universities. We need our data systems to tell our institutions and the public who's earning degrees and certificates, how long it takes, what's working and what's not, and the costs and benefits, so every institution and state can increase the number of students who graduate to reach our 2020 goal.

We want students to earn their degrees and certificates in a much more streamlined, better-coordinated way. So again, we need more sophisticated partnerships with universities so community college students can have a transfer plan right from the get-go, in the first year or second year, when they clarify what their major is going to be so they don't take courses they don't need. And if they need remediation, students can get prepared--and much more quickly with much better curriculum--without testing into a system that's going to throw them into a dead-end remediation sequence of classes where only seven percent of students make it to the college level. We need a whole new modernization plan for remediation.

Historically, the community colleges have been the "unsung sector" of American higher education, and we want to bring them into the forefront. They play a huge role in the pipeline from high school to college and into the workforce. It's not either or. It's not work or education. In the new century we need students to get an education AND work. The new century demands a continuing personal investment in education that will enable students to grow, increase their knowledge and skills, mature, and be ready to transition to and be successful in more than one career over their lifetimes.

**Dr. Bragg:** Your perspectives are very helpful. I think our readers will be especially appreciative of your comments about community colleges and the remediation issue. I attended the meeting in January at the U.S. Department of Education where the Department brought together 40-50 practitioners, policy makers, and researchers to look at the college completion agenda. In your remarks, you mentioned creating a repository for best practices, and you asked members of the audience to make sure they share what's going on in their institutions and states to support the [College Completion Agenda](#). Will you please explain to our readers what that project is about and identify how they can submit best practices?

**Under Secretary Kanter:** Many readers are familiar with the Institute for Education Sciences' (IES) *What Works Clearinghouse*. So this idea was to be a very pragmatic way for institutions from across the country to submit the high impact practices that are making a difference to help students complete college, complete courses they are taking, persist from one semester to the next, and the like. These are the great ideas that don't come from Washington DC; they come from institutions and people who are working in the field, in classrooms, with students every day. We designed a "request for information" to showcase evidence-based programs, services, and policies that lead to student success. We are currently reviewing the initial round of submissions and look forward to more submissions in the months and years ahead. Please ask your readers to visit [[the website](#)] and send us their **Promising and Practical Strategies to Increase Postsecondary Success**.

As luck would have it, I was just at the board meeting of the [American Association of Community Colleges](#). One of the state commissioners of higher education shared a list of completion strategies he'd been collecting over the past few years. I told him, "You've got to put these high impact practices into our database," so I came back to Washington with a long list of high impact practices that we're going to add to our database. For example, we received information about a college's "learning-to-learn" program, and another about a program to teach college-level skills to underprepared students where the community college nearby recently adopted the same kind of model, and another about an online program that uses database simulations to improve teacher education and incentivize students to enter the teaching profession. We want a very wide and diverse set of submissions to stimulate a national conversation about what it takes to get students through college and how to adopt or design high impact practices with evidence that demonstrates students are moving through the pipeline to graduation.

Many colleges and universities are putting in early alert systems and they're doing universal advising, so can these strategies be shared and scaled to help more students stay on track? There's some new research on paying federal, state, and institutional scholarship and grant aid to students on a weekly basis so that students don't find college is unaffordable, because they don't spend all their money in the first few weeks of the semester in a lump sum. There are lots of ways to increase college

completion, including the completion and productivity research at [Carnegie Mellon University](#) that is leveraging the learning sciences and analytics to accelerate student learning and success. We need to ask ourselves how to leverage technology and the learning sciences research to help more students succeed?

**Dr. Bragg:** That's very helpful. My next question goes back to our earlier conversation about potential challenges that need to be overcome. You mentioned remediation, and you also alluded to a concern about certificates that are sometimes outside the system, that aren't always recognized in higher education or by employers. Some critics of the college completion agenda are saying we're putting too much emphasis on certificates and not enough on degrees. What is your comment to that concern?

**Under Secretary Kanter:** I love the video on YouTube called "*SHIFT Happens*". If you haven't seen it, you should. It's really great! In *Shift Happens*, if you step back and think about what we are doing, we should be preparing students today for jobs that don't yet exist as well as giving them the knowledge and skills for success in the workforce and civic life. Employers tell us that students need far better critical thinking skills, the ability to solve problems, an unparalleled work ethic, an appreciation of diversity, and the ability to work on diverse teams in their companies and organizations. Business legitimately wants graduates with a good foundation for learning, along with the customized, more narrowly focused set of skills to meet its needs. If we pit giving students narrow skills and training against providing them with a broad range of knowledge and skills, we'll have a less educated society in the long run. I don't think we've been smart enough about the fundamentals students will need to be successful in this new century.

Today, we have 93 million low-skilled adults. Too many of them lack the knowledge and skills to transition to other jobs, particularly during an economic downturn. We cannot let that happen going forward. We have to do better than that as a country. We have to leverage higher education and help those students to be at a level of critical thinking that prepares them for various jobs across a lifetime. Baby Boomers of our generation have had a number of jobs, but students today and tomorrow may have 5-10 or more jobs in their lifetimes. These students may well go overseas for a portion of their lives because more and more companies are expanding worldwide and countries are working more closely together in our global economy.

**Dr. Bragg:** I'm sure you have a big wish list for research but are there a couple of areas that are really critical, especially to the community college?

**Under Secretary Kanter:** Yes, academic preparation. I had a call last week from a community college president who said, "You know, Martha, you're improving your data systems with part-time and transfer numbers and rates, and you've got graduation, average debt, and loan repayment rates, and you've got default rates that will go on the College Scorecard, but we really need to understand student performance by level of academic



preparation. What are the constraints, what are the barriers, what are the practices that will turn the situation around when millions of students enter college with such varied levels of academic preparation? We need more research on the academic preparation challenge. We also need more research on how to accelerate the preparation of community colleges and university students.

Today, there are lots of “breakthrough” symposia popping up around the country. I can’t tell you how many conferences are held on the topic of “disrupting higher education.” I understand frustration with the status quo, but our higher education system is still the envy of the world and we should only disrupt to improve opportunity and success for students. We simply don’t have enough education research to chart our course based on evidence. Also, we haven’t had nearly enough research on effort-- on understanding how to incentivize students to put their best effort into their work. I recently spoke with one of our ombudsmen in our federal student aid program who told me that her job is to help students avoid defaulting on their loans. She shared that when she talks to students in these circumstances, their first explanation for being on the verge of defaulting was that their finances got in the way. But when she probed beyond that response, she also heard a second answer: “It was too hard for me”. We need to understand that. Was it too hard because they weren’t prepared to be independent students? Maybe they didn’t have study skills, maybe they lacked the content – the academic knowledge or the basics, so there are likely a whole lot of reasons we need to understand and address. Maybe they didn’t have the financial literacy to make good choices about the cost of college. We must do a better job of supporting students before AND after they enter college. Research shows that the more selective the institution, the more successful the students will be. Our challenge will be to educate well all 100 percent of students who enter college.

The last comment I would make is on the use of technology and use of different delivery systems based on the learning styles of students. We shouldn’t give a full-on distance learning program to a student with poor technology skills, a student who is not an independent learner and won’t sit down at a computer for a couple of hours, learn the content, and do the homework. Again, we have to understand the student experience much better. And we need more qualitative as well as quantitative studies of these broad cohorts of students who aren’t as prepared as they need to be, of how technology can play a role, and of where the best teaching occurs--where and under what conditions.

With such dramatic declines in state funding for public higher education, too many students are being shut out of the American Dream. It’s up to all of us to ensure that they too will have the opportunity for a college education. In a knowledge-based, global economy, education has immeasurable power to promote growth and innovation. Education in America is the great equalizer: It is the one force that can help overcome differences in background, culture, and privilege. And that is why it is so important to elevate education--and live up to the American creed that every man and woman should be able to advance as far as their talents and efforts will take them.

**Dr. Bragg:** That is very helpful. I know your schedule is very tight this morning, and I really appreciate the time you gave us today.

**Under Secretary Kanter:** Great. Call anytime. ♦

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# Pathways to College Completion: Credentialing Models for Students who Stop Short of a Bachelor's Degree

by Stacy Bennett & Julia Panke Makela, OCCRL

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Reaching the college completion goals set by policy makers, business leaders, and educational foundations requires creative thinking and a variety of pathways to college degree attainment. Whether the goal is to help “an additional five million Americans earn degrees and certificates in the next decade” (Obama, 2009) or to raise the proportion of the American adult population that holds a college degree or credential from the current 37.9% to 60% by 2025 (Lumina Foundation, 2010), focusing solely on completion for traditional college-going student populations is clearly insufficient. Reaching out to a variety of populations that are underrepresented in higher education, such as racial and ethnic minorities, low-income students, first-generation college students, and adults, must become a national priority.

One group that is beginning to gain national attention is adults who have accumulated a substantial amount of college credits, but did not finish or obtain a college degree. These individuals essentially have no credential to show for their work or to mark their achievements. A compelling study by Johnson, Rochkind, Ott, and DuPont (2009) explored the reasons that students leave college, uncovering that the primary contributors to decisions to leave college include financial hardships; the stress of multiple commitments of work, family and school; perceptions of limited educational options; and misunderstandings regarding the impact of not earning a college degree.

Knowing exactly how many students fit this important underrepresented group is difficult to determine, yet several sources help us get a sense of the magnitude of the issue. The Lumina Foundation (2010) reported that more than 22% of working adults in America (which translates to 37 million Americans) have attended college but not completed a degree. Bowen, Chingos, and McPherson's (2009) estimated that almost 45 percent of student departures from college occur after the sophomore year, with the rate of departure highest among students attending less selective institutions. In a currently unpublished data analysis conducted by the Office of Community College Research and Leadership (OCCRL), analysis using the National Center for Education Statistic's 2003-2009 Beginning Postsecondary Students data set demonstrated that over 50% of students who entered college in 2003 had not obtained a certificate or degree in six years. Furthermore, over 20% of students who had not obtained a degree had accumulated 46 college credits or more. The insights provided by these sources suggest that a large number of students may have already earned enough (or nearly enough) credits to warrant the awarding of a certificate or an associate degree to mark their accomplishments.

Funded by the Lumina foundation, we conducted research to understand current efforts of higher education institutions and

governments to help students receive a credential or degree that is commensurate with the credits that they have earned, even when students do not reach their original degree attainment goals (see Bragg, Cullen, Bennett, & Ruud, 2011). This article explores a subset of the degree completion opportunities that we discovered, specifically what we termed “mid-point credentials” that are designed to be embedded into baccalaureate degree pathways. In practice, these programs go by a variety of names including alternative exit, en-route, nested, and milestone degrees. We desired to understand which higher education institutions (both domestic and international) award mid-point credentials, as well as the characteristics of those degree offerings. What do these degree pathways look like? When are the mid-point credentials awarded, and who initiates the award of those degrees?

## What We Did

During the summer of 2011, we explored mid-point credentialing programs in three steps. First, a literature review was conducted that focused on college departure and postsecondary credentialing, including literature on both domestic and international higher education institutions that grant mid-point credentials for students who do not complete baccalaureate, associate or equivalent degrees. Second, an extensive website search was conducted, examining states and higher education institutions to identify models, policies, and programs that appeared to align with the mid-point credential concept. Requests for more information were sent to administrators and institutional researchers at selected higher education institutions that had implemented models that appear to relate to the mid-point credential concept. Finally, we reviewed publicly accessible datasets on the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) website and made inquiries to several state-level education agencies to determine their potential to quantify post-freshman departure and postsecondary credentialing. Full details on the research methods are available in the technical report for this project (Bragg et al., 2011). Insights for the findings presented in this article were primarily drawn from the literature reviews, as well as the website searches and higher education institution contacts.

## What We Found

Several examples of baccalaureate degree pathways with embedded opportunities to earn mid-point credentials were found in the United States. Yet, interestingly, this structure for mid-point credentials seemed more prominent on the international stage, particularly in countries such as Australia, Canada, the UK, and Sri Lanka. Each individual pathway that we discovered has unique features, however when examining similarities across

examples, three categories of conceptual models emerged for mid-point credential opportunities: an alternative exit model, a stepping stone model, and a nested opportunity model (see Figure 1). In some degree pathways, all credentials are awarded by a primarily baccalaureate-degree granting institution, while others involve partnerships between associate and baccalaureate-degree-granting institutions.

Keep in mind that the conceptual models presented in Figure 1 are based on our interpretations of program design and policy. All degree types are referred to with titles that are equivalent to their U.S. counterparts, in order to facilitate comparison and discussion. Brief descriptions are provided for each conceptual model, with examples drawn from our research. This is followed by comparisons of key characteristics of the models. Table 1 (see page 7) provides website links to more information on the degree pathways with mid-point credential opportunities that are highlighted in this article.

### **Alternative Exit Conceptual Model**

The alternative exit model is designed to provide credentials for students who stop short of their original goal, but have completed enough credit to earn a lower degree. The intention is to ensure that students do not leave the program empty handed. A distinguishing feature of these programs, in many cases, is that the alternative credentials are only available to those who

leave the degree program prior to completing the baccalaureate degree. These credentials can, in essence, be thought of as a “consolation prize” that is not considered necessary for students who persist to the baccalaureate degree. Programs fitting this model are primarily found outside of the U.S., particularly in Australia. At Charles Darwin University, alternative exit awards are available in 14 undergraduate programs. Students must request an alternative exit award when they leave.

### **Stepping Stone Conceptual Model**

The stepping stone model provides automatic credential awards as students progress towards the baccalaureate degree. Generally, once students complete the requirements for a lower credential, they are awarded it. If they leave before completing the baccalaureate degree they will leave with the lower certificate(s) or degree(s) they have completed. This model also provides early accreditation in a field for students who are working or need to work while attending college (Wheelahan, 2000). An example of this model in the U.S. is the en route degree at CUNY Staten Island, which is part of the City University of New York. CUNY Staten Island is unique in that it was established in the 1970s with the merger of a community college and senior college. This arrangement helped facilitate the development of mid-point credentialing opportunities more than 30 years ago. Students are notified when they have completed the credits for an associate’s degree and have the option

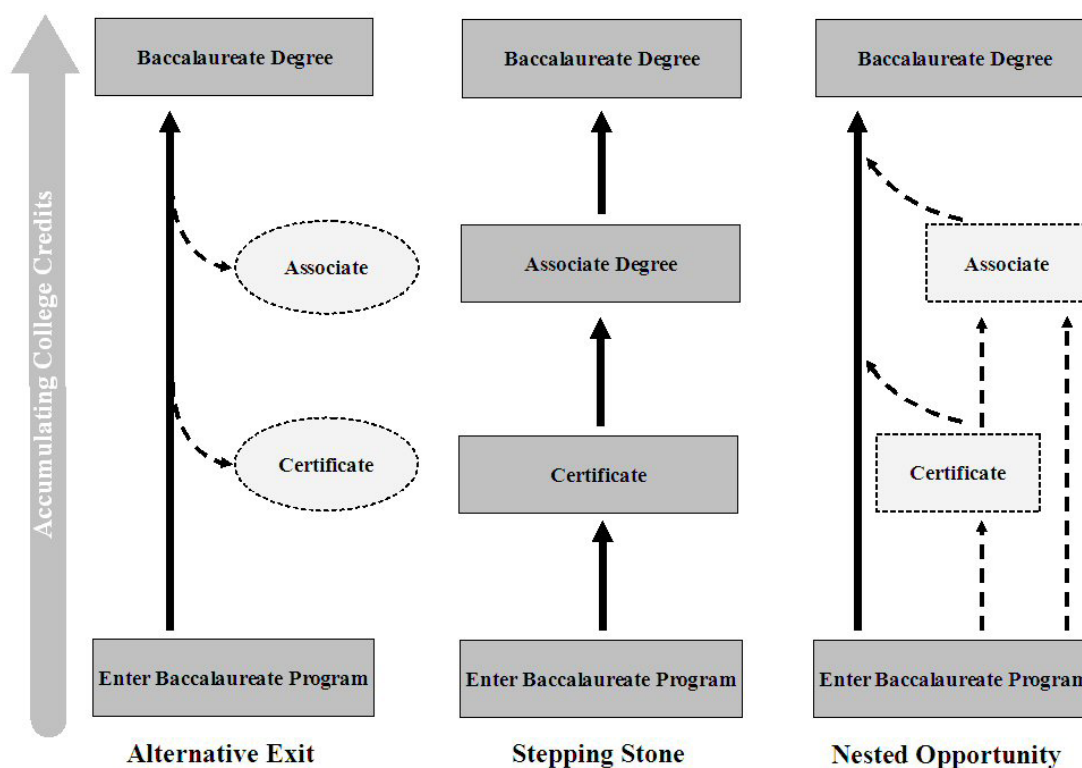


Figure 1. Three conceptual models of mid-point credentials that are embedded into baccalaureate degree pathways.

Table 1. Examples of Conceptual Models for Mid-point Credentials

Conceptual Model	Institution	Website Address
Alternative Exit	Charles Darwin University (Australia)	<a href="http://www.cdu.edu.au/studentportal/alternative-exit-award.html">http://www.cdu.edu.au/studentportal/alternative-exit-award.html</a>
Stepping Stone	CUNY Staten Island (US)  University of Moratuwa (Sri Lanka)	<a href="http://www.csi.cuny.edu/catalog/undergraduate/academic-policies.htm">http://www.csi.cuny.edu/catalog/undergraduate/academic-policies.htm</a>  <a href="http://www.codl.lk/webcodl/programmes/bit/">http://www.codl.lk/webcodl/programmes/bit/</a>
Nested Opportunity	Goodwin College (US)  University of Melbourne (Australia)	<a href="http://www.goodwin.edu/academics/majors.asp">http://www.goodwin.edu/academics/majors.asp</a>  <a href="http://policy.unimelb.edu.au/UOM0369#section-4.4">http://policy.unimelb.edu.au/UOM0369#section-4.4</a>

to accept or decline the degree. An international example of this model exists at the University of Moratuwa in Sri Lanka. This program not only provides multiple credentialing points, but also provides multiple entry points, so a student could enter the program with a certificate or associate's degree and continue on to the baccalaureate level.

### ***Nested Opportunity Conceptual Model***

The nested opportunity model provides students with the choice of receiving lower level degrees on their way to the baccalaureate degree. When they accumulate credits needed for a certificate or associate degree, students can make the choice to apply for the credential they have earned. In some cases, students must be certain to meet specific course requirements for a lower level credential, whereas students who are not pursuing the mid-point credential have more flexibility in course selection. This allows students who accumulate a substantial number of credits but stop short of the baccalaureate degree to depart with a lower level credential that recognizes their work and achievements. An example of this model in the U.S. is the milestone degree program at Goodwin College, a small, private, 4-year college located in Connecticut. The college began as a career college, but received non-profit status in 2004. Goodwin had primarily been an associate degree-granting institution, but it has been increasing the number of baccalaureate degrees offered. According to their website, Goodwin College believes that, "all credentials earned by our students towards reaching their goal of obtaining an associate or bachelor degree should be celebrated." An international example of this model is the University of Melbourne's nested degree, where a lower level degree is formally nested in the higher level degree. A student has the opportunity to receive a lower level degree once they have earned the appropriate credits even if they are enrolled in the baccalaureate degree program.

### ***Comparison of Conceptual Models***

A common goal of the degree pathways with embedded mid-point credential opportunities that are presented here is to encourage students to engage in a clear pathway to a baccalaureate degree, while providing additional opportunities and safety nets for students who do not persist to the baccalaureate degree. The approach by which this common goal is achieved, however, bears some striking differences across the conceptual models (see Table 2, page 8).

On the one hand, there is an important difference regarding the time at which mid-point credentials are awarded. The Alternative Exit model offers lower level credentials only if the student chooses to leave the degree program and pathway prior to completing the baccalaureate degree. The certificate or associate degree is essentially a replacement credential that marks a student's choice to change educational directions. It ensures that a student does not leave empty-handed and provides a reward for work that is completed. The Stepping Stone model takes a notably different approach. Rather than replacing degree attainment goals, the Stepping Stone model builds one credential on top of another along students' path to the baccalaureate degree. This approach communicates a message of marking milestones as they are achieved and recognizing a cumulative nature of those achievements. Finally, the Nested Opportunity model appears to be a hybrid of the other two models, providing students with the option of building from one credential to another along the path to a baccalaureate degree if they choose to pursue it.

The source that initiates the awarding of mid-point credentials is also an important differentiating feature among the conceptual models. In the Stepping Stone model, program administrators appear to initiate the awarding of degrees. Students are informed of eligibility and receive the credential automatically,



Table 2. Comparison of Models that Embed Mid-point Credentials into a Baccalaureate Degree Pathway

<b>Models that Embed Mid-point Credentials into a Baccalaureate Degree Pathway</b>			
<b>Key Characteristic</b>	<b>Alternative Exit</b>	<b>Stepping Stone</b>	<b>Nested Opportunity</b>
When is the mid-point credential awarded?	The highest mid-point credential earned is awarded to a student who leaves the program before completing the baccalaureate degree.	Each mid-point credential is automatically awarded to all students as they progress towards the baccalaureate degree.	Mid-point credentials are available to students who wish to receive them while progressing toward a baccalaureate degree.
Who initiates the award?	A student must apply for the mid-point credential, indicating that he/she no longer intends to complete the baccalaureate degree.	The institution initiates the mid-point credential award, although a student may choose to decline.	A student must apply for the mid-point credential. In some cases, students must meet specific course requirements whereas students who are not pursuing the mid-point credential have more flexibility in course selection.

unless the student specifically chooses to decline it. In the Alternative Exit and Nested Opportunity models, students may or may not be informed by the higher education institution of eligibility for the award of credentials. The responsibility for initiating the award of credentials lies with the students who must apply to receive them. The source of initiating mid-point credentials is an important because it raises questions regarding how well students understand: (a) the value of mid-point credentials, (b) their personal eligibility for these credentials, and (c) the steps required to receive an earned credential.

### Where We Go Next

This research provides a foundation for understanding the prevalence and design of degree programs that offer mid-point credentials. We recognize that this work has merely scratched the surface of what there is to learn. There are likely numerous other programs (and perhaps conceptual models) that we have not yet located, particularly in countries where language created a barrier to our data collection because information about degree programs was not available in English. Yet, this preliminary study raised important research questions and demonstrated great potential for future work.

Reflecting upon mid-point credentials and the college completion agenda, students who have already accumulated substantial amounts of college credit appear to be “low-hanging fruit.” Could the awarding of mid-point credentials achieve dual goals of contributing to the national college completion agenda while also providing students with a valuable marker of their educational achievements? What structures or supports help facilitate

students’ attainment of mid-point credentials? How are these structures and supports made available within the different conceptual models for mid-point credentials? What roles might associate degree-granting institutions and baccalaureate degree-granting institutions play in the mid-point credential market? What measures are available to certify the quality of student learning experiences along the path to mid-point credentials?

Additionally, data is limited regarding the outcomes and impacts of mid-point credentials for students and higher education institutions. What benefit do students perceive and experience in programs that offer mid-point credentials? How are those benefits similar or different across the different conceptual models? How do employers view mid-point credentials and the students who receive them? Does the offering of mid-point credentials encourage students to continue in higher education to pursue higher-level degrees? What happens when students who have received mid-point credentials decide to pursue additional postsecondary education? How do they reenter degree pathways?

Despite remaining questions, baccalaureate degree pathways with embedded mid-point credentials seem to offer intriguing potential for students, institutions, and policy makers alike. We look forward to continuing to explore opportunities for mid-point credential attainment, and encourage others to get involved. ♦

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# A Guide to Major U.S. College Completion Initiatives

by Alene Russell, Senior State Policy Consultant, American Association of State Colleges and Universities

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**Editors' Note:** This policy brief is reprinted with permission from the American Association of State Colleges and Universities. The brief frames the national completion agenda, provides observations across completion initiatives, and includes links to various initiatives. We hope our readership finds this to be a useful introduction to the national completion agenda context. The original article can be found at [http://www.aascu.org/uploadedFiles/AASCU/Content/Root/PolicyAndAdvocacy/PolicyPublications/Policy\\_Matters/College%20Completion%20October%202011.pdf](http://www.aascu.org/uploadedFiles/AASCU/Content/Root/PolicyAndAdvocacy/PolicyPublications/Policy_Matters/College%20Completion%20October%202011.pdf)

## Context

Over the past three years, a wide variety and unusually large number of organizations have adopted a “college completion agenda.” Spurred by President Barack Obama and funded by major foundations, they are undertaking diverse activities aimed at a common goal: to significantly increase the number of adults in the United States who have earned a postsecondary credential. Along with many governors, private businesses and higher education systems and institutions, they are part of a growing national movement focused on increasing student success and educational attainment.

For decades, studies have indicated that the majority of jobs of the future will demand high-level knowledge and skills requiring some postsecondary education. For individuals, obtaining a postsecondary credential is needed to achieve middle-class status; nationally, this credential is needed to boost economic competitiveness. The current interest in college completion is rooted in growing concerns that the United States is steadily losing ground in global competitiveness. While other nations have been making progress, particularly in the attainment of sub-baccalaureate degrees and certificates, the United States has not. We have achieved measurable success in improving access to postsecondary education, but we have not achieved a comparable growth in degree attainment.

The data most often cited come from the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and describe educational attainment among OECD member nations. What has caught people's attention is the rapid increase in “tertiary” (postsecondary) educational attainment among the young adult populations of European and Asian nations while the United States has been relatively stagnant. The latest OECD data indicate that 41 percent of older workers (aged 55-64) and younger workers (aged 25-34) in the U.S. have attained tertiary education— indicating that there have been no increases over time.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development. (2011). *Education at a Glance 2011: OECD Indicators*. Indicator A, Chart A1.1.

Meanwhile, other nations have made significant progress. For example, only 13 percent of Korean adults aged 55-64 have attained tertiary education, while 63 percent of 25-34-year-olds have done so. In G-20 nations as a whole, 22 percent of older workers have attained tertiary education, but that number increases to 36 percent for the younger group. Even Canada—with educational attainment comparable to the United States among older workers (41 percent)—has 56 percent of its younger workers with tertiary attainment. Put another way, because of its older workers, America still ranks in the top five most-educated G-20 countries; however, it ranks 15th among those ages 25-34, representing a significant decline.<sup>2</sup> To make matters worse, recent projections from the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) support the notion that the United States is not on track to make dramatic gains over the next decade in degrees conferred.<sup>3</sup>

Concerns about these trends have been moving this country from its traditional focus on increasing educational access to new interest in educational attainment. This is expressed not only in terms of institutional graduation rates, but also in terms of meeting state and national educational attainment goals. As such, the terminology has shifted from “access” goals to “college completion” goals.

This paper is intended as a guide to the myriad college completion initiatives that have arisen in recent years. First and foremost, it will help answer the “Who? What? When? Where? and Why?” questions about this diverse array of projects. A second purpose is to provide some brief general observations about college completion activities. This paper focuses only on major national/regional college completion initiatives. It does not address the efforts of specific states, systems and institutions, nor does it cover initiatives focused primarily on access or college preparation that happen to contribute to completion.

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<sup>2</sup> Sparks, S. (2011, September 13). U.S. Postsecondary Edge Shrinking Among G-20 Countries. *Education Week*.

<sup>3</sup> National Center for Education Statistics. (2011, September). *Projections of Education Statistics to 2020*.

## Observations

**The Obama administration has served as a catalyst to focus national attention on college completion, and it has explored new territory for the federal government in setting college completion goals.**

In a joint session of Congress on February 24, 2009, President Obama set forth a goal that “by 2020, America will once again have the highest proportion of college graduates in the world.” Stating that three-quarters of the fastest-growing occupations now require more than a high school diploma, the newly inaugurated president outlined this goal as part of his agenda to revive the nation’s economy and “to build a new foundation for lasting prosperity.” This speech has helped to define a national problem and to stimulate activity around the nation, as evidenced by the frequency with which the 2020 goal has been cited by a wide range of individuals and organizations.

Early on in his administration, the president proposed the American Graduation Initiative, a \$12 billion program that focused on community colleges, calling on them to increase their number of graduates by 50 percent. However, through political compromise related to passing the health care reform bill, only \$2 billion for career training was actually approved by Congress.

In March 2011, the administration released the *College Completion Tool Kit*, presenting seven “low-cost” action strategies for governors to consider. This document recognizes states as leaders in improving college completion, and indicates that the federal government “can provide a supporting role to accelerate and expand on that state-led work.” In unveiling the tool kit, Vice President Biden called on each governor to host a state college completion summit, and announced a \$20 million grant program under the Fund for the Improvement of Postsecondary Education (FIPSE)’s Comprehensive Program to increase college success and improve productivity. To help governors develop their college completion plans, the administration released a table of “state targets”—the total number of college graduates that each state would need to achieve to be on target to meet the 2020 national goal.

The administration has proposed two additional programs in its FY 2012 budget. The \$123 million “First in the World” incentive program would support programs that accelerate learning, boost completion rates and hold down tuition. The \$50 million College Completion Incentive Grant program would fund states and institutions for undertaking systemic reforms that produce more college graduates.

**Major foundations have provided both the voice and the funding to drive a national college completion agenda.**

In November 2008, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation announced an ambitious national educational goal: to double the

number of low-income students who earn a postsecondary degree or certificate by age 26 by the year 2025. The initial focus was on community colleges, a sector that has received the continued interest of the foundation. Their strategy includes the following:

- Improving the performance of the postsecondary education system;
- Supporting young adult success; and
- Encouraging U.S. leaders to commit to helping students complete their degrees.

Also in 2008, the Lumina Foundation for Education began talking about a single, overarching “big goal”—to increase the percentage of Americans with high-quality degrees and credentials to 60 percent by the year 2025. Lumina has defined three critical outcomes:

- *Preparation:* Students are prepared academically, financially and socially for success in education beyond high school.
- *Success:* Higher education completion rates are improved significantly.
- *Productivity:* Higher education productivity is increased to expand capacity and serve more students.

Lumina’s three approaches include effective practice, public policy, and public will-building.

These foundations have committed to working as partners to achieve their mutual goals, and many other foundations have joined in this effort.

**Many organizations have responded to the call for increasing college completions, and they are carrying out a wide array of activities.**

Included in this policy brief is a table containing descriptions of over a dozen major national college completion initiatives. As the table illustrates, some initiatives are broad-based, covering the wide spectrum of higher education. Others have a more narrow focus, concentrating on sub-groups such as community colleges or adult populations. Some focus specifically on narrowing the completion gap between traditional college populations and underrepresented groups.

Though their goals, objectives and strategies vary, completion initiatives generally concentrate on one or more of the following:

- Raising awareness of issues and mobilizing public support.
- Improving public policy.
- Improving institutional outcomes through programmatic activity and creating a culture of student success.
- Improving higher education productivity.



- Developing more refined completion measures.<sup>4</sup>
- Analyzing current policies and practices, and identifying effective policies and best practices.

**If the nation is to reach its college completion goals, it will take long-range, coordinated effort. Some cautions and potential pitfalls can be pointed out.**

- *Initiative fatigue should be avoided.* Given limited time, money and energy, there is decreasing value in spreading institutional or state efforts too thin, in terms of developing and/or signing on to new projects.
- *Coordination is essential.* This is the key to minimizing duplication of effort and to maximizing efficiency and effectiveness. For example, consensus around new metrics is preferable to developing numerous separate sets of measures.
- *Access goals must not be abandoned.* Educational attainment goals cannot be achieved without continued commitment to educational opportunities for all.
- *Commitment to quality must be maintained.* Despite funding challenges, there is little value in producing many more postsecondary credentials if those credentials provide poor preparation for the workplace. Quality must be maintained, if not strengthened.
- *There must be planning for the future.* It is easy to focus on the initiative rather than the long-term goal. Plans are needed for what will happen when current funding sources are depleted.

## Conclusion

There is no doubt that significant challenges lie ahead if the nation is to meet the president's goal of having the highest proportion of college graduates in the world by 2020. Whether that goal can be met remains to be seen, but significant progress can and must be made if the nation is to remain competitive in the global economy. This paper has described many key initiatives currently tackling the goal of generating more college degree completions, including important efforts to engage state policymakers and institutions in bringing about needed change. The real work will continue as governors and state legislators strive to put into place finance systems, accountability systems and other state policies in support of college completion goals, and as institutions work to make student success an integral part of everything they do. ◆

<sup>4</sup> Because many of the new completions will come from students who are currently excluded from the Graduation Rate Survey (GRS), new metrics are being developed to track the progress of part-time students, transfer students and students returning to college with previous credits. Additional measures are being developed to: better track subgroups, such as low-income students; measure educational attainment in the context of state demographics; and monitor intermediate steps along the way to completion.

## List of Major U.S. College Completion Initiatives (Adapted from Russell, 2011)

### Access to Success (A2S)

Sponsoring Organizations: National Association of System Heads (NASH) and The Education Trust  
Funding Partners: Lumina Foundation for Education and the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation  
Website: <http://www.edtrust.org/issues/higher-education/access-to-success>

### ACE Commission on Education Attainment

Sponsoring Organizations: American Council on Education (ACE), American Association of Community Colleges (AACC), American Association of State Colleges and Universities (AASCU), Association of American Universities (AAU), Association of Public and Land-grant Universities (APLU) and National Association of Independent Colleges and Universities (NAICU)  
Website: None

### Achieving the Dream

Funding Partners: Lumina Foundation for Education (Founding Investor) and over 20 funders  
Website: <http://www.achievingthedream.org/>

### Adult College Completion Network

Sponsoring Organization: Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education (WICHE)  
Funding Partner: Lumina Foundation for Education  
Website: <http://www.adultcollegecompletion.org>

### Boosting College Completion for a New Economy

Sponsoring Organization: Education Commission of the States (ECS)  
Funding Partner: Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation  
Website: <http://www.boostingcollegecompletion.org/>

### College Completion Agenda

Sponsoring Organization: College Board  
Collaborating Partners: National Conference of State Legislatures (NCSL), *Excelencia* in Education and National Council of La Raza.  
Website: <http://completionagenda.collegeboard.org/>

### College Completion Challenge

Sponsoring Organizations: American Association of Community Colleges (AACC), 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 Honor Society  
Website: <http://www.aacc.nche.edu/About/completionchallenge/Pages/default.aspx>

**College Completion Initiative**

Sponsoring Organization: Southern Regional Education Board (SREB)

Website: [http://www.sreb.org/page/1456/degree\\_completion.html](http://www.sreb.org/page/1456/degree_completion.html)

**Complete College America**

Founding Partners: Carnegie Corporation of New York, Lumina Foundation for Education, Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, W.K. Kellogg Foundation and Ford Foundation  
Collaborating Partners: Nearly 20 national and regional higher education organizations for policy and research expertise  
Website: <http://www.completecollege.org/>

**Complete to Compete**

Sponsoring Organization: National Governors Association (NGA)  
Funding Partners: Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, Lumina Foundation for Education, and USA Funds  
Website: <http://www.subnet.nga.org/ci/1011/>

**Ensuring America's Future by Increasing Latino College Completion (EAF)**

Sponsoring Organization: *Excelencia* in Education  
Collaborating Organizations: 60 organizations, including ACT, Inc., American Council on Education, College Board, Complete College America, Hispanic Association of Colleges and Universities, Institute for Higher Education Policy, Jobs for the Future and National Conference of State Legislatures  
Funding Partners: Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, Lumina Foundation for Education and Kresge Foundation  
Website: <http://www.edexcelencia.org/initiatives/ensuring-america%27s-future>

**National Coalition for College Completion (NCCC)**

Sponsoring Organization: Institute for Higher Education Policy (IHEP)

Collaborating Partners: More than 20 organizations, including Boys and Girls Club of America, Business Roundtable, Center for American Progress, Center for Law and Social Policy and National Urban League  
Funding Partners: Ford Foundation, Lumina Foundation for Education and Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation  
Website: <http://www.ihep.org/programs/nccc.cfm>

**Project Win-Win**

Sponsoring Organization: Institute for Higher Education Policy (IHEP)  
Collaborating Partner: State Higher Education Executive Officers (SHEEO)—evaluation partner  
Funding Partners: Lumina for Education and Kresge Foundation

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# TAFE DIRECTORS AUSTRALIA (TDA) Occasional Papers

## What the UK, US and Australia Can Learn from Each Other

by Leesa Wheelahan (PhD, MEd, GradDipEd, BA, GradDip ComDev), Associate Professor  
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**Editors' Note:** This article is reprinted from an occasional paper written for TAFE Directors Australia. It offers our newsletter readers an intriguing international perspective on systems of education in Australia, the UK, and the US. Similarities and differences are examined related to vocationally-oriented postsecondary education programs and institutions, and suggestions are made regarding what these countries can learn from one another.

A few acronyms are used in the article that may not be familiar to some of our US audiences. Here are some brief explanations.

- **TAFE** is the Technical and Further Education system in Australia, which is “a government-owned and nationally operated system of colleges offering qualifications that are recognized and transferable internationally. The focus in TAFE is on hands-on, practical training with key competencies worked into every course that are thought to be essential for people entering the workforce” (<http://tafe-australia.org/>).
- **VET** stands for “vocational education and training.” TAFE institutions are typically associated with competency-based VET qualifications.
- **TDA** stands for TAFE Directors Australia, which is a “national body incorporated to represent Australia’s 58 public TAFE Institutes and university TAFE divisions, and the Australia-Pacific Technical College.” The TDA “advances vocational education policy in Australia, leads advocacy efforts for funding, [... and works to position] TAFE Institutes as the major training brand delivering skills in Australia” (<http://www.tda.edu.au/>).
- **FE** refers to “further education” colleges in the UK that are distinct from universities (which are referred to as “higher education” institutions). FE colleges primarily offer work-based, adult, and community learning opportunities in a continuing education environment.

The original article can be found at [http://www.tda.edu.au/cb\\_pages/files/TDA-OCC9.pdf](http://www.tda.edu.au/cb_pages/files/TDA-OCC9.pdf)

### Introduction

I was the LH Martin Institute component of the joint TDA/LH Martin Institute Mission to the United States in April 2011 to study community colleges that offer four-year bachelor degrees, and, along with Pam Caven (Director, Policy and Stakeholder Engagement, TDA), undertook an extended visit in June 2011 to the United Kingdom to study higher education in further education colleges. I’ve learnt a lot about both systems, and in particular, have been able to contrast direct engagement with practitioners and policy makers with the research literature that discusses higher education in community colleges and further education colleges. Overall, the research literature effectively outlines and analyses the benefits and difficulties of this sort of provision, and the dilemmas and opportunities that colleges face in both systems. I find this quite encouraging as a researcher. However, the literature can only go so far in providing insights into other systems and in understanding their complexity and the issues practitioners face. These two trips have been very helpful in deepening my understanding of the two systems and their differences and similarities to Australia. Rather than outline the specifics of each trip (as this has been done in other contributions to this *Occasional Paper*), this paper compares and contrasts the US, UK and Australian systems, and identifies issues we need to think about in Australia.

### Comparing the Systems

On first blush, the Australian system seems to be quite different to the other countries because Australia has a much more differentiated tertiary education system than the either US and the UK. Up until recently, our tertiary education sectors were differentiated by type of institution, and type of program that they offered: TAFE institutes offered competency-based VET qualifications; and universities offered degrees and postgraduate qualifications. In the United States, community colleges have always been regarded as *higher education* institutions, and they have been differentiated from universities because the latter offer four year bachelor degrees, whereas community colleges offer two year short cycle higher education qualifications. In contrast, further education colleges in England and Scotland are not regarded as part of the higher education sector (and in this way they are similar to Australia), but they have always offered a broader range of qualifications than we do in Australia that include further education qualifications, competency-based qualifications and higher education qualifications. They also have a much wider remit in teaching senior school qualifications to students aged 16 – 19 years than does TAFE in Australia (although TAFE is increasingly taking on this role). Australia’s system is perhaps most similar to that in the UK.

While big and important differences remain, the systems are starting to converge because they are responding to similar economic and social pressures, and this means Australia's system is starting to look more like that in the UK and US (although there is a long way to go). TAFEs are still mainly identified as VET institutions and associated with VET qualifications, and universities with higher education institutions and higher education qualifications, but this is starting to change as institutions in each sector increasingly offer qualifications associated with the other sector.

The changes that are affecting Australia are having a similar impact on the UK, US, Canada and New Zealand because all are Anglophone countries that have similar liberal market economies. Each country is trying to increase the percentage of its population that has higher level qualifications to respond to economic demands for a higher skilled workforce. Each country sees tertiary education as crucial to social inclusion because without higher level qualifications people are more or less excluded from the labour market and from broader participation in society. Each country is using its more vocationally oriented tier of tertiary education to increase access to higher education.

In the 1980s and early 1990s, which was when the last big expansion of higher education took place, Australia and the UK grew their higher education systems through expanding their university systems, while the US just expanded all its higher education institutions, including community colleges. Now, further education colleges in England have a 'special mission' to increase access to higher education through foundation degrees, which are two-year short cycle vocationally oriented higher education qualifications and they deliver about 10% of undergraduate higher education. Scotland's further education colleges deliver around 20% of higher education through higher national certificates and higher national diplomas which are respectively one year and two year short cycle vocationally oriented higher education qualifications. New Zealand's polytechnics are offering degrees, three provinces (out of 10 provinces and three territories) in Canada have authorised their community colleges to offer baccalaureate degrees, and 15 of the US's 50 states have authorised their community colleges to offer baccalaureate degrees. Eleven TAFEs (which includes all of NSW TAFE) in five states and territories have been registered to offer associate degrees and degrees.

## Rationale for the Provision

Each country has a similar two-fold rationale for expanding access to higher education through its vocationally oriented tier of tertiary education. The first is to expand access to higher education through more work-focused, applied degrees. In each country, the institutions claim that their provision is more vocationally focused than universities, can produce graduates who are more work-ready and can meet skill needs and shortages more effectively (and often more cheaply). They argue this is because of their closer links to industry.

The second rationale is they argue that their provision is more student-centred and can help expand access to higher education for under-represented students from disadvantaged backgrounds. This is because they have more emphasis on preparing students who are academically 'under-prepared' and can offer a more individualised learning experience through smaller classes and more supportive pedagogy. In all cases, these institutions emphasise their orientation to their local communities, their capacity to welcome adults to higher education (as well as young people), and their understanding of the needs of local employers.

## Relationships with Universities

The position of all these institutions in the vocational tier of tertiary education places them in similar relationships to universities. The tertiary education systems in each country are hierarchically structured so that universities have more funding and status. The US system arguably provides more access to universities for students from community colleges than either the UK or Australia, because some states legislate to specify the percentage of community college students that universities must admit and also mandate the amount of credit they will be given in some programs, but this is not always as straightforward as it appears. Credit arrangements are only specified for some programs, and credit is less available for vocational and technical programs than it is for academic programs. Community college leaders told us that one reason they were offering degrees was because community college students couldn't get access to universities – demand for places at universities increased as a consequence of the global financial crisis and community college students have had less success in gaining access to universities than other categories of applicants. Even so, one lesson we can learn from this is that universities that don't usually admit TAFE students can be forced to increase access for TAFE students and provide appropriate credit, and not just be bribed to do so.

In Florida, community colleges must demonstrate that there are skill shortages in the area of their proposed degree and apply to their state accrediting body for permission to offer a degree. However, universities are able to submit alternative proposals if they object to particular community college proposals. While in practice this has not been an issue, it does not give community colleges the same scope to offer degrees as universities.

In England, FE colleges must get their foundation degrees accredited (or validated) by a university, and generally speaking, funding for the foundation degree is routed through the university. This means that students studying at the FE college are students of the university, even if the FE college has developed the program. It also means that the university can withdraw places for their own use, as has happened in some cases recently because the English government has placed a cap on higher education places and universities are seeking to maximise their places. Foundation degrees are designed in collaboration with



employers and must articulate to a three year bachelor degree (which the English call an ‘honours degree’). In theory this gives students access to full degrees, and this often happens in practice, but in some cases students have to compete for places in the degree. Since 2008, FE colleges have been able to apply to the Privy Council to accredit their own foundation degrees. No FE college has been granted this right as yet, but it is expected that a couple of FE colleges with a large amount of higher education provision will soon complete this process.

There are some very good examples of strong partnerships between universities and FE colleges (and there are some very bad ones). The partnership between the University of Plymouth and its partner colleges provides a potential model for Australia to explore. The University of Plymouth College Faculty provides representation of all FE partners on the faculty board, and separate governance arrangements exist between each FE college and the University. FE teachers who teach University of Plymouth awards are associate members of the university and have access to the university’s library and professional development activities. Other arrangements are in place to support the development of subject areas, academic standards, consistent assessment practices, staff professional development and engagement of students in higher education life.

In Scotland, FE colleges get their higher national certificates and diplomas accredited by the Scottish Qualifications Authority and so have more autonomy in developing their qualifications, but FE students don’t necessarily have guaranteed access to universities or guaranteed levels of credit for previous studies. Degrees in Scotland are four years, unlike the three year degrees in England. FE colleges are directly funded by government for their higher education provision. The Scottish government is investing in ‘articulation hubs’ to improve student articulation and to deepen partnerships between FE colleges and universities. Some FE colleges are considering partnership or franchise arrangements with English universities where they deliver two year higher national diplomas or foundation degrees that then articulate into the third and final year of a degree, but this seemed to be a controversial proposal among some colleges. An impediment to this may be that English universities will charge significant amounts of money for degrees (around GBP 7500 on average, but up to GBP 9000), whereas Scottish universities do not charge fees for Scottish students.

## Similar Challenges

There are similar challenges facing FE colleges in the UK, community colleges in the US and TAFEs in Australia. A problem for both England and Australia is that FE colleges and TAFEs feel that the accreditation process forces them into a ‘university’ mould of higher education qualifications. In England this is because universities are the validating body for their qualifications, and in Australia it is because the accreditation process includes university academics who are competitors on the accrediting bodies, but also may have more traditional ideas about

what degrees should look like. The requirements for accrediting degrees in non-self accrediting higher education institutions also specify that degrees should be comparable with degrees offered at universities, and this is often interpreted (so it is argued) that degrees should be *like* those offered in universities.

Another common challenge is the need to build capacity within institutions to offer higher education qualifications. This includes strong academic governance arrangements, but also teachers’ capacity for scholarship, and the creation of cultures of scholarship within institutions. The literature identifies this as a problem in the UK, US and Australia: teachers report that they need lighter teaching loads to engage in scholarship to teach at the ‘higher’ level (including in the US), that they need to engage with their professional and disciplinary bodies, and that they need better library and other resources for teaching. Senior managers we spoke to in the US didn’t seem to think this was a problem, and we didn’t really speak to teachers. The US community colleges didn’t seem to consider scholarship as an issue for them because they identified it with research (whereas we try to distinguish between scholarship and research in Australia, at least some of the time). It may be that they do engage in activities that would be regarded as scholarship, but it certainly is not an institutional imperative to develop ‘scholarly cultures’. It is in the UK and in Australia where the notion of scholarship is hotly debated. We didn’t speak to teachers in all of the six colleges that we visited in England and Scotland, but we did in some, and they reported difficulties in engaging in scholarship, particularly when they were also undertaking higher level qualifications. TAFE teachers also reported this is Australia when colleagues and I undertook the NCVET funded HE in TAFE project in 2008/9.

All countries have challenges in supporting students moving into higher education. The literature, institutional leaders and teachers generally agree that students need to recognise that they are taking a ‘step up’ and that more demands will be made of them. The US has a vast literature on ‘transition shock’ which refers to the difficulties articulating students experience when they move to four year degrees or four year colleges (universities). This is because of the higher level demands that are being made on them in new, more impersonal, learning environments, combined with managing the demands of study with the demands of their personal lives. Given that community college students are often from older and/or from disadvantaged backgrounds (as in the UK and Australia), they are likely to have more complex lives and less academic support they can draw on at home. The US places emphasis on ‘remedial support’ (an unfortunate term) to a much greater extent than in Australia, and invests in preparing students for studying higher education. England and Scotland also do this through incorporating ‘personal development’ subjects in their qualifications, which help students acquire the skills they need to study at a higher level. Australia does not do this as effectively, partly because only competency-based programs are publicly funded in TAFE, and training package qualifications generally don’t

have the development of study skills to study at a higher level in associated qualifications. The new Australian Qualifications Framework now specifies this as an outcome for all qualifications, and hopefully this will be reflected in the design of VET qualifications in future.

Institutions in the UK, US and Australia also face challenges because they will always be under scrutiny and have to defend the quality of their qualifications against those who regard them as second class higher education qualifications. This is because their students are more likely to be academically under-prepared; their staff have higher teaching loads, are less likely to engage in research and probably won't consistently be as highly qualified (usually interpreted as having a PhD); and, because they have tighter ties to industry which raises questions about their academic independence and overly 'applied' qualifications (such as applied degrees). This may be unfair and unjust, but it is the way it is and institutions need to ensure they can demonstrate the quality of their provision to allay these concerns. Government policies, accreditation and quality assurance processes, and support for capacity building are crucial in supporting institutions to offer high quality qualifications, and to be demonstrably doing so.

### Some Key Lessons for Australia

A key difference between Australia and the UK and US is that higher education in FE colleges and community colleges is publicly funded, whereas it isn't in Australia (with a small number of exceptions). Higher education provision in these institutions in the UK and US has been mapped into public policy and is being used to support government objectives to increase the skills of the workforce, tackle skill shortages, increase the percentage of the population with higher level qualifications, and widen access to higher education. It is also cheaper. Community colleges are funded by government at a lower rate than universities and have lower fees. The US doesn't have income contingent loans and charges real rates of interest on student loans, and this has been a big incentive for students to undertake community college baccalaureate degrees. England is about to embark on high fees for higher education, and FE colleges will not charge as much as universities in their emerging marketised system. The Australian government could consider funding higher education places in TAFE at a somewhat lower rate because they will not be funded to undertake research (as universities are). It is inequitable to withhold public funding for higher education in TAFE in Australia, given that students who undertake degrees in TAFE are more likely to come from disadvantaged backgrounds compared to those in universities. State governments are increasingly mapping TAFE into their policies to increase access to higher education (particularly in the regions) and increase the skills of the workforce, but this will be hampered as long as TAFE does not have access to public funding for higher education qualifications.

Another key lesson, particularly from the UK, is the importance of developing policies to help ensure the quality of provision of higher education in TAFE. The Quality Assurance Agency in England has worked with FE colleges to ensure the quality of their provision (even if that's not how the FE colleges necessarily perceive it), and institutions such as the Higher Education Academy (the English analogue of the Australian Learning and Teaching Council) have had dedicated programs to build capacity for higher education in FE colleges. Government has, in the past, funded a range of programs to develop consortia between universities and FE colleges to build institutional capacity for higher education delivery, and the research funding bodies have provided extensive funding to research higher education in FE colleges (by our standards at least).

Another key lesson – from all countries, including Australia – is that it takes institutional effort to build capacity to offer higher education programs. It is necessary to invest in staff development, scholarly cultures, a higher education experience for students, and academic governance. There also needs to be greater investment in academic support (all institutions in all countries report that students find essay writing and referencing to be agonising) and in resources such as libraries. Partnerships with supportive universities may be one way of contributing to this capacity building, but institutions will need to dedicate sufficient time and resources to develop their higher education provision. This may be difficult when higher education is still only a small part of what they do and the main funding and institutional effort goes to their 'traditional' programs.

Finally, and in conclusion, while there are important differences between each country, there are sufficient similarities and common interests to support the development of an international community of practice of institutions that offer higher education in community colleges in the US and Canada, FE colleges in the UK, polytechnics in New Zealand and TAFEs in Australia. Such a community of practice would support institutional and policy learning in all countries, support the development of networks, and exchanges of staff and students. There is much we can learn (and have learnt) from these other countries, just as there is much they can learn from us. ♦

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*Leesa Wheelahan has about 18 years' experience in tertiary education in Australia, starting as a TAFE teacher at Victoria University in 1994. Following this, she worked in policy and academic development at VU, and as a teacher of VET teachers as Southern Cross University and at Griffith University. Her research interests include VET and tertiary education policy, relations between the VET and higher education sectors, student pathways and credit transfer, student equity, and the role of knowledge in vocational curriculum. She is now an associate professor in adult and vocational education at the LH Martin Institute, University of Melbourne.*

# Pathways to Results: Implementation of a Data-Driven Approach

by Ann Jones, OCCRL

Among their recommendations to ensure success of the College Completion Agenda, the Commission on Access, Admissions and Success in Higher Education calls for “institutions of higher education set out to dramatically increase college completion rates by improving retention, easing transfer among institutions and implementing data-based strategies to identify retention and dropout challenges” (Lee et. al., 2011, p. 219). This article demonstrates how the Pathways to Results (PTR) process, developed by the Office of Community College Research and Leadership (OCCRL), can help institutions embrace data-driven decision making to improve student outcomes. This article begins with an overview of the PTR process, and then shares an experience of the PTR process in action at Lewis and Clark Community College (LCCC) in Godfrey, Illinois. Each step of the process is introduced and illustrated showing benefits of looking at data to improve Programs of Study. LCCC provides an example of a way in which community colleges can increase student success in Programs of Study through the implementation of the PTR process.

## The PTR Process

PTR is an outcomes-focused, equity-guided process to improve student transition to postsecondary education and employment. This 5-phase process is based on collaboration among partners, including educational institutions at all levels of the P-20 system, business and industry, community-based organizations, and other stakeholders (See Table 1). It engages people in a

systematic problem-solving process that identifies sustainable solutions and facilitates equitable student outcomes. PTR is designed to improve Programs of Study planning and implementation, to improve transition outcomes for all students, and to improve access to data and tools that support evidence-based decision making and continuous improvement. It is aligned with public policies dedicated to improving student transition to college and careers. The PTR process focuses on a wide variety of Career Clusters, Career Pathways, and Programs of Study. Problems addressed by PTR teams are equally diverse, ranging from recruitment and retention to curriculum alignment and college and career readiness.

## Example Implementation

In 2010-11, LCCC implemented the PTR initiative in their Radio Broadcasting program. LCCC’s goal was to develop a pathway of study model in Radio Broadcasting from dual credit high school courses to associate degree attainment that they could then use as a template for the creation of other pathways for degree programs at the institution. The PTR process provided LCCC with the opportunity to assess student data to ascertain student success rates throughout the degree program. The College deemed that by providing students with clear academic and career goals, and a way in which to achieve those goals, there would be greater opportunity for LCCC to facilitate the students’ successful completion of their program and transition into the workplace or higher education.

Table 1: The Five Phases of Pathways to Results

Phase 1	Engagement and Commitment: Team members and partners collaborate to focus on critical problems that need to be addressed to improve student outcomes and enhance program quality. The team members represent all stakeholders who have vested interest in improving the chosen Program of Study.
Phase 2	Outcomes and Equity Assessment: Teams use student-level data to examine outcomes and identify gaps in results between racial, ethnic, low-income, and other groups and special populations. Using these data, teams identify areas where outcomes are especially successful and areas where short- and long-term improvements are needed.
Phase 3	Process Assessment: Teams seek to understand how major processes impact student outcomes and contribute to the identified problem. The focus is on thoroughly understanding each step of the processes and the contributing factors that impact the identified problem to first determine root causes.
Phase 4	Process Improvement: Teams develop solutions to the identified problem. Potential solutions are generated and evaluated to determine whether they support the desired outcomes. Teams draft an evaluation plan to track progress of implementation of the process improvements.
Phase 5	Review and Reflection: Team members participate in activities that encourage review, reflection and shared learning at the individual and group levels. The team discusses ways in which the solution can be sustained and the PTR process can be applied to other Programs of Study.

While collecting data for their PTR study, LCCC found that though they had numerous students enrolled in their Radio Broadcasting program, the data collected did not accurately reflect students seeking this degree. Many students had not indicated that they were planning on completing the Radio Broadcasting degree when enrolling for program courses. As a result there were a number of students who were planning to complete a Radio Broadcasting degree, but were not declared majors in the program. Several issues stem from this inaccuracy. Without a declared career technical education (CTE) degree, students eligible for special student services were not receiving the support designed to remove barriers to academic and occupational success. Students were not being advised properly when registering for classes and advisors were placing students in classes that may or may not be required for their major. This resulted in students taking unnecessary courses, potentially running out of financial aid and not completing their career program requirements in a timely manner, or at all.

The findings from the PTR process led to changes in LCCC's enrollment system and various departments working together to develop a new data collection procedure. Enrollment and advising staff are now required to update a student's degree information each semester. The online enrollment system necessitates updated major information before a student is allowed to complete the enrollment process as well. Students are prompted if a course is not part of their program and required courses are suggested. To help all students, LCCC implemented this enrollment procedure college wide. This one alteration in the college system has the possibility to improve student outcomes.

Along with the practical changes of the enrollment process, through the PTR initiative LCCC gained an understanding of the importance of having thorough and complete data in planning and decision-making. They discovered the importance of data-driven decisions and the need for correct information in making those decisions. Because of what LCCC found in their data, this new system was implemented to improve retention of students through the aid of student support services and cut down on dropout challenges such as depleted funding of tuition and delay in student program completion. To learn if this change in the enrollment procedure will have lasting implications continued data collection and analysis will be necessary. ♦

### For More Information

For more information on Pathways to Results go to <http://occr.illinois.edu/projects/pathways>.

### References

Lee, J. Jr., Edwards, K., Menson, R., & Rawls, A. (2011). *The College Completion Agenda 2011 Progress Report*. Retrieved from [http://completionagenda.collegeboard.org/sites/default/files/reports\\_pdf/Progress\\_Report\\_2011.pdf](http://completionagenda.collegeboard.org/sites/default/files/reports_pdf/Progress_Report_2011.pdf)

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## High Schools Promoting Career and College Readiness: An Interview with Mr. Corey Tafoya of Woodstock High School

by Tracey Ratner, OCCRL

Mr. Corey Tafoya has been the Principal of Woodstock High School in Woodstock, Illinois since the 2005-2006 school year. During the 2006-2007 school year, he was instrumental in creating the *Cum Laude* program, which promotes and encourages all students to become ideal graduates. In order to become a *Cum Laude* graduate, students must “meet” or “exceed” on all sections of the PSAE, participate in one sport, club, or activity during their high school career, demonstrate community involvement, earn at least 260 credits, earn a 2.50 GPA or higher, be a good citizen with no suspensions or good conduct violations, maintain a 95% attendance rate during both junior and senior years, and complete a Capstone course or one Advanced Placement (A.P.) course.

In implementing this program, Woodstock High School has seen an increase in the number of students who are both college and career ready. In addition, more students are completing high school because they hope to reach *Cum Laude* status. In March 2012, Tracey Ratner, OCCRL Graduate Research Assistant, interviewed Mr. Tafoya about the *Cum Laude* program and what it has done for their school.

**UPDATE:** What led to the creation of the *Cum Laude* Program?

**Mr. Tafoya:** We began discussing this program during my first year in the building. As our discussions began, someone asked “What do we want our students to look like once they graduate?” We really struggled with this question because we didn’t want an ideal graduate to simply be defined by test scores. Eventually, after much research and discussion, we came up with the eight criteria that identify what an ideal graduate from our high school looks like. In addition, we came up with the name *Cum Laude* and feel as though it really demonstrates the values of our community and school. It is also important to note that implementing a program like this one is inexpensive and can be tailored to the needs of any school.

**UPDATE:** How does the *Cum Laude* program encourage high school completion?

**Mr. Tafoya:** Interestingly enough, we didn’t realize just how valuable the program would be for high school completion. We initially thought the program would be more about allure and recognition. However, it has had a positive impact on graduation rates and on drop-out rates. At our school, students were actually graduating early because we were overcrowded and we didn’t give students much to look forward to. *Cum Laude* has given them something to aim for and has created excitement about graduation. For example, in school year 2005-2006, we

had 13.5% of students graduating early. In school year 2010-2011, we had 8.5% of students graduating early and we anticipate it will be even lower this year. These students are still graduating, but are sticking around for the extra semester. *Cum Laude* graduates wear a special white stole and receive a designation on their diploma.

**UPDATE:** How does the *Cum Laude* program promote college readiness?

**Mr. Tafoya:** Due to the program, more students than ever before are taking our Advanced Placement (A.P.) and Capstone courses. For example, 90% of our senior students took an A.P. or Capstone course last year. At our school, students need 222 credits to graduate, but in order to become a *Cum Laude* graduate, students need 260 courses to graduate. So, students are taking courses they would not normally take and are therefore better prepared for careers or post-secondary education. When we designed the eight criteria, we kept in mind what college readiness looks like, and we believe the criterion reflects that.

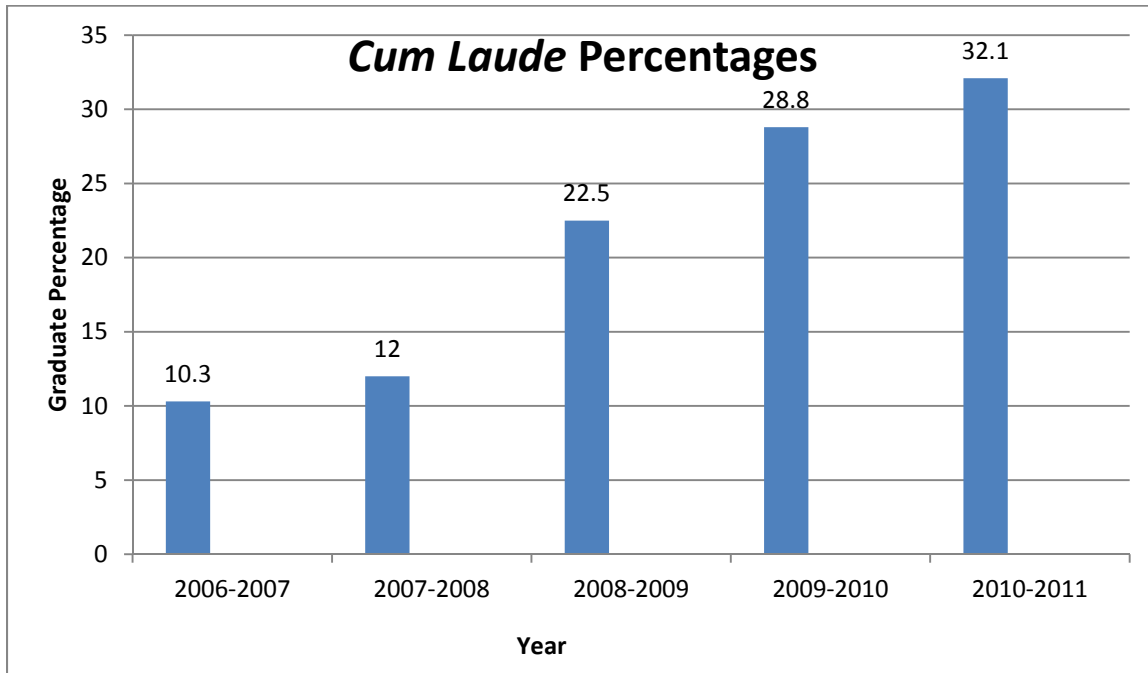
**UPDATE:** How does the *Cum Laude* program encourage career readiness? Can you talk about how your Capstone courses encourage career development?

**Mr. Tafoya:** Part of the *Cum Laude* program requires good citizenship, which we feel helps prepare students for the workforce and for careers. In addition, the program requires a 95% attendance rate, which is very important for students as they learn responsibility in the real world. Another component of the program requires a Capstone course, which is a course that goes higher and deeper in a particular area of interest for the student.

In November 2005, our Board of Education adopted a policy which states that “a career awareness and exploration program must be available at all grade levels.” We then took immediate action to find ways for students to learn about careers Pre-K through twelfth grade. In our school, we have a career clusters curriculum guide that we introduce students to as freshmen. While we don’t have students declare any particular major or area of study, we do require them to complete plans and take courses that interest them for a future career. We then track what clusters our students are interested in offer courses that support their interests. For example, we realized that our students were interested in engineering, so we paired with *Project Lead the Way* to offer courses in that area. We also continue to listen to area businesses and find a way, within our mean, to accommodate them.

**UPDATE:** What data have you gathered on the *Cum Laude* program?

**Mr. Tafoya:** We have been tracking data on the program from the start. First and foremost, we tracked the percentage of students who have become *Cum Laude* graduates, which has increased each year. You can see this information on the charts below:



Percentages of <i>Cum Laude</i> Graduates Based on Total Number of Graduating Seniors	
2006-2007	44 out of 428
2007-2008	49 out of 408
2008-2009	93 out of 413
2009-2010	111 out of 386
2010-2011	82 out of 259

In addition, we have tracked certain subgroups as they graduate *Cum Laude*. Since beginning this program, our Hispanic attendance rate has gone up 5%. Similarly, our African American attendance rate has gone up 10%. We believe this is due to the attendance requirement as part of the *Cum Laude* program. You can view the subgroup participation in the chart below:

Subgroup Percentages of <i>Cum Laude</i> Graduates					
	2006-2007	2007-2008	2008-2009	2009-2010	2010-2011
American Indian/Alaskan Native	NA	NA	NA	.9	NA
Asian/Pacific Islander	4.5	4.1	1.1	.9	4.8
Black/ African America	2.3	NA	1.1	4.5	NA
Hispanic	NA	4.1	5.4	9.0	10.8
Multi-Racial	NA	2.0	NA	.9	2.4
White	93.2	89.9	92.5	83.8	81.9
Free/Reduced Lunch	--	--	--	9.9	10.8

Our A.P. testing has improved, as well. We use Newsweek's Power Factor, which is the total number of graduates, divided by total number of A.P. tests taken. Our Power Factor is currently .95 and during our first year of the program, it was only .48. We are very pleased by this.

Below, you can see that we have also tracked the percentages of senior class students earning partial criteria toward *Cum Laude*. Even though these students have not received *Cum Laude* status, they have achieved higher than they would have without the program.

Percentage of Senior Class Earning Partial Criteria										
	2006-2007		2007-2008		2008-2009		2009-2010		2010-2011	
	Total	Percent	Total	Percent	Total	Percent	Total	Percent	Total	Percent
1 of 8	456	95.8	419	97.0	392	86.5	366	85.7	279	98.2
2 of 8	388	81.5	371	85.9	371	81.9	352	82.4	269	94.7
3 of 8	304	63.9	307	71.1	330	72.8	308	72.1	237	83.3
4 of 8	224	47.1	246	56.9	273	60.3	270	63.2	194	68.3
5 of 8	163	34.2	199	46.1	214	47.2	222	52.9	153	53.9
6 of 8	105	22.1	130	30.1	167	36.9	168	39.3	119	42.0
7 of 8	69	14.5	91	21.1	115	25.4	121	28.3	94	33.1

**UPDATE:** What do you think you can do to increase high school completion and college completion?

**Mr. Tafoya:** I believe it is our job to provide interesting courses to students so that they want to graduate and move on with their education. Also, we need to keep high expectations in place and assist students in reaching those expectations.

**UPDATE:** Where do you see the *Cum Laude* program going in the future?

**Mr. Tafoya:** We are actually thinking about raising the bar again for *Cum Laude* graduates. We have a post-secondary readiness committee that is suggesting a few changes to the eight criteria, based on what we have seen. We don't just want the status quo to be acceptable. We are anxious to tweak the program to make it even more effective for students.

For more information, you can contact, please contact Mr. Tafoya at [ctafoya@d200.mchenry.k12.il.us](mailto:ctafoya@d200.mchenry.k12.il.us) ♦

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# Contributions of Transfer Students and Structures to the College Completion Agenda

by Jason Taylor & Julia Panke Makela, OCCRL

The national focus on college completion encourages the attainment of all types of postsecondary degrees, ranging from certificates, to associate degrees, to bachelor's degrees and beyond. This article highlights some emerging strategies designed to facilitate increased bachelor degree attainment for transfer students. Why focus on bachelor's degrees? Carnevale, Smith, and Strohl (2010) project that the U.S. economy will produce 46.8 million job openings by 2018. Approximately 63% of those jobs will require workers with at least some college education; 33% of which will require a bachelor's degree or higher. At current rates of educational attainment, the supply of workers who have achieved a bachelor's degree will fall well below the 16 million job demand.

Though images of full-time students attending residential campuses may still be the popular perception of bachelor's degree seekers, this traditional model of college-going is no longer the norm. In fact, only 25% of college students attend school full-time on residential campuses. As stated by Complete College America (2011), "nontraditional students are the new majority" (p. 6), with 75% of students commuting to school and often balancing school, work, and family responsibilities. If bachelor's degree attainment numbers and rates are to increase, it is essential to reach out to students who may have historically been seen as "nontraditional" for baccalaureate degree-granting institutions, such as transfer students and older adults.

Some have argued that transfer students can represent 'low hanging fruit' for bachelor's degree attainment, and research suggests students transferring from a community college to a four-year college or university are equally successful as native students who begin at a four-year college (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). These students have often accumulated a substantial number of credits to contribute to the bachelor's degree and gained familiarity with the language and culture of higher education environments, which can contribute to their persistence and success. However, it is also important to acknowledge that many transfer students want more information about the transfer process and many do not make social connections with other students and academic connections with faculty, particularly at large research universities where students often feel anonymous (Townsend & Wilson, 2006). States and institutions are responding with the implementation of programs and policies to promote transfer student success (Zamini, 2001).

This article first shares insights on the transfer patterns that students engage in as they move between higher education institutions, demonstrating the need to implement structures to help students more clearly navigate between and among higher education institutions. It then illustrates an initiative designed to

increase the number of students transferring to and graduating from bachelor's degree programs.

## Understanding Student Transfer Patterns

The original transfer pathway envisioned by William Rainey Harper, David Star Jordan, and other founders of community colleges was the completion of two years of lower division coursework marked by a transfer associate degree (AA or AS), followed by transfer to an additional two-years of upper-division study for a bachelor's degree (BA or BS). While this pathway is certainly still prevalent, many additional transfer patterns have emerged. In a seminal article on transfer students, Barbara Townsend (2001) conceptualized six transfer patterns, which broaden our understanding of the ways in which students move between and among higher education institutions. Three of the patterns begin with students at a community college, while the other three begin with students at a four-year baccalaureate degree-granting college or university.

Students who begin at a community college may:

- Transfer to a four-year college or university before completion of a transfer associate degree (AA or AS)
- Transfer non-liberal arts courses or degrees (e.g., Associate of Applied Science, AAS; Associate of Technology, AT) to a four-year college or university
- Transfer in a 'swirling' pattern, moving back and forth between community colleges and four-year colleges or universities

Students who begin at a four-year college or university may:

- Transfer dual credit courses from a community college to a four-year college or university
- Transfer community college courses taken during summer terms to a four-year college or university
- Transfer community college courses taken concurrently with a four-year college or university

Recent research using the National Student Clearinghouse data found that as many as one third of undergraduates exhibit some type of transfer behavior (Hossler et al., 2012) suggesting that many of these transfer patterns are common for today's college students. Yet, how does the transfer of credits among higher education institutions contribute to degree completion? When do credits earned at one institution transfer to another? When are credits nontransferable, and therefore do not ultimately



contribute to bachelor's degree attainment? If degree completion is to be a primary goal, structures are needed to provide clear pathways for students who navigate their college experiences between institutions in ways that maximize the transfer of earned credits.

### **An Example Initiative for Engaging Transfer Students**

Since 2006, the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign (UIUC) has been engaged in a Lumina Foundation funded initiative called Transfer Student Advising Mentors (TEAM) aimed at increasing the number of community college transfer students at UIUC (Cullen, 2007). TEAM began with a three-year grant to develop programs that provide information, individual counseling, and hands-on assistance to help underserved and traditionally underrepresented students with the transfer process and to promote the success of transfer students through graduation. The project was anticipated to "result in doubling the number of transfer students from the target districts within five years and achieving graduation rates for transfer students as high as [native four-year university students]" (Cullen, 2007, para. 2).

#### ***Program Development***

An unanticipated outcome of the TEAM efforts was the emergence of the Parkland Pathway program, a partnership between Parkland College (a community college) and UIUC. The intent of the program is to increase the number of students, particularly underrepresented students, transferring from Parkland College to UIUC. The program began implementation in the 2008-2009 academic year and is currently in the fourth year of implementation. Formative evaluation efforts conducted in the programs' third year of implementation revealed salient program features that provide structural mechanisms that ease the transition of students from Parkland College to UIUC (Taylor, forthcoming). These features can be categorized into administrative, academic, and support components, affecting all aspects of the student experience.

***Administrative.*** The program is structured so that students are dually admitted to both Parkland College and UIUC as freshmen and are considered both Parkland College and UIUC students during their first two academic years. Further, students identify one disciplinary major (e.g., mechanical engineering) or a disciplinary major track (e.g., engineering undesignated) within an academic unit at the beginning of the program and are expected to stay in that program throughout their bachelor's degree studies. This latter program feature allows students to remain in one program of study and have a clear path from Parkland College to UIUC.

***Academic.*** Students begin their college experiences with a course, taken at Parkland College, which is called Educational, Career, and Life Planning. The course, required of all Parkland

College students, emphasizes college and career planning and success. Parkland Pathway students are assigned to the same course section to connect students with similar academic interests and help build community among Parkland Pathway students.

Another program component that is significant to the academic experiences of students is dual enrollment. During students' freshmen and sophomore years, students take the preponderance of their courses at Parkland College. However, this unique dual enrollment component allows students to take one class per semester on the UIUC campus. This dual enrollment component allows students to experience the academic environment and adjust to the academic expectations at UIUC prior to transfer in their junior year.

***Support.*** The Parkland Pathway program is intentionally designed to provide support services that are recognized as critical to successfully transitioning students from Parkland College to UIUC. First, new students are required to participate in an orientation program that is customized to the needs of Parkland Pathway students. Second, students are mandated to meet with disciplinary-based academic advisors from Parkland College and UIUC every semester during their freshmen and sophomore years to ensure students take the correct sequence of courses. Third, as both Parkland College and UIUC students, the Parkland Pathway students receive a UIUC student ID (I-Card) as freshmen and sophomores. This allows Parkland Pathway students access to the privileges associated with possession of the card including access to student recreation facilities, libraries, computer labs, student discounts, to name a few. Similarly, Parkland Pathway students can participate in UIUC student organizations. Finally, students have access to UIUC housing and the health services as freshmen and sophomores, neither of which are available at Parkland College.

#### ***Program Outcomes***

Because the program is in its fourth year of implementation, it is premature to evaluate the extent to which the program contributes to bachelor's degree completion. However, the Parkland Pathway program contributed to the TEAM goals of increasing the number of students transferring to the University of Illinois. First, program enrollment numbers have increased since the first year of the program. In 2008, 27 students were enrolled, 67 students in 2009, 60 students in 2010, and 84 students in 2011. Of the students who completed the first two years of the Parkland Pathway program, the transfer rate was 44% for the 2008 cohort and 28% for the 2009 cohort. However, several students did not complete the Parkland Pathway program, primarily because they switched majors but still transferred to Illinois. Including these students, the transfer rate was 67% for the 2008 cohort and 60% for the 2009 cohort. Although premature to know the transfer rate for the 2011 cohort, estimates suggest that 90% will transfer based on students who applied to transfer.

## Concluding Remarks

The Parkland Pathway example addresses the need to facilitate student transfer and implement appropriate structures and policies that have the potential to facilitate students' bachelor degree completion. The program represents just one of the transfer pathways described by Townsend (2001), but knowing and understanding multiple transfer patterns can help with the development and implementation of explicit structures that support transfer students and ultimately their completion of a bachelor's degree. For UIUC, transfer success is not limited to Parkland Pathway, and the TEAM project has implemented programs and policies addressing several transfer patterns<sup>1</sup>.

If transfer students are a 'low-hanging' fruit then institutions and policy makers should be attentive to existing research and programs and capitalize on the opportunity to improve bachelor's degree completion by modifying and refining existing structures that impede transfer student success. To fully understand the impact of program and policy changes, research and evaluation efforts should accompany implementation efforts. ♦

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<sup>1</sup> The following links include more information about the TEAM efforts:

<http://news.illinois.edu/ii/07/1018/team.html>

<http://occrll.illinois.edu/projects/team>

[http://handouts.aacrao.org/am11/finished/W0915a\\_D\\_Cullen.pdf](http://handouts.aacrao.org/am11/finished/W0915a_D_Cullen.pdf)

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