Chapter Seven

Moving the Needle on Student Success

[7.0] Community college students possess multiple risk factors which work against their odds of completion or transfer. While scholars debate whether community college students would be more successful if they began their postsecondary careers at four-year colleges and universities, it is reasonable to conclude that the 50 percent of community college students who are at greatest risk would have limited success in either type of institution.

[7.1] Throughout this book the challenge of improving student success at community colleges has been explored from multiple perspectives. Basically the difficulties faced by students can be viewed as falling into three buckets. First, the academic preparation bucket. Standard community college assessment practices indicate that the majority of community college students do not demonstrate college level mathematics and English skills at entry. The second bucket is the social bucket. For many students, the strong social connections on campus that would enable them to become integrated into the academic community of college are lacking. The third bucket is financial. Many community college students are paying for college themselves, which means their financial situation—including financial literacy and financial decision making—may affect persistence and completion. The interventions chosen to address these buckets approximate where change can occur. Unfortunately, too many community college students face challenges in all three areas, so while an intervention might plug a hole in one bucket, the other two continue to leak.

[7.2] Research has provided some important insights into student success at community colleges. Synthesizing the more detailed findings described throughout the book into manageable bites can help leaders and staff create interventions that enhance student success.
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THE ACADEMIC BUCKET

The academic challenges faced by community college students are well documented. The reality is that the students with the greatest academic needs are directed to the postsecondary institutions with the least resources in the public sector. Public four-year institutions spent $36,000 per FTE in 2008–2009, whereas public two-year colleges spent $12,000.¹

Problems with the weak academic preparation of students have been present throughout the history of community colleges.² Remedial education, intended to address weak academic preparation, is not effective for most students. This has been confirmed for many years by quantitative analyses across all higher education sectors. Analyses conducted by Attewell et al. cite Adelman’s decade-old observation that based on his analyses of students attending college in the 1980s and 1990s: “‘remediation’ in higher education is not some monolithic plague that can be cured by a single prescription. Determined students and faculty can overcome at least mild deficiencies in preparation . . . . But when reading is the core of the problem, the odds of success in college environments are so low that other approaches are called for.”³ Current community college practice, however, places a cohort of twenty to thirty academically low-performing students in classrooms for several hours a week with the assumption that they can succeed over a period of time. Standard approaches that rely on placement testing followed by remedial education if necessary are under intense scrutiny. Different pedagogical approaches are being tested with a goal of providing intervention alternatives to improve the outcomes of remediation.

Socioeconomic status (SES) is known to play a critical role in student success. SES is a strong predictor of academic preparation. Racial and ethnic minorities are more likely to begin college in remediation. Differences in academic preparation reflect, in large part, gaps in the quality of K–12 schools, even for those students who have been out of high school for several years. SES also correlates with the likelihood of being the first in one’s family to attend college. When combined with other characteristics, SES makes it difficult to become integrated into the college community. And while the aspiration of the open door college has been to provide access, and by so doing, provide hard-working students with the opportunity to overcome their socioeconomic circumstances, the reality is that current practice at community colleges is inadequate to help them overcome the barriers to their potential.

Community college students are challenged by circumstances that predate their arrival on campus. Some can be related to variability in the performance of K–12 schools. The composition of school districts often concentrates low SES students in particular schools on the basis of geography. Curriculum and teaching in low SES schools are rarely adequate to improve the outcomes of
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low SES students. Further, there may be lower expectations in terms of curriculum requirements with fewer mathematics and English courses that students must complete during high school, compounding skills that are already marginal. Many students treat their senior year lightly, taking low-demand courses that contribute to marginal performance on placement tests, leading in turn to a higher risk of failure in college. Learning disabilities, anxieties about subject areas such as mathematics, writing, or reading, and difficulties stemming from English language proficiency add to students’ learning challenges.

Although interventions over the past decade have resulted in improvement, in truth, community colleges have a limited number of power tools in the toolbox. Remediation, in its current form with semester-long courses in sequences of two to three semesters, clearly does not work. Focusing on K–12 to college transitions may offer some hope for improving student outcomes. In this respect, community colleges are at an advantage in comparison to four-year colleges and universities that work with much larger service areas. The students who are likely to attend community colleges are known long before college matriculation. While interventions at the high school level can be costly and result in elaboration of the community college mission, becoming more deeply involved in K–12 education is increasingly being viewed as a necessity for community colleges.

THE SOCIAL BUCKET

Well-meaning efforts to ensure access work against basic social science knowledge about how retention in higher education works. First-year students need to have opportunities to forge connections with faculty and peers on campus even when commuting from home. It is also important for institutions to communicate with their students in a systematic way during the first semester to prepare them for participation in a culture of success. The most direct way to ensure that this happens is through structures such as learning communities and student success courses where curricula can be used to encourage and develop social and academic integration into the college community.

In general, community colleges are not well positioned to provide social supports to students because they operate on relatively small budgets. While community colleges spend approximately 9 percent of their per FTE expenditures on student services, this is 21 percent less per FTE than public four-year colleges. Practices that limit interaction between students and college faculty and staff include high student to counselor ratios, high ratios of students to advisors, collective bargaining agreements that govern faculty advisory roles and office hours, and the prevalence of part-time faculty.
The social challenges experienced by community college students can be described in terms of cultural capital. The theory of cultural capital, developed by sociologist Pierre Bourdieu,\(^5\) has been applied to many educational settings, including the work of Annette Lareau in elementary school classrooms.\(^6\) In her research, Lareau observed that low SES parents interact with schools and teachers very differently than high SES parents. As part of her study, parents were observed at “open house” nights. Lareau noted that, “many of the [low SES] parents did not speak with a teacher during the visit. When they did, the interaction tended to be short, rather formal, and serious.”\(^7\) In interviews, these parents “expressed doubts about their educational capabilities and indicated that they depended on the teacher to educate their children.”\(^8\) By contrast, open house nights at the high SES school in her study were attended by 96 percent of parents (compared with 60 percent at the low SES school) and “almost all of the parents talked to a teacher or to the teacher’s aide; these conversations were often long and punctuated by jokes and questions.”\(^9\) High SES parents approached teachers as equals and partners in educating their children—they engaged them as opposed to deferring to them.

These differences in behavior had important educational consequences for children in Lareau’s study. She concluded that social class influences schooling as high SES parents were culturally better aligned with their children’s teachers and understood each other. This was not true of lower SES parents, who minimized their interactions with teachers as a way to diffuse their discomfort. An individual’s cultural capital consists of an accumulation of his or her past experience.

What can be drawn from the theory of cultural capital is that community college students may lack the cultural capital to succeed in college. Community college faculty and staff are highly educated and have embraced and internalized the culture of academe. Students, on the other hand, may have less of a basis for this kind of cultural alignment. Many are likely to have been raised by parents similar to those described by Lareau; those who avoided conversation with teachers, focused mainly on nonacademic issues, and kept to the periphery of classrooms. Students displaying similar behaviors might be interpreted by faculty as hostile toward school or disinterested in education.

At the beginning of their postsecondary careers, many community college students are strangers to the culture of college and are unclear about college-level expectations. They lack an “intuitive” understanding of how to interact with faculty and staff and frustrate and disappoint faculty with what appears to be an absence of motivation, disinterest in academic subjects, and poor study skills. Attention to cultural alignment between students and the college environment will need to be better understood if community colleges are to help students achieve academic and career goals.
Students choose community colleges because they are proximate and affordable. The incentive structure that shapes college choice results in community colleges enrolling a disproportionate number of students who do not have adequate resources to pay for college and who are overwhelmed by time and financial commitments. Because two-thirds of students enroll part time, it can take years to complete a community college education, during which time burdens of family and work commitments can overwhelm students.

While tuition at community colleges remains relatively low, many students are financially independent and contribute to family finances. Moreover, job demands often interfere with college success. As a result, a number of risk factors correlate with low income, including part-time attendance, full-time work while in college, and stop-out. Performance-based scholarships have shown some promise for improving outcomes. Higher levels of support that could alleviate financial barriers is a desirable solution, but one that is too costly, and therefore not feasible for most colleges.

Supports that might help students address financial challenges are more likely to be programmatic than monetary. Educational practices such as internships and service learning can help students network within their communities, which can lead to paid employment. Additionally, strengthened connections with community organizations can also provide support for students. Community-based organizations (CBOs) can be useful partners for community colleges because they are structured and funded to provide social services in ways that community colleges are not. It may be possible to engage or forge agreements that place social workers on campus. There are also CBOs that specialize in financial literacy and provide access to electronic systems that inform students of public benefits for which they qualify. These types of services can help relieve external pressures in students’ lives so that they can focus on succeeding in college.

College practitioners engaged in improving student success know that significant reform is needed in order to achieve change. This is certainly not a reflection of the level of commitment and professionalism typically found at community colleges. The problem is significant because too many students attending community colleges face challenges to persistence and completion rooted in academic, social, and financial problems. Community colleges have evolved around a deeply held value of access to education. Many of the structures associated with ensuring access—last minute deadlines for deci-
sions related to registration and withdrawal and remedial placement poli-
cies—are now proving to be barriers to improving student success.

To begin thinking about the prospects of cultural change, it is useful to
step back and consider how community colleges look in comparison to K–12
schools, which have long been under intense public scrutiny. K–12 schools
have decades of experience with ongoing efforts at reform. Is this the fate
of community colleges? The answer is probably “no,” because community
colleges have several characteristics that differentiate them from K–12 schools.
First, there are fewer of them, while states looking to reform K–12 schools
are dealing with hundreds of schools. Community colleges number just over
1,000 nationwide and most states have fewer than twenty. Second, commu-
nity colleges are, by comparison, a tightly knit sector. There are numerous
venues for information exchange across colleges, including national conven-
tions, regional meetings, and nationwide initiatives such as Achieving the
Dream. It is perhaps this collegiality that has contributed to a third asset,
which is the ability of community colleges to attract resources to support
their reform initiatives in the form of grants that supplement state funding.

Achieving scale on an institutional level will be more difficult than
achieving scale on a systemic level. Bringing reform to scale on an institu-
tional level—or disruptive innovation—involves cultural change. A useful
distinction can be made between the “technologies” of reform and the “cul-
ture” of reform. Throughout this book I have mentioned the technologies of
reform—strategies and innovations such as learning communities, modular-
ized curricula, and statewide articulation agreements. Identifying the technol-
gies of reform involves creativity, trial and error, and evaluation. Replicat-
ing and broadening the impact of successful technologies involves culture,
and this is where community colleges need to focus their attention. Well-
known management expert Peter Drucker observes that “culture eats strategy
for breakfast.” At community colleges, culture sometimes nibbles and some-
times devours the technologies of reform, but it rarely stays out of the way.
Three areas of culture are particularly important to reform efforts: account-
ability; curricula and teaching; and working in networked organizational
structures.

Focus on Accountability

In our personal lives, we use the ability to measure and quantify results to our
advantage. The simplest example involves measures of health. Every visit to
a physician begins with measuring weight and blood pressure. These meas-
ures do not tell us all that much, for it is difficult to interpret a small
change—is it a trend or an anomaly? Furthermore, we know that both meas-
ures are arrayed on a bell curve, and therefore to some degree the differences
between individuals are meaningless. We use these measures primarily be-
because they are easy and inexpensive, and changes in level correlate with underlying problems requiring further examination. In truth, there are ways to measure aspects of weight and blood pressure that can provide more insight, but they require specialized tools and specialists who are trained to use them. Overall, the benefits of using imperfect measures such as weight and blood pressure outweigh the costs.

There are lessons that can be taken from these simple procedures measuring physical health. First, they are only descriptive tools. They are not analytical, and do not provide explanation for observed change. They are subject to inaccuracy based on context—for example, the equipment being used or specific events surrounding the time of measurement. If we want to know what is really going on, we use different, more robust measurement techniques that can morph into a wide range of explanations from food choice to psychology. Similarly, many of the measures that we use to determine the health of a community college do not give us any helpful insights. IPEDS (Integrated Postsecondary Educational Data System) graduation rates, for example, have come under much scrutiny because they do not measure important aspects of community college service. For example, in their current form, IPEDS graduation and transfer rates leave out the two-thirds of students who are not full-time and are distorted by the fact that two-thirds of the students being measured are not starting at college-level when the time clock for measurement begins. They also do not take into consideration factors that would affect outcomes, such as the demographic characteristics of students.10

There are important differences when comparing measures of health against those used to measure student success. The purpose of keeping track of body weight and blood pressure reflect a private concern with monitoring health. On the other hand, accountability has been framed by policy makers as a public concern for improving institutional performance. In other words, underlying accountability is the belief that the public is entitled to transparency and evidence of productivity. From an institutional perspective, it may be more helpful to think about accountability measures as ways to monitor the health of a college. What is needed are clearly stated standards and simple, inexpensive ways to monitor organizational health so that goals can be set for improvement, and leaders can easily gauge institutional performance.

Community colleges need not and should not rely on external forces to drive monitoring strategies. Our colleges have become increasingly adept at measuring performance and have made this part of standard business practice. Taking the analogy a step further, if you want to change your weight, take a baseline measurement and set a goal. If you are serious about reaching the goal, buy a scale and weigh yourself at regular intervals. Community colleges are taking measurements and setting goals. The problem is that we
know all too well that, while food intake and exercise are levers to bring about a change in weight, levers relating to the outcomes of community college students are less well known and considerably less direct.

Montgomery County Community College in Pennsylvania is a college that has worked extensively with metrics to monitor organizational health. Under the leadership of its president, Karen Stout, Montgomery developed a balanced scorecard to measure and report college-wide performance. Conceptually, balanced scorecard measures are somewhat like baseball statistics that bring indicators such as productivity in pitching, hitting, and errors together in a table. Arrows pointing up and down indicate the direction that the most recent measurement took in relation to past measurements. It is also possible to set goal ranges; for example, a course completion rate of 0–65 percent could be red, 66–75 percent could be orange, and 76 percent or higher could be green. This allows for an immediate snapshot of where the college is relative to its goals.

Throughout this book I have provided descriptions of data sources being used by community colleges and policy makers to understand quality and productivity. These data sources are also part of a system for monitoring the health of institutions. There are other methodologies for accountability, in addition to the balanced scorecard, such as benchmarking, which can be conducted using institutional historical data or data comparison with peer institutions.

Most of the national surveys provide benchmarking as a routine function, to enable colleges to determine where they are relative to other institutions. There are many contextual variables shaping community college outputs—a circumstance that makes accurate benchmarking comparisons difficult. College size, demographic profile (race, ethnicity, and age distributions), balance of full- and part-time students, and the proportion of students receiving Pell grants are all measures that must be taken into account in benchmarking. Additionally, community colleges are heavily influenced by state policy, making comparisons across states difficult. Measures of student engagement may be called into question because they are self-reported, but measures such as transfers, workforce development, financing, and organizational structures (e.g., class size and developmental education requirements) tend to be more accurately compared because they are transparent.

One of the best examples of community college benchmarking is the National Community College Benchmarking Project (NCCBP), which is directed by Jeff Seybert at Johnson County Community College (Kansas). In 2011, the NCCBP processed and reported data from 280 participating community colleges across the nation. Participating colleges pay a subscription fee and submit data to a database which allows them to harvest information on how they compare to similar institutions submitting data to NCCBP. The benchmarking data are organized into three categories: Students and Student
A critical first step in transforming community colleges to become success focused is to develop methods of tracking student outcomes that are simple and efficient. Institutional size is an important determinant of the practicality of developing such a system as scale is critical to making the process efficient. Monitoring provides only rudimentary information, however, and it must be done as efficiently as possible in order to be effective.

Going back to the analogy of weight and blood pressure, imagine a world in which these two measurements required hours of human labor, sophisticated knowledge or expensive tools. There would be inequality in our ability to monitor health, for those without resources would not be able to afford the cost of the service. Further, taking these measurements might actually undermine health because they would drain resources away from the very activities that could lead to better health, such as joining a fitness club or buying healthy food. Similarly, small institutions, and those for which the costs of obtaining data are high because of inefficient data systems, are at a significant disadvantage.

Measuring progress toward student success must become internally focused if it is to become part of the process of improving outcomes. The measures that policy makers are looking for in accountability mandates are not the same measures that will provide meaningful feedback internally regarding progress toward improved outcomes. Therefore, part of the solution to improving student success must involve integration and alignment of the goals of policy makers, college administrators, and faculty, and staff. Measurements that offer a big picture of performance through comparison across institutions and time need to be developed and maintained. Internally, researchers can play a critical role as institutional leaders and participants on interdisciplinary teams that are working toward generating the information needed to address persistent problems in student success.

Since the best predictor of success in community college courses is past academic performance, it follows that a major focus of reform efforts needs to be on the classroom. Community college students differ from four-year college students in important ways—they are commuting to campus, older on average, juggling multiple responsibilities, and have struggled academically in the past. Teaching community college students is a specialized task, and methods of working successfully with this population need to be developed and shared.

A number of teaching techniques have proven to be helpful with community college students. Collaborative and hands-on pedagogies engage stu-
dents in classroom activities. Wherever possible, using applied curricula and contextualized learning can help to reduce the anxiety students experience when learning abstract concepts. The idea of heterogeneous classrooms in which students of different academic levels are combined has proven successful in K–12 schools, and early results from the Accelerated Learning Program at the Community College of Baltimore County show promise for community college students as well. Learning communities offer a variety of benefits including reduction of student workload by combining assignments. In addition, contextualized learning and culturally aware teaching methodologies deserve attention at community colleges to help faculty and students improve their understanding of each other.

Transfer is an area of student success in which alignment of goals at all levels of the system is critical. States have sought to support community colleges in this area through policies involving curriculum, including developing a statewide core curriculum and leveling courses to increase consistency across institutions. In some states, policies provide incentives for students, for example mandating that students who complete their associate degrees be admitted as juniors to four-year colleges and universities, or supporting concurrent admissions to the community college and a public university. And there are statewide supports for articulation involving electronic course auditing systems that provide students with information about which universities in the state will accept courses they have taken. All of these programs reinforce the curriculum at the community college level as a conduit to enrollment and completion at baccalaureate degree institutions.

Student learning outcomes have an important role to play. Curriculum mapping and establishing standards allow for important communication among faculty. Making standards available to students brings them into the curriculum so they can understand the connection between topics and courses. Assessment of student outcomes provides detailed information on curricular gaps and weaknesses as well as strengths. It can help diagnose why students are failing and provide a roadmap for prioritizing curriculum development.

Degree pathways and clearly articulated systems help students succeed. Practices that are moving community colleges in this direction include educational planning systems, such as Valencia Community College’s Life Map,11 in which early on students engage in career exploration and goal setting. Since many community college students are the first in their families to attend college, they do not have family members who can help in solving problems or making critical connections on campus. Building supports for students into systems of advising and counseling are important. Classroom practices such as defining and measuring student learning outcomes can also help by making the community college curriculum more transparent to students. The use of e-portfolios can help by enabling students to make connec-
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tions and develop independence as learners. Clearly defined pathways can reinforce and tighten connections between systems as well, so that transitions between levels of education (K–12, community colleges, and baccalaureate institutions) are seamless.

ESSENTIALS FOR REFORM

Experience with community college reform is demonstrating that there is strength in both numbers and diversity. The Achieving the Dream initiative evolved out of a partnership among eight organizations, each of which brought expertise such as research, publicity, leadership, and educational reform to the table. Months of debate and discussion produced the foundation underlying Achieving the Dream. Today, the faculty and staff at ATD colleges have opportunities to connect with one another through webinars, the Internet, and the annual DREAM Institute. In 2012, the DREAM Institute was attended by more than 1,500 community college faculty, staff, and administrators who could share ideas and information about student success across state and institutional boundaries.

Similarly, the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching’s Statway and Quantway initiative relies on teams. In this initiative, the team involves researchers, curriculum experts, faculty, and institutional researchers from pilot institutions. This model gives credence to the process of knowledge development through collaboration. It does not assume that the answers are known, but that institutions have the capacity to find them through shared expertise.

These efforts have in common an approach to change that is simultaneously top-down and bottom-up. Rather than relying on existing networks that reinforce the status quo, these initiatives engage leaders and staff in networks that are organized around student success. Understanding that leadership is distributed, rather than hierarchical, means that leaders must re-conceptualize their work. In a flattened organization, they become team members working shoulder to shoulder with others. Their task is to identify and amplify the positive results of instructors and staff who are working directly with students. Students understand the experience of being a learner best and should not be overlooked as potential team members along with community stakeholders and business and industry representatives.

PROMISE OF THE FUTURE

In 1995, Deborah Meier published The Power of Their Ideas which was about an experiment with small schools in Harlem. Her ideas and insights were gained through service as principal of this school, where she was able to
create a culture of success. Students at Meier’s school, regardless of background or academic potential, were lifted to success by a school that refused to let them down. Meier’s leadership philosophy is based on the conviction that every student can succeed:

The task of creating environments where all kids can experience the power of their ideas requires unsettling not only our accepted organization of schooling and our unspoken and unacknowledged agreement about the purposes of schools. Taking this task seriously also means calling into question our definitions of intelligence and the ways in which we judge each other. And taking it seriously means accepting public responsibility for the shared future of the next generation.13

The climate surrounding community colleges today is not all that different from the one in which Meier’s Central Park East Secondary School flourished. Community colleges are under increasing public scrutiny regarding the success of their students. There is also an erosion of public support in the form of state financing, although political support remains strong. One could say that the major difference between K–12 schools and community colleges is that students are mandated to attend K–12 schools, but have choice when it comes to community colleges. Students vote with their feet, however, and many acknowledge that college no longer seems voluntary because a degree or certificate is required for most reasonably compensated jobs.

As the title of this book suggests, multiple stakeholders need to be involved in achieving a culture of success. Policy makers, funders, advocates, administrators, staff, faculty, and students must all focus on common goals. Aside from placing greater value on graduation and reinforcing this through systems and pathways to guide students, colleges need to value the individual student. Our colleges face major challenges in this area, as students spend very little time on campus. Not only are students likely to be part time, so are instructors. From the perspective of evening students, the college administration and staff are practically nonexistent. If students are to achieve success, an investment must be made in counteracting obstacles. Community building that encourages students to form bonds with each other and with faculty and staff, is important to success. Emphasizing teamwork and opportunities to get to know peers during classroom time and as part of the curriculum can help this happen. Learning communities, student success courses, and service learning opportunities are practices that provide instructors with opportunities to help students become connected to the college community.

Finally, although much has been learned over the past decade about success at community college there is still much research and evaluation to be done. Community college leaders and staff need to understand what is working on their campuses. Which instructors and staff are effective, and what can they teach us about working with students? Which students are effective,
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and what are the secrets of their success? Open and engaged discussion and debate will contribute to the development of critical insights in every corner of our colleges.

**NOTES**


[7n7] 7. Ibid., 78.

[7n8] 8. Ibid., 79.

[7n9] 9. Ibid., 78.

[7n10] 10. The Department of Education’s Committee on Measures of Student Success made recommendations regarding new measures that would take into consideration institutional characteristic in a report drafted late in 2011.


[7n12] 12. NOTE MISSING

[7n13] 13. NOTE MISSING