

CELEBRATIONS

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Raising the Bar on Completion

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After nearly 10 years of focused attention on improving high school graduation rates, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation realized that high school improvement alone was not enough to improve access to opportunity in America. From that realization, in 2008, a new area of investment was developed to improve postsecondary completion rates.

Today, I share that work with you relative to three primary topics:

- Why has the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation focused its next deep area of investments on college completion? Why does completion matter so much, and why have we placed so much of our efforts on community colleges?
- The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation has invested \$100M in community college innovation. So what are we learning about the highest impact practices? What works? How do we measure success? How can students move more quickly and effectively to their goals?
- Third, what can you and your colleges do to improve completion? Why does leadership by faculty and administrators matter?

You are the ones who will carry the banner for completion and make it a reality for your students. Frankly, we need your help!

Why Is the Foundation Focused on College Completion?

The Foundation's work is driven by Bill and Melinda Gates' deep personal commitment to this core belief: Every Person Deserves the Chance to Live a Healthy, Productive Life.

- In developing countries, we focus on people's health and help them lift themselves out of hunger and extreme poverty.
- In the United States, we seek to ensure that all people, especially those with the fewest resources, have access to the opportunities they need to succeed in school and life.

It was out of a deep examination of disparity in educational outcomes that we developed the Postsecondary Success goal to be achieved by 2025: to double the number of low-income young adults who earn a postsecondary credential with value in the labor market by age 26. While this is certainly not solely a community college strategy, it is clear that we cannot achieve our goal without significant attention to completion and progression within two-year institutions. Our focus on postsecondary credentials comes from three facts:

- The U.S. is slipping in global graduation rates and no longer leads developing countries
- Completion matters to the economic future of students and the country
- While community colleges have done an outstanding job of creating access for low-income students, that access has not translated into completion; and the disparity in graduation rates is highest for low-income and first-generation students—the students who need us the most.

First, as a nation, we are no longer leading the way in college completion. In fact, we are now tied with Spain for 10th place, and our graduation rates have been stagnant over the last 40 years, with just over 50% of the population achieving a BS degree. In every developed country, the new generation is attaining more education than their parents—except in the United States!

Second, it is pure economics! The economic payoff of completion is strong. Today, a degree beyond high school is a necessity for a job that pays well. The percentage of jobs in the U.S. that require a college degree has doubled in the last 30 years, and the number that require only a high school diploma has shrunk to less than 25%. For each credential or degree earned, students gain earning power and improve their chances of being employed—even in a bad economy.

Third, we are focused on completion because the data tell us that the chances of success for low-income students are significantly lower than for others.

We need to be clear.

- Access is working. Community colleges have done an outstanding job of creating access for low-income students.
- Nationally, 40% of all community college students are the first in their families to attend college.
- Nearly 60% of all low-income students start their education at a community college.



But while community colleges have made entry into college possible for significant numbers of first-generation and low-income students, that access has not translated into success.

- While 54% of students who are not low-income complete some type of college degree or credential, only half as many low-income students (26%) leave college with a degree or certificate.
- While we know that many students leave for employment or transfer to another institution, somewhere between 22-25% of our students complete a degree or certificate.
- But when the rates are disaggregated by race and ethnicity, we see that fewer than one in seven, or less than 15%, of Hispanic and African American students leave with a credential.

So, low-income students are half as likely to complete a degree or certificate, and our goal is laser focused on that disparity.

- How can we alter that pathway for low-income students?
- How can we level the playing field to assure that they can finish what they start and, most of all, that they can have the education they need to support themselves and build a better life for their families?

What Are We Learning?

Here is the good news! We are learning that community colleges are far beyond making excuses and are now in the business of implementing the transformative change that will result in a better chance of completion for low-income students.

That is the effort that the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation joins with you to accomplish. Fortunately, we join significant work that already has been done. We are building on the increasing amount of research, best practices, and innovation across the country. We recognize the impact of national leaders and networks seeking to transform community colleges, including:

- 40 years of leadership by Dr. John Roueche and the impact of the Community College Leadership Program (CCLP), the Community College Survey of Student Engagement (CCSSE), and the powerful ways NISOD engages faculty and institutions in positive change; and
- National networks, such as Achieving the Dream, and the growing list of national and regional funders focused on postsecondary completion.

So our learning agenda is to help us find out how philanthropy can partner with colleges, states, organizations, and networks to support improvement that makes a difference. The foundation has invested \$143M to improve postsecondary success and has a significant future investment planned for going forward. As we looked to what we needed to know in order to impact completion, we began by investing in three areas:

- What do we already know about what works?
- What new ideas need to be tested?
- How can effective practices be scaled within colleges and spread to multiple colleges?

We are learning all we can about what matters in college completion and, of course, we found some of what you already know—that students in community colleges face complex barriers to completion. As you know better than anyone, the academic and financial barriers they face do not begin to tell the story of what gets in the way of student success. In her own talks with students, Melinda Gates has had opportunities to hear their personal stories about their educational journeys. For example, she heard from a young mother enrolled at Seattle Community College who told her about taking two buses each day to get her twin three-month old girls to child care so that she can go to school. This young mother told Melinda it was clear that all of her struggles were worth it because she is committed to creating a better life for her two babies.

What Programs, Support Services, and Strategies Make a Difference for Student Success?

We began our research by examining the pathways of students through community colleges.

- What barriers do they face at each step?
- What interventions seem to make a difference in keeping them on track?

In looking at those pathways, it appears that the entry points pose the biggest risks:

- Application
- Advising
- Assessment
- Placement
- Enrolling in developmental education
- Completing academic catch-up courses
- Succeeding in college-level gatekeeper courses.

What Are We Learning about Developmental Education?

As we looked at the loss points for students along the pathway to completion, one of the first things we learned is that in order to raise the bar on completion, we must also raise the bar on developmental educational outcomes. With an average of 60% of all new students needing to be placed into one or more developmental education courses, we need solutions that can impact most, if not all, of our students.

Last year, Bill Gates, Sr. met with students and faculty at La Guardia Community College (NY). The students were all student leaders and Phi Theta Kappa members. Bill Senior asked this group of high-performing student leaders how many of them started their college work in developmental education, and every hand went up! He asked one of the students if she was surprised that she was placed into developmental education. She responded that it was a huge setback for her, that she had been a manager at Macy's for 10 years and being faced with developmental math was a blow for which she was not prepared.

It really brought home that developmental education is not something at the edges of our mission. We need to make improving progress through or around developmental education mission critical issues for the community college. It is not surprising that students beginning college without a strong academic foundation are less likely to complete. But when we look at the results of students progressing through developmental education, the results are striking.

Achieving the Dream research indicates that students who test into the third level of developmental math have less than a 10% chance of passing college math and only 17% of them ever complete the developmental courses to which they are referred.

As we have initiated research and support for innovation, we have begun to learn what really makes a difference in moving students quickly and effectively through developmental education and on to what they came to study.

Some emerging ideas show promise in changing outcomes for low-income and first-generation students, and there are examples out there of great work being done in some of our grant projects in community colleges. We know there are no silver bullets, but there is a growing consensus about the approaches that make a difference. They fall into three categories:

- Acceleration
- Structure
- Teaching and Learning.

Acceleration

Knowing that students who face multiple levels of developmental education have a very low chance of succeeding, how can we reduce the number of students who place into developmental education, and how can we help those who are, to move more quickly onto college courses? Allowing students to skip over levels of developmental education or moving them more quickly through on a skills-based approach saves valuable time and money for the student and the college. I highlight two types of acceleration:

- Early testing or preparation for assessment testing before college entry and
- Designing programs so that students accelerate through the content more quickly.

Early testing or preparation before college entry is critical. How many fewer students would be placed into developmental education or into lower levels if they prepared for the assessment tests they take when they register? One of 15 colleges in the Developmental Education Initiative of Achieving the Dream, El Paso Community College (TX), found that by testing the students while still in high school, it dramatically reduced the numbers of students who placed into the lowest levels of developmental education. By being familiar with the assessment test and having the chance to review or improve before they enroll, students are placing into significantly higher levels of academic work and courses when they arrive at the college. This raises questions of how we handle assessment, including the overarching question of why any students would take assessment tests without preparation.

Structure

The Academy for College Excellence (ACE), formerly called the Digital Bridge Academy, began at Cabrillo College (CA), and currently is being scaled to multiple institutions. The Academy provides students with an intensive two-week head start and an accelerated first semester that moves them a full level ahead in both math and English. The students who have succeeded in the ACE program are those who face multiple barriers: drug use,

incarceration, and migrant-family conditions. Yet, they are significantly more likely to enroll in full-time work and succeed in college gatekeeper courses.

How do we apply systemic approaches to provide students with clear pathways to their goals? We are finding that approaches that provide students with clear, intentional pathways produce higher outcomes—reducing choice, increasing requirements, and being clear on expectations. We have learned from the Community College Survey of Student Engagement (CCSSE) that students who have the least amount of knowledge about going to college often make poor choices, progress sporadically, and fail to take advantage of the study skills, tutoring, and other support systems that could make the difference to their success.

One structured program that has shown excellent results is I-BEST or Integrated Basic Education, Skills and Training; it began in Washington State. I-BEST redesigns career programs so that students with low skills are placed into an accelerated learning community with two faculty members: one developmental or ESL and one in the program content. Early results show students in these communities have a 30% higher chance of completing their program.

Teaching and Learning

We are beginning to re-think how developmental courses are taught. What approaches quickly and effectively prepare students for college-level work? With 60% of all developmental students being taught by adjunct faculty, how can we find, share, and scale the best classroom strategies—the ones that work for the students with the lowest chances of success?

Global Skills for College Completion, a partnership with the League of Innovation and LaGuardia Community College, has engaged 26 high-performing developmental education faculty in an exciting online community to re-think together how to increase student outcomes dramatically. Their goal is 80% completion rates for developmental education.

How do we begin to move from our knowledge about what works to significant improvement in student outcomes?

- What can you do? What can colleges do?
- What can we do together to raise the bar on completion?
- How do we apply what we know for transformative change in our colleges?

What things will make the most difference for students?

- Commit to Completion
- Use data to power change
- Support faculty-led innovation.

First, we need to commit to completion. We need national organizations, colleges, networks, presidents, trustees, faculty departments, administrators, staff, and faculty to make completion their goal for students. Achieving the audacious goal of doubling the number of low-income students who achieve the credential for which they came to college will take leadership and advocacy for change.

I am proud to say that in Seattle, this April, at the American Association of Community Colleges annual meeting, NISOD joined AACC, ACCT, and the League

for Innovation, PTK, and CCCSE in signing a national call to action for a commitment to completion. With the completion agenda as a national imperative, community colleges have an obligation to meet the challenge of completion while holding firmly to traditional values of access, opportunity, and quality. This is a great step toward setting expectations for our students. Has your institution committed to student completion?

Second, we need to use the data. We have learned a great deal from Achieving the Dream and other power-users of student data. To change student outcomes, we must be driven by the data on how students are performing. We need a laser focus on the data around student success.

- Do we know how many students place into developmental education and how many of those actually complete? And how long it takes them?
- Do we know if those results are different for low-income students and students-of-color?
- And if we do know these data, what are we doing about what we know?

Third, we need to develop and support faculty leadership. Innovation thrives in the community college, and faculty lead innovation. Yet, great practices, great ideas, and great solutions for student success often remain isolated and do not scale to all of the students who need them.

How can you help? We need your help as research practitioners—trying new methods, measuring results, and, most of all, sharing with colleagues. You are the primary vehicles for scaling great solutions, assuring that the ideas

that work are spread across departments and adopted by the institution as the new way of doing business. And to do that faculty must insist on having the data they need to track student progress, to see what is working.

What does it mean to commit to the mission of dramatic improvement in completion? Fundamentally, it means that we are redefining what access means for our students—access that not only is a doorway into college but that is a pathway to completion of college and the right to a productive life.

There has never been more attention on community colleges—the number of students we serve, the high percentage of low-income and first-generation students we serve, our potential for changing lives, and the challenges we face when many students who need us the most do not reach their goal.

But most of all, the light is being focused on community colleges as the institutions that have the talent, flexibility, innovation, and will to improve dramatically the chances of success for our students. As we all know, we cannot achieve what we do not set out to accomplish. You are the keys to improving completion in America, and we cannot achieve that goal without you.

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