The Completion Agenda: Implications for Organization and Governance of Higher Education

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Abstract

College completion is increasingly becoming a top policy issue in American higher education at national and state levels. To promote economic development and better position the U.S. to compete globally, many state and national leaders have called for greater educational gains. Specifically, the Obama administration has set the goal that by the year 2020, 60% of Americans will have a postsecondary degree or certificate. In response to this challenge, state leaders and intermediary organizations have implemented several college completion initiatives, some of which have been met with criticism from those within higher education communities. Recent research, policy briefs, and commentaries regarding the completion agenda reveal interesting implications for the organization and governance of higher education.

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Introduction

College completion in the United States is becoming an increasingly important policy issue at national and state levels. Concerns for the American economy regarding an adequately educated workforce and competitive global positioning, as well as the rising costs and unsatisfactory productivity of higher education, have contributed to this recent attention on completion. In light of these concerns, national and state policymakers, as well as educational philanthropists and university leaders, have made recent efforts to increase degree attainment in the U.S. and improve college completion within the states. From President Obama and Bill Gates to state governors and college presidents, college completion is increasingly on the minds of higher education stakeholders.

College Completion at the Federal Level

In 2009, President Obama declared that higher education would be one of the top priorities of his administration. In a joint session of Congress he charged the United States to reclaim its standing in the world as the nation with the highest degree attainment (The White House, 2009). To perhaps inspire the nation to increase degree attainment by nearly 20% in a single decade, the Obama administration proposed a college ranking system that would score institutions on how well they graduate their students, as well as the employability and salary of their graduates (Lewontin, 2014)—a proposal that has been met with an array of criticism (ACSFA, 2013; Parry, Field, & Supiano, 2013; Perna & Finney, 2014). More recently, the White House hosted an event in which college presidents, governors, and educational organizations made 600 new commitments to college completion efforts (The White House, 2014). Clearly, college completion is a federal policy priority; this attention on college completion has

subsequently motivated the creation of several organizations and influenced many state policy agendas.

Since Obama's 2009 speech to Congress, dozens of new college completion organizations and initiatives have been generated (AASCU, 2011). Some of the most prominent organizations include Complete College America (CCA), the National Governors Association's (NGA) Complete to Compete, the Lumina Foundation's Goal 2025, and the Southern Regional Education Board's (SREB) Completion Initiative. These intermediary organizations and foundations have played an important part in shaping the completion policy agenda at both federal and state levels; they frequently provide governors and college presidents with widely accepted policy recommendations that are intended to improve the completion deficit.

CCA is funded by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, Lumina Foundation and others, and has been called the "standard bearer of the completion agenda" (Walters, 2012, p. 34). CCA has published a variety of reports outlining the rising costs of college and the poor performance of postsecondary institutions, namely unsatisfactory graduation rates, and emphasizing the demand for more graduates, more quickly (CCA, 2011, 2013, 2014). CCA also offers competitive innovation grants to participating states actively seeking to improve completion, arguably an impetus to join the alliance for some governors.

NGA's Complete to Compete initiative has helped shape performance indicators for tracking progress and success of completion endeavors. Endorsed by CCA, the NGA "common metrics" are more inclusive than those typically reported to IPEDS and the like. Rather than restrict assessment of progress to traditional, first-time, full-time students, NGA encourages including part-time, returning, and transfer students in analyses to obtain a more complete picture of successes and areas for improvement. Motivated by national policy priorities, these

organizations have been influential in informing policymakers and the public about college

completion inadequacies and the best approaches for improvement.

Completion Agenda: Descriptions and Origins

Essentially, the completion agenda is a call for greater degree attainment in the U.S. and

improved college completion at the nation's higher education institutions. Why is college

completion such a prominent issue *now*? It has been projected that the U.S. workforce will be

inadequately prepared for jobs in the coming years: by 2018, 63% of American jobs will require

some postsecondary education, at current rates there will be a deficit of approximately 8 million

educated workers (Carnevale, Smith, & Strohl, 2010). Furthermore, the United States is slipping

in the world rankings in terms of degree attainment, now hovering near 10th in the world,

decreasing the ability to compete internationally (Hauptman, 2012). Finally, many claim that too

few students who begin a postsecondary degree actually finish. The National Center for

Education Statistics (NCES) reports that 56% of students attending public, four-year institutions

graduate within six years; only 33% graduate within four years (NCES, 2012)[1]. In summary, the

primary reasons for a national and state level focus on college completion is to spur economic

development through an educated workforce (US DOE, 2011; SREB, 2010; NGA, 2010) and to

improve the global positioning of the U.S. to become more internationally competitive (Rhoades,

2012; NGA, 2010). It is also important to point out the well-documented private and social

benefits of higher education: college graduates are more likely to have greater lifetime earnings,

be healthier, be more civically engaged, and contribute more in taxes (Baum, Ma, & Payea,

2010). The arguments, thus far, for increased college completion are compelling.

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[1] These rates are limited to first-time, full-time students and do not include those who transferred and earned a degree at another institution.

Though it may seem that the recent, enthusiastic attention to college completion emerged spontaneously, an emphasis on outcomes, efficiency, accountability and productivity in higher education has been building since the 1980s (Alexander, 2000; Perna & Finney, 2014; Terenzini, 1989). With rising tuition costs, limited state funds, public criticism of higher education, and the growing need for an educated work force, pressure for accountability continues to mount (Alexander, 2000; Lingenfelter, 2003; Schmidtlein & Berdahl, 2011; Zumeta, 1998). One of the most obvious policy shifts toward greater accountability can be seen higher education funding mechanisms. Traditionally, state appropriations have been allocated based on student enrollments and other input variables. Recently, however, more states are funding colleges and universities by linking funds to performance indicators. Outcomes-based funding, or performance funding, is a key strategy lauded by many completion advocates (CCA, NGA, U.S. Department of Education, etc.). The impetus for performance funding as a completion strategy stems from the idea that institutions must be incentivized to improve completion, otherwise they will not be concerned with helping students earn degrees (Auguste, Cota, Jayaram, & Laboissiere, 2010; U.S. Department of Education, 2011). This rationale has met with tremendous criticism within the higher education community (Rhoades, 2012; Walters, 2012).

Critiques of the Completion Agenda

While most stakeholders agree that increased degree attainment is a worthy and necessary goal, there are some important critiques and misunderstandings of the completion agenda to consider. Concerns about college completion should be addressed in the appropriate context. While it is true that the U.S. is no longer first in the world regarding degree attainment, other countries are educating an increasing share of a decreasing population, while the U.S. population continues to grow and become increasingly diverse (Hauptman, 2012, 2013). Furthermore, while

some intermediary and governmental organizations claim that U.S. attainment rates have remained unchanged for a generation, Hauptman (2012) demonstrates that attainment rates have continued to rise even after a move toward mass education.

It is likewise important to filter completion concerns through an historical context. Despite the claims of some organizations that U.S. higher education is fundamentally flawed since so few degree-seeking students graduate, there has never been a time in which nearly every student completed a degree (Smith & Mullin, 2014; Tinto, 1982). A recent report from CCA claimed, "we can restore the promise of graduating in four years—and we must," implying that graduating on time was once the standard outcome for all college students (CCA, 2014, p. 5). Completion agenda devotees give the impression that higher education has suddenly "fallen from grace" when, in fact, completion rates have risen even while student populations have grown more diverse (NASPA, 2014).

Many higher education scholars and practitioners believe that the completion agenda, as presented by policymakers and external organizations, could lead to reduced quality and/or diminished access to higher education (ACSFA, 2013; Rhoades, 2012; Walters, 2012). Others believe attainment goals are unrealistic and the strategies to reach them are misappropriated (Chingos, 2012; Hauptman, 2012). For instance, while college completion and degree attainment are undoubtedly related, some scholars argue that increasing completion rates will not necessarily improve degree attainment in the U.S.—institutions can increase graduation rates by becoming more selective and reducing access, potentially leading to a decrease in attainment (ACSFA, 2013). Many also believe that performance indicators such as graduation rates are limited measures of success since they exclude populations of students that continue to grow

(i.e., part-time and transfer students) and demonstrate little to nothing about student learning or degree quality (AASCU, 2006; Hauptman, 2013).

College Completion Literature

The burden of meeting completion goals is frequently placed on institutions via state governments, intermediary organizations, and the federal government. To more fully understand how state and institutional policies can influence college completion, it is important to examine the elements that influence completion at the institution and student levels. The scholarship concerning student success is extensive. From the literature, it is well known that more selective institutions, those with more resources, greater proportions of full-time faculty, greater expenditures on instruction and student services, and those with greater proportions of full-time, traditional aged, non-minority students have higher graduation rates (Engle & O'Brian, 2007; Kalsbeek, 2013; Heck et al., 2014; Ryan, 2004). Additionally, doctoral granting institutions tend to have higher undergraduate graduation rates than other types of institutions (Heck et al., 2014). Scholars have shown that a state's political culture and governance structure often determine the allocation of state appropriations for higher education institutions, and thus can indirectly influence graduation rates (Heck, Lam. & Thomas, 2014; Perna & Finney, 2014). In sum, the structural elements and mission of an institution, as well as the organization of higher education systems and political culture at the state level, significantly shape student persistence and graduation.

Individual student characteristics are also strongly related to the likelihood of completing a college degree. The possibility of graduating from college is associated with academic preparation (Adelman, 2006; Astin, 1972; DesJardins, Ahlburg, & McCall, 2002; McCormick, 1999), student demographics such as age, race, and gender (DesJardins et al., 2002, 2006;

Knight, 1994), family income (Ishitani, 2006; McCormick, 1999; Wei & Horn, 2009), and parental education (Ishitani, 2006). The only mechanism by which institutions can control student characteristics is the admissions process. To enroll a student body with a higher likelihood of graduation, institutions must become more selective. The improvement of completion, then, might be at the expense of other valued institutional objectives.

Scholars have also examined the impact of the interaction between students and the institutional environment on the likelihood of success in college. Tinto (1993), Bean (1980), and Kuh, Kinzie, and Schu (2010) pioneered the field of scholarship regarding student attrition, student-institution fit, and student engagement. Overall, this literature indicates that the more students are integrated into the campus culture and connected with peers, faculty, and staff, they are more likely to persist in their educational pursuits—clearly an element that is within an institution's control, but also indicative of organizational processes, management, and priorities.

A sizeable body of literature exists demonstrating the impact of institutions' organizational behaviors and environments on student outcomes. Berger and Millem (2000) note that the organizational literature largely ignores students and the literature pertaining to student experiences in college largely ignores organizational behavior as an influential factor; their conceptual model aims to bridge this gap. Drawn from the college impact and organizational behavior literatures, Berger and Millem's (2000) model illustrates the "process by which colleges and universities as organizations affect student outcomes" (p. 307). The authors found in their review of the related literature that five organizational dimensions (bureaucratic, collegial, political, symbolic, systemic) can impact four types of student outcomes (cognitive-psychological, cognitive-behavioral, affective-psychological, affective-behavioral). Of interest to the current paper is the impact of organizational structure/behavior on cognitive-behavioral

outcomes, such as persistence. In general, evidence suggests that organizational environments that are perceived as collegial are associated with greater persistence, while environments perceived as bureaucratic are associated with greater attrition (Astin & Scherrei, 1980; Bean, 1980, 1983; Berger & Braxton, 1998; Blau, 1973; Brier & Braxton, 1989). These findings are generally consistent with the student engagement literature.

Since graduation and persistence are related to student characteristics, integration into campus environment, institutional structure and organization, and the political culture and governance of higher education within a state, it is clear there are few elements that institutions can impact concerning completion improvement. Hossler, Ziskin, & Gross (2009) aptly indicate that while improving completion and persistence is certainly possible, "dramatic improvements may well depend on changes that are either impractical (large infusions of campus funding, significant increases in state and federal financial aid) or out of step with their founding mission (becoming more selective or more residential)" (p. 9).

College Completion Policy Recommendations: Efficiency is Best

There is no shortage of policy recommendations for improving college completion. Intermediary organizations, governmental agencies, think tanks, and nonprofit as well as corporate firms have much to say regarding college completion improvement (Auguste et al., 2010; CCA, 2011; Reyna, 2011; SREB, 2010a, 2010b; U.S. Department of Education, 2011). In general, these agencies and organizations suggest that state leaders should provide incentives for institutions, encourage/demand greater efficiency in the degree production process, and appoint effective leaders that can influence higher education culture. Moreover, these policy recommendations also claim that no new investments in higher education are necessary; if colleges and universities become more efficient, and reduce the cost of producing graduates, it

would be possible to increase completion rates without additional funding. Finally, these reports also indicate, usually as an aside, institutions should maintain both educational quality and access, though little is said regarding how this is accomplished. Select reports are discussed below.

The U.S. Department of Education (DOE) (2011), in their report *College Completion Toolkit,* provides policy recommendations for governors. The DOE emphasizes the need for more graduates without any new investment. Like many other policy briefs, the 'toolkit' recommends performance-funding mechanisms to incentivize institutions to improve completion. Additional recommendations include an alignment of high school standards with college placement standards, better transferability of college credits, more streamlined use of data in decision-making, and targeting adult learners to complete unfinished degrees.

CCA promotes efficient educational experiences through their five "game changers": performance funding, co-requisite remediation, full-time is fifteen, structured schedules, and guided pathways to success (CCA, 2014b). By taking fuller course loads, registering for prescribed courses in a streamlined sequence, and choosing from a limited selection of courses that satisfy a general area of interest, students can more quickly complete their degrees and, ideally, realize significant financial savings (CCA, 2013, 2014a). However, CCA presents their initiatives as one-size-fits-all, recommending implementation of strategies regardless of institutional context, a common source of criticism for the organization (Perna & Finney, 2014; Rutherford, & Rabovsky, 2014). In addition to the game changers, member states must set statewide completion goals, collect and report common measures of progress, develop action plans, and move key policy levers.

The Southern Regional Education Board (SREB) (2010a) set a goal for member states to reach 60% degree attainment by 2025. SREB suggests action in three key areas: increase access to higher education, increase the rates at which students complete postsecondary education, and make paths to degrees/certificates more cost-effective. Like CCA, SREB also calls for a statewide completion plan with common metrics to assess progress and success. SREB (2010a) suggests, "states should require institutions to make graduation central to their campus culture" (p. 6). This report also outlines ten policy recommendations that target accountability—holding leaders accountable for increases in numbers of graduates and graduation rates, improvements in assessment metrics, and the implementation of performance funding. Like CCA, SREB pushes states/institutions to not only graduate more students, but also graduate them more quickly and efficiently.

NGA has similar goals as other organizations through their Complete to Compete initiative (Reyna, 2011). Their Common Metrics Guide is also used by CCA and includes outcome metrics (degrees and certificates awarded, graduation rates, transfer rates, and time/credits to degree) and progress metrics (enrollment in remedial education, success beyond remedial education, success in first-year course, credit accumulation, retention rates, and course completion). NGA points out that IPEDS data lacks important parts of the student population such as part-time students, transfer students, or the ability to disaggregate data based on income, or first-generation status. NGA also advocates for performance funding as a strategy to incentivize college completion improvements.

In their report, *Winning by Degrees*, McKinsey and Company encourage higher education institutions to reduce the cost per degree by systematically enabling students to reach graduation, reduce nonproductive credits, redesign core support services, and optimize

institutional operations (Auguste et al., 2010). This report—which has received substantial

criticism from higher education professionals (Hauptman, 2012, 2013; Rhoades, 2012; Walters,

2012)—claims that producing more graduates is possible with no new investment, without

reducing quality or restricting access. They highlight five operational levers to produce more

graduates, including the use of efficient operational processes, effective management systems,

and leaders and staff who are "committed to achieving degree productivity gains" (2010, p. 15).

These reports advocate for college completion strategies that champion efficient

educational processes and experiences. Recommendations include incentivizing better results

through performance funding and streamlining educational processes for students by reducing

choices and requiring heavier course loads. Although nearly all of the reports mention

maintaining quality and access, they provide few recommendations on those fronts. The reports

outlined here emphasize the importance of making higher education more cost effective as to

avoid any additional investments.

Completion Policy Recommendations: A Different Approach

Generally, higher education scholars and practitioners have opposing views of the

completion agenda than those presented by external firms and organizations. Though most agree

that improving college completion is an important and essential goal for economic development

and global competitiveness in the U.S., higher education practitioners tend to take a different

approach to improving college completion and degree attainment than the policy briefs described

above. While many individuals within higher education communities agree that effective

leadership, strategic planning, and an understanding of institutional culture are vital to improving

college completion, they typically reject performance funding as an incentive mechanism,

emphasize the importance of quality educational experiences, and demonstrate the necessity of additional resources.

In a 2012 issue of *Liberal Education Magazine*, several higher education practitioners and scholars discussed the "incomplete completion agenda." Therein, several authors take offense to the idea of being incentivized to focus on student success. For instance, Walters (2012) suggests policymakers assume that higher education practitioners "don't care deeply about student success to graduation and aren't good managers because they don't focus on productivity analysis" (p. 34). Secondly, these authors are concerned about quality. Rhoades (2012) described the completion agenda as an "unfunded mandate to do more with less" (p. 18). He emphasized the importance of student-faculty interaction and the necessity of better supporting contingent faculty to meet completion needs. Rhoades states, "Faculty working conditions are student learning conditions. Any agenda that overlooks the former, short changes the latter" (2012, p. 21). Finally, these authors demonstrate the need for resources to adequately reach completion goals. Humphreys (2012) states, that policymakers and other governmental and intermediary organizations are "operating under the assumption that the *causes* of low graduation rates are primarily a matter of neglect, lack of awareness, misplaced priorities, or incompetent leadership…data and leadership matter, but so do resources" (2012, p. 21). Collectively, the authors suggest emphasizing quality and access in completion goals, by "investing in the human infrastructure" and embracing changing student demographics (Rhoades, 2012, p. 24).

The American Association of State Colleges and Universities (AASCU) highlights the importance of adopting policies that fit an institution's context and culture, rather than "simply finding 'best practice' somewhere and 'plugging it in'" (2005, p. 4). Additionally, AASCU demonstrates establishing an institutional culture around student success is vital for any

completion initiative or program to succeed. Its 2005 study reveals that institutions that consistently demonstrated an institution-wide commitment to student success—a focus on student learning, high quality educational programs, and student-faculty interaction—were more successful in retaining and graduating students. Finally, AASCU (2006) emphasizes the importance of student learning in promoting completion—in general, they suggest the completion agenda needs a broader view of what constitutes success.

Engle and O'Brian (2007), of the Pell Institute, studied a variety of institutions' completion efforts and the relative success of those efforts. The authors found that highly selective institutions, historically effective in retaining and graduating students, experienced success without an emphasis on retention and graduation goals. Other less selective institutions were active in the pursuit of improving retention and graduation. Of these institutions, those that were most successful had committed and effective leaders; explicit campus-wide completion goals; faculty, staff, and administrator support of these goals; faculty were rewarded in tenure and promotion processes for teaching and service efforts in line with completion; and, the mission was clearly communicated. Less selective institutions that were not successful in terms of completion had disjointed leadership goals; retention and graduation was not considered a core mission; faculty remained unsupported and without resources or rewards for meeting completion goals; bureaucracy tended to impede progress; and, there was little evidence of faith in the institution's leadership. However, it seemed the institutions that were best positioned for success—those that exhibited the organizational characteristics and behaviors that were associated with high completion rates—were those with sufficient resources.

The Advisory Committee on Student Financial Assistance (ACSFA) produced a report entitled *Do No Harm*, regarding the completion agenda. This report refuted policies that restrict

access to higher education, for instance tying measures of merit to Pell grant eligibility (ACSFA, 2013). ACSFA argues, "increasing the percent of Americans holding a postsecondary degree or certificate cannot be achieved by reducing the opportunity to seek one" (2013, p. 1). The policy recommendations provided are related to the allocation of federal funds. ACSFA suggests making federal financial aid more easily accessible by making information available earlier and streamlining and simplifying the application process. They also provide compelling justification for supplying federal funding to students in need; they claim that these funds were created to promote access to higher education and should remain true to that function.

In a recent study, the College Board (2011) sought to examine how college and universities organize themselves to meet completion goals. In general, they found that while many institutions demonstrate clear interest in improving completion, there is little time, power, or resources allocated to retention and completion efforts. They emphasize the importance of having a top-level administrator (with sufficient authority and funding to implement initiatives) in charge of completion efforts. They essentially provide an inventory of completion strategies utilized by a sample of institutions—advising, early alerts, student-faculty interaction, orientation programs—but do not provide any evidence on the effectiveness of these strategies.

The reports and commentaries in this section—provided by higher education researchers and practitioners, AASCU, ACSFA, the Pell Institute, and the College Board—highlight the importance of educational quality, maintaining (or improving) access, and the necessity of additional resources to meet completion agenda goals. Furthermore, these documents tend to reject the idea of tying state appropriations to performance indicators. Another common theme throughout this section is promoting an institutional culture that is centered on quality educational experiences, student learning, and student-faculty interaction.

There are clear differences in the two sets of reports/commentaries discussed. The first group, primarily policy recommendations from organizations external to higher education, emphasized efficiency, streamlined educational processes, and cost reduction to reach college completion goals. Though they indicated maintaining quality and access to higher education is important, nearly all agreed no new investments in higher education were necessary. In contrast, the second set of documents, research, commentaries, and policy recommendations largely within higher education communities, stressed the importance of quality and access by way of obtaining additional resources. Despite these differences, many of the documents highlighted the importance of effective leadership, understanding institutional culture, and other organizational features.

Organizational and Governance Themes

A variety of organizational and governance elements are found throughout research, policy recommendations, and commentaries concerning the completion agenda. Consistently throughout these pieces, authors highlight the importance of organizational structures, effective leadership, and understanding and influencing the institutional culture. There is also evidence of isomorphic pressure applied to states and institutions to accomplish completion goals.

It has been shown consistently throughout the literature that the organizational structure of an institution—from its size and selectivity to its organizational behavior—impacts student success. Throughout the policy recommendations provided by intermediary and governmental organizations there is evidence of leveraging organizational structure and behavior to meet completion goals. Many of the policy briefs and studies described above indicate the importance of charging an upper-level administrator with the task of implementing and monitoring completion initiatives (AASCU, 2005; College Board, 2011; Hossler, et al., 2014). Not only is it

vital that those in charge of the task have the authority to establish initiatives, but they must also

be able to devote time and resources to executing the programs. Implementing effective policies

and programs also requires flexibility in the organization, in other words, organizational

elements that are loosely coupled (Hammond, 2004). For example, AASCU (2005), in the

context of implementing effective retention and completion initiatives, suggests:

> "the most effective organizational structures are as much lateral as they are hierarchical
>
> and emphasize the flexibility and 'on-the-ground' effectiveness that can be gained when
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> work teams drawn from different places (and reporting lines) are able to work together on
>
> a problem. Individuals far down…on the 'chain of command' should be given as much
>
> authority as possible to make critical decisions without asking permission" (p. 16).

Additionally, Perna and Finney (2014) demonstrate that the organization of a state's system of

higher education can also influence completion and attainment. Therefore, policies and

appropriations at the state level should be considered when implementing college completion

objectives.

Nearly all the policy briefs, as well as commentary from within higher education

communities, emphasize the importance of effective leadership in accomplishing completion

agenda goals. Though the precise definition or description of an effective leader remained

abstract, effective leaders were frequently discussed in conjunction with influencing the campus

culture, making college completion a top priority, and encouraging widespread buy-in of

completion plans (AASCU, 2005; Engle & O'Brian, 2007; SREB, 2010a, 2010b; U.S.

Department of Education, 2011). These recommendations are mostly in line with Birnbaum's

(1989) description of an effective leader, which includes deeply understanding the institution's

culture and the symbolic nature of leadership. An interesting discussion of leadership and

governance was found in the U.S. Department of Education's recommendation for governors. To

ensure that completion goals would be met in each state, the Department of Education

encouraged governors to carefully consider who they appoint as leaders in higher education

institutions:

> "In general governors also can exert greater influence than they traditionally have over
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> *individual* college goal-setting and…action plans through explicit use of their role in
>
> appointing or recommending for appointment both systems and institution of higher
>
> education leaders. In making appointments and reappointments, however, governors
>
> can demand a commitment to statewide and individual institution college completion
>
> goals, insist that individual institution action plans be created, and condition
>
> reappointment on progress in meeting system goals" (2010, p. 5).

However, this tactic is unlikely to be successful within state governance structures that allow

more institutional autonomy. Additionally, this approach seems to assume a rational,

bureaucratic model for higher education in which authority is strictly top-down, goals are clearly

stated and agreed upon, and there are known institutional actions that will achieve the indicated

goals. When considering the college completion research and the myriad factors that influence

student and institutional success, it is doubtful that this approach would effectively improve

college completion.

Nearly all of the policy briefs and commentaries discussed above identified the

importance of integrating completion objectives within an institution's culture (Engle & O'Brian,

2007; AASCU, 2005, 2006; SREB, 2010a, 2010b). In the organizational literature,

understanding culture is a vital part in implementing successful change and effective leadership

(Clark, 1972; Masland, 1985; Minztberg & Westley, 1992; Tierney, 1988). Mintzberg and

Westley (1992) discourage the application of policies or programs without considering the institutional context and culture: "importing outside learning without passing it through internal vision…instead going straight to procedural planning, tends to be dysfunctional" (Mintzberg & Westley, 1992, p. 46). Organizations like CCA and NGA are frequently criticized for encouraging this kind of broad implementation of "best practices" regardless of institutional environment. Additionally, Mitztberg and Westly (1992) demonstrate that a shift in culture should accompany action; they claim that changing culture or vision without also changing structures, systems, positions, and programs is essentially an "empty gesture" (p. 41). The College Board (2011) found evidence of these empty gestures at institutions that cited completion goals as important but did not allocate time or resources to meeting the goals; they posited these institutions would be less successful in improving completion.

Two divergent themes emerge from the documents analyzed related to leveraging institutional culture to accomplish completion objectives. One is to create a culture that emphasizes graduation, in which educational experiences are streamlined and efficient (SREB, 2010a). The other stresses creating quality learning environments in which students engage with faculty and explore a variety of educational opportunities. As an example of the former, CCA's "full-time is fifteen" strategy is not only a policy lever, but also demonstrates a cultural shift in which students consider full-time enrollment as at least 15 credits per semester rather than 12 (CCA, 2013). As an example of the latter, a culture that values quality educational experiences and student-faculty interaction is depicted in the view of an administrator: "The primary focus is on improving the student learning environment and if this is achieved, graduation and retention will follow" (AASCU, 2005, p. 9). In both examples, culture explains what is valued and what is expected (Masland, 1985). In the former scenario, it seems efficiency and cost-effectiveness is

valued most and students are expected to graduate (on time); while the latter values quality

educational experiences and students are expected to learn.

These two themes might be further categorized as organizational dimensions. A culture

that emphasizes completion through a streamlined, optimally efficient educational process seems

more indicative of a bureaucratic environment, while a culture that is centered on student

engagement with faculty, peers, and others seems representative of a collegial environment. It is

important to reemphasize that evidence presented in the literature suggests that environments that

are perceived to be collegial are associated with greater persistence than those that are perceived

as bureaucratic.

There is also evidence of isomorphic pressure exerted on states and institutions in

completion agenda documents. DiMaggio and Powell (1983) describe three types of isomorphic

pressure: coercive pressure is exerted by political entities usually when the legitimacy of an

institution is threatened; mimetic pressure is observed when organizations imitate similar

organizations, often in a time of uncertainty; and normative pressure stems from standards of

professionalization. The pressure for institutions and states to improve completion rates seems to

be a source of coercive and normative pressures, primarily from political entities. National

completion objectives, in conjunction with a variety of intermediary organizations' objectives,

seem to influence state policies, which then exert pressure on individual institutions. For

example, Georgia's Complete College Georgia initiative requires each college and university to

create an institutional completion plan and publish annual updates and progress (USG, 2012).

While some may view outcomes-based funding as incentive mechanisms, they also seem to

supply coercive pressure. Linking resources to outcomes—what Walters referred to as "pressure-

punitive funding" (2012, p. 34)—is essentially a threat to diminish resources for not achieving

some prescribed outcome. The Gates Foundation may be another source of coercive pressure

since they provide substantial resources for those states that comply with their completion

strategies (Parry et al., 2014).

The proliferation of college completion goals set by dozens of different organizations

could provide evidence of normative pressure. Thirty-four states are currently members of CCA,

perhaps placing normative pressure on governors to join. As graduating an adequate number of

students and/or reaching appropriate attainment rates increasingly legitimizes institutions and

states (consider Obama's proposed rankings, for instance), institutions may be pressured into

shifting or refocusing their missions to graduating as many students as possible.

Two Approaches and Two Critiques

Generally, there is widespread agreement that college completion should be a policy

priority. However, there are opposing views as to the best ways to accomplish completion goals.

Both approaches presented here offer important insights into the purposes, values, and challenges

of higher education, and both leave several questions unanswered.

Many of the policy briefs and reports from organizations external to higher education

(CCA, NGA, SREB, U.S. DOE, and McKinsey and Company) while emphasizing the

importance of creating an efficient educational process, also briefly mention maintaining quality

and access. However, few recommendations were made regarding quality and access. How do

institutions actually increase output and simultaneously maintain quality and access with no

additional resources? The only suggestion provided is to better use technology—which they fail

to note, often requires additional resources. Furthermore, there is no evidence that implementing

advanced technologies maintains educational quality; it is certainly possible and perhaps likely,

but is not discussed. This group of policy briefs presents completion issues as a function of

"ignorance of effective strategies" (Perna & Finney, 2014) and "mismanaged resources" (Walters, 2012) within higher education, but in general, fail to recognize the inherent student and institutional factors that impact completion empirically shown in the literature. (This is, perhaps, unsurprising considering the historical divide between policymakers and researchers (Birnbaum, 2000).) How will effective policies be developed if influential organizations and governmental entities do not recognize these significant elements?

The, research, policy recommendations, and commentaries made from within higher education communities (AASCU, ACSFA, Pell Institute, the College Board, and other researchers and practitioners) demonstrate how to both maintain the quality of and access to higher education. Unsurprisingly, they claim these efforts require additional resources. These pieces fail to discuss, however, how to address rising costs of education. Can resources be restructured so they are utilized in better ways? Can administrative bloat be reduced? (Although with increasing reporting requirements, administrators are increasingly needed for compliance purposes.) These reports and opinion pieces largely ignore the issues that accompany rising costs for students, institutions, and states. Though providing a quality education may require freedom for students to explore educational options uninhibitedly, this practice is expensive, especially in comparison to advances in technology that can streamline the educational process and provide considerable financial savings (given the purchased technology provides a positive return on investment).

It is fascinating that nearly all the policy recommendations for achieving completion goals, both inside and outside of higher education communities, often include the same elements: effective leadership, cultural understanding, access, and quality. But how these recommendations are enacted is entirely different. Whereas one organization would suggest broad implementation

of strategies that have worked in few specific contexts (CCA, 2014; Rutherford, & Rabovsky, 2014), others would suggest a deeper understanding of an institution's culture and context before implementing new strategies (AASCU, 2005). Whereas influencing culture to some means promoting on-time graduation for all students by prescribing paths to graduation (Auguste, et al., 2010; CCA, 2014), others would suggest creating a general culture of student success by emphasizing student learning and student-faculty interaction (AASCU, 2005; Rhoads, 2012). When governors and college presidents decide how they will address the completion agenda, which approach will they take? The tactics that have garnered the most attention seem to come from organizations with abundant resources. The Gates Foundation, for example, has played a considerable role in shaping the completion policy agenda at federal and state levels (Parry et al., 2013). Parry et al. (2013) demonstrate that Gates also influences how the completion agenda is presented in the news and media. Additionally they claim that those with opposing views, or who would offer a different approach to meeting the same goals, are not likely to speak out as to not risk compromising their chances of obtaining grants that Gates offers.

Conclusion

What does an emphasis on completion mean for the mission of higher education in the U.S.? The evidence provided here illuminates a considerable amount of pressure for organizations of higher education to graduate more students. While encouraging students to graduate may be an important, and necessary priority, it is not the only goal of higher education and is not a priority for every institution (consider access institutions, transfer institutions, non-degree-seeking students, etc.). The completion agenda, from the point of view of those outside of higher education, seems to prioritize pushing students through the system as fast and efficiently as possible. Take for example, the increasing use of predictive analytics as a completion strategy

(Fain, 2014). Predictive analytics can determine the educational path on which a student is most likely to be successful (choosing a major, registering for courses, etc.) to minimize the risk of failure and generate the most efficient educational experience. This strategy may benefit some students and prevent underrepresented students from falling through the cracks, but it also may discourage students from exploring an area of interest due to potential failure. Likewise, while CCA's promoted strategies may remove barriers to completion, for instance structured schedules and guided pathways, they are essentially prepackaged educational plans that allow minimal room for exploration.

It is important to note that college completion is simply one measure of success in higher education and demonstrates very little about student learning or degree quality. Unfortunately, learning and quality are more difficult to measure than the percent of first-time, full-time students who graduate within six years. As institutions continue to be assessed—and increasingly funded—according to outcomes, success may become dependent upon those outcomes that are most easily measured (graduation rates) rather than other valued results (student learning). Increasing the number of college graduates in the U.S. is certainly warranted in the twenty-first century, but the processes by which states and institutions meet this goal should be closely examined. Producing more college graduates with degrees of reduced quality is certainly not an optimal strategy for equipping the U.S. workforce, promoting economic development, or improving the U.S.'s international position to become more globally competitive.

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