

e-mentor

DWUMIESIĘCZNIK SZKOŁY GŁÓWNEJ HANDLOWEJ W WARSZAWIE
WSPÓŁWYDAWCA: FUNDACJA PROMOCJI I AKREDYTACJI KIERUNKÓW EKONOMICZNYCH

2015, nr 2 (59)



J. Sener, *A better Completion Agenda: expanding the range of acceptable outcomes in higher education*, „e-mentor” 2015, nr 2(59), s. 86–94, <http://dx.doi.org/10.15219/em59.1175>.

A better Completion Agenda: expanding the range of acceptable outcomes in higher education

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The Completion Agenda is part of a larger transformative shift in education, which is moving from a focus on providing instruction to a focus on producing results. This gradual but profound paradigm shift has been underway for multiple decades, and its impact on higher education cannot be understated; as one well-known description of this phenomenon noted, shifting the focus from teaching to learning „changes everything” about how higher education is conducted¹. Grounded in the increasingly close relationship between educational attainment and economic success², this results-oriented approach is driving many of the major efforts for change in U.S. higher education, including the Completion Agenda, performance-based funding, the revived interest in competency-based education, and standardized assessments such as the Collegiate Learning Assessment.

The Completion Agenda takes several forms. In its most basic form, the Completion Agenda refers to efforts to increase the numbers of college graduates³. In its more extreme form, the Completion Agenda in U.S. education also includes two additional components: 1) efforts to regain the status as the country with the highest proportion of college graduates and 2) the notion that every American needs to have more than a high school diploma to have any chance

at economic opportunity⁴. The assumption behind the first component is that economic competitiveness is tied to college completion, so retaining the position as the top economic nation is dependent on regaining the top spot in the world college completion rankings. The notion that everyone should go to college to earn a postsecondary credential has been so deeply embedded in American society for so long that its precise genesis is now difficult to discover. However, several contributing factors are easy to identify, including the post-World War II GI Bill; the 1947 Report of the President's Commission on Higher Education (more commonly known as the Truman Commission Report) which stated that „free and universal access to education, in terms of the interest, ability, and need of the student, must be a major goal in American education”⁵; and the rise of two-year community colleges starting in the 1960s. The notion that everyone should go to college is now a subject of vigorous debate in the U.S.⁶, and the notion that there should be fewer college students rather than more is also under discussion⁷. Nonetheless, the predominant view at present is that the U.S. needs to produce more college graduates, and the Completion Agenda is the most operative manifestation of this belief.

¹ R.B. Barr, J. Tagg, *From Teaching to Learning: A New Paradigm for Undergraduate Education*, „Change” 1995, Vol. 27, No. 6, <http://www.maine.edu/pdf/BarrandTagg.pdf>.

² D. Humphreys, *What's Wrong with the Completion Agenda – And What We Can Do About It*, „Liberal Education” 2012, Vol. 98, No. 1, <http://www.aacu.org/publications-research/periodicals/whats-wrong-completion-agenda%E2%80%94and-what-we-can-do-about-it>.

³ *Ibidem*.

⁴ B. Obama, *Remarks of President Barack Obama – As Prepared for Delivery*, Address to Joint Session of Congress, 2009, http://www.whitehouse.gov/the_press_office/Remarks-of-President-Barack-Obama-Address-to-Joint-Session-of-Congress/.

⁵ *Higher Education for Democracy: A Report of the President's Commission on Higher Education*, Vol. 1, *Establishing the Goals*, President's Commission on Higher Education, New York 1947, pp. 1–3, 5–8, 25–29, 32–39, 47–49. <http://courses.education.illinois.edu/eol474/sp98/truman.html>.

⁶ E.g., *Should College Be for Everyone? Room for Debate*, „New York Times” 2012, March 1, <http://www.nytimes.com/roomfordebate/2012/03/01/should-college-be-for-everyone>; S. Owen, I.V. Sawhill, *Should Everyone Go To College?*, CCF Briefs, Brookings Institution, 2013, <http://www.brookings.edu/research/papers/2013/05/08-should-everyone-go-to-college-owen-sawhill>; M.J. Petrilli, *Kid, I'm Sorry, but You're Just Not College Material*, 2014, http://www.slate.com/articles/life/education/2014/03/college_isn_t_for_everyone_let_s_stop_pretending_it_is.single.html.

⁷ E.g., *Are Too Many Students Going to College?*, „The Chronicle of Higher Education” 2009, November 8, <http://chronicle.com/article/Are-Too-Many-Students-Going-to/49039>.

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In practice, this more extreme formulation of the Completion Agenda overstates the case. A recent study from Georgetown University's Center for Education and the Workforce calculated that almost two-thirds (65 percent) of all jobs in the U.S. will require postsecondary education and training by 2020⁸. While this proportion has more than doubled in the past several decades (up from 28 percent in 1973 according to the Georgetown study), that still leaves 35 percent of jobs for which postsecondary education will not be required. Likewise, the assumption that the top ranking in college completion rates correlates with world leadership on the economic front is widely accepted without question, even though there is a dearth of actual evidence to support this direct connection⁹. Nevertheless, this growing tendency to view higher education in ever more strictly economic terms has driven the advancement of the Completion Agenda in its various forms to the forefront of U.S. higher education policy and, increasingly, practice as well.

As evidenced by the Completion Agenda, the U.S. appears to place an especially strong emphasis on college completion as the path to economic success. In particular, the need to be #1 among world countries in college completion rates and the notion that everyone needs to go to college seem to be uniquely American afflictions. This approach can be contrasted, for instance, with Europe's „Youth Guarantee Program”, an initiative which appears to attack the employment issue outside of the frame of formal education through training and apprenticeships, although the actual execution of this program to date has been underwhelming¹⁰.

The U.S. Completion Agenda may frame the issue in a unique or even peculiar manner, but the larger issues behind it, especially the resulting efforts to make higher education more effective, arguably apply to all countries. Consequently, readers in other countries may be able to extract useful lessons and principles from the U.S.'s experience with attempting to put its Completion Agenda into action.

Evolution and role of the Completion Agenda in US higher education

Since its inception, the Completion Agenda has been embraced by a wide variety of higher education stakeholders, criticized by others, but ignored by few, at least at the macro or organizational level. Even before President Obama's February 2009 State of the Union address, the push for a national completion agenda was underway, driven to a large extent by major foundations who provided „both the voice and the funding” for the agenda¹¹. In late 2008, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation announced a goal for the year 2025: doubling the number of low-income students who earn postsecondary credentials by the age of 26¹². The Lumina Foundation undertook a similarly ambitious agenda with its Goal 2025 campaign, whose stated goal is to increase the percentage of Americans who hold „high-quality degrees, certificates and other credentials to 60 percent” by the year 2025. Lumina's campaign also aims to foster „a national sense of urgency for action” to achieve its target goal, as detailed in its most recent strategic plan¹³.

At the two-year level, the American Association of Community Colleges issued a „Call to Action” report which offered numerous suggestions for advancing the completion agenda through strategic changes in institutional policies and practices which would likely „require some colleges to focus on empowering faculty, staff, and students to work together in new and productive ways”¹⁴. A wide variety of other organizations with interests in education also jumped on the bandwagon with reports, initiatives, and other activities related to the completion agenda, including the College Board, Complete College America, National Conference on State Legislatures, ACE Commission on Education Attainment, and many others, most of which were funded by the Lumina or Gates Foundation or both¹⁵.

⁸ A.P. Carnevale, N. Smith, J. Strohl, *Recovery: Projections of Jobs and Education Requirements Through 2020*, Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce, 2013, https://cew.georgetown.edu/wp-content/uploads/2014/11/Recovery2020.FR_Web_.pdf

⁹ According to the most recent OECD report (*Education at a Glance 2014 OECD Indicators*, Centre for Educational Research and Innovation, 2014, http://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/education/education-at-a-glance-2014_eag-2014-en), for instance, the four countries which are outpacing the U.S. in the percentage of tertiary-educated adults aged 25–64 include the country whose recent economic performance spawned the term „lost decades” (Japan), two countries whose combined GDP is only about one-eighth that of the U.S. (Israel, Canada; World Development Indicators Database, World Bank, 2014, <http://databank.worldbank.org/data/download/GDP.pdf>), and a country whose economy is currently in crisis due to the recent collapse in world oil prices (Russian Federation).

¹⁰ *Youth unemployment in Europe: Guaranteed to fail*, „The Economist” 2013, July 20, <http://www.economist.com/news/leaders/21582006-german-led-plans-tackling-youth-unemployment-europe-are-far-too-timid-guaranteed-fail>.

¹¹ A. Russell, *A Guide to Major U.S. College Completion Initiatives*, American Association of Colleges and Universities, 2011, <http://www.aascu.org/policy/publications/policymatters/2011/collegecompletion.pdf>.

¹² *Postsecondary Success*, Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, 2009, <https://docs.gatesfoundation.org/Documents/postsecondary-education-success-plan-brochure.pdf>.

¹³ *Lumina Foundation Strategic Plan, 2013 to 2016*, Lumina Foundation, 2013, <http://www.luminafoundation.org/files/file/2013-lumina-strategic-plan.pdf>.

¹⁴ C.J. McPhail, *The Completion Agenda: A Call to Action*, American Association of Community Colleges, 2011, http://www.aacc.nche.edu/Publications/Reports/Documents/CompletionAgenda_report.pdf.

¹⁵ *The College Completion Agenda State Policy Guide*, College Board, 2010, http://www.ncsl.org/documents/educ/policy-guide_062810sm.pdf; A. Russell, *op.cit.*

Pluses and minuses of the Completion Agenda

Pluses

The Completion Agenda has helped support renewed interest in several related educational initiatives by providing a context for enabling these initiatives to make progress, most notably the following:

Performance-based funding: For many decades, higher education funding in the U.S. was focused on *input elements* as determined by either a negotiations-based approach (e.g., an institutional budget request determined through negotiations between the institution and its funding agencies), a formula-based approach (e.g., many U.S. higher education institutions receive state funding based on student enrollments), or a combination of the two¹⁶. By contrast, performance-based funding (PBF) shifts the focus from inputs to *output or outcome elements* and from institutional needs to governmental priorities¹⁷, which in the U.S. is at the state level for the most part¹⁸. U.S. higher education experienced an initial wave of interest in PBF from the late 1970s to early 2000s; during this era, PBF funding systems focused on allocating „bonus” funding based on typical indicators such as graduation, job placement, retention, or transfer. The current, second wave of PBF which started in 2007 places more emphasis on intermediate achievement indicators such as course completion, developmental education completion, program completion, and attainment of credit thresholds¹⁹. This renewed interest in PBF has been driven largely by the aim to produce

more credentials, which is the essence of the Completion Agenda²⁰. Not surprisingly, many of the related initiatives have also been supported by the Lumina and Gates Foundations²¹.

Competency-based education is based on the premise of measuring learning rather than time. Also called competency-based learning or competency-based instruction, competency-based education (CBE) allows students to learn at their own pace and progress based on their ability to demonstrate mastery of a competency or skill, that is, show what they know or can do. CBE has been around for many decades and, like PBF, is also enjoying a resurgence thanks to the Completion Agenda²². Its advocates believe that effectively implemented CBE can improve quality, provide greater consistency, reduce costs, and shorten the time to obtain a degree, while offering more accurate measures of student learning²³.

The shift in focus from providing instruction to producing results is perhaps most evident in the proliferation of *student success initiatives* in American higher education institutions (a recent Google web search of the terms „student success” + „programs” by the author yielded about 6.7 million results). Student success programs are sometimes explicitly linked to the Completion Agenda²⁴, but more commonly are indirectly linked through an emphasis on student retention²⁵ or graduation.

In its less extreme form, the Completion Agenda has several other positive attributes. *Reaching the next 20+ percent: a tangible, aspirational goal*. „College for everyone” may be effective as rhetoric, but attaining this goal is simply not possible under current condi-

¹⁶ B. Jongbloed, *Performance-based Funding in Higher Education: an international survey*, Center for the Economics of Education and Training, Monash University, Working Paper No. 35, 2001, <http://arrow.monash.edu.au/vital/access/manager/Repository/monash:130977>.

¹⁷ T. Harnisch, *Performance-based funding: A re-emerging strategy in public higher education financing (Higher Education Policy Brief)*, American Association of State Colleges and Universities, Washington, DC, 2011, http://www.aascu.org/uploadedFiles/AASCU/Content/Root/PolicyAndAdvocacy/PolicyPublications/Performance_Funding_AASCU_June2011.pdf.

¹⁸ *Performance-Based Funding for Higher Education*, National Conference for State Legislators, 2015, <http://www.ncsl.org/research/education/performance-funding.aspx>.

¹⁹ K.J. Dougherty, V. Reddy, *The Impacts of State Performance Funding Systems on Higher Education Institutions: Research Literature Review and Policy Recommendations*, CCRC Working Paper No. 37, Community College Research Center, Teachers College, Columbia University, 2011, <http://ccrc.tc.columbia.edu/media/k2/attachments/impacts-state-funding-higher-education.pdf>.

²⁰ C. Ruud, *Performance-Based Funding in Higher Education: An Emerging State-Based Approach*. Office of Community College Research and Leadership, College of Education at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 2013, <http://occrll.illinois.edu/performance-based-funding-in-higher-education-an-emerging-state-based-approach/>.

²¹ E.g., D. Lederman, *Performance Funding 2.0*, Inside Higher Ed, 2008, <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2008/12/17/perform>; M. Will, *Who's Tying Money to College Performance, and How? A Report Breaks It Down*, „Chronicle of Higher Education” 2015, February 12, <http://chronicle.com/article/Whos-Tying-Money-to-College/189975?cid=megamenu>.

²² M. Grush, *What Can Competency-Based Assessment and Degree Qualification Mean for the National Degree Completion Agenda? A Q&A with Gary Brown*, „Campus Technology” 2012, July 8, <http://campustechnology.com/Articles/2012/07/18/Competency-Based-Assessment-and-Degree-Qualification.aspx>; *The Case for Competency-Based Education: A New Age of Teaching and Learning?*, New England Board of Higher Education, 2014, <http://www.nebhe.org/events/cbe/>.

²³ R. Mendenhall, *What Is Competency-Based Education?*, „Huffington Post” 2012, September 5, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/dr-robert-mendenhall/competency-based-learning-_b_1855374.html.

²⁴ E.g., *Student Success and Completion Agenda, 2012–2016*, Muskegon Community College, 2013, http://www.muskegoncc.edu/PDFFiles/Student%20Services/Student%20Success%20and%20Completion%20Agenda%20Plan%2010_Jan_2013.pdf.

²⁵ M. Dennis, *Developing a Sustainable Student Retention and Success Program*, 2012, <http://www4.aacrao.org/semsource/sem/indexb965.html?fa=view&id=5428>.

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tions. By contrast, the less extreme form of the Completion Agenda represents a tangible, if aspirational, set of targets for U.S. education to attain. The Lumina Goal 2025 initiative aims to raise the proportion of adult Americans holding college credentials from its current level (38.6 percent according to recent figures)²⁶; to 60 percent by 2025. This goal at least bounds the problem: reaching the next 20+ percent of Americans who currently lack a college degree. This 60 percent target is also somewhat comparable to the Georgetown projections regarding the need for jobs requiring postsecondary education credentials (47 percent by 2020).

Helping higher education focus more closely on a specific target population: There is some evidence that the Completion Agenda is providing a framework for enabling higher education to identify target populations that are „lower hanging fruit”, for instance people who are closer to degree attainment than they realize, or ones who earned enough credits for an associate degree but never realized it²⁷. This may be particularly important, given that one of the unacknowledged realities about U.S. higher education is that many members of the „next 20 percent” target population are not as well prepared for college. They are more likely to be non-traditional students, first generation college students and thus more likely to have less social capital²⁸. There is evidence that the Completion Agenda is providing a justification for efforts to ameliorate this situation, for instance by creating social capital within the college experience through student support services²⁹.

Minuses

Despite its apparent momentum and seemingly substantial array of benefits, the Completion Agenda, even in its less extreme form, is a seriously flawed framework for addressing the real issues which tertiary education faces in the U.S. and elsewhere.

The emptiness of being #1. Consider the questionable assumptions embedded in this fairly typical description of the “problem”³⁰:

„The United States, long considered to have the best higher education in the world, now ranks eleventh in the proportion of 25- to-34-year-olds with a college degree. As other countries have made

dramatic gains in degree attainment, the U.S. has improved more slowly. In response, President Obama recently laid out a national „completion agenda” with the goal of making the U.S. the best-educated nation in the world by the year 2020”.

The empirical evidence for each of these assumptions is lacking:

- *The country with the „best higher education” is the one with the highest proportion of citizens with a college degree.* As noted previously, there is no correlation between a country’s world ranking and economic success or other measures of well-being.
- *Countries can be ranked by the proportion of its young people with a college degree.* This ignores several important questions, for instance whether all these additional graduates are actually needed in the workforce or whether workforce needs are already being met by older workers, or for that matter whether the simple increase in production of college graduates will match well with the actual needs of the workforce.
- *A college degree automatically equates with learning.* In fact, there is more evidence that relying on such narrow measures of attainment will reduce learning rather than indicate increased learning³¹.

As a result, the target of regaining world leadership status in degree completion rates would seem to be an empty goal by itself – except that it is so widely accepted by stakeholders as an essential and „laudable”³² goal.

The less extreme form of the Completion Agenda also suffers from several severe deficiencies: *An aspirational but unattainable goal.* Even in its less extreme form, the stated goals of the Completion Agenda are audacious and almost surely unattainable targets. Considering current attainment rates and levels, to reach a 60 percent credentials attainment rate would require a historically unprecedented increase in the rate and volume of credentials produced. By some estimates, for instance, reaching this rate by 2020 would require a quadrupling of the yearly growth rate in attainment and a 33 percent increase in the volume of degrees produced at the community college level³³.

²⁶ *Current Population Survey, Annual Social and Economic Supplement*, United States Census Bureau, 2014, <http://www.census.gov/hhes/socdemo/education/data/cps/2014/tables.html>.

²⁷ *The Completion Agenda – Webinar*, Inside Higher Education, 2014, <https://www.insidehighered.com/audio/2014/04/09/completion-agenda>.

²⁸ J. Coleman, *Social Capital in the Creation of Human Capital*, „American Journal of Sociology” 1988, Vol. 94 (supplement), p. 95–120, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1086/228943>.

²⁹ E.g., D.C. Pearl, *Mentoring Social Capital between First-Generation College Students and Student Affairs Practitioners*, 2013, http://www.academia.edu/3630753/Mentoring_Social_Capital_between_First-Generation_College_Students_and_Student_Affairs_Practitioners.

³⁰ A.P. Kelly, M. Schneider (eds.), *Getting to Graduation: The Completion Agenda in Higher Education*, 2012, <http://www.amazon.com/Getting-Graduation-Completion-Agenda-Education/dp/1421406225>.

³¹ D. Humphreys, *op.cit.*

³² S. Evenbeck, K.E. Johnson, *Students Must Not Become Victims of the Completion Agenda*, „Liberal Education” 2012, Vol. 98, No. 1, <http://www.aacu.org/publications-research/periodicals/students-must-not-become-victims-completion-agenda>.

³³ A.P. Kelly, M. Schneider, *op.cit.*

This massive increase is expected to happen without a proportionate increase in resources, despite some new proposals such as President Obama's recent call for free community college tuition for qualified students³⁴.

Targeting or triage? The other 40 percent. It's not surprising that the Lumina target goals, while operative within the policy space, are still relatively visible to the larger public. While the notion of college for everyone may lend itself well to rhetorical excess and lofty ideals of equity, the actual policy goals are something quite different. This may be because of a larger, more unpleasant truth: the goal of 60 percent attainment is arguably a form of triage, since the Completion Agenda does not address the question of what happens to the remaining 40 percent. Although there has been increased interest in the U.S. in reviving non-college paths to employment, as evidenced for instance by Harvard University's Pathways to Prosperity project³⁵, the Completion Agenda encourages attention to college-based paths to employment. This shortchanges other professions that don't require a college degree; at the same time, it also encourages „credential creep” for professions in which educational requirements are of dubious value³⁶.

The root of the problem

The most glaring deficiency of the Completion Agenda, however, is that it *narrows the range of acceptable outcomes*, an excessively single-minded approach which produces or threatens to produce a variety of undesirable outcomes. A „completion-only” approach of focusing solely on credentials attainment creates a variety of dangers³⁷. This result is utterly predictable and is concisely expressed in Campbell's Law, which states that when a single quantitative social indicator is used to make social decisions, the indicator is more likely „distort and corrupt the social processes it is intended to monitor” the more it is used³⁸. Among the corruptions and distortions the Completion Agenda is likely to produce include the following:

Quantity over quality. The urgency of the goals can lead to favoring speed over rigor³⁹. The recent rapid expansion of the Ethiopian medical education system offers an extreme but instructive example of this dynamic. To meet a dire shortage of doctors in the country, the Ethiopian government more than doubled the number of medical schools in the country by opening 13 new medical schools in 2012. In the process, Ethiopia increased its enrollment of medical students almost tenfold compared to five or six years previously⁴⁰. As a result, many medical schools are reportedly handling many more trainees than they were built to accommodate, and numerous disturbing stories are emerging regarding a severe deterioration in the quality of medical education, raising concern that Ethiopia is producing „a generation of doctors who don't know what they're doing” and whom „could do more harm than good”⁴¹.

Quantity can prevail over quality in less dramatic ways, for instance by lowering existing curricular and program completion requirements to help meet target quotas. There are already distinct signs that this is happening, for instance the substitution of elective credits for required courses and the removal of a research paper requirement from English Composition courses⁴². Campbell's Law enables us to predict confidently that many more such examples will emerge in the future as the Completion Agenda is implemented.

Reducing colleges to job training programs. The internal logic of the Completion Agenda allows little if any room for the many other important outcomes of a college education which were once more highly valued such as promoting better citizenship, maximizing human potential, creating global perspectives, etc. Conversely, the Completion Agenda also supports the ongoing outsourcing of employer responsibility for job preparation to colleges and universities. The role of employers in job readiness is essentially absent from the conversation. As a result, the Completion Agenda represents abject surrender to the notion that employers know what they want and that the role of higher education is to provide that to them.

³⁴ *Fact Sheet – White House Unveils America's College Promise Proposal: Tuition-Free Community College for Responsible Students*, The White House, Office of the Press Secretary, 2015, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2015/01/09/fact-sheet-white-house-unveils-america-s-college-promise-proposal-tuition>.

³⁵ *Creating Pathways to Prosperity: A Blueprint to Action. The Pathways to Prosperity Project and The Achievement Gap Initiative at Harvard University*, Harvard Graduate School of Education, 2014, <http://www.agi.harvard.edu/pathways/Creating-PathwaystoProsperityReport2014.pdf>.

³⁶ P. Ciciora, *Expert: Pervasive 'credential creep' bad for health care practitioners, consumers*. News Bureau, Public Affairs, University of Illinois, 2015, http://news.illinois.edu/news/15/0127credential_creep_DavidHyman.html.

³⁷ D. Humphreys, *op.cit.*

³⁸ D.T. Campbell, *Assessing the Impact of Planned Social Change*, The Public Affairs Center, Dartmouth College, 1976, [https://www.globalhivmeinfo.org/CapacityBuilding/Occasional Papers/08 Assessing the Impact of Planned Social Change.pdf](https://www.globalhivmeinfo.org/CapacityBuilding/Occasional%20Papers/08%20Assessing%20the%20Impact%20of%20Planned%20Social%20Change.pdf).

³⁹ *The Completion Agenda – Webinar*, *op.cit.*

⁴⁰ M. Werman, A. Kelto, *Ethiopia's Crowded Medical Schools*, PRI's The World, 2012, <http://www.pri.org/stories/2012-12-20/ethiopias-crowded-medical-schools>.

⁴¹ M.H. Idriss, *Too crowded to train: the dire state of medical schools in Ethiopia*, 2014, http://www.ethiomeia.com/11notes/medical_schools.html.

⁴² D. Humphrey, *op.cit.*

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Other unintended, destructive consequences. The narrowly defined outcomes of the Completion Agenda may have other unintended but destructive system consequences, for instance rewarding institutions which have the best prepared students or most resources, or discouraging colleges from enrolling at-risk students⁴³.

An educational monoculture. Collectively, an increased emphasis on narrowly defined definitions of institutional and student success will happen at the expense of other important outcomes which will be diminished and lost in an increasingly monocultural assessment landscape.

It doesn't have to be this way. A better Completion Agenda could produce more desirable outcomes for all concerned and provide educators with a powerful vehicle for improving education in the process.

A better alternative: expanding the range of acceptable outcomes in higher education

The current Completion Agenda in higher education could be improved considerably by expanding the range of acceptable outcomes by legitimizing a wider range of outcomes in productive and effective ways.

Rewarding intermediate steps

As noted previously, current performance-based funding initiatives often place more emphasis on course completion, developmental program completion, attainment of credit thresholds, and other intermediate achievement indicators⁴⁴. One method for doing this is called the *momentum points model*, which is based on research at Teachers College at Columbia University⁴⁵. Momentum points are measurable educational attainments, for instance completing a first year college math course, that are empirically correlated with the completion of a milestone such as degree completion. Momentum point models have been implemented in several states, including Texas⁴⁶ and Washington⁴⁷.

Completion plus quality

The momentum points model mitigates the potentially corrosive effects of performance-based funding by distributing the financial rewards for outcome achievement across many measured outcomes instead of a singular one (i.e., credentials completion). However, each of the outcomes in a typical momentum points model could, at least in theory, be achieved without any specific relationship with quality.

The Association of American Colleges and Universities proposed a „completion-plus quality” model designed to address this concern by complementing a focus on completion with a focus on the quality of student learning. Key characteristics of the AAC&U model include greater clarity about outcomes and levels of learning, experience of high impact educational experiences such as first-year seminars, learning communities, undergraduate research, service learning, and capstone courses, and the use of meaningful and authentic assessments⁴⁸.

Building on this framework, AAC&U has developed an assessment initiative named VALUE (Valid Assessment of Learning in Undergraduate Education) designed to assess authentic student work which reflect progress toward learning outcomes deemed essential by both employers and faculty. The VALUE initiative includes rubrics for assessing learning outcomes in several broad areas, including intellectual and practical skills, personal and social responsibility, and integrative and applied learning⁴⁹.

In keeping with its stated goal of enabling the attainment of „high-quality degrees, certificates and other credentials”, the Lumina Foundation also developed the Degree Qualifications Profile (DQP), a „learning-centered framework for what college graduates should know and be able to do” to earn a degree. Organized into five broad interrelated categories of learning outcomes (Specialized Knowledge, Broad and Integrative Knowledge, Intellectual Skills, Applied and Collaborative Learning, and Civic and Global Learning), the DQP also emphasizes the need for quality as well as completion⁵⁰.

⁴³ *The Completion Agenda – Webinar, op.cit.*

⁴⁴ K.J. Dougherty, V. Reddy, *op.cit.*

⁴⁵ D.T. Leinbach, D. Jenkins, *Using Longitudinal Data to Increase Community College Student Success: A Guide to Measuring Milestone and Momentum Point Attainment*, „CCRC Research Tools” 2008, No. 2, <http://ccrc.tc.columbia.edu/media/k2/attachments/longitudinal-data-momentum-point-research-tool.pdf>; W. Horn, *Milestones and Momentum Points for Analyzing Student Progress*, System Office, California Community Colleges, 2008, <http://extranet.cccco.edu/Portals/1/TRIS/Research/Research/Abstracts/StrategicPlanning/milestones.pdf>.

⁴⁶ *Texas Two-year Colleges Briefing for State Policymakers*, Texas Association of Community Colleges, 2011, http://www.tacc.org/documents/030711_WhitePaper.pdf.

⁴⁷ D. Jenkins, et al., *Washington State Student Achievement Initiative Policy Study: Final Report*, Community College Research Center and Institute for Higher Education Leadership and Policy, 2012, <http://ccrc.tc.columbia.edu/media/k2/attachments/student-achievement-initiative-final-report.pdf>.

⁴⁸ D. Humphreys, *op.cit.*

⁴⁹ AAC&U (n.d.) VALUE: Valid Assessment of Learning in Undergraduate Education, <http://www.aacu.org/value>; VALUE rubrics available at: <http://www.aacu.org/value-rubrics>.

⁵⁰ *The Degree Qualifications Profile*, Lumina Foundation, 2014, <http://www.luminafoundation.org/files/resources/dqp.pdf>.

Educating the whole person

Beyond the influence of the Completion Agenda, there are also efforts underway at various selective U.S. colleges and universities to review their commitment to a broader sense of education, as evidenced by various institutional initiatives focused on „educating the whole person”. For instance, Georgetown University’s Formation by Design initiative is based on the concept of formation at the heart of the school’s Jesuit tradition, which holds that education involves development of the whole person. This initiative aims to develop strategies and identify models for integrating formation into core institutional practices⁵¹.

The value of non-completion

The calculus of the Completion Agenda assumes that the value of education resides only in credentials completion and that non-completion is a waste, even a failure⁵². In this context, it is worth asking the counterfactual question: what is the value of not completing college? From a purely economic standpoint, there is evidence that college is worth it for noncompleters; one recent study found that noncompleting students’ lifetime earnings are roughly \$100,000 higher (in present value) than that of students who only completed high school. This means that getting some college as an investment yields a return higher than most conventional investments such as stocks, bonds, and real estate⁵³.

This evidence is indirectly corroborated by various studies which indicated that many students are able to achieve their educational goals without attaining credentials and that dropping out can even be a sign of success for mature learners who exercise their authority to decide when they have achieved their learning objectives⁵⁴. The long list of successful people who attained fame and fortune without completing a degree is also instructive. One could argue that these people are outliers whose exceptional talent would have enabled them to succeed under any circumstances. However, the stories they themselves tell often indicate a far different picture: that their college experience was instrumental to their success, even though they did not receive a degree⁵⁵.

If this is in fact the case, then it is indeed curious that colleges and universities don’t expend more effort to find out what happened to their noncompleters. Instead of assuming that noncompleters signify a failure of higher education, institutions might find

that their noncompleters signify success, at least in some cases or to some extent. Such research would provide more insight into a deeper truth: that higher education institutions provide learning experiences which play a much greater role in student success than indicated by traditional measures of attainment. Institutions should get more credit for helping students attain a broader range of acceptable outcomes such as learning to succeed from failure, enabling productive or even life-changing directions, or learning which realizes its value many years later⁵⁶.

Conclusion: a better alternative

The Completion Agenda provides an opportunity to educators to find new ways to focus on improving education, but only we refocus its purpose by committing to a much more expansive view of what educational success means. This requires moving the Completion Agenda beyond simple attainment to include attention to quality, educating the whole person, reclaiming the broad values which education provides, and even the value of noncompletion. Ironically, this more expansive approach would also increase the chances of educating a much larger proportion of the populace.

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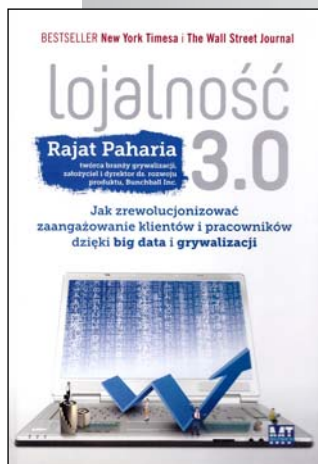
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POLECAMY



Rajat Paharia

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