Helping Community-College Students Succeed: a Moral Imperative

By KAY MCCLENNEY

Even in the midst of crisis, American community colleges embody the spirit of hope and change that has energized our national politics. Our challenges have never been inconsequential, but now, plainly, they are huge: As is typical in a recession, many community colleges are experiencing a surge in enrollment, at precisely the same time that they must — like many enterprises, both public and private — contend with choking constraints on resources.

But the challenges are more than fiscal. They are also educational. They are challenges of vision, leadership, and chosen priorities. Many would say that the challenges are even moral.

The reality for community colleges is this: No matter how good our colleges are today — and they do contribute mightily to educational access, work-force development, and economic prosperity — they simply are not yet good enough. Our results, particularly when stated in terms of student achievement, are not adequate to serve the pressing needs of individual students, communities, states, and the nation. Consider:

- Roughly 14 percent of students who begin studies in a community college do not complete a single credit in their first academic term.
- At least a quarter of entering fall-term students do not return for the subsequent spring term. Almost half, on average, are gone from our classrooms by the second fall term.
- Just under 30 percent have earned an associate degree after three years.
- Fewer than half of community-college students who aspire to earn associate or bachelor's degrees, or transfer to four-year institutions, achieve their goals within six years.

Some people argue that many such students never intend to progress or graduate, or that they will turn up later at other institutions. While that may sometimes be true, we should still not be complacent about such bleak statistics. Completion of credentials is good for everyone: the students themselves, their communities and states, and the country. And it's simply not acceptable that low-income students graduate at lower rates than their high-income peers, and that African-American and Hispanic students graduate at lower rates than their white classmates.

Without question, the most significant educational challenge for community colleges is providing effective remedial education for the large numbers of students who arrive underprepared to succeed in college-level work. Estimates indicate that close to 60 percent of entering community-college students...
need at least one remedial course. That percentage is substantially higher in some colleges, ranging into the upper 90s.

The results of remedial education are, all too typically, not good. Data from the national "Achieving the Dream: Community Colleges Count" effort — a multiyear national project that uses student-achievement data to design effective institutional changes to help community-college students succeed — show just how much improvement is needed. As discussed in a recent report by the Community College Research Center, the numbers indicate that of the more than 250,000 students in the study, many who were assessed as needing remedial classes never made it to college-level course work. Sixty-nine percent of students referred to remedial math did not complete their sequence, and 56 percent of students referred to remedial reading did not complete theirs.

Although remedial education is clearly a tremendous challenge, it is, again, critical to the success of six out of 10 entering students, so it must be an important priority for community colleges. Institutions committed to evaluating and improving their remedial offerings should begin by answering these questions:

- Does the college have in place, and does it consistently apply, policies that require assessment and course placement; enrollment in remedial education in the first term of college (starting with reading, if so indicated); elimination of late registration; college orientation; and enrollment of all entering remedial students in a student-success course?
- What percentage of remedial courses is taught by part-time faculty members? By faculty members who have been adequately prepared to teach those courses?
- What percentage of the instructional budget is allocated to support remedial education? How does that percentage compare with the proportion of revenue — tuition and public support — that is produced through remedial-education enrollments?
- Does the college routinely track the progress of entering students in remedial education, collecting data about the percentage of students who successfully complete remedial courses and sequences as well as their first, related college-level courses? Are those data widely shared and discussed?
- Does the college rigorously evaluate its alternative strategies for serving remedial students? Does the college budget reflect a commitment to bringing effective strategies to scale?

Unfortunately, in focus groups and interviews with faculty and staff members across the country, we frequently hear themes of frustration and discouragement: "If only our students were better prepared/worked harder/did their assignments!" "If only the high schools did their jobs." "Students have 'a right to fail.'" "Some people just don't belong in college." While we also often hear stories of heroic efforts that remain perennially underfinanced, the message we still hear too often is, "If only we had a better class of students, we would have much better outcomes around here."

The good news? While improving student achievement is clearly hard, it is possible.

Over a decade ago, for example, the Community College of Denver was widely recognized for its results in remedial education — a decade-long effort in which, with relentless focus but limited resources, the college showed that students' participation in developmental education can become not a life sentence to some outlying educational ghetto but a prelude to success. Through the use of a highly personalized case-management approach, open-entry and open-exit courses, a comprehensive academic-support center, and continuous review of student-performance data, Denver set an example and a standard for other colleges.
El Paso Community College, through its College Readiness Consortium — a partnership with local school districts and the University of Texas at El Paso — has made significant strides in reducing the need for remedial education among its entering students. Through early assessment of high-school students and work with high-school teachers, the group has been able to better align those schools' standards for high-school graduation with the academic skills and knowledge required for success in first-year college courses.

Valencia Community College, with the help of learning communities, supplemental instruction, and a life-skills course, is posting significant improvements in student outcomes in first-year college-level courses while also eliminating the achievement gaps across racial and ethnic groups.

Patrick Henry Community College, after instituting a cooperative-learning approach wherein students work together in teams, is seeing positive effects on student retention. Kingsborough Community College, part of the City University of New York, and Skagit Valley College have demonstrated promising results through the use of remedial-learning communities with increased student support that includes counseling and student-success courses. At Broward College, "success specialists" advise about 150 entering students who place into two or more college-prep subject areas. The specialists assign students to theme-based learning communities, most of which include a life-skills course, remedial classes, and a general-education course.

There is much challenging work yet to do, and those colleges would be quick to assert that they are not yet where they need to be. But once we begin to see data that show progress — in geographically diverse institutions serving extraordinarily diverse student populations, in settings where resources are just as scarce as they are at other colleges — then the sense of helplessness, or the rationalization of poor results that so often seems to stall our progress, will lift. The emerging successes of some colleges just might take away the excuses for all the others.

Three pertinent and powerful data points from "Achieving the Dream" illustrate both the current performance challenge in remedial education and the significant payoff when colleges are able to get it right. Tracking first-time college students from the survey's 2002 cohort — colleges with disproportionately high enrollments of low-income and minority students — researchers found that upon entry, 72 percent needed at least one remedial math course. After three years, only 23 percent of those students had successfully completed the remedial math sequence — a disturbing lack of progress over all. But — and it's a significant but — students from that very same cohort who successfully completed a remedial course in their first term of enrollment were then significantly more likely to persist than any other group in the college, including those who did not need remediation in the first place.

The scope of the problem is enormous, the stakes are high, and the return on investment is huge. The work is hard, but it is possible. We can do it. Moreover, we should do it — indeed, we must.

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