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With a shift towards performance-based funding for public institutions and growing competition across all of higher education, demonstrating on-time completion and positive student outcomes is a major challenge facing today's colleges and universities. Modern students and their families are expecting institutions to provide the tools and support to ensure students secure the necessary skills and competencies to prepare them for a successful life.

Institutions across the country are seeing students arrive on campus not academically prepared for college-level coursework. In fact, nearly 60% of students need remediation¹. Students often take courses that not related to their degree program. Or, they are unsure about which degree program is even best for their interests and skills. Consequently, over 40% of students who begin college never graduate².

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We hope this collection of articles written by esteemed experts provide you with information and resources in the area of guided pathways and student success. There are many avenues to explore that may have a tremendous impact on your campus. For more information on Jenzabar Guided Pathways to Success, visit jenzabar.com/guided-pathways.

Sincerely,



Eileen

Eileen Smith
Vice President, Marketing and Communications
Jenzabar

¹ Source: Beyond the Rhetoric. National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education. highereducation.org/reports/college_readiness/gap.shtml

² Source: The Condition of Education. National Center for Education Statistics. nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/



Introduction

Two decades into the movement to promote student success, educators agree that its goals have never been more important. At many institutions, retention and graduation rates remain low, particularly for black and Latino students. The breadth of student needs -- academic, financial, socioeconomic, logistical -- continues to be daunting. And yet the importance to students of finishing degrees (associate, bachelor's and otherwise) and preparing for careers has never been clearer.

The articles in this compilation explore strategies of different colleges and groups of colleges to improve the rigor of the college experience, to promote completion and to prepare students for the job market. *Inside Higher Ed* will continue to cover these issues and welcomes your feedback on this compilation and areas for future coverage.

--The Editors
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Completion and the Value of College

BY PAUL FAIN

The college completion agenda reaches an inflection point as the Obama administration ends and the nation increasingly focuses on jobs and college value. Experts assess shifts in the completion push and what comes next.

The national college completion agenda has reached an inflection point.

Republican control of the White House, U.S. Congress and most state capitols likely means less focus on the production of higher education credentials, at least those earned at traditional, four-year colleges.

Job training almost certainly will get more attention than college completion in coming years. But those two goals can be compatible. And the completion push already has begun to include looking at what happens to students after they graduate.

Inside Higher Ed spoke with 20 experts who work on college completion from a wide range of perspectives. Some common themes emerged.

The movement and its message have evolved during the seven or so years since the Obama administration joined with the Lumina Foundation and the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation to go all in on a broad

effort to increase the proportion of Americans who hold a meaningful post-secondary credential.

The White House at times appeared to focus on the bachelor's degree in its completion push, particularly early on. But certificates and associate degrees got more attention from Washington in recent years. And this administration did more to elevate community colleges than any previous one, even proposing a national free community college plan based on Tennessee's completion and work force development-grounded free community college scholarship.

Likewise, in 2014 Lumina [added](#) "high-quality" certificates to its annual tabulation of progress toward the foundation's national goal for 60 percent of Americans to hold a college credential by 2025.

That goal, which mirrors one set by the White House, is likely out of reach. In 2014, 45.3 percent of



working-age adults held a degree or a job-earning certificate, according to the [most recent data](#) from Lumina.

In 2008, Lumina's metric showed 37.9 percent of Americans holding at least an associate degree, meaning degree attainment is up 2.5 percent during the last six years (4.9 percent of Americans held a high-quality certificate in 2014).

College completion rates have begun to climb after a two-year slide. The National Student Clearinghouse Research Center in December 2016 said the [six-year completion rate](#) [grew](#) to 54.8 percent, an increase of roughly two percentage points over

the previous year.

While those tepid improvements aren't all that exciting, the numbers are moving in the right direction as [college enrollments have slid](#), largely due to the collapse of for-profit higher education and the gradual economic recovery since the recession. College enrollments typically go down when the job market improves.

The completion agenda also has taken root across much of the academy, adding completion to student access as primary goals for higher education.

Many say helping ensure that more students get to graduation was not in the past viewed as central to the jobs of faculty members or even college administrators. That view has changed to a substantial extent (at times provoking worries about a cheapening of college credentials to [meet completion demands](#)). Hence the demise of the old trope "look to your left, look to your right, because one of you won't be here by the end of the year."

Meanwhile, there's a growing feeling among higher education experts and policy makers of both major political parties that a singular goal of having more Americans earn college credentials isn't enough.

For one thing, achievement gaps between wealthier white students and their lower-income, more diverse peers have persisted. Academic quality remains a variable, raising the question of what, exactly, students are completing. And increasingly, higher education is



Jamie Merisotis

under pressure to demonstrate the value of college credentials in the job market.

The Obama administration [tried unsuccessfully](#) to link federal financial aid availability to how colleges stack up on student outcomes, including completion rates and graduates' earnings data. And the White House was able to push through regulations that would sanction for-profits and vocational, nondegree programs at community colleges that fail to meet thresholds for graduates' ability to repay their loans.

The so-called gainful employment rule probably won't be the last attempt by the feds to hold colleges accountable for their affordability and for the job-market value of the credentials they issue. Meanwhile, performance-based funding formulas -- some of which include data on graduates' wages -- are on the books in [more than 30 states](#).

Yet support for the college com-

pletion agenda could wane if, as many suspect, an administration led by Donald J. Trump were to say that too many people are attending college. Experts say big spending on infrastructure, which the president-elect's team has discussed, could be heavily focused on jobs for people with high school diplomas, not college credentials -- a substantial portion of Trump voters.

Equally challenging is the general public's loss of confidence in the value of higher education. While data show that college degrees are increasingly the ticket to the middle class, just 42 percent of Americans say college is necessary for success in the work force, a 13 percent drop since 2009, [according to polling](#) by Public Agenda.

Whether or not the college completion momentum continues could depend on how "college" is defined. One-year certificates earned at a community college or for-profit institution count as "college," too.

Leaders at the Gates and Lumina Foundations say they are undeterred about the completion agenda.

"We're doubling down," said Dan Greenstein, director of education and postsecondary success at Gates. He cited "unassailable facts" that "educational attainment tracks directly with earnings."

Messaging on College Completion Is Shifting

College affordability, student debt and the likelihood of getting a well-paying job after graduation

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have dominated conversations about higher education in recent years.

Those measures of student success and accountability, particularly with an emphasis on a credential's value in the labor market, will need to be at the core of the completion agenda for it to remain relevant.

In addition, the push for more students to complete college is a comfortable reform focus for the higher education industry, said Tony Carnevale, director of Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce.

"This is the kind of problem you want to have," he said of the higher education industry, arguing that completion also misses the larger concern about value. He calls the push "industrial hygiene," an attempt to clean up a self-serving issue.

The next iteration of the completion agenda, according to Steve Gunderson, president and CEO of Career Education Colleges and Universities, the for-profit sector's primary trade group, includes a longer list of imperatives: retention, completion, employment, repayment and student satisfaction.

And the word "college" more often than not should be replaced by "postsecondary skills," he said.

At the same time, some observers say higher education has yet to adequately resolve even first-order

questions about how its access and student success missions should fit together. As budgets tighten, particularly at public universities and small private colleges, there often are trade-offs between the two and tough decisions to make. Legitimate concerns about the completion push often are conflated with just hewing to the status quo.

Meanwhile, the nation's widening political divisions haven't helped advance the crucial discussion about the purpose of college.

Government Push Will Continue

College completion is a big part

“There are fairly clear biases [among Republicans] about moving beyond completion, moving beyond higher education's comfort zone.”

of the growing interest in performance-based funding at the state level, particularly in red states like Tennessee, which has perhaps the nation's most robust completion policies.

Lawmakers in many of these states view college completion as a work force issue. Employers need more skilled workers, and for now, skills are represented by credentials. There also is bipartisan agreement that college outcomes need to improve, including along equity lines. That's unlikely to change, given worries about the skills gap, job

creation and income inequality.

"Postsecondary learning is more important than ever before," said Jamie Merisotis, president and CEO of the Lumina Foundation.

Lumina has shifted its approach to more directly address the work force side of completion. For example, the foundation's [new strategic plan](#) focuses on how to reach adults who hold some college credits but no credential, as well as people who have no higher education experience. To meet its completion goal, Lumina will need to increase attainment in the former group by 6.1 million and 5.1 million in the latter.

Likewise, Tennessee [has expanded](#) its free community college program to include slots for returning adult students.

And while free college for all (with annual family income of up to \$125,000) is on hold for now, with the defeat of the presidential candidate who championed it, Hillary Clinton, college promise programs like Tennessee's are spreading to other states and many local communities.

As the college completion agenda matures, several experts said it will move toward a focus on jobs and on the nitty-gritty of implementing the next phases of reforms that began years ago.

For example, as colleges sought to improve graduation rates during

the last eight years, they were actually looking at student progression and retention, said Ellen Wagner, vice president of research for Hobsons, a company that works on student success, including the use of data analytics.

That work has a financial benefit for colleges, because each student retained means one more who doesn't need to be recruited, which can be expensive. Quitting that effort would be counterproductive.

One way to view the completion agenda, Wagner said, is an effort to "reduce friction" and barriers as students move through a P-20 education system. That's a big job, she said. "We're never going to be done with this."

Don't expect the federal government to drop its interest in completion, either.

It's a safe bet that congressional Republicans, who may well be the driving force in federal higher education policy for the next four years if a Trump administration focuses on other topics, will seek a smaller role for the feds. But Senator Lamar Alexander of Tennessee and Representative Virginia Foxx of North Carolina, who will lead the two congressional education committees, are both supportive of the value of higher education and of college completion. (Foxx, though, [recently told *Inside Higher Ed*](#) that she didn't know what the Obama administration's completion agenda was.)

Common Grounds on Pathway

The incoming Trump administra-

tion has floated the idea of an infrastructure improvement program with a \$1 trillion price tag. According to Carnevale, 70 percent of the jobs created by such spending would require only a high school diploma.

Even so, some of that money would almost certainly be used for job training at colleges, particularly two-year institutions. If the funding actually happens -- a big if at this point -- it's impact on higher education would dwarf the Obama administration's \$2 billion work force program that was aimed at community colleges.

A focus on high school training would also have a higher education component. That's because of growing interest in dual and concurrent enrollment programs, which Republicans in particular tend to favor.

More than 10 percent of high school students are taking college courses, according to the National Alliance of Concurrent Enrollment Partnerships. About one-third of dual enrollments are in career and technical education courses, the alliance said, with particular growth in rural schools and those where a majority of students are ethnic or racial minorities.

Likewise, apprenticeships are growing in popularity, with bipartisan support. And supporters say apprenticeships should expand beyond technical jobs.

A career and vocational focus earlier in the education pipeline is a form of "tracking," which is more common in Europe. Tracking tends

to freak out Americans, particularly when it is seen to diminish educational opportunity and if it is imposed on students, giving up on them too early.

Yet tracking, when done well, shares some common philosophies and goals with the [degree "pathways" approach](#) Gates is leading. The foundation is spending \$5.2 million to help 30 community colleges in 17 states "design and implement structured academic and career pathways at scale, for all of their students."

Free community college programs in some ways also bring together high schools and two-year colleges. Tennessee's government, for example, [says it is](#) the "first state in the nation to have a fully funded K-14 public education." Talking about K-14 is major shift, and one that mirrors what the Obama administration was trying to accomplish with its free community college proposal.

Other postsecondary alternatives that sit [somewhere between high school and traditional college](#) are expanding and enjoy bipartisan support. Those approaches include competency-based education programs, skills boot camps and employer certifications.

Some community colleges have begun offering competency-based credentials, through the federal government's \$2 billion work force grant and in partnerships with Western Governors University. Several two-year-college leaders said competency-based programs would ex-

pand in the sector.

Some of these emerging players offer “bite-size, high-value” credentials, said Carnevale. “The labor market and costs are melting the system.”

Another rare spot of agreement between Republicans and Democrats is that the accreditation process should be reformed, albeit in different ways.

The Obama administration and Senate Democrats have pushed accreditors to scrutinize student outcomes, including completion rates and employment outcomes.

Republicans seem less likely than Democrats to prod accreditors to set “bright lines” for graduation rates. And some conservatives say too much of a push on completion rates can lead to unintended consequences, including a weakening of academic standards. Faculty unions and many professors agree.

Yet members of both parties have sought to create alternative accreditation pathways for noncollege providers, including Senator Michael Bennet, a Colorado Democrat, and Senator Marco Rubio, a Florida Republican.

Lumina also has been active in exploring new forms of credentialing,

with an eye toward completion and job training. If those efforts take hold, they could feature different approaches to quality control.

Deregulation and For-Profit Colleges

It’s been a rough five years for the for-profit sector, which has seen aggressive scrutiny, high-profile collapses, sliding enrollments and hemorrhaging revenue.

While experts disagree about the role of federal regulation in the sector’s decline, the U.S. Department of Education has been tougher with the industry in recent years, and

aimed at for-profits, including gainful employment. The Trump administration likely would back that move.

Some community colleges are worried that a major recovery by for-profits would increase competition and cut into their enrollments. “There is a palpable sense of fear” on community college campuses about for-profits rising again, said Josh Wyner, executive director of the Aspen Institute’s College Excellence Program.

Yet for-profits have sustained potentially lasting damage. Many players in the industry also face structural challenges, including a price point that is a tougher sell and a stigma around the term “for-profit.”

Gunderson said the shift in Washington is an “opportunity for us

to reintroduce ourselves.”

But he said for-profits are unlikely to again seek to enroll large numbers of students who are unprepared for college and face low odds of completing.

“This sector is not going back to where it was in 2010 when it focused on open access,” said Gunderson. “We cannot ever endure the experience we have had over the last eight years.” ■

“ Postsecondary learning is more important than ever before. ”

contributed to the demise of Corinthian Colleges and ITT Technical Institutes, among others.

The decline of for-profits has slowed the country’s overall postsecondary attainment rates. That’s not a bad thing, according to the industry’s critics, who say for-profit-issued credentials too often lack value in the job market.

Congressional Republicans plan to roll back federal regulations

<https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2016/12/08/experts-talk-about-college-completion-push-and-what-comes-next>

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Free Summer Courses and Completion

BY ASHLEY A. SMITH

A Texas community college system is hoping the appeal of free summer courses will drive students to move from part-time to full-time status, giving completion rates a boost.

More community colleges are joining a movement to encourage larger course loads in an effort to get students to graduation quicker.

In Texas, the five community colleges that make up Alamo Colleges are using a new incentive -- offering free summer courses.

In October 2016 the San Antonio-based district created a [policy](#) that will allow students who earn a total of 24 credits in the fall and spring semesters to receive up to six free credit hours in the subsequent summer. The policy is slated to go into effect next year. It would allow students to earn the 60 hours needed for a degree within two years.

"We believe this is a good way to show students how to complete more quickly and encourage them to get on this pathway and get through or move on to a four-year institution or to their jobs," said Jo-Carol Fabianke, vice chancellor for academic success at Alamo.

In 2014, system officials noticed that at least 70 percent of its students were part time, which is pretty typical for community colleges, Fabianke said.

But officials wanted students to realize the benefits of attending college full time. One of those benefits is momentum, or the idea that students who take at least 12 credits per semester will graduate or transfer within a few years.

"You get more financial aid and you'll get through more quickly," she said, adding that the district examined incentives to encourage full-time enrollment, completion and persistence. "We have a lot of students who only take six hours. Is that really all they can take, or have we not done enough to point out the advantages of taking more hours and getting through quickly?"

But the system also wanted to address what some academics call "summer melt," or the loss of stu-



dents over the summer semester.

"We know there's research that shows we lose students from fall to spring, and we lose a lot more from fall to fall," Fabianke said. "So it was felt that if we could get students to stay enrolled and stay engaged, then we could get that momentum going."

There have been a number of popular momentum initiatives across the country. Complete College America, for instance, is an advocate of the controversial [15 to Finish](#), which encourages students to take at least 15 credits per semester.

City Colleges of Chicago imple-

mented a new momentum program last year that was connected to a [“flat rate” payment structure](#) -- tuition at the colleges became less expensive the more credits students carried.

This fall, following the tuition change, the two-year system in Chicago saw a 28 percent increase in the portion of full-time students taking 15 or more credits (as opposed to 12 to 14 credits) over the prior fall.

Those students also completed more credits per attempt -- an 8 percent increase -- with the same or better grade point averages, Katheryn Hayes, a spokeswoman for the Chicago system, said via email.

The Community College Research Center at Columbia University's Teachers College has studied the [benefits of momentum](#) and provided guidance to both Chicago and the Alamo Colleges, as well as to other institutions that are interested in creating incentives to drive stu-

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Students need to be shown from the start at every point along the way how far they have to go to complete a program.

”

dents to completion faster.

“People say our students are part time with outside responsibilities, which is all the more reason for colleges to offer a compressed, coherent, predictable way to allow students to take as many courses as they can rather than letting them take their time and attend part time over many years,” said Davis Jenkins, a senior research associate with CCRC.

Jenkins compares the momentum approach to professional degree programs that are typically compressed and accelerated, despite those students also working and having responsibilities outside the classroom.

At Alamo, students take an average of nine credits per semester,

so the district chose a 12-plus-12-plus-six credit framework, because it seemed better for their students, Fabianke said. However, students also can take 18 credits in the fall and spring and earn

three free tuition hours.

Six free summer credits could save students about \$186 a year, according to Alamo.

While decreasing the time to degree helps improve completion, Jenkins said there's no clear research yet on the types of incentives that work well for momentum. But he said colleges need to discuss time to degree with their students.

“We need to move away from full time and part time,” he said. “Students need to be shown from the start at every point along the way how far they have to go to complete a program, and they need to be informed ... if they do less, this will stretch out the time to degree, and we think that will change students' minds.” ■

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Relationships Matter in Recruiting Latino Students

By **ASHLEY A. SMITH**

Two-year institutions across the country are getting creative with Latino student recruitment as Hispanic populations grow.

In the winter of 2016, Addi Hernandez was an administrative assistant at Southcentral Kentucky Community and Technical College.

But as a graduate of the college and a Latina, Hernandez found Latino students on the Bowling Green campus would often approach her for advice on what forms they needed to fill out or what they needed to do to be better college students.

Hernandez remembered being in high school and wanting to go to college but struggling to find the help she needed for how to do so, so she started participating in the college's Super Sundays. These are events where people from the college attend churches in black and Latino communities in an effort to bring college information to students and families.

"The impact of it didn't happen so much at the church, but afterward by having a presence in the community," Hernandez said. "Young Latinos knowing there is a person in higher education that can guide them through these things."

More importantly, they know there

is someone connected to the college who has a similar personal journey, she said.

Southcentral Kentucky started to see an increase in the number of Latino students showing an interest and then enrolling on campus. So Hernandez began doing Latino outreach for the college part time, eventually accepting a full-time position as a recruiter and Latino outreach specialist for the campus.

"She's a wonderful asset. We've seen a 25 percent increase in Latino students in just one year of her being in this role," said Phil Neal, the college's president. "When she got in front of the congregation ... she was a natural and comfortable with talking in front of a crowd ... Addi loved it, getting out and working



Addi Hernandez helping a student.

with students and the community." The campus had about 180 Latino students last fall.

Many community colleges across the country have seen growing populations of Latino and Hispanic residents in their regions. But that growth often hasn't translated to increases in Hispanic enrollment on their campuses, especially as overall enrollments decline in a largely recovered economy.

Like Southcentral Kentucky, some colleges are learning that the key to reaching out to Latino students, in particular, requires more personal

effort than just college fairs or new advertising.

“Fifteen years ago, when I came up through the student affairs world, we were very clear about training advisers and financial aid folks to really talk to the student,” said De-niece Huftalin, president of Utah’s Salt Lake Community College. “Often we had Mom and Dad come in with the student and want to be involved, and our goal was to pull the student away and say, ‘You’re an adult. We’re going to talk to you, not Mom and Dad.’ We wanted to empower this young person.”

Huftalin said today that approach doesn’t work with many Latino students. And it often doesn’t work with millennials, regardless of race or ethnicity, who want their parents involved.

“With the Latino population, it’s important to have Mom and Dad in the room, so we had to shift our perspective,” Huftalin said. “The family has become an important part of the decision, so recruiting goes beyond the old-school ways of going to high school and talking to the student. We’re in community centers ... we’re more intrusive about going around and knocking on doors.”

Recruiters are finding they’re no longer just trying to reach the student, but they may also be turning the parents, siblings and cousins into potential students as well, she said, adding that the campus has hired bilingual students and more

Latino faculty to assist in recruitment.

Salt Lake has made progress. In 2009, less than 9 percent of students enrolled at the college identified as Hispanic or Latino. That number had grown to 17.5 percent by 2016.

“We know this is a young population, but they’re a population that is low income, first generation, and they may be immigrants and don’t know the system,” said Deborah Santiago, co-founder and chief operating officer of Excelencia in Education, adding that Latinos tend to

“ We know this is a young population, but they’re a population that is low income, first generation, and they may be immigrants and don’t know the system.”

place a high level of trust in someone who has already vetted the system and can recommend good organizations, groups or institutions.

If the message isn’t coming from someone they trust or relate to, then recruitment is harder, Santiago said.

When institutions say they’ll invest \$35,000 in translating their websites into Spanish instead of hiring a community liaison or hosting events in a welcoming environment, she said, they’re not going to see much improvement in Latino enrollment.

Unique Challenges

There are other challenges community colleges face when they

want to encourage more Hispanic students to apply.

“This is part of the fear of the unknown,” Santiago said. “You can appreciate in our current environment that young people may not know what they don’t know and may feel uncomfortable asking their parents.”

When families may be relying on a third party to help them fill out tax or federal student aid forms, that process requires a heightened level of trust. Santiago said some companies have taken advantage of Latino families by charging them to fill out FAFSA forms.

“It might not be they are undocumented,” she said. “It could be they don’t know where to access the information and fear it may cause unintended consequences.”

Even for students whose families went to college in their countries of origin, trying to figure out the American higher education system can be daunting, Hernandez said.

“There’s always the assumption that if somebody is not knowledgeable and Latino they’re undocumented,” Santiago said. “We’re finding Latino students are feeling disconnected. They’re U.S. citizens and they’re being asked about their documented status.”

Just a few weeks into the Trump administration, Hernandez said the discussion around immigration and a border wall with Mexico are having an effect on both current and

potential students.

“Students are getting discouraged, even with mixed immigration statuses, it’s kind of like they feel they’ll get discriminated against because of how they look,” she said. “People will look at you as Latino and automatically categorize you as illegal, so I think students are getting a little discouraged and they’re afraid to start talking about it.”

Even when immigration status isn’t an issue, there’s still a lot of misinformation about college and financial aid, she said.

“People just don’t know how to go to school,” Hernandez said. “They have this misconception that if you get Pell Grants, you have to pay them back. That was the biggest fear my parents had. They were scared I was going to get in debt. We just didn’t know.”

Reaching Latino students in Kentucky goes beyond the efforts at Southcentral. The state’s community college system has three Latino outreach coordinators, including Hernandez, in areas where the Hispanic population is growing.

Bluegrass Community and Tech-

nical College in Lexington enrolled about 150 students who identified themselves as Latino in 2005. A Hispanic outreach coordinator was hired that year, and enrollment has grown to 500. Latino students now comprise 4.5 percent of the total enrollment at Bluegrass.

“It still seems to be pretty small when compared to densely populated areas like California or Texas, but if you look at the school district and the main ones that serve the Lexington area, the student population is 16.9 percent Latino,” said Erin Howard, director of Latino outreach and student services at Bluegrass. “The majority of those schoolchildren are in elementary and middle school. So we’re starting to see the shift in population, and we are a very young population.”

The average age of all Latinos in the state is 23, whether they’re native or foreign-born residents. But the average age of Kentucky-born Latinos is 13, Howard said.

While these colleges are seeing significant improvements in their recruitment of Latino students, they’re all also working on improv-

ing completion rates and closing the achievement gap between minority students and non-Hispanic whites.

“We still have room to grow,” Huftalin said. “We’ve had an achievement gap for many years with white students, and in 2015 our Hispanic students made significant improvements.”

In 2015, completion rates over six years at the Salt Lake institution stood at 23 percent for white students and 18 percent for Hispanic students. That’s after a seven-percentage-point increase for Hispanic students since 2011, she said, adding that more work needs to be done for all students.

Back at Southcentral, Hernandez said her next goal is not only to continue giving more Hispanic students information about their opportunities in college but helping them to stay and graduate.

“I want to help the students that are here,” she said. “There’s still a lot to learn about this job, and this is the first full year I’m doing it. But I want to know where am I needed. What do students here need and how can I help them.” ■

<https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2017/02/16/community-colleges-step-outreach-latinos>

Finding a Ride

BY ASHLEY A. SMITH

For some two-year institutions, public and mass transportation options, or the lack thereof, can be the difference in whether a student attends and stays in college.

For many students at two-year institutions across the country, regardless of whether they're in a rural or more urban setting, transportation can be a significant barrier. Extending bus lines, buying shuttles and partnering with ride-sharing services are just some of the solutions community college leaders are looking at when it comes to getting their students on campus.

When Patricia Gentile arrived as president of North Shore Community College in 2013, she was surprised to find that there was no public transportation that reached the campus. North Shore, which is located north of the Boston metropolitan area, has three separate locations that serve about 7,000 students. The public transportation lines that travel through densely populated areas stop about four miles from one of the campus's locations.

"We did a survey of students, and they said they pretty much arrange which campuses they're using and the times of their classes based off when they can get there, so transportation has a big impact," Gentile



said, adding that the Danvers campus holds the college's signature and most in-demand health service programs.

So the college studied the demographics of the area and worked with a transportation consultant to examine where students lived and commuted in an effort to try to get a bus route extended -- it stopped at a shopping center about five miles away.

But in order to get a bus line extension, the college had to know its

potential ridership.

"It became a chicken and egg problem, because you don't know your ridership because you don't have a bus line," she said. "And you can't have a bus line because you don't know your ridership."

So Gentile and other North Shore officials decided to reach out to the ride-sharing service Uber to cover the gap in transportation between the shopping mall five miles away and the campus.

"Uber has been marketing the

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North Shore, and they've been building drivers in the area by extending out from Boston," Gentile said, adding that the company put together an app to collect data on students using the service so the college can know its ridership.

Meanwhile, the college is subsidizing Uber rides for students who use the app to travel between the mall stop and the campus. So far, since the start of this school year, 76 students have downloaded the promotional code from North Shore for the subsidized ride and eight people have taken a total of 16 trips.

Gentile said the college set aside \$40,000 to cover the subsidized rides, which is far less than the \$100,000 a year they estimate for potentially using shuttles instead.

For students attending community colleges in more rural areas, transportation has always been a bit of an issue.

On average rural students will travel 52 miles round-trip to attend college, said Randy Smith, president of the Rural Community College Alliance.

"There is no public transportation, for the most part," he said. "Some rural communities will have a local van service, but trying to get public transportation doesn't exist in a community of 8,000 or 10,000 people."

In that situation, it's not uncom-

mon for faculty to see attendance issues if a car breaks down or if a ride from a friend falls apart. Changes in who gets to drive a family vehicle to work may determine whether or not a student drops out, he said.

Some colleges will choose to run their own shuttle service, which can be cheaper when they're transporting a few students each day, he said, adding that others may try to build partnerships with local nonprofit agencies like the United Way that often have shuttle services for the elderly.

"A lot of individual colleges try to find ways to solve this effectively

opportunity to be on time to class or take a class earlier or later," said Oly Malpica Proctor, associate professor of math at Brookdale, who helped with establishing the bus lines. "We had to get into the mentality of taking public transportation, because we don't think about it ... we're a suburb. We drive everywhere, so we had to bring transportation to the conversation."

NJTransit worked with the college and examined class times to create a bus timetable that would accommodate students.

But not every college has had success with attempts to extend public

“ We’re not unique when it comes to community colleges. For our students, within the context of the Portland metropolitan area, housing is far less expensive in our district We’re seeing a large migration of individuals living in poverty and moving into our district. ”

transportation to their campuses. Officials at Mt. Hood Community College in Portland, Ore., learned recently that a proposed

and as cost-efficiently as possible," Smith said. "And some colleges don't have anything and students are kind of on their own."

At New Jersey's suburban Brookdale Community College, faculty and administrators successfully lobbied county administrators and New Jersey Transit for three bus routes connecting the campus and its centers to students. The lines were adjusted so that they can continue service in the evening and on weekends.

"Because the buses are more frequent, students have more of an

rapid-bus route to the campus was on the chopping block because of limited funding. The proposal would have connected Portland State University and Portland Community College through a route that ended at Mt. Hood.

"For many of our students in the east county area, it can take anywhere from an hour to two hours to actually get out to the college," said Debra Derr, president of Mt. Hood. "We're not unique when it comes to community colleges. For our students, within the context of the Portland metropolitan area, housing

is far less expensive in our district ... We're seeing a large migration of individuals living in poverty and moving into our district."

Mt. Hood's demographics are shifting to include more low-income, first-generation students, who often don't own a car and rely on mass transit to travel anywhere, she said.

"The impact is not just on our enrollment, it's on our workforce," she said. "Our business and industry partners are communicating to us the need for a skilled workforce. So how do people get skills and go to work when the frequency and bus lines have not been updated to address the education and training needs of these counties?"

Derr said she's in a similar position

the officials at North Shore were in when trying to establish a new route -- proving that the ridership is there despite not having the transit available to study that ridership.

Eliminating the stretch of rapid-bus transit from a transit center to the college would reduce the project's cost by \$24 million.

The entire project, which would include widening roads for dedicated bus lanes and upgrading streetlight technology, is expected to cost up to \$200 million, according to *The Oregonian*.

It wouldn't be the first time that Mt. Hood has been cut off from public transportation, though, Derr said, adding that 30 years ago a proposed mass transit line was

planned to reach the college, but back then the money wasn't available, either. She doesn't want to see the college have to wait another 20 or 30 years before the issue is addressed.

"Portland overall is just an amazing place for urban planning and for mass transit, but because we are located in the east part of Portland metropolitan area, sometimes we get left out or not prioritized," Derr said. "But this isn't just a Mt. Hood issue."

Getting students to and from school and to and from work is a challenge, and if we really want to look at the big picture of economic vitality, we have to look at the issue of transportation." ■

Pledging to Graduate on Time

BY PAUL FAIN

The State University of New York at Buffalo has made big gains on its graduation rates, thanks in part to a “Finish in 4” pledge that features real commitments by students and the university alike.

A decade ago just 35 percent of students at the State University of New York at Buffalo graduated within four years. That number climbed to 55 percent last year, and the gain was accompanied by a rare narrowing of graduation-rate gaps for minority and low-income student populations.

A key part of the university’s broad completion push is a pledge it introduced for students in 2012. And the so-called [Finish in 4](#) program features serious commitments, by both students and the university.

A. Scott Weber, senior vice provost for academic affairs at the University at Buffalo, helped create the pledge. He describes it as a demonstration of “joint responsibilities to make progress to a degree.”

The 1,479 incoming students who took the university’s pledge in 2012 signed their names on a piece of paper and promised to register for classes on time, follow a structured curricular plan and talk with an academic adviser at least once a semester.

Students also took an assess-

ment designed to help them choose a major and career path as part of the pledge. And they have to be in an approved major by the time they complete 60 credits, which typically is the midpoint to a bachelor’s degree.

Half the university’s incoming class took the pledge in 2012. This academic year more than three-quarters of new students signed onto an updated digital version. Weber also signs each pledge, as do student advisers.

“We track every one of these students,” Weber said. “If they haven’t met their goals, they’re no longer part of the cohort.”

That can come with a cost -- Finish in 4 includes the university’s promise that students who meet their obligations but do not graduate in four years may finish their degree at the university without paying any more tuition and fees. While



SUNY at Buffalo students during a 2013 campus visit by President Obama.

students who wash out of the program still get all the supports, like advising, the tuition guarantee goes away.

Likewise, the university has tried to make sure students can get into the classes they need to finish on time.

The University at Buffalo is a big place. It enrolls 20,000 undergraduates and 10,000 graduate students. The university, like many of its large public peers, often had overbooked courses, including ones required for completing a major.

“We felt we weren’t really meeting some of our obligations,” said Weber.

So the university bit the bullet in 2012, creating 300 new course sections -- the equivalent of 10,000 slots for students. And many of those new sections were in high-demand courses.

The university spent \$2.1 million on the program in the fall of 2012, officials said. And spending on additional student advising and other supports has raised the annual cost to \$2.5 million.

It has paid off for students.

Of the initial group of pledge signers, 930, or 63 percent, have graduated, topping the national on-time rate of 34 percent for public institutions. (The rate is 60 percent for research-intensive universities like Buffalo, according to federal data, meaning the university has closed that gap.) And while the self-selecting pledge group topped their non-pledging peers -- 52.7 percent of whom have graduated, according to preliminary data -- Buffalo’s overall four-year rate also is close behind at 55 percent. And the university wide, six-year graduation rate is a solid 74 percent.

Likewise, the percentage of black students at the university who completed their degrees within six years rose by 20 percentage points in the decade before 2013, earning Buffalo praise in a [report](#) by the Education Trust.

One reason Finish in 4 has helped more than just the students who signed on is that its support ser-

vices are available to all. And the scale of the program has helped it become a widely known priority.

“A lot of this, we were doing before,” Weber said. But the influence of the Finish in 4 “brand” has been more powerful on campus than predicted. “This is part of our university’s vocabulary.”

Changing Status Quo

Paula Lazatin signed the pledge in 2012, when she first enrolled at the university. She was surprised to learn that so many students weren’t graduating on time.

“I really wanted to make sure I was one of the ones who finished,” Lazatin said.

The national college completion campaign, which President Obama and foundations have led, obviously extends to research universities. But some might share Lazatin’s surprise that roughly half of students graduate within four years at universities like Buffalo, which is a member of the prestigious Association of American Universities.

A growing number of research universities want to improve graduation rates. For example, the University Innovation Alliance is a [relatively new coalition](#) of 11 research universities around the country that are sharing techniques for getting more students to graduation and for cutting equity gaps.

Likewise, the University of Texas at Austin is [spending big](#) to boost its four-year graduation rates, which have long lingered just above 50 percent. So has the University of Minnesota Twin Cities, a flagship

like UT Austin, which has increased its rate to 59 percent from 42 percent in a relatively short period of time.

Completion experts praised Buffalo for its decade-long push on graduation rates, which this year will include a universitywide early alert system to identify students who are struggling and help to get them back on track. And while Buffalo has gotten slightly more selective in its admissions during the same time period (with a 25-point gain in students’ median SAT score), Weber said selectivity hasn’t been a primary driver of the graduation-rate gains. He points instead to the systematic approach the university has taken to identify and reduce the barriers students face.

Patrick Methvin, deputy director of postsecondary success at the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, praised the university’s financial commitment to the effort. “They’re putting skin in the game,” he said.

Methvin cited other completion programs that funnel money and resources to helping students get to the finish line, including the City University of New York’s Accelerated Study in Associate Programs, [which features](#) \$4,700 in additional spending per year for each student participant. But he said that level of fiscal commitment is far from the norm.

Many campuses, systems and states are making on-time completion a priority, said Danette Howard, vice president for policy and mobilization at Lumina Foundation. For example, she cited the spread of [15](#)

to [Finish](#) programs, which encourage students to take 15 credits per semester.

But Howard said relatively few of those efforts include the sort of spending Buffalo has added for student supports.

“They put in place all these wrap-around services to ensure that students graduate on time,” she said.

Research and Completion

The University at Buffalo had enough advising capacity in place when the program began, Weber said, but the pledge ensured more students were seeing their advisers. Academic departments also created curricular plans for each degree path as part of the completion program.

Some faculty and staff members were wary of the project, Weber ac-

knowledges.

He heard worries about a cheapening of degrees amid the grad-rate push. And advisers wondered if they might have to absorb some of the tuition-guarantee costs as well as more work.

But Satish K. Tripathi, the university’s provost during the program’s creation, was a strong supporter. He made sure it wasn’t just a pilot program, Weber said, with an “everybody’s in” mentality. Tripathi became the university’s president before Finish in 4 began.

Most lingering doubts about the program have been washed away by its success, according to university officials.

And it helps, Weber said, that President Obama [came to campus](#) in 2013 to unveil his college ratings plan, giving a shout-out during his speech to the university and the

progress it has made on graduation rates.

“Not many deans are thinking about their graduation rates at an R1 university,” said Weber, but they are at Buffalo.

Weber said the program has become a recruiting tool for both students and parents, who understandably like the university’s attention to timely graduation.

The SUNY System [is also seeking](#) investment to roll out Finish in 4 at all its 64 campuses.

For her part, Lazatin said the pledge was a goal to lean on during the long, hard days when she was taking 21 credits or more in a semester.

“It got overwhelming sometimes,” she said. “But it helped me stay on track.”

In May 2016, Lazatin graduated, on time, with three majors. ■

Plan to Define and Test What Students Should Know

BY PAUL FAIN

New book unveils faculty-led effort to chart concepts and competencies students should learn in six academic disciplines, with plan to create standardized tests. Will faculty members warm to this version of “learning outcomes”?

Faculty members tend to be skeptical about attempts to go beyond grading with standardized definitions and measures of what students should learn -- the so-called student learning outcomes accreditors require colleges to collect.

The wariness of professors is often well founded, the authors of the influential book *Academically Adrift* argue in a May 2016 [book](#), because faculty members often haven't been at the table when these measures and related assessments are being developed.

“There's good reason for a lot of the skepticism and discontent,” said Richard Arum, a professor of sociology and education at New York University and director of the Social Science Research Council's Education Research Program. He said many faculty members view learning outcomes as a form of “sham compliance” for colleges with accreditors.

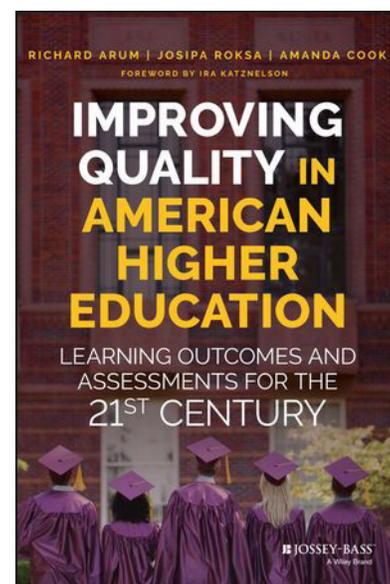
So [does](#) Bob Shireman, a senior fellow at the Century Foundation and former official at the U.S. Department of Education. In a [recent](#)

[essay](#), Shireman called learning outcomes “worthless bean-counting and cataloging exercises that give faculty members every reason to ignore or reject the approach.”

The Measuring College Learning [project](#), which Arum has helped lead, seeks to change that dynamic by putting faculty members in charge of determining how to measure learning in six academic disciplines. After more than two years of work, the project has defined the “fundamental concepts and competencies society demands from today's college graduates” in biology, business, communication, economics, history and sociology.

The project's initial results are included in a newly released book by Arum, Josipa Roksa, an associate professor of sociology and education the University of Virginia, and Amanda Cook, a program manager at the American Association of State Colleges and Universities.

The Social Science Research Council has overseen the Measuring College Learning project. (Arum



and Roksa were *Academically Adrift's* coauthors and Cook previously worked for the council.) The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation and the Teagle Foundation provided funding.

Besides being controversial with professors and some faculty unions, learning outcomes are hard to devise, the authors write in their introduction to the discipline-specific white papers that are featured in the book, even compared to other common metrics aimed at holding

colleges and academic programs accountable.

“Measuring graduation rates and early-career earnings, though not without challenges, is much easier than measuring student learning, given the absence of agreed upon measures,” according to the book, which is titled *Improving Quality in American Higher Education: Learning Outcomes and Assessments for the 21st Century*. Jossey-Bass is the publisher.

And those challenges can only be tackled by the professorate, say Arum and his coauthors.

“The fact that conversations about higher education outcomes and how to measure them are fraught with difficulties makes it that much more important for higher education faculty to contribute, and indeed, lead the way, especially when it comes to defining and measuring what students should be learning,” they write.

Six Frameworks

To come up with learning outcomes in the selected six disciplines, which collectively account for more than 35 percent of undergraduate student majors in the U.S., the Measuring College Learning project began by contacting disciplinary associations in each field. Those groups helped select 10 to 15 faculty members to lead the work -- a total of 70 professors participated.

New America, a D.C.-based think tank, earlier this year released a [report on assessment](#) by Fredrik DeBoer, a writing instructor at Purdue University. DeBoer said he likes the

Examples of the Project's Essential Concepts and Competencies

Economics: Essential Competency 3

Students should be able to:

Work with mathematical formalizations of economic models (e.g., graphs, equations) and perform mathematical operations (e.g. basic calculus)

Confront any observed correlation knowing it is not evidence of causation and explain why

Explain the design and results of laboratory and field experiments (i.e., randomized controlled trials)

Explain the conduct, results and limitations of basic econometrics (e.g. hypothesis testing, interpreting ordinary least squares estimates, omitted variable, included variable and selection biases).

Communication: Concept 2

A communications graduate should know and understand:

Relationality

Communication is inherently transactional and collaborative; as a human behavior, to communicate is to engage with others, share meaning, make arguments, speak and listen, and transact together in a state of consubstantiality. A fundamental concept, then, of communication is relationality, or how and why relationships form and are developed among communicating individuals, groups and audiences.

Biology: Competency 6, Concept 4

Students should be able to:

Appreciate and apply the interdisciplinary nature of science. Under the essential concept of pathways and transformations of energy and matter, this means being able to explain the transformations of energy between the plucking of a note on a guitar to the time a singer resisters the note played.

project's faculty-led approach.

"Going through professional associations is the right way to do it," he said.

The project sought to have each panel of experts represent a broad range of colleges, geographic locations and sub-disciplines. The majority work at four-year institutions, but some are at community colleges or academic associations. And most have worked on other faculty-led efforts to measure learning.

"They are people who are doing this work," said Arum, "and have been for decades."

The faculty panels tried to identify "essential concepts," meaning complex ideas, theoretical understandings and ways of thinking central to each discipline. They also came up with "essential competencies," which the book said are "disciplinary practices and skills necessary to engage effectively in the discipline."

The resulting concepts and competencies are not intended to be fixed, universal or comprehensive, the book said, calling them a "reasonable and productive framework."

In sociology, for example, one of the five essential concepts is the "sociological eye," which means students "will recognize key theoretical frameworks and assumptions upon which the discipline is founded and differentiated from other social sciences." That underpinning, the book said, includes founding theoretical traditions (Marx, Weber, Durkheim, Mead), a critique of rationality to explain human behavior and how social forces affect individuals.

Socialization is another essential concept, which is defined as students understanding the relationship between self and society, and how the self is socially constructed and maintained at multiple levels.

On the competency side, the panel said undergraduates in sociology should be able to apply scientific principles to understand the social world, evaluate the quality of social scientific data and use sociological knowledge to inform policy debates and promote understanding, among other essential competencies (there are six total).

Each discipline's resulting framework is different, of course. For example, the book said some use fields tend to feature standard introductory courses. Some don't. (Summaries of the six panels' defined outcomes are [available here](#).) Yet the authors said the project shows it is possible to reach a general consensus on how to measure learning.

"It may be difficult to list everything students should know and be able to do," the book said, "but when faculty are asked to focus on essential elements they are quite ready, willing and able to define priorities for student learning in their disciplines."

One of the project's goals is for the white papers to be used for the creation of tests, or assessments, that colleges can use in a standardized way. However, those possible assessments must be voluntary, the book said, and based on multiple measures rather than a simple box-checking, multiple choice test.

In economics, for example, the book said an assessment could include an open-ended data analysis simulation. And a history assessment could feature a digital archive of documents the test taker was asked to sift through and interpret.

Existing, discipline-specific assessments are not high-quality, said Arum. The project's leaders have been in touch with assessment firms and possible funders about creating the new tests. Arum said the goal is for the assessments to be publicly available tools in three to five years.

"Why not attempt to provide faculty with other tools?" he said.

Mixed Reviews

The book said the Measuring College Learning project seeks to complement existing efforts to identify and measure student learning. Those include the Association of American Colleges and Universities' VALUE [rubrics](#) and LEAP [learning outcomes](#), as well as the Lumina Foundation's Degree Qualifications Profile (DQP) and Tuning [projects](#).

However, Measuring College Learning (MCL) advances that knowledge, according to the book. For example, Arum said while [Tuning](#) is aimed at a more individualized form of assessment design, this project aims to create tools at a national level -- to measure what Tuning articulates.

The book includes essays by top experts who have worked on learning outcomes. While largely positive, the essays also identify challenges. Peter Ewell, the president of the Na-

tional Center for Higher Education Management Systems, for example, said the project bucks the trend of moving away from test-based assessment in higher education.

“Admittedly, the current lack of use may be due to a dearth of suitable instruments – a condition MCL hopes to alleviate,” he wrote. “But the fact remains that its stance on assessment technology puts the project out of the mainstream of current assessment practice at the program level.”

Carol Geary Schneider, AAC&U’s president, praised the project in her essay. But she wrote that her group’s VALUE rubrics also could be adapted for disciplines.

In a written statement, Geary Schneider said the real challenge confronting higher education is not just documenting student learning, it’s the need to “significantly raise the level of students’ knowledge, intellectual skills and meaningful accomplishment.”

And that takes resources and money, she said, which is a problem in a time of “scandalous” disinvest-

ment by many states in public higher education.

However, Schneider praised the project for putting faculty at the helm.

In addition to the strong faculty role, DeBoer said the project’s panels appeared to be on the right track with their frameworks. “These broad outlines are largely in keeping with what I’ve been calling for myself.”

Shireman was less impressed. He said the book is correct to emphasize “what students can do” rather than requiring them to know “lists of facts.

“But that evidence already exists in the everyday assignments student do in college, he said, and does not require standardized assessments.

Furthermore, Shireman said the project’s identified concepts and competencies are not defined specifically and fail to provide the “roadmap” the book promised.

“They say little to nothing about learning or student performance,” he said via email. “They do not provide any guidance as to the level of

understanding that would connote mastery.”

Part of the problem, according to Shireman, is that it’s futile to attempt to summarize learning with “supposedly pithy” statements.

“This book should put a nail in that coffin,” he said, “even though that’s apparently not what the authors intended.”

For his part, Arum said he’s hopeful the majority of faculty members will welcome the project’s first draft of learning outcomes.

That’s because the goal is to give them responsibility and ownership to drive the work “in a way that’s helpful to them.”

Even so, professors might have no other choice, the book argues, because policy makers and the general public will continue to pressure colleges to demonstrate value, including through some form of standardized assessment of student learning.

As Arum said, faculty “can’t just be reactionary and resist the use of measurements. That’s a non-sensible position.” ■

'Passport' for Transfer

By PAUL FAIN

New interstate network seeks to help students transfer across state lines without losing credits, but also defers to faculty members at each college about how to measure learning.

Professors and academic leaders from seven Western states in July 2016 rolled out an "interstate passport" to help students transfer across state lines without losing credits for what they learn in general education courses.

The Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education helped lead the [project](#), which has [been in the works](#) for five years. The Carnegie Corporation, the Lumina Foundation and the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation have contributed funding.

"The passport is designed to improve graduation rates, shorten time to degree and save students money," the commission said.

A framework of required learning in nine knowledge and skill areas (listed in box, below) is the passport's undergirding. Faculty members at participating institutions can create a "passport block," or a list of



courses and other learning experiences that satisfy the learning requirements in the nine areas.

Students who complete those courses with a grade of C or better can transfer to another participating college without having to repeat course work for the lower division, general assignment courses that correspond to that institution's passport block.

Now that the passport is complete, any nonprofit, regionally accredited institution can apply to participate, said Patricia Shea, WICHE's

principal investigator for the project.

A group of 16 institutions in the West took part in a pilot version of the passport, including both community colleges and four-year institutions. A dozen of the colleges awarded passports to 7,000 students over two years.

"The currency of transfer is a set of learning outcomes," Shea said. "It's not based on course-by-course articulation, but the learning the student achieved."

The framework's faculty member creators developed examples of

“proficiency criteria” for how students can demonstrate what they know and can do in each of the nine required areas of learning. This [wide range](#) of course assignments and exercises varies across disciplines, can span multiple learning outcomes and includes a range of formats, such as written, oral, visual and group assignments.

For example, quantitative literacy is one of the passport’s nine learning areas. It includes the required learning outcome of being able to “demonstrate proficiency with arithmetic and algebraic computational skills, and extend them, for example, to geometric and statistical computations.”

Possible ways of demonstrating that proficiency include the “use of logarithms to correctly solve a compound interest problem, or to solve linear and quadratic algebraic equations accurately and reliably without the aid of a calculator.”

The passport gives a wide range of latitude to each participating college. It does not, for example, require the use of specific assessments or other ways for students to demonstrate proficiency. And the framework doesn’t spell out which courses a college should count toward learning outcomes.

However, the project also includes mechanisms for seeking to assure academic quality.

Through a partnership with the National Student Clearinghouse, a nonprofit that can track 98 percent of the nation’s college students, registrars and institutional researchers

at participating colleges will be able to follow the academic progress of their former, passport-holding students. That way they can see whether the passport adequately prepared transfer students to succeed. Participating colleges also can use the Clearinghouse data to see if an incoming student has

Passport’s Nine Knowledge & Skill Areas

- Oral communication
- Written communication
- Quantitative literacy
- Natural sciences
- Human cultures
- Creative expression
- Human society and the individual
- Critical thinking
- Teamwork and value systems

earned a passport.

“The passport is built on the principle of trust but verify,” Shea said in an email. “Faculty at each institution determine how its students achieve the passport learning outcomes, and the tracking system provides the sending institution with data on the academic progress of its former students for continuous improvement efforts as appropriate.”

Praise and Criticism

Several experts on college transfer and efforts to measure learning praised the project.

Cliff Adelman, a senior associate at the Institute for Higher Education Policy, is a co-author of the [Degree Qualifications Profile](#), an effort to map out what students should know and be able to do upon completion of a degree. Adelman said he was

delighted that the passport “invokes cognitive-based learning outcome categories” for its framework.

“It’s going to be tough for some schools to document everything,” he said via email. “But bless them for the effort.”

Likewise, Davis Jenkins, a senior research associate at the Community College Research Center at Columbia University’s Teachers College, said the passport is “very forward thinking not just in its interstate focus but in defining learning outcomes in terms of competencies.”

Jenkins has [studied and written about](#) the many barriers community college students face in transferring. A key challenge for the passport, he said, would be to get four-year institutions to sign on and accept the general education competencies for credit.

In addition, four-year colleges increasingly have pushed program requirements for majors into the lower divisions, Jenkins said, which has long been the case in STEM disciplines. “So the question is how the passport competencies relate to competencies required for particular majors.”

Carol Geary Schneider, a prominent voice on both learning outcomes and general education, is a critic of the project.

“It’s a good idea gone awry,” said Schneider, who in 2016 stepped down after a long stint as president of the Association of American Colleges and Universities, which the passport project relied on in devel-

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oping its learning outcomes. “The devil is in the design.”

The passport’s reliance on grades and course completions, which Schneider calls “first-draft indicators of achievement,” fails to adequately show whether a student has achieved learning outcomes. She said the passport instead should have used nationally available metrics, such as her group’s Valid Assessment of Learning in Undergraduate Education rubrics.

The project is “trying to split the difference between speedy, unimpeded transfer and demonstrated student achievement of learning outcomes,” she said. “But the current plan is long on the first goal and weak on the second.”

In addition, Schneider said, faculty members at participating colleges may lack the resources to adequately “validate” outcomes under the passport. And the result will be a “race to reduce the challenges put before our students.”

Shea countered that faculty members said during the passport’s creation that they needed more “granular” outcomes than those spelled out in AAC&U’s metrics.

In addition, she said, the project’s next phase will feature a partnership with the National Center for Higher Education Management Systems, often called NCHEMS, to use broadly accepted rubrics with the passport.

The U.S. Department of Educa-

tion’s is chipping in \$3 million for the project, some of which will pay for the work with NCHEMS to “engage lower-division general education faculty at partner institutions in a closer look at how and what types of evidence are being used to determine the same lower-division general education competencies,” WICHE said in a [written statement](#).

For now, though, the passport defers to local faculty members on how to determine students’ competencies. And Shea said the completion of courses remains central to measuring student progress.

“We’re really about creating a passport in a way that respects the autonomy of the institution and the faculty,” she said. ■

<https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2016/07/05/wiches-interstate-passport-seeks-help-students-transfer-while-preserving-colleges>

Teaching Students Soft Skills

BY EMILY TATE

Reinhardt University launches program to train students in soft skills such as conflict management and strategic listening -- while preserving liberal arts mission.

Reinhardt University, a small liberal arts college in Georgia, is piloting a program aimed at cultivating students' soft skills and giving them an edge over their peers in the job market -- without changing the liberal arts curriculum that is the center of formal education there.

Similar to digital badges, which about [one in five colleges have adopted](#) as a form of alternative credentialing, Reinhardt's new program seeks to quantify skills and reward those who have picked them up outside traditional college courses.

Reinhardt's program, the Strategic Career Advantage Platform (S-CAP), was launched in fall 2016. Each month, the college offers a Saturday session focused on a different topic -- for example, one four-hour January session focused on emotional intelligence. Others so far have covered impression management, listening and mediation.

At the end of the session, the students are not tested on the mate-

rial. Instead, they write and reflect on what they learned and how they could realistically communicate that to an employer, said Reinhardt President Kina Mallard. The idea is for students to recognize real-life scenarios in which they have used those soft skills -- such as conflict resolution, mediation and listening -- and to then highlight that on their résumés or in job interviews.

For every five sessions students complete, they will receive a pin to wear on their graduation gowns, marking the achievement.

Mallard said one of the problems with digital badges and electronic portfolios, which provide a single place for students to showcase their skills and accomplishments, is they rely on employers to do part of the work of figuring out what the credentials mean. S-CAP places the responsibility on its students.

"It's not incumbent on the employer to research and understand the skills [our graduates] have," Mallard



Students discuss what they have learned in a session on soft skills.

said. "It's incumbent on the employee."

Mallard had the idea for S-CAP, part of a broader "enrollment to employment" initiative at the university, when she joined Reinhardt about a year and a half ago. Because the university is small -- about 1,400

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students are enrolled -- and focuses on building student-faculty relationships, Mallard thought students would benefit more from the S-CAP design.

"Students need a comprehensive career development program that starts at freshman year and goes all the way through," she said, adding that getting a job is different from getting the right job.

S-CAP, however, is new and untested. Administrators still don't know how employers will take to it, but Peggy Collins Feehery, director of career services at Reinhardt, will work with students throughout the year to turn the information from those sessions into résumé material and concrete talking points. A large component of this will involve mock interviews.

"I do think it will set our students apart," Collins Feehery said, "and that's exactly what we're trying to do."

As with other soft-skills training programs, S-CAP has some critics.

Colin Mathews is president and founder of Merit, a business that [sells colleges platforms](#) on which students can document honors, awards and out-of-class experienc-

es that are relevant to future employment. He says soft skills are synonymous with life skills, and employers don't need certificates, pins or badges to recognize which students possess the right set of life skills.

For example, employers like to hire athletes, Mathews said, because they know those students are disciplined, focused and able to balance a demanding schedule. They also like to hire students who hold down part-time jobs during the school year and first-generation college students, because those students are bold, tenacious and hard-working.

The same life skills Reinhardt is trying to teach through S-CAP, Mathews said, are skills employers have been able to identify in their applicants for decades.

"That's why badging has totally failed," Mathews said. "They're trying to invent a whole new language and have badges to communicate that language ... but nobody cares."

It's important that colleges find a way to communicate to employers that a degree from their school is valuable, Mathews said, but hosting these makeshift classes is not the

right way to do it.

Amber Garrison Duncan, a strategy director at the Lumina Foundation, said S-CAP is flawed because it's missing an effective digital format.

"The digital part is becoming more critical," Garrison Duncan, said, adding that electronic portfolios, which can be clicked on and read through, are helpful to employers during the screening process.

She said she often hears employers say they don't care how students learned the skill -- whether it was through an academic course, an internship or another life experience -- they just care that the students have it at all.

"I think [S-CAP] is a great step in the right direction, and certainly we know what the potential is here for the learner," Garrison Duncan said. "I would just encourage them ... to continue to develop their program."

That's the plan for Reinhardt. At this stage, they're "not billing it as more than it is," Mallard said, but hoping to use this pilot as a way to understand what skills students lack and how they can best prepare them for their postgraduate endeavors. ■

<https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2017/01/30/liberal-arts-college-tries-new-approach-teaching-soft-skills>

Stepping-Stone or Off-Ramp?

BY PAUL FAIN

Stackable credential pathways have plenty of promise, but a new study fuels worries about poorly designed programs shunting underrepresented student groups into short-term programs of questionable value.

The idea behind stackable credentials is that seamless academic programs -- ranging potentially from six-credit certificates to terminal degrees -- allow students to leave higher education for a job and then [return later](#), with their credits counting toward the next certificate or degree.

However, some worry that stackable pathways could shunt students, particularly those from underserved populations, away from degrees and toward short-term credentials of questionable value.

An October 2016 [research paper](#) validates some of those worries.

The study examined 11 health care credential pathways that a [consortium](#) of nine community colleges in five states created with a 2011 grant of \$19.6 million from the federal government. The money was part of \$2 billion in workforce development funds the U.S. Departments of Education and Labor distributed in recent years.

On the positive side, researchers found that many of the students

who completed a short-term program went on to earn more involved credentials or were still enrolled. And even students who earned minimalist certificates -- 12 credits or fewer -- were more likely to get a job.

However, certificates of 12 credits or fewer did not lead to a raise, the study found. In some cases, such as short-term certificates for certified nursing assistants or community health workers, certificate holders earned less than their peers without a credential.

Those findings raise questions about the labor-market value of brief academic programs, said Matthew Giani, a research scientist at the University of Texas at Austin and co-author of the study, which was published by the *Journal of Vocational Education and Training*, which is based in the United Kingdom.

"Some of the earning benefits for these short-term credentials are really minimal," he said.

Also troubling were achievement gaps the study identified. Specifi-



cally, 28 percent of white students and 26 percent of students from Asian backgrounds earned either a longer-term certificate or an associate degree, compared to only 17 percent of black students and 16 percent of Latinos.

The gap is concerning in part because white and black students were roughly as likely to earn very short- and short-term certificates (28 percent versus 23 percent, respectively), but black students were less likely to move on to longer-term credentials.

"It is important to continue to monitor whether the short-term pro-

grams improve equitable outcomes by giving underrepresented students a novel pathway into longer programs,” the study said, “or whether these programs instead have a diversionary effect on historically underrepresented groups such as students of color and low-income students, given longstanding criticisms of the diversionary effects of sub-baccalaureate education on marginalized populations.”

Giani cautioned against reading too much into the findings, offering caveats about the study’s limitations. He said labor market returns or student persistence might vary across different stackable credential pathways – in information technology, for example.

In addition, the study stressed that it gives a relatively brief view of students’ longer-term results.

The shortest-term certificates were the most popular among all credentials offered by the participating community colleges, accounting for more than 40 percent of credentials awarded. And while just one in nine participants who earned a short- or very short-term certificate went on to complete a longer-term program during the four years covered by the study, more than 40 percent of those credential earners were still enrolled at the end of the examined period.

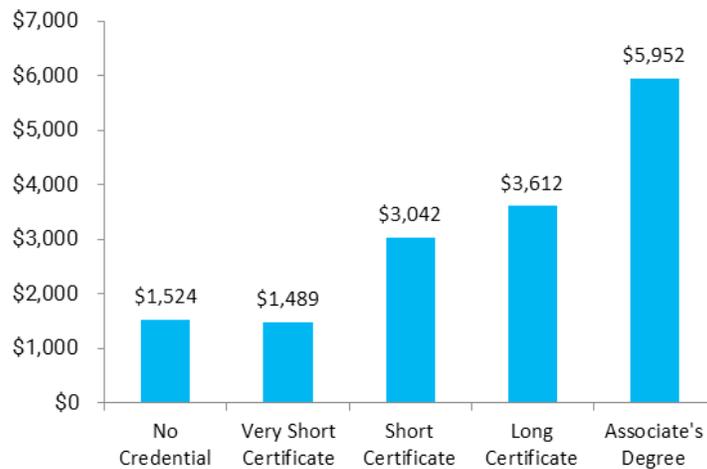
“It is possible that the stackable credential strategy was more effective than estimated in this study,”

the researchers wrote.

Getting to the Payoff

The health care pathways the study examined were funded by the first wave of the Labor Department grants. Many of the resulting programs were created quickly and included noncredit credentials, said Judy Mortrude, director of the Center for Law and Social Policy’s Alliance for Quality Career Pathways.

“They seemed to be stumbling around,” she said, with a focus on shorter-term, quick-win credentialing. “You had one year to put up a



program, get people through and be done.”

Ideally, however, a stackable credential pathway is credit bearing and includes a healthy dose of degrees, said Mortrude. They should be designed with plenty of input from employers, she said, with every credit stacking up to the “parent award.”

Under that approach, Mortrude said there are “on-ramps” for students to go back to college without losing time and money – and to not

be stuck in low-wage job.

Not surprisingly, the study found a higher wage premium for longer-term credentials. An associate degree, which was the highest available in the 11 pathways, paid the most – an average of \$5,952 in annual pay above participants’ previous wages.

Those numbers declined farther down the scale, with a \$3,042 pay bump for a short-term certificate and \$1,489 for certificates of 12 credits or fewer – a smaller wage gain than the \$1,524 earnings bump for students who earned no credential.

The negligible, or negative, earnings gains for the shortest-term certificates is concerning, said Mary Alice McCarthy, director of New America’s Center on Education and Skills with the Education Policy.

“I don’t think that these results mean that the strategy of stacking credentials is not a good one, but it does point

to the need for schools to be aware of the labor market returns of those shorter credentials,” she said via email.

“In cases where it is very low, success should be measured by the degree to which they help students persist and earn more valuable credentials.”

However, the shorter credentials examined by the study are for occupations that tend to be low wage, McCarthy said, adding that many low-income women pursue short-

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term certificates in health care and education.

Indeed, 81 percent of the 4,888 students enrolled in the study's programs were women.

Roughly 71 percent were employed when they began, but their wages were generally quite low -- participants' median annual earnings at intake was \$17,396, which is just above the federal poverty line for a household of two.

That's one reason stackable pathway designers need to know their target populations, said Mor-

trude. And they need to work with students to help ensure they eventually earn a credential that leads to a well-paying job. That means having a strategy in place to attempt to "re-engage" students after they complete a credential.

McCarthy said stackability should not be an end in itself, particularly in industries with many low-wage jobs.

"In those cases, stackability needs to contribute to persistence," she said. If it doesn't, colleges should

spend "more time on ensuring students can succeed on the longer certificate or degree programs."

Giani agreed.

"If this is a stepping-stone," he said of short-term credentials, "they're really worthwhile."

The stakes are high. Giani said it's not an option to ditch stackable credentials, given their potential. But colleges should be honest about their benefits.

"These pathways have to work," he said. "We just have to be cautious in how we sell them." ■

<https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2016/10/12/stackable-credential-pathways-can-lead-short-term-certificates-questionable-value>

Jobs Broker for Aviation Training

BY PAUL FAIN

New nonprofit is intermediary between aviation employers and partner colleges, with tailored academic programs that could send graduates across state lines for well-paying jobs.

Like many sectors of the economy, the \$70 billion aviation manufacturing and maintenance industry has a work force problem, with three-quarters of companies reporting a substantial shortage of skilled workers.

Colleges aren't producing enough graduates who have the right certification and training, aviation companies say, or who are willing to move across state lines for a job, assuming they even know about openings outside their region.

"Everybody is trying to find people," said Crystal Maguire, executive director of the Aviation Technician Education Council. "There are needs in areas that don't necessarily have the supply. And there is supply in areas that don't have the need."

Enter the Talent Solutions Coalition, a nonprofit that seeks to be an employment broker that bridges the gap between colleges and aviation employers. Experts praise the experiment, saying it could be replicated in other industries if the group is successful.



The four participating institutions so far are Wichita Area Technical College, in Kansas; Arizona's Pima Community College; Vincennes University, a four-year, public institution based in Indiana; and Tulsa Community College, in Oklahoma.

Here's how the coalition is designed to work.

A regional airline might tell the group it needs to hire 150 skilled workers within two years. The coalition, which is based at Wichita Area Technical College's National

Center for Aviation Training, would then work with its college partners to train 150 students through a specialized, in-person certificate or degree program. That could mean divvying up the slots, with three colleges each taking 50.

Curricula will be tailored to employers' needs, said Vincennes President Chuck Johnson, with a focus on hands-on experience that is relevant to the work.

The partnerships will lead to some standardization across col-

leges, Johnson said, and will “have at least a core set of competencies and outcomes.”

Sometimes the hiring pathways will cross state lines. That’s unusual for public institutions, particularly community colleges, which typically don’t plan to train students for jobs in other states or regions.

“It’s bringing together education, business and industry to really solve a national problem,” said Sher-ee Utash, president of Wichita Area Technical College. “It creates a network.”

The coalition will serve as a “hub for talent acquisition,” she said, and as a “one stop for employers.”

Going National

Most of the job-market benefits of participating will be local, said several officials at participating colleges. But graduates who leave the area also will benefit.

Students who earn credentials through the coalition will have a job waiting for them. And annual salaries often start at \$50,000-60,000 for entry-level technicians in aviation, with overtime typically boosting pay.

More than 90 percent of students who complete aviation programs at Pima stay near Tucson, where there are plenty of jobs in the industry, said Ian Roark, vice president of work force development for the community college. But he cited hiring shortages for well-paying aviation jobs both around Tucson and beyond.

“The labor market’s already national,” he said. “The shortage that

we’re experiencing regionally is ubiquitous nationally.”

Even so, employers often struggle to get the word out to students about those jobs, said Tim Welsh, the coalition’s executive director. Students typically have outdated views about the industry, thinking about riveters rather than robotics, he said. And the companies’ hiring needs extend beyond technicians to supervisory roles.

Welsh’s group is seeking to connect companies with marketing departments at participating colleges to help them get more information about the aviation career path to students and faculty members.

“This is putting pressure on the employers to get better about telling people why they should come work with them,” he said.

Welsh said the coalition, in its role of “standing up the supply chain,” also plans to help colleges and employers assess the job readiness of students. That means conducting tests aimed at measuring both technical and soft skills, like work ethic. And some of those assessments could be used to issue certifications.

For example, the coalition plans to offer certifications from SpaceTEC, a nonprofit that receives funding from the National Science Foundation and conducts third-party assessments.

The combination of a recognized certification from SpaceTEC with academic training courses that are tailored to aviation manufacturers would be particularly valuable to

employers, said Michael McDaniel, general manager of maintenance training for ExpressJet, an Atlanta-based airline.

One problem it might help fix, McDaniel said, is that many colleges’ aviation programs are designed around the Federal Aviation Administration’s relatively minimal licensing requirements, which have not been updated in decades.

“We are struggling to hire and maintain an educated work force,” he said. “The level of training they set is not adequate for our needs.”

As a result, ExpressJet spends time and money training new hires. It can take more than two years to get college-trained employees up to speed, said McDaniel. And bigger airlines often poach workers ExpressJet trains.

The coalition offers a more efficient hiring pathway, he said, by seeking to send to ExpressJet graduates who are well trained, familiar with the companies’ processes and holding a certificate from SpaceTEC.

“You’ve just completed three to six months of your training here,” he says of graduates who will complete the program. “That person’s value suddenly increases within the industry.”

Outgrowth of Federal Grant

The coalition grew directly out of a federal grant program with an exceptionally long name (and acronym): the Trade Adjustment Assistance Community College and Career Training program (TAACCCT).

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With \$2 billion in funding, the grant program backed projects at community colleges that were aimed at encouraging closer coordination with employers. The money went to coalitions of two-year colleges, often from disparate regions of the country, and was intended to create projects that would outlast the federal money.

Those lofty goals weren't always realized. But the Talent Skills Coalition appears to have done exactly what the Obama administration intended with the grants, said Mary Alice McCarthy, a former official at the U.S. Departments of Labor and Education, who is now director of the Center on Education and Skills with the education policy program at New America.

Wichita Area Technical managed one of the grants from 2012 until last October, when the funding expired.

The goal of that project, which included Tulsa Community College, was to promote careers in aviation manufacturing. When asked by the college, employers reported that their need for the collaboration remained, Welsh said, with plenty of shortages in well-trained hires. That research was used to create the coalition's business plan.

Employers are the nonprofit's primary financial sponsors, according to Welsh. And the coalition has three tiers of relatively low-cost membership fees for colleges to participate.

McCarthy called the partnership a "great outcome of the TAACCCT grants," which appears to be one of several fledgling efforts to create an "intermediary market that is really connecting education providers with jobs."

Jason Tyszko agreed. Tyszko, executive director of the Center for Education and Workforce at the U.S.

Chamber of Commerce Foundation, praised the coalition's supply-chain approach and the fact that it stretches across state lines.

"They recognize that labor is mobile," he said. "Whether the states recognize that is an open question."

So far, though, college officials sound confident that the model will be viewed as a win-win by colleges and policy makers.

Roark said he expects the coalition to contribute to Pima's growth in aviation programs, with the partnerships bringing in both more employers and students. The goal, he said, is to "empower our clients, our students, with more information about the labor market."

For his part, Welsh said, attention to the national hiring pipeline need not be a departure from the mission of community colleges.

"It's just a new definition of the word 'community,'" he said. ■

<https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2017/01/27/new-coalition-brings-colleges-and-aviation-employers-together-solve-national-hiring>

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