

Community College Voices in the National Completion Conversation

LEARNING ABSTRACTS

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By Participants in the League's 2014 Learning Summit

Last summer, some 300 community college educators convened in Chandler, Arizona, to focus on learning. As participants in the League's Learning Summit, these faculty, staff, and administrators engaged in roundtable discussions about the current national emphasis on college completion – the Completion Agenda. Facilitated by League Vice President for Learning and Research, Cynthia Wilson, the groups discussed definitions of completion, issues and challenges surrounding completion, and the promise of the Completion Agenda, and they posed questions about the current emphasis on completion. They recorded their conversations on flip chart paper, and this issue of *Learning Abstracts* presents the themes that emerged from the conversation records.

This article presents an informal snapshot of themes identified in the collected responses of Learning Summit participants, with themes organized by the four questions asked during the session, and it may help stimulate similar discussions at local community colleges. The League's [Faculty Voices](#) project sponsored the session at the Learning Summit, and is one way for community college educators to become involved in the national conversation.

What Does Completion Mean to You?

After a brief overview of the national completion focus, participants were asked four questions, the first of which was, "What does completion mean to you?" In their definitions of "completion," two particularly strong themes emerged: (a) *students fulfilling their own goals*, and (2) *students earning credentials*.

Students Fulfilling Their Own Goals. The emphasis on individual student goals included broad comments such as "establishing educational goals and attaining them," "students accomplish what they came to do," and "fulfill student's holistic purposes, whatever that is." Some definitions went further, providing specific examples: "academic and real work skills, personal growth," "good grades, passed class, transfer," "degree, experience, certificate," and so on. One group broke down the list into components of the student experience, with completion points at ever step in the process: "students completing academic goals, with success at each increment: enrollment process, advisement, course completion, degree/certification, career" while others mentioned options such as learning a language or seeking education for career advancement. Since community colleges provide a wide variety of educational opportunities to a diverse student population, the focus on meeting individual student goals is not surprising.

Students Earning Credentials. The second major theme, students earning credentials, is fairly straightforward, with completion of a certificate or degree program and transfer to a four-year institution as the most frequently cited examples. For some participants, employment was also seen as a defining element in completion. These groups mentioned "employment in the field," "gaining suitable employment," "completion of program and gets the job," "workforce preparedness," and "employability," in their definitions of completion.

Other Approaches. Some groups took different approaches, exploring distinctions in the meaning of completion by various stakeholder groups or considering the definition more philosophically. For example, given the prompt, "What does completion mean to you?" one group responded, "What Does Completion Mean to US?" with a list of 10 one-word answers:

Fulfillment	Satisfaction
Success	Results
Accomplishment	Achievement
An End	Proud
Recognition	Triumph

What Issues and Concerns Do You Have About the Completion Agenda?

Learning Summit participants were asked to list issues, challenges, and concerns they had related to the national emphasis on completion. Responses were more varied in this and later questions, with major themes emerging around academic rigor and relevance, and student support. Other themes included student funding, institutional funding, employability, student preparedness, completion goals, data, and college-level challenges. These themes are briefly outlined below.

Academic Rigor and Relevance. Participants expressed concern that the emphasis on completion would lead to a “degrading” of academic standards, particularly a “fear of compromising rigor so that more students will succeed,” or “decreasing standards perhaps to meet a goal.” Related to this concern was hastening students through programs, resulting in a “loss of personalized attention...just to get students through” and a “cycle of pushing students through the system.” The emphasis on completion also raised curriculum issues, including the relevance of classes; the possible narrowing of the curriculum; a reduction of the value of “human enrichment” and a concern that “lifelong learning is in conflict with completion”; the “integration of credit and non-credit”; a “fear of moving toward a high-stakes testing model” and “‘teach to the test’ attitudes,” distinctions between training and education; and a question of completion “pushing higher education to a business model.”

Student Support. Participants were interested in ensuring that students receive adequate support as they pursue postsecondary education to completion, emphasizing guided pathways to help students set reasonable goals and provide assistance in attaining them throughout the student experience. Participants were also interested in the role of access in the push toward completion, listing among their concerns the need to reduce barriers and create bridges to access and completion; provide meaningful and sufficient advisement; offer flexibility in course options and scheduling; and provide sufficient training and support for students in online learning courses.

Student Preparedness. The challenges faced by students who are underprepared for college-level classes were among the concerns listed by participants, stated by one group as, “We really need to figure out developmental education.” Participants raised issues of student costs, increased time to completion, the large number of students in developmental education, “moving students from developmental education into core classes,” and “problems with rushing students through.” One group asked, “Where’s the personal accountability—being prepared, committed?”

Student Funding. Concerns in this area primarily surrounded the affordability of higher education for community college students and prospective students, described by one group thus: “The reality of education and cost fights against the promise of the Completion Agenda.” Concerns were expressed about the availability of financial aid and the “huge debt burden [that] diminishes the value of a degree.”

Institutional Funding. Participants expressed concern about ways funding is tied to completion as well as the definition of completion used in funding models. One group noted there is “more concern over the colleges’ numbers or ‘bottom line’ than the students’ goals.” Concern was also expressed about a college rating system based on completion that would be used to determine funding.

Employability. Participants listed among their concerns the availability of jobs for students who complete certificate or degree programs, particularly as the number of graduates increases. They noted a disconnect between employer needs and the skills graduates possess, and that the pressure to find a career “ASAP” left “no room [for] exploration.”

Driving the Agenda. Some concern was expressed about the postsecondary education agenda being driven by external organizations that may be pushing their own agendas. Participants mentioned a lack of alignment between policy makers and implementers.

Defining Terms. Some concern was expressed about the inconsistency of the definition for completion used by various stakeholders in the national completion conversation. Some groups expressed concern about a lack of consideration for the “relationship between completion and success” and the limitations in the definition if “success=completion.”

Completion Goals. Participants raised questions about the goals associated with the Completion Agenda, expressing concern that failure to increase completion rates “adds to internal stress by increasing demands” and “gives incentives to pressure students into degree programs.” Comments in this theme echo others concerning a need to focus on student goals and the distinctions between community college and four-year institution missions and students. Participants expressed concern that “completion rates focus on available data, not long-term success”; “completion does not necessarily focus on retention”; and that the postsecondary experience will mirror the “same pressure that K-12 has experienced.” One group asked if completion is, “Panacea or more complex problem?”

Data. Learning Summit participants included data in their lists of issues and concerns, focusing on the importance of designing ways to quantify and track completion that consider student intent, student learning, appropriate metrics, the definition of completion in the community college context, and the ethics surrounding efforts “to make statistics look better” at the expense of helping students.

College Challenges. Groups identified issues and concerns at the college level, including pressure by administration and governing boards to move students through programs; consistency and competition among campuses in a multi-campus system; cultural changes with the shift to an emphasis on completion; lack of sufficient orientation and training for new employees; differing department goals; and practices and procedures that slow student progress or inhibit student success, such as cancelled classes and class size.

What Promise Do You See in the National Focus on Completion?

Participants were asked to identify what they consider the promise of the Completion Agenda—what promise does it hold for students, educators, colleges, and communities? One group began by posting a pointed second question, “Why are we doing this if there are no promises?” Overall, responses focused on the promise at both national and local levels, with benefits for the students, colleges, communities, and the entire country.

The National Conversation. Responses in this theme reflect the overall national-to-local flavor of answers, ranging from “regain international stature” to “has brought attention to the community colleges and all they offer.” One group noted that “the national conversation demonstrates interest in the topic.” Another response expressed this interest a little differently: “It’s good that people care about student success.”

Collaboration. Participants saw opportunities for collaboration as a promise of the completion conversation, including collaboration within colleges and across education sectors. Descriptions ranged from “allows for greater collaboration across college functions” and “encourages collaborative ‘system-wide’ thinking across community college systems” to “The Completion Agenda has prompted conversations among all levels of institutions,” and “aligning curriculum from early childhood education to ‘completion’ of college.”

Retention. Groups indicated that the Completion Agenda is “raising awareness of noncompletion,” and “beginning with the end in mind,” while causing “more proactive student/institution communication” and “more focus on goal development.”

Benefits for Students. In terms of promise for students, participants turned to the career opportunities and accompanying financial benefits related to earning a college credential. One group explained, “Students with a degree are absolutely in a better position to gain employment. The completion emphasis forces colleges to reach more students and help them succeed.” Others cited increased lifetime earnings, having “an edge in the global marketplace,” “better way of life,” and “gainful employment.” One response connected completion, as “an opportunity to bring people out of poverty,” with stabilizing the national economy. Not all responses focused on financial rewards, though, as others noted “improved student success and satisfaction” and college personnel “rallying around the students to help them complete.”

Benefits for the Community. As with benefits for students, benefits for the community included economic matters. From students being better trained to enter the workforce and the consequent attraction of more higher-wage jobs, participants saw local economic development as a promise of the Completion Agenda. Other benefits of an educated population were also included in responses, such as decreased crime rates and increased civic engagement. One group responded that completion “can ‘equalize’ the playing field for all social classes.”

Benefits for the College. On campuses, conversations about completion are, according to one participant group, “opening up dialogue to innovation in our approaches/strategies.” Other groups had similar comments focused on being “at the table” for the completion conversation, whether in internal college conversations or external discussions with communities, business and industry, workforce development, and other education sectors. The promise of the Completion Agenda also included improving processes and policies that impede student success; using resources more efficiently and meaningfully; and “redefining our role in society.” Professional development was also identified with the promise of the completion emphasis, with the need for more staff and new roles for staff, along with “greater focus on pedagogy” and “improved quality in services and programs.” Participants also indicated that, “National discussions on completion may provide more funding and programs” from government agencies and foundations.

What Are the Big Questions You Have Regarding Student Success and Completion?

Finally, participants were asked to identify their own big questions about the completion conversation, and the groups responded with scores of questions. Most questions fell into five major themes, including (a) the definition of completion; (b) engaging and supporting students to completion and careers; (c) employability and a living wage; (d) joining the conversation; and (e) college needs. In this section, a few examples of questions are listed

below each theme.

The Definition of Completion

- Why must there be universal agreement on the definition of completion?
- What if a student only wants to focus on specific skills?
- What if the national definition does not match the institution's? Are differing ideas accommodated?
- Are student success and completion the same thing?
- Whose definition matters?

Engaging and Supporting Students to Completion and Careers

- What resources and motivations do we (college) provide to help students get the degree?
- What types of career counseling are students getting? Can it be made mandatory?
- How do we prepare students for specific job duties, with broad skills so they can be adaptable to change?
- What are the barriers that prevent our students from succeeding (including the ones we create)?
- How do student learning outcomes connect to student completion and student "success"?

Employability and a Living Wage

- Will they (completers) have jobs?
- Is our society ready to handle the number of college graduates? Are we over-saturating the market?
- Will debt swamp the economy?

Joining the Conversation

- How can we impress upon leadership the importance of inviting front line staff and support personnel to these conversations and training?
- What will happen when the new administration is in place, a new president? Who drives the conversation when politics change?
- Will we (government, foundations, education) stay focused on this or move to another initiative? How do we get past the "flavor of the day" approach?
- Do people still see the same value in education they once did?
- Will this conversation lead to effective actions?

College Needs

- Are we staffed to address concerns? Where are trained teachers to meet demand?
- How do we improve our tracking? How do we know when someone has completed?
- Where are the established resources in place at other institutions we can utilize?
- How do we get the public to recognize the worth and value of community colleges?
- Will resources exist to help us move to a culture of completion? Will colleges change what we do and/or should be doing to chase funding?

Content for this issue of Learning Abstracts came from participants in the League's 2014 Learning Summit symposium on Faculty and Staff Engagement, held June 10, 2014, in Chandler, Arizona. Responses were compiled by League staff. Contact: [Cynthia Wilson](#), Vice President, Learning and Research, League for Innovation in the Community College.

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