POLICY MEETS PATHWAYS

A STATE POLICY AGENDA FOR TRANSFORMATIONAL CHANGE

By Lara K. Couturier | DECEMBER 2014

A decade of interventions and improvements have fallen short because states and campuses have not taken large enough steps to address their biggest challenge—helping the 12.8 million students enrolled in community colleges earn postsecondary degrees and credentials to find good jobs.

Community colleges continue to take the spotlight as the most economical and powerful engine to upgrade the skills of the workforce and provide low-income students a pathway to postsecondary credentials and family-sustaining jobs. But in spite of 10 years of interventions and student support initiatives, the nation's most disadvantaged adults and young people are not gaining traction towards degrees. Last month, the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center reported that while more first-time students entered college in 2008 than in 2007, the percentage that had completed a degree or certificate six years later actually dropped—from 56.1 percent of students who entered college in 2007 and completed in 2013 to 55 percent who entered a year later and graduated this year.

To address these challenges, campuses and states must do more than establish metrics for success, change transfer policies, provide better academic advising and support pilots targeting specific student subgroups. Campuses need to redesign pilot projects and ad hoc interventions into structured or guided pathways that reshape every step of the student experience, and states must scale pathways across state systems to serve all students. But all too often, campus efforts are embedded in state policy environments that are outdated, driven by the wrong incentives, or incompatible with colleges' efforts. States need to redouble their efforts to modernize policies, and develop more effective approaches that support campuses and build capacity to strengthen implementation.

The broad-scale expansion of effective initiatives to serve low-income students has been hindered by an implementation gap similar to that in K-12 education where policymakers have underestimated the challenges of transforming instruction in schools on the ground. State leaders have pulled a lot of policy levers—setting goals, monitoring progress and demanding accountability—but now it is time to intersect more closely with the needs of educators and campus leaders. Institutions need to operate in a policy environment that helps them introduce comprehensive and integrated reform strategies that change every aspect of what they do—from admissions and instruction to student services and workforce preparation—to increase the percentage of low-income students who earn degrees and find jobs that pay a living wage.

Campuses and state systems introducing structured or guided pathways efforts, such as the nine colleges that have participated in the Completion by Design initiative funded by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation,

are redesigning every step of the student experience, gearing all they do to the end goal of high-quality certificates, degrees, and good jobs. On many of these campuses, orientation to college includes an assessment of a student's career interests and academic and non-cognitive needs. Students choose and enter streamlined, coherent academic programs organized around specific program pathways—a set of courses that meet academic requirements across a broad discipline grouping such as health sciences, business, or education—with clear learning goals aligned with further education and/or a career. Students' routes through college are mapped out, with course requirements made clear and visible. Pathways efforts also provide intensive student supports, such as academic advising and career counseling, and monitor student progress, providing frequent and customized feedback to learners.

THE COMPLETION BY DESIGN CADRES

Cadre Colleges	State Lead Organization
Miami Dade College (Managing Partner), and Hialeah Campus, Homestead Campus, InterAmerican Campus, Kendall Campus, Medical Center Campus, North Campus, MDC West, Wolfson Campus	Florida College System
Guilford Technical Community College (Managing Partner), and Central Piedmont Community College, Davidson County Community College, Martin Community College, Wake Technical Community College	North Carolina Community College System
Sinclair Community College (Managing Partner), and Lorain County Community College, Stark State College	Ohio Association of Community Colleges

While these types of programs have gained recognition and visibility, they are still not being introduced nationwide in a way that is systematic and rigorous. Pockets of evidence-based innovations are everywhere, but fully scaled redesigns are few and far between. Significant, measurable improvements in student success have not materialized.

Part of the reason for the limited impact is that, too often, policymakers have sought quick fixes, enacting big legislation without fully evaluating what needs to happen to create success. They've also failed to provide adequate resources, build needed buy-in from key stakeholders, or acknowledge the progress already being made on the ground. Policy changes are also regularly layered on top of legacy laws and regulations, inevitably causing confusion and chaos during implementation. Efforts like performance funding or improved transfer seem like no-brainers for policymakers seeking to improve outcomes but, if not implemented well, can encourage campuses to help the students who are most likely to graduate and to shy away from those hardest to serve.

MODEL STATE INITIATIVES

Policy Meets Pathways notes that some states have created incentives for colleges to take on the types of transformational change necessary to implement structured pathways. Though challenges and gaps remain, the three states (Florida, North Carolina, and Ohio) involved in the Completion by Design initiative have made good progress by thinking big and offering a series of integrated interventions.

In **North Carolina**, the state community college system collaborated with its Completion by Design colleges to identify needed policy changes, and then skillfully designed a work plan to put structured pathways policies in place. Colleges are accelerating their students' progress through developmental education based on a statewide effort to redesign its delivery. The state also has established a new placement and assessment policy that allows colleges to place students into college-level courses based on their performance in high school. This has helped accelerate student progress and minimize placement errors created by an overreliance on standardized assessments. State system leaders revised transfer policies to include pathways with clearly defined goals, courses that are guaranteed to transfer, a better understanding of university requirements, and guidance on mapping academic pathways. Other changes have included streamlining program requirements and clarifying programs and pathways for students in career and technical programs and reducing the number of gateway math courses from 14 to five. This has helped clarify expectations, simplify course choices, and improve credit transfer.

In **Ohio**, the Ohio Association of Community Colleges is implementing a wide range of reforms that span the student lifecycle simultaneously with broad-scale implementation of an outcomes-based funding system. As of fall 2014, all state funding for community colleges will be based on performance as measured by student outcomes such as students earning their first 12, 24 or 36 credit hours; completing the associate degree; or transferring and enrolling for the first time at a state four-year institution. In addition, each college is accountable for a completion plan detailing its strategies to encourage students to complete certificates and degrees. These efforts have encouraged colleges to integrate many other initiatives that otherwise might have become discrete, disconnected efforts but are now part of a larger, visionary, completion-focused design. State leaders also have taken steps to bolster developmental education, improve faculty professional development, and redesign mathematics pathways. Moreover, the state requires every public high school to offer dual-enrollment options for their students and has introduced many policies supporting adult learners. Ohio gives students credit for military service and for demonstrating knowledge on an assessment for prior learning. The state also allows graduates from its adult career centers who complete a 900-hour program of study and obtain an industry-recognized credential to transfer 30 college technical credit hours toward a technical degree upon enrollment. Each initiative is coordinated through a statewide implementation process.

In **Florida**, a mix of new and existing policies implemented by the Florida College System is creating a powerful example of how state policy can set the conditions for spreading many of the principles of structured pathways. In particular, the Florida Legislature in 2013 passed Senate Bill 1720, which included some elements that align well with Completion by Design. The Florida College System is leveraging its mandate to implement SB 1720 to help Florida colleges not formally participating in Completion by Design to learn from and adopt aligned practices. For example, SB 1720 establishes meta-majors—a set of courses that meet academic requirements across a broad discipline grouping such as health sciences, business, or education—to guide students through their early academic requirements. The law also requires the colleges to accelerate developmental education, and to develop plans to provide comprehensive advising and track student outcomes.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR STATE ACTION: DesignForScale

RECOMMENDATION 1
CREATE STATE POLICY CONDITIONS THAT SUPPORT COLLEGES' EFFORTS TO UNDERTAKE COMPREHENSIVE, INTEGRATED REDESIGN

Step 1: Charge a team with analyzing the existing policy environment

It's time for national leaders, state officials, and system heads to put efforts to bolster completion on a new trajectory by analyzing the extent to which state policies support the colleges that are trying to do right by their students. The report recommends that states begin by creating a team to analyze the existing policy environment, systematically evaluating the policies and supporting structures in place statewide. To facilitate this process, Jobs for the Future has developed the DesignForScale: State Policy Self-Assessment Tool designed to lead state teams through a deliberate and thoughtful analysis.

Step 2: Prioritize policy changes in support of transformational change

The report urges states to implement seven high-leverage policy priorities meant to serve large percentages of low-income and nontraditional students. Key policy priorities need to "design for scale" and tackle thorny policy issues that states often avoid, by:

> **Streamlining program requirements and creating clearly structured programs of study** to help students gain traction toward degrees rather than be stymied by an overwhelming array of course options, unclear program requirements and a lack of guidance.

> **Encouraging colleges to redesign developmental education** into accelerated on-ramps to programs of study that include strong advising, student entry into program streams or meta-majors with developmental education courses relevant to that stream, as well as comprehensive "wraparound" services that provide everything from counseling and financial literacy to supplemental instruction.

> **Supporting colleges in developing and implementing a suite of research-based, wraparound student support services** that propel students through to completion, including redesigned student intake

procedures, comprehensive advising with integrated career counseling, early alert systems and educational program mapping.

> **Ensuring that structured pathways lead to credentials and durable competencies** that allow students to build on their skill sets, continuously adapt to thrive in the fast-paced and constantly evolving global economy, and access robust career opportunities.

> **Supporting colleges' strategic use of data**, with a particular focus on creating statewide data systems that monitor students' progress from postsecondary education into the labor market. State efforts also should build the capacity of institutions to use student data and real-time labor market information.

> **Creating financial incentives**, such as performance-based funding for institutions and performance-based scholarships that connect financial aid awards to students' achievement of certain milestones—such as attending advisor sessions, completing courses, and returning in subsequent semesters.

> **Investing professional development dollars** in statewide structures that create intensive, authentic faculty engagement and link efforts to increase college completion to a deeper focus on teaching and learning.

RECOMMENDATION 2
BUILD STATE STRUCTURES TO SET THE CONDITIONS FOR SCALED REFORM

The report also calls on states to develop state-level structures that can support these scaled-up improvements. States can leverage their convening power, access to colleges, authority over innovation funding, and communications vehicles to:

> **Help colleges set the conditions for sustained improvement through a systematic self-assessment of institutional policies and practices.** Scaling up and embedding reforms across an institution requires strong alignment of institutional policies with reform efforts, responsive leadership, strategically targeted professional development, and clear mechanisms for planning and resource allocation. To facilitate this process, JFF has developed the [DesignForScale: College Self-Assessment Tool](#) to help states support their colleges in a deep and consequential effort to look at every institutional practice and policy and

analyze the degree to which all of those support (or don't support) student success.

> **Create structures for authentic statewide faculty engagement.** States and colleges can encourage ongoing and meaningful involvement of each institution's faculty and staff by creating deliberate opportunities for authentic discussion, sharing, learning, and long-term action. North Carolina's Student Success Learning Institute, for example, brings together teams from each campus (comprising the chief academic and student development officer, the research director, and a faculty member) to participate in convenings, webinars and courses focused on topics such as identifying performance indicators, creating structured programs of study, and redesigning advising systems.

> **Engage diverse stakeholders systemically.** States can benefit from stakeholder boards that help identify and resolve policy and funding challenges that are barriers to student success, and make recommendations at the institutional, state agency, and legislative levels. Texas' Student Success Council, for example, brings together a diverse group of members representing all stakeholders to propose policy changes and conditions that improve the success of students in the state's 50 community college districts.

> **Create and support a statewide Student Success Center.** Growing directly out of a decade of hard work to dramatically boost student completion rates in the community college—through national improvement efforts such as Achieving the Dream, the Developmental Education Initiative, Breaking Through, and Completion by Design—Student Success Centers organize a state's community colleges around common action to accelerate their efforts to improve student persistence and completion. Seven states—Arkansas, California, Connecticut, Michigan, New Jersey, Ohio, and Texas—operate these centers with support from the Kresge Foundation. College and association leaders launched the centers to establish a statewide, cross-college support venue for collaboration and faculty engagement.

> **Join cross-state learning and action networks.** Because colleges and states face similar challenges, state and campus leaders typically benefit from collaborating across state lines to share ideas and

co-develop solutions. In JFF's Postsecondary State Policy Network, state and campus officials from the largest and most diverse states regularly meet to share information about challenges and solutions, review research and state actions, and analyze ideas from their different contexts and perspectives. JFF facilitates interactions through face-to-face meetings, webinars, and cross-state affinity groups and conversations. The Network was a key player in Virginia and North Carolina's efforts to redesign developmental education, Ohio's introduction of its performance-based funding model, and Massachusetts' adoption of meta-majors and a new multiple measures placement process.

The past decade of the college completion movement was the right work at the right time. But 10 years of experimentation and research have led to an inescapable conclusion: It is time for both states and community colleges to be more systematic, serious, and organized about designing visionary, integrated reforms to be implemented at scale to achieve meaningful and equitable results for our students. This report helps show how that can be done based on some of the best examples in the field.

The full report, *Policy Meets Pathways: A State Policy Agenda for Transformational Change*, is available at
http://www.jff.org/publications/policy-meets-pathways-state-policy-agenda-transformational-change

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COMPLETION BY DESIGN