

Completion Work Group

Research Brief

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I. FACTORS/ISSUES IMPROVING INSTITUTIONAL SUPPORT OF COMPLETION

Simply put, institutional support of completion can be examined from both student-centered and institution-centered perspectives. Student-centered perspectives focus on policies, programs, and initiatives that address the social and psychological factors that affect completion. Institution-centered perspectives address the organizational policies and structures that promote or impede student progress toward degree. Common to both of these groups is the importance of adequate financial aid. However, because a discussion of financial aid covers a wide range of institutional, state, and federal considerations, it will not be addressed in this paper.

Student-Centered Perspective

Traditional Students

Drawing from the work of Astin (1993) and Tinto (1993), programs and policies that promote social and academic integration, academic success, and financial stability have been shown to have a positive influence on student completion, particularly among at-risk student groups. The programs provide the opportunity for intensive peer interaction and small classes, and often include faculty and staff in non-academic programs and gatherings. “Communities of learning” can be developed around specific academic, cultural, or pedagogical themes such as the University of Michigan’s Health Science Scholars, Women in Science and Engineering, and Michigan Community Scholars (service-learning). Programs tailored to the needs of specific student subgroups, such as under-represented students, first-generation college students, and economically disadvantaged students, are also helpful. A significant drawback to these kinds of programs is their cost, including dedicated support staff, facilities, and the use of faculty teaching time.

On the national level, the POSSE Foundation (www.possefoundation.org), a nonprofit organization based in New York City, “identifies, recruits and selects student leaders from public high schools to form multicultural teams called ‘Posses’”. These teams are then prepared, through an intensive eight-month Posse Training Program, for enrollment at top universities nationwide to pursue their academics and to help promote cross-cultural communication on campus.” Scholarships and other forms of financial aid are available. The foundation partners with local high schools, community-based organizations, and member institutions to provide a comprehensive social, academic, and financial network for students.

Nontraditional Students

Programs designed to promote completion among traditional students are not necessarily appropriate for nontraditional students, many of whom attend community colleges when time and money allow. While still in need of academic and financial advising, they are much less likely to become “integrated” into the campus environment because they are present only a few hours per week. The factors that have an impact on their educational goals include work schedules and family issues.

In a qualitative study of students at five community colleges across the country, Matus-Grossman et al. (2002) identifies nine themes that affect educational pursuits:

- Time-to-degree is typically longer than the traditional two-years due to employment, finances, and family responsibilities.
- Financial aid, including compensation for wages lost because of reduced work hours, is a significant factor in the decision of whether to attend college.
- Balancing work, life and college is difficult.
- Availability of on-campus academic and personal support, including academic and personal counseling and financial aid assistance
- Students are not always aware of the services that are available to them.
- Academic remediation
- Availability of on-campus child care
- Work-based social services can be difficult to access.

Some nontraditional students also require services beyond those usually associated with college attendance; for example, Marygrove College's financial advisor.

Institution-Centered Perspectives

Degree requirements, course availability, AP, transfer credit, and drop/add policies fall under the realm of institution-centered perspectives as all have an impact on the student's progression toward a degree. While student- and institution-centered factors clearly overlap to some extent (e.g., multiple changes of majors), institutional roadblocks can pose serious impediments to timely degree completion.

Articulation and transfer policies are already a major focus of discussion in the work group. The following are some additional major arenas of focus for improving completion rates. (In addition the Education Trust report *A Matter of Degrees, Improving Graduation Rates in Four-Year Colleges and Universities*, as well as the GAO report on college completion [both posted to the commission website for the Completion Work Group] have good discussions of approaches to boost completion rates.)

Accountability Measures

Several states have introduced accountability measures intended to improve both access and degree completion in postsecondary education. According to the National Commission on Accountability in Higher Education (www.sheeo.org/account/comm-home.htm), these efforts include:

- Kentucky has developed a framework structured around key issues designed to monitor student, community, and state needs. Nineteen "key indicators of progress" (including student completion) were identified and yearly progress reports are available on the website of the Kentucky Council on Postsecondary Education.
- South Carolina's legislatively mandated statewide accountability initiative ties the allocation of state funding to institutional performance. The results of this eight-year effort are being used to restructure the state's accountability policies and practices.

- Texas' "Closing the Gap" initiative sets target goals for participation, success, excellence, and research to be met by year 2015.
- In 1999, Virginia implemented the Reports of Institutional Effectiveness, which includes system-wide performance measures and core competencies. The component of accountability reports is used to examine institutional effectiveness and system reporting.

Structure and Design of Specific Degree Programs

While the "traditional" baccalaureate curriculum is still predicated on 120 college credit hours, the requirements for many degree programs—particularly sciences and engineering—have increased substantially in the last thirty years. As a result, these programs are packed with requirements, leaving little room for experimentation or error. The average Mechanical Engineering degree, for example, is a carefully prescribed program with specific courses dictated for each term and year of enrollment (www.engin.umich.edu, www.kettering.edu, www.mtu.edu, www.gvsu.edu). In addition to program requirements, general education requirements must be fulfilled, and at some colleges the number of credits required for those are increasing as well. Maturation and poor decision-making aside, it is not unusual for students take more than four years to complete a baccalaureate degree. This has financial implications for both the institution (faculty, staff, and facility needs) and for the student (financial aid, student loan, and employment considerations).

In 1995, the steady upward creep of time-to-degree, coupled with a belief that traditional engineering curricula were no longer meeting the needs of today's employers, prompted the faculty in the College of Engineering at the University of Michigan to undertake a substantial review of the undergraduate curriculum. After much analysis, and in consultation with the primary engineering accrediting agency, ABET, "Curriculum 2000" was developed. "Curriculum 2000" emphasized "the overall structure of the curriculum as it affects the time to graduate; ...the required courses in the first 2 years; and...the systemic treatment of nonprogram topics, including communication, mathematics, sciences, humanities and social sciences, and other important issues not generally treated in separate courses" (www.engin.umich.edu/dept/techcomm/curric_2000/UGTF_sect1.html). In terms of time-to-degree, degree requirements were restructured such that a student taking four 4-credit courses each semester could complete a bachelor's degree in any engineering discipline in eight semesters: the 4x4x8 model.

In 1993, the Board of Governors of the University of North Carolina System adopted a plan to improve graduation rates. Aspects of the plan included:

- A 128-credit limit on baccalaureate degree programs (135 credits for certain programs with specific permission of the Board of Governors)
- Mandatory conferences for faculty on successful strategies to reduce length of time to degree
- Recommended minimum credit elections per term (15) for undergraduate students
- An increase in resources for on-campus employment of students
- Mandatory development by each institution of a plan to improve four-year graduation rates and shorten time-to-degree. This includes a review of degree program requirements, review of course schedules for availability of needed courses, review of academic advising policies and practices, review of policies governing course withdrawal and repetition practices,

review of financial aid policies, and review of GPA requirements for admission to major or satisfaction of grade requirements in major to ensure that they are not causing students to reduce course loads or repeat courses and thus lengthening time-to-degree.

The system developed a student monitoring system to track time to degree and used a quadrennial graduate survey to determine why some students took more than four years to graduate.

An important element of any degree program is the availability of classes. Particularly in science, language, and technical fields, timely progression to advanced coursework is reliant upon availability of introductory and other “prerequisite” coursework. For example, the inability to elect calculus can delay graduation by a term or more for students in engineering, economics, and other quantitative fields (particularly those with linear requirements). At community colleges, the problem is accentuated by the lack of flexibility in student schedules. If the only course a student can attend is full, the student must wait until the next term and hope for the best.

Drop/Add and Course Election Policies

While short (e.g., 1–2 weeks after the start of the term) drop/add and course election policies are thought to encourage students to make informed choices (with the aid of good academic advising), students argue that these policies can also “trap” them in classes that are not appropriate for them. Some students find that they are performing below expectations yet have no choice but to complete the course.

Excess Credit Tuition Surcharges

In an effort to promote timely completion to degree, a number of states have imposed “tuition surcharges” for students who accumulate substantially more credits than needed for graduation. Exceptions are made for extenuating circumstances, but in most cases students must appeal to the college’s registrar.

- University of North Carolina system (1993): A 25 percent surcharge is imposed on students who take more than 140 credit hours to complete a baccalaureate degree in a four-year program or more than 110 percent of the credit hours necessary to complete a five-year program.
- University of Utah (2003): Tuition for credit hours in excess of 135 percent of the credits required for a program of study (excluding concurrent enrollment, AP and credit by examination) is charged at the full cost of instruction.
- University of Wisconsin system (fall, 2004): resident undergraduates will be assessed a 100 percent tuition surcharge on credits over 165 in total. AP credits and transfer credit from *private* institutions will not be counted.

II. COMPLETION OUTREACH STRATEGIES

For many people, the path to an educational credential is not linear. Skills and knowledge gained over several years through work experience, vocational training, occasional college classes, and apprenticeships/internships can result in an accumulation of disparate educational units rather than one cumulative credential. This does not mean that the skills and experience gained through these various mechanisms are not valid; yet the professional and economic benefits of these skills are weakened by the lack of a unifying credential.

Completion outreach strategies provide the means for people to translate their varied educational and professional experiences into a unified credential. The strategies are broad and attempt to address many of the hurdles that face nontraditional and economically disadvantaged individuals. The list below is not exhaustive but is intended as a representative sample of programs currently in use.

The literature on adult learners highlights two important factors regarding adult perspectives on education. First, adults have pragmatic, focused reasons for seeking education and often leave when those needs have been met. Second, because of those needs, adults have specific expectations regarding the educational experience and quickly become frustrated when those expectations are not met (Kerka, 1995). In order to improve the odds of success, completion outreach strategies should be designed with those two factors in mind.

Completion of in-progress degrees

As noted in the August 12 Completion Work Group research brief, some colleges have initiated programs to facilitate the completion of degrees. Typically these programs address two primary issues with nontraditional students: Alternative credit awarding systems, and access to college instruction. Thomas Edison College (N.J.), Charter Oak College (Conn.), and Governors State University (Ill.) are examples of institutions that were either designed specifically to meet the needs of nontraditional students, or have developed specific degree completion programs to do so. Keystone College (Pa.) offers two programs designed specifically to meet the educational needs of its community. First, the Weekender Program allows students to complete both two- and four-year degrees by offering “clusters” of courses on weekends. “Utilizing a trimester format, Weekender classes begin in September, January, and May. Students may begin during any trimester. Classes are held on six weekends, usually three weeks apart” (www.keystone.edu/Weekender). Second, the college partnered with the local Proctor & Gamble manufacturing plant to offer on-site classes scheduled around the plant’s “swing shift” schedule, which had prevented many employees from taking college classes even on the weekend.

“Chunking” of educational curriculum

“Chunking” refers to the grouping of certificate and degree coursework into small sets of one- or two-semester courses that are designed with a skill or job goal in mind. The “chunks” are cumulative and eventually result in certificates and degrees (www.pcc.edu/services/pdf/157/CareerPathwaysOverview&BestPractices10-03.pdf). Macomb Community College’s “3+1 Applied Baccalaureate Degree Sequence” is a local example of a “chunked” program. As students progress toward the baccalaureate degree, credit and skill “milestones” are recognized through the awarding of an appropriate credential. The curriculum builds upon a basic foundation and adds breadth as well as depth as the student continues. The “chunked” curriculum is part of a larger “career pathway” that includes remedial coursework (if necessary); academic, career, and financial advising; occupational and career “roadmaps”; and conveniently scheduled classes.

Washington State has embarked on a “Workforce Development System” that involves secondary and postsecondary vocational-technical education, state worker retraining, private career schools, apprenticeships, and adult education/family literacy. The goal is to “promote a seamless workforce development system that anticipates and meets the lifelong learning and employment needs of our current and future workforce” (<http://www.wtb.wa.gov>). Core measures of the

program include earnings, educational participation, and educational attainment. The system is coordinated by a Training and Workforce Development Board and focuses on jobs that do not require a baccalaureate degree

Educational credit “banks” or “warehouses.”

Excelsior College (N.Y.) has developed the “Excelsior College Credit Bank,” an evaluation and transcript service through which Excelsior students (and others for a fee) can consolidate their academic records and gain credit for prior academic and nonacademic learning experiences. The Credit Bank then issues a single transcript listing all credit. Students submit documentation of the learning experience, which is then evaluated by Excelsior administrators. If the documentation meets established standards, a prescribed amount of credit is granted. This credit can be used to complete an Excelsior degree or can be transferred as regular credit to other colleges and universities (www.excelsior.edu).

The credit bank model could potentially be adopted at the state level, either through the state Board of Education, the Michigan Virtual University, or a consortium of state universities. Partnerships with professional unions and vocational training centers could be included. State-issued “credentials of value” could be developed which have recognized legitimacy within the state (and thus would encourage skilled workers to remain) and could also be used as curriculum “chunks” to be applied toward further education/credentials.

Joint Training Programs

Joint training programs (JTPs) have been established between professional unions and major state employers to provide an opportunity for members to augment their technical and general educational skills. In particular, the United Auto Workers (UAW) operates a JTP with each automobile manufacturer. These programs are separate from tuition-assistance and other educational programs provided as employee benefits from each company.

UAW-DaimlerChrysler (DCX)

In addition to a tuition assistance program, in which employees can seek reimbursement for courses taken at an accredited college, local joint training committees at each DaimlerChrysler facility conduct training classes that range from self-enhancement courses to college degree programs. These courses are held on-site.

The program also offers Learning Centers that “help UAW-DaimlerChrysler workers brush up on basic math, reading, and writing skills so they may successfully pursue more advanced education. The program (formerly called Tech Prep at some locations) also has something to offer others, such as help with college studies or learning English as a second language. Individualized instruction is a hallmark of the program. Classes are offered at DaimlerChrysler plants and staffed by teachers from local school systems” (<http://www.uawdcx.com/training/learning.cfm>).

UAW-General Motors

The UAW-GM Center for Human Resources (CHM) offers a variety of educational opportunities, ranging from basic skills instruction to transition counseling to courses for certification. Certification can be obtained in three internal areas: Joint Activities Representatives, Joint Training Representatives, and Human Resource Development

Representatives. Each of these programs includes courses in specific skill sets as well as general management and leadership classes.

In addition to benefits for current employees, the UAW-General Motors partnerships offer both School-to-Work and School-to-Career programs. School-to-Work programs involve public high schools and seek to prepare high school students to enter the modern workforce. Classroom instruction is coupled with work-based learning experience. There are currently two of these programs underway, one in Lansing and one in Detroit.

The School-to-Career program combines “school-based learning and on-the-job instruction into a structured learning sequence” (www.uaw-gm.org/edu_train/stow.html). Students gain experience in the working world and have the opportunity to create connections to a variety of postsecondary career options, including college, technical training, and skilled entry-level work.

UAW-Ford

Among the training programs offered, UAW-Ford, in partnership with the AASCU, offers the “Prior Learning Assessment Project,” which functions in a manner similar to Portfolio Learning programs at some baccalaureate institutions. According to the AASCU website (<http://www.aascu.org/ufu/about.asp>), “the Prior Learning Assessment (PLA) project is a pilot effort by the UAW-Ford National Programs Center to help UAW-Represented Ford hourly employees receive college credits for in-plant and on-the-job training. Working with eight cooperating colleges or universities and six UAW-Ford facilities, this project has:

- Evaluated a dozen Joint Training Program (JTP) courses for college credit worthiness
- Explored an array of over 600 college courses to determine if JTP training will lead to credit for those college courses
- Developed model PLA guidelines by which hourly employees can have their JTP training experiences assessed at cooperating colleges and universities
- Developed articulation agreements between the cooperating colleges and universities
- Developed a UAW-Ford University transcript for Joint Training Programs that have received credit recommendations
- Developed a voluntary Individual Assessment Option for Joint Training Programs to facilitate the award of credit by colleges and universities”

Michigan colleges involved in the program include Macomb Community College, Madonna University, and Eastern Michigan University.

International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers (IBEW)

The IBEW-National Joint Apprenticeship and Training Committee (IBEW-NJATC) has apprenticeship, associate’s degree, and baccalaureate degree programs, all of which have been evaluated by the ACE. Two online associate’s degree programs are offered in conjunction with Pellissippi State Technical Community College (Tenn.): Associate in Applied Arts in Electrical Construction, and Associate of Science. The Associate of Science degree provides the core requirements for entry into the baccalaureate program in Construction Management Technology at Middle Tennessee State University. While housed at MTSU, the baccalaureate program is designed for distance learners and takes into account prior skills and learning:

The degree requires 120 credit hours to graduate. Thirty-three semester hours must be completed through MTSU. Work experience and apprenticeship training will be evaluated and considered toward 20 upper division credits required by MTSU. This particular program is designed for individuals who have already completed some college coursework. Students should have completed 50 transferable semester hours from an accredited institution. Included in those hours should be: two transferable, college-level English courses and; one transferable, college-level math course” (www.njatc.org/collegetcredit/bachelor.htm).

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