

DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 438 854

JC 000 169

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TITLE Community Colleges: Public Failure and Private Success.
PUB DATE 2000-06-00
NOTE 37p.
PUB TYPE Opinion Papers (120)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC02 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS College Outcomes Assessment; *Community Colleges; *Effective Schools Research; *Institutional Evaluation; *Institutional Research; Outcomes of Education; *School Effectiveness; *Student Educational Objectives; Student Motivation; Student Needs; Two Year Colleges

ABSTRACT

Community colleges are often seen as failing institutions due to their low graduation rates. However, a more appropriate assessment instrument may show that these colleges are more successful at fulfilling their missions than the public believes. Because students' motives for attending community colleges are many and varied, a more flexible measure of the success rate of a community college should be used to determine whether those who attend such colleges achieve their goals. This article sets forth the Individual Academic Plan (IAP), an assessment program that could help community colleges support their claims of success by providing an accurate and quantitative assessment of their success. The information that is gathered on each student through utilization of the IAP becomes part of the database for institutional assessment, and would form the basis for evaluation of institutional success. It would also be used for the assessment of the particular needs and interests of each student, so that the institutional resources could be offered as soon as possible in order to assist each student to achieve his or her goals. This article also discusses problems in implementing the IAP. (VWC)

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Community Colleges:

Public Failure and Private Success

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Abstract

Community colleges are often seen as failing institutions due to their low graduation rates. However, a more appropriate assessment instrument will show that these colleges are more successful at fulfilling their missions than the public believes. This article describes the Individual Academic Plan, an assessment program that could provide the data to help these colleges support their claims of success.

Community Colleges:

Public Failure and Private Success

Are community colleges failures or successes? Are community colleges, particularly those in urban settings, serving their purposes? The answers depend on how you look at the situation. The answers depend on the idea of what a community college is supposed to be doing, or what its mission is. Looked at one way, they are not doing very well, but looked at in another way, they may be seen as a success story.

Unfortunately, the public often accepts its perception as what constitutes reality. In the United States the perception many people have of community colleges, particularly those in urban settings, is that they are failing institutions. This perception of failure, however, is not the reality that is experienced by those who work and/or attend community colleges. In fact, the reality is quite different, if the actual mission and role of the community college is understood and the evidence in support of student success is presented.

Community colleges are often portrayed as failing in their mission. They are severely criticized and at times ridiculed as egregious failures due to the small percentage of students who graduate in two years. Even more unfortunate is the use of these percentages to support or justify inadequate funding for such colleges, which in turn diminishes their abilities to accomplish their mission. While low graduation rates may be the case in many colleges, the more accurate picture may be that community colleges are the model of a success story in education. Presenting the story of their success, and

documenting such is a challenge for many community colleges, particularly those in urban settings where the student population is very diverse. What is needed, then, is an accurate, practical and quantitative measure that is both fair and adequate to the task of assessing how well community colleges are accomplishing their mission and serving their communities. Such a measure must be based on an understanding of the roles these colleges play in their communities. This measure must be created if the public is to have a realistic understanding of the community colleges, their mission and their performance.

The Problem

The Public's Misconceptions

The public often thinks of community colleges as two-year institutions, that is, colleges with programs that last just two years. The popular conception is that students who attend such colleges are doing so in order to earn associate degrees through programs that take two years to complete. Some students are thought of as attending in order to earn a two-year degree and then going on to a four year college to earn a four year degree. While this conception has considerable support, the more accurate depiction is more varied and colorful. Community colleges were originally conceived of as centers for life long learning. They were founded to offer opportunities for higher education to the non-traditional, the returning, and the part-time student. They were to offer education for those who sought it for occupational advancement and for personal enrichment.

Furthermore, community colleges were conceived as institutions contributing to the democratic process and the general enrichment of the communities they served. The idea

that such institutions are to be measured principally or solely by the percentage of those who receive a degree in two years is at best unfair to these colleges.

There are several problems with the use of the graduation rates as an index of institutional success. The first is that it fails to take into account the poor academic preparation many people who enter community colleges have. The use of this measure is predicated on the assumption that students entering community colleges are prepared for college work, will do so for two years and then move on to a four- year institution or proceed with their occupation. While this was true in the past and may still be true for an appreciable number of students at some community colleges, the last decades have seen a steady decline in the academic preparation of those entering colleges in this country. This is a well-documented phenomenon that has become a national trend.

While efforts to reverse this situation have been in progress for some time there are still large numbers of individuals entering college whose basic language and mathematical skills are not what they had been for high school graduates at the end of the Indo China war. Nationally, for example, 41% of freshmen at public, two-year colleges took at least one remedial course in 1995. (New York Times, 1998). The increasing number of under-prepared students who are entering college has been exacerbated by the influx of recent immigrants and international students who often lack fluency and proficiency in the English language. The criticism of the use of graduation rates as an index of institutional success has been made frequently and forcefully, but to little avail because of the lack of an alternative measure, particularly a quantifiable measure of success.

Furthermore, those who use graduation rates as the exclusive or primary assessment measure of such college's success often appear to be ignorant of or to misunderstand the purpose for which community colleges were created and continue to serve. When one evaluates the effectiveness of the community college by looking primarily or exclusively at the graduation rates, one fails to take into account the fact that not all community college students ever intend to complete the requirements of and earn a two-year degree.

In some community colleges, for example, the percentage of students who do not intend to earn a certificate or degree equals or exceeds those who do plan to complete a degree program. The Queensborough Community College (QCC) Entering Student Survey that was conducted in the Spring of 1998, for example, showed that 40% of the freshmen indicated that they planned to take less than the 60 credits that is required for a degree at QCC. (QCC Entering Student Survey, 1998). Therefore, to measure the success of a community college by graduation rate when those who attend do so for purposes not associated with nor leading to such graduation is unfair. Worse still is that the focus on and use of such an inaccurate measure often lead to a failure to appreciate what these colleges actually do. This in turn has led to a decline in popular support for community colleges, which translates into a decline in financial support for these institutions.

Students' motives for attending community colleges

People who attend community colleges have many different motives and goals for doing so. Consequently, the more accurate measure of the success rate of a community college should be the determination of how well those who attend such colleges do

achieve their goals. When students, achieve their goals, that accomplishment is success. Students attend a community college in order to, among other things, prepare themselves for transfer to a four year college, earn a two year degree, improve their occupational status, enrich themselves culturally, improve job skills, and/or to develop their English language skills. When they have accomplished their goals, they have succeeded.

Furthermore, many individuals who attend a community college would have preferred to attend a four-year college, but circumstances such as finances, language skills or academic achievement, prevented them from doing so. For them, attending the community college is an interim measure, a time for them to remedy their deficiencies, earn some college credits and prepare to transfer to a four-year institution.

Additionally, there are some students who elect to attend a community college because of its convenience both financially and geographically. They intend to remain for a set period of time and then transfer to another institution. The community colleges that provide these students with college level instruction that enables them to earn credits and transfer those credits to another institution is assisting those people to achieve their goals.

There are other students who are attending community colleges, some of them with support from their employers, in order to improve their job skills. It is their intention to take a limited number of specific courses and then to stop attending, at least to stop for a while unless or until their occupation or employer requires further education.

Still, there are those who attend such an institution intending to earn a specific number of credits. They do so to make themselves eligible for some employment opportunity or

to earn a salary differential. Many of these students have no intention of earning a degree, although a few go on to do so, perhaps thereby earning a second or even a third degree.

Finally, at community colleges across the nation, some people attend classes for no other purpose than personal enrichment. This is the case particularly with elderly people who attend these college classes in order to learn about subjects they have long been curious about or else they attend in order to enrich their minds and learn for the sheer joy of learning itself. Their success is established when they complete a single course or series of courses they set out to experience. There is no intention or need for them to achieve a certificate or degree. They are part of the student census, yet, they are not matriculated nor are they headed for further higher education. Their presence at the college is as legitimate as the matriculated student intending to earn a degree. Therefore, the measure of the success of a community college must take into account how well such institutions serve the needs of its constituents.

Whatever the motives or goals are of students who attend a community college, if that college, through offering of services and classes, enables those people to achieve their educational goals, then that is success for that educational institution and it should be recognized as such. How well the college assists its students to achieve their academic goals should be the primary measure of how well the college is fulfilling its mission. What is the process through which community colleges can be properly assessed? How are the quantitative analyses or assessment of such institutions to be accomplished?

A Solution

The institutional assessment process and the Individual Academic Plan (IAP).

Assessing the success of a community college solely by its graduation rates is clearly unfair, whether those rates are for those receiving degrees or certificates in one, two or even three years. What is needed is a process through which community colleges can record each student's goal in attending the College. Once recorded, each college determines whether or not the student has achieved that goal. The number of students who achieve their goals, whether that is a degree, certificate or otherwise should form the basis for any claim a community college may make for succeeding at what it does. The College needs to develop a program to record the presence of students, their goals for attending, and the results of their experiences at the College in terms of those goals. Such a program would enable the College not only to determine whether or not individual students had achieved their personal educational goals, but also how well the institution is performing, primarily through assisting students to achieve their goals. Such a program would be an important part of the institutional assessment process. The Individual Academic Plan is such a program.

What is the Individual Academic Plan and how does it work?

The IAP would provide an accurate and quantitative assessment of the success of community colleges. The IAP begins with a process through which information is gathered concerning each student who attends a community college. When students enter the college, they are asked to give information concerning their goals, desired courses, and so forth. This initial interview would also include information concerning the special

needs of each student, problems that they may be experiencing, particularly difficulties that may hinder, impede or prevent their achieving their goals. Once identified, the difficulties that may be alleviated through utilization of college resources can be addressed and assistance offered. This interview is preferably done through a website but may also be done on specified computers on campus, or through an advisor who is assigned to the student, and who has access to a computer that is part of the college-wide system.

At crucial points in the semester, for example, the midpoint, the end, and the beginning of the next semester, the monitoring of the student's progress is performed. If the student has been assigned to an individual advisor or counselor, then that counselor is contacted by e-mail and requested to update the information on the advisees. The counselor or advisor may check each student's/advisee's record and make a determination as to the student's progress toward or completion of their academic goal. Indeed, through such a computer check it could be determined whether or not the student had achieved his or her goal.

If completion of the goal or progress toward it cannot be determined through a check of the computerized information (transcript), then the advisor would contact the advisee to gather more information and to ascertain, where possible, why the goal or progress toward it was not being accomplished. This contact could be facilitated through the IAP by incorporating an e-mail address, phone number, office hours, and location.

If the student has not been assigned to an individual advisor, the computer can perform the check of progress toward the goal and in those cases where a completely automated assessment does not lead to a clear determination, then the Institutional Research staff would refer those student cases to the full-time academic advisors who would then make individual determinations.

Automation of the process.

Given the meager resources, and the limited time faculty members have to devote to this process, and given the electronic technologies currently available, and those that are rapidly emerging, the tasks which need to be performed should be automated. This will make the process simple, effective and efficient.

If the process is automated the advisors will be guided through the interviews and various steps of developing the IAP. Additionally, the advisors will have access to information regarding specific courses that the student needs to take, support services that are available, and the courses that are available during the time of registration. Indeed, part of the process of developing or monitoring the IAP could include registration into the actual classes. The more automated the process, the easier it will be to capture the information and make use of it without their being an individual staff member performing those tasks.

While it is preferable to assign one student to an advisor who is assigned to that student for the entire time that the student is at that college, this may not be possible given the small number of faculty, staff, counselors and advisors. Where there is an individual advisor for the student, having as much of the process of information gathering

and transmission automated also increases the ease of accomplishing the tasks which in turn will permit and encourage more faculty and advisors to provide assistance to more students. Naturally, the number of students that would be assigned to each faculty and advisor would vary according to their other commitments and their own level of ability and interest. Since faculty have their teaching and research responsibilities they cannot be expected to provide advisement services to as many students compared to, for example, academic advisors who have the provision of such services as one of their primary responsibilities.

The IAP and Institutional Assessment

The information that is gathered on each student through utilization of the IAP becomes part of the database for institutional assessment, and would form the basis for evaluation of institutional success. It would also be used for the assessment of what the particular needs and interests of each student are so that the institutional resources can be offered as soon as possible in order to assist each student to achieve his or her goals.

How well the College assists its students to achieve their academic goals would then be the primary measure of how well the College is fulfilling its mission. The value for the institution in performing such an assessment comes more in the analysis of why students do not complete their goals. If the reason involves factors over which the institution can exert influence it becomes possible for the college to then develop an action plan to remedy the situation, thereby providing more support, assisting students to achieve their academic goals.

The institutional assessment process also provides for the analysis of the data gathered through the IAP. Thus, at crucial points during the academic year, and when the student stops attending, an assessment is made of whether or not the student achieved his or her goals. The percentages of successful completion would be tabulated then the factors that correlate with success would be ascertained. The institution would then have a clearer understanding of what is working when it does work. When the goals are not met the IAP would be analyzed in an attempt to learn what prevented the successful completion of the student's academic goals.

The college may learn that there are students who did not achieve their goals due to factors beyond its control. A student, for example, may be ineligible for any further financial aid. That student may withdraw, due to failure to meet the financial cost involved in attending college. The College should then examine whether or not it had identified finances as a likely obstacle to this student achieving his or her goal, and whether it offered as much financial assistance as was possible from all the available sources. If it had done all that it could, then that failure is one that, while still recorded as a failure, cannot be attributed to a failure of the institution, but perhaps to the wider community for failure to give more support to higher education. College officials can then use numbers of such cases to support their efforts to gain additional financial aid and other funding that would decrease the number of such cases.

Should analysis of the case of failure due to lack of finances reveals that the situation could have been remedied had the student's financial need been identified sooner, and

then financial aid sources been made known to the student, then the College knows it has more work to do to improve its efforts to foster students' success. In either of these two cases of failure due to lack of financial resources, it remains a failure and not a success, but now with the hard data available the College is in a better position to improve its performance in accomplishing its mission.

What is true of the case of failure due to financial reasons is also true of failures due to reasons of English language difficulties, learning disabilities and so forth. With the IAP program in operation each college is in a better position to analyze what is inhibiting students' success and what it might be able to do to improve the rate of success.

There will be cases where students must withdraw and not achieve their goals due to personal problems. Family situations such as illness, death in the family, or relocation of the family are outcomes that the college and even the wider community are powerless to prevent. These will be listed as failures because they will not be contributing to the percentage of successful outcomes. Nevertheless, the College will be able to ascertain that these cases were not the responsibility of the institution to alleviate. The College can and should offer counseling and the opportunity for the student to return at a later date, but if students do not complete the courses and degree programs that they had indicated as their goal and if they are still not in attendance or have not indicated the date of their return, those cases are not successes and cannot be recorded as such although manifestly, they are not evidence of the failure of the institution.

Problems in Implementing the IAP

There are problems with making this concept operational. There may be difficulties, for example, in gathering the information, effectively using the information to assist students, tracking the students as they proceed toward their goals and then recording the final outcomes. With the problems in gathering the data, for example, the question arises as to when, how, and by whom it is to be gathered. Additionally, cases such as students who are not certain of or change their goals, or who cannot be traced may be problematic. Most difficult would be determining what the principal factors were that led to the students' failure to achieve their academic goals.

For the most part, this information and analysis would be straightforward and uncomplicated, thereby providing the institution with a substantial database for it to determine how well it is accomplishing its mission. Additionally, these difficulties are not so great as to prevent the adoption of this manner of institutional assessment, but rather they are a challenge to be faced and dealt with as the assessment program is implemented and developed. Refinements in the process that will make it more effective can and would be made in time.

Other student related problems that may occur include the following: Some students, for example, enter the college uncertain of what their goals are. They spend time at the College, they take courses and they may develop an idea, a goal, and a purpose for furthering their education. If upon entering they were uncertain as to their educational goal, and through their experiences at the College they formulate one, it could be maintained that the College had performed a service for that student. For that student the College may record the development of an educational goal as a goal in itself. Through

interaction with the counselors and academic advisors of the College, assisting students to formulate a clear academic goal, and a plan to achieve it is part of the mission of the College.

Many students change their academic goals while attending college. They may change their degree programs, from taking a few courses to pursuing a degree or the reverse. Regardless of the change or the direction of the change the student would have an initial primary goal and perhaps a secondary goal as well. The assessment of how well the institution has served these students could still be performed. If students change their primary goal due to a change in values or a more realistic appraisal of their basic competencies and abilities, then assisting them to achieve the new primary goal becomes the basis for evaluating how well the college has accomplished its mission with regards to those students. Should students change their primary goals due to a failure to overcome obstacles, then the college can perform its assessment as to what degree the institution might have been able to remove or minimize those obstacles. It could identify at what points interventions and support services were in order and to what degree it met those needs.

There will also be students who change their goals due to failure to accomplish the first. If they elect to remain at the College and attempt to achieve another academic goal, for example, earning a certificate rather than a degree, then upon achieving the alternative goal, the college should record that as another success. The mission of the college should not be seen as assisting students in achieving any academic goal that they elect but in achieving any academic goal that it is possible for both the student to achieve and the

institution to provide opportunities for achieving. Assisting students to succeed is part of the mission of the College. It does so by assisting students to succeed at formulating realistic appraisal of their competencies, at developing academic goals consistent with those appraisals and not only at achieving the completion of courses, certificate and degree programs.

Clearly, to ascertain the success or failure of a community college in fulfilling its mission requires more than a cursory inspection of the graduation rates. It requires an understanding of the varied mission of the community college and how it serves its community. Community colleges should implement a more effective process of self-assessment. With an effective self-assessment instrument, the institutions will deliver more efficient and effective support services to students, and will provide the public with a more accurate picture of their performance. When community colleges report on the findings reached by an institutional assessment process that measures how well it assists students to achieve the goals of their Individual Academic Plans, they will be reporting a story much different from that decried by their public critics. The story of community colleges may just turn out to be one of continuing success amidst great adversity. The IAP will provide community colleges with the data to assist in accomplishing and in supporting their claims of that success.

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Abstract

Community colleges are often seen as failing institutions due to their low graduation rates. However, a more appropriate assessment instrument will show that these colleges are more successful at fulfilling their missions than the public believes. This article describes the Individual Academic Plan, an assessment program that could provide the data to help these colleges support their claims of success.

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Unfortunately, the public often accepts its perception as what constitutes reality. In the United States the perception many people have of community colleges, particularly those in urban settings, is that they are failing institutions. This perception of failure, however, is not the reality that is experienced by those who work and/or attend community colleges. In fact, the reality is quite different, if the actual mission and role of the community college is understood and the evidence in support of student success is presented.

Community colleges are often portrayed as failing in their mission. They are severely criticized and at times ridiculed as egregious failures due to the small percentage of students who graduate in two years. Even more unfortunate is the use of these percentages to support or justify inadequate funding for such colleges, which in turn diminishes their abilities to accomplish their mission. While low graduation rates may be the case in many colleges, the more accurate picture may be that community colleges are the model of a success story in education. Presenting the story of their success, and

documenting such is a challenge for many community colleges, particularly those in urban settings where the student population is very diverse. What is needed, then, is an accurate, practical and quantitative measure that is both fair and adequate to the task of assessing how well community colleges are accomplishing their mission and serving their communities. Such a measure must be based on an understanding of the roles these colleges play in their communities. This measure must be created if the public is to have a realistic understanding of the community colleges, their mission and their performance.

The Problem

The Public's Misconceptions

The public often thinks of community colleges as two-year institutions, that is, colleges with programs that last just two years. The popular conception is that students who attend such colleges are doing so in order to earn associate degrees through programs that take two years to complete. Some students are thought of as attending in order to earn a two-year degree and then going on to a four year college to earn a four year degree. While this conception has considerable support, the more accurate depiction is more varied and colorful. Community colleges were originally conceived of as centers for life long learning. They were founded to offer opportunities for higher education to the non-traditional, the returning, and the part-time student. They were to offer education for those who sought it for occupational advancement and for personal enrichment.

Furthermore, community colleges were conceived as institutions contributing to the democratic process and the general enrichment of the communities they served. The idea

that such institutions are to be measured principally or solely by the percentage of those who receive a degree in two years is at best unfair to these colleges.

There are several problems with the use of the graduation rates as an index of institutional success. The first is that it fails to take into account the poor academic preparation many people who enter community colleges have. The use of this measure is predicated on the assumption that students entering community colleges are prepared for college work, will do so for two years and then move on to a four-year institution or proceed with their occupation. While this was true in the past and may still be true for an appreciable number of students at some community colleges, the last decades have seen a steady decline in the academic preparation of those entering colleges in this country. This is a well-documented phenomenon that has become a national trend.

While efforts to reverse this situation have been in progress for some time there are still large numbers of individuals entering college whose basic language and mathematical skills are not what they had been for high school graduates at the end of the Indo China war. Nationally, for example, 41% of freshmen at public, two-year colleges took at least one remedial course in 1995. (New York Times, 1998). The increasing number of under-prepared students who are entering college has been exacerbated by the influx of recent immigrants and international students who often lack fluency and proficiency in the English language. The criticism of the use of graduation rates as an index of institutional success has been made frequently and forcefully, but to little avail because of the lack of an alternative measure, particularly a quantifiable measure of success.

Furthermore, those who use graduation rates as the exclusive or primary assessment measure of such college's success often appear to be ignorant of or to misunderstand the purpose for which community colleges were created and continue to serve. When one evaluates the effectiveness of the community college by looking primarily or exclusively at the graduation rates, one fails to take into account the fact that not all community college students ever intend to complete the requirements of and earn a two-year degree.

In some community colleges, for example, the percentage of students who do not intend to earn a certificate or degree equals or exceeds those who do plan to complete a degree program. The Queensborough Community College (QCC) Entering Student Survey that was conducted in the Spring of 1998, for example, showed that 40% of the freshmen indicated that they planned to take less than the 60 credits that is required for a degree at QCC. (QCC Entering Student Survey, 1998). Therefore, to measure the success of a community college by graduation rate when those who attend do so for purposes not associated with nor leading to such graduation is unfair. Worse still is that the focus on and use of such an inaccurate measure often lead to a failure to appreciate what these colleges actually do. This in turn has led to a decline in popular support for community colleges, which translates into a decline in financial support for these institutions.

Students' motives for attending community colleges

People who attend community colleges have many different motives and goals for doing so. Consequently, the more accurate measure of the success rate of a community college should be the determination of how well those who attend such colleges do

achieve their goals. When students, achieve their goals, that accomplishment is success. Students attend a community college in order to, among other things, prepare themselves for transfer to a four year college, earn a two year degree, improve their occupational status, enrich themselves culturally, improve job skills, and/or to develop their English language skills. When they have accomplished their goals, they have succeeded.

Furthermore, many individuals who attend a community college would have preferred to attend a four-year college, but circumstances such as finances, language skills or academic achievement, prevented them from doing so. For them, attending the community college is an interim measure, a time for them to remedy their deficiencies, earn some college credits and prepare to transfer to a four-year institution.

Additionally, there are some students who elect to attend a community college because of its convenience both financially and geographically. They intend to remain for a set period of time and then transfer to another institution. The community colleges that provide these students with college level instruction that enables them to earn credits and transfer those credits to another institution is assisting those people to achieve their goals.

There are other students who are attending community colleges, some of them with support from their employers, in order to improve their job skills. It is their intention to take a limited number of specific courses and then to stop attending, at least to stop for a while unless or until their occupation or employer requires further education.

Still, there are those who attend such an institution intending to earn a specific number of credits. They do so to make themselves eligible for some employment opportunity or

to earn a salary differential. Many of these students have no intention of earning a degree, although a few go on to do so, perhaps thereby earning a second or even a third degree.

Finally, at community colleges across the nation, some people attend classes for no other purpose than personal enrichment. This is the case particularly with elderly people who attend these college classes in order to learn about subjects they have long been curious about or else they attend in order to enrich their minds and learn for the sheer joy of learning itself. Their success is established when they complete a single course or series of courses they set out to experience. There is no intention or need for them to achieve a certificate or degree. They are part of the student census, yet, they are not matriculated nor are they headed for further higher education. Their presence at the college is as legitimate as the matriculated student intending to earn a degree. Therefore, the measure of the success of a community college must take into account how well such institutions serve the needs of its constituents.

Whatever the motives or goals are of students who attend a community college, if that college, through offering of services and classes, enables those people to achieve their educational goals, then that is success for that educational institution and it should be recognized as such. How well the college assists its students to achieve their academic goals should be the primary measure of how well the college is fulfilling its mission. What is the process through which community colleges can be properly assessed? How are the quantitative analyses or assessment of such institutions to be accomplished?

A Solution

The institutional assessment process and the Individual Academic Plan (IAP).

Assessing the success of a community college solely by its graduation rates is clearly unfair, whether those rates are for those receiving degrees or certificates in one, two or even three years. What is needed is a process through which community colleges can record each student's goal in attending the College. Once recorded, each college determines whether or not the student has achieved that goal. The number of students who achieve their goals, whether that is a degree, certificate or otherwise should form the basis for any claim a community college may make for succeeding at what it does. The College needs to develop a program to record the presence of students, their goals for attending, and the results of their experiences at the College in terms of those goals. Such a program would enable the College not only to determine whether or not individual students had achieved their personal educational goals, but also how well the institution is performing, primarily through assisting students to achieve their goals. Such a program would be an important part of the institutional assessment process. The Individual Academic Plan is such a program.

What is the Individual Academic Plan and how does it work?

The IAP would provide an accurate and quantitative assessment of the success of community colleges. The IAP begins with a process through which information is gathered concerning each student who attends a community college. When students enter the college, they are asked to give information concerning their goals, desired courses, and so forth. This initial interview would also include information concerning the special

needs of each student, problems that they may be experiencing, particularly difficulties that may hinder, impede or prevent their achieving their goals. Once identified, the difficulties that may be alleviated through utilization of college resources can be addressed and assistance offered. This interview is preferably done through a website but may also be done on specified computers on campus, or through an advisor who is assigned to the student, and who has access to a computer that is part of the college-wide system.

At crucial points in the semester, for example, the midpoint, the end, and the beginning of the next semester, the monitoring of the student's progress is performed. If the student has been assigned to an individual advisor or counselor, then that counselor is contacted by e-mail and requested to update the information on the advisees. The counselor or advisor may check each student's/advisee's record and make a determination as to the student's progress toward or completion of their academic goal. Indeed, through such a computer check it could be determined whether or not the student had achieved his or her goal.

If completion of the goal or progress toward it cannot be determined through a check of the computerized information (transcript), then the advisor would contact the advisee to gather more information and to ascertain, where possible, why the goal or progress toward it was not being accomplished. This contact could be facilitated through the IAP by incorporating an e-mail address, phone number, office hours, and location.

If the student has not been assigned to an individual advisor, the computer can perform the check of progress toward the goal and in those cases where a completely automated assessment does not lead to a clear determination, then the Institutional Research staff would refer those student cases to the full-time academic advisors who would then make individual determinations.

Automation of the process.

Given the meager resources, and the limited time faculty members have to devote to this process, and given the electronic technologies currently available, and those that are rapidly emerging, the tasks which need to be performed should be automated. This will make the process simple, effective and efficient.

If the process is automated the advisors will be guided through the interviews and various steps of developing the IAP. Additionally, the advisors will have access to information regarding specific courses that the student needs to take, support services that are available, and the courses that are available during the time of registration. Indeed, part of the process of developing or monitoring the IAP could include registration into the actual classes. The more automated the process, the easier it will be to capture the information and make use of it without their being an individual staff member performing those tasks.

While it is preferable to assign one student to an advisor who is assigned to that student for the entire time that the student is at that college, this may not be possible given the small number of faculty, staff, counselors and advisors. Where there is an individual advisor for the student, having as much of the process of information gathering

and transmission automated also increases the ease of accomplishing the tasks which in turn will permit and encourage more faculty and advisors to provide assistance to more students. Naturally, the number of students that would be assigned to each faculty and advisor would vary according to their other commitments and their own level of ability and interest. Since faculty have their teaching and research responsibilities they cannot be expected to provide advisement services to as many students compared to, for example, academic advisors who have the provision of such services as one of their primary responsibilities.

The IAP and Institutional Assessment

The information that is gathered on each student through utilization of the IAP becomes part of the database for institutional assessment, and would form the basis for evaluation of institutional success. It would also be used for the assessment of what the particular needs and interests of each student are so that the institutional resources can be offered as soon as possible in order to assist each student to achieve his or her goals.

How well the College assists its students to achieve their academic goals would then be the primary measure of how well the College is fulfilling its mission. The value for the institution in performing such an assessment comes more in the analysis of why students do not complete their goals. If the reason involves factors over which the institution can exert influence it becomes possible for the college to then develop an action plan to remedy the situation, thereby providing more support, assisting students to achieve their academic goals.

The institutional assessment process also provides for the analysis of the data gathered through the IAP. Thus, at crucial points during the academic year, and when the student stops attending, an assessment is made of whether or not the student achieved his or her goals. The percentages of successful completion would be tabulated then the factors that correlate with success would be ascertained. The institution would then have a clearer understanding of what is working when it does work. When the goals are not met the IAP would be analyzed in an attempt to learn what prevented the successful completion of the student's academic goals.

The college may learn that there are students who did not achieve their goals due to factors beyond its control. A student, for example, may be ineligible for any further financial aid. That student may withdraw, due to failure to meet the financial cost involved in attending college. The College should then examine whether or not it had identified finances as a likely obstacle to this student achieving his or her goal, and whether it offered as much financial assistance as was possible from all the available sources. If it had done all that it could, then that failure is one that, while still recorded as a failure, cannot be attributed to a failure of the institution, but perhaps to the wider community for failure to give more support to higher education. College officials can then use numbers of such cases to support their efforts to gain additional financial aid and other funding that would decrease the number of such cases.

Should analysis of the case of failure due to lack of finances reveals that the situation could have been remedied had the student's financial need been identified sooner, and

then financial aid sources been made known to the student, then the College knows it has more work to do to improve its efforts to foster students' success. In either of these two cases of failure due to lack of financial resources, it remains a failure and not a success, but now with the hard data available the College is in a better position to improve its performance in accomplishing its mission.

What is true of the case of failure due to financial reasons is also true of failures due to reasons of English language difficulties, learning disabilities and so forth. With the IAP program in operation each college is in a better position to analyze what is inhibiting students' success and what it might be able to do to improve the rate of success.

There will be cases where students must withdraw and not achieve their goals due to personal problems. Family situations such as illness, death in the family, or relocation of the family are outcomes that the college and even the wider community are powerless to prevent. These will be listed as failures because they will not be contributing to the percentage of successful outcomes. Nevertheless, the College will be able to ascertain that these cases were not the responsibility of the institution to alleviate. The College can and should offer counseling and the opportunity for the student to return at a later date, but if students do not complete the courses and degree programs that they had indicated as their goal and if they are still not in attendance or have not indicated the date of their return, those cases are not successes and cannot be recorded as such although manifestly, they are not evidence of the failure of the institution.

Problems in Implementing the IAP

There are problems with making this concept operational. There may be difficulties, for example, in gathering the information, effectively using the information to assist students, tracking the students as they proceed toward their goals and then recording the final outcomes. With the problems in gathering the data, for example, the question arises as to when, how, and by whom it is to be gathered. Additionally, cases such as students who are not certain of or change their goals, or who cannot be traced may be problematic. Most difficult would be determining what the principal factors were that led to the students' failure to achieve their academic goals.

For the most part, this information and analysis would be straightforward and uncomplicated, thereby providing the institution with a substantial database for it to determine how well it is accomplishing its mission. Additionally, these difficulties are not so great as to prevent the adoption of this manner of institutional assessment, but rather they are a challenge to be faced and dealt with as the assessment program is implemented and developed. Refinements in the process that will make it more effective can and would be made in time.

Other student related problems that may occur include the following: Some students, for example, enter the college uncertain of what their goals are. They spend time at the College, they take courses and they may develop an idea, a goal, and a purpose for furthering their education. If upon entering they were uncertain as to their educational goal, and through their experiences at the College they formulate one, it could be maintained that the College had performed a service for that student. For that student the College may record the development of an educational goal as a goal in itself. Through

interaction with the counselors and academic advisors of the College, assisting students to formulate a clear academic goal, and a plan to achieve it is part of the mission of the College.

Many students change their academic goals while attending college. They may change their degree programs, from taking a few courses to pursuing a degree or the reverse. Regardless of the change or the direction of the change the student would have an initial primary goal and perhaps a secondary goal as well. The assessment of how well the institution has served these students could still be performed. If students change their primary goal due to a change in values or a more realistic appraisal of their basic competencies and abilities, then assisting them to achieve the new primary goal becomes the basis for evaluating how well the college has accomplished its mission with regards to those students. Should students change their primary goals due to a failure to overcome obstacles, then the college can perform its assessment as to what degree the institution might have been able to remove or minimize those obstacles. It could identify at what points interventions and support services were in order and to what degree it met those needs.

There will also be students who change their goals due to failure to accomplish the first. If they elect to remain at the College and attempt to achieve another academic goal, for example, earning a certificate rather than a degree, then upon achieving the alternative goal, the college should record that as another success. The mission of the college should not be seen as assisting students in achieving any academic goal that they elect but in achieving any academic goal that it is possible for both the student to achieve and the

institution to provide opportunities for achieving. Assisting students to succeed is part of the mission of the College. It does so by assisting students to succeed at formulating realistic appraisal of their competencies, at developing academic goals consistent with those appraisals and not only at achieving the completion of courses, certificate and degree programs.

Clearly, to ascertain the success or failure of a community college in fulfilling its mission requires more than a cursory inspection of the graduation rates. It requires an understanding of the varied mission of the community college and how it serves its community. Community colleges should implement a more effective process of self-assessment. With an effective self-assessment instrument, the institutions will deliver more efficient and effective support services to students, and will provide the public with a more accurate picture of their performance. When community colleges report on the findings reached by an institutional assessment process that measures how well it assists students to achieve the goals of their Individual Academic Plans, they will be reporting a story much different from that decried by their public critics. The story of community colleges may just turn out to be one of continuing success amidst great adversity. The IAP will provide community colleges with the data to assist in accomplishing and in supporting their claims of that success.

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