

Students

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February 2, 2012

Multiyear Study of Community-College Practices Asks: What Helps Students Graduate?

By Jennifer Gonzalez

Community colleges are brimming with programs and policies designed to help students complete their studies. Practices like requiring orientation and establishing early-academic-warning systems have sprouted since 2009, when President Obama announced that he wanted to make the United States the best-educated country in the world by 2020.

Now the questions for the nation's community colleges are: Which of the practices work and why? And perhaps most important, how do colleges expand them to cover all students?

A new, multiyear project led by the Center for Community College Student Engagement will attempt to get some answers. The research organization plans to analyze data from four different but related surveys and produce reports annually for the next three years. The surveys represent responses from the perspective of entering and experienced students, faculty members, and institutions.

Kay M. McClenney, the center's director and a senior lecturer in the Community College Leadership Program at the University of Texas at Austin, says the project will allow community colleges to make more-informed decisions about how they spend money and about the type of policies and programs they want to emphasize.

The first of three reports, "A Matter of Degrees: Promising Practices for Community College Student Success" was released last week. It draws attention to 13 strategies for increasing retention and graduation rates, including fast-tracking remedial education, providing students with experiential learning, and requiring students to attend orientation.

The strategies specified in the report are not new. In fact, many of them can be found at two-year colleges right now. But how well those strategies are working to help students stay in college and graduate is another matter. The report found peculiarities among responses on similar topics, suggesting a disconnect between institutions and students, while also raising questions about how committed institutions are to their own policies and programs.

For example, 74 percent of students said they were required to take academic-placement tests, but only 28 percent said they used materials or resources provided by the college to prepare for those tests. While 44 percent of participating colleges report offering some sort of test preparation, only 13 percent make test preparation mandatory, the report said.

Also, 42 percent of part-time students and 19 percent of full-time students work more than 30 hours per week. More than half care for dependents. But only 26 percent of entering students reported that a college staff member counseled them about how many courses to take while balancing commitments outside of class.

Colleges need to figure out a way to better align their programs and policies with the needs and realities of their students, Ms. McClenney says. The report found a sizable gap between the percentage of students who plan to graduate and those who actually do, suggesting that what colleges think works may not be helping retain and graduate students. In fact, fewer than half (45 percent) of entering community-college students actually graduate with either a certificate or associate degree within six years after enrolling at an institution, according to the report.

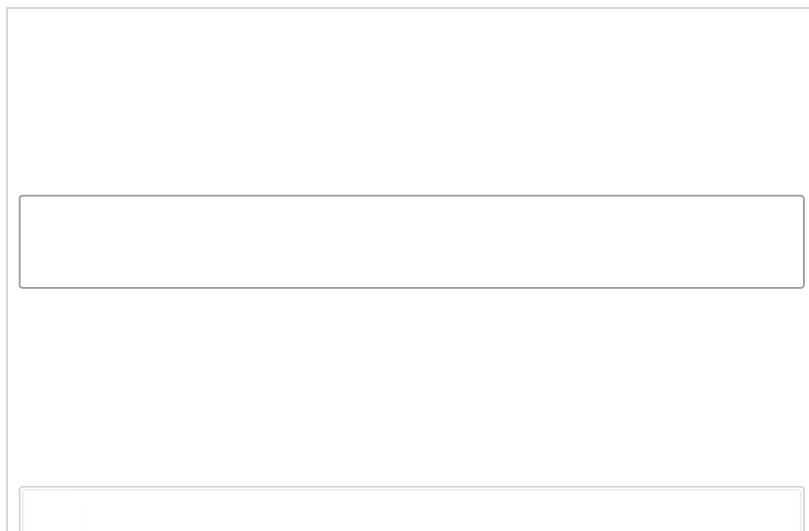
"Colleges all over the country need to have serious conversations

research suggests that students who take those intensive classes perform equally as well as, or better than, students in traditional remedial education.

The report found similar results regarding orientation services, which include providing students with information on navigating the library and finding support services such as academic and mental-health counseling. Previous research shows that participation in orientation leads to greater use of support services and improved retention of at-risk students, the report says. However, among colleges that offer orientation programs, only 38 percent report that they require it for all first-time students.

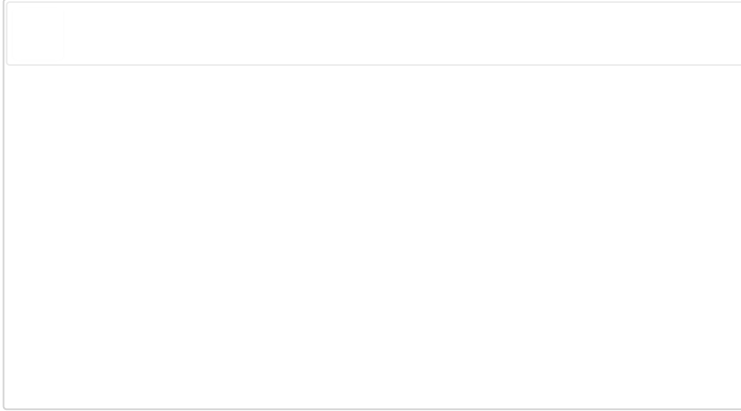
Some institutions do require students to participate in specific programs—and they've seen positive results. For instance, Brazosport College, in Lake Jackson, Tex., began to require first-time students to take a student-success course in 2007. It teaches time-management skills and proper study habits. As a result, the fall-to-spring retention rate for students who completed the course jumped to 89 percent, compared with the baseline rate of 66 percent. Those students passed remedial courses at a higher rate than before, and as a result were more likely to stay enrolled in college, the report says.

Scaling up programs at community colleges continues to be a challenge, especially because of financial constraints. That has led to what the report calls "pockets of success rather than widespread improvement." Community colleges around the country are stuck and need to find a way to "re-engineer the college experience," Ms. McClenney says, from one that is seen as exceptional for some



The best way to help a student graduate is to admit only students who are college-ready and motivated. Students who need remediation or are late admits/enrolls fail to be retained at much higher rates. Studies also show that if willing and able students are able to meet 50% of their financial needs either via savings or scholarships, they are retained at a higher rate than those who have to fund their education completely via loans.

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Community colleges are open admissions institutions. We cannot admit only students who are college-ready and motivated. Our mission is to serve our respective communities, not to become the Harvard or Stanford of our area. So we seek to improve the ways we serve students who, in many cases,