# NUANCES OF COMPLETION:

## Improving Student Outcomes by Unpacking the Numbers

Elisa Rassen, The RP Group

Priyadarshini Chaplot, The RP Group

Davis Jenkins, Community College Research Center

Rob Johnstone, The RP Group

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the Research & Planning Group for California Community Colleges

CCRC COMMUNITY COLLEGE RESEARCH CENTER

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# About the Authors

**Elisa Rassen** is a consultant whose practice specializes in helping nonprofit organizations improve opportunities and outcomes for vulnerable populations. She has worked as a writer for the RP Group on a number of projects that translate emerging concepts and research in higher education for community college leaders and practitioners. Ms. Rassen also works with nonprofits across the country to link their missions with fund development strategies and secure support from foundations, corporations, and government agencies. Previously, as the Grants Manager at national environmental education organization NatureBridge, Ms. Rassen raised over $6 million in a two-year period to enable underserved youth to experience that natural world. Additionally, as the Institutional Advancement Coordinator at City College of San Francisco, she raised over $14 million in four years in support of STEM education, career/technical education, support services for struggling student groups, and more.

**Priyadarshini Chaplot** is the director of professional development and a senior researcher at the RP Group. She dually leads the design, implementation and evaluation of professional development opportunities that engage a variety of community college practitioners and actively participates in research projects on applied inquiry and student support. Previously, Ms. Chaplot served as the educational research assessment analyst at Mt. San Antonio College, where she partnered with faculty, staff and administrators to develop and assess student learning outcomes and connect these research findings to planning efforts in order to improve student success. Additionally, she served as an instructor teaching math and English in the Adult Diploma Program. Working in the California community college system for six years and in the field of education for over a decade, she is passionate about practitioner engagement, college reform and student success.

**Davis Jenkins** is a senior research associate at the Community College Research Center at Columbia University's Teachers College. He works with colleges and states to find ways to improve educational and employment outcomes for students, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds.

**Rob Johnstone** leads the RP Group's national programs and provides strategic consulting & technical assistance that help community colleges across the country improve student completion outcomes. Through his work on projects such as the RP Group's Bridging Research, Information and Culture (BRIC) Initiative, the Gates Foundation's Completion by Design initiative, and the Aspen Prize for Community College Excellence, he has catalyzed the evolution of college cultures that use inquiry, research and evidence at the practitioner level to create the conditions for change. Dr. Johnstone has over a decade of experience as a Director, Dean, and Vice President of Instruction in community colleges in California, and brings a practitioner's experience and perspective to bear on complex structural issues. Dr. Johnstone also served as a strategic consultant in industry prior to his work in higher education, where he specialized in working with companies on how to utilize information and analytics to more purposefully manage customer relationships.

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The content within this guide has been developed with and by a host of thought partners. We are grateful for their thought capital, collegiality and continued drive to improve the lives of our community college students, and the local, statewide, and national economies that the community college completers will serve. Our thought partners include:

- Community College Research Center (CCRC)
- Public Agenda
- WestEd
- Jobs for the Future
- JBL Associates

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- The Aspen Prize for Community College Excellence - www.aspeninstitute.org/policy-work/aspen-prize/about
- Bridging Research, Information & Cultures (BRIC) – www.rpgroup.org/projects/BRIC.html
- Student Support (Re)Defined - www.rpgroup.org/projects/student-support
- Hewlett Leaders in Student Success - www.rpgroup.org/hewlettleadersinstudentsuccess

While this work has been supported by our partners, projects, and funders, these guides represent the RP Group's interpretation of these issues. Questions about these guides should be directed to Dr. Rob Johnstone at rjohnstone@rpgroup.org or Priyadarshini Chaplot at pchaplot@rpgroup.org of the RP Group.

# NUANCES OF COMPLETION:

## Improving Student Outcomes by Unpacking the Numbers

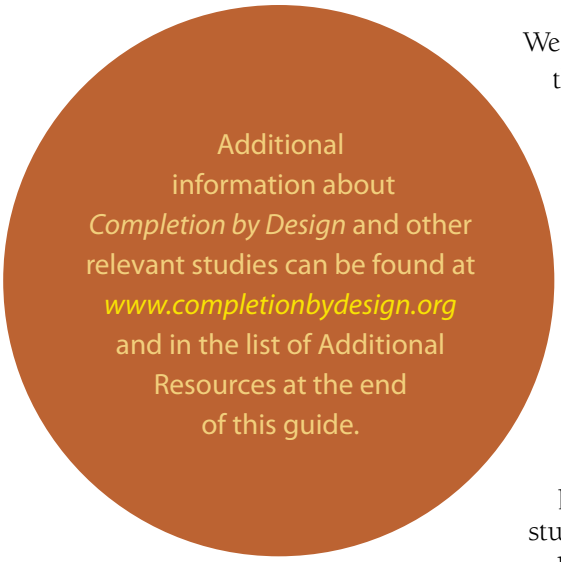
## Introduction

"Accountability" is one of most loaded terms in education today. State governments, students, parents and taxpayers are demanding to know whether public education institutions are spending their money wisely and producing results. In response, colleges are investing enormous amounts of time, energy and resources in trying to increase the number of certificates and degrees awarded and transfers achieved. Increasingly, "completion" numbers often become the litmus test for the success or failure of an entire institution.

Amidst this frenzy of activity to improve student completion rates, few colleges have had time to "unpack" the numbers and examine the student experiences being represented by these figures. No matter how big or small, each and every community college serves a diverse group of students with a broad range of backgrounds, talents and goals. These students have not only widely varied starting points and end goals, but also varied pathways to completion. How can colleges better understand the factors that affect diverse students' ability to achieve completion?

## How Can You Use This Guide?

Measuring completion outcomes is an important part of understanding how well community colleges are serving their students; however, the way in which these numbers are typically understood and used does little to help colleges meaningfully increase the success of its students. This guide explores a more nuanced understanding of what completion means for the wide range of students who are each seeking their own versions of "success" and offers colleges an opportunity to use this broader interpretation of completion to take specific action around boosting student success.




We begin by examining the limitations of the traditional approach to completion outcomes and take a closer look at the educational experiences that comprise students' journeys to those outcomes. From there, we introduce an expanded understanding of completion that includes the wide range of student groups that community colleges serve and the diverse pathways that they travel. We then explore how to use this understanding as a launching pad for a meaningful improvement of student outcomes. Finally, we discuss the complexities of comparing completion outcomes across institutions.

Empowered by a new understanding of completion that is both deeper and broader, community colleges leaders and practitioners will be able to:

1. Explore the diverse pathways and ambitions of students at their institutions
2. Unpack completion data and use those data to inform change and enhance student success
3. Identify the first steps toward reframing completion outcomes at their colleges
4. Examine the push for universal completion benchmarks and the complexities of this endeavor

The guide also includes discussion questions, examples of tools and links to other resources.

# What is Completion by Design?

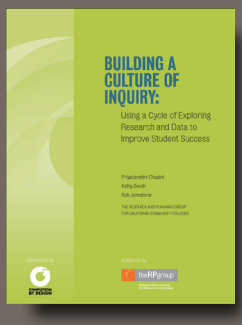
**Completion by Design** is a five-year initiative sponsored by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. Through this project, cadres of community colleges within three states–Florida, North Carolina and Ohio–are working to increase the ability of students to succeed by developing coherent pathways of study. Completion by Design has identified three key completion goals on which to focus: earning certificates and degrees, transferring to four-year institutions and raising their value in the labor market.

The aim of the initiative is to raise community college completion rates for large numbers of students while containing college costs, maintaining open access and ensuring the quality of college programs and credentials. The Completion by Design initiative provides each cadre with grants as well as a broad range of technical assistance and other supports. These supports include assistance in data gathering and use; cost and productivity gains; research about implementation options; change management including policy change; and faculty engagement.

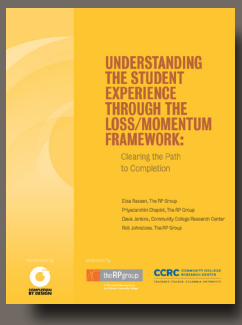
In addition to monetary funds to catalyze implementation of the proposals from the planning year, these colleges are receiving strategic support within their own cadre from a managing partner as well as focused technical assistance from a host of national partners. This support includes on-campus presentations, workshops and within-cadre convenings from national assistance partners such as the RP Group, Public Agenda and Columbia University's Community College Research Center (CCRC). In addition, the national assistance partners work with the Foundation as well as each other to engage colleges in the implementation strategy while maintaining a focus on practitioner engagement. This engagement focuses on such issues as exploring and integrating research evidence into strategy, engaging in difficult conversations around the implications of implementation and empowering practitioners to visualize the changes in their own work as a result of the implementation. Equipped with such varied support, these cadres work collaboratively to review, rethink and ultimately, redesign their organizational systems to raise student completion rates. Instrumental in this redesign process is the act of student-focused inquiry that the cadres will use to fundamentally rethink their systems. This activity requires administrators, faculty, student services professionals and students to:

- Construct thoughtful questions to better understand the student experience
- Face realities about the status quo
- Collect and examining various types of data
- Interpret the evidence among colleagues
- Collectively engage in passionate discourse on how to interpret this evidence and use it to inform action

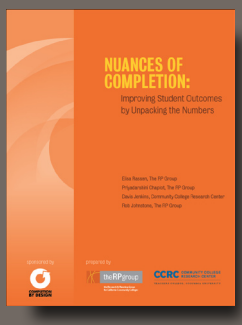
In completing each of these critical steps, colleges are evolving from institutions that work with cultures of evidence to institutions that work with cultures of inquiry.[1] In order to bring these concepts to other colleges around the country, a set of four inquiry guides documenting these approaches and insights has been developed:



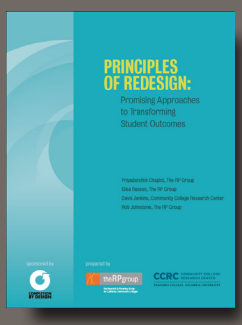

**Building a Culture of Inquiry: Using a Cycle of Exploring Research and Data to Improve Student Success** explores the concept of a culture of inquiry and introduces a framework to strengthen a college's ability to better use research and evidence to inform improvement efforts.




**Understanding the Student Experience Through the Loss/Momentum Framework: Clearing the Path to Completion** introduces an approach to examining students' own experiences at community college, identifying factors that catalyze and impede student progress and using these insights to address opportunities to improve student outcomes.



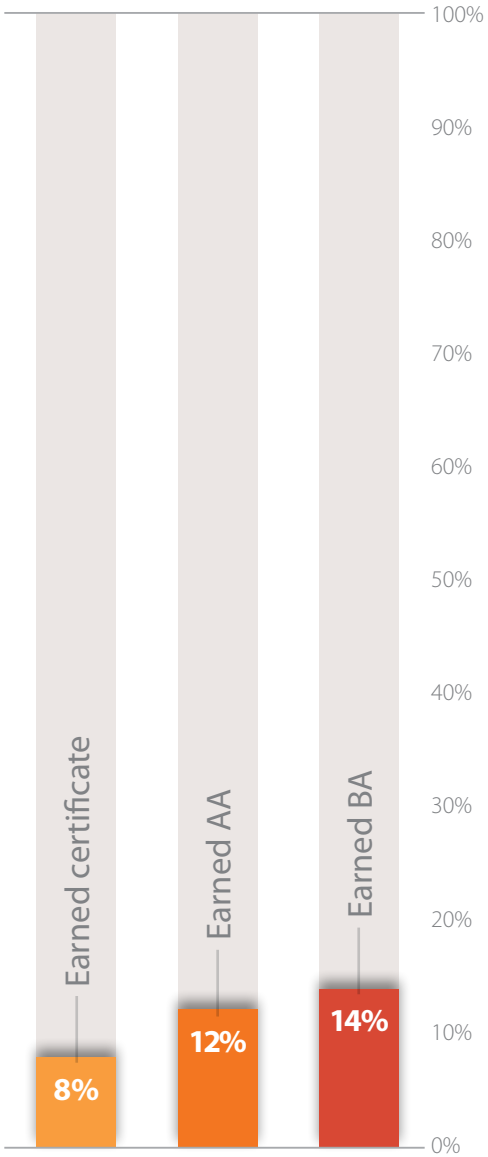

**The Nuances of Completion: Improving Student Outcomes by Unpacking the Numbers** examines the hidden complexity of completion outcome data and offers an approach to teasing out the complex factors that affect student completion in order to boost student success.




**Principles of Redesign: Promising Approaches to Transforming Student Outcomes** presents eight core ideas to help colleges address the fundamental challenges to student success.

# Limitations of a Traditional Look at Completion Outcomes

Completion rates are usually defined as the percentage of students who earn a certificate or other credential, attain an associate's degree or transfer to a four-year institution. Looking at credential attainment, the College Board Advocacy & Policy Center indicates that nationwide, only 8% of community college students earn a certificate in six years, and a mere 14% attain an associate's degree in the same period of time.[2] A visual representation of these outcomes would look like this:




Looking at these numbers, it's no wonder tens of thousands of community college leaders and practitioners are feeling intense pressure to raise completion rates. How can colleges advocate for state resources and public confidence when so many students are unable to earn a credential in six years of community college attendance?[3]

The first step to addressing these discouraging numbers is to look at them more closely. This requires drilling down into the data rather than looking only at high-level metrics. These numbers cannot truly tell the story of the diverse talents and goals of more than 12 million community college students that represent the broadest range of ethnicities, income levels and level of academic preparation. If we know that only 8% of students earn a certificate in six years, this knowledge does not tell us which students are succeeding and why in a way that colleges can replicate and disseminate effective practices. Neither does it illuminate which students are struggling and why, so that practitioners can focus their time and energy on reducing roadblocks to achievement.

In addition, institution-wide completion outcomes lump together the successes of some students with the lack of success among others. A college with an overall completion rate of 50% might have some student groups within which 90% of students earn a credential or transfer alongside other groups in with 10% of students achieve their educational goals. Looking at a single number that averages out the achievements and challenges of all students can result in a missed opportunity to understand where students are thriving and where they are encountering insurmountable obstacles.

Ultimately, these basic numbers do not point the way to the changes community college leaders and practitioners need to make to improve student outcomes.

## DISCUSS

1. Which completion outcomes are tracked at your college? How is this information shared across the college?
2. How do administrators, faculty and staff use these data to understand student success and/or inform change?
3. What additional information would you like to know about students' path to completion?

# The Pathway to Completion

Let's imagine a college that is focused on improving student outcomes—a scenario that has become quite common. Under recent pressure from the state, the institution has delved into students' academic progress and discovered that only 20% of students earn an associate's degree within five years. Knowing that the college's state funding is at stake, the president starts the new term with an inspiring address to administrators, faculty and staff that sets an ambitious goal: increase the degree attainment rate to 40% within the next three years. The president knows that all of her employees are truly committed to the students they serve and is confident that everyone can work together to reach this goal. The faculty and staff, in turn, are excited by the president's bold aspirations and are ready to hit the ground running.

In the first weeks of the new semester, administrators, faculty and staff return to their offices, energized to begin making progress. Yet as they sit at their desks, individuals find it difficult to pinpoint the specific roles they are going to play in increasing degree attainment. What exactly are they supposed to do?

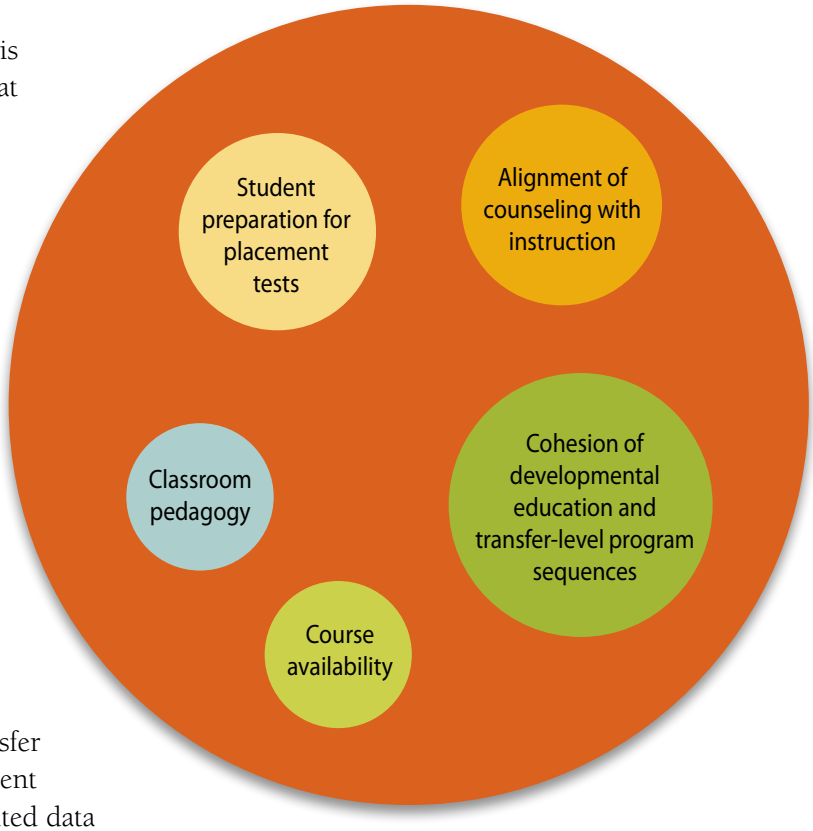
## More than Just Data Points

The truth of the matter is, while credential attainment and transfer rates are important measurements of an institution's effectiveness, these numbers do not represent a singular event. Rather, they are culminating expressions of each student's numerous interactions with the college. In our guide *Understanding the Student Experience Through the Loss/Momentum Framework: Clearing the Path to Completion*, for example, we considered the journey of one student, Sarah. While Sarah ultimately ended up transferring to a four-year institution, her path to that outcome comprised hundreds of smaller, incremental steps; in each of these steps, she engaged with the college in a way that catalyzed or impeded her progress. From motivating meetings with counselors, to struggles in choosing a program of study and difficulty enrolling in key courses, all of her experiences led to that single data point representing Sarah's transfer to a four-year institution.

The traditional approach to examining completion rates at today's community colleges looks at the achievement of credentials, degrees and transfer in a manner that can be represented in this way: ▶

**What is our college's transfer rate?**

However, if we "zoom in" on this orange dot and deconstruct what the transfer rate includes, that single orange dot might look more like this: ►




As can be seen at right, this one data point represents factors such as the effectiveness of counselors in helping students build and commit to educational plans with transfers in mind, the cohesion of the college's programs of study and the degree of articulation to four-year institutions. When looking at an outcome like transfer rates as a representation of student experiences rather than an isolated data point, it becomes easier to identify ways to make a difference.

## DISCUSS

1. What are the goals at your college for transforming completion outcomes such as transfer rates, credential attainment and/or increased labor market value?
2. Take one of those goals and try to unpack it—what are the critical factors that affect that goal? Which student experiences contribute to it?
3. How might you and your colleagues tackle one or more of those aspects of the student experience to facilitate student success? What efforts are already under way at your college, and by whom? What new ideas might be worth trying?

# What Does a More Nuanced Understanding of Completion Look Like?

A nuanced understanding of completion takes individual metrics (such as the transfer rate) and disaggregates them to reveal diverse institutional factors and student groups. Each of these ideas is discussed in more detail below.

## A Broader Look at Student Milestones

Certificate attainment, degree earning and transfer are important student achievements, and it is understandable that most colleges focus on these outcomes in particular when measuring the overall success of the institution. However, there are a number of other milestones that also provide critical information about how well a college is (or is not) preparing students for advanced study and increasing those students' labor market value. As such, it can be incredibly revealing for colleges to examine outcomes such as:

- **Continued enrollment at the college after achieving 30+ units:** these students have already achieved so much and may need only a small push to reach completion.
- **Bachelor's degree achieved after transfer:** examining this outcome could be an important indicator of how well-prepared students are for success at four-year institutions after they transfer.
- **Transferred to a four-year institution without a credential:** finding out how many students are transferring without a credential offers the college a chance to examine policies and procedures that might be encouraging this mixed outcome.
- **Credential achieved at another institution:** discovering whether students are completing their goals at other community colleges provides another opportunity to investigate how well an institution's structures and practices support student success.
- **Certificate achieved in one year or less:** understanding the proportion of students who are or are not moving quickly through certificate programs could illuminate effective practices or institutional roadblocks.

Not all students seek certificates, awards or transfer and not all pathways through the college are documented and measured. A study called *What's Completion Got to Do with It? Unpacking the Value of Student Short-Term Course-Taking* revealed a sizeable cluster of "skill-builder" students who took a small number of courses over a number of years and passed them 94% of the time. However, they were not seen as "completers" since they did not transfer or earn degrees or certificates.

- **Attainment of a non-community college credential:** learning that students elect to get a certificate offered by an industry or the state, rather than through the community college, may point to issues with the value of the community college credential.
- **Wage increase or employment without a credential:** understanding when students are able to get a job or increase their pay without completing may point to opportunities to better align certificates with workplace needs.

By broadening the definition of completion, community colleges equip themselves to shed new light on how the institution is facilitating or hindering student success.

It is also important to keep in mind that many students come to community college without completion in mind at all—for example, those who take a handful of classes to increase their labor market value, or those who enroll to learn a new language or seek personal enrichment in other areas. These students are counted as "failures" when institution-wide completion outcomes are tallied up, even when they have successfully achieved their personal educational goals.

## Identifying Different Types of Students

In the same way that exploring a broader range of student achievement milestones empowers a college to better understand student success, accounting for the diversity of the student body when looking at completion outcomes also opens the door to understanding how to increase those results.

To begin, consider the rate of transfer for students who entered an institution "college-ready"—it is likely to be vastly different than for students who must first complete three years of developmental education. Similarly, part-time students and full-time students are likely to have different experiences at the same institution. As such, a college whose student body comprises a large percentage of part-time students might find low rates of completion within five years, because students who can only take a few courses at a time will take much longer to complete their educational journey. Student groups need to be examined closely in order to help the college assess how to best promote the success of its widely varied student population.

To explore the educational journeys of particular student groups and better understand how to catalyze their success, see *Understanding the Student Experience Through the Loss-Momentum Framework: Clearing the Path to Completion.*

It is important to note that most colleges already make some distinctions among student groups when examining outcomes across the institution, particularly related to race, ethnicity and gender. However, there are a number of other characteristics within the student body that might reveal even more about what kind of institutional redesign is needed to best catalyze student achievement, including:

- Career/technical education (CTE) students
- English as a Second Language (ESL) students
- Adult Basic Education (ABE) students
- General Education Development (GED) students
- Dual enrollment students
- Developmental education students
- College-ready students
- Part-time students
- First-generation students
- Students receiving financial aid
- Students working full-time, over 50% part-time and/or providing childcare
- First-time college students
- Students who transferred from another institution of higher education

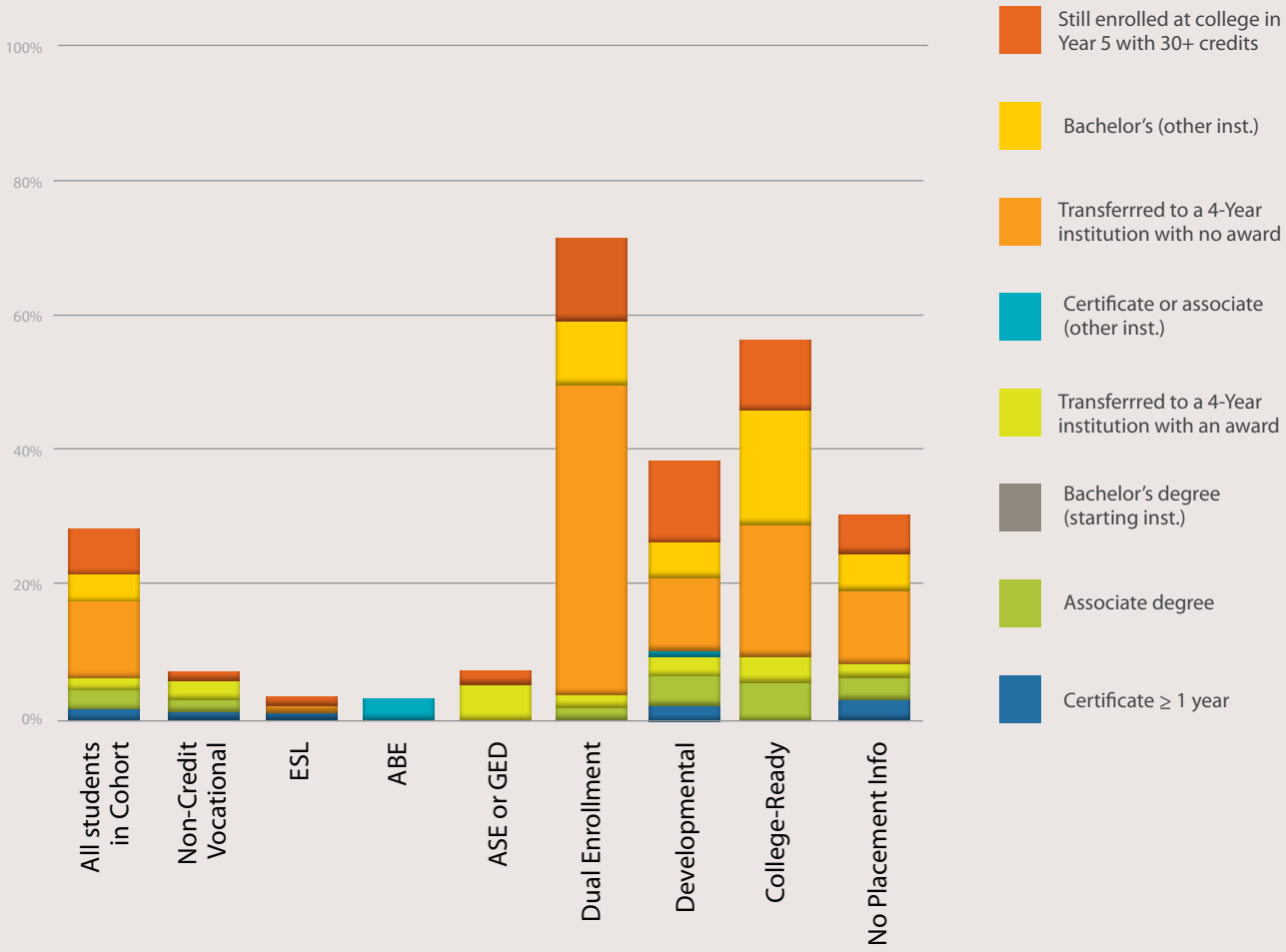
Of course, these are not the only ways to break down student characteristics; depending on the college and the make-up of the student body, there may be other equally meaningful ways of looking at subsets of the student population.

## Looking at Student Outcomes Using the Nuances of Completion

Below is an example of a bar chart that shows what an investigation into a broad range of completion outcomes for a variety of types of students might look like. This chart tracks which completion outcomes students have achieved over a five-year period of attendance at the college. The data show outcomes for nine student groups: first, a summation of all students in the cohort that is being examined, and then eight subsets of the student population. For each of these student groups, the chart shows the percentage of students who have achieved each of a range of outcomes.

These categories of students and outcomes may not align completely with every institution's experience, but they offer a powerful example of what a nuanced examination of completion might look like. (An exploration of this chart will be undertaken in the next section.)

## 5-Year Highest Educational Outcome by Starting Program Level




## DISCUSS

1. Which completion outcomes are tracked at your college? Are there other student achievement markers that would be useful for you and your colleagues to explore?
2. What are the key types of students at your college? Which ones struggle the most to make educational progress?
3. How might you and your colleagues explore the particular experiences of these student groups to better understand how the college is facilitating or hindering success?
4. How might you use this increased understanding of student experiences to take actions that would help students to achieve greater success? Who should take those actions?

# Using a Nuanced Understanding of Completion to Inform Change

## Exploring the True Complexity of Completion Outcome Data

At first glance, the bar chart on the previous page might look somewhat overwhelming. With so many different types of students making various amounts of progress toward such a wide range of goals, how can a college begin to make meaning out of this information? Let's take a closer look.

The height of each bar shows the total achievement of some kind of milestone for that group of students. Then, looking closely at the color blocks within each bar, one can get a sense of the percentage of students in that group that achieved each particular completion outcome. It is important to note that a chart like this is helpful in getting a broad sense of the rates of completion for each student group; in order to examine the exact percentages of achievement, the source data will need to be referenced.

One of the most effective first steps in making meaning out of these complicated data is to ignite curiosity and start asking questions. Faculty, administrators and staff from across the institution can all benefit from looking at these data, and each might see something different in it. To launch the conversation, each person examining these data can ask her or himself, "When I look at these data, what jumps out to me as unusual, unique, exciting or confusing?"

An examination of the sample bar chart on the previous page might inspire the following types of questions:

- Dual enrollment students seem to have a higher overall rate of success than any other student group. What is it about the dual enrollment experience that might be causing these outcomes? How might the college expand what seems to be working well for dual enrollment students to other student groups?
- Adult Basic Education (ABE) students seem to be struggling to achieve any completion outcome. Yet, the outcomes that are achieved by ABE students are exclusively in the realm of certificates or associate's degrees from other institutions. Why is that? What programs or systems at the institution might play a role in this outcome?
- In all of the student groups, even the ones who are relatively successful in terms of completion outcomes, only a very small percentage earn a certificate in one year or less. Are there policies or structures that prevent students from moving quickly through the college?

Depending on the perspective of the person examining these completion outcomes, the data might suggest an investigation into the different aspects of the student experience:

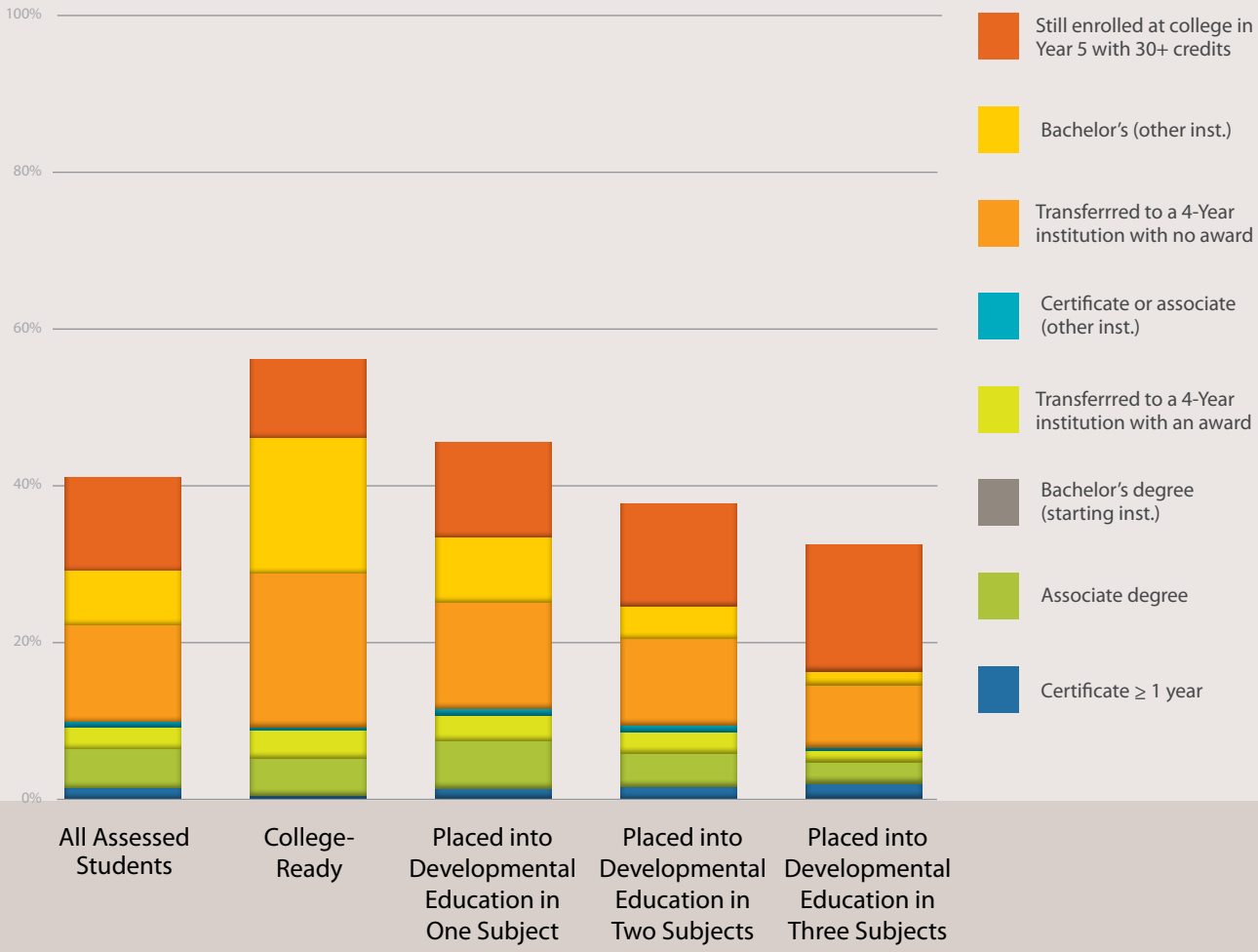
- College presidents or vice presidents might look at how college-wide procedures and policies may be catalyzing some outcomes and impeding others for different student groups.
- Deans of career/technical education might focus on the outcomes for vocational students and dig deeper: are there some programs of study producing better results than others. If so, what are they doing that could be replicated?
- Faculty members who teach in dual enrollment programs might think about the ways in which these courses are preparing students for success and explore how that learning experience might be influencing outcomes down the road.
- Counselors or advisors might consider the role of support systems for ABE students and whether they play a role in these students' departures to other institutions.
- Staff members in financial aid could explore administrative policies that might steer students in particular directions and prohibit movement in others.

Since each of these individuals has a unique perspective on the institution, and the ways in which students interact with it, it is essential that a wide range of college personnel have the opportunity to examine and reflect on completion outcomes. Furthermore, a conversation that includes these diverse perspectives is likely to yield a meaningful investigation into the structures, policies, practices and procedures at the college that have combined to create the observed results. These kinds of conversations can happen in a variety of forums that range from once-a-year events to daily interactions, such as professional development days, department meetings, committee or subcommittee meetings, or even on an ad hoc basis with designated colleagues.

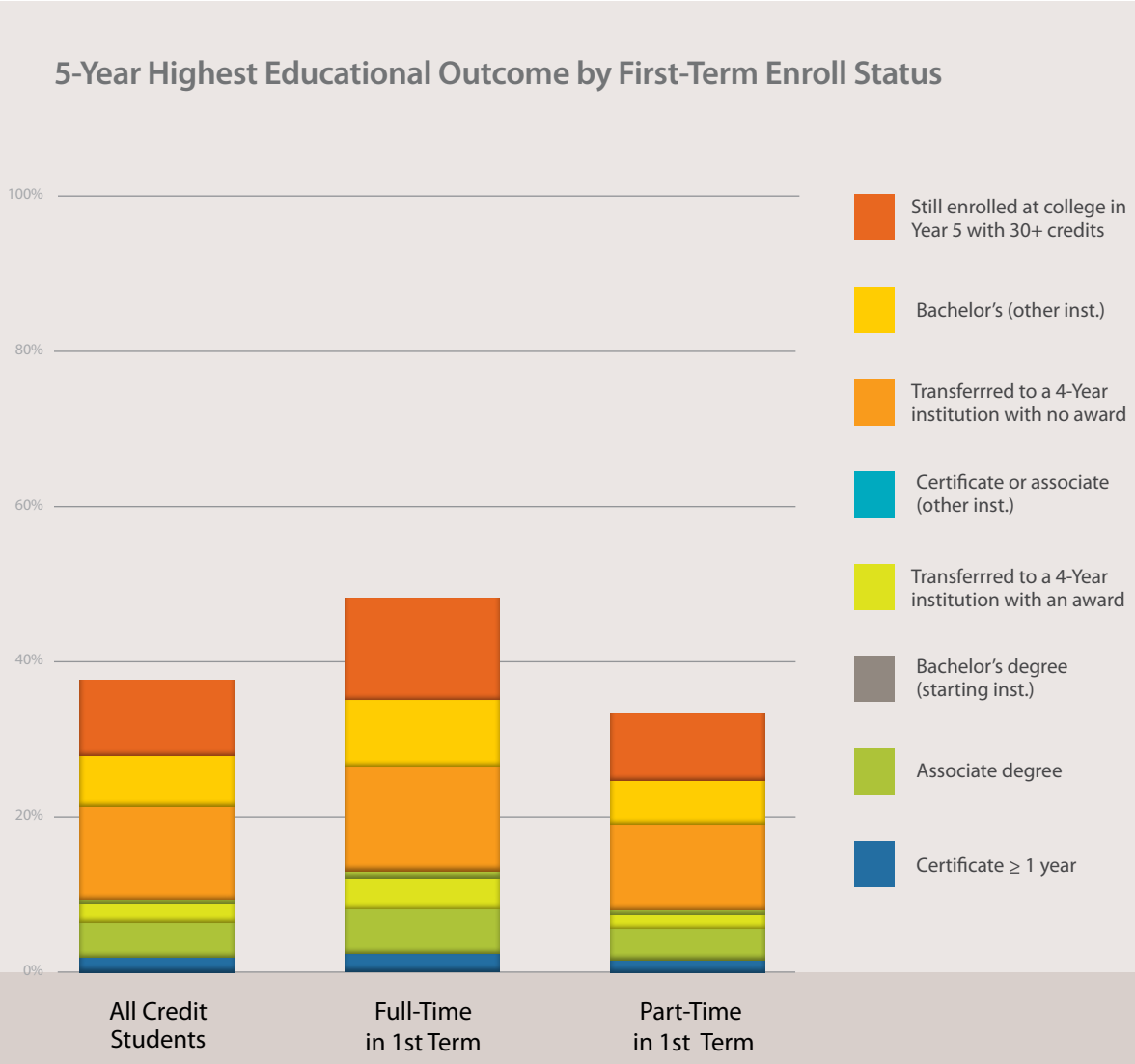
# Numerous Possibilities for Inquiry and Discovery

While the sample bar chart on page 15 offers one nuanced look at completion, there are many ways to slice and dice completion outcomes so that areas for action can be identified. For example, one could investigate how students' initial placement is related to their long-term outcomes. That kind of inquiry might look like this:

## 5-Year Highest Educational Outcome by Initial Placement Level

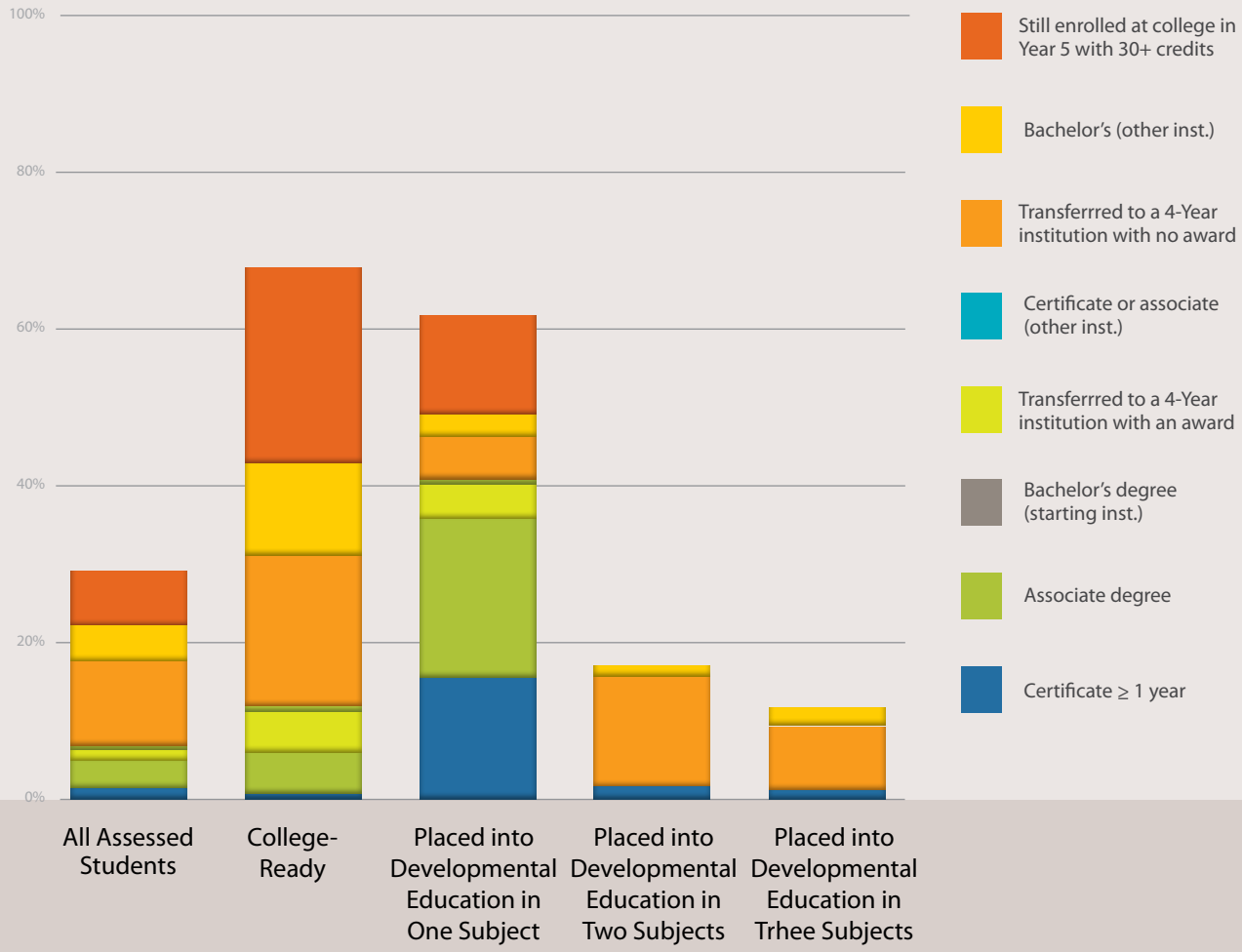


Another interesting look at completion outcomes might examine students based on full-time or part-time status. This kind of investigation could result in a chart like this one:



Colleges can also pursue their inquiry into completion outcomes at the programmatic level. A chart like the one below examines outcomes for "concentrators," which are defined as students who passed at least three college-level courses in a subject area. This kind of chart can spark questions about program coherence, course curriculum, intra-departmental collaboration, course sequence or course availability.

## 5-Year Highest Outcomes: Concentrators Compared with Non-Concentrators and Non-Attempters



# Inquiry as a Foundation for Change

While community colleges do not want to get lost in the available data, these kinds of questions lay the foundation for data-informed change that can ultimately result in improved completion outcomes. Armed with both nuanced information about completion and the results of in-depth inquiry from stakeholders across the institution, colleges no longer have to rely on well-meant but ultimately empty declarations to simply "improve the college's transfer rate."

Charts like the ones in this guide empower colleges to begin a meaningful investigation into the experiences of students, which yields a deeper understanding of how the college is catalyzing or impeding student success. While even nuanced numbers do not tell the whole story, they can reveal specific areas for further inquiry, enabling colleges to identify barriers and catalysts for student success. With this information in hand, colleges are equipped to develop targeted reform strategies that result in meaningful increases in completion outcomes among struggling students.

For more information about understanding the student experience and effective practices in institutional reform, check out *Understanding the Student Experience through the Loss-Momentum Framework: Clearing the Path to Completion* and *Principles of Redesign: Promising Approaches to Transforming Student Outcomes.*

## DISCUSS

1. Pick one of the bar charts in this section—what jumps out to you as striking or intriguing? What questions would you ask about this chart?
2. If you were to design one or more of these kinds of charts for your college, which subsets of the student population would you want to examine? Why?
3. Who else at your institution would you want to look at and discuss completion outcomes? What perspectives would be valuable in this kind of exercise? Why?

# Comparing Apples to Oranges: The Limitations of Universal Completion Benchmarks

Almost every community college in the country understands the pressure to meet completion benchmarks; accountability reports are mandated in almost every state, with legislators and the general public demanding that colleges prove their value to students and the community. When 75% of students at one college are earning associate's degrees and only 10% of students are doing the same at another college, it is easy to interpret that first college as a success and the second as a failure. However, there are numerous complicating factors that make this kind of comparison much more difficult than it appears on the surface.

## Differences in Student Populations

As we saw in the first bar chart showing the wide range of completion outcomes for different subsets of the student body, the makeup of a student population can be one of the biggest factors influencing completion outcomes. Some community colleges enroll a large number of students who need remediation and begin their educational pathway in developmental education. Research shows that these students are less likely to earn a certificate or degree or transfer to a four-year institution than their peers who start immediately with college-level coursework. In contrast, a college with a higher percentage of students who walk in the door college-ready would likely show much higher rates of credential achievement and transfer. While colleges should aim for students to attain completion goals regardless of the skills they enter with, colleges with a greater number of developmental education students face a greater challenge than those serving a larger numbers of college-ready students.

Additionally, not all students who enter community colleges intend to transfer or earn a degree or transfer. The study mentioned earlier, *What's Completion Got to Do with It? Unpacking the Value of Short-Term Course-Taking*, analyzed course-taking patterns and found a notable cluster of students that it called "skills-builder students." Students in this cluster took a small number of courses over a few years, often in transferable humanities and career/technical education, and successfully passed their courses 94% of the time. However, if a college assessed its overall student completion outcomes, these students would show up as "failures", since colleges do not generally have methods to capture these kinds of positive impacts. As such, this college would see its completion rates suffer, even though the students have achieved their own educational goals.

# Impact of Policy

In addition to the impact of the composition of the student body, policies at the college, district, or state level can have a profound effect on completion outcomes. For example, an examination of completion outcomes in Texas shows a high percentage of students who transfer to a four-year institution without a credential. While this outcome may at first seem odd, further investigation reveals that Texas, like many other states, has created a "common core" standard: a predetermined set of courses that, when taken by community college students, allow them to transfer to a state university. Students who complete the common core courses alone, however, do not receive an associate's degree from the community college. This statewide policy had a profound influence on the educational choices of individual Texas students.

Policies at the district or even college level can impact student outcomes as well. For example, the sample bar chart on page 15 showed how powerful the experience of dual enrollment can be and the ways in which it can impact completion outcomes years later. Districts that have strong dual enrollment policies, facilitating or even mandating the availability of dual enrollment opportunities for high school students, are likely to see the impact of that policy in completion outcomes. If these outcomes were examined in isolation, without the context of differing policies, colleges in those districts may seem more successful than their counterparts in other regions.

# Apples to Apples?

Ultimately, setting universal benchmarks for community college completion outcomes is not as simple as it seems. Although the idea of holding colleges accountable for the outcomes of their students is not inherently flawed, it is difficult to draw meaningful conclusions by simply comparing traditional completion rates among community colleges. Moreover, these institution-wide completion rates lump together the successes and challenges of a wide range of students to create a bottom line that fails to paint a meaningful picture of students' educational experience.

While a surface-level comparison of traditional completion rates reveals little, identifying colleges that are successfully moving students along the educational pathway can help identify solutions. An in-depth look at colleges with similar student populations and operating under similar constraints, or an examination of a particular student group within another college, might bring fresh ideas to the table. Most importantly, colleges can use completion metrics as benchmarks to measure their own improvement as reform initiatives are generated, implemented and tested over time.

## DISCUSS

1. Have completion outcomes at your institution been compared to others in the region, state, or country? In what ways was this comparison useful, and in what ways was it not?

2. Looking at your college's overall completion rates, do they accurately represent the successes and challenges of your student body? If not, are there student groups whose successes are not accounted for? Are there student groups whose challenges have not been acknowledged?

3. What policies at the state, district and/or college level may be positively or negatively impacting student completion at your institution? How might these policies be affecting different student groups in different ways?

4. What characteristics of the student population, local community, or region may be positively or negatively impacting your college's completion rates? Are there specific student populations that are more or less successful? Are there alternative approaches that would better represent your student body?

To explore how to move from a discussion about data to taking action that will improve student completion, explore *Building a Culture of Inquiry: Using a Cycle of Exploring Research and Data to Improve Student Success.*

# Final Thoughts

At the end of the day, practitioners at every community college in the country want their students to succeed. This powerful drive to transform the lives of students who come through their doors is essential to students' ultimate success—still, drive and desire alone cannot create change.

This guide illuminates a number of ways that community college practitioners can better understand their diverse students and the wide range of starting points, experiences, goals, milestones and ultimate outcomes that comprise the journey for each student. Equipped with this information, community colleges can take the first step toward improving completion outcomes and are empowered to use research and data to dive deeper into the inquiry, inform action and better serve their entire student population.

# Additional Resources

## Completion by Design

This website shares information about the Completion by Design initiative, including its approach, tools, news, participants, partners and resources.

www.completionbydesign.org

## Completion by Design Knowledge Center

This searchable database catalogs foundational and emerging research and planning documents to support colleges through the stages of planning, decision making and implementation of reform efforts.

http://knowledgecenter.completionbydesign.org/knowledge-center

## Completion by Design Inquiry Guides

This set of four inquiry guides documents the approaches and insights gleaned from the planning phase of the Completion by Design initiative.

- *Building a Culture of Inquiry: Using a Cycle of Exploring Research and Data to Improve Student Success* explores the concept of a culture of inquiry and introduces a framework to strengthen a college's ability to better use research and evidence to inform improvement efforts.
- *Understanding the Student Experience Through the Loss/Momentum Framework: Clearing the Path to Completion* introduces an approach to examining students' own experiences at community college, identifying factors that catalyze and impede student progress and using these insights to address opportunities to improve student outcomes.
- *The Nuances of Completion: Improving Student Outcomes by Unpacking the Numbers* examines the hidden complexity of completion outcome data and offers an approach to teasing out the complex factors that affect student completion in order to boost student success.
- *Principles of Redesign: Promising Approaches to Transforming Student Outcomes* presents eight core ideas to help colleges address the fundamental challenges to student success.

www.rpgroup.org/content/inquiry-guides

## Assessment of Evidence Series

Gathered and synthesized by the Community College Research Center, this large body of research evidence showcases concrete evidence-based recommendations and strategies to practitioners, policymakers and researchers in the following eight major topic areas that may improve the success of community college students.

- Developmental assessment and placement
- Developmental acceleration
- Developmental mathematics pedagogy
- Contextualization of basic skills instruction
- Online learning
- Non-Academic support
- Institutional and program structure
- Organizational improvement

http://ccrc.tc.columbia.edu/research-project/assessment-of-evidence.html

### Changing Course: A Guide to Increasing Student Completion in Community Colleges

Developed by WestEd, this guide summarizes key design principles for improving completion rates in order to assist community college practitioners in rethinking and redesigning their systems, programs and instruction.

http://knowledgecenter.completionbydesign.org/sites/default/files/changing_course_V1_fb_10032011.pdf

### Changing Course: A Planning Tool for Increasing Student Completion in Community Colleges

Developed by WestEd, this tool offers additional information and strategies, including a series of self-reflective questions to assist colleges in planning their own approaches to improving college completion.

http://knowledgecenter.completionbydesign.org/sites/default/files/changing_course_tool_10032011.pdf

### Game Changers Series

Prepared by WestEd, this series includes the following three reports that highlight current efforts and suggested reforms aimed at increasing completion rates:

- *Providing Structured Pathways to Guide Students Toward Completion*
  This report outlines issues related to the creation of more structured student pathways.
- *Acceleration in Developmental Education*
  This report shares the value of acceleration and highlights key principles of successful acceleration models.
- *Integrating Student Supports and Academics*
  This report explores how the integration of student supports and academics can build a more seamless and engaging learning experience for students.

www.wested.org/cs/we/view/spl/185

## Stakeholder Engagement: An Overview

Developed by Public Agenda, these materials provide a frame for understanding public engagement and provide a philosophy, best practices and general tools consistent with this technique. This toolkit includes:

- *Principles of Conflict Resolution*
  This guide provides a brief overview of conflict management techniques, identifying the popular styles.
- *Public Engagement: A Primer from Public Agenda*
  A primer introducing Public Agenda's public engagement philosophy and practices.

http://knowledgecenter.completionbydesign.org/binder/440/stakeholder-engagement-overview

## Stakeholder Engagement: Facilitation Toolkit

Developed by Public Agenda, this toolkit supports the facilitator and recorder in their work in designing and implementing conversations of engagement. This toolkit includes:

- *Campus and Community Conversations: Working Together for Community College Success*
  A step-by-step planning guide on seven key principles for building effective dialogues around improvement efforts
- *Completion by Design Facilitator & Recorder Training, July 25–26, 2011, Miami Dade College*
  A guide for facilitators and recorders in group decision-making processes
- *Completion by Design Facilitator's Handbook*
  A ready-made reference guide to support Completion by Design facilitators
- *The Recipe for a Great Moderator: A Self Assessment Tool*
  This self-assessment tool provides moderators a series of criteria on which they may rank their performance.

http://knowledgecenter.completionbydesign.org/binder/244/stakeholder-engagement-facilitation

## Stakeholder Engagement: Faculty Buy–In

Developed by Public Agenda, this toolkit focuses on how to engage faculty buy-in through facilitated conversations. The toolkit includes:

- *Changing the Conversation about Productivity: Strategies for Engaging Faculty and Institutional Leaders*
  This Public Agenda report explores how to more effectively engage faculty in reform efforts.
- *Engaging Adjunct and Full-time Faculty in Student Success Innovation*
  This publication identities the principles and practices that best support effective faculty engagement.

- *Internal Stakeholder Engagement Workshop Toolkit*
  This toolkit is designed to support cadres' and colleges' efforts to more effectively engage key internal stakeholders during the final quarter of the Completion by Design (CBD) planning year.
- *Planning Guide: Campus and Community Conversations*
  This planning guide provides a comprehensive overview to Community Conversations.

http://knowledgecenter.completionbydesign.org/binder/441/stakeholder-engagement-faculty-buy

## Building Research, Information and Cultures Inquiry Guides

Developed by the RP Group, this set of ten inquiry guides support needs of various college constituency groups – faculty, student services professionals, institutional researchers and administrators – in areas of inquiry-based practice at the institution.

- *Assessing Student Learning Outcomes*
- *Assessing Basic Skills Outcomes*
- *Research and Assessment for Noncredit Colleges and Programs*
- *Improving CTE Programs with Data and Evidence*
- *Assessing Strategic Intervention Points in Student Services*
- *Using an Equity Lens to Assess Student Outcomes*
- *Maximizing the Program Review Process*
- *Assessing and Planning for Institutional Effectiveness*
- *A Model for Building Information Capacity and Promoting a Culture of Inquiry*
- *Turning Data into Meaningful Action*

www.rpgroup.org/content/BRIC-inquiry-guides

# Endnotes


1. Chaplot, P., Booth, K., and Johnstone, R. (2013). *Building a Culture of Inquiry: Using a Cycle of Exploring Research and Data to Improve Student Success.* Berkeley, CA: The Research and Planning Group for California Community Colleges. www.rpgroup.org/sites/default/files/CbD-Building.pdf

2. College Board Advocacy & Policy Center, "The Completion Arch: Measuring Community College Student Success." http://completionarch.collegeboard.org/completion/completion-rates-within-six-years/six-year-completion-rates-us

3. Ibid.

COMPLETION BY DESIGN

**Completion by Design** is a five-year Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation initiative that works with community colleges to significantly increase completion and graduation rates for low-income students under 26 while holding down costs and maintaining access and quality. The Gates Foundation has awarded competitive grants to groups of community colleges to help transform their students' experience.

theRPgroup

the Research & Planning Group
for California Community Colleges

Based in Berkeley, CA, the **Research and Planning Group for California Community Colleges (RP Group)** strengthens the ability of California community colleges to undertake high quality research, planning and assessments that improve evidence-based decision making, institutional effectiveness and success for all students.

CCRC COMMUNITY COLLEGE RESEARCH CENTER

TEACHERS COLLEGE, COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY

Housed at Teachers College, Columbia University, the **Community College Research Center (CCRC)** is the leading independent authority on the nation's nearly 1200 two-year colleges. CCRC conducts research on the major issues affecting community colleges and contributes to the development of practice and policy that expands access to higher education and promotes success for all students.

For more information, contact
Dr. Rob Johnstone, Project Director at rjohnstone@rpgroup.org or
Priyadarshini Chaplot, Senior Researcher at pchaplot@rpgroup.org