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Our University – Completion Rates

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Our University – Completion Rates

A measure of university success in “rankings exercises” such as U.S. News and World Reports, Kiplinger’s, and others has appropriately been the rate at which a student completes college.

If a student spends a few years at a university and then drops out and never finishes, a two-year investment approaching \$20,000 according to the College Board, is squandered. This does not include the lost opportunity costs that a student incurs while not engaged in full-time employment.

In addition, a student who starts and does not complete takes up the seat of another student who might start and complete. These are tough words, as opportunity and risk carry with it the potential for failure. While we don’t have Debtor’s Prisons, exorbitant debt for failed college attempts may feel a lot like them.

College completion is a national problem.

Students should be given the chance to succeed in post secondary education. It is not an inalienable right, but it is a very sensible approach to building a strong nation and a robust economy, as long as the risks incurred in the pursuit of the dream of a college education are considered.

Community college is an excellent way to reduce cost by providing local, low cost opportunities for students to begin study. For many years these institutions were seen as a poor substitute for a university. I do not believe that to be the case, and appropriate mission focus for the community colleges becomes a powerful way to increase college completion rates for students, and of almost equal importance, institutions.

In the U. S. only half of the students who start college finish. This is a wasteful scenario for individuals and institutions. For students who start and complete an associate’s degree the numbers are better.

The three best indicators of student propensity to finish college are high school grades, class rank, and standardized test scores. This trifecta is never a happy equation when access is added into the equation. Many students who have not done well will not do well. This trend is denied by many looking for miraculous transformations.

The University of California Master Plan, hatched in 1960 by Clark Kerr and an informed legislature, has never been equaled in insight or impact. The Master Plan had community colleges playing a significant role in university excellence and efficiency. Any high school graduate could enter a community college, and if

he or she completed two years of study, at very low cost, would have access to a four-year school in the state.

Community colleges were access machines that turned into completion machines. They preened and pruned and opportunity existed for all. The plan was magnificent, leading to five decades of unchallenged U.S. leadership in higher education on the world stage.

Unfortunately, many community colleges clamor to offer baccalaureate and even master's degrees, field teams in intercollegiate sports, and take other actions simulating four-year institutions while driving up the costs for two-year attendees. A focus on getting students started, or providing training for vocational careers, at the lowest possible cost should be the goal.

Our university, and others like it, should not try to be all things to all people. Rather, focus should address the needs of well prepared students who have demonstrated the interest and capacity for study at the university level.

Our completion rates will soar.

At our university, efficiency and quality indicators will not solve all budget problems to be sure, but excellence and efficiency have never created a single budget problem.

There is no downside to legitimate excellence when increasing completion rates.