

Freedom to Fail? The Board's Role in Reducing College Dropout Rates

BY STAN JONES

TAKEAWAYS

- 1 More than 20 percent of the working adult population has started college but has not completed a degree. This increased dropout rate reflects a student body that juggles work with academic responsibilities. To govern effectively, boards must recognize this new majority student.
- 2 Boards can help reduce the dropout rate by enacting policies that equip students to make informed decisions with clear expectations concerning their education.
- 3 To retain students, boards should consider an approach to governance that reduces the time it takes for a student to graduate, lessens the number of choices, and provides more predictability and structure.

TODAY MORE THAN 70 PERCENT OF YOUNG Americans enroll in some type of advanced education and training within two years of graduating from high school. But only about half of those who pursue a four-year degree full-time finish it within six years. Worse yet, little more than two in 10 students pursuing an associate degree full-time make it to graduation day in three years. Part-time students fare even worse.

While it is true that a number of students are thriving and succeeding—especially at our flagship institutions, elite research universities, and top private liberal arts colleges—it is taking too long for most people to graduate. In fact, for far too many students, graduation day will never come.

Already over 37 million Americans—or more than 20 percent of the working adult population—have gone to college but not completed it and obtained a degree, according to

a report from Lumina Foundation for Education. Unless the nation's dropout problem changes dramatically and quickly, this generation of Americans will be the first in our history to be less educated than the previous one—with significant negative repercussions on their lives. Moreover, for our nation to compete in a global economy, it will need five million more college graduates—or six out of every 10 adults between 25 and 35—by 2020.

What can institutions and their boards of trustees do to encourage more students to graduate and obtain their degrees?

A Question of Good Intentions

For decades, I have worked in higher education and examined the problem of college dropouts. I support a number of emerging policy recommendations to improve student success in college, including better remediation, improved transfer policies, and stronger financial-aid programs. But my colleagues and I at Complete College America have found that, for real progress to occur, what is most important is that we in higher education embrace approaches that run counter to our impulses. We must flip our collective thinking and accept that sometimes—even in America—less is actually more.

Our shared values encourage us to want more time, more choice, and more flexibility. Americans want what they want when they want it: It has become the organizing principle of our commerce, our culture, and our lives. At colleges, that organizing principle has paved a road to extended periods of “self-discovery,” course catalogs the size of phone books, and chaotic schedules poorly matched to the needs of today’s students. Yet the results—low graduation numbers for more than 20 years—make it clear that doing more of the same will just get us more of the same.

Could it be that our greatest obstacles to significantly improving college completions in America are not specific policies and laws but our long-held beliefs and traditions? By letting the clock run, providing endless choices, and allowing flexibility to rule, have we simply provided students the freedom to fail?

Our campuses are overflowing with eager students with high aspirations from all walks of life. We have succeeded in convincing our young people that, for good jobs and a better life, high school isn’t enough. That provides a historic opportunity: The future generation we are counting on is there by the millions on the first day of classes. We can’t afford to miss this chance for a better, stronger, more prosperous America.

It is long past time for some bold, new thinking. Boards of directors, those entrusted with governing our institutions of higher learning, should lead the way with the urgency that the moment demands.

The Pressure Is On

The current fiscal crisis has exposed our unsustainable situation in stark relief. Beyond record enrollments, the crushing state budget cuts, escalating health-care cost and other expenses, and growing workforce demands leave trustees with little choice: More must be done with less.

Legislators are scrutinizing spending as never before, with little inclination to raise taxes to fill budget shortfalls. And administrators and trustees must be prepared to respond to compelling new data about poor graduation rates that could fuel justification for further appropriations cuts. Accord-

ing to *Finishing the First Lap: The Cost of First-Year Student Attrition in America’s Four-Year Colleges and Universities*, published just this past October by the American Institutes for Research, more than \$9 billion was spent from 2003 to 2008 on students who dropped out after one year. After the study’s release, headlines appeared in newspapers across the country like one in the *Chattanooga Times Free Press*: “Early College Dropouts Cost Taxpayers Millions.”

Meanwhile, many private colleges and universities are also struggling with student dropouts, while having to cope with smaller endowments and fewer or less-generous financial donations. Those institutions, too, can’t afford to have students who enroll but don’t graduate.

Clearly, the pressure is on and growing more intense. It is not an overstatement to claim that managing institutions of higher education has never been more challenging. Colleges can’t simply “ride out” the increased scrutiny and accountability, dwindling state funding, shrunken endowments, and often anemic donor support; most observers predict that the economic recovery will sputter along for years. Instead, boards should seize the moment and help leverage this crisis to fix things long broken, remove archaic obstacles to student success, and reinvent American higher education.

A New Majority Student

Leading the world again in college completion requires that we open our eyes to see the changing nature of today’s college students—and how we educate them. The traditional 18- to 24-year-old students who attend a residential institution for four years full time are increasingly giving way to a new majority. In fact, only 25 percent of American college students today go to residential colleges.

That’s not to say that traditional students can’t be found at campuses around the nation. And, certainly, a number of students are full of intellectual curiosity. It’s also true that the most financially fortunate have the luxuries of time and resources to experiment with the broad and extensive array of programs that higher-education institutions offer. But rapidly growing numbers of other students need to spend less time on campuses, confront fewer confusing choices, and be given less flexibility in their schedules.

Why? Because today most students balance the jobs they must have with the higher education they desire. According to a recent study by Public Agenda, nearly half of students at four-year colleges work more than 20 hours a week. At community colleges, 60 percent are at jobs more than 20 hours a week, and a quarter are working more than 35 hours. That’s a far cry from the American ideal of the ordinary college kid who attends full-time, lives on campus, goes to parties and football games, doesn’t work, and gets most of his bills paid by Mom and Dad.

So, if we summon the will to see the true nature of the emerging American majority on our campuses, we can understand that most are struggling, as they must delicately balance work and college. Nearly 40 percent of all of college

Five Steps Board Members Can Take

1. **Make College Completion Job #1.** The premiere mission of higher education is to produce graduates—now more than ever before. Require completion plans, not just strategic plans, for every campus and student.
2. **Understand the New Majority of Students.** Take a long, hard look at student data, especially for part-time students, to fully understand this new majority. Help administrators identify obstacles to such students' success as they balance work and college, and then don't let tradition stand in the way of making necessary changes to better serve them.
3. **Ask Institutional Leaders to Set Significant Goals to Boost Retention, Shorten Time to Degree, and Increase Graduations.** Ensure that the goals require stretching, not just marginal improvement.
4. **Hold Leadership Accountable.** Choose top administrators who are committed to the completion mission, measure progress toward improvement, reward success, and do not tolerate poor performance. Above all, move with a sense of urgency.
5. **Publicly Report Progress.** Make sure that your institution demonstrates to policy makers, taxpayers, donors, students, and their families that it shares their interest in success and responsible stewardship.

students can only attend part-time. Almost a quarter have kids of their own to support. More and more are from backgrounds and groups that for too long have been most likely to fail.

Today's students need to finish their studies as soon as possible and get on with life. They need clear pathways to quality degrees and career certificates to land the good jobs they desperately want. And they must have predictable schedules they can count on in order to juggle their jobs and studies.

The Counter-Intuitive Solution: Less Time...

When it comes to college graduation, time is the enemy. According to federally collected data in 2008, only 29 percent of full-time students at public four-year institutions graduated in four years. After the fifth year, 19 percent more graduated. Only 6 percent more students in the sixth year made it to graduation day and then only 3 percent more students in the eighth year. Giving students more time to graduate clearly does not yield many more graduates. Why? Because, simply put, life gets in the way.

Each passing month and year in adult life often adds more complexity. More hours are needed at jobs to make ends meet. Children arrive, requiring even more juggling between parenting, working, and college. A promotion to assistant manager at the retail store seems like a good opportunity for now, so classes take a back seat. All of the above and more thwart students'

progress to their degrees.

When, out of good intentions, those of us who lead colleges and universities or help shape institutional policies add more credit requirements; semester-long, multiple-level remediation courses; limitless periods of exploration before declaring a major; and transfer policies that don't readily recognize credits earned at multiple campuses, we must stop to ask: Will it take longer to graduate as a result? Are we adding time?

If the answer is yes, good intentions are leading to one of the worst unintended consequences: Fewer graduates.

Less Choice...

James E. Rosenbaum, professor of sociology, education, and social policy at Northwestern University, and his colleagues have found that students at two-year colleges, which now make up nearly half of all college students today, often lack the know-how to direct their own progress. Further, their work revealed that although students "are assumed to be capable of making informed choices, of knowing their abilities and preferences, of understanding the full range of college and career alternatives, and of weighing the costs and benefits associated with different college programs...many students have great difficulty with such choices."

Meanwhile, according to Rosenbaum and his fellow researchers, many private two-year colleges—with identical student bodies containing large numbers of low-income and minority students who did poorly in high school—shift academic planning responsibilities to themselves, "devising procedures to help students succeed even if they lack the traditional social prerequisites of college." And it works: The private two-year schools in the study graduated 15 percent more students than their public peers.

How do they do it? The private two-year colleges in the study offered students "package deal" plans for accomplishing specific academic and career goals in a set length of time. Instead of charting their own paths by navigating daunting catalogs overflowing with choices, students make the "big choice" of a desired career or academic discipline and then the colleges make all of the "little choices" for them—using structured programs that move students to degrees in the shortest time possible. In those cases where students are unsure of their majors, they can be guided to begin their studies by taking a general-education core, but for the vast majority, such a system of informed choice is most productive.

Before assuming that only private colleges can accomplish that, consider the past 20 years at the public Tennessee Technology Centers. Part of the Tennessee Board of Regents system, the statewide centers have been regularly accomplishing graduation rates of 75 percent or higher and job placement rates above 85 percent. Meanwhile, their community-college counterparts experience graduation rates of just 14 percent, on average.

Students sign up for whole programs, not individual courses. They are clearly told how long the program will take

to complete and the total “all in” costs. There are plenty of “big choices,” but “little choices” are directed, streamlined, and packaged to cut down on confusion and the chance of mistake.

So, this isn't about public versus private two-year colleges. Nor is it just about college students. It's also about the human capacity to process an abundance of choices. In one study, subjects became nearly paralyzed when presented with 24 choices of fruit jams. While 60 percent helped themselves to samples, only 3 percent could ever decide which jam to buy. By reducing the choices to six, nearly a third of the 40 percent who sampled the jams made a purchase.

Whether choosing jams or college courses, people succeed most when their choices are streamlined and directed. By thinking differently about choice, colleges can meet the needs of more of today's students and share in the success that comes with more graduates.

...More Structure

Combining directed choice with new structures for academic delivery unleashes the full potential of reforms to boost college completions. At almost all colleges, courses are scheduled all over the weekly calendar. Yet in a student-centered culture, would programs be designed that required an 8 a.m. class on Monday, a 2 p.m. class on Tuesday, 11 a.m. on Wednesday, etc.? Of course not.

Instead, what if programs were designed with more structured scheduling? Students could attend classes every day, five days a week, from 8 a.m. to 2 p.m. Full-time attendance would now be possible for many more people, significantly shortening the time it takes to graduate. And finding time for jobs in such a predictable daily routine would no longer be a challenge.

When presented with this concept, students are incredulous. “That would be a dream come true,” they have told us. Here again, the dream is actually a tried-and-true reality.

The Tennessee Technology Centers structure academic delivery in just this way. Three-quarters or more of their students earn career certificates in 12 to 18 months going full time, five days a week, from 8 a.m. until 2 p.m. Every year, more than 12,000 students move through the multiple Technology Center campuses and nearly all of them head straight into jobs.

Structure also produces some added bonuses that should not be overlooked. Compressed class schedules create stronger connections among faculty members, as well as among students. Professors not only interact more often, they also tend to create team approaches to teaching the students they share. And students often move through programs as a group, strengthening their ties to and support of one another.

But, structured scheduling only works for vocational education and career certificate programs, right? Wrong. The City University of New York's ASAP program for accelerated

completion of associate degrees is so successful that the system will soon open an entire campus designed to use block scheduling, student groupings, directed choice, regular academic advising sessions, and comprehensive career counseling. Why make that kind of investment in the midst of a budget crisis? Because it works so well: As many as 50 percent of ASAP students graduated in three years, compared to 25 percent of their peers at other institutions.

The Message for Boards

Time, choice, and structure are the optics through which higher education must be viewed in order to clearly see the needs of today's American college students—and to evaluate the worthiness of new approaches and reforms intended to boost their success. When considering whether to put in place new policies or support certain legislation, boards should apply these vital questions: Will this approach reduce the **time** it takes to graduate? Will it help direct students in making an informed, transparent **choice**, clearly consistent with their aspirations? Will it provide more predictability and **structure** so as to help them balance school and jobs?

If the answers are yes, please proceed in all haste. We cannot allow this generation of Americans to achieve less than their predecessors. Clear evidence suggests that we don't have to do so. Relying on their significant knowledge and experience, and empowered with proven new approaches and practices, trustees can help fully seize the opportunities for our country that overflowing campuses provide, significantly boost college completions, turn the broken dreams of dropouts into the bright futures of graduates, and make America once more the world leader in college attainment. ■

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T'SHIP LINK: William G. Bowen, Matthew M. Chingos, and Michael S. McPherson, “Crossing the Finish Line: Completing College at America's Public Universities.” November/December 2009. Theodore J. Marchese, “Graduation Rates: The Stakes for Boards.” May/June 2009.

OTHER RESOURCES: Jean Johnson and John Rochkind, with Amber N. Ott and Samantha DuPont, “With Their Whole Lives Ahead of Them” (Public Agenda 2009). Complete College America, www.completecollege.org.

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