

ACCESS TO SUCCESS

Increased Student Completion in New Jersey Community Colleges

Trenton, May 9, 2016 -- A Newsletter from The Governor's Higher Education Council

One of the best opportunities our State and County governments offer to citizens aspiring to lift themselves up educationally and economically is to attend a community college. Community colleges are relatively affordable and play a critical role in building the State's workforce. The opportunity to enroll in a community college and take courses to enhance one's education provides both personal and societal benefit. The benefit is enhanced for those students who complete the course work and earn an associate's degree or a certificate. With a degree or certificate in hand, graduates are prepared either to enter the workforce or to transfer to a college or university to earn a bachelor's degree. However, while community colleges have done a good job of providing access to education, they must do more to provide access to success, that is, to completion of a degree or certificate.

There are nineteen community or county colleges with 70 sites located throughout the State. All offer associate's degrees in both liberal arts and sciences as well as certificates in career-technical fields. These institutions represent a considerable investment by New Jersey taxpayers to build and support them, but the return on investment should and could be better. Of students who enrolled full-time or part-time in New Jersey community colleges, after six years, 36% had received a degree or certificate, 15% were still enrolled and 49% had dropped out. These rates are slightly worse than the national average and certainly not good enough for New Jersey. Given the investment in our community colleges and given the need for an educated workforce we must do more to increase the success rates.

Nationally and in New Jersey low completion rates have been a problem for years. Educators have been working at increasing success rates but there has been little upward movement. All acknowledge that the reasons for community college drop-outs are many. They include: lack of academic preparedness of high school graduates, resulting in the need for remedial courses; lack of advisement in negotiating the challenges of enrolling in goal-driven courses which will efficiently lead to a degree; the complicated path to receiving financial aid; the limited financial aid available to low-income students which is not loan-based; the financial constraints of supporting oneself and perhaps one's family while attending school; and family demands such as childcare and caring for aged or ill family members.

What is to be done?

In 2008 New Jersey's community college presidents committed to increase the number of degrees and certificates awarded by 4.9 percent per year from 2008 to 2020. They have worked to generate ways to improve student completion and they remain on target, with graduates increasing from 15,925 in 2008 to 23,066 in 2015. In 2012 the community colleges and the New Jersey Council of County Colleges created a Center for Student Success. The Center provides support in several areas which contribute to student success.

One of the key areas is methods of increasing completion rates. The Center serves as an information resource for campus administrators as they determine how to increase completion rates for their particular institutions.

To bolster student learning and success the colleges have implemented various programs and initiatives. One program which holds promise was rolled out in 13 of the 19 community colleges in 2014. It is called Guided Pathways to Success. Variants of Guided Pathways have been adopted by colleges and universities in several States and the results are positive, with a similar program reporting almost doubled graduation rates. Guided Pathways involves a systemic redesign of the college experience from the application process to graduation. It has several features designed to make the educational experience more focused, more coherent and more predictable, enabling students to succeed at the goal of a degree or certificate, and either a transfer to a bachelor's degree program or a career. A key feature is an academic curriculum "Pathways" map which is aligned either with curriculum requirements for continued bachelor's degree education so that credits are not lost in the transfer process, or with the requirements for career placement for occupational programs. Another feature of Guided Pathways includes exploratory majors with enhanced guidance for students who do not have a specific major in mind when they start school. Importantly, predictable schedules are created which sequence the entire course curriculum and lead to on-time graduation. Predictable scheduling for students also makes it easier for students who work or provide family care to schedule work and family obligations along with school schedules. For those students who require it, developmental courses are coordinated with college level courses. In addition, student progress is tracked, feedback is given and assertive student advisement is provided.

Programs such as Guided Pathways require substantial financial resources, particularly as the programs start up. Despite the up-front investment to implement and operate a similar program, in a neighboring State at the three- year point the program was shown to reduce the cost per degree when compared to other student graduates because it produced so many more graduates.

How to finance the Guided Pathway program and other new initiatives aimed at student success in New Jersey community colleges is a question that must be addressed. If the State and County governments are to realize a higher return on the investments made in community college education, student success rates have to increase. For this to happen funding for these programs must be found either through State and county governments themselves or in conjunction with business and industry. We cannot continue to allow these very valuable institutions of higher learning to yield six-year graduation rates of 36% when New Jersey and its business and industry are in need of an educated workforce. More importantly we cannot continue to dash the hopes and dreams of those students who enroll in community college hoping to improve their lives and their futures and then end up joining the ranks of New Jersey's higher education drop-outs. Our community colleges must advance from broader access to broader success.

The New Jersey Governor's Higher Education Council (John McGoldrick, Chair; Robert Campbell; Patricia Nachtigal; John Wefing; Richard Wellbrock).

See <http://www.nj.gov/highereducation> for more about the Council.