

The Virginia NEWS LETTER

Community Colleges and the “Completion Agenda”

by John R. Donnelly

Introduction

Over the past decade, few issues in education policy have garnered as much attention from state and federal lawmakers as has college completion. Within the completion debate, college access and affordability have been consistent topics of reform-minded legislators. More recently, the question of the time it takes students to complete two-year and four-year degrees has moved to the forefront. Longitudinal analyses show that 57 percent of those who entered four-year colleges or universities in 2003 graduated within six years of enrolling. For community college students who enrolled as first-time, full-time students in two-year degree programs in 2006, 29 percent had graduated within three years.¹

In light of these data, a new focus has emerged on increasing the number of Americans who complete post-secondary degrees and certificates. The “completion agenda,” as it is known, has become a major issue in higher education policy and practice. “Student success” and “the completion agenda” are prominent terms in the higher education literature, among higher education policy groups, and in college and university strategic plans. These terms have also become popular in both the higher education



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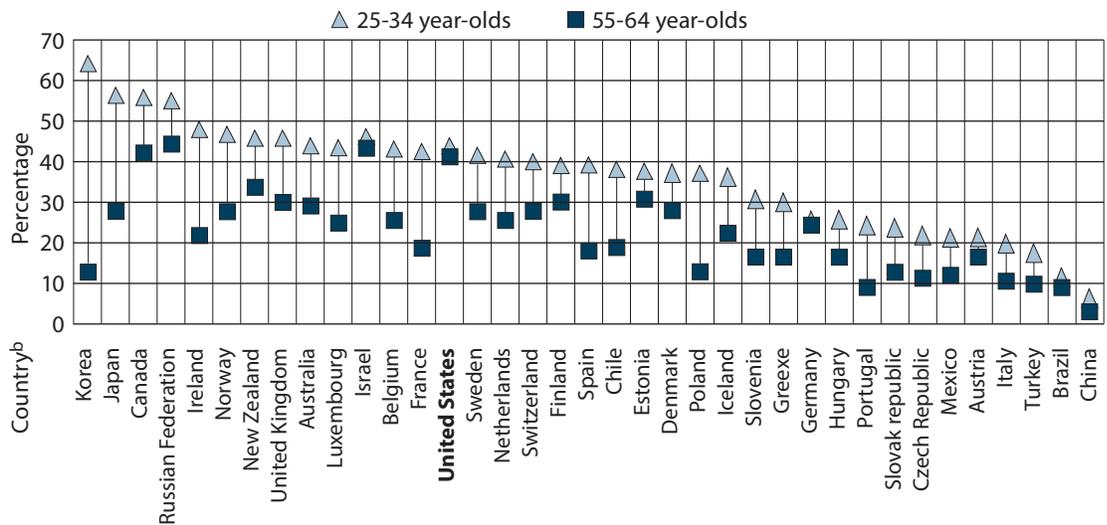
and legislative policy discourse. State governors, legislators, policy makers, and the president of the United States have spoken about the importance of the completion agenda to the future of American prosperity in the current global economy. President Obama has highlighted the importance of community colleges in the completion agenda by stating, “And community colleges aren’t just the key to the future of their students. They’re also one of the keys to the future of our country. We are in a global competition to lead in the growth industries of the 21st century. And that leadership depends on a well-educated, highly skilled workforce.”²

It is widely agreed in the higher education policy community that not enough college students who enroll in degree programs in the United States complete those degrees in a timely fashion. This is true in an absolute sense and in comparison with other countries. In a period when policy makers and the business community express deep concern over global competitiveness, a comparison of completion rates in the United States with those in other countries shows that the United States is losing ground. The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) tracks educational attainment among its members and other nations. As



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Figure 1: International Data on Percentage of Population by Age Group with Higher Education Attainment, 2010^a



Source: Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, *Education at a Glance: OECD Indicators 2012*, United States (n.d.), p. 2 <http://www.oecd.org/unitedstates/CN%20-%20United%20States.pdf>

a 2010 except for Russian Federation (2002), Brazil (2009), and China (2000).

b Countries are ranked in descending order of the percentage of 25-34 year-olds who have attained higher education.

shown in **Figure 1** the United States was 14th in world post-secondary educational attainment in 2010. The figure also shows that several countries in Europe and Asia have moved ahead of the United States in educational attainment. Policy makers note, that while the United States has had measurable success in increasing access to post-secondary education, current low educational completion rates threaten America’s economic competitiveness in the world. For most Americans, obtaining a post-secondary credential is seen as essential to living a middle-class lifestyle, while legislators see low rates of attainment as limiting individuals’ ability to succeed in the 21st century knowledge economy.³

As early as 2008, the College Board established a goal to increase the proportion of 25 to 34 year olds who hold an associate degree or higher from 39 percent to 55 percent by the year 2025.⁴ Early in his presidency, Barack Obama set the ambitious goal that by 2020, America would move to first place in the global ranking of the proportion of college graduates in each nation. The president placed community colleges at the center of his administration’s effort to achieve this goal. President Obama launched his effort with the American Graduation Initiative, legislation designed to devote \$12 billion to strengthen America’s community colleges, as it called upon them to produce an additional five million degrees and certificates by 2020.⁵ In the end, less than \$2 billion was allocated to community colleges to strengthen career and workforce training through grants administered by the U.S. Department of Labor. In October 2010, the White House

brought community college leaders to a summit to determine strategies and recommendations to increase completion, and in 2011, Vice President Biden unveiled the “College Completion Tool Kit,” which provided states with seven low-to-no-cost strategies to boost completion.⁶

The National Governors Association has also focused on increasing the number of Americans earning college degrees and certificates. In 2010 the group launched the initiative, *Complete to Compete*, noting that higher education institutions were not producing enough college graduates, and that as a result, America would be disadvantaged in global economic competition.⁷ The initiative called for governors to raise awareness about the need to increase college completion and to develop a series of best practices governors could adopt and policies they could implement. The initiative also called on governors to create a common set of higher education completion measures and productivity metrics that could be used to compare performance among states and among institutions.

In all of these initiatives, the importance of community colleges in advancing the completion agenda is a common theme. Seeing both a challenge and an opportunity, the American Association of Community Colleges (AACC) launched its 21st Century Initiative in 2011, the goal of which was to assist community colleges in an effort to enable an additional five million students to earn degrees, certificates, and other credentials by 2020. In 2012 the leaders of the initiative published a report entitled *Reclaiming the American Dream, Community Colleges and the*

Nation's Future. The report called for a new vision for community colleges that would redesign students' educational experiences by improving college readiness, increasing the number of students who complete developmental education, and focusing more attention on career and technical education that provides the knowledge and skills needed for success in the workplace.⁹ The AACC report challenged community colleges to balance their fundamental mission of providing access to higher education with a new mission focused on redefining student success as the attainment of post-secondary credentials.

In Virginia the General Assembly passed the Virginia Higher Education Opportunity Act of 2011, which Governor Bob McDonnell signed into law.¹⁰ The legislation called for higher education institutions in the state to create or enhance programs that lead to more college graduates and greater employability. And, in 2013, the Virginia Chamber of Commerce rolled out its *Blueprint Virginia: A Business Plan for the Commonwealth*, which intended to provide business leadership direction and long-range economic development planning for the state. The availability of post-secondary education opportunities was a significant component of the plan with higher education, specifically the Virginia Community College System, being identified as a critical gateway to post-secondary education and the workforce for high school graduates and mid-career adults.¹¹

Defining the Contemporary Completion Agenda

Within the policy and political arena, the completion agenda is understood at multiple and often different levels. With all the attention surrounding the completion agenda, it is important to define what it is. Most agree that, at a basic level, the completion agenda is concerned with efforts at increasing the number of college graduates who earn degrees, certificates, and other credentials. The goal may be to increase the percentage of Americans with a degree or certificate or to increase the number of individuals completing a degree, certificate, or other credential. Debra Humphries in her article, "What's Wrong with the Completion Agenda-And What We Can Do About It," notes that at a deeper level, the completion agenda is also concerned with the following: collecting data about students' educational process toward credentials, improving the college-readiness of entering students, enacting new policies that incentivize increased graduation, improving the efficiency of degree production, and tying funding to increased completion rates. Humphries states that the completion agenda should be focused on

pursuing productive approaches that help different groups of students stay in college and graduate on time.¹²

The Completion Agenda and Community Colleges

The intense focus on completion of degrees and certificates is not new. In the 1970s, there was a concerted effort to increase the number of four-year degrees being awarded. However, there are two significant differences in the recent iteration of the completion agenda. The first distinction is the new rationale for why the United States needs more post-secondary credentials. While the effort to increase completion in the 1970s was driven by demand in specific sectors of the U.S. economy, in the contemporary completion debate there is an acceptance of a "21st century knowledge economy"—recognition of global economic demand for knowledge and skills and intense competition. The policy discourse that accompanies the completion agenda argues that nations need to develop highly educated and effective workforces that will sustain economic growth and increased prosperity for individuals, communities, and the country as a whole. In this paradigm, economic growth and prosperity are directly related to the types of education attained by individuals and by overall levels of educational attainment. The fact that educational attainment and completion in the United States have stalled and that elementary and secondary students lag those of other nations in math and reading add considerable power to demands for improvement.

The second distinctive factor in the contemporary completion movement is a focus on different forms of credentialing and training, which, in turn, has increased attention to the role of community colleges in improving educational attainment. In the 1970s, upward mobility through postsecondary education was fundamentally tied to baccalaureate completion. Today, labor market analysts predict that future economic growth will be increasingly linked to jobs that require post-secondary education at the sub-baccalaureate level. Thus, they argue that more individuals should earn technical degrees and certificates that enable them to enter into high-demand and well-paying jobs in medical and health fields, technology, and the trades.

Indeed, contemporary community colleges are well positioned to play a key role in increasing the number of individuals who earn post-secondary credentials that will strengthen economic prosperity. Since their proliferation in the 1960s, community colleges have had the fundamental mission of providing access to anyone who can

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benefit from post-secondary education, with a focus on transfer to four-year institutions and workforce preparation. Despite a history of challenges to their effectiveness and efficiency from policy makers and scholars, community college enrollments have remained a central aspect of the post-secondary system, with almost half of all college students attending a community college.

While uniquely positioned to play a key role in advancing the completion agenda, community colleges are also especially challenged in meeting the goal of increasing the number of individuals who earn degrees and certificates. As “open access” institutions, community colleges serve those students who come through the doors with considerably less sorting or selection than in many other postsecondary sectors. Community colleges educate students with a wide range of levels of college preparation, including a large portion of each cohort that arrives with significant academic, financial, and social challenges. Community colleges are predominantly public and tuition-driven institutions. The prevailing legislative stance of postsecondary funding, which entails reductions in public funding and resistance to tuition increases, assures that most community colleges lack sufficient funding to serve the disparate and growing needs of their students. In essence, they have to provide more types of education to more students, with declining resources.¹³

Community College Approaches to the Completion Agenda

Given the prominence of the completion agenda, and the promise of new funding to support increased student success, community colleges are developing new approaches to enabling more students to complete degrees, certificates, and credentials in a more timely manner. Because each community college is unique, there are as many different approaches as there are community colleges. That said, many community colleges are positioning themselves to meet the completion agenda goals by focusing on three main areas. First, they are creating educational programs that lead to a mix of short, medium, and long-term credentials that position students to effectively compete in the contemporary labor market, locally, nationally, and globally. Second, community colleges are developing policies and practices to more effectively provide remedial/developmental education, a longstanding barrier to persistence and completion for students who do not arrive “college ready.” Third, community colleges are developing policies and practices that provide clear pathways for transfer students going between two-year and four-year institutions.

Providing a Diversity of Credentials

Georgetown University’s Center on Education and the Workforce identified what it calls the “great jobs mismatch.” While there are currently approximately nine million people who are unemployed, there are open jobs that cannot be filled due to a lack of sufficiently educated or trained workers. The center suggests that the problem is rooted in that fact that many community colleges are not well connected enough to their local business communities and thus have a lack of defined programs of study that lead to credentials needed in emerging job areas.¹⁴ However, there are community colleges that have been successful in developing educational programs that provide a diverse array of degrees, certificates, and other credentials that prepare students to succeed in the changing economy.

A useful example of the use of short, medium, and long-term educational programs in career preparation can be found in the health sciences area. Phlebotomy skills such as the puncturing of veins in order to withdraw blood or introduce a fluid into the body are typically learned through short-term vocational programs. These skills are in high demand in local health care settings. These skills may be learned through a non-credit training experience or through a short-term, credit-bearing certificate program. While no certification or licensure is required in Virginia for employment as a phlebotomy technician, individuals can earn an industry-recognized certification that may increase compensation and job security.

Educational programs that prepare students to be registered nurses are considered medium-term vocational programs. Students in registered nursing programs typically earn a two-year associate degree or a diploma. Holders of an associate degree or diploma in nursing must also pass the NCLEX (National Council Licensure Examination) to receive a nursing license, which is required to practice as a nurse. These types of medium-term educational programs provide a wider array of job opportunities than do most short-term programs. Long-term programs, such as the sequence of courses and requirements that lead to a bachelor’s degree in nursing, offer greater labor market opportunity, flexibility, and compensation. Four years of study and the successful completion of a licensing examination are required to complete a baccalaureate degree in nursing which are both requirements to practice. Compared to nurses who have two-year degrees and diplomas, those with bachelor’s degrees enjoy greater mobility and access to supervisory positions.

While each of these three educational programs prepares students for high-demand jobs,

scholars and policy makers advocate developing linked pathways between each program. Such linkages offer students greater opportunity and labor market mobility and can increase the overall level of preparation and skill development in the labor force. Using the health sciences programs noted above as an example, linkages between these vocational programs might include restructuring initial phlebotomy training programs so that completers can receive academic credit toward an associate degree or diploma in nursing. For a nurse with an associate degree, guaranteeing admission into a bachelor of nursing degree program in a partnership between a two-year and four-year school would increase the likelihood of completion of the bachelor's degree.

There are benefits to short, medium, and long-term training. Short-term programs typically prepare individuals for entry-level positions, which provide a low to moderate wage. Medium and long-term educational programs prepare individuals for higher-level positions that pay significantly better wages. Institutions that have all three and that have seamless pathways between programs are likely to increase their number of completers at all levels.

Developmental Education

A significant part of the mission of community colleges is to provide developmental¹⁵ courses for students who are unprepared or underprepared for college-level work. The American Association of Community Colleges (AACC) defines developmental education as courses that develop basic skills to performance levels required for success in college-level courses. Because community colleges are open access institutions, a significant number of students arrive lacking basic reading, writing, mathematics knowledge, and skills needed to be successful in college-level courses.¹⁶ A vast number of community college educational programs require students to be college-ready in reading, writing, and mathematics, making these skills an essential prerequisite to the completion of degrees and certificates.

Yet, developmental education is a major challenge for community colleges as they seek to increase rates of completion. Statistics from the Community College Research Center at Columbia University's Teachers College show that over 60 percent of students entering community colleges are placed into developmental education courses even though the vast majority of them are high school graduates. Only half of these students complete their required developmental courses, and only 25 percent of those who enroll in developmental education courses will earn a

degree or certificate within eight years of their first enrollment.¹⁷ Put simply, the vast majority of underprepared students who do not complete developmental education courses ultimately leave community colleges without completing certificates or degrees. Thus, it is essential that institutions have the resources to implement programs, policies, and practices designed to help students complete required developmental education courses efficiently and effectively.

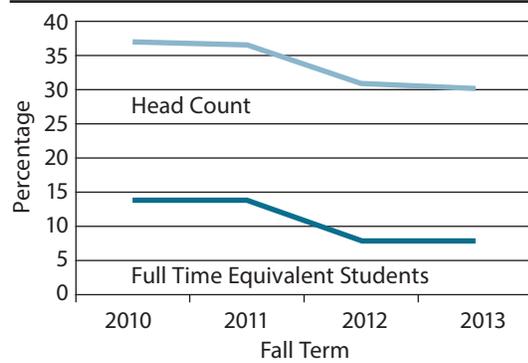
Community colleges across the nation are introducing innovative approaches to reducing the barriers students encounter in completing developmental courses. Students may need a few weeks or a few years of developmental education courses, depending on their levels of prior preparation. As a result, programs focused on contextualizing, accelerating, and modularizing basic college-level concepts in reading, writing, and mathematics have begun to emerge at community colleges. As one example, in 2012, the Virginia Community College System (VCCS) undertook a redesign of its developmental mathematics program. At the time, the program consisted for a series of traditional three-credit courses that could take up to two years to complete. In the redesigned program all developmental mathematics instruction was delivered through nine different one-credit skill modules. The modules were accompanied by a web-based, diagnostic and adaptive placement test that identified the specific modules a student needed to complete. College faculty determined the exact amount of mathematics knowledge and skills that were needed for each degree or certificate program and assigned a specific number of modules that needed to be completed. These varied by discipline. Students in liberal arts degree programs were required to take, or demonstrate prior competency in, the first five modules. Those students in STEM-related programs (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) were required to take, or place out of, all nine modules.¹⁸ Initial results have shown that the redesign has decreased the number of students who are required to enroll in developmental mathematics courses (**Figure 2**), and it has increased the number of students completing developmental mathematics requirements within one year (**Figure 3**).¹⁹

The state of Florida has adopted another novel approach, which is to make developmental education optional for all college students. The default for students is to enroll in gateway college-level courses that offer additional academic support services for students who are in need. This new policy went into effect on July 1, 2013, and studies are under way to assess its impact on student success and completion.

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Figure 2: Percentage of First Time in College Program Placed Students Enrolled in Development Math, Virginia Community College System, 2010 to 2013



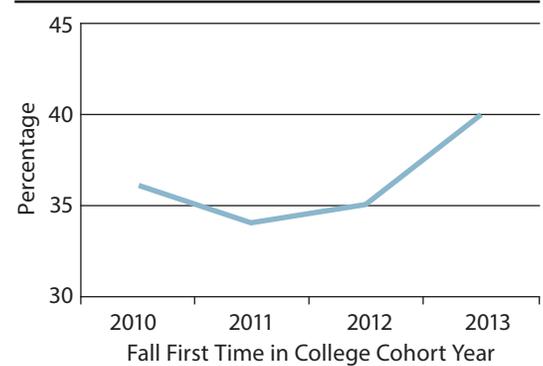
Source: Virginia Community College System, Office of Institutional Research Effectiveness, *Initial Review of the Impact of the Developmental Education Redesign at Virginia’s Community Colleges*, (December 11, 2014), p. 1. <http://cdn.vccs.edu/wp-content/uploads/2013/07/Dev-ed-redesign-initial-impact.pdf>.

Transfer Pathways

Another significant aspect of the mission of community colleges is preparing students for transfer to four-year institutions by providing the first two years of an undergraduate degree. The AACC notes that the transfer function at community colleges has become less visible, in light of the intense focus on the completion agenda. That said, community colleges play an important role in meeting the demand for bachelor degree attainment: some 28 percent of those who earned a bachelor’s degree began postsecondary education at a community college, and 47 percent of those who earned a bachelor’s degree took at least one course at a community college.²⁰

It has long been the case that successful completion for transfer students is defined as earning the bachelor’s degree. It is also the case that community colleges count as a success those students who complete an associate degree before transferring. However, many students transfer to four-year colleges before earning an associate degree or other credential. In these cases, community colleges do not receive credit for their contribution to the student’s matriculation to a four-year

Figure 3: Percentage of First Time in College Program-Placed Students Attempting College Math by Following Fall Term, Virginia Community College System, 2010 to 2013



Source: Virginia Community College System, *Initial Review of the Impact of the Developmental Education Redesign, at Virginia’s Community Colleges*, p. 1.

college. The ratio of students who transfer after earning an associate degree to those who transfer before earning an associate degree varies by state. Several studies have shown that bachelor’s degree attainment is higher for those who transfer with an associate degree compared to those students who transfer without an associate degree. **Table 1** shows the four-year completion rates of Virginia community college students who transferred from community colleges to public four-year institutions. Those students who transferred with more credits or an associate degree had higher four-year completion rates.

In addition, studies have shown that transfer students who have all of their community college credits accepted by four-year institutions are more likely to earn the bachelor’s degree than those who have some, but not all, credit accepted.²¹

In order for community colleges to more effectively contribute to the completion agenda, it is important that they develop policies and practices that provide clear pathways for transfer students going between two-year and four-year institutions, and that these pathways optimize the number of credits accepted by the receiving institution. Two specific approaches have proven successful in maximizing the transfer of community college students. The first is the presence of articulated, guaranteed admissions agreements between community colleges and four-year institutions. The second is to credit community colleges for students who

Table 1: Four-year Completion Rates of Virginia Community College System Students Transferring to Public Four-year Institutions in Fall and Spring of 2009-10

All transfer students	61.5%
Transfer students with 15 community college credits or fewer	52.3%
Transfer students with between 16 to 30 community college credits	64.5%
Transfer students with 31 community college credits or greater (no associate arts degrees)	78.4%
Associate degree awarded prior to transfer	68.2%

Virginia Community College System, “Two-Year TRO5: Transfer-Four-Year Completion.” (no date).

<http://research.schev.edu/feedback/transfer/TRO5.asp>.

transfer to four-year institutions before attaining an associate's degree or other credentials, while incentivizing both community colleges and four-year institutions to encourage students to transfer after they have earned an associate degree.

Articulation and guaranteed admissions agreements between community colleges and four-year institutions are becoming more commonplace. At a minimum, articulation agreements identify comparable coursework between the community college and the four-year institution, and these agreements list which courses will and will not transfer. Guaranteed admissions agreements tend to be more specific, and they provide assurances of admission to students who meet certain criteria, including earning an associate degree and maintaining a specific grade point average. Both articulation and guaranteed admission agreements are examples of practices that build and maintain pathways to and through college. Virginia and Florida are examples of states with these types of strong transfer pathways. Florida state law requires that any student who earns an associate degree is guaranteed admission into a public university degree program and that all community college credits are accepted by the receiving institution as a block. In Virginia, by 2008 the VCCS had entered into guaranteed admissions agreements with all 15 public four-year institutions in the state as well as many private institutions. While each agreement is different, all agreements provide guaranteed admission for those students who earn a transfer associate degree and maintain a certain grade point average.

More difficult is how to work with both community colleges and four-year colleges and universities to increase the number of transfer students who earn an associate degree before transferring. Despite the greater likelihood of those with an associate degree completing the baccalaureate, in many states the majority of community college students who transfer to four-year institutions have not earned the associate degree. **Table 2** shows that in Virginia from 2006-07 to 2009-10 more than two-thirds of community college students transferred prior to earning the associate degree. In fact, some of Virginia's four-year colleges and universities accept transfer students with as few as 24 community college credits. Maximizing associate degree attainment for those who intend to transfer also maximizes baccalaureate attainment for those students. Rewarding both community colleges and four-year institutions for transferring students who have earned the associate degree would make a significant contribution to meeting the goals of the completion agenda.

Table 2: Transfer Enrollment at Four-Year Institutions, Virginia Community College System, 2006-07 to 2009-10

Academic Year	Total Transfers	Without Associate Degree	With Associate Degree
2006-07	10,931	8,407	2,524
2007-08	12,705	8,848	3,857
2008-09	13,103	9,023	4,080
2009-10	14,208	9,620	4,588
Change, 2006-07 to 2009-10			
Number	3,277	1,213	2,064
Percent	30.0%	14.4%	81.8%

Source: State Council of Higher Education for Virginia (SCHEV). *Preliminary Report: Aspects of Student Transfer and Post-Transfer Success at Virginia Public Institutions*, March 16, 2105, p. A13.2. <http://www.schev.edu/schev/AgendaBooks/2015March/AgendaBook31615.pdf>

Conclusion

Diversifying credentials, streamlining developmental education, and creating seamless transfer pathways will help community colleges meet the ambitious completion agenda goals, but without adequate financial resources, none of these interventions can be created or sustained. Over the past ten years, community college enrollments have risen steadily, while public funding of community colleges has declined. At Piedmont Virginia Community College (PVCC) in 2001-2002, state funding made up approximately 70 percent of the total funding for each full-time equivalent student, with the other 30 percent from tuition. In 2011-2012, this situation was reversed. State funding provided for 40 percent of funding per full-time student and tuition accounted for 60 percent. A review of total revenue for all 23 Virginia community colleges and the Virginia Community College System Office shows that in the 2006 fiscal year tuition, fees, and other non-general funds made up about 43 percent of all revenues while state funding (general funds) made up 57 percent. In fiscal year 2015 tuition, fees, and other non-general revenue made up approximately 60 percent of all revenues while state appropriation made up 40 percent.²²

Most community colleges across the nation receive state funds based on student enrollment numbers, and in the last three years, enrollments at community colleges across the nation have plateaued or declined slightly due to the recovery in the national economy. In challenging economic times, community college enrollments tend to increase as a result of individuals seeking new skills and education; in prosperous economic times, community college enrollments tend to stay flat or decline. Declining enrollment has had the effect of

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further reducing revenues. For community colleges to contribute to increasing the number of Americans who complete post-secondary degrees and certificates, adequate public investment including state and federal funding will need to be in place, decreasing the reliance of community colleges on tuition for operational costs.

As many policy makers and institutional leaders have noted, the completion agenda is an investment in the future of the country. Meeting the goals of the completion agenda has many benefits, including increased prosperity for individuals, families, and the nation. But an investment in human capital requires money. The more we invest in community colleges to help them meet the goals of the completion agenda, the more Americans we will have with post-secondary degrees and certificates, which will repay the investment many times over.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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- 22 Information on state revenue and tuition revenue trends over the last ten years provided in an email exchange dated July 3, 2015 from Donna Van Cleve, Vice Chancellor for Administrative Services, Virginia Community College System (VCCS).

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