Unclaimed and Unrecognized: Finding Existing Community College Completers

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NEW MEXICO WORKFORCE AND EDUCATION STRATEGY ACADEMY
26 MAY 2010

Improving CC completion

- Build more community colleges
- Make (information about) financial aid more accessible
- Improve instruction, particularly developmental education
- Develop better K-12 and 4-year connections

- Or, recognize AA 'eligibles' and 'potentials'
- Earned 60+ credits but no degree of any kind
  - Fourteen percent of 1982-1993 (HS&B) cohort
  - Sixteen percent of 1992-2000 (NELS) cohort

Some quick math

1. GPA>2.0 + all 60+ credits are additive:
70k students
2. Add college-level math, not currently enrolled anywhere:
Decreases to… 44k students
3. Multiply by 1.44, the factor that includes delayed entries and older beginners:
Increases to… 63k students

Number of AA degrees awarded annually would increase by more than 8% and number of AAs awarded by community colleges by 12%

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The tough questions

- Optimally, institutions and states must reconcile differences between:

  * Thresholds of degree qualifications

  * Formal recognition

  * Barriers between thresholds and recognition

- Touches on issues of financial “holds,” non-academic requirements, incomplete transcripts, identification of cognizant institution, residency and so on

Project Win-Win

- Pilot study with 7 community colleges in 4 states (LA, MD, NY, and OH) and 3 four-year colleges in Louisiana that award Associate’s degrees

- Given 7 months to scan student records, sift out ineligibles, run degree audits and establish final “eligibles” and “potentials” bins

- Results were encouraging but varied from college to college

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Initial ground rules

- Not enrolled in 2009/2010
- Initial enrollment at any time after 2001 (or 2003 in some states)
- Initial enrollment can be transfer-in
- Credit threshold—between 60-64 credits
- GPA threshold—whatever is required for graduation
- No Associate's (or certificate) earned from any institution

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Initial observations

- **Accrued credits do not mean degree eligibility**

- **Changes in computer systems and software during the period covered**

- **The one institution that set a higher GPA threshold (GPA>2.5) and wound up with a lot fewer students**

- **Expected to take 2-day task but in some places it took 2 months**

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Second sort, different than first

- **First match set goes to the central state data system**
    - **Students are *provisionally* moved into the degree pool**

- **Residuals sent to National Student Clearinghouse (NSC)**

- **After both matches, records are ready for close examination—DEGREE AUDIT!**

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More observations

- Some institutions skipped the state match and went directly to NSC
  - Some institutions used the project as an excuse to join NSC
  - NSC is not the end-all-be-all
  - Turns up current enrollments for students thought to be gone
- State IT versus local IR as to who “owned” the information
- FERPA issues raised in one state
  - Resolved with creation of a new set of IDs

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Sit-rep

- Community colleges
    - 9,500 passed the first sort
    - 48% stayed after the second sort
- 4-year colleges
    - 3,300 passed the first sort
    - 56% stayed after the second sort
- Now the hard work can begin

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Degree audit

- Do they *really* qualify?
  - Some institutions have developed software with degree templates

  - Those that do not must rely on hand-and-eye readings; typically takes 10-15 minutes

  - Often hand-and-eye is necessary after an automated audit because the software does not pick up nuance, i.e., the degree requirements that were in effect in the year of entry instead of the more recent year

Drilling deeper

- Students with 100+ credits who did not pass
  - Auditors found courses that do not exist

- Student qualified for AA/AS but seeking AAS in a specific field and could not pass audit
  - Degree requirements may have changed since time of entry and audit software was not recalibrated

- “Academically short” students removed from “eligible” bin and placed in “potential” bin unless. . .
  - Number of credits/courses exceeds what the institution determines is a reasonable ceiling for completion in a timely period, e.g. 9 credits/3 courses

Recognition and threshold barriers

- Financial “holds”
- Did not file papers or pay fees for award
- Did not know they were eligible
- Transferred and did not care about degree
- Had not completed non-academic requirement, such as physical education, swimming test, orientation course
- Missing transcripts from other institutions they had attended
- Residency issues, both threshold and last 25 percent of credits

Half of these are procedural issues and largely within the control of community colleges

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An uncomfortable example

- Financial “holds”
  - State laws/regulations apply even for minor parking fines
  - Tuition versus fees
  - Institutional / state loan issues
  - Outstanding library, equipment and parking obligations
  - Transcripts from other institutions are on financial holds

What can be done?

- Orange flashing lights should start at around 55 credits
- Waive non-academic requirements and degree fees
  - Build latter into general student services
- For those with “holds,” recognize completers on your books
  - Notify students that neither the degree nor the institutional transcript will be released until the conditions of the “hold” are met
- Notify students that they qualify for the degree and ask if they want the diploma
  - If response negative, award the degree on your books and tell the student they can request the credential later

Why decline degree?

- Default degree is AA/AS or AGS

- If intention is a particular AAS, students think they will lose financial aid eligibility when default degree is accepted

- Not always true, as financial aid officers have leeway to award beyond the 150% of credits

- Students need to be aware of this

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To the community colleges

- Conversion is real
  - One site awarded 300 more Associate's degrees under these procedures

- Institutions have got to adopt explicit and public decision-rules for degree audits
  - Particularly true if audit is judged against degree requirements in force at the time of initial enrollment

- Scaling up would require special grants to community colleges to develop/refine degree audit systems
  - There are CCs out there without the data capacity or discipline to do any of this

To state policymakers

- In degree audits, incorporate acceptable course substitutions into existing automated systems
    - State should adopt standardized degree criteria

- Empower the state higher education authority to grant degrees, particularly in the cases of nomads with no distinct cognizant institution

- ‘Bigger is better’
    - Participation in inter-state data sharing agreements

Lingering questions

- Can the institution award a degree without the student's consent?

- Can the institution apply for the degree on behalf of the student?

- Can an institution force others to provide missing transcripts?

- Can alumni raise funds to reduce or eliminate any of the financial "holds"?

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Number of AA degrees awarded

Level/ Control	Number awarded 2008
Community College	507.0k
2-year, for profit	58.4
2-year, not-for-profit	6.5
4-year public	71.5
4-year, for profit	68.4
4-year, not-for-profit	38.2
Total	750.0

Number of AA degrees awarded by field of study

Field of Degree	Number	Percent
General Studies	211.2	41.7%
Nursing	55.7	11.0
Business/Acc't	43.0	8.5
Allied Health	32.8	6.5
Criminal Justice	15.3	3.0
Engineering Tech	14.1	2.8

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Precedents

- At the bachelor's level, USC/Up Country found 600+ students, chased them down, determined 180 eligible, and got 60 back to school (mid-1990s, well before the option of on-line course delivery)

- At the associate's level, San Diego Miramar focused on retroactive degree awards, and increased Associate's by 175 degrees (and certificates by 185) over two years (1999-2001). At that time, Miramar's annual Associate's degree base was 500, so the increase was about 18 percent.

- While we are not dealing with certificates, start multiplying the other numbers by the volume of institutional type (weighted, of course, by enrollments)!!!

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