



TIME TO COMPLETION: STATES AND SYSTEMS MUST TACKLE THE TIME DILEMMA

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HERE'S THE ALL-TOO-FAMILIAR CHALLENGE: THE NATION NEEDS HIGHER POSTSECONDARY COMPLETION RATES TO ENSURE A COMPETITIVE LABOR MARKET AND TO RESTORE OUR RANKING INTERNATIONALLY. BUT HOW DO WE GET MORE PEOPLE TO COMPLETE?

IF WE CAN MAKE A DENT IN THE COLLEGE READINESS RATES, SOME YEARS FROM NOW THERE SHOULDN'T BE SO MANY YOUNG PEOPLE AND ADULTS WHO FAIL OUT OF COLLEGE OR NEVER GET THERE. FOR NOW, THOUGH, THE BEST RECOMMENDATION IS TO PAY ATTENTION TO FACTORS THAT STAND OUT IN INSTITUTIONS THAT GRADUATE STUDENTS AT HIGH RATES—AND ONE IMPORTANT BUT OVERLOOKED FACTOR IS THAT THEY GRADUATE HIGH PERCENTAGES OF STUDENTS ON *TIME*.

WHAT DO WE KNOW ABOUT TIME AND COMPLETION?

As the national campaign to get more Americans to complete college was starting, Jobs for the Future was producing its own entry into completion issues. We work with populations—at-risk young people and low-income working adults—often judged to be behind or slowed down because of barriers they face, and our mission over the years was to make up for lost time (and poor instruction) by developing acceleration strategies. With the new emphasis on completion, we set out to figure out the relationship between completion and time within Lumina Foundation for Education's initiative to increase productivity in postsecondary education. To our surprise, we discovered that while educators and policymakers knew that two-year degrees should be called five- or six-year degrees, and that four-year degrees were really six-year degrees, almost no one was looking at shortening "time to degree" as a way to improve completion.

Enter the fiscal crisis, which requires higher education do more and better with less. Today, many educators are willing to say "time is money." There is now a *Time to Completion* Web site, a framework, and new online tools to assess state policies, collect institutional data, and estimate costs of extended time to degree. Among new publications is one from JFF on identifying predictors of completion—*Taking The Next Step: The Promise of Intermediate Measures For Meeting Postsecondary Completion Goals*. A second publication, from the Southern Regional Education Board—*No Time to Waste: Policy Recommendations for Improving College Completion*, focuses on policy options. And recently, JFF and SREB cosponsored a conference about timely completion to test our ideas and gather additional ones.

HERE ARE THE HEADLINES

It is expensive, wasteful, and, yes, unnecessary for so many students to add semesters and even years to their college pathways. Not only does extended time cost everyone more, it also puts students at risk of non-completion. For some students, slow progress may be necessary, but a growing body of evidence on predictors of completion suggests that that is not the case for most students. For example, completing college-level math within two years of entering a community college is associated with completion—the odds of earning a degree drop dramatically after that. And among Bachelor's degree aspirants, completion rates tail off dramatically beyond the six years. If you want to finish, go faster. A logo of a ticking clock should be added to the complete college banner.

Extended time is also expensive for institutions: registering, advising, and providing facilities for part-time students drains institutional capacity and blocks space for new students. These expenses come on top of those associated with students who take up seats in classes they do not pass, accumulate extra credits, or stay on because required courses are not available.

Currently, the nation is not on course to reach the Lumina Foundation's goal of 60 percent of the adult population having a postsecondary credential by 2025. For most states, adult students returning to college represent a critical population to recruit back into completing in order to hasten progress toward this goal. Ironically, these "delayed completers" are the students who stand to benefit most from an accelerated path to a degree. The country is far from providing the financial aid, family support, and incentives needed to help more of these students attend full time—the most obvious way to ensure completion. But strategies that go in the right direction are being identified.

The recommendations focus on the start of college and the end point. Fixing developmental education is a high priority, as is limiting the number of credits a student can take beyond the 120 needed for graduation. Here both institutions and students must do their part. Institutions need to ensure that schedules suit working adults, that courses are available as needed, and that pathways through majors, timelines, and outcomes are transparent. Students need to choose majors early and limit withdrawals from courses. And everyone has to get along with fewer choices and more structure. After all, there are lifelong learning opportunities, online resources, and workplace training to meet the need for new skills and knowledge and satisfy the yen for exploration.

HERE'S THE MESSAGE PUT SUCCINCTLY

To improve momentum toward completion, institutions need to put the foot on the accelerator pedal at the beginning of postsecondary, and put up a big STOP sign at the end—in the form of a reduced number of credits to degrees and reductions in credits for majors and gen ed. But those GO and STOP signs have to be coupled with institutional change: acceleration policies, practices, and pathways that lead to degrees with fewer choices, better structures for completion, and clearer connections to the labor market and/or further education.



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