

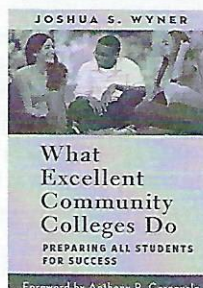
Book Review

What Excellent Community Colleges Do: Preparing All Students for Success

Review by Michelle A. Payton

By Joshua S. Wyner
Harvard Education Press, Cambridge, MA

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Costs—financial and opportunity—have become too high to accommodate undecided and underprepared students, even in community colleges. There are many burning questions regarding how to increase student success, and Joshua S. Wyner, author of *What Excellent Community Colleges Do: Preparing All Students for Success*, makes arguments for dramatic redesign by profiling colleges that received the highest recognition for the Aspen Prize for Community College Excellence. Those recognized had the highest achievements in areas of completion, equity, learning, and labor market. The quantitative and qualitative data from the diverse institutions are imperfect and cannot be translated nationally; however, data does reveal levels of success or lack of success that can be examined, learned from, and tested in other community colleges.

Higher education was built around serving well-off young adults who attended college from start to finish; community college students have less in common with that traditional population and have lower completion rates. Programs are shared on how community colleges attempted to close that completion gap and a number of the community college examples focused on “greater structure and limit[ed] course choice” (p. 24), but this has not yet solved the completion issue since “as little as 20% make the leap to a four-year college” (p. 26). Solutions are shared on strategies to accumulate college credits that transfer to public four-year colleges as well. Reformation with effective measurements is vital to narrow the completion gap.

Diverse populations have greater access to higher education, but the problem of inequity for the underserved hasn't been solved with 70% needing at least one developmental class (p. 46). A projected growth of 13% for college enrollment is tied directly to Hispanic and African American student increase (p. 49) yet, in 2012, Complete College America concluded that developmental education in community colleges should be completely stopped. Many community colleges didn't agree and strategies were outlined that moved students through courses more quickly. Some of these tests failed and others showed promise, but the bottom-line, according to the author, is that community college success is directly correlated with underprepared community college students' success; otherwise, the entire system will collapse.

Assessing and quantifying student learning outcomes for some community colleges included working toward developing authentic cultures of

excellence. Although controversial, the author argued that more comparable metrics from state-to-state would contribute to excellence. Some programs can be measured and compared, but online coursework may evolve into common national assessments. For complete cultural excellence, a balance of teaching freedom and elevating teaching without becoming completely robotic, must be established without alienating faculty. There is no single national answer, but multiple tools are suggested to develop cultural excellence across all faculty, departments, and the overall work environment.

Ultimately, learning and credentials must pay off and graduates must be better off than if they only earned a high school degree. The author argued that certificate and degree programs must be in step with jobs offering decent wages. Certain community college leaders talked directly to employers to be aligned with industry needs and even created new jobs. Conversely, there were other times when community colleges produced too many graduates and closed unsuccessful programs. There are some that may not welcome labor market measurements; however, to truly determine achievement, the author argued that following students up to 10 years after graduation would be a testament to leaders who truly advocate for students.

The many ideas discussed in this text can be complicated by the longevity of administration, staff, and faculty. For instance, 5 years is the median tenure for a community college president (p. 119), yet multiple step-by-step action plans that result in dramatic change can take longer. The author's position is, “community colleges cannot be great without great presidents” (p. 139), but the definition of a good president has changed, and may even require hiring accomplished professionals outside of academia. As many programs are assembled and disassembled, results may not be reported within leaders' tenure, so many points are shared on what to look for when hiring future presidents.

The solutions in *What Excellent Community Colleges Do: Preparing All Students for Success* are imperfect, may take many years to quantify, may require quick decisions as the market fluctuates, and can't always be nationally translated. However, many ideas can be critically analyzed and tested. To do that, leadership must understand who they serve, the percentage of underrepresented students at their institution now and projections in for the future, and the University transfer programs and job markets to which students aspire. A burning issue is enrollment is no longer an accurate measure; students' job success up to 10 years after graduation is a more accurate gauge. Many issues were considered, but Joshua Wyner's closing thought is this book is “a celebration of those colleges that are leading the way and a call to action for policy makers, leaders, researchers, trustees, and communities to support other colleges following suit” (p. 146). There are no easy answers or single outcomes to solve the current state of community college gaps, but community colleges are ripe with potential.

