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Community Colleges Can!

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Community Colleges Can!

Article Review by Pam Lau, Dean of Academic Services at Parkland College (Champaign, IL)

McClenney, K., Dare, D., & Thomason, S. (2013). Premise and promise: Developing new pathways for community college students. *Community College Journal*. Retrieved from http://www.ccjournal-digital.com/ccjournal/april_may_2013#pg58

Can community colleges rise to the challenge of increasing the educational capacity of individuals and the nation? McClenney, Dare, and Thomason say Yes *if* community colleges can design clearer student pathways to completion. In their 2013 article, *Premise and Promise: Developing New Pathways for Community College Students*, they present the case for a new model of academic pathways that focuses on providing students with “an integrated and coherent experience” of college (p.57), one that enhances student success. The select-from-an-array-of-discrete-services model that is standard fare in most community colleges does not serve students well. Students swirl in and out of classes and then leave with an ill assortment of credits and no credential. Instead, McClenney et al. envision the narrowing of student choices to six structured pathways (or more depending on a college’s size, transfer agreements, and regional labor market demands) such as an arts, humanities, and design pathway, a social sciences and human services pathway, a health careers and life sciences, and a STEM pathway. The pathway model mandates that all students participate in learning-related experiences known to enhance student success. Students do not get a choice; students do not fall between the cracks. This is Kay McClenney’s maxim that students do not do optional writ large.

According to McClenney et al., each pathway is like an expanded learning community. Each has its own cohort of students bonded by common career or academic major aspirations. Faculty make intentional connections with students to produce the quality of academic integration that Vince Tinto tells us is fundamental to the student decision to stay in college. Co-curricular activities to provide vital social integration are woven into classroom experiences. Inside each pathway, entry expectations and exit standards are clearly aligned to support student progression from developmental education into college level coursework and onto the completion of certificates and/or degrees. Developmental education and college success courses are contextualized to the academic competencies and non-cognitive behaviors needed for success in the pathway. Each pathway has embedded advisors who are tasked with guiding students from entry to completion and academic coaches who provide timely and intrusive academic support. Every student completes a realistic educational plan by the end of his or her first semester.

The famed statement that is oft attributed to either Byron or Kay McClenney is repeated here: “Every college is perfectly designed to produce the results it is currently getting” (p.63). To get better outcomes for the sake of the students to whom we promise access, McClenney et al. However, we must reimagine the student experience and implement educational designs that result in outcomes. Yes, community colleges can!