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## Editors' Notes to *New Directions for Community Colleges*, no. 175

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## Editors' Notes

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National reform movements have placed considerable attention and pressure on community colleges to substantially and efficiently increase the number of students who earn degrees and certificates in the next decade (Harbour, 2015). The Completion Agenda, led largely by policy makers, professional organizations, and philanthropic foundations, is a national imperative and democratic obligation to increase completion rates, collect quality data regarding students' pathways, and enact and improve policies that encourage and improve degree production. Though the aims of such an effort are welcome by community college practitioners and fit with these institutions' long-standing missions of community responsiveness, some warn that without accompanying means to ensure high quality, the Completion Agenda threatens to detract from open access, exacerbate inequities, and narrow the community college mission around their credentialing function (Lester, 2014).

Currently, about 39% of all students who enroll in community colleges obtain a degree or certificate at any institution within 6 years (Shapiro et al., 2015), whereas completion rates remain disproportionately lower for low-income students and students from underrepresented racial/minority groups. In response, the American Association of Community Colleges (AACC) has partnered with other national organizations in committing to assist community colleges in increasing the number of degrees and certificates earned by students by 50% by 2020. The AACC recommends that community college degree completion rates can be improved in part by enhancing "high-impact, evidence-based" educational practices such as orientations and first-year experience courses and by creating additional programs to engage students. Recent reports also urge colleges to reduce use of boutique programs and move toward bringing effective programs to scale (AACC, 2011, 2012).

The community college has unique characteristics that make identifying high-impact and potentially transferable practices a considerable challenge (Haberler & Levin, 2014). Community colleges are grounded by a fundamental mission to provide educational opportunity to students regardless of their prior academic experiences, ability to pay, or intentions to complete a degree program (Harbour, 2015). In support of

the open access mission, community colleges strive to provide programs and services at a low cost, effectively restricting resources—absent additional public allocations—for specialized practices and programs that may support more students in formulating and realizing their ambitions (Mellow & Heelan, 2008).

Scholars agree that national completion goals cannot be achieved without community colleges substantially ramping up efforts to support success for the diversity of students who are enrolling at colleges. At the same time, community college stakeholders are searching with urgency for the magic potion of effective practice that will substantially increase completion rates for students of all backgrounds (Levin, Cox, Cerven, & Haberler, 2010; Weiss et al., 2014). Unfortunately, there are presently critical gaps in our understanding regarding how to effectively design and implement scalable practices and programs on community college campuses for such a wide variety of students.

This volume of *New Directions for Community Colleges* presents a compendium of the latest research and practice regarding practices and programs that researchers have identified as promising in fostering positive community college student outcomes. Our volume explores the latest research on how student success program research is conceptualized and operationalized and offers evidence for ways in which programs foster positive student outcomes, including ways that outcomes are defined in the first place beyond persistence, transfer, and credential attainment. The issue also provides a critical inquiry of how students themselves experience practices and programs and discusses challenges surrounding program design, implementation and evaluation. The volume brings together perspectives from researchers and administrators representing centers and federally funded projects seeking to build knowledge around promising practices and programs in community colleges, including the Community College Research Center (CCRC), Achieving the Dream, the Center for Community College Student Engagement (CCCSE) and the National Resource Center for The First-Year Experience and Students in Transition.

The issue begins with four chapters that offer frameworks for conceptualizing and understanding practices and programs on community college campuses. In Chapter 1, Deryl K. Hatch, Gloria Crisp, and Katherine Wesley summarize definitions for proposed high-impact programs and practices, relationships among them, and the kinds of impacts they are designed to achieve. This chapter offers a visual map to illustrate key relationships and program features. Next, Hatch offers a brief history of how various *special* or *high-impact* practices and programs have been identified and grouped as such, followed by an explanation of how Cultural Historical Activity Theory (CHAT) can be used as a framework for conceptualizing some of the more prominent kinds of student-success programs—at least those that are typically course based and go by a wide variety of labels—as instances of a more general type of intervention.

Chapter 3, by Melinda Mechur Karp, senior research associate at the CCRC, invites readers to go beyond the idea of program containers and consider the fundamental *mechanisms* of nonacademic support that foster successful outcomes for community college students. Karp makes a case for how these mechanisms can be part of formally structured programs or implemented through other means—especially in-class interactions. Chapter 4, by Evelyn N. Waiwaiole, E. Michael Bohlig, and Kristine J. Massey of the CCCSE, describes how community colleges have been successful in leveraging CCCSE's High-Impact Practice (HIP) Institutes in developing and implementing short-term action plans to improve student outcomes. Examples of interventions that evolved from the institutes are provided as examples of how colleges can continue to use resources developed by CCCSE's HIP Initiative.

The next two chapters provide comparative and contextualized views of first-year experiences at community colleges. Chapter 5 is written by Dallin George Young and Jennifer R. Keup from the National Resource Center for The First-Year Experience and Students in Transition. Their work provides a national portrait of first-year seminars and their unique features in the community college setting in contrast to those found in 4-year institutions. Importantly, their chapter also shows how seminars serve as a place to connect students to other practices and programs that have been deemed high impact. The next chapter, by higher education scholars Nancy Acevedo-Gil and Desiree D. Zerquera, documents students' voices and perspectives in participating in community college first-year experience programs—a perspective that is sorely lacking in the national discussion and research literature related to high-impact practices.

The final three chapters of the volume are dedicated to providing practical advice, recommendations, and resources related to promising practices and programs at community colleges. In Chapter 7, *Achieving the Dream Data Coaches*, Bruce E. McComb and Jan W. Lyddon, offer guidance and best practices in evaluating student success interventions. Chapter 8, written by Vincent D. Carales, Crystal E. Garcia, and Naomi Mardock-Uman, identifies resources and relevant research to assist community college staff, faculty, and administrators in developing, implementing, and evaluating student success initiatives. Our volume concludes with a summary by Gloria Crisp of the key ideas and themes presented throughout the issue. She also provides observations and recommendations for future research regarding designing and implementing effective practices and programs at community colleges around the country.

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