Testimony for Oregon Education Investment Board meeting, March 13.

OEIB members and guests

On March 9, I entered testimony regarding the form of the Achievement Compacts initially envisioned ("Achievement Compacts are worth Getting Right and Doing Right"). The gist of the testimony was that the Compacts as initially envisioned were inadequate to the strategic task of accomplishing 40-40-20 and a world-class educated citizenry. This initial form of compacts did not seem informed by an analysis and strategy that had a credible chance of mobilizing the human and financial resources for success. The problematic element in the initially formulated Compacts was their primarily focus on completion and persistence data to *drive* progress toward the goal of 40-40-20 and a world-class educated citizenry.

If completion is not an adequate *driver*, what is a credible driver of change that can mobilize the human and financial resources to achieve the bold and desirable goal of 40-40-20 and a world-class educated citizenry? Please, seriously consider that it is investing in a unified Oregon education system and aligned it to identify and adapt for Oregon the rigorously proven practices existing globally that exemplify world-class best practices. (This approach is sketched out with some detail in the March 9 testimony.)

This approach requires a fuller and a best-practices targeted form of Achievement Compact. Oregon's success plausibly rests on taking the time to make this mid-course correction in the form of the Compacts. Thus, I suggest it is important, while being immersed in the details arising from the initially proposed form of Compact, to be open to the wider conversation that is critical of this completion-driven approach. Please consider the variety of voices in the attached March 2 report featured in the March 9 Chronicle of Higher Education. Paying attention to this diversity of people, all critical of completion data as a driver of education quality, can be particularly valuable for gaining perspective on the importance of getting the Compacts right.

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Do College-Completion Rates Really Measure Quality?

'First, Figure Out Why We Are Failing'

By Judith Ramaley

In his inaugural speech, President Obama declared that "our schools fail too many." Few would disagree with the fundamental premise that we must promote greater educational attainment for everyone if we are to meet the challenges of today's world. The United States once led the world in the percentage of young adults with college degrees, but in recent years, 15 other nations have surpassed us in that measure. Some nations are already pulling ahead of us in the proportion of their total adult population that holds college degrees.

Concerns about our nation's declining position in the global education race and what that may mean for our competitiveness have led us to a focus on college completion. Policy makers are setting goals for degree attainment, designing ways to measure the progress of students and how quickly they earn a degree, and asking colleges and universities to shorten degree programs and remove barriers to academic success. Few of these efforts include a discussion about what it means to be educated and why we are failing to serve all of our students well.

A focus on "completion" will not be enough to help us increase our competitiveness, prepare our students to be responsible citizens, and protect and enhance our nation's role in the world. We must first figure out *why* we are failing so many students, and then we must do something about it. Only then will the completion rates go up. We must also talk about what an accumulation of credit hours can actually tell us about our graduates. By focusing on degree completion without considering the quality and outcomes of the experiences that accompany that achievement, we are shortchanging ourselves and our students.

Every thoughtful observer has his or her own favorite explanation about why we are failing so many of our students, as well as a preferred solution. It is tempting to pick a solution that can generate solid data—for example, credit hours or degrees conferred—to be used for accountability. However, our problem is bigger than that.

To meet contemporary needs, our colleges must not only graduate a higher proportion of students but also educate them in new ways. We need to pay attention to the skills they will need to thrive in the 21st century, as individuals and as contributors to a democratic society. Public policy should provide additional financing that promotes both completion and a quality educational experience that prepares graduates for the demands of a new age.

Many institutions that serve a broad range of students have reason to worry that data on degree completion will become dashboard indicators of institutional quality. It is too easy for institutions that serve exceptionally well-prepared students to look good and for institutions that serve a significant proportion of nontraditional and underrepresented students to look bad.

Many colleges welcome students who are simply not fully prepared for college-level work. I have been inspired and encouraged by what I have learned from institutions like Salt Lake Community College and LaGuardia Community College about how to support students like these.

Salt Lake Community College has produced a road map outlining what it must do to prepare its students for academic and career success. The early results are encouraging. LaGuardia Community College has developed a First Year Institute that is yielding exciting results for both new students and continuing students who are having academic difficulties. Both institutions serve a significant proportion of nontraditional and underrepresented students. These colleges have a compelling story to tell about what it takes to help students who are not fully prepared for college-level work. We can all learn from these stories, regardless of

whom we serve. We should be judged on what we know about our students and what we are doing to help them be successful. Improved degree completion will follow.

A heavy focus on degree completion leaves out the realities of life in today's academy and can, unfortunately, lead to unintended consequences. Institutions that enroll extremely well-prepared students from economically secure and well-educated families will naturally have high completion rates. Institutions that serve the underserved can improve their standing in two ways—by raising their admissions standards to weed out students who are unlikely to succeed without special support or by adopting new and promising practices that foster academic and career success for all their students, regardless of how prepared they are when they enter college.

Both approaches will increase completion rates for a particular institution. Only the latter strategy will deal with the serious gaps in academic and career success that are causing us to fall behind other nations in the educational attainment of our citizenry.

Judith Ramaley is president of Winona State University.

'We Should Look to Other Indicators to Measure Worth and Value'

By Arthur M. Hauptman

There is little question that the shift in policy focus in this country over the past decade from access to success has been a positive development. College officials and policy makers at both the federal and state levels now recognize that it is not enough to measure the scope of higher education just in terms of how many students enroll; if we as a nation are to remain globally competitive, it is also critical to ensure that more students actually complete their program and attain a degree.

But are high college-completion rates a good indicator of educational quality, and do increases in completion rates over time mean that quality is improving? As with so many things, the answer is that it depends. If higher completion rates are achieved by high schools doing a better job of preparing their students, or by colleges and universities paying more attention to the needs of students once they enroll, or by states financing institutions at least partly based on the number of students who graduate, then we are on the right track in using completion rates to improve quality.

In some other important ways, though, the attainment and completion debate in this country has taken some wrong turns over the past five years. One such misdirection is the assumption that higher completion rates automatically result in higher attainment rates. To understand the problem here, we need to recognize that completion and attainment rates do not measure the same thing. Completion rates are the percentage of students who finish the program they began, while attainment rates measure the share of the adult population who hold a degree.

Traditionally the United States has had high rates of bachelor's-degree attainment compared to some other countries. But this ranking was not achieved by having high completion rates. Indeed, for a long time we have had comparatively mediocre completion rates because we expend more effort to increase access than many other countries that have more elitist systems of higher education. So the traditional U.S. leadership in bachelor's-degree attainment has been a function of enrolling lots of students who, even with modest completion rates, produce very high rates of bachelor's-degree attainment. The stimulus for the national debate we are having is that we now rank much lower on all measures of educational attainment.

But it is a mistake to assume that modest completion rates are the reason for our lower standing when it comes to attainment. Rather, the philosophy and the policies of countries, states, and systems of institutions are the primary determinant of completion rates. For

example, a country with an elitist higher-education system that allows only 10 or 15 percent of its population to enroll in college is likely to have a much higher completion rate than a country that allows a much broader share of its population to enroll.

Similarly, it is also a mistake to use institutional completion rates as a measure of educational quality, because institutional selectivity is by far the principal predictor of completion rates. An open-access institution that graduates 50 percent of its students is most likely doing a much better job of educating its students than a highly selective institution that graduates only 60 percent of the students who enroll. So in assessing the record of institutions with regard to their quality, they ought to be compared with peer institutions with similar degrees of selectivity. If we are really interested in improving and measuring quality, then we should look to other indicators that measure the worth and value of the educational process, such as a willingness to invest in faculty who are good teachers and a commitment to provide a quality education to whichever students are admitted.

Arthur M. Hauptman is a public-policy consultant specializing in finance issues in higher education.

'Student Commitment Is a Major Determinant of Quality'

By Patrick M. Callan

The issue of quality cannot be separated from the question of how well higher education serves students and society. Do colleges and universities produce and certify graduates in sufficient numbers and with the requisite knowledge and skills to enhance opportunity, citizenship, and productivity in the knowledge-based global economy?

Educators, institutions, accreditors, and government have historically relied on institutional characteristics, processes, and practices—principally inputs—as proxies for educational quality. In the current environment, with the imperative to significantly raise rates of educational attainment and with less deferential attitudes toward educators, direct evidence of educational effectiveness is also needed. Completion rates are important, but measurable and comparable evidence of student learning will be essential if completion is to be ultimately accepted as a legitimate measure of college quality, as it should be.

Of course, there are issues of definition and measurement. How to account for students who attend multiple institutions en route to earning a degree or certificate? Or those who enroll for other purposes than certification? Or those who meet their goals—new knowledge or skills or employment—without obtaining certification?

However, even with the most sophisticated metrics, relying on completion numbers and rates exclusively is as unjustifiable as leaving completion out of the quality equation. A one-dimensional emphasis on completion can have unanticipated and unwanted consequences at the institutional and policy levels.

College students are adults, and no institution can or should take full responsibility for the learning or graduation of every student. Student effort is a major component of educational quality. Public-opinion research has consistently found that the American public believes that the commitment of students is the principal determinant of higher-education quality—one reason it has been difficult to convince the public and many policy makers that completion rates are key indicators of quality and should be taken seriously as major components of public accountability.

The issue of completion has justifiably become an important element of quality and accountability, not because colleges should ensure that every student completes, but because poor completion rates are a systemic pattern of all too many postsecondary institutions. They are a necessary but not sufficient measure of quality.

Patrick M. Callan is presiden of the National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education

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'We Have Yet to Use Them Where They Are Needed Most'

By Sylvia Hurtado

College-completion rates only partially reflect institutional quality, and we have yet to adequately make use of completion information for institutional improvement where it is needed most—with students who are first generation, low income, or are from underrepresented racial and ethnic groups. Recent analyses of national data that track full cohorts of freshmen to graduation suggest that completion rates reflect entering-student characteristics and intentions, how students are able to finance college, peer norms associated with enrollment-mobility patterns, and institutional resources.

If we hope to improve degree completion in this country, we have to use more sophisticated ways of assessing completion rates that not only inform students who are making choices but are also fair to institutions with fewer resources that are doing the most to offer access to diverse college students and advance them toward a degree.

The recent report on Completing College released by the Higher Education Research Institute encourages the use of completion rates adjusted for entering-student

characteristics and intentions to assist campuses in assessing whether they are doing better than expected (or worse) based on the types of students that they recruit and admit. That is, it is well established that students who are low income, first generation, part of an underrepresented minority, or entering college with lower academic ability are more likely to leave their original college for a variety of reasons.

This tendency for student mobility is almost a force of nature, particularly at broad-access institutions in urban areas. Students take advantage of higher-education opportunity as it suits their learning needs, goals for particular careers, or family finances. Over all, the likelihood of a student's completing a degree at his or her first college is lower when many peers are attending part time, consider it normal to stop their education, have to work many hours per week, or take some of their courses at other local colleges.

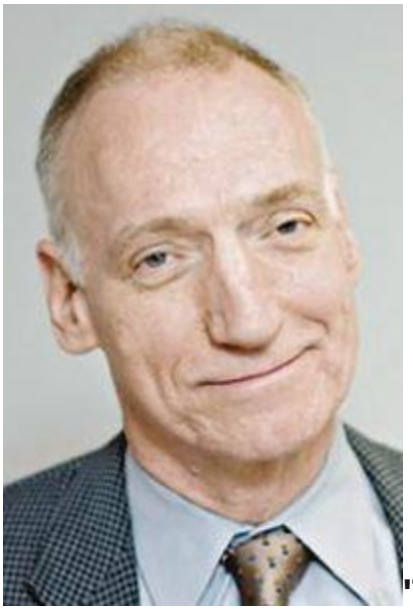
Moreover, the lingering economic downturn affects students' decisions to stay as much as it affects colleges' ability to offer aid, open more sections of classes, or provide support for the students most likely to leave college. In fact, the higher the loan that students take out in the first year of college, the less likely they are to graduate from the same college six years later.

We now have the data to try a more systemic approach to degree completion. We can identify institutions that contribute to the degree progress of underrepresented students by sharing the assessment of institutional impact and employ intermediate benchmarks to help institutions review internal policies or economic decisions that may be causing unnecessary mobility among particular groups of students.

Instead of ranking institutions using completion rates, we should find ways to use measures of degree completion that reward institutional contributions to improving degree progress over all and equity in degree-completion rates across populations. This could permit institutions to share resources via regional consortium agreements, allow families to conserve resources or reduce costs, and give students more choices if they can obtain basic skills and general-education courses at one institution and select majors at any number of local institutions.

The point is not to halt student mobility but to allow institutions to exert more control over it—to channel students instead of either diverting them or ignoring the issue completely. Completion rates should reflect both institutional contributions and collective efforts to increase degree attainment and educational equity.

Sylvia Hurtado is a professor of education and director of the Higher Education Research Institute at the University of California at Los Angeles.



'There's a Serious Distortion for Community Colleges'

By Thomas Bailey

Completion rates certainly have the potential to provide useful information to people who need to make decisions about enrollment, financing, hiring, and other matters. However, particularly in the case of community colleges, which enroll nearly half of all undergraduates in the nation, there are fundamental deficiencies in how the rates are defined, determined, and used. Unless these shortcomings are dealt with, completion rates will continue to offer a distorted snapshot of how well community colleges fulfill their mission. For instance:

Completion rates do not distinguish between types of institutions. The concept of a "graduation rate" seems simple enough, but different definitions can change the rates and significantly alter institutional rankings. Both four-year institutions and community colleges are required to report to the U.S. Department of Education completion rates based on the proportion of first-time, full-time, "degree seeking" students who obtain a degree within 150 percent and 200 percent of the "normal" time it takes to complete a degree.

This measure may make sense for selective four-year colleges, where most students attend full time immediately after high school. But it is much less meaningful for community colleges, where many students attend part time, return to college after an absence, or transfer from another institution. For community colleges, the normal graduation rate is based on the experience of a small minority of students.

Moreover, the current calculation treats students who transfer to another college without completing a degree at the "college of first enrollment" as "noncompleters." This standard creates a serious distortion for community colleges because most of their students enroll with the goal of transferring to a four-year college, but those who do transfer tend to do so without first obtaining a community-college credential.

Completion rates obscure variation within colleges. Students or employers may be interested in a particular program, but success measures can vary significantly by program and major or by degree type within a college. In community colleges, certificates and associate degrees are combined in one measure, but certificate programs have higher completion rates, so a college with more certificate programs will have a higher graduation rate than one with fewer certificate programs, even if the quality of certificate and degree programs in the two colleges is the same.

Completion rates lack crucial measures of quality. Graduation rates can be raised by lowering standards. Or colleges may have programs with high completion rates in occupational areas for which there are few or only low-quality jobs. So a comprehensive measure of institutional performance should also include indicators of program quality such as measures of student learning or employment outcomes.

Completion rates do not take into account costs. This is an increasingly critical component when assessing college productivity and quality, especially in the current fiscal environment.

The Department of Education began reporting consistently measured graduation rates for most colleges in late 1990s, and these numbers have significantly advanced the discussion about college performance. But we must recognize that they continue to provide only a partial picture. Given their limitations, completion rates should serve as a jumping-off point for conversation and exploration rather than as an end in themselves.

Thomas Bailey is a professor of economics and education at Teachers College, Columbia University, and is director of the Community College Research Center.

'Many Two-Year Students Are Counted as Failures'

By Eric Reno

As the accountability steamroller flattens any attempts to provide meaningful explanations of institutional missions and individual student circumstances and motivations, I would like to focus on the neglected 40 percent of community-college students who are vital to building the country's economic strength and civic engagement: those who are between the ages of 25 and 65.

As opposed to four-year students in this age group who are largely upper-division and graduate students, two-year students of these ages are in the beginning, or resurgence, of their higher-education journeys. Seventy-four percent of them are attending part time, and they are more likely to include parents, professionals, and breadwinners. As a result, they are also more likely to be subjected to those pesky instances of life that affect the best-laid educational plans.

In debating the definition of a "successful community-college student" many years ago when I was in the Florida system, the chief academic officers finally agreed that the only

legitimate measure of student success was proof that a student was still in good academic standing whether or not she was currently enrolled. Aside from identifying students who had actually failed, all other measures were subject to the vagaries of life far beyond most institutions' control. Under many current accountability measures, the following students would be counted as institutional failures or not counted at all:

- First-time college students who fail or drop out and return later to achieve doctorates.
- Students who do not begin their college careers as full-time students.
- Students who take longer than five years to complete their degrees.
- Active military members whose educational goals are stalled due to deployment.
- Students who get jobs after having received skills from the partial completion of their programs.
- Students who transfer to any private or out-of-state institutions, without having completed degrees, and where tracking processes are not in place.
- Students who stop their education, for reasons too numerous to list, and who remain in good academic standing at their institutions.

So how do we convert what should be seen as quintessential American success stories to successes in the eyes of those who want to hold us accountable, and of the multiple communities we serve and whose support and confidence we have worked so hard to earn?

First, we should establish accountability measures on things that institutions can control, including measuring graduation rates only for terminal-degree or certificate programs and making four-year colleges require associate degrees as a condition of transfer.

Second, we should establish measures that reflect the mission and character of the institutions, including creating timelines that reflect student demographics and enacting success and accountability measures that recognize the accomplishments of returning and part-time students.

We all know the many sayings that reflect the unreliability of data, by itself, to speak the truth. As educators and public decision makers we need to start being more deliberate in how and what we measure, given that the results will color public perception, determine public and legislative support, and mandate operational change.

As leaders of public institutions it is our job to be accountable; it is also our job to ensure that our accountability measures are meaningful. There is too much truly meaningful work that needs to be accomplished to do otherwise.

Eric Reno is president of Northeast Lakeview College, in Universal City, Tex.

‘Inputs Have Never Measured Quality’

By Jamie P. Merisotis

Most people now agree that, as a nation, we desperately need more citizens with postsecondary degrees. We need them to bolster our economy, to strengthen our democracy, and to lead our communities. For individual Americans, the consequences of not completing some form of postsecondary education are increasingly dire—especially in this economy. It's no wonder that millions are seeking postsecondary education and that policy makers and higher-education leaders are focused on increasing the number of Americans with college degrees and other postsecondary credentials.

But the pursuit of increasing college-attainment levels is not without its critics. More to the point, the drive to increase the number of college degrees is raising legitimate concerns about their quality. At Lumina, we believe strongly that increasing the number of Americans with postsecondary degrees and credentials to 60 percent by the year 2025 is essential, but

we also believe that merely increasing the number of college graduates isn't enough. Quite frankly, without a sharper focus on quality, increased degree attainment is meaningless.

So we must have an honest discussion about what a quality education comprises. Is it correlated with such things as admissions selectivity, faculty credentials, class size, physical facilities, the size of the endowment—even the price of tuition? Most people think of higher-education quality in terms of these input measures.

But inputs are not now—and probably never have been—a measure of quality. Today actual outcomes are what matter, particularly outcomes for students. There are many student outcomes that are important, but they can best be described in three overarching ways: employment, learning, and completion. The main reason that so many more Americans are seeking college educations is that employers are increasingly demanding college credentials, and opportunities for people without them are severely limited in today's economy.

But all available evidence points to the fact that employer demand is based on a real need for the underlying skills and knowledge that college degrees represent. In this sense, what matters is what students actually learn and how they can use what they gain in their programs of study. To really benefit students, employers, and society as a whole, this learning must be clearly defined, transparent to all, and recognized in a credential.

A list of credits earned and courses taken does not provide that assurance of quality. We must be accountable for the quality and integrity of our degrees, and that means we must be accountable for student learning.

If degrees really do matter, we must increase the number of Americans who complete them. But in the final analysis, college degrees must represent real learning.

Jamie P. Merisotis is president and chief executive of the Lumina Foundation.