

# Enough of Beat the Clock

## How to Measure Real Success in Community Colleges

JOHN J. SBREGA



**Eight-five percent of community college students work full- or part-time while attending class; they never intend to complete a degree program in two or even three years.**

The appropriation of state funds carries with it a public trust, and all public institutions must adhere to performance measures and welcome objective scrutiny by external entities.

The ongoing effort in Massachusetts to devise a broad array of performance measures for public colleges and universities appears headed in the right direction. The community and state colleges and the Board of Higher Education generally agree that an effective system of accountability can be built around issues of student access and success, regional economic and workforce development needs, cost-effective use of resources and quality data reporting.

But one troubling area of performance measurement is gathering attention. Some policymakers and commentators want community colleges to report their graduation rates in an attempt to use those rates as some purported measure of our quality. But graduation rates are an ineffective performance measure for community colleges. In fact, the core purpose of a community college runs counter to the notion that students should be on a strict timetable to reach their goals.

Part of the problem stems from the misnomer that community colleges are “two-year” institutions. Many students arrive at community colleges with goals other than degree attainment. They may enroll in one or two courses for specific job skills, or they may seek personal enrichment experiences. They may take a few selected courses to explore new directions, that is, to “test the waters.” If these students don’t graduate in two years with a degree or don’t graduate at all, that does not mean they failed to achieve their goals.

There are also many students who go to community colleges intending to earn a degree, but who bring with them a variety of issues that make degree completion in two years unrealistic. For example, 85 percent of community college students work full- or part-time while attending class; they never intend to complete a degree program in two or even three years. In fact, community college students who set the goal of earning a degree or certificate and actually do so deserve high praise, regardless of how long they take.

Other factors can prevent students from completing degrees or certificates within a two-year timeline. Some need developmental courses to prepare for college-level work. Some pursue college study intermittently because of personal reasons involving family, work, health or finances. Again, this says nothing about the effectiveness of an institution.

As open-admissions institutions, community colleges foster lifelong learning. We accept and support all learners, many of whom are the first in their families to attend college. Some face challenges so great that they must temporarily step out or slow down before attaining their goals. Setting some artificial timeframe within which these students have to reach those goals fails to take into account the challenges they bring to the task. Rather, community colleges excel at giving these students the tools they need to progress toward those goals over time.

At its most recent commencement, Bristol Community College honored the accomplishments of more than 800 people. I asked graduates how many completed their degrees in two years; very few hands were raised. When I asked how many were working and had children or grandchildren (and, yes, even great grandchildren), the fallacy of relying on graduation rates became quickly apparent. Were they any less successful for taking more than two years? Were the ones who took one or two courses and moved on any less successful? The glory of the community college mission is that it allows students to set goals and accomplish them, irrespective of artificial, external timelines.

Certainly, graduation rates can be useful indicators of institutional effectiveness, but only when considered in combination with other performance criteria. Other performance indicators to assess access and affordability could include:

- Comparing student costs with the region’s per-capita income;
- Tracing the historical relationship between institutional tuition and fees and state appropriations;
- Identifying institutional efforts to increase financial aid (particularly to offset federal/state recisions);

- Delineating those selective academic programs that generate lengthy student waiting lists;
- Examining what policies are in place to monitor a student's "satisfactory progress;" and
- Analyzing institutional budgetary expenditures not only by category (e.g., instruction, instructional support, administrative services, plant management, etc.) but also in comparison with peer institutions.
- Employment placement rates for graduates; and
- The number of the institution's collaborative activities in economic and workforce development with community partners (K-12, higher education, business-industry, community-based organizations and public officials).

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Some similar indicators for the category of economic and workforce development might include:

- The number of contracts with employers and the number of employees participating in those training experiences;
- Institutional efforts to prepare students for "critical need" fields;
- Surveys of employers and alumni about institutional effectiveness in preparing students to enter the workplace;


One of my favorite causes is to urge state and local public officials to include me as they woo CEOs of distant corporations to relocate in our region. The number of such presentations—and more important, the number of actual business relocations—should also constitute a key performance indicator for economic and workforce development.

There are many more examples of key indicators that graphically gauge institutional effectiveness. Of course, the grouping of institutions and the selection of peers requires much care. Should the same criteria apply to four-year state colleges and community colleges? Rural and urban? Large and small?

Moreover, it is important to note the distinction between these indicators, which assess institutional efforts, and the use of graduation rates, which address student persistence. So many personal factors discourage community college students from completing (or even seeking) a degree in a set amount of time, it is disingenuous to hold community colleges to that arbitrary standard. Our assessment criteria should focus on how we reach out to students, conduct the learning process, shepherd our resources and serve the community.


*John J. Sbrega is president of Bristol Community College.*

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