



COMPLETION BY DESIGN

LESSONS LEARNED



Background

In 2011, nine community colleges in three states began a five-year journey to increase student success and completion and break down obstacles that students encounter along the way. Funded by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation (BMGF), Completion by Design (CBD) colleges began the transformative process to develop structured pathways that meet students where they are, even as their needs change. With this goal in mind, the colleges embarked on institution-wide change in policies, programs, and practices to align resources and services toward strengthening their student pathways to completion. At the CBD sunset, six of the nine CBD colleges continued with BMGF's Frontier Set (FS) initiative which continues and builds on CBD's transformative work.

Now ten years later, American Institutes for Research (AIR) and ASA Research came together for a retrospective information gathering to understand how institutional change occurred at these six colleges during their transformative journeys. This study was conducted in two parts: an analysis of student success

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NOVEMBER 2021



key performance indicators (KPIs) to examine changes and trends in student outcomes over the 10 years; and interviews with college staff and support partners who were involved with the CBD initiative to gather information regarding:

- Vital factors, conditions and activities that facilitate the success of transformative work.
- Bumps in the road that may slow institutional progress.
- The connection of state and system policies with institutions' transformation work.

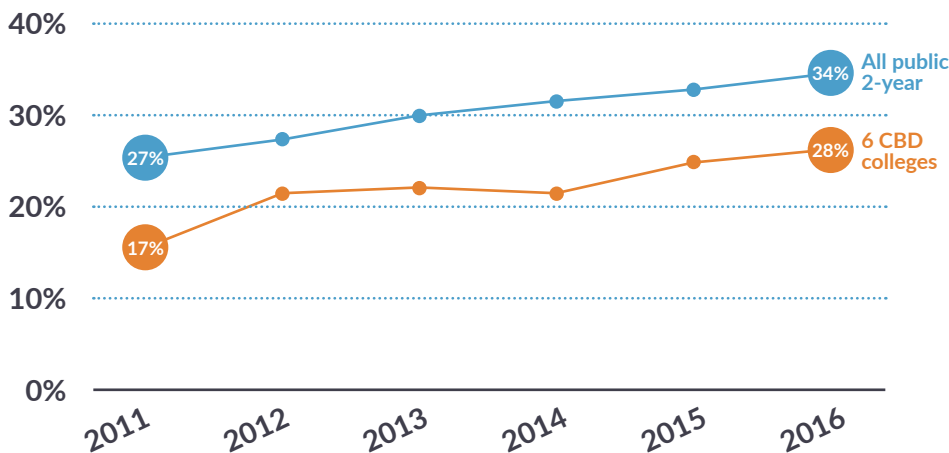
This brief starts with a glance at the changes in student outcomes across the six colleges and provides highlights of the reflections shared by interviewees.

Student success measures

The initiative's ultimate goal was to increase completion rates. Compared to community colleges nationally, on average, the six CBD/FS colleges included in the study saw greater increases in three-year graduation rates since the start of CBD compared to the national rate, 11 compared to 7 percentage points. Notably, beginning with the 2014 cohort, the slope of improvement is generally steeper than the earlier cohorts. This is not surprising, as research suggests that significant time is needed to implement multiple reforms "at the level needed to effect meaningful change in student outcomes"¹, and likely longer than CBD's 5-year grant period.^{2,3} As colleges continue to refine their strategies and policies, the hope is that the recent steep slope of improvement continues in coming years.⁴

Figure 1. CBD/FS Colleges' three-year graduation rates improved at a higher rate than all public 2-year institutions, nationwide

Three-year graduation rate, 2011 through 2016 cohorts



Source: American Institutes for Research analysis of IPEDS, 2014-15 through 2019-20 Graduation Rates Survey data

THE 6 CBD/FS COLLEGES ARE:

NORTH CAROLINA

Davidson County Community College

Guilford Technical Community College

Wake Technical Community College

OHIO

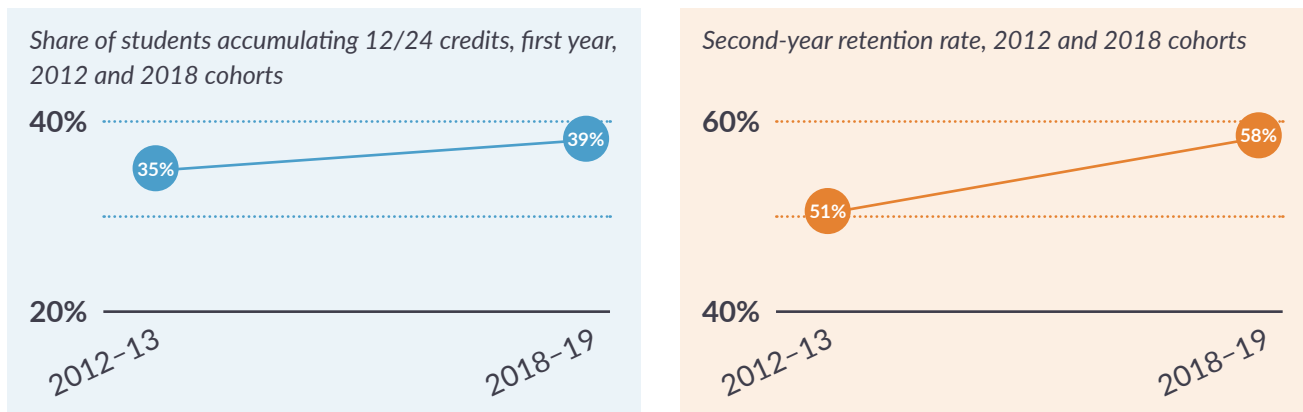
Lorain County Community College

Sinclair Community College

FLORIDA

Miami Dade Community College

Figure 2. CBD/FS Colleges' students gain early momentum as the share of students attaining credit thresholds and retaining improved



Source: American Institutes for Research analysis of three CBD colleges' National Student Clearinghouse, Postsecondary Data Partnership (PDP), Analysis-ready files, spring 2021; PDP Dashboards, March/April 2021

Research evidences that early academic student success is strongly associated with higher rates of completion.^{5, 6, 7, 8} This study's analysis reinforces this finding and identifies credit accumulation and second-year retention to have the strongest relationship, of the studied near-term KPIs, with completion.

Data for three of the six CBD colleges were available to compute the share of students achieving the first year 12/24 credit accumulation threshold (for part- and full-time students, respectively), and the share being retained (re-enrolled or completed) in their second academic year. The share of students achieving the credit threshold increased by 4 percentage points between the 2012 and 2018 cohort, to 39 percent, and retention increased 7 percentage points, to 58 percent. These increases in student outcomes support the increased graduation rate evidenced.

Factors that influence institutional transformation and student success

Interviewees shared their reflections on a number of topics: identifying early strategies, resource allocation decisions, successful and less successful strategies, notable implementation differences across colleges, shifts in strategies, connected strategies or those with friction between them, and how equity was embedded in the CBD work. Interviewees also reflected on state and system policy and other contextual factors that may affect the work. Highlights of what surfaced follow.

“The idea is not about scaling discrete innovations...this is based on research, field after field after field after field. It's all about 80 percent culture and mindset and engagement of people...maybe...60 percent.”

Leaders that champion broad transformation and new possibilities, such as the CBD cadre leads, help to create an environment that is open to change. One interviewee noted that broad institutional transformation can be derailed by leadership focused on technical details such as mapping, planning, scheduling, or developmental education, rather than attending to the culture, and noted that this type of cultural shift takes time, often three to four years.

Adopt a Framework and a Starting Point

Sometimes, institutions are not initially comfortable with, or may not know how to go about identifying broader shifts in strategies. The loss/momentum framework (LMF) provided the CBD colleges with a structure for scaffolding their student success efforts. By establishing a common framework, institutions benefit from having a shared language around their student success efforts. A common framework also helps all stakeholders to understand the broad view, consider how they can contribute to the overall vision, and to think through how to identify future problems (e.g., recognize loss points). Moreover, a framework provides a clear and direct path or map that can be sustained or referred to, even when conditions shift.

Additionally, the CBD national assistance partners developed a set of design principles, drawn from research and practice, that stand out as supporting college efforts as they work to increase student completion. The principles guide colleges through the development of programs focused on large scale innovations, as opposed to those focused only on student services.

KEY ACTIVITIES THAT SUPPORT AND MOTIVATE THE WORK ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ●

“CBD Couldn’t Happen Without Data”

A strong institutional data capacity coupled with strategic use of data were highlighted as key throughout the CBD work. At the beginning of CBD, looking at data differently by taking a more holistic view of student performance, and sharing data both within and outside of the institution were novel ideas. These processes became ingrained as “business as usual” practices for the CBD colleges and the colleges started to deliberately and regularly use data to monitor progress and success, and to identify where to focus their strategies.

From the beginning, CBD colleges were encouraged to use data to question current practice, identify “low hanging fruit” and patterns where students were draining from the college or progressing with good momentum. Working with the data helped the college teams to connect with strategies: Colleges’ deep data inquiries provided them with an understanding of students’ patterns and led them to be better able to develop interventions and other operational changes designed to improve student success.

Data was noted as a key facilitator for each one of the six colleges. For example:

- Miami Dade College (MDC) had a structured, data-evidenced monitoring and assessment process to support building their infrastructure and institutional capacity. At MDC, at the beginning of each year teams identified their goals for the year and, at the end of the year, they evaluated what worked, what they did, and developed their plans for the next year.
- The Ohio colleges depend largely on their data to decide where implementation changes are needed.
- Several colleges used data to gain buy-in and provide reassurance by showing faculty, staff and other stakeholders data and evidencing early wins.
- Sinclair has an annual data summit that brings staff from across campus together to look at data reports.

Target Setting and Assessment Provide an Impetus for Change

Assessment and use of data were most often cited as the impetus for change among the CBD colleges. Measuring progress regularly and routinely improves performance and, indeed, institutions consistently cite the importance of internal data use in leading their institutional transformation efforts.

Setting targets, described as a focusing event for CBD campus teams, was seen as important for providing long-term vision for investment and short-term motivation. CBD colleges participated in intensive target setting workshops and received extensive technical support around these conversations. Through the target setting process, colleges mapped their student success strategies to the CBD KPIs. They researched supporting evidence for how and how much the strategies may improve their student outcomes on the KPIs. Considering the evidence of what is effective practice, including structure, contextualization, acceleration, and understanding that improvement occurs by making systemic changes in practice and policy, college teams then set their targets in collaboration with a team of CBD Assistance Partners.⁹

Networks and Outside Experts

Networks and outside experts are important in fostering and enabling cross-institution learnings and the application of lessons learned to inform transformation approaches.

National- and state-level initiatives and networks were perceived as providing necessary support to institutions as they worked to improve student success. Cross-team collaboration enabled campus teams to serve as change agents for their institution. Within the context of CBD, for instance, one interviewee suggested that the biggest catalyst for change arose from learning about policies and strategies from other cadres. Strategies, such as the use of multiple measures to track student progress and outcomes, were observed “to travel across colleges and state lines.”

In North Carolina, the establishment of the Belk Endowment’s “My Future NC,” a statewide advocacy organization designed to increase postsecondary attainment in the state, has had a significant facilitating effect. Of particular note is the organization’s focus solely on supporting postsecondary issues in North Carolina.

“Over time, [a program or practice] goes stale ... so people tend to mix it up by trying something different. There is no such thing as the perfect solution, there is a solution that works well for your institution, right now.”

“...Having a trusted outside voice... helps institutional leaders cut through deadlocked debates and groupthink. [They’re] often able to have more authentic conversations ... and help normalize institutional change for staff/faculty who have become unsettled by it.”

When Technology Doesn't Keep Up with Needs

At the beginning of CBD, technology providers were developing their products at the same time the CBD colleges were developing and implementing their strategies. While colleges wanted the technology to be the solution, the technologies were not ready to fully support the colleges. Although the technologies eventually caught up, in some cases, the college's work was stalled or they turned to an alternative, more manual means until the technology caught up. However, this highlights the importance of understanding the capacity of a potential new technology and how it aligns with the specific college's needs.

When Dependencies with External Organizations Go Awry

A colleges' momentum can be stalled when they depend on a defined external partner organization to co-create and implement a practice or policy, if the external partner does not have the capacity for or does not prioritize the work. For example, one college's four-year institution partner lost staffing capacity and did not have the operational bandwidth to co-create transfer agreements with the CBD college, thus stalling the CBD college's ability to develop strong transfer pathways. Because student transfers are a component of the state's funding formula, this resulted in unrealized revenues for the CBD college. This highlights the importance of understanding the capacities of defined partners and planning accordingly; this may mean planning for and identifying alternative revenue sources to supplant the potential loss, possible alternative partners, or means to support the partner's capacities, if possible.

STATE AND SYSTEM POLICIES APPEAR TO FACILITATE BUT NOT DRIVE THE WORK ●●●●●●●●●●●●●●●●

Interviewees voiced different views regarding the connection between state policy and student success strategy. One interviewee stated that college leadership made all of the difference throughout the CBD work and that state policy was not a significant facilitator for student success initiatives. Another noted that state policy can have different effects across sectors within a state; Florida was noted to support the four-year institutions at the detriment of the two-year colleges. A third interviewee noted that state policy, such as performance-based funding, and institutional student success strategies can be complimentary and noted, "PBF [Performance based funding policies] did not drive the work ... as much as our research, benchmarking and analysis of our initiatives did. [Colleges] did what was best for students and tried to inform the PBF commission of what we considered to be best practice." And, while policies can sometimes push strategy, this can also leave colleges scrambling to successfully adjust to new and changed policies. How long it takes institutions to adjust is important and can result in the derailment of student success-related activities. For example, MDC was better able to adjust to new statewide developmental education policy quickly because of their CBD work, which helped to strengthen their college and make them flexible.

Conclusion

With this retrospective, we had the opportunity to reflect on a decade's worth of hard work by campus teams. Over this time, the CBD colleges researched, analyzed, assessed, and reflected to develop and implement strong supports and conditions to increase their students' success. The work is not done and, as stakeholders noted, these colleges continue their journeys through a continual improvement process.

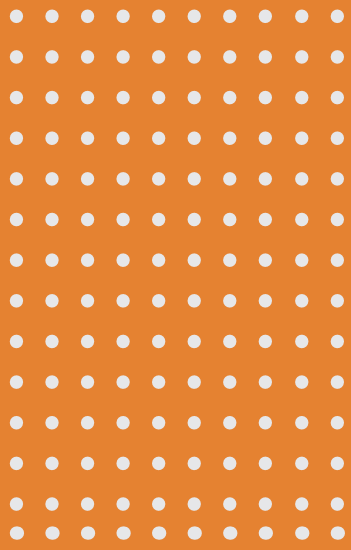
- **CAREFULLY CONSIDER THE METRICS USED FOR MONITORING AND ASSESSMENT.** Grounded in the evidence that a student's first year is critically important in laying a strong foundation for timely completion, focus on the strongest observed near-term levers—credit accumulation rates and retention surfaced from this study—that are indicators of long-term student success. Use the same measures over time to assess with validity, along with a consistent and clean logic model and an established set of research questions.
- **EMBED EQUITY.** Equity applies to race, ethnicity, nationality, language, religion, class, gender, sexual orientation, and physical disability. Each campus environment and context is different. As such, consider which student populations should be included in your equity conversations. Equity is often seen as a valued principle, but is not regularly assessed or measured, and what gets measured gets noticed. While we may embrace and celebrate diversity on campus, diversity does not imply equity. Identifying where inequities occur – in access to education and supports, inclusion in activities, curriculum, and outcomes – is necessary to close the gaps. Incorporate detailed student equity plans to discuss disaggregated data for key outcomes, identify which demographic groups are experiencing inequities, set goals for closing equity gaps, and propose specific activities to reach those goals. Explicitly define and develop a common understanding across campus as to what is meant by equity, and a methodology for measuring equity gaps.



ENDNOTES

- 1 Grossman, J. B., Quint, J., Gingrich, J. Cerna, O., Diamond, J., Levine, A., & Willard, J. (2015). *Changing community colleges: Early lessons from Completion by Design*. MDRC. https://www.mdrc.org/sites/default/files/changing_community_college_2015.pdf
- 2 Curry, B. K. (1992). *Instituting enduring innovations: Achieving continuity of change in higher education*. The George Washington University, School of Education and Human Development. <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED358809.pdf>
- 3 Kezar, A. J. (2007). *Tools for a time and place: Phased leadership strategies to institutionalize a diversity agenda*. *The Review of Higher Education*, 30(4), 413–439. <https://doi.org/10.1353/rhe.2007.0025>
- 4 Note, pandemic era data are not a focus of this analysis because the intention herein is to focus on strategies, activities, policies, and environments that occurred during the CBD-intensive work between 2011 and 2016, and the related outcomes of the corresponding student cohorts (2011 through 2016). The implication that these institutions were not immune from the effects of the pandemic is not intended; further deeper study is needed to understand the pandemic-era outcomes and how these institutions' outcomes compare to other, non-FS-CBD colleges.
- 5 Adelman, C. (1999). *Answers in the tool box: Academic intensity, attendance patterns, and bachelor's degree attainment*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, Office of Educational Research and Improvement. <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED431363>
- 6 Adelman, C. (2006). *The toolbox revisited: Paths to degree completion from high school through college*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education: Office of Vocational and Adult Education. <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED490195>
- 7 Attewell, P., Heil, S., & Reisel, L. (2012). *What is academic momentum? And does it matter?* *Review of Research in Education*, 34(1), 27-44. <https://doi.org/10.3102/0162373711421958>
- 8 Belfield, C., Jenkins, D. & Fink, J. (2019). *Early momentum metrics: Leading indicators for community college improvement*. Community College Research Center, Teachers College, Columbia University. <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED596315.pdf>
- 9 Guthrie, K. & Walsh, S. (June 21, 2012). *Next steps in mapping strategies to KPIs and setting improvement targets*. Internal Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation Memo: unpublished.

Interviewees wish to remain anonymous, as such, quotes herein are not attributed to individuals.



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