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Q&A with Davis Jenkins: How can we improve community-college graduation rates?

By Liz Willen
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There's a reason so many students in U.S. community colleges don't finish: Not enough enter a specific, college-level program, according to Davis Jenkins, who has over 25 years of experience as a researcher, evaluator, consultant and program manager on projects related to education and employment in the U.S. and abroad. *The Hechinger Report* spoke with Davis, a senior researcher at the Community College Research Center at Teachers College, Columbia University, on the eve of the second anniversary of President Barack Obama's American Graduation Initiative.

Your recent research points to a major reason why most students who enter higher education through a community college fail to earn a postsecondary credential. You also offer some potential solutions. What must community colleges do to get more students to graduate?

We have to think about how to take students with clear goals and knowledge of college and guide them to enter programs that are well-structured and lead to something. A key thing that our research—and other research—points to is that most students who enter community colleges don't even get into a program, either because they are stuck in remedial education or they drop out. Those who enter a coherent program early on [like marketing, nursing or criminal justice] do better. You have to provide a clear pathway built into the curriculum ... you have to lay out the pathways. The big issue is incentives and support. Community colleges should require student-success courses.

The innovative institutions really understand you can't let students navigate themselves through college. A lot of community-college students have no idea what to do. And they aren't spending enough time and focusing on rethinking what they do. We think it's beneficial to help students chose a program of study and support them through it.

On the eve of the second anniversary of President Barack Obama's American Graduation Initiative, The Hechinger Report found countless obstacles in the way of meeting the ambitious goal of restoring the U.S. to first place by 2020 in the proportion of 25- to 34-year-olds with college degrees. Do these findings surprise you?

The problem is, there were zero financial incentives. The bigger package that President Obama wanted had a lot of provisions to work with states and to create these kinds of policy incentives to focus on outcomes. But if creating more structures to align students is the answer, community colleges have almost no financial incentive. They are under-resourced, and with the flood of students and displaced workers who want to retrain, they don't have much time. Students can't spend a lot of time earning a degree. They need something that leads to a certificate, but many of them have been out of the workplace and need at least a brush-up in math ... and it has to be done very quickly. The question is how to provide incentives. I see the community-college movement trying to do it, but not only are budgets getting cut, there is a policy mindset lumping them together with four-year universities. They have their own issues and they can't be treated the same way.

Piecemeal efforts, even those at a fairly large scale, aren't going to move the needle. I'm talking about really rethinking, about a systemic change in rethinking what colleges do. If they take a look at what they

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do, they will realize quickly they aren't doing enough to guide study. The community-college movement is trying to serve its communities. We need more students with more postsecondary training, so community colleges are trying to adapt to that. They have to help students think about their goals, or what it takes if they want to transfer to the state university. They need to look at their own programs and make sure they do indeed lead somewhere. If it's a certificate, it should be linked to a program. If it's an associate degree, it should clearly be linked to a bachelor's degree.

Why is it so critical that we get more Americans to complete degrees? There are plenty of people arguing that doing so isn't necessary.

You can't get a decent job anymore that pays a living wage without some postsecondary training, and now so many of the unemployed may have credentials. If you don't have one, you are competing against someone who does. A high-school diploma doesn't mean anything. A degree at least shows motivation and a basic level of literacy—and, ideally, some real skills.

This conversation has been edited for length and clarity.