



³Shipley, David K. *The Working Poor: Invisible in America*. Alfred A. Knopf. New York. 2004. p. 11.

⁴Gonzalez, p. 2.

⁵Morgan, Julie Margetta and Marshall Steinbaum, "The Student Debt Crisis, Labor Market Credentialization, and Racial Inequality." Roosevelt Institute. October 2018. <http://rooseveltinstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/The-Student-Debt-Crisis-and-Labor-Market-Credentialization-final-1.pdf>

When Success Spells Failure

For many years in my young adulthood, I agonized about not being successful. However successful I was, I felt that I fell short of true success. I became somewhat obsessed with my own hopes of success and fears of failure. One day, I was talking to a therapist about this during my master's program. He asked me a question that now strikes me as obvious: "What do you mean when you say 'success'?" This line of questioning led me in a direction that has helped me change my life for the better, as I approached my concept of "success" with more deliberate mindfulness.

Community colleges have long had a focus on success. As state funding has become tied to student success, the focus on "success" has sometimes become an obsessive fixation not unlike my own. As with my own obsession with success, community college teachers and administrators have assumed that we know what "success" means and that this fixation is one worth having. So, to paraphrase my former therapist, what do we mean when we say "success"? As of 2013, a tenth of state allocations for community colleges in Texas are "tied to student outcomes, including first-year course completion, degree and certificate completion, and transfers to four-year institutions." Texas is not the only state to adopt performance-based funding for higher education. The National Conference of State Legislatures' 2015 analysis found that 32 states had similar initiatives in place, with an additional five in transition to include them. The percentage of overall funding that is performance-based varies widely too, from Illinois, where it is under 1 percent, to Ohio and Tennessee, where it can run as high as 80 to 90 percent.

Dougherty et al., authors of the 2016 book *Performance Funding for Higher Education*, find that the results are a mixed bag. There is some encouraging evidence of increased efforts to change policies and programs based on institutional data. However, it's hard to quantify how many of the observed changes

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were specifically consequences of performance-based funding, and even the best analyses available have failed to produce clear evidence that performance-based funding ultimately works. The unintended consequences can be severe, too, with community colleges sometimes sacrificing their broad-access policies in order to admit fewer students who are unready to succeed according to state-prescribed measures.ⁱⁱⁱ

As Texas' change in state funding has been so recent, let's take a closer look at how this is calculated and consider what unintended consequences this may yield over the life of the program. According to the Texas Association of Community Colleges, performance-based funding at community colleges is calculated on the basis of "Key Performance Indicators" (originally named "Student Success Points") awarded to students as they complete various tasks:

- Students who are not ready for college-level courses in math, reading, and English can earn points for completing their developmental courses: 1 point (for math), $\frac{1}{2}$ point each (for reading and writing)
- Students who successfully complete their first college-level math, reading, or writing course with an A, B, or C earn 1 point (for math) or $\frac{1}{2}$ point each (for reading and writing)
- Students who complete 15 semester credit hours in one fiscal year: 1 point
- Students who complete 30 semester credit hours in one fiscal year: 1 point
- Students who earn a degree or certificate: 2 points (2.25 points for degrees or certificates in what the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board determines to be a "critical field")
- Students who complete at least 15 semester hours and then are shown to transfer to a four-year institution: 2 points.

Given this model, we maximize state funding by getting as many students as possible to tick off these boxes. We can do this by getting students to:

- Take a lot of credit hours each semester
- Score a C or better in their classes
- Earn a degree or certificate as quickly as possible
- Transfer to a four-year institution immediately, preferably in the same fiscal year.

On the surface, the Key Performance Indicators



model is appealing and forward thinking. As the Texas Association of Community College states:

The underlying premise of the model is student success at community colleges should not be defined solely by end-point events (e.g., degrees and transfer). The model includes intermediate steps—completion of developmental work, first college-level course—that mark student success at community colleges. The model also details important missing elements that should be added in the future (ABE/ESL, GED, Employment/Workforce).^{iv}

However, even if Texas stops short of undercutting its open-access model in community colleges, we are still at risk of the sorts of unintended consequences we have witnessed in the pre-collegiate public school system. These include:

- Encouraging grade inflation and instructor cheating
- Negatively affecting institutions in impoverished or otherwise disadvantaged areas
- Focusing on teaching to the test
- Discouraging instructors, leading to loss of talented faculty.

Let's consider how each of these issues could and/or does translate to higher education.

Encouraging Grade Inflation and Instructor Cheating

When funding is tied to students scoring a C or better, there is pressure on teachers to inflate grades. The pressure can be subtle or overt, conscious or subliminal. Grade inflation tends to push through underprepared students and reinforce the unfortunate and often outdated reputation for community college education being subpar, inadequately preparing students for university standards.

There is also pressure on instructors to try to game the system (intentionally or not). Just as public school teachers have been caught manipulating student answers in order to boost test scores, instructors can and will find ways to manipulate the system to inflate grades. On the extreme end of the spectrum, I have met at least one professor with a “Give-‘em-all-As” philosophy. Others create test prep materials so exhaustive that they’re all but giving away the exam answers before the students see the test. Some award extra credit so liberally as to make the final grade meaningless. Others over-

emphasize participation in their grading rubric to the point that if students are usually present, they’re almost guaranteed a C or better. Some overly adjust the final data through curving assignment or final grades.

Grade inflation is real and has been increasing for decades. Most of this inflation in recent years seems to result from an increase in As rather than an increase in passing grades. While community college grade inflation seems to have leveled off recently, Stuart Rojstaczer, a former Duke University professor who has been studying grade inflation, noted that community colleges have some additional pressures that may lead to grade inflation. These include a “student-as-consumer” model and a heavy reliance on adjunct instructors who lack the job security to risk negative course reviews for rigorous grading.

As finances are increasingly tied to student performance, there is increased pressure on community colleges to get students to succeed, which can yield positive results (increased services, such as more extensive and personalized advising) and negative ones (grade inflation).

Negatively Affecting Institutions That Are in Impoverished or Otherwise Disadvantaged Areas

Within the Lone Star College system alone, success rates vary substantially among our six main campuses. These seem to correlate best with local household incomes. The LSC system is currently investing in additional resources to assist students who are socioeconomically disadvantaged on the campuses most susceptible to these issues. This seems like a potentially positive result of performance-based incentivization, though we must be cautious not to imply correlation from causation, since the LSC system has a long history of championing student success and may have made these decisions even in the absence of performance-based funding.

More broadly, though, we must remember that this funding model is only a few years old in Texas. Just as Dougherty et al. warned of the risks of community colleges moving to more restricted access models, the performance-based model also economically disincentivizes the creation of community colleges in disadvantaged communities that need



them most, because of the potential for lower success rates undermining their future funding. As student success weighs increasingly heavily in funding formulas, this problem is only likelier to occur.

Focusing on Teaching to the Test

While our current model isn't based on standardized tests, it is based on reaching certain goals. These goals encourage students to take a lot of hours, to stay focused on their degree plans with minimal investment in enrichment coursework that strays from their degree path, and to get out of community colleges and into four-year institutions quickly. While these can be good things for some students, there are also unfortunate consequences. The result of these notions of success quickly lead us to prioritize completion of core classes and degree or certificate plans, as well as the transfer to four-year universities, to the *exclusion* of all other outcomes.

Several policies have shown that this is a clear legislative priority in Texas. The 6-drop rule only allows students six withdrawals from any classes in their *entire* Texas public college or university education. The so-called 150-hour rule withdraws state funding from students who take classes outside of their degree program in excess of 30 credit hours. The ACGM (the catalogue of Texas community college academic courses that can receive state funding) has been eviscerated in the last few years, as all academic courses that do not feed directly into four-year programs have been removed. In my field (music) alone, well over a dozen courses were cut, including courses in composition/songwriting, electronic music, musical theatre, and others.

The end result is that students have less room to make mistakes, change their minds about what degrees they want to pursue, or take elective courses for enrichment. When everything is geared toward transfer or certification, the community college becomes little more than a series of hoops for students to jump through *en route* to four-year education or their careers.

Discouraging Instructors, Leading to Loss of Talented Faculty

Increasingly, community college instructors are finding it hard to offer students diverse coursework, to be innovative in the classes and opportunities we're offering, and to encourage students to take some time to explore coursework before set-

tling in on a field of study. Those of us who are passionate about learning and education can find this immensely frustrating, as many of the most engaging and interesting courses are stripped away and every decision we make is in deference to the practices at four-year universities. We celebrate innovation in the abstract, but in actual practice, our focus is on creating programs that duplicate as closely as possible the practices at the universities. This gives all the agency to university faculty and administrators and none to community colleges. As the courses we can offer disappear and every idea we have has to pass the are-the-four-years-doing-it test, it is increasingly difficult for community college faculty to retain their love of early undergraduate education for a singularly diverse population of students. The risk is that students lose educational and enrichment opportunities and faculty feel so limited by the system, they are likely to consider seeking opportunities in other states or in the university system, where the performance-based funding model has not yet been instituted in Texas.

When Successes Are Failures

Here are some samples of the sort of students we frequently see in community colleges. These are students whom most would consider successful, but who reduce our funding by not quickly accruing key performance indicators. In other words, these students are failures in the student success game in Texas:

- A working parent who takes one or two classes a semester, gradually finishing his/her degree over the course of a decade
- A retiree who takes a college course or two each semester out of interest, but never working toward or completing a degree
- A student who gets a year or so into a degree only to discover his/her true passion and switches to that degree plan, delaying his or her graduation and accruing too many hours outside of their degree plan
- A student who completes an associate degree, takes a few years off to work and save for college, only then to continue his/her education at a university
- A student who completes the majority of his/her degree and transfers to a university without actually earning his/her associate degree.



Where to Now?

There are, perhaps, no perfect solutions to these issues. The problems that performance-based funding tries to address are important and real. The term “two-year college” has become a hopelessly outdated misnomer, as “only 33 percent of entering students actually transfer to a four-year institution within six years.” While we know what tends to help students at community college succeed (personalized and deeply involved advisors, for example), most schools don’t have the money or infrastructure to invest sufficiently in these solutions. Free market competition is often viewed as a magic bullet, especially in conservative-leaning states, and getting colleges to compete for resources is in line with this thinking. However, the recent history of public secondary education suggests that solutions like these often create more problems than they solve, and the research to date on performance-based funding provides little evidence in its favor.

The principal goal of transferability and degree or certificate completion strikes me as valid. The majority of students I have encountered are using community college as a stepping stone to careers or university education. However, one of the great strengths of community college education is how many different purposes and people it can serve. These diverse populations that we can and should serve, and have historically served, include students who want to take courses just for enrichment, students who aren’t entirely college ready, nontraditional students (veterans, the elderly, immigrants, working parents, etc.), high-level students who want affordable but comparable education for their first two years, and students who need to figure out if undergraduate education is right for them without the crushing burden of the costs of attending university.

When we define success for these students as “transfer with an associate degree” instead of supporting their own notions of success, when we tie funding to global markers that don’t adjust to different types of students, and when we devalue and reduce opportunities for enrichment and exploration of different fields, we take the diverse ecosystem that community colleges naturally cultivate and reduce it to a forced monoculture. Our students deserve educational diversity—community colleges that embrace diverse student populations and diverse student wants and needs. In that very real

sense, in our zeal for “success,” we fail them.

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Endnotes

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