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certifies that this is the approved version of the following dissertation:

COMMUNITY COLLEGE RESPONSES TO CALLS FOR HIGHER COMPLETION RATES:

THE CASES OF THREE COMMUNITY COLLEGES

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Chairperson Susan Twombly

Date approved: 1 April 2013

COMMUNITY COLLEGE RESPONSES TO CALLS FOR HIGHER COMPLETION RATES: THE CASES OF THREE COMMUNITY COLLEGES

Abstract

The primary purpose of this study was to understand how three diverse community colleges are interpreting and acting on federal initiatives to increase completion rates. The study attempted to answer four main research questions: (1) How do a selection of Kansas community colleges, as organizations, interpret the initiative to increase completion rates? (2) How are community colleges responding to how they understand the latest initiative? (3) What are obstacles to responding? (4) How are interpretation and response affected by Kansas Board of Regents, U.S. Board of Education, accreditation, or local policies?

We have yet to understand how continuing calls for higher completion numbers, better student success, and more accountability affect morale, work environments, or public relations for personnel at community colleges. This dissertation attempted to address this deficiency through a multi-case study of three community colleges in Kansas. Administrators, faculty, and staff were interviewed to learn their perceptions, views, and beliefs about completion, the community college missions and values, and the latest initiative to increase completion rates. Almost no discrepancy between colleges was found, although a wide variety of views were discussed by participants. In general, interviewees believe that this latest initiative is a good goal, but without better definitions for completion and without better funding, the largest benefit of the current initiative is in its promotion of community colleges as viable providers of education, whether as bridges between K-12 education and four-year colleges or as contributors to the economic security of both graduates and communities through vocational programs.

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank my dissertation committee: Dr. Susan Twombly, Dr. Dongbin Kim, Dr. Lisa Wolf-Wendel, Dr. Marlesa Roney, Dr. Suzanne Rice, and Dr. Thomas Heilke, for your tireless work and advice. Special thanks go to Dr. Roney, who joined this study at the very end to help out a colleague on sabbatical. Special thanks are also due to Dr. Twombly, who as committee chair has provided a great deal of support and advice at long distance and over weekends as I worked to complete this dissertation after moving for a new job. She always seemed to be checking her email when I was working on the weekend and had a question, which was always very much appreciated! Thank you all.

My thanks also go out to the many administrators, faculty, and staff who consented to take part in my interviews. In the interest of anonymity, I cannot name them, but special thanks are due to the presidents of the colleges in this study. You gave me time, gave me names of people to interview, and promoted my study with your faculty and staff—I could never have done this without the three of you, and your support, advice, and encouragement before, during, and after the interviews made this study possible. One president even emailed or called presidents at other colleges to "sell" this study to them and encourage their participation. The three of you will always be remembered for your thoughtful remarks, your encouragement of my study and my personal and professional goals, and your kind help—thank you all. "Remy," you especially made it easier for me to keep going when I got discouraged. Your advice was timely, funny, and exactly what I needed to hear. Thank you.

Two individuals who became mentors of a sort must be mentioned. Dr. Kim Wilcox, then Dean of the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences at the University of Kansas, hired me for my first doctoral assistantship, thus giving me a start in the coursework leading to this study. Kim, you were an amazing boss—you hired me sight-unseen, you encouraged me throughout my

first classes, and you continued to encourage me even after you moved away from KU. Thank you. And then at the end, Dr. Lawrence Tyree, then interim president at Johnson County Community College, met with me to discuss office politics, writing for a committee, and Gators football! You continued to encourage me after you moved away, even reading my interview questions to make sure they made sense. Thank you. Without you two acting as mentors to help me get started and help me finish, this process would have been so much more difficult, and I will always appreciate your help.

Another person who has supported my work at the end of the process must be acknowledged: Dr. Diane Jacobs, who hired me knowing that I would need time and energy to complete my dissertation in a timely manner. She has excused me from work for writing when deadlines loomed, and has excused occasionally brainless errors because she knew my mind was busy trying to rewrite a section in my head when I should have been focused on work. I haven't meant to be so divided between work and writing, but you have acknowledged that sometimes, writers and researchers just can't easily set aside those concerns. Thank you for your encouragement, your understanding, and your patience!

There were of course many helpful people along this journey—administrative assistants who helped me schedule interviews, personnel at the University of Kansas who advised me on deadlines and formatting, and library personnel who helped me find obscure sources. I'd like to thank two University of Central Florida College of Medicine librarians in particular who really saved the day while I was finishing the writing process: Natasha Fortune, you have the fastest interlibrary loans I've ever seen! And Kerry McKee, you found a very obscure chapter online when I needed it immediately—you saved me several hours of running to the main campus library and back when I really needed to keep writing. I've been writing a dissertation on higher

education, not medicine, but you both took the time and effort to help me with my personal source searches. Thank you both!

Of course, this program would have been impossible without my family: my parents, Patrick and Cheryl Smock; my brothers, Michael, Patrick, and David and their families; and my in-laws, especially Marlene Bunker—all these people, as well as many friends, supported me emotionally, financially, and often by babysitting so I could go to class, go to conferences, travel for interviews, and write this dissertation. You have all made sacrifices, provided love and encouragement, and done everything in your power to support me in my quest to be the latest Dr. Smock. This achievement would not have been possible without you all.

Last but certainly not least, my deepest love and heartfelt gratitude go to my husband, Art Bunker III, for your continued love, encouragement, support, and sacrifice. You have given up so much so I could chase my dreams, and I thank you. Along with Art, I must thank my wonderful children, Stuart and Anne, who have also made multiple sacrifices so Mommy could study and write. You have never known a time that I was not working on my doctorate; I know it hasn't been easy to leave me alone so I could work. Stuart, we had to get you your first computer because you didn't want to leave mine alone long enough for me to do my homework! I love you all so much, and I look forward to spending much more time with you now that I'm done. Let's go to the beach—often!

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

In July 2009, President Obama proposed the American Graduation Initiative (AGI), a funding package of twelve billion dollars meant to "reform and strengthen community colleges from coast to coast so they get the resources that students and schools need—and the results workers and businesses demand" (Obama, 2009, online). These reforms were supposed to help an additional five million Americans earn degrees or certificates by 2020. However, the AGI failed to become law. According to Moltz (2010a), the AGI was among the many priorities that President Obama and his Congressional allies sacrificed to get a larger healthcare and student aid measure passed.

Not to be defeated, in October 2010 President Obama held a White House Summit where he again promoted the goal of five million more community college graduates by 2020 (cnn.com, 2010; whitehouse.gov, 2010). This Summit was one of a long line of initiatives by various groups to increase college completion rates. Some initiatives, such as those by the American Association of Community Colleges (2010) and Achieving the Dream (2011), focus mainly on two-year degree attainment, while others, such as that by the American Association of State College and Universities, focus on bachelor's degrees, and still others, like the Complete College America (2010) initiative, focus on both.

Although the 2010 White House Summit simply added one more initiative to many years' worth of such, it did set forth some goals and definitions that made the news. For example, most former initiatives focused on associate or baccalaureate degree attainment. The implication of the president's speech in 2010, especially when reviewed in the light of his attempt to pass the AGI in 2009, is that completion numbers for community colleges will include

certificate as well as both terminal and transferrable degree earners as “graduates.” The president explained his focus on community colleges by saying, "they may not go to four-year colleges right away, but the community college system can be just a terrific gateway for folks to get skills. Some start at a community college and then go on to four-year colleges. Some just get technical training, get a job and then come back maybe five years later to upgrade their skills or adapt them to a new business" (cnn.com, 2010). New funding includes programs for workforce training as well as Pell grants for low-income students to attend college (cnn.com, 2010).

During the summit, President Obama also announced a new five-year initiative by the Gates Foundation to increase community college graduation rates—including certificates as well as two-year degrees (whitehouse.gov, 2010). These are important moves to increase the historically low number of students who graduate from community college. This latest plan to increase completion rates comes at a time when the costs of higher education have risen much more quickly than inflation (cnn.com, 2008, 2010), causing many students to choose to begin their college careers at their local community college, even when their goal is to complete a baccalaureate degree. Although research has shown this choice decreases their chances of earning their bachelor’s degrees by around thirty percent (Bowen, Chingas, and McPherson, 2009, p. 136), it is the only way many students can afford to begin college. Community college tuition is much less expensive than even small regional state colleges, and many students can decrease their costs even further by remaining at home. With so much financial reason to begin their college careers at a local community college, more students are taking their first college courses at a two-year school.

New college completion goals, combined with this large wave of student enrollment, increase pressure on community colleges at the same time that funding from local and state sources is being reduced dramatically. Admittedly, several groups and foundations have created

new grants to community colleges to help them reach these goals, but the money also comes with an increase in accountability for improving graduation rates.

Community colleges, in particular, have focused for many years on access instead of completion, which makes it more difficult for them to show accountability for improving completion rates. Kay McKlenney, director of the Center for Community College Student Engagement at the University of Texas at Austin, explains

> One of the reasons graduation rates are as low as they are is because it's never mattered. There's been no funding policy, no accountability policy, no policy whatsoever that has made it matter. You hear people say, 'The community college mission is different and complicated.' And it is. They say, 'People don't always come here to graduate.' And that's true. But it's the truth we hide behind that keeps us from getting serious about improving graduation rates (Thevenot, texastribune.org, 2010).

Access will no longer be the ultimate goal. Although community colleges have often used as an indicator of their success whether individual students meet their goals by enrolling in community colleges, the new initiative assumes that community colleges will now need to focus on student progress toward degrees and attainment of degrees (or transfer). Researchers such as Bailey and Morest (2006), the Achieving the Dream Project, and the Voluntary Framework for Accountability being developed by the American Association of Community Colleges (AACC, online, 2011) recognize the need to transform college culture and track much more than student satisfaction as a measure of institutional success. This may not seem like a major change, but for community colleges it may represent a major shift in culture as well as requiring much more focused action. Increasing graduation and transfer rates involves much more than merely saying it is a priority. While some colleges have joined the Achieving the Dream Initiative, only a few

of the roughly 1100 U.S. community colleges have done so. How will other colleges respond? Do they have sufficient financial and human resources to respond? Do they even want to try?

Purpose of the Study

Now that a new initiative has increased pressure on community colleges to graduate students, the question is how community colleges are reacting to this responsibility. The primary purpose of this research is to understand how three diverse community colleges are interpreting and acting on the initiatives to increase completion rates. Some of the steps in this process will be to identify the requirements—such as finding new room in the budget for new staff or newly required reports to accreditation, governing, and legislative bodies—put on community colleges by the new initiative, and then discern community colleges' actions in response to those burdens. This study attempted to determine if community colleges are actually making changes because of the new completion goals, or if they were waiting to see if the political landscape would change with the presidential and congressional elections of 2012.

The study found a few changes being made specifically in response to the initiatives; these were categorized by themes to help make sense of how community colleges are demonstrating that they are becoming more effective in meeting goals of increasing certificates, transfers, and two-year and four-year college degrees.

Research Questions

This study seeks to answer the following questions: (1) How do a selection of Kansas community colleges, as organizations, interpret the initiative to increase completion rates? What does the initiative mean to them in a practical sense? Is accountability part of the initiative for them? (2) How are community colleges responding to how they understand the latest initiative? What are the specific actions, if any, they've taken since Fall 2010? (3) What are obstacles, such as lack of resources or political power struggles in the college or community, to responding? (4)

How are interpretation and response affected by Kansas Board of Regents, legislative, U.S. Board of Education, accreditation, or local policies? In other words, do community colleges, as organizations, see the initiative as an opportunity or a threat? How will community colleges increase graduation rates? Are they attempting to enhance graduation rates, or transfer rates, or both? What specific actions are they taking in making these attempts? How are they dealing with demands for increasing accountability?

Conceptual Framework

This study uses two conceptual frameworks to give structure to the literature review and data collection and analysis. The first is not a conceptual theory, but a phenomenon—the politics of accountability. How a community college demonstrates its success (in areas such as student retention, certificate or degree completion, student satisfaction, student completion of remedial education, number of students who transfer to a four-year college, and number of vocational students who pass a licensure exam) informs decision makers that the college is doing its job. This, in turn, helps those decision makers, such as accrediting agencies, legislators, regents, governors, and the community, continue to provide resources and positive decisions to the community college. The decisions and plans for the community college are made in the context of accountability. A more thorough discussion of accountability, its history and political development, and what it means to community colleges is in the literature review in Chapter Two. Currently, there are various groups working on voluntary and other accountability frameworks; these are also discussed in detail in Chapter Two.

How colleges respond to the decisions and policies made within the context of accountability leads to the second framework, based on Bolman's and Deal's (1997) theories of organizational structure. How a problem is viewed by a leader or organization and how the solution is defined and discussed on campus can make a huge difference in the success or failure

of an initiative. For example, if a leader focuses on the *political frame* (Bolman & Deal, 1997), using organizational politics to support a new initiative, he or she may, knowingly or unknowingly, emphasize power struggles or create a suspicious environment. This dissertation started out using this framework to structure questions and ideas about community college leadership. However, as research continued, an interest in how personnel at all levels of administration, teaching, and student services interpreted such an initiative as this grew. President Obama's challenge to increase community college completion rates did not affect only the upper administration of each college. The administrators were not even the only ones attempting to make meaning of the new goals. At each college in this study, administrators, faculty, and staff all came together to try to work out the most beneficial changes they would need to make, as an entire organization, to meet the challenges created by new completion goals. Therefore, Bolman and Deal's (1997) theories of organization became much more pertinent in looking at how these three schools responded as organizations. This framework was used to help better understand how community colleges approached the challenge of increasing accountability in response to the initiative to increase completion rates.

For more information on these conceptual frameworks, see Chapter Two's review of the literature. The section on "Administrative Roles in College Policy Changes" discusses Bolman's and Deal's (1997) theories on organizational frames in more detail.

Rationale

This dissertation will attempt to gain a better understanding of how three particular community colleges have responded to the latest goal of increasing college completion rates by five million graduates by 2020, with or without federal, state, or local policies in place to help their colleges. Even before the White House Summit of October 2010, community college

associations and states were calling for increasing college completion rates. Various initiatives have been formed, with an assortment of goals and assessment strategies.

In April 2010, a Call to Action was signed by leaders of the American Association of Community Colleges, the League for Innovation in the Community College, the Association of Community College Trustees, the Center for Community College Student Engagement, the National Institute for Staff & Organizational Development, and the Phi Theta Kappa Honor Society. This Call to Action pledges to meet President Obama's initiative by increasing student completion rates by fifty percent over the next ten years (American Association of Community Colleges, 2010). Although some college presidents expressed concern that this pledge would impel a "No Child Left Behind Goes to Community College" type of federal assessment plan on to two-year colleges, others argued that the pledge and a proposed voluntary national accountability system would keep the government from enacting such a centralized assessment program. Mary Spilde, AAC board chair and president of Lane Community College in Oregon, explained, "I would rather shape and influence what happens to us rather than leave it up to somebody else. We've got to shape it so it doesn't end up being a centralized, federalized system we don't want" (Moltz, 2010b p. 2).

Along with the Call to Action, many states and even cities have set their own completion goals and formed alliances to help each other develop action plans to meet President Obama's objectives. In November 2010, the Community College League of California released their "2020 Vision" commission recommendations, including the goal to produce one million more community college certificate and degree holders by 2020. The League states this is California's share of President Obama's national aims, since California's 112 two-year schools enroll about one-third of all U.S. community college students (Moltz, 2010c, p. 1).

In early December 2010, Virginia's governor also called for action. Governor Robert M. McDonnell set a goal of awarding one hundred thousand more associate and bachelor's degrees by 2025 and requested the state legislature provide $58 million to higher education to achieve this goal (Moltz, 2010c, p. 2).

In 2000, long before other states began focusing on completion, Texas introduced *Closing the Gaps*, aiming to increase certificate, associate, and bachelor degree completion to 210,000 by 2015. The initiative sets a specific goal for state community colleges to increase associate's degrees to 55,500 by 2015 (Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board, 2010, online). As of 2009, Texas was on track to meet their 2010 target, but state administrators acknowledge they have serious work ahead of them to meet the ambitious 2015 goal. In November 2010, the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board suggested that an outcomes-based funding model be adopted by the state legislature to help meet the state's completion goals (Moltz, 2010c, p. 2). So far, Texas has improved college completion levels by mandating that all high school students take the college-preparatory program, testing high school students for remedial needs to prepare them for college, and creating better linkages between secondary and postsecondary student information systems (Moltz, 2010c, p. 2). Although these mandates are all focused on college preparation, current opinion (e.g., Gates Foundation, Lumina Foundation, Delta Project) is that increasing preparation will increase completion, since fewer students will be taking multiple remedial courses. According to Goldrick-Rab (2010), nearly two-thirds of community college students enroll in one developmental course, with one-quarter taking two or more such courses (p. 438). Since only thirty percent of students who took Adult Basic Education or General Education Development coursework earned any college credits within five years of beginning remedial classes (Goldrick-Rab, 2010, p. 447), current leading opinion seems

correct. By reducing the need for remedial coursework on college campuses, colleges, communities, and governments should be able to increase certificate and degree attainment.

States have continued to answer the White House Summit call to action. On December 3, 2010, the Maryland Association of Community Colleges also signed a pledge to increase the number of community college graduates. Their goal is for an annual increase of about 4.5 percent, from 11,200 in the 2009-10 academic year to more than 18,600 in the 2024-25 academic year, at the association's sixteen two-year schools (Maryland Association of Community Colleges, mdacc.org, 2010; Moltz, 2010c, p. 2).

Maryland revealed its goal as part of its membership in Complete College America. This group was founded in Spring, 2009, to focus "*solely* on dramatically increasing the nation's college completion rate through state policy change, and to build consensus for change among state leaders, higher education, and the national education policy community" (completecollege.org, 2010, emphasis in original). Currently boasting 24 member states, the group is supported by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, the Lumina Foundation for Education, the Ford Foundation, the W.K. Kellogg Foundation, and the Carnegie Corporation of New York (completecollege.org, 2010).

Complete College America sets six "essential steps" for states to follow to increase completion rates. Although these steps are summarized on CCA's website as "lead, measure, act, innovate" (completecollege.org, 2010), a complete list may lay a foundation for research and interview questions.

1. Set state and campus completion goals: a statewide goal gives everyone the same focus for effort and the same measurement for success.

2. Uniformly measure progress and success: a uniform set of measurements allows schools to identify needs and opportunities for improvement, as well as revealing progress quickly.
3. Shift to performance funding: currently, most schools are funded by headcount alone, which provides little incentive to increase graduation rates.
4. Reduce time to degree and increase student success: delays to graduation increase the likelihood that students will drop out as well as increasing costs to students and states.
5. Transform remediation: too many students arrive at college without proper academic preparation. Remedial coursework does not count towards a degree, and fewer than 25% of community college students who are placed in remedial education receive a degree or certificate. Remedial education should focus on "targeting, tailoring, and time" (Complete College America, 2010, online).
6. Restructure delivery for today's students: the "traditional" student makes up a smaller proportion of today's campus, but certificate and degree programs are often still geared towards the full-time, non-working, on-campus student. Today's students need a delivery system that works for them.

One of the essential steps above is "transform remedial education." After the April signing of the Call to Action at the American Association of Community Colleges annual conference, Melinda Gates addressed a large group of two-year college leaders. She restated the pledge by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation to provide $110 million to replace weak remedial programs with modern technologies and new ideas (Moltz, 2010b, p. 2). Gates argued that reforming remedial education is essential to increasing graduation rates. Specifically, Gates said,

> Community colleges led the way on college access, now they must lead the way on college completion. Research shows that improving remediation is the single most

> important thing community colleges can do to increase the number of students who graduate with a certificate or a degree (Moltz, 2010b, p. 2).

Although around $43 million of Gates' pledged funding has already been given to programs, such as the Developmental Education Initiative, which help community colleges make remedial education more effective, the remaining 57 million dollars will be given as grants to schools and other programs over the next two years (Moltz, 2010b, p. 2).

Although there are philanthropic organizations who have promised funding to help the United States increase college graduation rates, the economic reality is that there is not enough funding to make up for the shortfall in recent budgets. When the Call to Action was signed at April's American Association of Community Colleges conference, the response was not entirely positive. "How in the world are we going to be able to do this without any new resources in the system?" asked Ron Wright, chancellor of Delgado Community College, in New Orleans (Moltz, 2010c, p. 1). Delgado has seen its state appropriations cut by nearly $5.5 million in the 2010 fiscal year, with more cuts expected (Moltz, 2010c, p. 1), and it is not alone.

Hercules Pinkney, interim president of Montgomery College, in Maryland, agreed that the completion agenda is a good thing, but the timing of it is just not right. He explained, "from the standpoint of the states and counties that support this initiative—which everybody knows is right and is what we should do—it's out of sync with reality. . . . Everything is in place except the resources to get the job done, and we're not asking for a lot of new resources right now" (Moltz, 2010c, p. 2). Instead of increasing services to help students succeed, Pinkney has been forced to make cuts.

James Middleton, president of Central Oregon Community College, has also been asked to achieve higher goals with less funding. His college has seen enrollment spike by more than eighty percent in the past three years, while funding has been reduced. Since Central Oregon

receives less than fifteen percent of its funding from the state, the school is somewhat protected from budget cuts, compared with other public colleges. However, Middleton still sees challenges to achieving President Obama's goals: "we cannot sustain five times the number of financial aid awardees, the vast expansion of advisees challenging our faculty advisers, the need for senior faculty to mentor part-timers in addition to their expanded teaching loads, and other short-term responses to the immediate needs" (Moltz, 2010c, p. 2).

According to the American Association of State Colleges and Universities, "public colleges and universities throughout most of the U.S. are performing budgeting triage in the wake of major reductions in state appropriations" (congressweb.com, January 2010). The AASCU continues by saying that such financial woes are not entirely negative, as bad as they may be. A lack of funding provides opportunity to reassess higher education at all levels.

> The current recession provides a chance to fundamentally change how higher education is delivered and how campuses operate. Amidst a drought of new state revenues, seeds of innovation—born of necessity—are being planted at the institutional level. The same may also take place at the state level. Recession-induced reform may be witnessed on issues such as appropriations policy, tuition policy, state student grant aid programs, system and institutional governance structures, and capital outlay policy and related funding (AASCU, congressweb.com, January 2010).

The hope is that such reform will address many challenges facing higher education at this time. "The challenges are more than fiscal. They are also educational. They are challenges of vision, leadership, and chosen priorities. Many would say that the challenges are even moral" (McKlenney, 2009, online). When more than ten percent of students do not complete a single credit in their first semester at a community college, and less than thirty percent of students have earned an associates degree within three years (McKlenney, 2009, online), the system needs

work. Although McKlenney agrees, to a point, with community college promoters who explain that many of those students have no intention of completing a degree, she is adamant that certificate or degree completion is good for everyone: the students, the schools, the communities and states, and the country (2009, online).

Several groups have studied the response so far to the White House Summit completion goals. The Delta Project on Postsecondary Education Costs, Productivity and Accountability; the National Center for Higher Education Management Systems; and the National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education together released a report that recommends a series of policies and actions to be followed (Dec. 2010, online). In part, these recommendations include clearly defined goals from the federal government for states, with assurance that all federal policies support those goals, instead of hindering them. Further, federal regulations and reporting agencies should emphasize policy over compliance and restructure data collection programs to ease the translation of data into information that will help improve institutional policy and practice (the Delta Project, et al., 2010, online).

The report (the Delta Project, et al., 2010) also proposed that states clearly define goals based on their unique populations and needs, and then ensure that their higher education institutions have the capacity to meet those goals. In addition, recommendations were that states change funding programs to reward progress towards goals instead of merely enrollment numbers or other objectives that do not clearly lead to the new goals (online). According to Jane V. Wellman, executive director of the Delta Project, President Obama's goals are feasible. "A bunch of 1-percent and 2-percent improvements will get us there" (Kelderman, 2010, *The Chronicle* online).

The American Association of Community Colleges has published its Voluntary Framework of Accountability, or VFA, to begin to address concerns that community colleges

and the public have about community college effectiveness and the contributions they deliver to their local, state, and national communities (AACC, online, 2012). Many of the concerns about effectiveness relate to completion rates, and the VFA is intended to provide

- Measures appropriate to community college missions and the students served
- Usable and consistent definitions to enable benchmarking and collaboration
- Measures by which community colleges should be held accountable and therefore can be used to influence policy conversations with stakeholders (AACC, online, 2012).

The AACC began pilot testing the VFA in forty community colleges in 29 states in January, 2011 (AACC, online, 2011), with preliminary feedback scheduled for March 2011. Pilot testing included reports for student cohort outcomes on areas such as college readiness, progress and retention, degrees earned, transfers, certificates earned, licensure exam passing rate, and GEDs earned (AACC, online). After this initial pilot testing, the AACC made the VFA available to all community colleges in January 2012.

Along with the AACC, Achieving the Dream (ATD) is a national organization that has been working to make the student success agenda a priority at community colleges since 2005. They work with 130 community colleges in 24 states and the District of Columbia, providing on-campus coaching of faculty and staff, assistance with data collection and analysis, and networking opportunities and information to help community colleges increase student success (ATD, online, 2011). Since 2005, ATD goals have been integrated with multiple state boards of education and other bodies of policymakers. In Connecticut, the council of college presidents endorsed ATD goals and embedded them in the system's strategic plan for all twelve schools. North Carolina established a state-wide taskforce on underprepared and underrepresented students using ATD goals to measure success. Several states, including Texas, Florida, and

Virginia, have adopted new measures to track student progress, particularly among developmental and first-year students, using ATD benchmarks (ATD, online, 2011).

The Lumina Foundation has contracted with MDRC (formally Manpower Demonstration Research Corporation) to evaluate the ATD initiative. As this evaluation progresses and data are made public, the American Association of Community Colleges and various governing bodies may learn important strategies to increase student completion rates. Since the 130 ATD schools are already working on goals which correspond to President Obama's completion agenda, schools which are just now beginning to respond to the initiative may have multiple models from which to choose.

In Kansas, the retention and completion numbers are not bad, but they're based on what many consider "faulty" data. When the Kansas Board of Regents published the state numbers, data from the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS) were used. The tables below show retention for students who entered their programs in 2010 and graduation for students who entered their programs in 2008 (both tables use the pseudonyms for the colleges in this study).

Table 1. Retention rates for first-time students who began program in 2010.

	Bison College	Meadowlark College	Sunflower College
Full-time students	58%	60%	56%
Part-time students	28%	36%	45%

Table 2. Graduation rates for full-time, first-time undergraduates who began program in 2008.

	Bison College	Meadowlark College	Sunflower College
Percentage of entering students counted in calculating graduation rate	43%	41%	22%
Overall graduation rate	33%	24%	17%
Transfer-out rate	23%	27%	29%

This is problematic for this dissertation because the NCES uses definitions that don't work well for community colleges, as discussed further in Chapters Three, Four, and Five concerning the problems with defining "completion." Very few community college students are full-time, and a relatively small percentage is enrolling in any college coursework for the first time. However, these numbers do provide some comparison, especially since NCES reported the percentage of the college student population who were counted (as seen in Table 3.) From the tables, as expected, we see that the higher the number of full-time, first-time undergraduate students, the higher the overall graduation rate. This dissertation hoped to be able to compare similar tables for students entering after the White House Summit of October 2010, but no such data are currently available. The most similar numbers are shown in Figure 1, where graduation rates for Kansas two-year colleges, both community and technical, are compared with the national average for two-year schools.

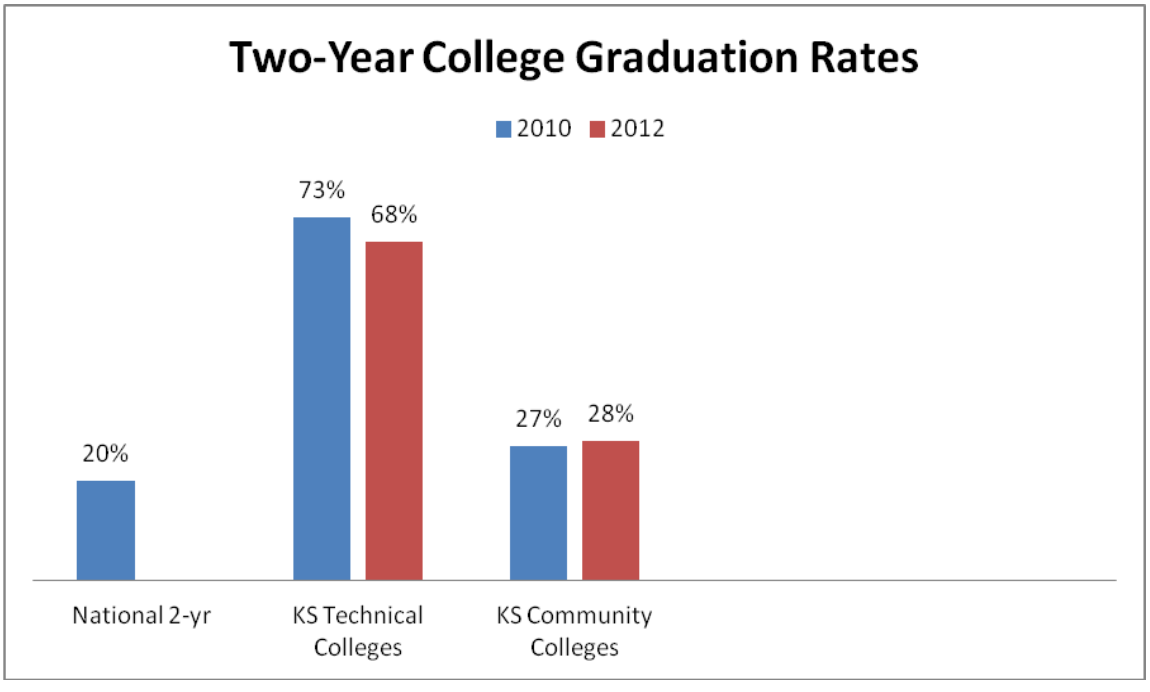

Figure 1. Two-year college graduation rates, 2010 and 2012. (Source: KBOR, 2013.)

This figure shows that by this standard, however flawed, Kansas is improving somewhat and is ahead of the national average. Again, data are given using IPEDS standards of first-time, full-time enrollment. That type of student is statistically much more likely to persist from year to year and graduate in a timely manner (Ewell, 2011, p. 29), as defined by IPEDS as 150% of degree time, or within three years of entry for community college students (KBOR, 2013).

In summary, community colleges have recently been challenged to increase graduation rates in a time of increased enrollment but decreased funding. To exacerbate the difficulty, community colleges have long had a crisis of identity—is their primary mission access, or transfer, or job training, or community service, or something else specific to their campus? Some of these missions conflict with each other, but community colleges across the United States have attempted to provide all of them to their districts. At different times in the history of community colleges, the emphasis given to each of the assorted missions has changed. Now, the

focus is on completion, including certificates, two-year degrees, and transfers to four-year colleges. But just what will that focus mean to community college personnel?

Definitions

In this dissertation, so as not to use the same words and phrases over and over, *community colleges*, *two-year institutions*, and *two-year schools* or *colleges* will be used interchangeably.

This dissertation discusses "completion," but there is no widely accepted definition of "completion" for community college students, as will be further discussed in Chapter Two, the Review of Literature. President Obama's challenge includes both two-year associate's degrees and one-year and shorter-term certificates. However, using these formal measurements does not include students who successfully transfer to a four-year college without completing a degree or certificate, nor does it include students in workforce development programs or other non-certificate courses of study. The existing literature and this dissertation both use "completion" loosely, depending on the author's or speaker's context. One of the findings of this study is that any single definition of "completion," even by a well-known and respected educational expert, will be hotly contested by many other equally well-known and respected experts in the field.

CHAPTER TWO

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

History of the Community College Missions

The first "junior" college opened in Joliet, Illinois, in 1901, to serve as a link between high school and university work (American Association of Community Colleges, 2010). For many decades, the ever-growing number of two-year schools had as their foremost mission the providing of general education coursework suitable for transfer to the university (Bailey & Morest, 2006; Brint & Karabel, 1989; Cohen & Brawer, 2003; Dougherty, 1994; Roksa & Calcagno, 2008). However, according to Cohen and Brawer (2003), the transfer function has never been the only mission of even the junior college. Functions include vocational-technical education, developmental education, continuing education, and community service (p. 20). Cohen and Brawer (2003) explain that ever since Hollinshead's 1936 "The Community College Program" was published, authors have discussed all the varying missions of the community college, including providing recreational and cultural activities to its surrounding community (p. 20). The meaning of community has expanded in the last decade to include an international focus, with more immigrant and international students attending community college campuses. Those campuses have, in turn, added the global market- and workplace to the "community" they serve (Levin, 2001).

Changes in the Community College Environment

One of the biggest changes for community colleges has been growth—growth in numbers of community colleges, especially during their early years, and growth in numbers and diversity of students. Although the first junior college opened its doors in 1901, by 1909 there were twenty and by 1922 there were 207 two-year colleges operating in 37 states (Cohen & Brawer, 2003, p. 13). A rapid growth in new colleges could not have been possible without students: in

1922, those 207 institutions enrolled approximately twenty thousand students. By 1940, there were 440 junior colleges in 43 states, serving around seventy thousand students (Cohen & Brawer, 2003, pp. 13-14). There are currently 1,677 two-year colleges in the United States, including branch campuses, down from a high of 1,755 in the 1997-98 school year. The sixteen hundred-plus schools enrolled 3.1 million students in 2007 alone, according to the U.S. Census Bureau (Pew Research Center, online, 6/6/11). Bailey and Morest (2006) have higher numbers yet, stating that community college enrollment, relatively flat during the 1990s, increased by 20%, from 3.1 million in 2003 to 3.7 million in 2007. This growth was fueled by the "baby boom echo, a soft job market, and bleak employment prospects for those without a college education" (p. 13). The American Association of Community Colleges (AACC) reports on its website that over 100 million people have attended a community college in the last century, taking both credit and noncredit courses (AACC, online, 6/5/11).

The early two-year colleges enrolled mainly young white middle-class males, the "traditional" college student. Beach (2011) explains that other students—working class or minority students—either dropped out of high school before earning a diploma to begin work early, or got a job immediately after graduating from high school. He says, "very few working-class students entered junior colleges" (p. xxxiii) in the early half of the twentieth century.

Cohen and Brawer (2003) concur; it was not until 1978 that women and men enrolled equally in college courses (2003, p. 46), and minority student enrollment at community colleges has grown from twenty percent nationwide in 1976 to 31 percent nationally in 1997 (Cohen & Brawer, 2003, pp. 46-47). Since community college students most often attend a school in their own communities, the percentage of minority enrollment at each campus is extremely variable, based on the community the college serves. For example, in 1997 Tucson's population aged fifteen and older was 27 percent minority (including Black, Asian or Pacific Islander, Latino, and

American Indian), and 39 percent of the Pima Community College's students came from those groups (Cohen & Brawer, 2003, p. 47).

Along with growth in traditional-aged students from various backgrounds came the growth in students both older and younger than the traditional college age of 18 to 24. Probably the first major jump in nontraditional enrollment came after the GI Bill of 1944, when over one million veterans enrolled in college within the first two years after the bill was signed (Thelin, 2004, p. 263). According to the AACC, "more than 2.2 million veterans, including more than 60,000 women and approximately 70,000 blacks, attended college under the GI Bill" (AACC, online, 6/6/11).

After that first increase in older student enrollment, the 1970s saw a new wave of older students begin to enter community colleges (Beach, 2011). However, unlike the nontraditional students of the 1940s, who were veterans with fairly generous financial aid packages, these new students were less economically advantaged. Unfortunately, the community colleges of the 1970s did not have the resources or services these new students needed to succeed (p. xxxiii). Luckily, community colleges have adapted. Cohen and Brawer (2003) say that student services that are particularly beneficial to older students, such as child care and job placement offices, have become widespread at community colleges (p. 215).

Not only older students have been taking advantage of college coursework. Younger students, still enrolled in high school, also have a chance to earn college credit. Dual enrollment programs, where students enroll in classes for college credit while remaining enrolled in high school, have grown in the past several decades (Morest & Karp, 2006). These programs provide opportunities to both advanced learners and those with lower grades. According to Morest and Karp (2006), developments in dual enrollment programs "reflect a belief on the part of policy makers and educators that participation in rigorous academic experiences such as dual

enrollment can promote student access to and success in colleges" (p. 224). These programs are seen as a way to encourage students to attend college when they might otherwise not enter into any postsecondary schooling.

Another change that may have attracted more nontraditional students, especially older, part-time students, to community college campuses is the growth in contract and continuing education. As community colleges added more variety to their vocational-technical offerings in response to community needs, they discovered a need for contract training and continuing education. As Morest (2006) states, "today's version of the vocationalization debate has to be expanded to include contract and continuing education. Continuing education is often noncredit and is aimed at students seeking to learn or upgrade specific job-related skills" (p. 29).

Beach (2011) states that by the early 1990s, over ninety percent of community colleges were offering contract training (p. 54). He believes such a growth in this mission came from several desires: (1) to find alternative sources of funding, (2) to increase student enrollments, (3) to show campus responsiveness to community needs, (4) to strengthen campus prestige and therefore political support for the college in its community, (5) and in response to new demands from government agents, community college associations, and businesses (p. 54). There were—and still are—people who perceive this added contract training and continuing education mission as a threat to the community college's academic offerings. As Dougherty and Bakia (2000) explain, the fear was that these job-related training programs would detract from the proper focus of community colleges, redirecting assets such as money and personnel away from credit curricula such as transfer-ready academic programs. Beach (2011) agrees. He sees a general erosion of colleges' commitment to their traditional curriculum, with any new funding more often going to the resource-generating programs in contract training and continuing education while established programs such as those in the liberal arts are starved for income (p. 54).

Morest (2006) also sees community colleges expanding and institutionalizing a mission to provide contract and continuing education. "Community colleges are clearly strengthening their position as service providers to business and industry, though not without some internal growing pains" (p. 31). The probable cause of this increased interest in offering contract and continuing education is the continued reductions in state and federal funding to community colleges. Beach (2011) believes community colleges have been able to increase revenues and student enrollments while gaining support from their communities, area businesses, and their states (p. 54). As other funding sources have decreased, both two- and four-year colleges are supplementing their budgets by providing private services through contract and continuing education (Morest, 2006, p. 32).

Luckily for the opponents of expanded vocational and continuing education programs, Morest (2006) also sees a major trend at community colleges of expanding and strengthening their transfer programs. As the economy continues to grow slowly at best, Morest (2006) observes evidence of a growing importance of transfer in student enrollment patterns and community college organizational structures (p. 31).

Retention and Graduation Rates at Community Colleges

Community colleges face calls to do more than provide access to all students. As Bailey and Morest (2006) say, "getting students into college (access) is not enough if they face financial, social, or educational barriers to achieving their postsecondary educational goals" (p. 2). Students need to remain enrolled until they have obtained the certificate or degree for which they entered college. Thus, the retention and graduation of students begin to take center stage as the main statistics for which community colleges will be "graded." As Bragg and Durham explain, this shift from access to success has put community colleges in a difficult place. "By offering the primary pathway to higher education to historically underserved students, including

learners who are unprepared for college-level coursework and who struggle to finish, community colleges diminish their chances of demonstrating success" (2012, pp. 106-107).

Over the history of the community college, retention and graduation rates have not been high. ACT, Inc. publishes data for retention trends from freshman to sophomore year, for the years 1983-2010. The percentages of students who re-enroll for their sophomore year are shown in the table below (2011, online).

Table 3. Retention trends, freshman to sophomore year, 1983-2010

	Highest %	Lowest %	Current %
2-year public	55.7 (2010)	51.3 (2004)	55.7
2-year private	72.6 (1992)	55.5 (2008)	58.6

Community College Accountability

Low retention and graduation rates, among other factors, have produced calls for increased oversight and accountability of community colleges. According to Burke (2005), "*accountability* is the most advocated and least analyzed word in higher education" (p. 1). As defined by Zumeta (2011), *accountability*, broadly stated, is "responsibility for one's actions to someone or multiple parties as a result of legal, political (in the best, constitutive sense), financial, personal, or simply morally based ties" (p. 2). Accountability is not a new term; as Folger (1977) stated over three decades ago, "public accountability of institutions is an old idea" (vii). A brief history of accountability at the college level follows.

History of Accountability in American Higher Education

Head (2011) explains briefly that accountability in American higher education came from the funding and enrollment declines of the 1970s. These declines affected the quality of higher education, so colleges were required to prove their effectiveness by various governing agencies, accrediting bodies, students, and the public. This led to an increased demand for accountability, or what Head calls *institutional effectiveness* (p. 7).

Zumeta (2011) provides an excellent, concise description of accountability in American higher education in his ASHE presidential address. At first, he explains that governance by trustees—"leading citizens"—was felt to be sufficient to ensure public and private colleges were responsible in their missions (pp. 2-3). However, during the explosive growth in enrollment after World War II, many states established state-level governing boards for higher education, mainly to help arbitrate the expensive competition inside their own and among other states for new colleges. Generally, these boards were still composed of "leading citizens" at that time, and it was not until the 1970s that many states began creating standard state agencies of higher education, run by civil servants (p. 3). Also at this time, state budgets became more complex and stricter in directing how higher education dollars should be spent. "Over time, legislators and finance agencies became increasingly likely to ask if money had been used as intended and sometimes wanted answers at a fairly detailed level. They also began inquiring about efficiency in resource use" (Zumeta, 2011, p. 3). However, although these inquiries showed some officials cared about how state money was spent, there was very little focus on educational outputs such as graduation rates or student learning outcomes (p. 3).

Zumeta (2011) explains that beginning in the 1980s, more policymakers began questioning those outcomes, and he believes six major factors were influential in creating this shift:

1. Public higher education increases in size and cost made it a more noticeable portion of the state budget, especially during the recession of the early 1980s.
2. The recession led many people to begin to look at business methods of cost control and quality improvement (i.e., Deming's "Plan-Do-Check-Act" method).
3. In 1983, *A Nation at Risk* was published, with similar reports following, complaining about U.S. education. These reports first focused on K-12 but later condemned higher education as well.
4. State legislatures have become much more educated, with both legislators and their staff having more ability to collect and analyze more data. According to Zumeta (2011), this has two important consequences: first, legislators whose constituents complain that college is too expensive, or ineffective, or inefficient, can dig into those complaints and discover how "true" they may be. Second, since more legislators and their staff now hold at least a bachelor's degree, they no longer defer to academic leaders as often as they did in the past.
5. The 1980s were the Reagan years. President Reagan began his political career in California, crusading against the "mess at Berkley" (Zumeta, 2011, p. 3). He helped lead the movement to scrutinize higher education and continued this movement as U.S. president.
6. Under Reagan, the federal government began involving itself much more closely in the internal decisions of colleges and universities. Because of climbing tuitions and the federal government's increasing role in financial aid in the 1980s, federal began to ask why college had to be so expensive just as often as their state counterparts (Zumeta, 2011, pp. 3-4).

Head (2011) adds a compelling reason why *A Nation at Risk*, as referred to in Zumeta's (2011) fourth factor above, is important to the history of accountability in higher education. He states that although the report concerned K-12 education and never used the word *accountability*, "colleges and universities were not immune from the pressures directed to elementary, middle, and high schools" (Head, 2011, p. 6). In fact, he continues, financial accountability had been required for some time, but after the mid-1980s, the public and governing bodies expected accountability for effective performance, including outcomes (p. 6).

To continue Zumeta's (2011) history, which ended in the Reagan era, McLendon et al. (2006) explain that "increasingly, states are demanding performance by public colleges and universities. In scrutinizing outcomes, state policymakers have sought to influence institutional behavior for the purpose of improving institutional performance" (p. 1). This desire to influence behavior began in the 1980s and 1990s with incentives systems and programs to award funding based on outcomes such as "student retention and graduation rates, undergraduate access, measures of institutional efficiency, student scores on licensure exams, job placement rates, faculty productivity, and campus diversity" (McLendon et al., 2006, p. 2). These programs took three separate forms: performance funding, performance budgeting, and performance reporting.

1. *Performance funding* links state funding directly, in predetermined and prescribed ways, to college performance on defined indicators.
2. *Performance budgeting* has no predetermined or prescribed links—officials can determine budgets on many factors, including the desired outcomes.
3. *Performance reporting* has no formal link to budgets. The idea is that colleges will want to look good and so will improve where needed (McLendon, et al., 2006, p. 2).

Each of these programs has contributed to the increasing demands for outcomes assessment, commonly called *accountability*.

Accountability in Higher Education Today

Burke (2005) states, "to many beleaguered leaders in colleges and universities, accountability appears two-faced, with sponsors and stakeholders demanding more services while supplying less support. To many outsiders in government and business, higher education seems more interested in autonomy than accountability—in demanding support than supplying services" (p. 1). This conflict, especially when combined with the confusion in what each side means by "accountability," has created discord in our national discussions of higher education. For much of the history of community colleges, higher education was seen by most Americans to be a public good for all, but many politicians and others have recently stated they see it as beneficial only to the graduates themselves (Burke, 2005). Bloom, Hartley, and Rosovsky (2007) agree that recent trends in governing bodies have weakened support for public funding of higher education. For example, some economists feel that encouraging enrollment through private incentives is sufficient to secure any public benefits, so public funding is not necessary. Bloom et al. continue, public support has also been decreased by "the emergence of conservative ideology that decries bureaucratic waste in government and that hails private actions for private gain" (2007, p. 298). When these attitudes are combined with the public suspicions that colleges serve more to "feather the nest of faculty and administrators" (Bloom et al., 2007, p. 298), there seems a strong shift in American attitudes that higher education is a private good that should not be financed with public funds.

This shift has caused an even greater need for schools to prove themselves to be a public good, often through accountability. Burke explains,

> Accountability imposes six demands on officials or their agents for government or public service organizations, including colleges and universities. First, they must demonstrate that they have used their powers properly. Second, they must show that they are working

> to achieve the mission or priorities set for their office or organization. Third, they must report on their performance, for "power is opaque, accountability is public" (Schedler, 1999, p. 20). Fourth, the two "E" words of public stewardship—efficiency and effectiveness—require accounting "for the resources they use and the outcomes they create" (Shavelson, 2000, p. 8). Fifth, they must ensure the quality of the programs and services produced. Last, but far from least, they must show that they serve public needs (p. 2).

The first demand, Burke continues, is not nearly so difficult for colleges as the last five. Since most higher education institutions have collegial governance, a variety of missions and goals, and widely diverse communities they serve, colleges do not find it easy to measure all their outcomes or services.

Accountability and Accreditation in Community Colleges

Since at least the late 1800s, colleges have attempted to meet these accountability demands. Although the U.S. Department of Education did not begin recognizing regional accrediting agencies until 1952 (U.S. Department of Education, online, 2011a), both the North Central (NCACS) and the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACS) were first formed in 1895 to establish "close relations between the colleges and secondary schools" (NCACS, online, 2011) within their borders. Accreditation proves to the federal government that colleges can manage federal aid funds, and over time, this function has expanded to include supervision of areas such as degree program requirements and student complaints (p. 26).

Perhaps even more important than its role as supervisor and manager, accreditation "constitutes the generally accepted public seal of approval that an institution meets acceptable quality standards" (Ewell, 2011, p. 26). Students at non-accredited schools can not receive most forms of student aid, and most accredited colleges will not accept transfer work from non-

accredited institutions (studentaid.ed.gov, 2011-9/14). Thus, seeking and earning accreditation is essential for legitimate colleges.

Since the goal of accreditation is to ensure quality in education (U.S. Department of Education, online, 2011b), accountability in one form or another is an essential part of accreditation. According to Harbour and Day (2009), community colleges have traditionally been accountable through their governing boards to the state, local, and community policymakers and funders (p. 5). In the 1980s, state legislatures began to expect new levels of community college accountability (p. 5), leading to either performance reporting, performance budgeting, and performance funding programs or market-based funding programs such as vouchers, performance contracts, or fee-for-service contracts (pp. 5-6). In both these types of programs, funding for the college is linked to specific measures of institutional effectiveness.

Problems Defining Effectiveness in Community Colleges

According to Ewell (2011), institutional effectiveness, as originally intended, was to measure all aspects of a school's processes; this was to make a distinction between it and assessment, which was usually used only for the measurement of student development and learning (p. 23). Institutional effectiveness has been explicitly addressed by community colleges since it was adopted as a review criterion by the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools in 1986 (p. 23). However, the typical performance measures used to verify institutional effectiveness do not work well for community colleges. Ewell (2011) explains that policymakers and college leaders must understand the reasons for this so more appropriate measures can be developed and utilized.

First, comprehensive community colleges manage a wide assortment of extremely different missions simultaneously:

- The first two years of a bachelor's degree

- Transferrable credit in vocational programs
- Vocational program credentials that are not transferrable
- Remedial and developmental instruction for students who are not ready for college
- Noncredit education such as English as a Second Language
- Contract training for local employers

Many community colleges add four-year bachelor's degrees as well as noncredit personal and professional development courses open to the community to these already disparate offerings (Ewell, 2011, pp. 27-8). When colleges have so many and so diverse missions, what constitutes effectiveness for the institution as a whole? Ewell (2011) states that not only must measures take each mission into account, they must also evaluate strategic leadership and planning, including institutional research, as well as enrollment management. By including these areas, Ewell claims, accreditors and other accountability agents can more easily see how the college is positioned to manage its changing environment and also how it is improving student success rates (p. 28).

However, measuring student success at community colleges is not an easy task (Bragg & Dunham, 2012; Goldrick-Rab, 2010). Community college student goals are not clearly defined; some enroll to transfer to a four-year institution, some enroll for a two-year degree or a certificate to help them get employed quickly but still hope to return for a bachelor's degree at a later time, while others enroll in a "terminal" degree or certificate program. There are still other students who do not enroll in a degree or certificate program at all. Most community college completion measurements are still focused on degree and certificate completion—after all, these are the most easily measured outcomes available. Measuring only these goals does not tell the true story of student success, nor of institutional effectiveness. As Bragg and Durham state,

"students' diverse goals need to be understood and honored so that low rates of completion are not blamed on students' uncertainty, ignorance, or underpreparation" (2012, p. 113). Community colleges resist accountability initiatives that unfairly compare graduation rates of two-year to four-year colleges (Bragg & Durham, 2012; Bailey, Calcagno, et al., 2006), so "completion" initiatives must take a variety of definitions of "success" into account.

Student success is related to the second area where community colleges are not easily assessed by typical measures of institutional effectiveness. Established measures such as the Graduation Rate Survey (GRS) required by the Integrated Postsecondary Educational Data System (IPEDS) are not suitable for community colleges because the GRS is calculated using full-time, first-time-in-college students, tracked for a relatively short time to degree or certificate completion (Ewell, 2011, p. 28). Only about 43 percent of community college students enroll full-time (National Center for Education Statistics, 2009, online), contrasted with 73 percent of students at four-year colleges, plus many students at two-year institutions have substantial college credit before enrolling (Ewell, 2011, p. 28). These factors make the GRS patently inappropriate to gauge institutional effectiveness at the two-year college.

All student characteristics, not just full- or part-time enrollment patterns, tend to be extremely varied at the community college. Ewell (2011) explains that this student diversity is the third reason why two-year schools should have a distinct set of measures of institutional effectiveness (p. 29). Students enroll with all levels of college preparation and academic ability. For example, in school year 2007-08, roughly 42 percent of first- and second-year students at public two-year schools reported taking a remedial course at some point (U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, National Postsecondary Student Aid Study 2007-08, Table 6.2). This is particularly important because a significant number of students who take remedial coursework will not graduate. According to Bailey (2008), less than 25 percent of

community college students that took a remedial course completed a degree or certificate within eight years of enrolling. In contrast, about forty percent of community college students who did not take any remedial courses graduated within eight years, and fourteen percent transferred without completing a degree (p. 14). With this important statistic in mind, the Committee on Measures of Student Success (CMSS) (2011) recommended "the Department should distinguish between remedial and non-remedial students in IPEDS graduation rates" (p. 13). The CMSS explains that students enrolling in remedial classes are not currently identified separately, and it strongly encourages the Department of Education to help community colleges determine the best way to separate the two groups and report on them individually (p. 13). This would help colleges better define student goals and retention or graduation rates.

In addition to their preparation, students have widely differing enrollment patterns and goals. The CMSS (2011) explains, "two-year institutions serve a diverse set of students—students seeking to learn new skills and not pursue a degree, students working toward an occupationally focused certificate, students who plan to earn an associate's degree, and students who plan to earn credits and transfer to a four-year institution" (p. 4). This does not include the many students who enroll in non-credit coursework that leads to specific credentials but not certificates, nor the ones who enroll in contract training for local industries (CMSS, 2011, p. 5). Basken (2008) explains that the graduation rate, the traditional measure of success, simply does not fit a college where students "intend to transfer to a four-year college, acquire a vocational skill, obtain remedial assistance, or just learn for the sake of learning" (p. N7). Boughan and Claggett (2008) continue, "people attend community colleges for a variety of reasons other than earning a degree. Identifying degree-seekers is not straightforward as student goal data are often incomplete, changeable, out of date, and even deliberately false" (p. 150). When student goals and enrollment behaviors are as variable as they are at community colleges, equally varied

patterns of success are seen. One result of this amazing variety is that commonly used statistics do not actually give much useful information. As Ewell (2011) says, "an average graduation rate of 22 percent at a given college may vary from more than two-thirds for well-prepared and application-screened nursing or allied health students to less than 19 percent for undeclared students" (p. 29). This issue creates a quandary for college administrators attempting to demonstrate an increase in completion rates in response to the latest initiative, thus leading to interview questions in this study.

Along with an extremely diverse student body and set of missions, community colleges are themselves quite diverse. Community colleges come in many forms: those that serve a mostly traditionally aged full-time student body preparing to transfer, those that serve primarily as part-time or short-term vocational institutions, or those that give nearly equal weight to all the diverse missions already discussed (Ewell, 2011, p. 30). Because of these differences, accountability measures must take into account each institution's most significant characteristics.

Efforts to Change Accountability Measures

According to the Institute for Higher Education Policy (2006), state accountability systems currently in place do not provide policymakers with the information they need to make decisions to help meet state goals (p. 3). Several groups have begun work on recommending new accountability measures that will be useful to community colleges, their governing bodies, their students, and the U.S. Department of Education.

One of those groups is Achieving the Dream: Community Colleges Count. Conceived as a national initiative in 2004, Achieving the Dream (ATD) claims it is closing achievement gaps is closing achievement gaps and accelerating student success nationwide by: 1) improving results at institutions, 2) influencing public policy, 3) generating knowledge, and 4) engaging the public (Achieving the Dream, 2011, online). Achieving the Dream collects data from its 160

participating schools in 30 states, researches and evaluates efforts to change measures and policies, and works to create an educational environment where schools are rewarded for increasing numbers of degrees and other credentials (ATD, 2011, online).

Another such group is Complete College America (CCA), established in 2009 to increase the number of Americans with college degrees or other valuable credentials and to close education gaps for underrepresented populations (completecollege.org, 2011). Their reason for such a focus, they say, is because although college enrollment has grown 35 percent since 1970, college completion rates have remained the same. Access to college has improved, but students are not graduating with degrees or certificates. According to CCA, this created a compelling need for them to increase completion rates "through state policy change, and to build consensus for change among state leaders, higher education, and the national education policy community" (CCA, 2011, online). CCA believes that state leaders should be the ones to increase completion rates within their own states: state taxpayers are the majority investors in public colleges and universities, so governors, legislatures, and state boards of education should be encouraged to reform their systems. States should use governance and funding programs to increase completion rates, holding themselves and their schools accountable for success (CCA, 2011, online).

Another important group working to show accountability and increase success is not a new group at all—the American Association of Community Colleges (AACC) was founded in 1920 as a forum for two-year colleges (AACC, 2011, online). In 2009, the AACC formed the Voluntary Framework of Accountability (VFA) steering committee to work on the first national system of accountability designed by community colleges specifically for use by community colleges (AACC, 2011, online). Pilot testing of the proposed accountability measures was conducted at forty colleges, with preliminary data presented at the AACC's annual convention in

April 2011. Those measures include individual standards in three broad categories: student progress and outcomes; workforce, economic, and community development; and student learning outcomes. The AACC plans to make the finalized VFA available to all community colleges in 2012-2013 (AACC, 2011, online), then implement an online data tool and train colleges in its use in 2013-2014, with ongoing plans to evaluate and refine VFA metrics, methodologies, and approaches (AACC, 2013, online).

One recent change to accountability measures comes from the federal government. In October 2010, regulations were published that required institutions "to report certain information about students who enrolled in Title IV eligible educational programs that lead to gainful employment in a recognized occupation (GE programs)" (Department of Education, Information for Financial Aid Professionals, online). Community colleges geared up their reporting offices to begin assessing student employment outcomes, but a legal challenge has halted much of that reporting. The Department of Education reported, "on June 30, 2012, the Department received a court ruling in a legal challenge which affects the implementation of the Gainful Employment regulations. We are reviewing the court's decision and our legal and policy options to move forward in a way that best protects students and taxpayers" (online). Until the Department of Education releases its final decision on what Gainful Employment requirements are, colleges have no concrete idea of what sort of data they must collect and report.

These changes to standards of accountability make it imperative that community college personnel and policy makers understand how accountability will be defined, measured, and reported, and how colleges will be either rewarded or penalized for their measurements. With this in mind, the cultural phenomenon of accountability became an important structural framework for this study.

Organizational Frames in College Policy Changes

Changes in community college policy do not happen by themselves. When policy is changed by mandate from above, such as when states require schools to prove increases in graduation rates or the nation's president declares an ambitious new goal, many administrators find themselves having to "sell" new policy decisions. How well this is accomplished is often affected by the way in which policies are framed to and by the college as an organization. Since research questions include behaviors or responses to new completion goals, a framework to analyze organizational behaviors was used to help focus questions and analyze results.

Fairhurst (2011) explains that leaders "manage meaning when others are unable" (p 45). The way leaders frame their messages can make a "crisis" or a "cause for concern," or even put everyone on "red-alert" (p. 43). Bolman and Deal (1997) discussed four ways in which leaders "frame" their communications with their organizations; these "frames" can also be used by organizations to respond to communications. In the *structural frame*, the focus is on the rules, roles, goals, and policies (p. 15), but too much reliance on this frame can neglect important stakeholders (p. 280). The *human resources frame* allows for focusing on needs, skills, and relationships (p. 15), but may be too optimistic about including the needs of their employees with the needs of the organization (p. 280). Leaders and organizations who use the *political frame* focus on power, conflict, competition—in other words, organizational politics (p. 15). However, this type of framework may lead to cynicism and communications which unconsciously reinforce conflicts and feelings of mistrust while overlooking opportunities for collaborative problem solving (p. 280). The final model of organizational communication is the *symbolic frame*, in which organizational culture, metaphor, ritual, and stories inspire (p. 15) communications inside the organization and to outside policymakers. This frame takes a communicator who can use symbols easily without making them camouflage for manipulating the people around them (p.

281), but organizations can acknowledge and use their culture and rituals to create meaningful and motivational structures within their organization.

This study used Bolman and Deal's (1997) four frameworks to view and give meaning to the ways in which the community colleges responded to the challenge to increase completion rates by five million graduates by 2020. Do colleges approach this challenge in a *human resources* manner, hiring and training staff? Do colleges use the *bureaucratic* framework, creating new processes and procedures in response to the initiative? Do colleges approach the challenge *politically*, competing with other colleges for more of the state or federal budget? Do colleges react in a symbolic manner to this initiative, using rituals and stories to create a culture of completion? Or do colleges use a combination of two or more of these approaches to find their best way to respond?

CHAPTER THREE

METHODS

This dissertation attempted to identify community college employees' perceptions of and responses to the challenge to increase college completion rates. Many authors have discussed completion rates (i.e., Bailey, Calcagno, et al., 2006; Boughan & Claggett, 2008; Goldrick-Rab, 2010) or accountability (i.e., Ewell, 2011; Harbour & Day, 2009; the Institute for Higher Education Policy, 2006), but no one has focused on what an initiative to increase college completion rates, especially during a period of economic recovery from a recession, might mean to the "troops on the ground." The people most affected by the latest community college completion initiatives are the administrators, faculty, and staff at such colleges. We have yet to understand how continuing calls for higher completion numbers, better student success, and more accountability affect morale, work environments, or public relations for personnel at community colleges. Therefore, this dissertation attempted to address this deficiency. According to Merriam (2002), a case study describes and analyzes a bounded system, such as an institution or community (p. 8); because I wished to learn institutional responses, I chose to do a case study.

One alternative would have been to do a survey asking many college presidents how their colleges have responded to the current completion goals. However, I wanted to discover how an institution or its leader has responded to increased pressures to raise completion rates, and I wanted to know why leaders and institutions have responded in those ways, so the case study method seemed most relevant. According to Yin (2009), "the more that your questions seek to explain some present circumstance (e.g., "how" or "why" some social phenomenon works), the more that the case study method will be relevant" (p. 4). A survey would not help me discover "how" or "why," especially with the same detail, as a case study. Since I also hoped to make an

in-depth description of a college's leadership and responses to current social and administrative pressures to increase completion rates, case study methodology is the best method for me to use (Yin, 2009, p. 4).

However, I am not only interested in hearing how one institution's policies or environment has changed since the publicly announced push to increase college completion rates. I wanted to know how diverse colleges may have responded in different ways to these pressures, and why, so I decided to do a multi-case study. In this instance, I purposefully selected three community colleges in Kansas.

Settings

It was important to purposefully select participants, documents, or settings that will best help me understand the research questions (Creswell, 2003, p. 185). Therefore, I chose community colleges based on resources and location. College location is important because, according to Waller and Tietjen-Smith (2009), retention is highest for suburban community colleges and lowest for rural ones (online). Resource availability is important because community colleges will have to meet multiple goals, even within the completion initiative, such as certificate and two-year degree completion and student transfer without degree achievement. Responses to the challenge to increase college completion rates may vary widely depending on how much the college can spend on new requirements, such as staffing for student retention or assessment of student transfers.

The original plan was to use one suburban, high-resource campus; one urban, fairly high-resource campus; and one rural, low-resource campus. One college president acted as gatekeeper to his college as well as marketing representative to other schools; he kindly contacted multiple presidents to encourage their participation in this study. One president was not responsive, even to repeated requests from both of us. I was fortunate in finding another

college that was not quite as urban as I had hoped, but which has a campus that serves as an urban center. That college president agreed to help with the study, so my three colleges became one suburban, high-resource campus; one college that serves an extremely diverse population from urban, suburban, and rural communities and has a fairly high amount of resources; and one rural, low-resource campus.

Participants

Interview subjects on each campus were chosen after conferring with the gatekeeper president. He made excellent suggestions of which administrators, faculty, and staff might have a role or definite interest in any college attempt to increase completion rates. They included, if at all possible:

- Campus President
- Vice President or Dean of Student Services/Affairs
- Vice President or Dean of Academic Affairs
- Vice President or Dean of Vocational Education/Workforce Development/Career and Technical Education
- Two or more faculty members, at least one from liberal arts and sciences—transfer education—and at least one from vocational education, such as nursing, cosmetology, or HVAC
- One or more staff members who work with retention of students—a retention specialist if the campus has one, or an academic advisor or enrollment counselor who serves in that role
- One or more trustees of the college, especially ones specifically in charge of budgeting and certificate or degree requirements.

I was able to fulfill these plans, except for the retention specialist. Although two of the colleges did have one or more full-time retention specialists, none of those staff members were available for interviews within the short windows of opportunity. However, I was able to interview at least one advising or enrollment management specialist at each school, and since one college did not have a retention specialist on staff, this change was actually more balanced than the original plan. The numbers of actual administrators, faculty, and staff at each college who participated in interviews are shown in Table 4 below. The numbers are higher than the actual number of people interviewed; many administrators held faculty appointments in addition to their roles as president, vice president, dean, or other administrator. To better compare numbers in each group, I have listed each role separately, instead of choosing a single role for each person.

Table 4. Interview subjects by type of appointment.

College (pseudonym)	Administrators (including Trustees)	Faculty	Staff
Bison	5	3	4
Meadowlark	4	4	3
Sunflower	5	3	2

I also planned to interview one or more members of the Kansas Board of Regents who make state policy decisions for Kansas community colleges. However, even after repeated telephone calls and emails to the main office in Topeka, no one was available. One administrative assistant at one of the colleges where I conducted interviews even gave me the name and number of a specific person who schedules meetings and appointments for regents, but

she also did not return my calls. Because I had to complete all the interviews before moving out of Kansas for a new employment opportunity, I regretfully decided I would have to do without a regent's interview.

Documents

Along with interview transcripts, I attempted to gather any documents the Kansas Board of Regents or the various colleges had already released concerning the challenge to increase college completion rates. I wanted to analyze the content of those documents to see if colleges are truly "walking the walk." Such documents were to include memos to faculty or staff, manuals for new processes or procedures for assessment or intervention programs, or Regents' or Trustees' meeting minutes. I thought I would be able to access some of these documents through the colleges' or Kansas Board of Education websites, but very few documents are actually available online. I had thought I would need assistance from the colleges' Offices of Institutional Research or from the interview participants' offices, departments, or divisions to get some documentation, but later discovered that such materials are actually very difficult to find. All three college presidents were very helpful and requested their assistants and their offices of research to help me. However, all three presidents also commented that they might not be able to provide much recent material. Most emails would be parts of email chains to individual administrators or staff members and would be difficult to extract from those chains. Most memos and minutes were also not exclusively concerning any new completion initiatives, and so would be difficult to find. It turns out that none of the colleges could provide any information that was not currently on their websites. All three research offices are gathering data on completion rates but do not have anything in a form they were willing to share. This raises a possible finding—are community college leaders really taking action in response to the challenge to increase completion rates, and if so, how? Is it truly this difficult to find emails, memos, and

similar documents, or is this initiative not really being discussed in any organized way at each college? This will be further discussed in Chapters Four and Five.

During the process of researching and interviewing, I realized that colleges must report on "gainful employment," so I thought those numbers would be easy to find. However, according to one research officer at Sunflower College, "As far as I know the Feds haven't released gainful employment (GE) data and I'm not sure that they will." This lack of verifiable numbers made my attempts to triangulate data and verify the colleges' "walking the walk" impossible. This will be discussed further in Chapter Five, the Discussion, where I will address challenges and weaknesses in my dissertation.

Process

Because this study is a dissertation, therefore "sponsored" by the University of Kansas, and because I interviewed people, I applied for approval through the university's Institutional Review Board (IRB), in this case, the Human Subjects Committee Lawrence (HSCL). This requirement is in accordance with The National Research Act of 1974/1983 (PL 93-348), to ensure the rights and welfare of all study participants (HSCL, 2011). Such application must be made before interviews may be conducted, and consists of submitting an application form, sample consent forms, letters to be used in recruiting participants, and any other materials I feel may assist the committee in evaluating my application. This application was filed in February 2012, approval was obtained, and interviews began in March.

I conducted a single interview with each participant. I planned to telephone or email respondents for clarification, but this was not necessary. I hoped that an interview of an hour or so would be adequate so I would not pose an undue time burden on the subjects' schedules; most interviews were approximately forty-five minutes, with a wide range between seventeen minutes and over ninety minutes.

Interviews were semi-structured, with open-ended questions concerning the interview subject's views on current goals to increase completion rates at community colleges. I had originally planned to focus questions differently depending on the participant, with college presidents being asked about their leadership style and other participants being asked about their college president's leadership and communication styles. I was interested in learning how leadership and communication style might affect a college's response to a new challenge. However, the questions concerning leadership and communication styles did not fit with the questions about actual responses and stresses in the college about the challenge to increase completion rates. I rewrote the interview questions several times, trying to make the interview flow more naturally from one area to another, and the leadership questions did not belong. After consultation with my advisor, we decided to drop that line of questioning and focus on the real interest of this dissertation: what are colleges doing and what stresses do they feel when faced with a new challenge to increase completion rates. With that in mind, I asked questions about any changes personnel have experienced in their college's mission statement, policy, or budget in response to pressures to increase completion rates. All participants were asked basically the same questions, with some variation in order depending on how completely an interviewee answered any given question.

Each interview was digitally recorded and then transcribed verbatim. Interview participants were offered transcripts of their interviews to verify that interviews were recorded correctly, but none wanted to see the transcripts. Transcriptions were made as soon after each interview as possible, so data analysis could begin immediately and continue throughout the process. I used the different colors of highlighters available in Word to code interviews for similar responses, then transferred quotes to separate pages with headings of possible themes that

helped to answer my research questions. As is often the case, many quotes fit multiple themes, so I put them where they seemed to fit best with similar quotes.

The writing process included creating a descriptive profile of each participant and campus. I was going to do a cross-case analysis of colleges to look for disparate topics and themes, but the interviews provided very little disparity. There was generally consensus on most topics, no matter the interviewee's position, the campus, or the student population being discussed.

Validity and Credibility

Along with grouping responses by theme, I looked at comparisons across the different cases. I hoped that this process would show differences in how diverse colleges are responding to the college completion initiative, but as discussed above, there was very little disparity. The three colleges provided very similar answers; disparity in responses to the challenge to increase completion rates was nearly entirely caused by differences in the resources a college could use. By asking similar questions of people who hold similar positions at different colleges, I was able to triangulate the data to build justification for the themes I found.

Further strategies to check for validity and credibility included clarifying any bias I may have brought to the study, presenting negative or discrepant information in my results, and asking a peer to review my dissertation to see if it makes sense to an outside reader. As I reviewed interview data, I made note of any discrepancies and reflected on my personal feelings about the interview and how those feelings or discrepancies may affect the study. Again, with very little discrepancy noted, this process was shorter than anticipated, although helpful when looking for my personal biases.

Anonymity

Schools and individuals were given pseudonyms to maintain anonymity as much as possible. Any reader with close connections to any particular college or employee may be able to guess identities, but every precaution was made to provide anonymous responses to questions. I believe this provided more complete and in-depth answers, which in turn gave better information about what these colleges and administrators are currently doing in response to the current completion challenge, and how they are managing changes.

Research Questions, Revisited

The interviews attempted to answer the following questions: (1) How do a selection of Kansas community colleges, as organizations, interpret the initiative to increase completion rates? What does the initiative mean to them in a practical sense? Is accountability part of the initiative for them? (2) How are community colleges responding to how they understand the latest initiative? What are the specific actions, if any, they've taken since Fall 2010? (3) What are obstacles, such as lack of resources or political power struggles in the college or community, to responding? (4) How are interpretation and response affected by Kansas Board of Regents, legislative, U.S. Board of Education, accreditation, or local policies?

In other words, do community colleges, as organizations, see the initiative as an opportunity or a threat? How will community colleges increase graduation rates? Are they attempting to enhance graduation rates, or transfer rates, or both? What specific actions are they taking in making these attempts? How are they dealing with demands for increasing accountability?

The 2010 White House Summit goals are simple: increase community college graduates by five million by 2020. However, as we have seen, defining "community college graduates" is not so simple. The president's speech implied that students who receive certificates and other

"terminal" degrees, as well as transferrable associates' degrees, are all considered graduates (whitehouse.gov, 2010). For this study, I needed to identify colleges' specific goals and actions or reactions so I might discover information that is more meaningful to community colleges and scholars. The American Association of Community Colleges' (AACC) Voluntary Framework for Accountability (VFA) (Jan. 2012, online) served as context for exploring community college responses to the latest college completion initiative. Thus, I looked for documentation about the schools'

- College readiness measures, such as the proportion of students who complete the necessary remedial education,
- Progress measures, such as retention,
- Outcomes and success measures, such as how many students complete an associate's degree or certificate, how many students transfer to a four-year college without obtaining a degree, and how many students drop out, with good or bad academic standing,
- Career measures, such as average wage increases of students who complete a program,
- Non-credit courses, such as state- and industry-accepted credentials awarded to students,
- Adult basic education or GED measures, such as the proportion of students who complete a GED and continue education or become gainfully employed (Moltz, 2011).

The VFA is a response by community colleges to pressure from outside groups, such as the Department of Education and accrediting agencies, to increase measuring and reporting of student outcomes such as graduation rates or GED completion rates. However, much of this pressure comes without scholarly research on definitions, costs, measurability, or usefulness of the measures, reports, or even the outcomes themselves. This study seeks to discover, at least in part, some of the challenges and opportunities presented by the current focus on college

completion, most recently by a presidential mandate to increase student completion rates at community colleges.

CHAPTER FOUR

RESEARCH FINDINGS

The purpose of this study was to investigate how community colleges have reacted to the increased pressure to graduate students. The study attempted to identify new burdens placed on community colleges by the latest initiatives, how the colleges have tried to respond to those burdens, and whether or not colleges are currently making changes or are waiting to see if their focus will change with a changing political and economic environment.

The following research questions informed this study: (1) How do a selection of Kansas community colleges, as organizations, interpret the initiative to increase completion rates? What does the initiative mean to them in a practical sense? Is accountability part of the initiative for them? (2) How are community colleges responding to how they understand the latest initiative? What are the specific actions, if any, they've taken since Fall 2010? (3) What are obstacles, such as lack of resources or political power struggles in the college or community, to responding? (4) How is interpretation and response affected by Kansas Board of Regents, legislative, U.S. Board of Education, accreditation, or local policies?

In other words, do community colleges, as organizations, see the initiative as an opportunity or a threat? How will community colleges increase graduation rates? Are they attempting to enhance graduation rates, or transfer rates, or both? What are they doing? How are they dealing with demands for increasing accountability?

During in-depth interviews, study participants described their perceptions of and experiences with various initiatives to increase college completion rates in both career and technical education (CTE) and general education (GE). They discussed the challenges faced by their colleges, the solutions they had found, the actions they personally had taken in response to

the initiatives, and their feelings about the initiatives, most specifically President Obama's 2010 challenge to increase college completion by five million new graduates by 2020.

Background

The participants of this study were comprised of 26 administrators, faculty, and staff from three community colleges in eastern Kansas. Each college's president consented to be interviewed and then assisted in "selling" the study to faculty and staff to facilitate interviews. The other participants ranged from deans of student services and deans of academic affairs to registrars, trustees, directors of student tutoring centers, and instructors of English composition, criminal justice, communications, and business, all with a wide range of experience in education, specifically at the community college level. Most faculty and staff had attended community colleges themselves and felt a strong kinship towards community colleges in general, although one faculty member explained he had been at a regional state university for several years and really had no prior experience at a community college. His comments about the public perception of community colleges were particularly interesting, since he was still catching himself in some biased comments and apologizing for them. Since many responses show that community college personnel often feel that two-year colleges are viewed as "lesser" than four-year colleges—less academically rigorous, less beneficial, less able to promote student success—his biases and apologies for them contrasted with the sometimes bristling defense of community colleges by other respondents.

To protect the identity of the participants, colleges and interviewees were assigned pseudonyms, while descriptions of college locations and program offerings were changed slightly or removed, depending on how identifiable they were. Names have been changed to protect anonymity; it was hoped that pseudonyms and lack of personally identifiable details would prompt honest and thoughtful answers, even to difficult questions.

Participants contributed differing amounts of information to the themes that emerged. Some subjects got on their soapboxes and had obvious strong feelings about certain aspects of the completion initiatives, while others had very little to say. However, everyone had their own perceptions to add; therefore, this narrative represents all 23 interviewees and speaks through their words. Any emphasis in the quotations comes from the stress and accents the participants used to ensure their words were understood.

Setting

A brief profile of each of the three colleges is provided here, with names and specific identifying details removed or altered slightly to protect the identity of the participants. Kansas state symbols were chosen as college pseudonyms. Since nearly all Kansas community colleges provide housing, but one of the colleges here does not, housing is not described. All three colleges have thriving online or distance learning programs as well as their on-campus offerings. All three colleges are public, have elected trustees, and are governed by the Kansas Board of Regents, who has provided full funding for each of the three colleges through its Performance Funding Agreements (KBOR, online, 2012).

In Kansas, community colleges are "assigned" a territory based on county. More densely populated counties have their "own" college which is funded partly by the state and partly through mill levies on the local citizens and businesses; more sparsely populated counties are grouped into a single college's territory. Counties with public universities are not considered part of a community college's base, but many students from those counties will enroll in the nearest community college anyway. Paying non-resident fees, where applicable, is often cheaper than the university tuition, and if students desire a program not offered by their local university, such as construction trades or cosmetology, their choices are more limited.

Sunflower College

Sunflower College is a large, suburban community college serving a population of over twenty thousand students (exact numbers have not been stated to preserve anonymity). For the most part, Sunflower serves a single county, but students come from nearby counties as well, and often cross the state line from Missouri. The college has one main campus with seven much smaller satellite locations. College staff and students take pride in its green spaces, provisions for showcasing student achievement such as space in the hallways for student art, and continued growth. Sunflower serves its community not only through its course programming, including many personal enrichment courses, but through frequent cultural events as well, including concerts, theatrical productions, athletic events, and various festivals.

Although large, Sunflower has been able to keep its faculty to student ratio low (average of 1:13, Sunflower Office of Institutional Research, 2012), which they feel enhances student engagement and student learning. Cost per credit hour is $84 for county residents, $99 for Kansas residents outside the college's home county, and $197 for out-of-state residents (online, 2012). This low-cost education includes over fifty career certificate and degree programs and over one hundred articulation agreements with area colleges and universities to help students transfer more easily (online, 2012). According to the college website, over 36 percent of students enrolled in Fall 2011 planned to transfer, while 89 percent of surveyed students who had completed a career program were employed full-time. About three-quarters of the students come from the "home" county of the college—almost twenty percent of that county's recent high school graduates enrolled at Sunflower (online, 2012).

Sunflower takes pride in its size, diverse student body, many course offerings, and student satisfaction. According to the president, a recent student survey showed Sunflower had a higher satisfaction rate than Santa Claus! (personal interview, 4/2012).

Bison College

Bison College is a small, rural college serving a little over three thousand students (again, exact numbers are purposefully not stated). Bison has three counties in its territory, but there are two counties nearby with public universities, so Bison serves as the "community" college for students from those counties as well. Bison is also near enough to the Missouri state line that they often have students from Missouri, or students who transfer to a university in Missouri after attending Bison. This causes problems in tracking students, as will be seen from comments later.

Bison College has one main campus with nine satellite locations, including specialized technical centers. Bison offers thirty broadly defined programs, both in general education and occupational programs, and has a student to faculty ratio of 1:7 (registrar's office, 2012). Compared to most colleges, Bison's operating budget is miniscule—Johnson County Community College's annual budget is nearly $233 million for 2012-13, the University of Kansas' 2012-13 budget is roughly $569 million, Highland Community College's budget for 2012-13 is just over $14.5 million. Bison manages on just over $9 million. As their president said, "come on in, there's not a lot of waste here" (personal interview, 5/2012).

Although its budget is small, Bison provides educational, training, athletic, and cultural opportunities to its students and community. The registrar's "census" data reported "an overwhelming majority" of Bison students seek a degree, with about half of those students desiring to transfer to a four-year college (Office of the Registrar, 5/2012). There are two career programs at Bison that, unfortunately, cannot be discussed, since they are unique to that college. Bison's president commented that "if you talk about this, it's going to give us away!" The college is very proud of all it can accomplish in spite of its small budget.

Meadowlark College

Meadowlark College has a rural location but is near enough to a large city that it serves as that city's community college. Although the college lists on its website a main campus and twenty "learning centers," including area high schools, it is fairly evenly split between two campuses, one "main" and one which is technically a satellite campus, in the town of "Cottonwood." Since the Cottonwood campus is thirty minutes closer to the city, it has grown so much that it currently enrolls more students than Meadowlark's main campus—over 3,000 at the second campus versus just about 2,500 at the main campus (Entz, online, 10/17/2012). Meadowlark serves a territory of five counties, with two neighboring counties having public universities. One of those neighboring counties, including the nearest large city, is within fifteen minutes of the Cottonwood campus, which probably explains the quick growth of that campus during the economic downturn of the last decade.

Meadowlark College has over thirty departments in general and transfer education and over twenty departments in career and technical education. These departments offer degrees and certificates to over twenty thousand students at Meadowlark's multiple locations. Students enjoy an average faculty to student ratio of 1:17 (Office of Institutional Research, 5/2012), and the college provides a wide variety of programs for students and the community, including athletics, an award-winning choir, and other cultural events ("Meadowlark," online, 2012).

Study Findings

Arguably, the most interesting finding is one that came from what was *not* said by interviewees: although everyone had heard about President Obama's completion initiative, and they agreed that it was talked about at their schools, there was no concerted or organized effort to lead the schools to a college-wide response. Administrators could not point to a single action taken solely in response to the challenge to increase graduates. There was no framing of the goal

in words, actions, or symbols to send a signal to the college as a whole as to what they should do about this initiative. There were no meetings specifically in response to it, there were no college-wide goals set specifically in response to it, there were no emails or meeting minutes or other documents to contribute to the colleges' staff awareness of the initiative or the numeric goal set by President Obama. This seems to point to a crisis of identity at community colleges; as discussed in Chapter Two and further in Chapter Five, community college missions are so varied that a new challenge seems to nearly paralyze the school community.

Actual responses—what people said—to interview questions were varied, but several major themes emerged from the interviews:

1. College staff can only do so much—many people believed they were already trying as hard as they could to help students succeed, and unless a large influx of funding came with this new initiative to increase completion rates, very little change is expected. Colleges were responding to the challenge to increase completion rates, but interviewees frequently commented on the fact that most of the new programs put in place after the White House Summit had been at least discussed previously, and sometimes were already in the planning stages. The new initiative had really only moved up their own timetables in many cases.
2. Until preK-12 education is more effective, community colleges will continue to pay to provide developmental education to high school graduates—and Complete College America (2010, online) states fewer than 25% of community college students who are placed in remedial education receive a degree or certificate, so this directly affects college completion rates. Most new programs to increase completion rates were attempting to either make developmental education merge more seamlessly into the general education curriculum, or were attempting to catch students who were having

trouble with their courses before they left college. All three colleges had similar programs to deal with at-risk students, either through developmental education or "early alert" systems.

3. Reporting requirements are challenging for all three colleges. Different state and federal departments require different data, or the same data reported in different ways, at different times of the year. There never seems to be enough staff and enough time to create the reports needed, and data from which to create those reports are not always available. Since many current funding agreements rely on reporting and accountability measures, many college personnel feel caught in a Catch-22. They need more money to be able to account for themselves and report required data, but they can't get more money unless they account for themselves and report required data.
4. Kansas needs to have better articulation agreements and find ways to track students across state lines. Kansas records whether students have enrolled at a different school within that state—but what if students transfer out of state? All three colleges in this study are close enough to one or more state borders that people were concerned about tracking transfer student data. The interviewees also commented that neighboring states often worked with them better than Kansas does to help students transfer. Currently, college budgets are at least partly funded through "completion" numbers, but students who transfer to a non-Kansas school without first completing a program at one of the colleges in the study are not counted as completers for that college.
5. Colleges need to let go of programs that don't work, or aren't a good return on the investment. Many participants discussed how difficult it is to dismiss a program, even if it costs more than it brings in, even if very few students are interested in that program.

6. Community colleges need more money. Nearly every interviewee talked about how difficult it is to keep up buildings, start new programs, hire staff, and generally provide a good college experience and education at the current funding levels. All three colleges' staff expressed pride in what they're able to accomplish on their budgets, but know they could do much better with more money.
7. Finally, the single most common theme is that "completion" is not defined realistically. Community colleges have always had a very different mission than their four-year counterparts, and have always attracted a very different student body. Many students at the community college have no intention or desire to complete a certificate or degree at the community college. However, for many legislators and other decision makers who are not at the community college level, "completion" means attainment of a certificate or degree. Nearly every interviewee complained that if a student transfers to a four-year college before completion of their associates degree, that student should be considered a "completer" for the community college. Actually, most participants had an even broader definition of "completion" than this one, as will be discussed further later in this chapter and in Chapter Five, the "Discussion."

After the discussion of each of these seven themes, I have added shorter sections with interesting subthemes that I believe enhance the general perceptions and help to answer the research questions. Although I interviewed personnel at three different community colleges and was open to a cross-case analysis, answers were so similar from all three colleges that no such analysis was necessary. The perceptions, views, opinions, and feelings varied, sometimes widely, from person to person, but were generally quite similar in themes from college to college. Where one person might believe the college was failing miserably at increasing completion rates, and one of their colleagues might feel the college was visibly gaining ground,

their feelings about why or how the college was attempting to make these changes were often the same. Overall, there was a general consensus about the initiative and about the community colleges' reactions to that initiative to increase completion rates.

"There's Only So Much You Can Do"

One college president said the main response to the president's challenge to increase completion rates was that "we are re-*new*-ing our energies and our focus on our efforts to see students complete." Nearly every interviewee discussed how they believed their colleges had always wanted to help students complete their educational goals; when asked about feeling pressure about increasing rates, many people had a comment like this one from Nancy, an instructor and coach at Bison: "Pressure? Not really. We're already doing it. We're doing all we can." Some people even felt having an announced goal was demeaning: Vito, in Bison's advising office, said, "to have a certain number, it's almost saying that I don't think you guys want to have completion happen as much as you should." After all, as Aaron, in advising at Meadowlark explained, "even though you feel that pressure, if you're already doing as good a job as you can do, you know there's only so much that you can do."

Since participants felt they were doing as much as they could to help students achieve their goals, they felt the problem with the challenge to increase completion isn't that there is a number that's been publicized. It isn't that a national announcement has been made that community colleges need to increase completion. It isn't any sort of increased national attention or pressure on the colleges. The problem, according to Andy, an administrator at Sunflower College, is that "you need to increase student completion by this much, but you still have the same amount of people, and you still have the same amount of resources, we're not going to be able to help you with any resources." Most study participants agreed. Otto, a trustee at Bison College, exclaimed, "I would *love* to see five million new graduates by 2020. The question then

is where is the system, the finances, that's gonna be available in order for that to happen. In order for us to meet those kinds of goals, it's going to need—we're certainly going to need an infusion of finances to cause us to do that." As one administrator, Alan at Bison, said, "we're a very small school with *exceptionally* small margins, and when we're running as fast as we can now, it's hard to stop and reflect and initiate new strategies to address the charge." Bison may be the smallest school with the lowest budget, but the other schools' interviewees agreed. Oliver, a trustee at Meadowlark, asked, "Where do we find the money to do all of the things that we need to do, at a time when taxpayers are already stressed?" Tanya, a Meadowlark faculty member, said, "services that we want to provide in college all require dollars." And again at Meadowlark, "our resources are just not going up fast enough to deal with the initiatives and things we're trying to do." The same was heard at Sunflower from Andy, an administrator: "in order to engage in these initiatives, you need *money* to do that, you need to have stuff, you need to pay faculty." Andy later laughed, eyes crinkled with amusement, "when asked, what are the three most pressing challenges for community colleges, I always say funding, funding, and funding!"

Although nearly every interviewee lamented the lack of funds for their programs, they all agreed that they're doing a good job. They might not have the completion numbers they would like, but "we continue to provide excellent education at an affordable price." And how are they doing that? According to Dora, an administrator at Meadowlark, "we've become more efficient. . . . We've become much more efficient at using the technology that's out there. But it's expensive!" At Sunflower, Remy in administration worries, "you just can't deal with the increase in enrollments we have, and the decrease in funds, and not have there be an impact, and so we're trying to refocus ourselves towards the things we do the best. Sunflower has hired a lobbyist to help them work on pro-community college legislation and funding at the state level,

and they're going after more grants. Sunflower College's Andy said "we've been searching *very* aggressively out there for grants, alternative sources of funding, also" to meet the college's needs. Bison has instituted a more college-wide budgeting process where administrators from both student services and academics get together to work on the budget. One staff member in student services, Vern, explained the process.

> The strategic budgeting process now engages basically everyone on campus, we allow everyone to have input, the divisions on the instruction side of the house, and the divisions on the student services side of the house, it's basically, directors and staff coming together individually as directors, then corporately, student services comes together and we place our strategic needs, our budgeting needs in there. We identify critical items, and we then, as an institution, take *all* of them and say, as an institution, where do we place the most value?

This process has really worked well for them at times, he said. For example, one program change Bison College made to try to increase completion rates is instituting an "early alert system." With this system, any student who is falling behind in class, not completing work, not coming to class, and so on, can be entered into an online system that is available to all faculty, advisors, and administrators. Any staff person can enter a student's name and the problem, and then advisors, coaches, and faculty members can group together to try to intervene and help that student. According to Vern, sometimes they need to use "aggressive intervention," even going out into the hallways and calling students on their cell phones to find students who are not attending class. However, Vern's colleague Nora, in academic affairs, believes they can't do as much intervention as they'd like. Once again, it comes down to funding. "Because we're running on a *very* shoestring budget, we cannot afford—I would love to *do* aggressive intervention, but I don't see *lots* of that happening. We're going to have to focus on the very

small number of worse-case scenarios." Many of those "worse-case" students come in to college without the preparation they need, which causes many problems.

"Close to 80, 90% of Our Students Read Poorly"

It is widely recognized that students who must take remedial coursework are at a higher risk of dropping out of college (Complete College America, 2012; Moltz, 2010b; Bailey, 2008). With this in mind, it was disturbing to hear Andy, an administrator at Sunflower, say, "nationally, you look at developmental rates, and it's about 75% of community college students have to take at least one developmental course, and you look at Sunflower, and you look at the K-12 systems that we do have here, that are just outstanding, and yet it's still the same. And there's a disconnect there somehow." Hannah, a Sunflower administrator, said, "developmental education has to be a part of our agenda, *unfortunately*. We need to be really, really diligent about making sure that we have all those foundational areas, because even in *our* area, and we have *very* good K-12 systems, here, even in our area, we have an astronomical number of students who come to us unprepared." To explain Hannah's comment, the two main public school districts within Sunflower's district are both highly regarded, with many "Schools of Excellence" honors awarded by the Kansas State Department of Education to elementary, middle, and high schools, and more than one No Child Left Behind Blue Ribbon award from the U.S. Department of Education. However, Kansas does not make remedial numbers readily available. The only numbers to back up Hannah's claim of an "astronomical number" of unprepared students come from the Kansas High Schools report card from the Alliance for Excellent Education (2011, online) in Table 5 below.

Table 5. ACT-tested Kansas high school graduates ready for college-level work.

	English	Math	Reading	Science	All Four Subjects
Kansas	73%	51%	60%	34%	28%
Nation	66%	45%	52%	30%	25%

The AEE lists only the percentage of high school graduates who took the ACT; many students who enroll at a community college never planned to enter college and never took that exam. It is probable that the numbers of those students ready for college-level work are much lower than in the AEE's table; the need for developmental education is probably quite high at every community college in this study.

Debbie, an administrator and faculty member at Sunflower explained why developmental education is such a concern, "if they start low, or they're at a low level, they may never get through the sequence, it eats up their financial aid, and our data showed that they just—they didn't continue, typically." At Bison, Vito in advising explained, "developmental education classes are increasing, we have to have more and more sections of our developmental education. Students that I know don't even know how to *read*, so of course, if I was frustrated with not knowing how to read, with not being able to take a test because I couldn't read the test, that would be a big hindrance to me to finish college." A Bison administrator in academics, Nora, continued, "it's hard to do anything with completion rates until you've dealt with the developmental education side of it. Something like seventy to eighty percent of our students have to have some form of developmental education; I would say close to eighty, ninety percent of our students read poorly. How do we take them from there into the college classes? How do we retain them through that process?" She continued, laughing, "I'm hearing that Harvard

University is adding developmental education, and that just shocked the dickens out of me! *Very* expensive pre-algebra!" A Meadowlark trustee agreed, "what is going on here that a college has to spend time and effort and money getting people to the level where they can read at kind of even a high school level? They have to be able to *do* college level work before they can complete it." He continued, saying the problem is that "we're trying to increase the quantity of the output, and actually the *quality* of the output at the same time, and the inputs are, well, *not* improving." Vern, in Bison's student services, said,

> I think right now American education is faced with a tremendous depletion in acceptable level of learning. I think we have more and more people coming to the college level curriculum expecting to succeed, and being completely unprepared to succeed. I'm not throwing stones at K-12, but I do think the K-12 student now is less likely to be prepared to deal with true college curriculum than maybe 25 years ago.

Erin, a general education instructor at Sunflower, agreed that the school is focusing more on developmental education than it used to. She said that's important, because "I've found myself in the really awkward position of teaching people who can't learn, and that's not fair to me, and it's not fair to people who've waited a really long time to come back to school."

Mike, faculty member at Meadowlark, believes the No Child Left Behind regulations have drastically increased the need for developmental education. He explained,

> Students who come out of a competency-based No Child Left Behind situation, and we've seen several years of this, the fact that we're seeing more and more students coming in to us with developmental needs, one, makes us question how well did we teach competencies, or did we teach to the test only, what kind of skills did we develop in our students? We see this as probably a bigger challenge, where we see students who come in *not* prepared. That [course] sequence is growing, but not at the higher end—it's

> growing at the lower end. So *our* challenge is, what do we do when we get a student who comes in and tests *lower* than Fundamentals? Because we've had to develop a course for *that* student, because we want to see them get at least in Fundamentals.

Dora, in Meadowlark's enrollment management division, agreed that things are at a bad point in our current educational situation. "There's a constitutional obligation in the state of Kansas for K-12 education, they're not meeting that, either. . . . The last report I saw in Kansas, only 28% of high school graduates are college ready. Nationwide, it's 22%. That's scary." The problem gets worse for students who need financial aid, Dora continued:

> The government is no longer going to pay for remedial education through grants and loans, if it's not at least high school-level work. Well, believe it or not, we teach courses here that are equivalent to sixth grade. You start out at that level, your first *year* is going to be all remedial work. And if you're not going to be eligible for grants, there's a good chance you're not going to be able to afford it. So maybe those students won't start.

As Ned in student services at Sunflower summed it up, "there's a commercial out there that shows us 21st in the world in education, and for God's sakes, *Slovenia* is above us, and you're going, no, *that* can't be. . . . It's not necessarily that the world is going to come to an end if Slovenia is number one in education, . . . but it's a powerful [competitive] thing. If we think we are the best in the world, then let's prove it."

So what are colleges doing to help "prove it"? What solutions have they found, or what changes to people believe colleges need to make to decrease student time in developmental coursework? Sunflower's student services person, Ned, believes we need to fire up the nation with a competitive spirit. He continued, "I was around when there was a speech about reaching the moon, and that's been used lots of times. . . . it's the Russia versus the United States thing."

Andy, a Sunflower administrator who works closely with developmental education, believes Kansas needs to acknowledge that there's a problem. He explained,

> We sent to the staff of the Kansas Board of Regents our desired performance indicators, and they rejected all the developmental ones. I, I, it just *stunned* me. I—they said, this is not an indication that developmental education isn't important, it's just that we don't want developmental indicators in the performance agreements. [He laughed and rolled his eyes.] O—kay. That's a mixed message if ever *I* heard one!

Andy said he understands some of the difficulty. He sighed deeply, searching for words as he continued,

> It's *not*, it's, it's not flashy, you know, developmental education, I mean, like a culinary program is, or athletic programs or something like that where people just hop on board. Developmental education is very difficult to get people behind it. You don't want to point your finger—the high schools will say it's the middle schools, the middle schools will say it's the elementary schools, the elementary schools will say it's the *parents*. It just keeps on continuing, it just keeps on going.

Other solutions are found in changing how the colleges manage developmental coursework. Debbie, a Sunflower division chair, explained that Sunflower started a program a few years ago where "students who were typically at risk got some scholarship money, and they got a lot of one-on-one attention. [The program] was small, it wasn't as successful as we wanted, but you know, you learn so much from those things!" She believes the lessons Sunflower learned from that program helped them start a new developmental math program "in our computer lab, but it's very hands-on, the first two weeks are very intensive, and the number of sections has expanded, so that's helping people get through that math barrier." Along with that new math course, Sunflower has increased the number of learning community programs, including ones with

developmental reading, math, and writing (Debbie, personal interview, 4/2012). Ned in Sunflower's student services office, said the college has "put more support into the underprepared students, purposely, to help them get better prepared to do the college work they need to do in order to do the completion. Because if they can't get through the developmental education courses, they'll never make it to the end." Hannah, an administrator at Sunflower, explained that just in 2012, "we hired two different people, part-time, that we call transition counselors, and they are different from the academic advising counselors that we have on this campus. These people are more hands-on, and they are transitioning, trying to get our GED students enrolled in college."

Andy, the Sunflower administrator who works closely with developmental education, said some of the changes, like the math course described by Debbie above, are more specific. For example, "maybe students just need help in fractions or something like that, why do you have to take a semester-length class that deals with fractions and everything else under the sun, if you're only lacking in that one area?" New short-term developmental workshops are being developed to help students learn just the areas where they are deficient, thus allowing them to begin college-level coursework more quickly. He said Sunflower is also considering a developmental "certificate" to provide a milestone for those students, since milestones are so important. As Remy, an administrator at Sunflower explained, "those midterm credentials become really influencers, motivators to a student, particularly adult students."

Along with working more closely with the students needing developmental education, Andy said Sunflower is trying to bridge the "disconnect" he mentioned when talking about Sunflower's developmental rates.

> We have *begun* to have conversations with the K-12s, to begin to address that gap there.
>
> What we're doing, is we're allowing those placement tests, we're taking them into the

> high schools and they're taking them their sophomore years, or their freshman year or their sophomore year, in order to determine where those gaps are so they can work on them during their high school years.

Andy's colleague at Sunflower, Ned, who works in student services, said the problem with students not being ready for college-level work is the real reason why completion rates are down. He also wants to partner with the K-12 schools in the area, because

> if you have one hundred students, and only ten complete, ten percent, but of the one hundred, fifty of them weren't ready to do the work, but we don't look at them that way. We don't break the numbers down and say, well, okay, if we have ten completers of *fifty*, that's a very different percentage. We don't ever look at it that way.

Callie, an administrator at Meadowlark, agreed that connections with K-12 education providers are key. She said with a big grin,

> if I were Queen of the World, I would establish linkages with the K-12 system, and particularly high school, although I know you need to go lower, so there is that level of academic preparedness that needs to take place, so when the students come to us, they're *ready* to do college-level work, and they don't *waste* semesters one, two, or three getting to the point of doing college-level work.

Along with building bridges between their colleges and the area K-12 schools, all three community colleges have created and begun using "early alert" systems for at-risk students. Debbie at Sunflower confirmed they've "instituted an early alert program," although she didn't go into much detail, just saying they're trying to track and intervene with students who aren't doing well. Vern, the student services administrator at Bison, said they used to have a system they used mainly for athletes, but it wasn't easy, and many faculty didn't use it. The new system is "electronic, much more meaningful to our faculty. Now, it's easy, it's quick, and it gets the

info out to the people who need to know." Otto, the Bison trustee, agreed, saying that the early alert system is "a really good way to get the instructors engaged in communicating about how the students are doing to all our departments. Instructors are using it, and they didn't use the other one." Vito, a Bison advisor, explained further.

> We used to be very intensive about that for our athletes, because the coaches wanted to know they were doing well in classes, so they could play, and now I feel like we've spread that out to more of the whole campus, so when those early alerts go out, it's not just athletes those instructors are reporting on, it's the whole class.

At Meadowlark, Reggie, an instructor and club sponsor, said, "we have this system set up, if you have a student who hasn't shown up regularly, or if they're having a problem academically, or in class, behaviorally, you can go in, and enter their name." Aaron, in advising at Meadowlark, says "we've hired somebody to track students who are at risk." He worries, though, that "I'm not sure we have *all* the support services that are needed in order to address those issues."

To support at-risk students, staff and faculty need to be able to reach them. This isn't easy, according to Vito at Bison's advising office.

> Community colleges, as a whole, well, we've got a lot of nontraditional students, we've got a lot of people that will stay in apartments, or in town, them being off campus takes them out of the palm of our hands. So it's harder to get a hold of them, and a lot more students don't want to be gotten a hold of. They'll change their cell phone number every semester, so it's hard to track them down! At a four-year, that's your life, you live there, you work there, you're going to school there.

Ned, the student services administrator at Sunflower, concurred. "Students don't come and hang around, it's hard to build that whole college experience." One thing Sunflower is trying to do is to build relationships with at-risk students, especially first-generation students. Hannah, an

administrator, said Sunflower is attempting to assign volunteer faculty and staff to newly enrolled students, so "they call [that student] personally at the beginning of the summer, and then have them come down and meet a faculty member, counselor, or someone so they have a face to recognize, so then when they come to campus [for class], they'll feel more comfortable." At Meadowlark, Reggie is attempting his own version of this through his position as a club sponsor. He said, "because of that club, I know one student who really has some serious issues going on in her life, she may or may not show up to class on any given day, but she will to club, and I've definitely developed a relationship with her, which gives me a better chance of reaching out to her." In a more formal attempt to help students make connections, Bison College's financial aid office sends staff to recruiting fairs and orientations. As Iris, a financial aid professional, said, "it's not just to get their paperwork done, but to associate a face so they'll know who they can contact." Debbie, the Sunflower division chair, would agree that personal contacts are important. She said, "we feel that personal touch, and relationship development, and student engagement—'cause if you can get them engaged, they're much more likely to stay."

"It's Just Paperwork at that Point"

Students who don't stay are very difficult to track, which means reporting them is next to impossible. Have they completed their personal goals? Have they transferred out of state? Did they get a job before they were done with a program? How do colleges know if they've done their job and helped a student be successful? According to an administrator at Sunflower College, Remy, the Kansas Board of Regents is instituting completion as part of their performance agreements with community colleges, but colleges don't always know if their students are doing well after they leave, so how do they report those students? According to Andy, in Sunflower's administration, "we really don't have the evidence, because of FERPA

laws, prohibit us in getting one-on-one information about students. So they leave here, we think they've transferred, but we're not positive if they have."

Even with certificate programs, knowing whether a student is successful can be problematic. Iris, Bison's financial aid professional, explained the difficulty:

> With the new gainful employment reporting requirements that the Department of Education has put on us, it's a new challenge—our challenge has been how do you find out? How do you find out where they've gone, what they've done? Are they using those certificates to *be* gainfully employed?

Of course, students who don't even complete a certificate are even more difficult to track. As Andrea, in developmental education at Bison, said, "where you have programs where a student can start something, and go into the workforce before they complete, those who make policies at another level may not see all of that." Nora, the academic affairs person at Bison, said she saw that frequently at a previous job. "In [other state], we used to lose a *lot* of students—we had a technology program, where they could go out literally after a year in the program, step out and make more money than their instructors. They could make $70,000 right out the door with a year of school behind them." Although her college knew the students could be successful, as in gainfully employed, without a certificate, there was no way to track them. If Bison College had a similar program, how could they report those students to Kansas?

Not only is it often difficult to have the necessary data for reporting, schools often have challenges simply keeping up with required reports. Even if they have the data they need, creating reports takes time and effort. First, data must be collected. According to Hannah, whose position in continuing education and workforce development at Sunflower means she makes frequent reports to business and government agencies, they've had to change the way they track data, "so we can include some of that, those [new, specific] metrics, in our reporting." Iris,

in financial aid at Bison, also makes frequent reports to state and federal agencies. She laughed, "accountability is awesome. It really is. It's just difficult to get it done, with never enough time or money or people, it's just imposing a lot of burden." She continued, "in our office, [the burden is] the time spent to make sure we're meeting the requirements." One of Iris' colleagues at Bison College, Vern, complained about the same burden.

> There's no commonality as to what completion means. On the one hand, completion means this, and then you hear it reported this way. On the other hand, someone might say completion could mean this, and we need to report it this way. And for a limited staff with limited time, having to respond multiple ways to a common goal is frustrating.

Iris agreed with Vern's summation but took it even farther, tying accountability reporting directly to student completion.

> Obviously, the more time that we have to spend doing the reporting, whether it's gainful employment, or the IPEDS, and all the different things we have to do, it takes away time from the students. Not being as available as we would like, so then that trickles down to well, can we get more staff to help, but if there's no money, then there's no staffing. So it's kind of a vicious circle. We don't have staff to help students, so the students get frustrated, and they leave. That hurts completion.

Along with the difficulty of meeting reporting requirements and deadlines because of lack of staff, sometimes it's just the timing that causes challenges. Bison College's Vern said accountability agencies really should think about when they require reports.

> The stress that comes from reporting, or trying to show evidence, and it's not that in and of itself. So often times, the timing is such that we need this by June the First. Does anyone realize that from March to May, it is a *zoo*, because you're trying to finish up the semester, you're trying to get ready for graduation, and have graduation, and so, that's

> where most of the stress comes in, is trying to meet the timeliness of some of the demands on us.

Another challenge is that sometimes, colleges just don't have the systems set up properly, for one reason or another, to collect the data they need. Ben works with technology at Meadowlark College, and he complained that it's impossible to make good reports because the college has collected bad data.

> When students apply for admission, they check what areas they're interested in, and the person that enters that into the computer chooses the first one on the list, because they can have only one. . . And then that same information that's reported bogus to the Feds in all our reporting, because it comes right out of the computer, and the computer's wrong. So—the only information you can get out for reports is what you put in there. . . .We have another new requirement this year called gainful employment. And with that requirement, we're to track students in programs, and the way that our [computer] program's set up to do that starts with majors. And when majors are wrong, it's just really tough.

Ben has a possible solution:

> So I'm suggesting we don't have majors on the application form, but maybe they have career pathways, so maybe they could have like a healthcare pathway, an education pathway, a manufacturing tech area pathway. They have to be more general, and after they start taking classes, they should work with their major advisor to figure out their path.

According to Ben, the reporting problems are even worse when it comes to the students who are in developmental classes.

> Well, some of them haven't even made it through their developmental classes yet, so do they qualify to be in a program yet, because most of them have prerequisite standards, and so they shouldn't really be in that program until they meet the requirements to *be* in that program, otherwise they come out on the printouts. So until we get that cleaned up, we don't even know *what* our rates really are!

Reggie, an instructor at Meadowlark, has issues with reporting as well. He stated,

> Our mechanisms for capturing data and doing it the way the state wants it done, and doing it the way the accrediting body wants it done, and doing it the way my division wants it done, are ways that you think are realistic, but they are a problem. . . . When you have to report what is in effect the same data three different ways to three different people, it can take three times as long. And it's because they just want it differently. It's just paperwork at that point. . . . For example, we put this accrediting body's report—we call it a QA, a Quality Assurance plan—together every two years. It's only about 25 pages. It would be really nice if I could hold that up and wave it at *whoever* comes to me—Kansas Board of Regents, our own school, my dean, whoever, and say Ah-Ha, see, I have this accrediting-accepted document, and I'd wave my magic wand, but the school has different needs for what they call program review, and you never know what's going to come from KBOR or different things.

"It's the In-State Schools We Fight With"

The Kansas Board of Regents, or KBOR, requires many reports, but according to interviewees, they're not very helpful when it comes to student data. According to Debbie at Sunflower, "Kansas' transfer system is very broken." Many students are encouraged by four-year colleges to take a year or so at the community college and then transfer, which makes those

students non-completers at the two-year institution. Ned, Sunflower's student services professional, illustrated this,

> I use the example of the student who comes here, takes twenty hours, goes to a four-year institution, and finds out that they cannot take any more classes at *our* institution, *must* transfer to the other institution. They haven't completed a degree or certificate, but they have met their educational objective because they have taken every class they can take due to the restrictions of that other program.

That student is not counted as a completer for Sunflower, even if the student completes his or her bachelor's degree at a Kansas university, because there was no community college degree or certificate completed at Sunflower.

Aaron, who advises students at Meadowlark, agreed that many students should not complete an entire 64-credit degree at the community college before transferring on.

> If the right thing for a student is to go a semester here, or two semesters and then transfer on to a four-year institution, without *any* certificate or *anything*, we hate to see that count against our retention efforts. We have a lot of students who don't *need* to be here for more than a year, otherwise they're putting themselves behind in their programs. And to have the fact that those students are doing the *right* think, and are being advised correctly as to what their next steps should be after a semester or two semesters, and then have that count against our retention effort, I think that's frustrating for everyone.

Andy at Sunflower gave a more specific example—because the program may be traceable back to the actual community college called "Sunflower" in this dissertation, it has been removed from the quote:

> We've got this agreement with KU, and they *love* for their [specific program] students to come here for their first year, because they get a special kind of instruction in [program]

> that they don't give over at KU, I guess, from what I understand. And so people come here, and after a year, KU takes them into their program. They don't have a degree, they don't have a certificate, okay, they're not successful, right? Well, no, they're *very* successful, and KU *loves* to have our students go there after a year—after a *year*.

So how should those students be counted? The community colleges are creating more and more articulation agreements with special programs at Kansas colleges, and even several out-of-state colleges, but so far, those agreements do not allow Sunflower or the other colleges to count those students as completers. Erin, who teaches in one of the transfer education departments at Sunflower, said she knows they're "working towards consistency across the state," while Nora, in Bison's academic administration, said "the common course standards for Kansas will certainly help with completion." Again, these solutions will be helpful for students, but will they help the community colleges increase their own completion rates?

All three community colleges have begun work on one solution that at first seems awkward—a "reverse transfer" certificate. Dora, in Enrollment Management at Meadowlark, explained how it would work:

> It would be a situation where if the students completed like 45 hours here but because of fear of transfer to the four-year program, it could cost them an extra semester if they stayed here, so they go ahead and transfer, and then that first semester, they could transfer those hours back to the college and still be considered a completer.

Andy at Sunflower just doesn't like this idea. He said, "the retroactive stuff, or to create these fluff certificates just to say, well, look, this person is successful. I don't think that really addresses the issue. I mean, it does maybe as far as funding is concerned, or notoriety, but it's kind of the wrong path. It's just artificial." However, many interviewees disagreed. Callie, an administrator at Meadowlark, described it this way:

> Reverse transfer articulation agreements, I think, will be of assistance with our transfer students who go on without completing that degree—to get that *milestone*, and again, going back to the research, we know if they get that milestone, they're more likely to complete—complete with a baccalaureate degree.

Hannah, an administrator at Sunflower, said, "if they do intend to transfer, there was a time when they would lose so many hours that it didn't make sense to stay more than thirty hours. . . .Let's take engineering. Which may recommend, yeah, take a year at the community college, but then transfer. Well, if that person graduates, they get the completion and we don't. So that's another reason why the reverse transfer concept is now coming into play."

Of course, reverse transfer certificates and articulation agreements cause their own problems. Most colleges, certainly all three in this dissertation, used to require students to be enrolled in the semester in which they graduate. Hannah at Sunflower confirmed the policy, but said, "we heard that was a barrier, so we eliminated that."

Of course, the entire idea of a reverse transfer certificate would be unnecessary if transfer students were considered "completers" for accountability measures. Nora, Bison's academic affairs administrator, said, "in Kansas, we've counted transfers as completers, but I'm worried that at a national level, that's no longer going to be a feasibility. It seems to me, if they've transferred on, they've completed what they needed to do here—they don't need to get a degree necessarily to go on to get an ag degree at K-State, or a medical degree at KU." Hannah at Sunflower concurred, "the transfer side, why do they have to complete? They're just gonna lose a bunch of credits when they do." Thus, the transfer certificate. Andy at Sunflower explained it would be "a transfer certificate of thirty hours, hoping that those students will look at that certificate as a sort of goal, and that maybe they will complete thirty hours. We're using classes

that have been articulated throughout the state into the universities, so all of those courses would be transferring to a university, if it's a state university here in Kansas."

The problem is, not all the students are transferring to a state university in Kansas. Andy said that at Sunflower, "the majority—right now, more students go to [a particular Missouri university] than go to KU at the moment, because that's—they're following the money. They're offering better scholarships and better articulation of courses, so we have all these students going to [Missouri] that the Kansas Board of Regents isn't even looking at. . . .[students are] getting in-state tuition to go there." So an out-of-state university is offering better articulation to Sunflower's students, but "the Kansas Board of Regents—they look at transfer rates to our Kansas universities, but they don't look across the state line."

Reggie, the faculty member at Meadowlark, agreed that out-of-state universities are often easier for students desiring to transfer. He said,

> For a fact I've never understood, out-of-state schools work with us *beautifully*. They can all go to Missouri schools, or wherever they want to go, even Oklahoma, and those schools are like, sure, we'll take those credits. But it's the in-state schools we fight with, so students have some incentive to just go across the state lines, which looks kind of sad.

And, as well as looking "sad," it also counts against the Kansas community college where the students got their educational start.

One problem with transfer students, Ned at Sunflower suggested, is that they never identify with Sunflower, they're not engaged there.

> The student has said something about their degree, and wanted a degree, but there's no one to create an identity for that transfer student. They're creating an identity for where they're going, not necessarily for where they're at. So, for our particular instance, somebody is going to say, I'm going to KU. So they're going to identify with KU, versus

> Sunflower. And that translates to the general faculty and staff of those areas—oh, I've got a bunch of KU students, or K-State students this semester, or Hays students.

Without an identity as a Sunflower student, or a Bison student, or a Meadowlark student, students don't feel a need to graduate from the community college.

"If We Don't Take Away [Programs] . . ."

Students may not identify with their community college, but the schools are also feeling an identity crisis with many programs. According to interviewees at all three colleges, but best voiced by Oliver at Meadowlark, "maybe too often schools will sort of continue to drag along programs that are outdated, low demand, don't have good potential for putting people into good jobs." Remy, an administrator at Sunflower, summarized this view by saying the school should "be honest with the things that maybe have run their course." Ben at Meadowlark agreed. He explained,

> we don't have a lot of students in the welding program. We could walk away from twelve students and save a million bucks of money, from the lab equipment and all of that business, not to mention we've got an unhealthy working environment with that lab. Why would you want us to spend one and a half million dollars building a new welding technology center, for those twelve students? That doesn't make sense. But the community doesn't want us to cut it.

Unfortunately, the community does not always see the big picture, in funding or state requirements. The identity crisis here is in balancing the missions of the colleges—community colleges are supposed to serve their communities. A community may be best served by letting go of an old, obsolete, or little-used program to free up resources for a new, more beneficial program, but the community may not allow the change. Community colleges are often faced with keeping old programs or making their communities feel like the college doesn't care about

them. Neither creates a good environment for the college and its varied missions. However, Kansas has just made some legislative changes in how programs are funded. Bison's academic administrator, Nora, said, "I think Kansas has addressed that already. If there's not a fairly high demand, they're not going to let us have the program, for instance." Although she expressed the opinion that some requirement for demand and completion is beneficial, she frowned when she said,

> I do think it's going to start impacting programs that *could* be important, and I worry a little bit about stuff like nursing, where the curriculum is really challenging, really intense, and we've *got* to have nurses in our area. . . .even if we don't have a huge completion rate, we've *got* to be able to get them out there. . . . That's not a newer program, necessarily, but I think there might be new programs that might not get started up, that might *be* important programs for this area.

Since Bison is a very small college in a very small town, Nora felt that nurses would not be likely to move in from out of the area. If Bison cannot keep their nursing program, their community could find itself hurting badly for trained nurses. This sort of problem was expressed by Alan, another administrator at Bison, as well. He spoke animatedly, admitting he was on his soapbox, when he discussed programs the school had to cancel:

> Dental hygiene is sexy. We had one. We couldn't afford it. I don't have anything against demand clusters. But what about the tried and true? Now, dental hygiene—our program came and went because we saturated the market. Now, that may have been our area, that may have been our region. If I'm in a more metropolis-region, maybe you don't satisfy that need. We're *never* going to satisfy the need for truck drivers.

Andy, an administrator at Sunflower College, agreed that some programs just aren't worth the expense. In times of decreased funding, he said, "we want to make sure that that money is going

to the best programming that we can. So I think it's really helped our college to look at programming in a new way, and saying, you know, how many students are in this program, do we see a market and a workforce increase in that area, and do we need to expand it, or do we need to curtail it?" Another administrator at Sunflower, Debbie, explained, "we just deleted about ten certificates that didn't have enrollment and didn't have completers. Now was it the right thing to do? Yes. . . .Now, the advantage of that is if we eliminate those, we have finances to put into where the students are, and what they need, rather than offering everything to everybody.

This idea of being everything to everyone was a recurrent theme, especially at Sunflower College. Andy said,

> I'm wondering if we need to eliminate some of those [certificate programs] to make less choices for students, and so, this past year we have eliminated—I want to say about fourteen certificates, and I'm hoping another fourteen by December. Because I think, too, we've lived through this age of giving students so many choices—you can be anything, you can do anything—and so they came to us sort of wanting to design their own curriculum almost.

Remy, another administrator at Sunflower College, summed it up by saying, "we can't, anymore, be all things to all people."

However much the community or the students may want certain programs to continue, Kansas is changing the requirements for programs and schools simply cannot afford to keep certain programs running. Sunflower's Remy shook his head sadly when he said, "in general, we're going to the place where if we don't take away, we may not be able to add any more programs." He continued, "we can't afford to run it, and so, kind of phasing programs out." Vito, an advisor at Bison, stresses that the important thing is that the school is "offering the kinds

of degrees that communities need." An administrator at Meadowlark, Oliver, agreed that schools need to focus on "ensuring that the right sort of programs is being offered for the region the community college is in." Alan, a Bison administrator, touched on that earlier when he discussed how his college had to cancel their dental hygiene program. He explained the need for certain programs in certain areas by saying,

> We need good electricians, we need plumbers. Nothing wrong with demand clusters. This world could not function without water operators, and plumbers, and electricians, and truck drivers. We need doctors. We need dental hygienists, we need x-ray technologists, but there's a foundational core that we're not addressing. . . . We have amazingly valuable programs that are not necessarily high demand-high wage-high skill. High demand, not necessarily high wage, not necessarily high skill. Water technology. Water operations. Wastewater operations. *Not* a real sexy program. When you turn on the water, you expect it to be clean. Clean water comes in one way, dirty water goes out another way. Not high wage, not exceptionally high skill. *Exceptionally* high demand. But that doesn't get considered in a lot of the career clusters. When a water plant might have one full-time certified water operator, who's going to work 40 hours a week out of 168, you better make sure that rural water plant has a fully certified water operator.

Interviewees agreed, community colleges must continue to respond to their communities' needs, whether in transfer coursework or workforce development. As Debbie, an administrator and instructor at Sunflower said, "we can be everything to the community that they want us to be, if it's in the right part of the college." With lower funding, there is a delicate balance that must be kept, between credit and non-credit, certificate programs that are popular and those that are necessary for the community's well-being, and so on.

Andy at Sunflower explained the trade-off between eliminating programs and adding new ones. "While we've been eliminating some of these certificates that have not been utilized, or well-utilized, I guess, but all of a sudden we're developing a lot of programs because we say we're responding to community need." It's not just certificates, he continued:

> on the more academic side, or transfer side, I think any of the faculty members will tell you that their departments have said, okay, if we offer, you know, an ancient Rome course in history, we may have to have one less class in Western Civ, you know, so they're making better choices in scheduling, because they have limited space and limited resources.

Bison College's Otto explained that limited resources can cause many problems. For example,

> depending on the kinds of programs you're going to offer, you'll need equipment for the students, in order to continue to be updated, the equipment's going to need to be updated, you'll need standards of—well, like programming, if you're going to go into any type of medical, it's changing so rapidly, so you have to continue to have the support to have the kind of equipment that you need, in order for the student completers, they're ready to go into the workforce.

Alan at Bison agreed that certain programs are much more costly than others. For example:

> For the last twelve years, we get funded for a nursing course, a nursing program, at the same level I get funded for a psychology course. That's ludicrous. How can we value workforce development when we don't fund it? How can we say that we value technical education when we don't fund it? How can we say that we want positive contributors to the industrial workforce when we don't fund it? I can easily put 35 students in a psychology class. By definition, I have a one to ten ratio in nursing.

And, of course, going back to what Otto said, it's not just the student-instructor ratio. It's the cost of the laboratories, the clinical skills equipment, and related expenses. The way community colleges have been funded has been a huge problem for them.

"We're All Going to Be in a World of Hurt"

Not surprisingly, the funding issue was one of the top challenges mentioned by every person interviewed for this dissertation. Hannah, an administrator and instructor at Sunflower College, explained.

> States fund their institutions, their public institutions in different ways. I think, it hasn't been that long ago that the state contributed about 35-40 percent of our revenue, and of course the universities are *really* dependent on state. But we also have tuition of course, and tuition keeps edging up, and then we also have local property taxes. . . . It's different now. I think the percentage that the state contributes has gone down to maybe eighteen or fourteen percent, so that's got to be made up somewhere. We've not been hiring new positions.

One of Hannah's colleagues at Sunflower, Diane, continued, "budget is always a challenge, and since we get the majority of our general fund budget through assessed valuation, just the fact that property values have gone down, we have seen less budget." The school must make up the budget shortfall somehow, but as Hannah at Sunflower said, "at the very time when people are losing their jobs, you hate to raise tuition. And this is a fairly conservative area, so we haven't raised the mill levy since I've been here. In fact, in some cases, it's gone *down*." Callie, an administrator at Meadowlark, agreed that raising tuition is a difficult decision and causes even more challenges. She frowned, saying

> You look at rising tuition rates—with dwindling state resources, *of course* we've had to raise our tuition. Which makes [paying for college] *more* of a challenge, *especially* for

> students who aren't quite eligible for Pell grants. I worry about that middle sector who don't. And then they take out student loans, and they begin accruing *more* student loans, because *some* of them use those loans to live on while they're in school, as well as to cover tuition, fees, and books.

Bison College's Otto also expressed a desire for better financial assistance for students. He said, "[we need] financial assistance for the students, 'cause many of those students . . . are going to need some type of financial support."

However, colleges don't just need financial aid for students when their budgets decrease. As Nora, an administrator at Bison, said, "we've *got* to have funding that's not tied to grants, necessarily. You know, you need something for a lab that's just day-to-day stuff, but if you don't have the money, you can't afford to do that." Aaron, an advisor at Meadowlark, understands the challenges with "day-to-day stuff," as he illustrated when he said, "we've got some computer technology programs that probably ten years ago were cutting edge, but I think we've allowed that to stagnate a little bit, and we're probably not on the cutting edge, but all of that takes money."

Bison College's Vern summarized the budget worries by saying, "limited number of staff poses some problems because we just don't have the people to do what we would like to do. We don't have enough resources, and on occasion, facilities become a challenge for us." Nora explained the problems with facilities in more detail when she explained, shaking her head,

> If you came to the college and saw the cracks in our walls, and the buildings that haven't been updated since the 1960s, when some of these community colleges were built, then you would see—it's really a challenge when you say we're spending too much money not on education. We're not flying around in jet planes. [She grinned broadly as she added,] I wish!

Alan, also at Bison, agreed, "you know, people talk about government waste. Come on in. See what we're doing. 52,000 credit hours on a budget of [less than ten] million. It's—there's not a lot of waste here." He explained the problem, saying, "we struggle as much as anybody financially because we don't have the economy of scale. Now, we don't have the property valuation or the tax base, either. But, you know, at [less than 5,000] students, we're just not big enough to have full-time people." [Note: exact figures were removed from responses to protect the anonymity of the schools.]

Callie, an administrator at Meadowlark, interrupted to say, "*more money!*" She then raised her voice dramatically to continue, "we need more money! We do exceptional work, and we need more money for it." Alan, an administrator at Bison, explained, "we talk openly that, if you always keep getting the job done, why and how do we need more funding, and why and how do we deserve more funding? At some point, when you push the mule too hard, it starts kicking back. We're getting close to breaking. We're bending back as far as we can go." Andrea, another administrator and instructor at Bison, summed it up like this:

> I think if our government doesn't start sending some money down to education, we're all going to be in a world of hurt. I think budget cuts have really, really hurt us. So that's where we have to be creative and think outside the box and think if we're not going to get funding from the state, then we *can* help our students succeed.

So how can a community college "think outside the box" to keep serving its area with a decreased budget? Tanya, a division chair at Meadowlark, explained, "we look at what are the priorities, and put the dollars and the resources to meet those important needs that we recognize or things that we have to do to help students complete their education." Nora, an administrator at Bison College, agreed, "we're a small college with limited resources; we have to really think through any processes that we change."

One of Nora's colleagues at Bison, Alan, discussed the latest limitations to the college's budget. He seemed a bit disgusted when he said,

> when the recession hit three years ago, the first year our enrollment went up sixteen percent. The second year, our enrollment went up six percent, so over those two years, we saw a 22 percent increase in enrollment, but we didn't see a significant increase in state funding. So we're basically trying to work with more students with the same amount of resources. Makes it a little more difficult.

At Sunflower College, Diane agreed with Alan's assessment, "we've come through the recession, so we see our enrollment go up and our budget go down. There's always that challenge of how do you respond to those additional needs?"

That challenge discourages many educators, as Bison College's Vern explained. "It's really frustrating for *this* college in that there are things that we would *like* to do, that we know we *could* do well, but back to the budget question that you had, there are many things that we simply can *not* initiate because we can't sustain them financially." Nancy, also at Bison, tied these funding woes directly to student completion. She said,

> In order for students to complete, we have to *keep* them here, and that's come down a lot to money, in my mind. We don't have the most up-to-date environment, our buildings are not perfect. A lot of these kids who come here, especially for sports, from other states, from bigger cities, they come from high schools that are more technologically advanced than they're coming to here.

"What Do We Mean by Completion?"

As Nancy said, colleges need to keep the students at the college if students are going to complete. However, the single biggest challenge for community colleges, according to everyone interviewed at all three community colleges, is the definition of completion. Sunflower

College's Andy explained, "the legislators and the general public just look at completion as, just, do you have that AA degree, or that certificate, or whatever, And it's a *lot* more complex than that when you get to community colleges." Andy's colleague, Debbie, explained, "completion doesn't mean the same thing to everybody. And completion doesn't necessarily mean a degree. It could be somebody who's been downsized and now they can act, they had a job, maybe they already had a bachelor's, but they want to change maybe from banking to accounting. So maybe we need to look at how we define completers." At Bison College, Vern agreed that completion means different things. He said,

> I don't have any issue with the concept of completion in and of itself, but what I have personal issue with *some* is that they don't define what they mean by completion, *or* they define it so narrowly that they miss the mission of the community college. Because there are *many* people who come to us whose only purpose is to improve some skill that they want to strengthen, and so then they take one course, or they take two or three courses, and that's *all* they intend to do, so the question is, are they a completer?

Callie, an administrator at Meadowlark College, agreed that students who only need a few courses should be counted as a completer in some way. She said, "what about the working adult, who wants to come back and take one, two, or three courses to upgrade skills? I believe we ought to be issuing a certificate of completion for that as well." Mike, an instructor at Meadowlark, explained in even more detail:

> We're in a unique *regional* location where we have a lot of businesses who are looking—and will *pay*—for additional training for a lot of our students. So *completion* might be the completion of six hours or so of coursework, with nothing associated with that in terms of a degree or certificate. It's something that the businesses need, and we've set

> out to meet that need, and I *know*, in some cases, we've taken it *to* the businesses for that. To me, that's a successful completion for that student.

Vern, an administrator at Bison, explained one reason why "completion" is so difficult to define for community colleges:

> Completion in the occupational world is a little more definitive. Because the programs are unique, specific, and the results are hands-on, the evaluations are so much hands-on, you can either put that motor together or you can't, and it either runs or it doesn't, or you can either take blood pressure or you can't, or you can give a shot or you can't, or you can lay bricks or you can't. It's just that when you get back over into the academic arena, it's a little more subjective, and a little less definitive on what you mean.

At Meadowlark, one instructor agreed that it's difficult to define completion in academics. Reggie commented, "I come from the sales world. Did you *sell* that copier? Do you have a check in your hands? You're good. Did you *not* get a check in your hands? You lose, you're done. The indication here is not cut and dry like that."

Alan, an administrator at Bison College, went into quite a bit of detail in his explanation of the different classifications of "completion."

> There are different definitions of completers. That works better in some fields than in others. [Specialized program] is a good example of that. The completion *is* the associate's degree. That's it. There is no industry-recognized standard for construction trades, they can get a Carpentry I credential coming out of the National Council of Construction Education and Research, after a three-hour course, and as far as I'm concerned, they're a completer. Now, the federal government may not see it that way, and Perkins legislation may not see it that way, so yeah, our more traditional courses, more traditional programs, meaning those two-year degree programs that don't have

> multiple pathways, are not, *cannot* be as responsive as those programs that have multiple entry and exit points, multiple stop points, multiple industry-recognized credentials, because at the end of the day, it's about the student getting the job. And, in certain industries, in certain fields, that credential means more than any certificate, or any associate's degree, or any federal definition of a completer.

As Nora, another administrator at Bison, said earlier, if a student can walk out of a program with a credential, even if that credential is less than a certificate, and make good money, why is that student not a completer?

It's not just the businesses or the occupational students who complete their goals without a certificate or degree, as Mike, an instructor at Meadowlark clarified. "If it's the student from KU who says, well, I'm going to go to Meadowlark this summer and take six hours, and then they're back up there. That met a need, at *some* point, that's a completion process." Abe, in Meadowlark College's enrollment division, agreed.

> They come for the summer from KU, and take classes, and go back to KU in the fall. Or even to take a few courses for a year and then transfer, or even what we call concurrent, I would call it dual credit, high school students. So we're always serving a lot of the population which are *never* gonna graduate from us. So those are *always* a challenge.

Erin, an instructor at Sunflower College, has a slightly different view of this. To her, this is a challenge, but it's also a real service to the students.

> We still have students that come, they're juniors at K-State, and they come back during the summer. They just couldn't get that Western Civ class, and they're gonna take it while they can concentrate on it. They're not interested in completing with us, but we're also offering them excellent teaching, and they know that, and so they know, well, that grad student is not making sense to me, I can't follow them, but I know I can go and take

> the same class at [Sunflower] with somebody who has a master's degree or PhD but is also totally focused on teaching. And so we're still providing a service for those people.

Each of the community colleges in this dissertation have a number of students who enroll before transferring, or who "swirl" between multiple two- and four-year colleges, but who never complete an associate's degree. According to Vito, an advisor at Bison College, "they don't *want* to complete a degree from us—they just wanna get those prerequisites done, and that looks bad on us. But that's not saying that student won't complete it somewhere else, and that we didn't help them get there." However, if the schools don't know where their students have transferred, it makes it more difficult to track completion. As Sunflower College's Ned stated, "now, in four or five years, when they finish their bachelor's degree at that institution, we *might* be able to declare them a success, *if* we knew, one, where that student was, and that there was a report back to us that they completed." Without some sort of tracking system, colleges do not know if and when a student has completed after transferring to another school. Meadowlark College's Mike explained, "completion has always been transfer students. They're meeting their requirements here, and they're going on."

So, occupational students, transfer students, students seeking to improve skills, all enroll at community colleges. As Debbie at Sunflower said, "we have a lot of students who come to the community college and fulfill *their* reason for being here, but not the federal or the state or the gainful employment or whichever definition we want to look at—I do feel a lot of our students do complete or reach their goal, and we can't count them as completers." Debbie's colleague, Andy, spoke animatedly about the problems with definitions.

> No, they're not successes, according to the old IPEDS [Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System] definition. So as long as we can come to an understanding and an agreement on what completion actually is, you know, if we don't do that, then this [he

> knocked on his desk to stress the importance of what he was saying] is just going to be *mired* in anger and confusion and headbutting, whatever. But if we come to an agreement on that definition, then I think it could be *amazingly* successful.

At Meadowlark, one faculty member, Abe, explained that the community college's haven't focused on completion as one of their main missions until now.

> Community colleges serve such a diverse population—we have a *huge* developmental education contingent, and we're serving them. We have English as a Second Language, and those students who are not necessarily here to graduate. The single parent who decides they want to go back to night school, or even distance education. So those people are taking advantage of what the community college has to offer, whether it's a dance class, or a traditional English class, what have you. So graduation rates just has never been our mission until now.

But if so many students enroll to fulfill their personal goals, why are they not considered completers? How are they even in the enrollment lists as seeking a degree? Dora, in enrollment management at Meadowlark College, had a sensible explanation.

> We have students coming out here for maybe nothing more than retraining or enhancing their particular skill. They're not interested in getting a degree, they're not interested in getting a certificate, they're taking a prescribed set of courses that *they* believe they need. But if they don't sign up for degree seeking, then they're not eligible for federal aid that would help them cover their costs, even if that's a low-interest loan, they're not eligible for that because they're not degree seeking. So what they do is they check "degree seeking" so they're eligible for aid, but they—they're—they've finished their courses and they didn't finish a degree and they're out. They completed what *they* set out to do, but according to records, they didn't, so that's the whole nature of the beast.

In other words, definitions of completer are often tied to financial considerations, like so many other challenges community colleges face today.

"If We Do the Right Things for the Right Reasons"

Along with the seven major themes discussed above, there was a general consensus in several other areas. Although these subthemes don't fit well into the larger themes, they add a great deal to our understanding of how community college personnel think and feel about college completion, about an agenda to increase college completion being announced at a White House Summit, and about their attempts to increase college completion both before and after the announcement of the initiative. These subthemes are:

1. Personnel felt their colleges have always spent a good deal of effort on increasing completion—as far as they understood completion, meaning helping the student get to his or her stated goal.
2. Interviewees generally felt they had seen some improvement, however slight, in completion rates after their schools had made changes in response to the White House Summit announcement. This was probably the area with the largest variety of responses, with some people very optimistic, some people very pessimistic, and many in the middle.
3. Staff worry that the push to increase completion rates may make some colleges ask for academic rigor to be decreased. This led many people to wonder if this initiative is truly in the best interests of the students or the colleges.
4. Goals and accountability are necessary to continuing pushing colleges to do better. There is disagreement about who should set those goals, how accountability should be measured, but not on the general idea of striving toward a stated goal and being held accountable for promises not kept.

Callie, an administrator at Meadowlark, may have summarized these subthemes best when she said,

> I think, on my most optimistic days, I believe if we do the right things for the right reasons for our students, the data will take care of itself and the external pressures will diminish. But we've *got* to rally our troops around seeing the value in this focus, and not letting extraneous variables or excuses get in the way.

"We *do* focus on completers." With so many challenges, what are some of the other ways community colleges are trying to respond, especially with a new national challenge to increase completion rates? And do college personnel believe their efforts are working at all? Do they believe they can see a difference in completion rates?

Some interviewees felt that some excellent responses were the smallest and least expensive—"changing the climate at the school" so students hear more about completion, for example, was mentioned by Sunflower's administrator, Andy. Erin, an instructor at Sunflower, commented that "we can do those kinds of simple things to help students understand the system and feel connected." One of the more specific ways one college is "changing the climate," as Andy said, comes from Callie, an administrator at Meadowlark College. She smiled when she said,

> we actually participated in the College Completion Day last Spring, an initiative driven by a number of national organizations, Phi Beta Kappa [an academic honor society], AACC [the American Association of Community Colleges], etc., and we used that as leverage, frankly, to make sure that our faculty and staff are aware of the benefits of marking milestone completion for our students.

In other words, as Callie's colleague at Meadowlark, Reggie, explained, "we *do* focus on completers. I do believe the adage that what gets measured gets the attention, so if we're measuring it, then it's important to somebody."

One small, simple change that has been discussed at all three colleges is eliminating the fee for graduation. As Meadowlark college's Ben commented, "we have a twenty-five dollar graduation fee. We're trying to look into ways of eliminating that barrier. Because some students will say, well, I don't really care if I have a degree from [Meadowlark] or not, so if it's going to cost me $25 just to say I do, naaah, it's not that big a deal to me." Now, obviously, that fee is to graduate and get the diploma, so technically, the student will still have completed their course of studies. Tanya, Ben's colleague in administration at Meadowlark, said faculty and staff need to help "students recognize that completing is the norm, not the exception." Ned at Sunflower College explained it more fully when he said, "Right now, most institutions say you need to apply for graduation. We've got to get out of the mindset of, do you want to graduate. As opposed to, you *have* graduated. And tell people that."

One very specific change concerning graduation one administrator at Sunflower made could make a big difference. Debbie shook her head laughing as she said,

> they didn't complete the graduation form—I know this sounds crazy, but we started handing the graduation form out in class. So we're gonna give you the form to fill out, and *we* will turn it in to Student Services for you. They didn't know they had to fill out a form indicating completion! . . . And faculty may say, you know, it should be their responsibility. Well, yes, it *should* be their responsibility, I would agree with you. *However*, they're not doing it. We can. So, you know, we're gonna make this change, and we're gonna do it.

Ben, an administrator and instructor at Meadowlark College, had a reason why such a "crazy" idea might bring big benefits for very little effort. He seemed disgusted when he complained about current students.

> I think it's a change in culture. We've had this concept that our students need to be accountable for themselves and take care of themselves, but I think with the students we have now—[he paused and shook his head]. Many students need to be guided and need help. It's the college's place to do that, absolutely, especially when you look at the range of students that we have. I mean, we have them all—we have really excellent, high-level students, and then we have the really low-level students with all kinds of barriers, so it's not a one-size at all.

Another simple change that seems likely to produce good results was mentioned by an advisor at Bison College, Vito. He said,

> instead of having tutors that the student would call to try to set up an appointment with, we have tutors at a set time and a set place, so the student knows that they're there at the set times, and it's not just an hour here or there, it's a block of time, so I think this really helps. It's hard enough to get a student in *once*. So if we can get them in once [for advising] and they want a tutor, I can say well, let's go walk over and see what you can hook up with them *right now*. So *that* has helped a lot.

Although it seems that the simplest changes all involve a good deal of student hand-holding, that sort of involvement and engagement may be just what students need to stay in college and complete their certificate or degree.

Several interviewees commented that one reason certificate completion seems to be higher than degree completion is because of the level of individual "hand-holding." Vito, an advisor at Bison, commented that there are simply fewer students per program in the

occupational programs. "I think it's sheer numbers. We'll even print out their schedules, go try to find 'em in class, but three hundred students is hard to track down instead of twenty or thirty that we might have in other departments. So I think *that* probably has a factor to play with completion rates." Hannah, who works closely with academic affairs at Sunflower College, agreed. "Our career programs do a much better job of tracking the students, they may know who all of them are, so they get that additional encouragement, or push, to complete . . ." Her colleague, Andy, a Sunflower administrator, continued, "I think they work with their students on an individual basis, because of the nature of their programs, and help them succeed at a better rate." Ned, in student services at Sunflower, summarized the difference by saying,

> I think in career, it is more content- and person-based, whereas with transfer, leading to baccalaureate, it's more numbers-based, and when I say numbers, I'm talking about, you identify what the possibilities are, and you work with the institutions to provide articulation agreements to address the majority of the people, not necessarily *all* of the students. For career, I really think they try to do individually, everybody.

In other words, the "hand-holding" that many interviewees discussed as a new response to help increase completion rates has probably been a regular part of career and technical education for some time. If a college accepts only thirty students into a specialized certificate program, but enrolls three hundred new students in the general education area, it's going to be much easier for the faculty and staff of the certificate program to keep an eye on and advise their students.

Another way the colleges are keeping an eye on students who might have some challenges is that two of the three colleges have hired a retention specialist. Aaron, an advisor at Meadowlark College, explained, "in the past, there was no specific way for students on probation or suspension, no specific steps they had to go through, they could come and enroll like anybody else. We might limit the number of hours, but now those people are funneled through that

retention person." However, hiring a new staff person takes money, and the current budgets at most community colleges preclude very much new hiring. College personnel are trying to find other changes that will help increase retention and completion rates.

In some cases, the colleges are making changes that might, at first glance, seem to be in opposition to the attempts to hold their students' hands through the college processes. Callie, an administrator at Meadowlark College, discussed one example:

> We've eliminated late enrollment. So, if a student wants to enroll in a course that has already met once, the student is unable to do that. And so we don't leave those students hanging dry, one of the byproducts is something I'm really excited about. We're expanding our scheduling options. We've always had the typical sixteen-week courses and the eight-week courses, but now we're developing some ten- and twelve-week classes, so we don't have to say to the student, we're sorry, you're going to have to wait eight weeks, or an entire semester. We can say to that student, *you* can enroll in this set of classes, that starts in just several days, or a few weeks, and in the meantime, let's make sure you're academically prepared to be successful in those courses.

Debbie, an administrator and instructor at Sunflower College, stated that Sunflower has made the same change. "We no longer do late enrollment on this campus. It's causing students to actually think about their education, think about their educational plan, and being proactive rather than reactive."

Debbie mentioned another change at Sunflower, related to helping students think more proactively about their educational goals. She discussed the changes to the counseling/advising department:

> It used to be walk-in only. Now there's a small walk-in window, but for the most part, if you want to come to school, you need to make an appointment with the counselor. I

> really think that was a direct response [to the completion initiative], because if students aren't prepared, if we're a second thought, or an afterthought, or it's just well, I think I want to go to school, chances are they won't complete.

Diane, an administrator who works closely with workforce development courses at Sunflower College, mentioned another simple change to help students complete. She said, some changes were "kind of operational things, like instead of offering a class for sixteen weeks, for three days a week, you know that doesn't fit a lot of people's schedules. So we offer a lot of online classes, and you know, maybe block scheduling." She theorized that if you can make classes more available to students without making them more expensive, perhaps more students can complete. Her colleague in administration, Andy, agreed. "*We* need to be more flexible in ways that we offer education, also." He continued, knocking on his desk for emphasis, "we need to relook at forms of teaching. Of disseminating the information." One of Bison College's administrators, Nora, had a similar view when she said, "they've seen wow, this content is *not* working for us, we're going to have to teach this differently, students are not getting this."

"We *have* seen some improvement." Colleges have made several changes in response to the challenge to increase completion rates. Do people feel any of those changes are helping at all? I did not ask people for exact numbers, because I wanted to hear their reactions, their feelings, their perceptions from their daily work, on whether students were completing at a higher rate than before. Responses are mixed, with some interviewees feeling the college has already seen significant growth in completion numbers, while others believe there's really nothing the college can do to increase completion. These mixed responses were no more optimistic or pessimistic at any one college; personnel at all three colleges had varied reactions to their college's attempts to increase completion rates. At Sunflower College, Andy said,

> I'm not sure we are [increasing completion rates]. Our completion rates have been just a flat line for as long as the college has existed, which says to me, it will be very difficult to change those completion rates, unless you do something such as—create a transfer certificate, that if you had that in the beginning, you'd still have a flat line. I'm not sure that's what the community college mission is.

Andy's colleague Diane was slightly more optimistic. She answered my question, "is the college increasing completion rates?" with, "not as well as we should. We have a lot of work to do. But we *have* seen some improvement." Another Sunflower response came from Hannah, an administrator. She said, "I think we're probably doing average. I don't know that we're excelling, but I think we have some challenges in place that we don't have any control over. I believe that it *is* a priority for us. We are conscious, we are aware, we are working on it." Sunflower's student services person, Ned, summed up the general consensus by saying "I think we're making micro steps, and those micro steps will at some point in time add up to a coordinated effort to do it."

Bison College's interviewees had similar responses. Otto, a trustee, frowned and said "hmmm" a bit before finally answering, "I'm sure we're making an effort to do that, because we realize we need to do that, and we *want* to do that." An administrator at Bison, Alan, was more direct. He said,

> I know that here, our graduation numbers have been relatively stable, sliding a bit perhaps, over the past five or six years. I think for us personally, it's a challenge for us to be able to expect significant numbers or growth, but that has to do primarily with our geographic location, our draw, our pool, from which we can draw . . ."

He continued with a specific challenge for Bison:

> I think you've got to look at, by what barometer. We have high numbers of program students already, which means we're passing a lot of students already, which means it's hard to get any more students in the completer programs, because they're already in the completer programs, so it's hard to move that dial.

Where some colleges have a larger population in their area, or more businesses who need specific programs that might add completion numbers to the college's bottom line, Bison is very limited in what they can offer and to whom.

Meadowlark College's administrator, Callie, explained that she feels retention is key to completion. She laughed, saying,

> That's the first step, isn't it? You've got to get them back from year to year before you can talk about completion! One of our key performance indicators was in our strategic plan—*two* of them—are retention rates, Fall to Fall, and completion rates. We're a little bit above the national average in terms of completion rates—*degree* completion rates. Okay, so what? That's still abysmally low—26, 27 percent, it needs to be higher. I feel it's nudging, maybe. We're *slowly* moving the needle.

Callie's colleague, Oliver the trustee, was not as confident as Callie. He said, "I personally have to give us kind of a C+. Lots of effort, but I don't know that I'm seeing the needle move yet." Ben, an administrator, was even less positive, when he said, "I don't think we've done enough. And the things we have in place now aren't gonna do it. As far as I'm concerned."

"…They can't do what they were set up to do." Interviewees not only had mixed feelings about the results so far, they also had mixed feelings about whether this goal is even the best idea. Some participants worried about how lower funding levels were affecting their missions. Completion is difficult to define, community colleges have widely varied missions,

and the communities served by the colleges have widely different populations and needs. For example, Andy, an administrator at suburban Sunflower College remarked,

> [this agenda] is disturbing to me on a couple of levels. First, the Kansas Board of Regents is going to set these outcome metrics. We know that in Independence, Kansas, or in Coffeyville, Kansas, or in Chanute, Kansas, those community colleges have a great completion rate. They don't have a large community surrounding them where the students can get good jobs or have a number of universities saying we'll give you big scholarship money to come see us. And, unfortunately, when initiatives like this happen, you're all lumped together.

He shook his head with a wry expression as he continued, "you know, this is embarrassing, but it is not unusual in urban-suburban settings. Students can just go new places."

At Bison College, Alan the administrator said, "it's hard to argue that you don't need some sort of measure for success. It's a lot more complicated than most people think. . . It's not a simple, straightforward, you get a degree or you don't get a degree." The complicated nature of the initiative and goal frustrated Alan. He exclaimed,

> We have so many contradictory indicators coming out from the Feds. We want completers, but we're cutting Pell. We want completers, but we're cutting summer Pell. We want completers, but we're cutting subsidized loans. It's absolutely ludicrous, the contradictory messages that we're getting.

Further frustrating Alan is the fact that he understands the need for accountability. He said, "philosophically, I have no problem with what the *accountability* movement's trying to do. I have problems with contradictory messages, and I have problems with boxing us in when they don't understand what they're actually writing in regulations or legislation."

Aaron, in advising at Meadowlark College, is also frustrated by regulatory or legislative measures. He said, "I think we're *so slow* responding to the needs around our area, and that's partially our fault, it's partially the state's fault, it's partially a national problem, because of the hoops that you have to jump through and that sort of thing." Sunflower's administrator, Andy, agreed. "Just recently, the U.S. Department of Education, students are going to lose financial aid if there's not a certain percentage of completers, completion in that [particular] program." Since no one seems to have a widely-accepted definition of completion, that new regulation is adding a great deal of frustration and stress to the daily lives of many community college personnel. Otto, a trustee at Bison, put it this way, "we have to be responsive to the needs of a community. If you put all these policies on community colleges, then you restrict them so they can't do what they are set up to do."

One of the things community colleges were "set up to do" was provide education for their community members who might not be eligible to attend a university. As Callie, an administrator at Meadowlark, said, "at the community college, you know the hallmark *is* accessibility. I don't want to throw the baby out with the bathwater, and while completion *is* important, let's not preclude access." Callie was not alone in her concern. Bison's Alan said, "I'm afraid access is gonna get lost," and Sunflower's Remy said, "open access hasn't changed." Mike, an instructor at Meadowlark, summarized the problem with open access:

> We can't select the students who come into our class. If they want to use a business model like that, and say, well, is this school *financially* solvent, based on completion rates, then I'm going to hand-pick the students. Just like a manager would go out and hire the right people, because *those* are the people who will get the job done.

Not only is open access in danger of being lost, but Vern, in student services at Bison College, is concerned that academic rigor may be lost as well. He worried,

> For the sake of completing, and having a higher number, I hope we don't sacrifice quality and learning for simply a number that says we have X number more this year than we had last year. That's important. But it's also I think important that [students] are equally as successful or *more* successful than their predecessors in terms of being able to deal with real-world situations. . .

Diane, in workforce development at Sunflower College, agreed. She raised an eyebrow and shrugged as she said, "I can get people through to completion if I undermine some of my rigor, or I change—you know, there are things that colleges could do, if [completion] is tied to funding." At Sunflower, Ned in student services said, "we go where the money goes. 'Cause right now, state money is not there, local money is less, you can raise tuition but that keeps putting the burden on the student, so then you look for the other source, but if the other source is grant money, and/or state *incentive* money, then that's what you start planning your programs for." Nancy, in academics at Bison, took that idea even further: "I think there might be new programs that might not get started up that might be important programs for this area."

With all the disagreement about this initiative and how it is being presented to colleges and regulated by state and federal governing bodies, the worst for many interviewees is the fear that their colleges will lose money if they don't reach a benchmark completion number. Vito, in Bison College's academic advising office, said, "I think whenever there's money involved, and whenever there's things *like* your funding will be cut if that doesn't happen, is *not* a good motivator." Mike, a general education instructor at Meadowlark College, explained,

> If this agenda is based upon funding ultimately, then I think they need to call it something else. Because it's basically crippling the horse you're trying to make a person ride. If you're in that area and you have a school where just because of cultural factors, or other social factors, you've got students who aren't successful, your funding goes down, and

> there's no hope for you to *improve* whether or not you have really great programs or really great people doing the teaching.

One of Mike's instructor colleagues at Meadowlark explained that tying funding to accountability measures can cause colleges to choose which programs to support.

> In the state of Kansas, the governor's initiative to foster technological "carrots" to community colleges has been quite popular. So when the governor says he's gonna funnel money towards programs which are arraigned in that certificate area, we are certainly pushing the numbers *hard* in that area.

However, when done well, funding incentives can be useful. Mike at Meadowlark explained:

> We can't make funding the kind of buggy whip. I definitely think they could use it as a carrot, like what are schools doing in an innovative way, to make these things happen. So then it's not so much a "do this or else," but "hey! You did this! We're gonna give you this!" That makes people work *harder* and not work in terms of complaisance.

"There's no incentive, there's no stick." However much disagreement there was concerning this particular initiative, interviewees agreed that schools need goals and accountability measures. Alan, an administrator at Bison College, slapped the table for emphasis as he exclaimed, "if you don't have a completion push, or a complet-*or* push, which are two different things, there's no reason, rhyme, or rationale to analyze the degrees and certificates *and* credentials you offer." He continued, "without these initiatives, there's no impetus, there's no incentive, there's no stick—to cause folks to review, analyze, reconsider." In Sunflower College's student services office, Ned asked just what we should be analyzing with these goals: "what's the dream, how do you get there, and give it a face, as far as the destination. What is it that we're trying to do?" Iris, who works in enrollment management at Bison, said, "we need

goals to help students get where they need to be, and accountability, accountability for the community colleges . . ."

One instructor at Meadowlark College, Reggie, said, "I'm a big believer in targets and scoreboards. I think it's good that it's focused and that we talk about it, or our focus will shift and slide and we'll fall down." Dora, in Meadowlark's enrollment management office, reminded me that "we really need to try to be moving these students towards a degree completion or a certificate completion—not just because there's somebody out there saying you should, but because it's better for the students." An administrator at Meadowlark, Callie, took it even further when she said,

> My worry is that we'll lose sight of why we're doing this. Let's make it a sustained initiative that is in the best interests of our students. . . . I don't want it to be a sexy initiative that sounds good on paper that lasts only for a nanosecond in the decades of time.

Nora, an academic administrator at Bison College, agreed, "completion is important in the sense of [students] getting what they need out of the college."

Summary

That's the true consensus—everyone interviewed believed they are doing their best for the students, helping students get what they most need. An administrator at Sunflower College, Remy, summarized his goals for changing American education:

> After all is said and done, it's really about helping students, it's not about me, or our faculty, or someone, whoever's sitting in the White House, or even whoever's leading the Gates Foundation, it should be about how do we help people find the best solution. . . .I would try to recapture that mindset, around student success, because it shouldn't be about

> the college, or around someone's politics, or someone's legacy. What we do should be around what's in the best interests of students.

Oliver, a trustee at Meadowlark, wanted the public to understand, "I don't think [students'] time here is *wasted*, even if they don't complete, if they get a little bit of anchoring in college-level coursework, then they've learned something . . ." One of Meadowlark College's instructors, Abe, continued with this idea. He said,

> I don't think completion rates is the right answer, at the community college. I think numbers in classes, butts in the seats so to speak, I think *that*'s the important number, *not* did somebody graduate, because I think that's a false consciousness, to say that a certificate or a degree is the be all, end all. Education is lifelong. This is a step.

Community college personnel understand the need for accountability measures, but Sunflower's Remy explained their real mission—through all their mission statements, all their published values, what community colleges do is "take students based on where they join us, and whether it's through developmental education programs, or the student comes in college ready, we'll meet you where you are, and we'll get you to the end goal."

CHAPTER FIVE

DISCUSSION

The purpose of this dissertation was to identify how community colleges perceive, interpret, and respond to the challenge to increase college completion rates announced at the White House Summit on Community Colleges in late 2010. This study attempted to determine what challenges community colleges have faced as well as what actions they have undertaken in response to the initiative. The goal of increasing completion rates at community colleges was announced at a time of severe cuts to budgets at all levels of education; this dissertation attempted to discover how college personnel were balancing these disparate pressures on their missions and daily activities.

The sample for this study was purposefully selected from among community colleges in Kansas. A multi-case study allowed for better understanding of how different colleges might perceive and face the challenges presented by the initiative to increase college completion rates. Three different colleges were chosen based on their location (urban, suburban, or rural) and resources (high, medium, or low), and their presidents were contacted. Although one college did not choose to participate, another college president was contacted and consented to participate. The participating college presidents then helped make contacts and create a group of interview participants at each college. Transcribed, audio-recorded semi-structured interviews, written observations, and college documents were utilized to triangulate the data and provide validity and reliability. Each college president was provided the opportunity to review the findings of the study to avoid misinterpretation and to lend trustworthiness and credibility.

Summary of Findings

This study sought to answer the following questions: (1) How do a selection of Kansas community colleges, as organizations, interpret the initiative to increase completion rates? What does the initiative mean to them in a practical sense? Is accountability part of the initiative for them? (2) How are community colleges responding to how they understand the latest initiative? What are the specific actions, if any, they've taken since Fall 2010? (3) What are obstacles, such as lack of resources or political power struggles in the college or community, to responding? (4) How are interpretation and response affected by Kansas Board of Regents, legislative, U.S. Board of Education, accreditation, or local policies?

In other words, do community colleges, as organizations, see the initiative as an opportunity or a threat? How will community colleges increase graduation rates? Are they attempting to enhance graduation rates, or transfer rates, or both? What specific actions are they taking in making these attempts? How are they dealing with demands for increasing accountability?

One difficulty found through this study is that community colleges face an identity crisis. With widely varied missions such as access for all, providing both transfer and vocational education, and providing for their communities' needs through workforce development and cultural programs, community college personnel cannot easily see a way to balance their missions while proving their worth through accountability measures such as increasing completion rates.

How Do a Selection of Kansas Community Colleges Interpret the Current Initiative to Increase College Completion Rates?

The interviewees, including presidents, vice presidents, deans, directors, faculty members, and staff in student services, enrollment management, and similar positions, all agreed

that this initiative came at a bad time. A common complaint was that the goal might be a good one, but without extra funding to support it, it might be impossible. College presidents especially, because of their position as leader of the college and liaison to legislators and the community, were disappointed that more funding did not come with the challenge to increase college completion rates.

All three college presidents and most of the other administrators worried that important programs might get cut if funding did not increase. With the new acceptance of certificates in overall "completion" rates, some extra funding may be in sight for the colleges. According to the Kansas Board of Regents (2012), in January 2012, Governor Brownback announced a plan to increase funding for career and technical education. The new funding system focuses on high school students who are earning college credits in technical courses, but several interviewees were hopeful that this is the beginning of better funding for all technical programs. However, funding is still at a low level for community colleges across their programs, and no new funding is currently planned for transfer education, still a major component of every community college's mission. College leaders in particular worried about their schools' missions changing over time to focus only on those programs with higher completion rates, or to focus only on those students with a higher likelihood of completing an associate's degree or vocational certificate program. Faculty and advisors, however, were most worried that completion initiatives might not take into account the fact that colleges remain open access—only specific programs such as nursing are able to "handpick" the students most likely to succeed.

With these challenges, it was not surprising to find disagreement over whether the stated goal of five million new college graduates by 2020 was feasible, although most people agreed "shooting for the moon" was generally a good idea. Interviewees had mixed feelings about the success of their college in increasing retention and completion rates; everyone agreed they

needed to do more to help students succeed. As shown in Figure 1 in the Introduction, Kansas community colleges are above the national average for completion rates. Interviewees agreed, even if their school in particular or Kansas in general is above the national average, it is not enough. As "Dora" at "Meadowlark" College said, degree completion is "better for the students." They all want to do more to help students succeed.

However, as discussed in detail in Chapter Four, the definition of "student success," is problematical. This is in keeping with research discussed in Chapter Two, especially Basken (2008) and Ewell (2011), who both explain that commonly used statistics are often not very useful where community colleges are concerned. For example, Ewell (2011) states, "an average graduation rate of 22 percent at a given college may vary from more than two-thirds for well-prepared and application-screened nursing or allied health students to less than 19 percent for undeclared students" (p. 29). Implications are that actual numbers vary so widely among a single community college's offerings that an overall "completion rate" may mean very little. Even so, all interviewees in this dissertation agreed that some measure of accountability is important, so colleges can show their students, prospective students, employees, communities, and governing bodies that they are doing what they've promised they would do. As discussed in Chapter Two, accountability is here to stay, and most educators are agreeable to having standards or measurements to show the college is being responsible with its funding and missions.

None of the interviewees felt that having some sort of measure or standard was the problem—it is the definition and process of what to measure, how to measure it, and who is measuring for whom that cause the difficulties for college personnel. None of the interview participants want some legislator who doesn't have a background in community college education to define these measures or standards for them; they worry about a purely bureaucratic process in which they have little or no voice and over which they have little or no control.

In all three cases in this dissertation, college personnel, especially the presidents, interpreted the 2010 White House Summit challenge in a *political* framework, according to Bolman and Deal (1997). The authors explain that the *political* framework is common where resources are scarce (p. 186), and college administrators voiced concern that necessary programs such as developmental education are already losing funding. Since many important programs, developmental education in particular, do not currently count towards completion numbers, administrators were anxious about how they can act as liaisons or even buffers between their colleges and legislators or other policymakers to keep funding for their communities' needs. The college presidents, especially, worried that they would have to push back hard against politicians and governing bodies who would see the completion initiative as an excuse to defund important programs that have relatively low completion numbers.

How Are Community Colleges Responding to the White House Summit Challenge to Increase Completion?

For the most part, based on the data gathered here, the colleges are not responding in any structured or concerted way. The interviewees responded that they have always tried to increase completion rates, but there were very few new college initiatives, programs, or other efforts in direct response to this challenge. There were no campus-wide meetings at any of the colleges to discuss the White House Summit, there have been no memos or announcements or other distinct efforts to create an agenda to find ways to boost completion numbers. Presidents, other administrators, faculty, and staff all believe the colleges need to have better funding, and they agree that completion numbers should be better, but they seem paralyzed by the identity crisis caused by their widely varied missions. For the most part, no real solutions have been proposed by college leaders or other interviewees. There seems a strong disconnect between the national

push for completion at the community college level and what the colleges are actually doing to increase those numbers.

When there is a definite response, community colleges show a bureaucratic reaction (Bolman and Deal, 1997) to the initiative to increase completion rates. They are attempting to develop new processes for measuring and reporting certificate and degree completion, gainful employment, and student engagement and retention so they have more control over how they show an increase in completion. However, since money is tight and little to no increase in budget is expected for the foreseeable future, colleges cannot afford to hire new staff to help manage the increased assessment and reporting burdens. Without new staff, reporting any measures to any governing body is a challenge for all three colleges. In this way, all three colleges are also attempting to respond to the challenge to increase completion in a *human resources* framework, as defined by Bolman and Deal (1997).

The colleges would like to hire and train more staff to measure and report completion rates to governing bodies, and also to increase student services to help retain more students to completion. The general area of student services also fits within Bolman and Deal's (1997) *human resources* framework, since it is involved with providing for personal needs and building better relationships among students and staff, so attempting to increase retention and completion through needs-based student services such as developmental education, tutoring, or advising, is also a *human resources*-based response.

Colleges are also attempting to balance the needs of the community with the need to have higher completion numbers. Some programs are necessary for the surrounding community, but have historically low numbers of completers—for example, one president mentioned that a community will always need skilled construction workers, but there is no single certificate program or certifying exam in construction trades. Many students take very few hours and then

leave for good jobs in the construction sector. This problem illustrates Beach's (2011) discussion of the reasons why community colleges offer contract training, although in a certificate or credit-based curriculum. He believes contract training is important for community colleges to show their responsiveness to their community (p. 54). In this particular case, the college president wondered how his school was supposed to show an increase in completion if many programs like construction trades made up its curriculum. He didn't feel he would be responding to his college's mission to serve the community if he tried to replace those programs with higher-completing programs, but he isn't a good leader for his college if his college loses funding based on completion numbers.

Part of the balance between serving community needs and exhibiting increased accountability was shown by cutting programs that are no longer needed. It has historically been difficult to dismiss a program, even if very few students enrolled in it, because the community thought it was important for the college to keep it. The budgeting shortfalls help administrators convince their constituents that certain programs are not worth continuing. Although this can be helpful, many interviewees also expressed concern that new programs might not get started because of lack of funding. One community college mission is to serve its community; participants worried that important programs and the purchase of updated equipment for ongoing programs might be cancelled, thus keeping the college from completing its community service mission. In this case, the *political* framework (Bolman and Deal, 1997) within which the colleges must function includes the governing bodies such as the Kansas Board of Regents and state legislators who make funding decisions based on their own interpretations and agendas concerning higher education. This political structure then makes it difficult for the colleges to manage their *human resources*-based mission of providing community services, as well as their

structural goals of managing their facilities, technology, and environment (Bolman and Deal, 1997).

What Obstacles or Challenges Do Community College Personnel Perceive in Responding to the Current Completion Initiative?

The number one challenge perceived, as mentioned above, is financial. Every single interviewee mentioned that their college was doing as much as it possibly could without an increase in its budget. The State of Kansas has drastically reduced expenditures in higher education over the past ten years, Congress has reduced eligibility for some financial aid, and property tax values, on which community colleges rely, have gone sharply down. At the same time, because many students return to college after they've lost work, colleges find it difficult to increase tuition rates. Tuition has increased, but study participants worried that education was being priced out of the reach of too many students. And, without more money, colleges cannot increase extra-curricular programs like tutoring, clubs, or other options that help keep students engaged, help students succeed, and ultimately, help increase completion numbers. However, the general response to this challenge is not "we can't" but "we'll keep trying"—trying to be more efficient, trying to find ways to help students without extra cost, trying to find new funding from grants and other sources. These three colleges expressed doubt that they could do much more than they are currently doing, but all are willing to keep trying their best. In this case, although funding is controlled through the *political* framework (Bolman and Deal, 1997), the colleges are mainly responding in both a *human resources* and a *symbolic* way—they are attempting to meet the needs of their students (*human resources*) by changing the culture of the college (*symbolic*). Respondents at all three schools discussed how they were trying to change the culture into one where completion is expected, the "norm" for all students. Even rituals or ceremonies, major components of the *symbolic* framework, have been created when colleges

celebrate milestone completions by adding certificates for developmental education, 30-hour transfer, and similar achievements.

Another important obstacle to increasing completion numbers is the increased need for developmental education. Several interviewees in this study were disturbed by the large percentage of students with high school diplomas who need increased levels of remedial work in reading, writing, and arithmetic. Many respondents discussed how high school graduates in their community colleges were not even reading at the sixth-grade level. Developmental education is a well-known predictor of non-completion. As discussed in Chapter Two, Bailey (2008) showed that roughly forty percent of community college students who did not take any developmental classes graduated within eight years and fourteen percent transferred to a four-year college without completing a degree at the community college. However, of those students who did take developmental coursework, less than a quarter completed a degree or certificate within eight years of enrolling (p. 14). With those numbers, it's no wonder why interviewees responded with dismay to their perception that developmental education needs have grown rapidly in the past ten years or so.

One major challenge to increasing completion rates voiced by every person interviewed is the definition of completion itself. The U.S. Department of Education may define completion one way, perhaps with completion of an actual certificate or degree, while an accrediting body may define completion another way, perhaps by transfer or certification exam, independent of the number of course hours completed. When states, the federal government, financial aid lenders, accrediting bodies, and other colleges all define completion differently, it makes it very difficult for community colleges to know where and how to set their goals. The colleges accept the need for accountability measures, as discussed in Chapter Two, but cannot agree on what to measure, or how, or when.

The colleges have to figure out the *political* (Bolman and Deal, 1997) framework being used by policy-makers to define and set their goals, and then they have to figure out a response, usually using multiple frameworks, as seen above. Since community colleges have always had widely varied missions, many respondents voiced concern that some missions, like access or community service, might be decreased or dropped in favor of increasing certificate or degree completion rates. Many people exclaimed that if the college will be funded partly based on their completion numbers, degree programs would probably become much more selective. Certain programs, like nursing or dental hygiene, are already quite selective, but interviewees worried that even historically accessible programs, such as welding or construction trades, might limit access as well. These responses would be *politically* framed (Bolman and Deal, 1997), but would deny the *human resources* framework of the community college mission to serve their communities and provide education for all eligible students. Limiting access or becoming more selective would also change the *symbolic* framework of the community college culture of inspiration as well as the *structural* framework of the policies used by community colleges for over one hundred years.

Community College Accountability Now

One important obstacle to responding to the current initiative to increase completion rates is creating standard accountability measures. As seen in Chapter Two, accountability has been around for a very long time. Community colleges have been accountable to local and state governing bodies for funding for some time, they are not yet accustomed to measuring completion, by any definition. Community colleges have publicly bemoaned the fact that they've been on the periphery of U.S. higher education, but that place, out of the public spotlight, has allowed them to create their own standards for measuring student success to fit their own and their communities' needs. Now that President Obama has issued a public challenge to them,

community colleges are struggling to figure out how they can best respond. The Voluntary Framework of Accountability, as discussed in Chapter Two, is a start.

Limitations of the Study

As is typical with case study research, because of the small sample size, results will not be generalizable to the larger population of community colleges in the United States. However, because the three colleges were selected for their variety in size, resource availability, and service area, the fact that the results were quite uniform should make this dissertation useful to many community colleges, especially those in Kansas.

The major limitation of this study was the time frame. Interview studies take a great amount of time, and because the researcher had just accepted a job 1200 miles away from her home in eastern Kansas, interviews had to be scheduled and completed in a relatively short amount of time. All community college personnel the researcher hoped to meet were available, but no regent at the Kansas Board of Regents responded to repeated requests for participation. Therefore, the desired perceptions of someone from a regulatory body are missing from this study.

An unanticipated challenge was the lack of verifiable college data for the school years following the White House Summit. First, the researcher discovered that there had been legal action against the gainful employment regulations (Information for Financial Aid Professionals, online), so colleges were in a holding pattern—they continued to gather data, but it was not in any reportable format. Research offices were waiting to discover exactly what data they would need to report and in what format they would present it. Secondly, even completion data for certificate and degree programs was still being gathered. All three colleges have older data published online, but there is no comparison data available to see if current programs to increase completion are working. None of the three had graduation or certificate completion rates for

2011 and on, after the specific challenge to increase completion rates was issued in the White House Summit. These numbers were shown in the figure and tables in the Introduction in Chapter One.

Finally, researcher bias must be addressed. I fell in love with the entire mission statements of community colleges in general many years ago—the idea that anyone can enroll in a class at their local community college and either take that one class or go on to complete a degree or certificate is, to my mind, a noble one. When that mission of access is coupled with the missions to provide cultural enhancement to a community and to provide general education for transfer, along with the variety of other missions most community colleges attempt to serve, the community college seems one of the most democratic institutions ever formed. They are still institutions of higher education, governed by legislative bodies and a great deal of bureaucratic policy that often seems to be nonsensical, but community colleges serve an important place in U.S. higher education. That being said, it was easy for me to choose to study community colleges. I wanted to know more about the challenges they face, and I wanted to know more about their reactions, as organizations, to "proclamations from on high," such as President Obama's challenge to increase completion rates. However, I believe my personal passion for the community college's place in their communities and in higher education led to better rapport with interview subjects. My rapport with the people who took the time to meet with me then led to an increased vigilance to report their words and perceptions to the best of my ability. When interviewees reported disgust for certain policies, or complained of procedures they thought were not right, I tried to report those just as much as when participants praised their schools' cultures, structures, and daily processes.

Conclusions

There is little doubt that community colleges have an important place in their communities and in higher education. They have survived many changes in mission, focus, and public perception over their one hundred-plus years in existence, and have often been praised for the services and education they provide. However, community colleges have also often been condemned for the small number of students who complete the degree they defined as their goal when first enrolling at the community college. As this study has shown through the review of literature and the interviews, some of this condemnation stems from misconceptions and problematic definitions of completion, but not all of it. Most community colleges have a very low number of completers, even when the definition of "completion" is expanded to include students who transfer without a degree or certificate, students who gain employment in their field without a degree or certificate, and students who never intended to take more than a course or two. Retention rates at community colleges must be addressed; they serve a population of students that faces a wide variety of challenges to remaining in school. Colleges need more advisors to help students better understand their career options, colleges need more and better methods for teaching developmental education so students complete their pre-college courses and continue into college-level work, and colleges need more resources to provide those things as well as student services such as daycare, block scheduling, and online classes. The biggest challenge for community colleges may be in finding ways to better define completion and then track students to assess their completion.

Recommendations for Community College Policymakers

Although this dissertation was limited in scope, there was marked agreement among the three colleges concerning the challenges they face. There was also consensus in what the interviewees perceived as needs for the colleges to provide an excellent education to their

students. With this in mind, policymakers should be made aware of these challenges and needs. Especially now that so many community college students must take developmental education, policy makers need to help colleges and K-12 education providers build bridges so students receive the education they need to find gainful employment and participate as citizens in their communities. As Bragg and Durham opine, it is imperative that policy makers recognize the large numbers of students taking developmental education at community colleges; community college "completion" rates cannot be compared fairly with four-year colleges that offer fewer developmental courses (2012, p. 113).

The nation must also decide if access is still as important as President Obama stated in both 2009 and 2011. Many universities have become more selective, leaving community colleges as the only opportunity for many students to continue education past high school. These students are the least likely to graduate, but if community colleges continue to serve them through their open-access policies, then those schools will be considered as unsuccessful by completion agenda standards. Do we believe students who cannot succeed without developmental education should not attend college, or do we believe higher education is a public good worth providing for in federal, state, and county budgets?

Budgets may be tight across all levels of education, but better communication among the various providers and policy makers will allow states and schools make the best use of the funds they have for education. In addition, Jenkins (2011) explained that incentives for improvement should be built into base budget funding for schools. He believes such incentives could pay colleges for the number of students completing a course, instead of by student enrollment. Another suggestion would be to pay colleges which are able to speed up the rate at which students achieve key milestones such as completing their first college-level math course or earning a certain number of credits within a specific time frame. Both these intermediate

milestones, Jenkins explains, are associated with higher degree and certificate completion (p. 26). Jenkins' suggestions seem like reasonable recommendations for budget decision makers at any level.

This researcher does not pretend to be an expert in politics or large-scale budgeting, but further specific recommendations for various policymakers are suggested, based on this dissertation's findings.

Specific Recommendations for Community College Policymakers

1. Continue to look for student- and staff-friendly ways to keep budget costs down, such as block scheduling, green initiatives, and online coursework.
2. Continue to build communication bridges among two- and four-year colleges and K-12 education to enhance student readiness and completion rates.
3. Continue to pursue grants and other funding to help make up for funding decreases.
4. Build and present a strong definition of higher education as a public good, in response to current trends, in state government especially, that weaken public support for colleges.
5. Publicize your students' and college's success stories to build support for your college in the community and the state. Show your community and the governing bodies that make policy decisions for you what your successes look like.
6. Most importantly, define yourselves. Community colleges need to collectively decide on the definitions of completion, access, and other pertinent measurements, and then they, as the experts, need to promote those definitions to their communities and legislative and accrediting agencies. As Mary Spilde, AAC board chair and president of Lane Community College in Oregon said, "I would rather shape and influence what happens to us rather than leave it up to somebody else. We've got to shape it so it doesn't end up being a centralized, federalized system we don't want" (Moltz, 2010b, p. 2). If the

colleges don't act, they will find themselves acted upon. Community colleges are currently in the national spotlight, so it behooves their leadership to articulate their missions and promote standards of accountability they believe best measure the success of their students and programs.

Specific Recommendations for State Policymakers

1. Find better ways to fund education at all levels.
2. Build communication pathways and/or tracking systems between all levels of education to decrease the need for developmental education.
3. Build communication pathways between legislative bodies, schools, and business leaders to better understand the developing needs of the state's communities.
4. Reward community colleges for the important work they do in developmental education, workforce training, and community service. According to at least one interviewee, Kansas plans on ending funding for certain developmental courses—but if the students need them, will anyone provide those courses? If not, what sort of workforce can we expect? What kind of voters can we expect?
5. Push community colleges to provide defined measurements and programs that the state legislature can agree to fund.

Specific Recommendations for Federal Policymakers

1. Find ways to better fund education at all levels, from early childhood programs through higher education—many highly regarded economists and other budgetary wizards have suggested solutions such as closing tax loopholes or cutting defense spending by a tiny amount so we can better fund education and other programs. In this dissertation, many interviewees strongly believe that continuing our current educational policies will create

an education gap of "haves" and "have nots" which will decrease our ability as a nation to create new technologies, new jobs, and new sources of income.

2. Allow at least some funding through financial aid for students who are attempting to (a) learn or enhance work skills for a new job or (b) take a few courses to see where their aptitudes and abilities are best suited for further study or work. This would decrease the number of students who mark themselves as "degree-seeking" when they are actually enrolling for a very specific reason but need financial aid, thus decreasing the number of non-completers.
3. Create a national tracking system—perhaps this would have to be voluntary at first, but if there were some way for schools to find out where their students have gone when they leave without completing a degree, it would help assessment and research. If a Sunflower student takes twelve hours and then crosses the state line to complete a program at a Missouri community college, Sunflower should be able to receive some recognition for helping that student get started on their path towards their goal.
4. Continue to create "man on the moon" goals and raise public awareness of the need for education—we need to change our national culture in a *symbolic* (Bolman and Deal, 1997) way to appreciate education more. One interviewee wondered why the public is not outraged that our educational standing has slipped so much in the past several decades. As he said, "we're behind *Slovenia*, for God's sake." Some interview subjects felt this current challenge is an attempt to begin a new "arms" race, this time in education, thus providing a *symbolic* framework for increasing college completion.

Recommendations for Future Research

Because this dissertation was limited to three community colleges in Kansas, expanding the research to include other states could aid in understanding the challenges community colleges

face. Community colleges everywhere serve similar populations of transient, non-traditional students who often have more challenges to completion than traditional students at four-year colleges. Community colleges everywhere face budget challenges. Further research including colleges in other states as well as future completion numbers published by the Department of Education or the colleges in question could increase the possibility of finding solutions to such challenges, which would enhance the educational opportunities for community college students.

Summary

Community colleges have a mission to provide education to all who can attempt it. For many years, the emphasis on access has meant that community colleges enroll students who do not complete a degree or certificate, even if that was their stated goal upon enrolling. In October 2010, President Obama issued a challenge to American colleges at the White House Summit on Community Colleges: increase completion by five million students by 2020. One major difficulty with such a challenge is the problem of defining completion. Does completion mean associate's degree? Certificate? Baccalaureate degree? At the same time, current accountability and completion movements have begun to concern educators who believe many students may lose access to education beyond the K-12 years.

Community colleges have faced such contradictory challenges in the past, but the current initiative, coupled with the current financial environment of low property values, low state budgets, and decreased eligibility for student financial aid, has made for an unusually challenging situation. Community college personnel must continue to provide an excellent education for all levels of students, define and assess completion, and report new completion rates to multiple governing bodies, without increases in their operating budgets. According to most people interviewed at these three community colleges in Kansas, they don't know how

much more they can do. However, they continue to do their best, as they feel they have always done, to fulfill all their missions.

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