The many projects, policies, and practices discussed in this volume suggest promising ideas for improving student success both before matriculation and in developmental education in community colleges. Ideally, improvement in the former will reduce the need for the latter, but until that happens, the goal will be to promote effective strategies for both. In this concluding chapter, the editors combine the information learned from the two strands within this volume to pose some final thoughts and next steps for future work in this area.

Looking Ahead: Synthesizing What We Know About National, Regional, and Local Efforts to Improve Student Preparation and Success

SuJin Jez, Andrea Venezia

As Chapter One discussed, the structure of this volume is split between chapters with campus-based and national perspectives. We believe this division parallels what needs to be happening in the field: reforms at the campus level must be supported, and sometimes spurred and documented, by others at the state, local, and nonprofit levels.

Focusing on reform in community colleges is different than it is in other education entities. Community colleges are unique in that they are completely open access; they each have different missions and goals, often tied to local economics and needs; they are usually locally autonomous; and their students are extremely diverse and, unlike students at other postsecondary institutions, do not share common goals. Moreover, community colleges must provide a multitude of educational options to diverse student populations with few resources, often little political clout, limited capacity, and a largely part-time or adjunct faculty.

Given the variety of student intents, programs, pathways, and courses offered at a given community college, it is almost impossible for community colleges to provide general information to all prospective students about how to prepare for all the courses offered. But if community colleges seek
to help students reach their goals, they must improve the academic readiness signals they send to prospective students. This volume highlights the difficulty of sending these signals to even a single population of students: students who are degree- and transfer-seeking. As the authors in this volume describe, many of these degree- and transfer-seeking students are ill informed of the academic standards of community colleges, and they discuss some of the consequences. Without community colleges and their partners creating and distributing information on standards, the situation will not change, and students will enter expecting either that they are prepared or that the community college will prepare them.

However, many students find that their expectations about rectifying their academic weaknesses in college are not always fulfilled. As Bailey discusses from a national perspective in Chapter One and Moore reinforces in Chapter Five with her experiences at the campus level, the key academic support of developmental education is not working as it should. Institutions and systems are not succeeding with a core function if students who take developmental education, by and large, do no better than those who enroll directly in college-level courses. Either the advising, assessment, and placement processes are broken, or the courses are not effective, or both. Bailey and Moore make compelling arguments for revamping all of those policies and practices and figuring out better ways to determine what community college expectations are and to measure all the skills necessary for a successful educational experience.

While improving developmental education is one way to improve student success, the other route is to focus on ensuring that students are prepared by the time they enroll at a community college. An innovative and promising model provides college-level course work to traditionally underserved high school students. As Hoffman, Vargas, and Santos discuss in Chapter Four, a variety of promising ways can integrate college-level work into high school. The three options they describe range from least to most intensive integration of high school and college: dual enrollment (also known as dual credit or concurrent enrollment), dual-enrollment programs or pathways, and early college high schools. Regardless of intensity, these programs show early signs of providing first-generation college students with the academic and nonacademic supports to graduate from high school and enroll in college in higher numbers than their peers in traditional education programs. This promising reform affects not only the developmental education issue but also issues of college access and success for traditionally underrepresented students.

The dual credit and early college high school phenomena are but two indicators of a growing interest in community colleges. Over the past five to ten years, funders such as philanthropic organizations and the federal government have turned a great deal of their attention to these open-access institutions. Ten years ago, it was virtually impossible to find funding for a
large-scale study focused on community-college-specific issues. Now, as Burdman outlines in Chapter Three, hundreds of millions of dollars are supporting both small- and large-scale efforts.

Working in the community college field and seeing these efforts, Burdman posits that “the nexus between policy change and institutional change may provide the most fertile ground in which dynamic improvement can occur.” This volume speaks to this intersection. Colleges, state and local governments, foundations, businesses, and other community groups must work collaboratively to build capacity and create initiatives addressing local needs. But community college administrators and faculty members might not realize that local needs are often not just local or that their community college may not be so unique. Outside entities such as government and foundations can help community colleges build capacity and assist with replication and scale. While outside, and often nonlocal, entities have an important role to play in advancing the role of community colleges, Spence clearly highlights in Chapter Eight the delicate balancing act that must happen in this relationship. His example of California State University’s Early Assessment Program shows that it is possible to develop effective large-scale reforms from the top down, but such reforms would likely be much more difficult to accomplish with community college systems given their history and culture of local autonomy. But if community colleges and their respective systems at the state level take the time and effort to find the lever that will get the most buy-in—one that builds off existing infrastructure or knowledge—they will create the most positive change for students.

This volume also delves into the intricacies of classroom-level reform. Each of the local perspectives highlights the importance of data-driven decision making. While several of the initiatives discussed in this volume are too young to have a significant amount of longitudinal data and thus cannot undertake rigorous outcome-focused evaluations, Klein and Wright showed in Chapter Six how the effective use of data can assist in making shorter-term decisions, as demonstrated when their frequent and continuing analyses of the data led them to veer an ineffective effort in an entirely different direction from what they originally intended. From analyzing the data, they learned that the program design itself was not the primary problem; instead, the instructors’ teaching practices often ran counter to the philosophies that served as the foundation of the program. From closely studying the data, they learned that effective curricular transformation depends on effective faculty transformation. Their project also reinforced several tenets that are important for anyone involved in this work:

- Standards and rigor should not be thrown out the door when equity and access issues are addressed.
- An understanding of what a community college student should know to succeed in college and to function well in life is needed.
An understanding of what the nonacademic skills and knowledge that community college students must know and have to succeed in college and in life and what the most effective ways to teach and measure those knowledge and skills is also needed.

There must be constructive and frequent reflection on our own work.

Like Klein and Wright, Juzwiak and Tiernan, in Chapter Seven, also used data in their decision-making process, along with sharing a long commitment to the reform process, involving faculty, learning from mistakes, and constantly refining practices. Juzwiak and Tiernan also developed important constructs about transparency. Policy transparency is often viewed as a one-way street; policies must be transparent to the stakeholders who supposedly benefit from them, and the stakeholders are seen as one amorphous entity. But Juzwiak and Tiernan realized that policy transparency acts better as a two-way street: a transparency feedback loop exists. Instruction must be visible to students, student learning must be visible to instructors, and outcomes must be transparent for a wide audience. Furthermore, the visible literacy component can be part of a signaling process for prospective students, providing them with information about community college expectations.

While Moore’s data in Chapter Five confirmed suspicions regarding students’ difficulty advancing past developmental courses, they also highlighted how large the problem was and where students were faltering. From these data, the college developed better placement exams and student assessments and created faculty learning communities to enhance faculty teaching and student learning.

As evidenced by the chapters in this volume, people are jumping at the opportunity to figure out the best ways to meet community college students’ needs and help ensure that more students persist in their course work and pathways, graduate, and are prepared to live a fulfilling life in which they can support themselves and their families. These reforms are happening at the classroom level, the state level, and every level in between. Moreover, interest in community colleges is growing. Everyone from policymakers and foundations to the general public shares an interest in how community colleges are faring with the millions of students who enter their doors every year.

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