

Co-enrollment and its Effect in Attainment and Completion

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### Abstract

Attainment and completion of college remains a problem for a large number of students, but particularly for community college and minority students. Co-enrollment is the process of enrolling at one or more institutions at the same time. This purpose of this practice brief is to review the literature on co – enrollment of students in both, 2 and 4 years institutions, as well as its impact in attainment and completion of a degree. This brief also aims to guide Community College leaders in the transfer of credits for con – enrolled students, following an ethical leadership approach, in particular a teleological metatheory.

*Key words: community college, co-enrollment, attainment and completion, ethical leadership.*

## Co-enrollment and its Effect in Attainment and Completion

Retention and completion are one of the most important issues leaders in higher education institutions, particularly Community Colleges, face today. Community Colleges enroll about half of all undergraduate students in the nation. The National Student Clearinghouse data reports that in the fall of 2014, 42% of all and 25% of full time undergraduate students were enrolled in the community college system. Many of the students entering community colleges are minorities, non – traditional students, and students that have been traditionally marginalized from the higher education systems. For instance, in 2014 Hispanic students were overrepresented in the public two year college while African American students were overrepresented in the for – profit sector. In addition, the National Student Clearinghouse data show that 39% of first-time community college students in 2008 earned a credential within six years, including 10% who completed a degree at a four-year institution (Ma. J. & Baum, S., 2016, p. 1).

Attainment and completion continue to be at the top of the educational agenda in our nation. Community colleges have traditionally been the point of access to higher education for minorities and underrepresented students. In 2014, 44% of all African American undergraduate students and 56% of all Hispanic undergraduate students were enrolled in a two – year institution. In comparison, in the same year, 29% of Hispanic students were enrolled in four – year institutions. During the 2000 to 2010 years, the total enrollment in the public two-year institutions increased from 5.7 million to 7.9 million; moreover, full-time enrollment increased from 2 million to 3.3 million (Ma. & Baum, 2016). Although Community colleges have seen a huge increase in the numbers of student enrollment, graduating numbers have not kept up with the current pace of higher education. As a result, initiatives such as making community colleges tuition – free, have come to highlight the importance of attainment and degree completion.

However, the success rates also vary depending of multiple factors such as ethnicity, parental educational level, income levels, among other significant factors.

Co – enrollment is a relatively new enrollment pattern in higher education. Co-enrollment is defined as “simultaneous enrollment at two or more colleges or universities during the course of a given term or semester” (Crisp, 2013, p. 2). According to Crisp, “multi-institutional attendance patterns are becoming increasingly common for online students and those living in urban areas who can take courses from multiple local institutions” (Borden, 2004; Crawley & LeGore, 2009; McCormick, 2003, as cited in Crisp, 2013, p. 3). Wang & Wickersham (2014) have also differentiate between vertical and lateral enrollment. Co – enrollment of students at institutions of the same level is defined as lateral co – enrollment, while co – enrollment of students attending a 4 and a 2 year old institution at simultaneously can be defined as vertical co – enrollment (Wang & Wickersham, 2014, p. 166). Moreover, theoretically, “co – enrollment options should provide students with a wider selection of courses and more flexibility in regard to cost and scheduling (Herzog, 2005; McCormick, 2003; as cited in Wang & McCready, 2013, p. 392). This flexibility on schedule and cost could mean the difference to attainment and completion. Although co – enrollment remains an understudied field, some of the research conducted has focused on attainment and completion of a degree or certificate at the 6<sup>th</sup> year after enrolling in college for the first time.

Perhaps one of the most comprehensive reports is the one completed by Peter & Cataldi (2005) for the United States Department of Education. The purpose of their study was to “provide an overview of the extent to which undergraduates attend multiple institutions as well as the relationship between multiple institution attendance and persistence, attainment, and time to degree” (Peter & Cataldi, 2005, p. iii). This extensive study was longitudinal in nature and

followed students who had started college in the 1995 – 1996 academic year and followed them until 2001, which is 6 years after first enrolling in higher education. By this time, some students were not enrolled anymore in higher education institutions and had not earned a degree or certificate (21%), some had either earned a certain degree (Associate or Bachelor) or certificate (65%), and some (14%) were still enrolled in higher education institutions. The authors also found that more traditional age students as well as full time students were more likely to attend multiple institutions at some point during their education than older students. In addition, dependent students were also more likely to attend multiple institutions than independent students (p. v). While the authors also found that co – enrollment may be a positive factor to degree completion, they also found that this pattern of attendance in multiple institutions also slowed their time for degree completion. They state that this “may be related to the difficulty of transferring credits, different requirements at various institutions, or gaps in enrollment, or mitigating factors such as a move, job change, or change in family status” (p. vii).

Wang & McCready (2013) have also studied co – enrollment but made a differentiation between students starting at a 2 year colleges and students starting at a 4 year higher education institution. They did a longitudinal study also and they have found a “consistently positive effect of co – enrollment that is stronger for beginning community college students than for beginning 4-year college students, both on attainment and on persistence” (p. 397). Based on the results of this study, they came to the conclusion that “the co – enrolled student appears more likely to persist in postsecondary education and attain a credential than his or her peers who did not co – enroll. Because co – enrolled students are not necessarily homogeneous, co – enrollment may not affect all students in a positive way, but on aggregate, we must conclude that co – enrollment appears to be a positive influence on postsecondary persistence and attainment” (p. 400).

Crisp (2013) on the other hand, has found some characteristics of student who do co – enroll in multiple higher education institutions. Her study suggested “that co-enrollees are more likely to be female, African American or Asian American, and have parents who have higher levels of postsecondary education. Additionally, students who co-enroll are more likely to have enrolled in college immediately after high school, receive higher amounts of financial aid, and have higher degree expectations when compared to non-co-enrollees” (Crisp, 2013, p. 16). Crisp’s research is significant, because it identified and characterized students who tend to co – enroll more and may help in making other underserved groups aware of this practice in an effort to increase completion rates among underrepresented students, particularly for African American and Hispanic students. Although the college enrollment rates of African American and Hispanic students has increased significantly, completion of these two particular groups is still a significant issue. In 2008, the percentage of adults 25 and older that had at least a bachelor’s degree was 20% of African American adults and 13% of Hispanic adults, compared to 52% of Asian/Pacific Islander adults and 33% of white adults (NCES, 2015).

Although Hispanic students’ enrollment increased from 353,000 in 1976 to 2,103,000 in 2008, in 2008 only 26% of Hispanics 18 – 24 years old were enrolled in colleges or universities. Those numbers also increased for African American students. The numbers of African American students rose from 943,000 students enrolled in 1976 to 2,269,000 students enrolled in 2008. However, this represented only 32% of African American 18 – 24 years old who were enrolled in colleges or universities (NCES, 2015). Of these numbers, Hispanic females had a greater participation rate of 29% and Hispanic males had a 23% participation rate. Also, African American females had a greater participation rate of 34% compared to African American males who had a 30% participation rate (NCES, 2015).

This lower attainment and completion rates on underrepresented student populations raises a concern from the economic point of view as well as from the equity and social justice point of view.

According to Swail, Redd, & Perna (2003) “continued racial and ethnic group differences in bachelor’s degree attainment suggest that a substantially smaller share of Hispanics and blacks than of whites and Asians are able to take advantage of the economic and social benefits associated with earning a college degree” (p. 27). Moreover, in 2014, the levels of families living in deep poverty for these particular two groups of students accounted for 18% of black children and 12.9% of Hispanic children (Who is poor?, 2016). In addition, these lower attainment rates are also detrimental for having access to advanced degrees such as master’s and doctoral degrees (Swail, Reed, & Perna, 2003). Swail, Redd, & Perna (2003) have also pointed out the importance of Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCU’s) and Hispanic Serving Institutions (HIS’s) and their efforts to support African American and Hispanic students to their road to completion. Co – enrollment then could be an option for minorities for persistence and degree attainment.

#### Counter – argument and recommendations.

The research conducted thus far on the co – enrollment model suggests that there may be a positive correlation between students who co – enroll and degree completion (Crisp, 2013; Wang & McCready, 2013; Wang & Wickersham, 2014). However, Peter & Cataldi (2005) also pointed out that this multiple transfer may slow their completion time due to “the difficulty of transferring credits, different requirements at various institutions, or gaps in enrollment, or mitigating factors such as a move, job change, or change in family status” (p. vii).

Community Colleges are considered bureaucratic institutions in nature with a defined set of rules and procedures to follow, including the transfer of credits among institutions. For instance, Dougherty (1992) addressed institutional factors as obstacles to students' completion in different stages, including when credits do not align and students are required to complete additional coursework after transferring from Community Colleges to Universities.

I argue that by establishing policies, with an ethical leadership approach in mind, and specifically under a teleological metatheory, may lead to better completion outcomes for students who co-enroll in multiple institutions.

Nevarez, Wood, & Penrose (2013) state that under an ethical framework, the ethical leader is supposed to follow a "right" or "good" course of action. In a broader sense, "ethics refer to an established standard of good while morality is the process of carrying out the standard" (p. 69). There are also three metatheories under the ethical approach: deontology, teleology, and axiology. The authors also define those metatheories as follows: under a *deontological metatheory*, it is implied that "the leader's concern should focus on the methods and mechanisms by which their decision are made as opposed to the end (outcomes) of a given decision". It also suggests that "decision should be based solely on existing rules, codes, policies, and laws" (p. 69). On the other hand, *teleological metatheory* is concerned with the ends of a given decision. Under this metatheory, the leaders are not concerned with the course of action but rather with the desired end. Teleology also suggests that the best outcome is the one "produces the greatest good for the greatest number" (p. 70). Strictly speaking from a Community College point of view, "the best course of action for a given community college is one that addresses the best interest (e.g., economic, social, political) of the local community as pursued through academic programming" (p. 71). Furthermore, *Axiology* is more concerned with virtues than values. From an axiological

perspective, every profession in the community college “is guided by a set of virtues that should facilitate decision making” (p. 72). An additional axiological theory is the *ethic of care* which encompasses the virtues of compassion, caring, understanding, trust, and otherness (Nevarez, Wood, & Penrose, 2013).

I argue that by implementing a teleological metatheory when transferring credits, will be beneficial to the students and as a result to the community. When addressing transferring credits among institutions from a teleological point of view, the focus is on the *outcome* (degree completion in this case) rather than in the *procedures* (how do we transfer credits among institutions). When we shift the focus to the main outcome (degree completion), the results lead in the students’ best interests as well as the interests of the college, which transfer into a benefit to the community too.

This particular leadership approach also aligns with the recommendations set forth by the American Association of Community Colleges in the *Code of Ethics for CEO’s of Community Colleges* (2005). Among the CEOs’ responsibilities towards students include: 5. *The Chief Executive Officer will ensure that accurate and complete descriptions of available academic programs are provided to students through official college communications channels; and 6. The Chief Executive Officer will seek recommendations from students with respect to college decisions that affect them.* Moreover, it also aligns with the CEOs’ responsibilities to other institutions: 4. *The Chief Executive Officer will promote collaboration among institutions.*

## Conclusion

Community Colleges face a myriad of challenges due to its unique position in the educational system as an access point to higher education for minorities and underserved populations. Just as Community Colleges have developed meaningful relationship with workforce development entities, it is also necessary to have a partnership regarding transfer credit with other 2 and 4 year institutions that result in a positive impact in students' completion and retention rates. One way to address the issue is by applying ethical leadership approaches, in particular a teleological framework, which could potentially result in better outcomes for the students, colleges, and for the community.

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