

 THE RESEARCH AGENDA

The Influence of the Completion Agenda on Decision Making by Community College Career and Technical Education Program Deans

By Helen B. Garrett

This study sought to understand the Community College Career and Technical Educational (CTE) deans' perceptions of the internal and external forces they perceive as influencing their decision making; what evidence exists to demonstrate the influence of the completion agenda on CTE deans' decision making; and if there is a perception that there is a conflict between providing immediate career opportunities for students versus meeting the needs of the completion agenda. Four themes emerged: limited control, dependency, indifference, and cognitive dissonance.

The purpose of this qualitative research study was to investigate and to fill a major gap in the literature by documenting the influence of the completion agenda on decision making by community college career and technical education deans. This study specifically sought to understand participants' perceptions of the internal and external forces CTE deans perceive as influencing their decision making; what evidence exists to demonstrate the influence of the completion agenda on CTE deans' decision making; and if there is a perception that there is a conflict between providing immediate career opportunities for students versus meeting the needs of the completion agenda. A narrative analysis was used to code data from the transcripts of in-person inter-

views with ten career and technical education deans at seven technical colleges in Washington State. Technical colleges in Washington State were selected because at the time of this study, the state had implemented the Student Achievement Initiative, had developed a sample completion agenda initiative, and relied on a performance-based funding model. The major findings of this study were developed within the theoretical framework of Resource Dependency Theory. Four themes emerged from the interviews and answers to the research questions: limited control, dependency, indifference, and cognitive dissonance. These themes provided answers to the study's research questions and yielded three key findings:

- A number of internal and external factors influence CTE deans' decision making; budgeting and faculty interactions are the most prevalent. These factors showed a strong connection to Resource Dependency Theory. It is clear that the CTE deans have limited control of factors that impact their decision making, and they are dependent on others—especially relative to funding, support from advisory committees to their programs, and employer demands and hiring of students.
- The second key finding was that the completion agenda is not a strong influencer on CTE deans' decision making. The influence of the completion agenda was not viewed as significant, and the deans were neither threatened nor inspired by it.
- The third key finding was that a conflict exists between providing immediate career opportunities for students and the requirements of the completion agenda. CTE deans struggled between supporting students' interest in receiving training to move into the workforce and the need to graduate more students to meet the needs of the Student Achievement Initiative. These findings support the need for further research on the influence of business and industry on CTE students' ability to earn more degrees and certificates to meet the needs of the completion agenda. Research suggests the benefit of community college CTE deans partnering with employers to allow students to move up or into the workforce while having release time and/or support to complete associate degrees so as to meet completion agenda goals.

“Setting a goal is not the main thing. It is deciding how you will go about achieving it and staying with that plan” (Landry n.d.). This statement by long-time Dallas Cowboys coach Tom Landry perfectly describes the challenge faced by U.S. higher education institutions that are expected to heed the call of the completion agenda while no single plan has proven successful. The term “completion agenda” refers to a directive to inspire, fund, and incentivize more postsecondary degrees and certificates at two- and four-year postsec-

ondary institutions. O'Banion (2010) observed that for more than a century, the Student Access Agenda led the community college movement; between 1990 and 2010, it was the Student Success Agenda that became the overarching goal of community colleges. The pressure for higher education institutions—community colleges, in particular—to graduate more students is not new, but the incentives—including from the former president of the United States, private foundations, state governments, employers, and the public—have taken on a new level of intensity since the recession of 2009. The recently minted Student Success Agenda evolved into the completion agenda, with a fine-tuned goal supported by the urgent national imperative to move students through the system efficiently. Once President Obama's 2009 American Graduation Initiative (Obama 2009) called attention to the completion agenda, it was not long before additional and similar initiatives appeared. Private foundations, anxious to support the desired increase in college graduation rates, launched fundraising efforts and initiatives.

Shapiro, Dundar, Chen, Ziskin, Park, Torres and Chiang (2015) and Hossler and Bontrager (2014) predicted that as students “patchwork” credits from multiple institutions at greater levels than before, there will be a new focus on the development of national policy, degree completion performance expectations at the institutional level, and, as a result, heightened accountability measures to address this shift in enrollment patterns and pathways. Yet research on changes in enrollment patterns over the last 20 years has not resulted in a greater number of students completing and earning degrees. O'Banion (2010) labeled the completion agenda a “tectonic shift” (45) because there has never been a community college movement so widely supported by deep pockets and focused on by entities worldwide. He noted that the focus in almost all cases is the students who are most likely to attend community colleges: those who have low income and are both underprepared and underrepresented.

The problem is particularly acute with community college students not earning a sufficient number of degrees and certificates. Although the goals of the

completion agenda may be clear, no single plan has been identified to achieve these goals or clarify what role community college administrators—specifically career and technical education (CTE) deans (higher education mid-level managers/leaders)—should play. With pressure on CTE deans to meet the needs and demands of faculty, staff, and students—as well as of local employers (relative to their expectations of training for future employee)—it is unknown if meeting the goals of the completion agenda is a factor in CTE deans’ everyday decision making.

Manyika, Lund, Auguste, Mendonca, Welsh, and Ramaswamy (2011) stated that more than 21 million new jobs need to be created in this decade to put Americans back to work and that the six sectors forecast to have the greatest job growth are health care, business services, leisure and hospitality, construction, manufacturing, and retail. These areas, which are traditionally taught in community college career and technical education programs, account for 66 percent of all jobs and 85 percent of new jobs. While the completion agenda puts pressure on community colleges to increase the number of associate degrees awarded, local economic and workforce development put pressure on CTE deans to produce trained workers in fields ranging from the health professions to welding and auto body repair. The question for CTE deans is whether all students need to complete an associate degree or certificate in order to earn family wage jobs and find meaningful employment.

O’Banion (2010) noted, “Complete can mean finished, ended, concluded; the completion agenda carries the connotation of an endpoint” (45). He wondered if there was danger of returning to the terminal-degree framework of the 1940s, when much emphasis was placed on the degree or certificate as the endpoint of a student’s college experience. Community colleges took decades to escape this paradigm and to be valued as offering educational experiences that would attract and enroll lifelong learners. Today’s learners must be prepared for the challenges not only of their first job after college but also of their next five or six or more jobs. Community college leaders, who understand and support the sector’s mission of lifelong learning, are

responsible for ensuring that federal and state agencies do not assume that the work of education is complete when a degree or certificate is earned (O’Banion 2010).

Moore (2015) provided insight into community college faculty members’ social construction of a shared meaning of change as it relates to the completion agenda. Faculty who were interviewed were aware of the external changes to their work as a result of the completion agenda and its impact. Lang (2016) evaluated community college student affairs officers’ perceptions of their institutions’ assessment of student learning outcomes, one aspect of a student’s educational experience that relates to the completion agenda. Lang’s (2016) study, like Moore’s (2015), found that senior student affairs leaders were aware of the higher education reform movement’s messaging and felt pressure to improve student outcomes as a result.

Yet the literature does not yield research on the role of CTE deans or their decision making as it pertains to the completion agenda. The current national and state focus on the completion agenda suggests that community college CTE deans may feel compelled to focus their decision making and limited resources on issues related to academic programs. (Such programs yield more degrees than do those in which students simply take classes to acquire training or learning.) Kenton, Huba, Schuh, and Shelley (2005) stated that Resource Dependency Theory (RDT) explains the behavior of an organization dependent on another, higher organization and the actions needed to survive and function.

Shulock and Offenstien (2012) noted that community college CTE students often make far more progress in completing coursework than in acquiring credentials. Students may struggle to find an effective way in which to develop their job skills to obtain family-wage jobs and to launch viable and sustainable careers. Community college students include military veterans joining the civilian workforce at midcareer; displaced and dislocated workers needing to retool for new employment opportunities; underrepresented and underprepared students, who may arrive with credit for prior learning or apprenticeship training; and former college students needing to combine credits to earn a degree (Connecting Creden-

tials 2016). These students may choose to enroll in CTE programs and could be impacted by the decision making of deans relative to new curriculum development and faculty hiring. If completion agenda goals established within the deans' institutions were tied to funding in exchange for degree and certificate completion, then CTE deans could focus on degree programs over classes in which students might be more likely to enroll but as a result might not complete a degree or certificate.

In a study of California community colleges' career and technical educational programs, Shulock, Moore, and Offenstein (2011) reported that many transfer-bound students in technical fields do not seek to earn an associate degree due to its perceived lack of market value. They observed that many career and technical program students are older, working adults who value coursework over degrees as a way to increase their job security or seek advancement; as many as 10 percent already had earned certificates or bachelor's degrees. Many students in the study were seeking certifications for industry or licensure and did not need or intend to earn a degree or certificate that could be reported as a completion agenda outcome.

CTE deans partnering with local advisory councils may feel pressure to produce a skilled workforce rather than meet the demands of the completion agenda. Bailey, Leinbach, Scott, Alfonso, Kienzl, and Kennedy (2003) observed that community college students are more sensitive to the varying demands of the local labor market than are four-year college students. They are more likely to seek an occupational credential; to see themselves as employees rather than students; and to work while enrolled. Kienzel, Alfonso, and Melguizo (2007) reinforced the unique relationship between students studying in career and technical education programs at community colleges and the local economy by stating that businesses look for students with sub-baccalaureate credentials locally while students with a sub-baccalaureate education tend to look locally for employment. The authors noted that because institutions are closely connected to local business and industry, the local economic climate is especially important for community college students.

The question remains: What will it take for institutions to both meet the goals of the completion agenda and assist community college students in attaining their graduation and career goals? The literature on completion agenda goals and initiatives is replete with suggestions for improvements by community college executive teams in response to changing funding models, by faculty to realign their curriculum and offerings, and by student affairs professionals to provide different academic support. Yet there does not appear to be a clear suggestion for CTE deans. In fact, conditions are not ripe for producing more degrees and certificates.

A quickly aging baby-boomer workforce has increased business and industry demand for community college CTE programs to prepare new workers (Dougherty and Townsend 2006). Career and technical programs have been identified as a unique area of focus for the completion agenda because it is not necessarily students' goal to earn an associate degree or certificate. Romano and Palmer (2016) noted that community college students often enter with intentions of earning a degree, but research shows that most do not ever do so. Students in community college health programs, many of which require an associate degree for employment, earn degrees at higher rates than do students who may find employment in high-demand labor markets (computer technology, for example) and leave college prior to completing a degree or certificate. A region's labor market conditions can impact college completion rates, depending in part on whether a degree or certificate is required for employment.

With the preceding information in mind, and as a community college administrator whose CTE dean colleagues seem not to be concerned about the completion agenda, the author embarked upon a qualitative research study to investigate and to fill a major gap in the literature by documenting the influence of the completion agenda on decision making by community college career and technical education deans. This study specifically sought to understand the participating deans' perceptions of the internal and external forces influencing their decision making; what evidence exists to demonstrate the influence of the completion

agenda on CTE deans' decision making; and if there is a perception of conflict between providing immediate career opportunities for students versus meeting the needs of the completion agenda. Resource Dependency Theory provided an ideal theoretical framework for the study given its basic premise of the need for entities subject to external funding sources to "follow the money" or risk extinction. Using Resource Dependency Theory, this study explored whether community college CTE deans' decision making might be affected by completion agenda goals focused on two-year institutions' outcomes, such as degree and certificate production in exchange for state funding. The study found that CTE deans were aware of the pressure of the completion agenda for community colleges to award more degrees but looked instead to their advisory councils that guide curriculum and provide employment and other resources to support their programs.

Methodology and Dataset

To lessen the time required to complete the study and to allow for deeper analysis of the themes presented, the study employed a qualitative research approach utilizing narrative analysis. In-person interviews of ten CTE deans from seven technical colleges in Washington State were conducted between June 3 and July 21, 2016. Transcriptions of the audio-recorded interviews were created, and in vivo coding was utilized to capture quotes from the CTE deans and to code specific words and phrases.

After studying the difference between codes, themes, and categories, it became evident that a second coding cycle was needed to truly hear what was being said both literally and subtly. The second coding was organic, free-form, and without boundaries. This led to a deeper and more descriptive coding process that facilitated the development of categories and themes.

Analysis Techniques

The researcher performed a preliminary exploratory analysis of the data to identify categories from the coding; the categories were then used to develop themes to assist in answering the study's research question and

to inform understanding of the central phenomenon being explored. Resource Dependency Theory provided a framework for the analysis along with the incorporation of the research discovered in the literature review.

The unit of analysis was mid-management dean decision makers below the executive level and responsible for CTE academic units. Each individual technical community college had different titles for those responsible for oversight of the various CTE programs. The decision makers included in the study were those to whom faculty report directly and therefore were academic divisional deans. Decision-making deans were those responsible for departmental budgets; for supervising, hiring, firing, and evaluating college faculty; and for control of or influence over curricular offerings. Depending on the size of the school, the decision maker directly responsible for faculty supervision, budgets, curriculum offerings, and hiring may or may not have been at the executive level. The study included ten CTE deans being interviewed at five Washington State technical colleges and two community colleges with technical programs; at three of the institutions, a single dean was interviewed.

Limitations

While saturation was reached by interviewing CTE deans from seven technical colleges, ten is a small sample to represent CTE deans throughout Washington State and the nation. Future research could extend well beyond the scope of the current study.

The study was conducted in a state with a well-established performance-based funding program, the Student Achievement Initiative (SAI). The mandated SAI meant that the CTE deans who were interviewed were more likely to be familiar with the completion agenda and its impact on their decision making than their counterparts in states without such programs would be.

Themes

Four themes were determined from the coding, categories, and transcribed data set: limited control, dependency, indifference, and cognitive dissonance.

Limited Control

After conducting ten interviews, the researcher observed that body language and changes in the volume of the CTE deans' voices communicated the influence of internal factors such as budgets, faculty hiring, and financial decision making and expressed a sense of limited control. Reading and re-reading the transcript data set, word choice, recorded pauses, and laughter (as well as other non-verbal behaviors) reaffirmed this theme. The identification of limited control as a theme did not reflect any specific response or emotion from the CTE deans over not having significant control of the areas they supervised; rather, it was attributed to life as a mid-level manager in a community college setting.

Dependency

Use of Resource Dependency Theory as the theoretical framework for this qualitative study assumes dependency as a natural theme. However, the tone of the responses to the interview questions and the CTE deans' emphasis on their need to "follow the money" provided clear evidence of dependency. Christensen (1997) contended that as a result of resource dependency, leaders and decision makers are powerless to have an impact on their organizations because of their reliance on the demands of those who provide funding. He stated that resource dependency theorists therefore conclude that the role of the leader who must adapt to the needs of those who support the organization financially is solely symbolic. Ultimately, he agreed that successful organizations realize the importance of the entity providing the funding over the executive decisions.

Responses to the interview questions illustrated a strong dependency on accreditation agencies and on the advisory committees that provide guidance on curriculum development as well as employer demands to produce trained workers and federal and state influences.

Indifference

Review of the interview transcripts and assessment of the researcher's reaction to the deans' statements and their non-verbal behaviors reflected indifference to both the completion agenda and the SAI as a statewide

example of a completion agenda. Most of the ten deans knew what the completion agenda and the SAI were and recognized their importance at the federal, state, and executive leadership levels; however, there was no passion to share what was happening on their campuses nor energy for the completion agenda or the SAI as influences on their behavior.

Cognitive Dissonance

Responses to the last set of questions evidenced the strongest emotions on the part of the CTE deans and demonstrated the cognitive dissonance between the known need and value of the completion agenda and the knowledge that it is not always in the best interest of students and faculty. The deans repeatedly offered examples of students who faced challenges when they were required to take general education classes toward degrees and certificates and who wanted to spend their limited time and resources on professional technical training to prepare for the workforce. Many deans commented on the timing of class offerings, noting that students wanted to spend as little time at the college as possible and to move quickly to meet their career goals. It was clear that the CTE deans understood the value of earning a degree or certificate, but their close relationships with faculty and students in their programs created mixed emotions.

Findings

■ The study revealed a number of internal and external factors that influenced CTE deans' decision making: The two most prevalent were budgeting and the management of and interactions with program faculty. The variance in the additional factors that affect decision making resulted from the position of the particular dean at the college as well as the dean's tenure in the position, personal views and values, and what was top of mind at the time of the interview. Analysis made clear that CTE deans have limited control over that which impacts their decision making and that they are dependent on others outside their institutions—namely, advisory committees and employers—to perform their roles, especially with regard to funding and support.

“How would you define the completion agenda?” One dean replied, “To check the box” [laughs]. This quote above all others signified the core message from the interviews: CTE deans felt neither passion nor disdain for the completion agenda. The level of understanding of its value both to their decision making and to their institutions varied; any emotion or concern relative to the ultimate impact of the completion agenda on their decision making was not evident. To be clear, individual responses addressed the significance of the completion agenda, and the deans provided examples of its influence at their institutions and on their programs. Yet reactions to the completion agenda itself were neutral.

Many of the CTE deans acknowledged the impact of the Student Achievement Initiative (SAI) and spoke to the need to support the point gathering mandated by the funding model yet were not fazed by any connection to their budgeting, faculty, or management of their academic programs. Verbal and non-verbal clues to support this finding were evident from the transcribed interview responses, which reflected the theme of indifference to the completion agenda and its manifestation on campus.

Discussion of the completion agenda and of the SAI as Washington State’s primary manifestation of the completion agenda and a form of performance-based funding resulted in a wide spectrum of responses to their meaning, purpose, and value. Overall, interview responses conveyed a mutual recognition of and respect for the completion agenda vis a vis the institution, academic programs, and, most important, students. CTE deans seemed indifferent to its influence on their decision making. They knew the completion agenda was real and present at different levels within their institutions, yet they exhibited no emotions as to its influence on their work as CTE deans.

- The study revealed that for the most part, CTE deans understood the meaning of the completion agenda and recognized its importance at both the federal and state levels. Ultimately, the deans did not have

a negative or positive reaction and were indifferent about its influence on their decision making. CTE deans again referenced Resource Dependency Theory through their mention of the value of earning points for funding through the Student Achievement Initiative. The completion agenda’s influence was not significant, and the deans felt neither threatened nor inspired by it.

Data analysis to answer research question three revealed competing elements for the CTE deans: their interest in how their academic programs allowed students to enter the workforce and to move toward financial gain and their commitment as college administrators to support their institutions’ progress toward completion agenda goals that would result in increased funding. Comments demonstrated the cognitive dissonance between the competing elements of students entering the workforce with professional-technical skill training versus the value of meeting the completion agenda goals at institution and statewide levels.

One dean’s use of the term “double-edged sword” provided a strong visual for the theme of cognitive dissonance. CTE deans clearly understood the importance of the completion agenda and the economic benefits to their institutions in earning as many SAI achievement points as possible. They also acknowledged that many CTE students want to get in to college, learn skills in order to increase their income, and get out.

- The CTE deans repeatedly alluded to their struggle between understanding and supporting their students’ interests in receiving training and moving to the workforce before earning an associate degree or certificate and the need to graduate more students in order to meet funding criteria associated with the Student Achievement Initiative. The data collected in this study are evidence of the conflict between providing immediate career opportunities and encouraging degree completion (and thereby meeting the needs of the completion agenda).

Implications for Practice

This study revealed that research on the completion agenda and related initiatives both historical and current was abundant; however, attention to the influence of the completion agenda on career and community college decision making was scarce. The news media and private grant foundations such as the Gates Foundation and the Lumina Foundation continue to focus on the benefits and goals of the completion agenda, but the focus specifically on community college deans' role in the completion agenda is not addressed. This study reinforced that Resource Dependency Theory is applicable to career and technical education deans' decision making. The deans identified employer needs and demands as having the greatest influence on their actions and noted that their effectiveness depends on these collaborative relationships and partnerships. Legislative policy makers, private foundations focusing on completion initiatives, and even community college executive leadership should seek to understand how limited control, dependency, indifference, and cognitive dissonance describe the completion agenda's influence on CTE deans' decision making.

Practical Implications

Campus leaders know that too many students are underprepared and need developmental coursework before they can succeed in college-level courses. Leaders know that completion rates are low; that the achievement gap between first-generation students and students of color is increasing; and that student and academic support services are inadequate. Campus leaders also know that reinventing the academy depends on collaboration and partnership among institutions and with partners such as local employers, industry, the private sector, government, and philanthropic organizations.

Shulock and Offenstein (2012) observed that while the completion agenda focuses on institutions awarding more bachelor's and associate degrees, the largest number of projected job openings require less than a bachelor's degree to provide family-wage earnings. This represents an opportunity for community colleges to offer an array of career-oriented and CTE degrees and certificates.

Scholarly Implications

The research literature documenting goals and hopes for the completion agenda has been prolific especially since President Obama launched the American Graduation Initiative in 2009 and foundations such as the Lumina and Gates Foundations focused their activities on increasing the number of students earning associate and bachelor's degrees in the United States. During the literature review phase of this study, it became evident that there is a lack of research and literature on the specific influence of the completion agenda on the decisions made by community college career and technical education deans.

After interviewing ten CTE deans, it was clear that they have responsibilities for a significant number of faculty, both full and part time, as well as for other staff. Deans are responsible for managing budgeting, hiring, and managerial duties as well as for responding to students' needs, marketing and recruiting their programs, and collaborating with state-mandated advisory committees to ascertain the demands and needs of local employers. The likelihood that actively employed CTE deans would research this topic and add to the literature available on this topic is low.

The completion agenda and how to meet its goals is a national conversation, far from complete, and it is possible that future researchers would value the findings of this study. By adding to the paper-thin literature on dean decision-making, fresh insight could be noted on the factors which influence deans' decision-making in general.

Where do we go from here?

This study will sensitize CTE deans and provide them with action steps to them to the call of the completion agenda while accommodating local industry and employers who support their training programs and hire their students.

■ O'Banion (2013) noted that the majority of community colleges agree that student success is evidenced by meeting the goals of the completion agenda and is a commitment worth making. He believes that community college leaders must agree on the condi-

tions that reflect their institutions' culture, values, and resources. O'Banion (2013) calls on leaders to be smarter in their use of institutional resources and to expand partnerships with business and industry beyond established academic programs and training. This could be accomplished by CTE deans embracing nimbler and time-sensitive approaches to curriculum development relevant to current employer training needs and hiring more practitioners from the field to teach current techniques.

- Those in a position to advance the completion agenda could expand their focus beyond changes to increase completion and changes by advisors, faculty, student support administrators, and college executive leadership. They could consider the impact of employer demands and the need for trained workers from CTE programs that result in an increase in the numbers of students completing short-term certificates and associate degrees. CTE deans could articulate the need for this set of administrators to be included in institutional discussions of the completion agenda to ensure that their voices and the needs of their students are heeded and heard.

- The findings might inspire community college CTE deans to help governing boards understand the importance of building and strengthening relationships with local employers and advisory committees comprising business and industry leaders to improve the training provided to current and future employees.
- The ideal completion initiative would allow students to gain the training from CTE programs that is necessary for employment or promotion. Institutions would partner with employers to create programs that would permit employees to finish their general education courses and earn associate degrees. Employer initiatives designed to address student/employee needs—as, for example, for subsidized childcare to allow classroom attendance outside of work schedules, for educational delivery models beyond the traditional 9 a.m. until 2 p.m. classroom schedule, and for promotional opportunities and higher wages for employees who complete their associate degrees—could have a significant impact on student success and help community college CTE deans contribute to the completion agenda.

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