Essential Factors of a 15 to Finish Campaign: Increasing On-Time Completion Rates for Community College Students

Martine Howard ⓘ
New Jersey City University
mhoward5@njcu.edu

Christine Harrington ⓘ
New Jersey City University
charrington1@njcu.edu

ABSTRACT

The "on-time" degree completion crisis within the community college system is alarming. Only 5% of students graduate in two years (Complete College America [CCA], n.d.-a). Many community college students are low-income and racially and ethnically minoritized, and their graduation rates are low (CCA, n.d.-a). Community colleges around the country have begun to implement intervention strategies to improve on-time graduation and close attainment gaps. One of the most successful interventions implemented across the country has been a 15 to Finish campaign, a campus-wide effort aimed to increase the number of college students taking 15 credits per semester (CCA, 2016a). A comprehensive review of the literature and conversations with college professionals were conducted to better understand the factors that contribute to a successful 15 to Finish campaign. The findings indicated that a successful 15 to Finish campaign includes: (a) maintaining a high level of institutional commitment and effective leadership, (b) making the case with data, (c) reaching all key stakeholders, including students and their support systems, (d) providing professional development to internal stakeholders, (e) avoiding a one- size fits all model and accounting for the unique institutional culture, (f) sending clear messages, (g) providing incentives, and (h) engaging in continuous improvement efforts. Based on these findings, recommendations are provided for those who wish to increase on-time completion rates for community college students.

KEYWORDS

15 to Finish, completion, full-time enrollment, on-time graduation, academic momentum

INTRODUCTION

Only 5% of community college students complete their degrees in two years, according to Complete College America (CCA), a nonprofit organization that advocates for higher graduation rates and closing equity gaps in higher education for traditionally underrepresented populations (Complete College America [CCA], n.d.-a). It is vital that a sustainable solution to combat this low completion rate is implemented. The average degree completion time is four years (CCA, 2016c). Many community college students are low-income and are racially and ethnically minoritized (CCA, 2016c). CCA indicates community colleges graduate just 1% of Blacks, 4% of Hispanics, 5% White students, 7% Asian students, and 4% of Pell-Grant students in two years (CCA, n.d.-a). It is critical to understand the issues surrounding those low on-time completion rates and devise a plan of action to alleviate the root causes of this concern. It is crucial to our society that we provide an equitable education for those who often are left behind, enabling them to transition into high-potential jobs in the least amount of time with the lowest cost.

Barriers to Timely Completion

Four main barriers contribute to why community college students are not graduating on time. The first barrier is that students are not informed of the academic benefits of taking 15 credits per semester (Attewell & Monaghan, 2016). Research in the last decade indicates that students who enroll in their first semester with 15 credits gain early momentum, attain a higher GPA, and are more likely to graduate than those who take lesser credits (Attewell & Monaghan, 2016; Belfield et al., 2016).

The second barrier to on-time completion is that students are not encouraged by the institution to enroll in 15 credits each semester. Social norms within higher education institutions do not support credit loads above 12 credits (Headlam et al., 2019). The culture at colleges across the country has been to ease students into college academics, especially minoritized students (Spiva, n.d.). Due to social influence, these students often emulate what their peers do and attend full-time with 12 credits (Headlam et al., 2019). This creates an "anchoring" effect where students continue into their next semester with the same habit of enrolling in the number of credits

they did or were told to do by their advisor in the first semester (Headlam et al., 2019).

Financial aid procedures contribute to the third and fourth barriers to finish on time. Federal financial aid policies do not offer incentives for students to take 15 credits per semester. The policy created a default of 12-credits per semester as full-time (Jones, 2015). This promotes a delay in finishing a degree on time. The fourth barrier is that students are unaware of loan benefits that allow them to finish in the shortest amount of time with the least debt and lowest wage loss. By not graduating on time, students add unneeded time and money, which adds to higher tuition and fees, expenses, and loss of opportunity and retirement wages (Abel & Deitz, 2014).

15 to Finish: An Intervention to Timely Completion

Community colleges across the country have begun to implement intervention strategies to diminish or eliminate institutional barriers to improve on-time graduation and close the disparity in attaining a college degree between low-income and racially and ethnically minoritized students known as attainment gaps. One of the most successful interventions being implemented is the 15 to Finish campaign (Klempin, 2014). This campaign increases awareness of the academic and financial benefits of enrolling in 15-credits per semester (Klempin, 2014).

Merely 11% of students at community colleges are taking 30 credits a year to be on-time students (CCA, 2016c). At least 30% of community college students are taking 24 credits, only needing one more course per semester to become on-time students (CCA, 2016c). The first university system in the country to study momentum students, students attending 15 credits or more per semester, and initiate a strong intervention to increase students' enrollment to 15 credits per semester was the University of Hawaii System (UH System). In 2010, researchers at the UH System analyzed the first-year student data and found that students were more likely to earn their degree on time if they completed 30 credits in their first academic year, declared a major by their second year, and completed college-level English and math within their first academic year (College Career Readiness and Success Center 2014). First-time, first-year students at the UH System carrying 15 credits in a semester were not only more persistent but were more successful and did better than students taking less than15 credits across all levels of academic preparation (C. Bio, personal communication, September 15, 2020).

As a result of the study, the UH System embarked on a major initiative to change mindsets and pioneered a 15 to Finish communication campaign. The UH System raised awareness of the academic and economic benefits of enrolling in 15 credits versus 12 credits. Although the campaign was named 15 to Finish, the UH System was interested in students finishing 30 credits per year. This included taking 15 credits each semester or taking 12 credits per semester plus six over two summers. The campaign was a great success, with on-time graduation rates at the two-year institutions increasing by 84% since its implementation (CCA, n.d.-b).

Since the implementation at UH System, numerous institutions in the country have launched such a campaign increasing the number of students enrolling in 30 credits per year (CCA, 2016a). CCA Vice President Elston stated that the 15 to Finish strategy sets the bar at the level needed for students to achieve on-time completion (CCA, 2016c). The strategy is integrated into academic maps, metamajors, math pathways, structured schedules, corequisite remediation, and gateway courses in the field of study during the first year. Elston asserted that the 15 to Finish strategy is "the catalyst that moves the momentum for students to finish on time, no matter at what strategy one looks" (CCA, 2016c).

Several institutions that implemented a 15 to Finish campaign reported that their completion rates increased, and attainment gaps have narrowed or disappeared. For example, as of 2020, improvement in on-time graduation at the two-year institutions in the state of Nevada has risen by 243% (CCA, n.d.-b). Jim McCoy, Associate Vice President of Academic Affairs for the colleges of southern Nevada, stated that they had closed the achievement gap after implementing a 15 to Finish campaign. The 12% of Blacks at their colleges are now equaling their peers' rate in taking 15 credits, and the 35% of Hispanic students are exceeding their peers' rate (personal communication, February 11, 2020). The UH System reported in 2017 that they also closed the equity gap, which is the inequality in educational achievement between low-income and racially and ethnically minoritized students, both at the two-year and four-year institutions with the 15 to Finish campaign (CCA, 2017e).

Given the extensive data that illustrates the 15 to Finish campaign's effectiveness, it is important to understand what the elements are that make a 15 to Finish campaign work in higher education. It can shed light on what is needed to successfully implement a campaign to increase the on-time graduation rates and narrow attainment gaps in credit and completion between ethnic and racial minoritized students and their peers.

METHODS

A wide-ranging review of qualitative and quantitative information was performed to gain an understanding of the key success factors related to the implementation of a 15 to Finish campaign at higher education institutions. The following three methods were used: (a) engaging in conversations with practitioners and administrators across the country, (b) an examination of peer-reviewed articles, and (c) the exploration of gray literature and public scholarship. This triangulated approach allowed for a comprehensive review of data related to 15 to Finish campaigns.

Professional Perspectives

To better understand the implementation of a 15 to Finish communication campaign at a higher institution of education, I engaged in conversations with administrators and practitioners across the country whose institutions implemented a 15 to Finish campaign or who are part of the movement to have students finish college on time. I first sought out five experts in the field of the 15 to Finish strategy who were posted as Fellow Experts on the Complete College America (CCA) website. CCA is a nonprofit educational organization that launched a network 11 years ago composed of state and educational institutions committed to their cause of on-time degree completion and closing attainment gaps. They formed an alliance that includes 47 states and consortia in the country (CCA, n.d.-c).

I communicated with the Associate Vice-President of Academic Affairs at a community college in Southern Nevada, who contributed to scaling the implementation of a 15 to Finish campaign in his state. I spoke to a former President of a CUNY Community College and a founder of CCA who aided in implementing the 15 to Finish strategy.

To better understand how a university system successfully implemented a 15 to Finish campaign and how they collected data to measure success, I connected with the Associate Vice-Chancellor of the University System of Georgia together with the Research Associate for the Board of Regents of the University System of Georgia in the Division of Research and Policy Analysis. The Chief of Staff and Senior Vice President of Strategy at CCA, who has been a keynote speaker at numerous events nationwide on the benefits of 15 to Finish, contributed to success stories in the implementation of the 15 to Finish campaign across the country. A conversation with the Executive Director of Student Success and University Initiatives at Sacramento State University was instrumental in understanding the dramatic changes at that institution when he implemented a 15 to Finish campaign as soon as he joined the institution.

A few of the CCA Fellow Experts suggested other prominent individuals whose viewpoints I needed to seek out. I connected with the President and Chief Operating Officer of the Gardner Institute, who discussed the importance of looking through an equitable lens for students taking 15 credits per semester to finish on time. I sought the perspective of the Student Success Director for Community Colleges in Hawaii, which is the state that pioneered the 15 to Finish campaign. She offered insight into the original campaign at the two-year institutions within the UH System and how it has evolved. Finally, I communicated with the Director of Strategic Outcomes for the Education Foundation of Mobile Alabama, who provided insights on Bishop State Community College, which recently launched an extensive 15 to Finish communication campaign.

The limitation of conversing with practitioners and administrators who implemented the 15 to Finish campaign is that the individuals might have a biased view as they all focused on the campaign's success.

Peer-Reviewed Research

I conducted a literature search by using the following five electronic databases: Academic Search Premier, Educational Administration Abstracts, Education Source, ERIC, and MasterFILE Elite. The settings were set to search the databases for peer-reviewed articles between the published dates of 2010 and 2020. Using the Boolean operation system, the search terms included "higher education" OR college AND "15 to Finish" OR "Complete College America" OR "early momentum" OR "academic momentum." The initial search produced 98 articles for review. After duplicates were removed, 41 articles remained.

Only articles that focused on higher education institutions that implemented an intervention requiring students to take 15 credits per semester as a strategy to on-time completion or launched a campaign to promote 15 to Finish were included in this literature review. I first scanned the abstracts of the 41 articles for relevance to the criteria. Twenty-three articles did not involve student enrollment in higher education and were therefore eliminated for further examination. The remaining 18 articles were maintained for analysis. I reviewed the full text of the 18 articles to serve for the research on implementing a 15 to Finish campaign at a higher education institution. Three articles were relevant to the intervention. They included initiatives for a campaign to have students graduate on time. I excluded all other articles as they discussed other college completion strategies or addressed the problem of not taking 15 credits per semester rather than the campaign intervention.

Gray Literature and Public Scholarship

The 15 to Finish campaign started in 2011 and is a recent strategy implemented at higher education institutions across the country. Many practitioners have discussed this strategy in blogs, interviews, and articles but have not published their findings and experiences in peer-reviewed literature. However, it is important to include their expertise to better understand the benefits of a 15 to Finish campaign and what contributes to its success. I searched websites of the following educational organizations and nationally known universities to retrieve materials of professionals who published on the 15 to Finish campaign: Achieving The Dream, Community College Resource Center (CCRC), Complete College America (CCA), League for Innovations, the University System of Hawaii, the University System of Georgia, and the Tennessee Board of Regents. Within those sources, I discovered four working papers from CCRC, five articles on the CCA website, one article at the League for Innovation in the Community College, one article on the UH System website relevant to a 15 to Finish campaign. Through the snowball effect, which is a way of discovering articles that were not appearing in the search but are relevant to the research by consulting the references of already attained articles, I added an article from the College and Career Readiness and Success Center relating to time to completion with a 15 to Finish strategy. I attained 11 forum discussions and presentations from the CCA convenings between 2016 and 2018 on the intervention associated with the research. They represent the human voices of practitioners and administrators telling the story of institutions in the nation that have implemented a communication campaign that reaches students of all walks of life and clearly communicates the benefit of completing college in the least amount of time with a minimum cost. Additional material with evidenced-based data on the 15 to Finish strategy and the campaign was found through university websites and social media.

RESULTS

Many factors that make implementing a 15 to Finish campaign successful at community colleges emerged from the conversations with administrators and practitioners and the literature research conducted. These factors are bringing change to time-to-degree-completion and have been organized by the following eight themes: (a) commitment and leadership, (b) making the case with data, (c) reaching students and their support system, (d) professional development, (e) one size does not fit all, (f) clear messages, (g) incentives, and (h) continuous improvement.

Commitment and Leadership

Bruce Vandal, Senior Vice President at CCA, asserted that the way to establish conditions for change is to receive the institution's commitment where the 15 to Finish campaign will take place (CCA, 2017d). Numerous states formed an alliance through CCA and demonstrated strong leadership starting from the governor's office to implement game-changers in all their institutions, including the 15 to Finish campaign (CCA,2016a). Other institutions' leaders have also illustrated urgency to drive change. The president of Bishop State Community College (BSCC) showed the campaign's importance by holding a signing day on campus, indicating to the community that they were committed to launching a 15 to Finish campaign (C. Scott, personal communication, September 21, 2020).

Commitment across campus is important. It is especially critical for key stakeholders from the Academic Affairs Office, Student Affairs Office, the Institutional Resource Office, and the Communication Office to commit to these efforts (C. Scott, personal communication, September 21, 2020). Advisors, financial aid counselors, and faculty are at the onset of the needed culture shift and are also critical internal stakeholders who need to be included in initial conversations related to the vision, research, and plan (CCA, 2016d).

Advisors are the staff members on campus immediately connecting with students, identifying their academic options, and providing them with resources and information (CCA, 2016a). Disclosing data to advisors is important to ensure that student success is "speeding up, not slowing down" (Ancel, 2017, p. 11) enrollment in academic courses (Ancel, 2017). Chandra Scott, Director of Strategic Outcome in the Mobile Alabama Education System, observed that at her institution, the financial aid staff needed to be trained as they had been automatically telling students during their entire career to take 12 credits to receive full aid (personal communication, September 21, 2020).

In addition to advisors and financial aid staff, faculty are critical in implementing the campaign and need to be engaged from the beginning. Kim Beatty from Houston Community College reported that faculty are focused on learning and not necessarily focused on what is happening beyond their classroom. However, when faculty see the evidence-based data and notice the gaps, they become more committed to a 15 to Finish campaign. (CCA, 2016f). Faculty serve in advising capacities and play an important role in the 15 to Finish messaging.

Making the Case with Data

Data are the source of information to understand the problem, to identify interventions, and then to drive the innovation needed to obtain student success. Institutional commitment to access, collect, analyze, and communicate the data associated with the campaign to stakeholders is essential (A. Bell, personal communication, August 26, 2020). CCA (2017) cautions in their scaling standard report that just data collection on its own will not drive change. The change comes when college professionals "interact and internalize the data, draw their own conclusions, and take action" (CCA, 2017c, p. 9). When the UH System noticed the low graduation rates, they examined their data and discussed how they could create a culture change based on their data for student success. Data showed that students taking 15 credits per semester did better in their courses and completed their degree on time (University of Hawaii System, 2013). By disaggregating the data, they observed that there were no disparities between subgroups. Students who took 30 credits in a year and completed a degree were students from all levels of academic preparedness, socio-economic status, first-generation students, and racially and ethnically minoritized students (University of Hawaii System, 2013). Collecting and disaggregating data by various student subgroups are vital to evaluate the educational equity outcomes. Elston stated that disaggregated data are important to analyze as they give "voice[s] to the students who have been underserved by higher education" (personal communication, September 4, 2020). Any decision made must be driven by data. When sharing data, Wendy Kallina, Director of Academic Analytics at Kennesaw State University and member of the Complete College Georgia initiative suggested that institutions find someone who is an empirical storyteller and a champion for the initiative that makes data come alive to stakeholders. Kallina emphasized that every meeting should start with data because using data-driven results will show that interventions can affect change (CCA, 2017b).

It is fundamental for the implementation team on campus to work with the data professionals by first identifying the data and then identifying the right audience with whom to communicate the data (CCA, 2017a). The Indiana Commission of Higher Education produced data sheets on 15 to Finish for advisors that tell the story of their campuses. The commission produced a data sheet for Ivy Tech Community College campus showing how many students were between 12-14 credits per semester, how grades improved when students took 15 or more credits, and how likely these students were to complete college (CCA, 2016a).

Data can inspire faculty, staff, and administrators to take action and get involved in the 15 to Finish campaign efforts (CCA, 2017a). However, institutions need to go beyond creating a sense of urgency for action and also provide paths of action (CCA, 2017a). The implementation team must introduce a plan of action that offers details of the campaign implementation to the institution's stakeholders (CCA, n.d.-b).

Reaching Students and their Support System

Jim Dragna, the Executive Director of Student Success and University Initiatives and the Director of Institutional Research at Sacramento State University, emphasized that communication directly to students, either through text or email messages, is important. Students can make informed choices after being encouraged to take on the challenge of a full 15-credit load (personal communication, September 16, 2020). Nia Haydel, the current Vice President at CCA for Alliance Engagement and Institutional transformation, pointed out that students want direction and, in general, want to finish on time. Students typically follow the path suggested by advisors (CCA, 2016e). Therefore, colleges cannot rely on text and email messaging alone; it is also critical that they are being encouraged by their advisors to take 15 credits.

Although students are the most important stakeholders, another key factor related to increasing academic momentum for students is to involve parents and caretakers. A strong communication campaign providing this population with beneficial information on the importance of taking 15 credits per semester is needed (CCA, 2016e). These messages position parents and caretakers to better support their children in making better academic and financial decisions (CCA, 2016e). While at the University System of Georgia, Helen Tate helped parents understand the benefits of 15 credits per semester during the summer orientation (CCA, 2016b). Parents and guests were in attendance when the institution played a short video clip created by Complete College Georgia on the financial benefits of taking 15 credits to finish on time. This often resulted in parents not allowing their children to leave the orientation session until they signed up for the 15 credits (CCA, 2016b). Ashley Ruby, an advisor at a community college in Western Virginia, used the open-source materials from CCA to engage in a 15 to Finish campaign during the welcoming sessions for new students and their support system (CCA, 2018a). Her goal was to inform all stakeholders in attendance of the importance of taking 15 credits per semester.

Professional Development

Institutions need to provide professional development to support college professionals in changing the advising culture that has prevented many students from taking 15 credits per semester (CCA, 2016a). Elston pointed out that the National Academic Advising Association stated that implicit bias goes on within advisement. It is, therefore, vital that training happens (personal communication, September 4, 2020). Advisors are part of the culture shift and must inform each student of what it takes to get to the finish line. Elston asserted advisors must look at 15 to Finish as a tool to start a conversation with the students on their trajectory while in college. NACADA, the Global Community for Academic Advising, has been working closely with CCA in sharing best practices for the academic advising community (Waiwaiole & Elston, 2017). They ensure that the key individuals responsible for providing students with guidance to an on-time completion provide the same message across the country (Waiwaiole & Elston, 2017).

When the Indiana Commission of Higher Education produced data sheets on 15 to Finish, it sparked conversations and discussions with advisors on shifting the bar to 15 credits and using an opt-out versus opt-in approach. Students opting out did so with full knowledge of what this will mean to on-time degree attainment (CCA, 2016a). Nichole Mann, an advisor at Ivy Tech Community College, revealed that the Indiana Academic Advisory Network created a Fall Institute to share ideas and offer advisors strategies related to "how" and "why" when discussing 15 to Finish with their students (CCA, 2016a). The training was focused on how to tell a particular population at their campus about their options, how to help students with decision making, and how students can overcome certain barriers. An expert in financial aid offered a session on how to advise financial aid recipients taking 15 credits. The workshops and discussions resulted in advisors putting completion goals for each student at the center of the educational planning process from the start (CCA, 2016a).

Faculty, both full-time and part-time, also need to be engaged in the on-time completion discussions and receive professional development on how to improve student on-time completion. Often, according to a report on the faculty voices project done by the League for Innovation in the Community College (2018), faculty expressed a lack of information given to them by the institution with important data on student success. The faculty indicated a strong desire to be more engaged in institutional decision-making on how to improve completion rates. They requested faculty training that would allow for strong collaboration with advisors. Colleges need to share completion data with faculty and assist them in accessing and interpreting it (League for Innovation in the Community College, 2018). To maintain a focus on equity, disaggregated data is important as it will help faculty understand the completion rates for the different demographics at their institution (League for Innovation in the Community College, 2018).

One Size Does Not Fit All

Elston believes that there is no set procedure to implement a 15 to Finish campaign. It depends on each institution's culture. He advised starting by analyzing the institution's data and then assessing the current situation at the institution. An analysis of the data will likely show that many students are not taking 15 credits (personal communication, September 4, 2020). This was a consistent message from conversations with practitioners. The

common phrase conveyed during the communication was "let the data guide you." The data and the institutional culture will drive the decision on how to proceed.

Many different approaches can work. For example, a traditional approach in the campaign is often to first engage the internal stakeholders. The Indiana Higher Education institutions and BSCC in Alabama first communicated data to college professionals, offered them professional development, and then launched the campaign (CCA, 2016a; C. Scott, personal communication, September 21, 2020). Some colleges opt first to engage external stakeholders. The UH System first targeted the students and parents in their campaign before the internal stakeholders. Risa Dickson, Vice President for Academic Planning and Policy at the UH System, indicated they made the decision knowing they would receive opposition from advisors and faculty but were hopeful that once the data came in, it would speak for itself (CCA, 2017a). Faculty and advisors were offered the results and received workshops on implementing the 15 to Finish strategy. A similar tactic was used at Sacramento State University. Dragna expressed that the institution blamed the students for not finishing on time due to their socio-economic status, race, ethnicity, and low academic preparedness. When he joined the institution, he immediately analyzed the data and created a communication campaign during the summer. Messages went directly to the first-year students presenting all the positive aspects of getting a degree on time. After one semester, the leading indicators of 15 credits came back with positive results. The results were then shared for discussion with staff and faculty (personal communication, September 16, 2020).

Clear Messages

It is important that the college's message is clear and that all stakeholders understand what the branding message entails. According to Elston, the question "what does the institution mean by 15 to Finish" must be answered the same by all parties to effectively communicate the message (personal communication, September 4, 2020). The original 15 to Finish pioneered by the UH System did not literally mean a student had to take 15 credits per semester. The UH System implied message was to get students to graduate "on time" (University of Hawaii System, 2013). This can also be accomplished by taking four semesters of 12 credits and 6 credits for two summers.

The institution needs to have a communications strategy in place (C. Scott, personal communication, September 21, 2020). Messages need to be tailored to motivate different stakeholders, and data should be presented in the form of persuasive visualization (CCA, 2017c). BSCC used infographics posted on classroom doors as well as on their website and social media (C. Scott, personal communication, September 21, 2020). The communications office of BSCC assisted by advertising the 15 to Finish messages on the college's website. This office also created infographics, a tag in the footer of emails, and posted numerous quotes from students tailored to the stakeholders. BSCC took advantage of the open resource material Complete College America provides to everyone who intends to offer a 15 to Finish campaign (personal communication, September 21, 2020). These include posters, brochures, presentations, videos, and social media ads found on their website to promote 15 credits per semester. The UH System incorporated public relations professionals to develop a strong media campaign to reach students and parents through television advertisements (C. Bio, personal communication, September 15, 2020). They crafted

messages for their target audiences and posted the 15 to Finish slogans on T-shirts, cups, and pens (Korn, 2016).

Incentives

Incentives are a great way to promote the 15 to Finish strategy. Institutions can offer motivational incentives and financial incentives to increase the number of students taking 15 credits. For example, Union County College in New Jersey offered banded tuition as an incentive for students to take more than 12 credits. The tuition rate between 12-18 credits is fixed, allowing full-time students to enroll in 15 credits for the same price as enrolling in 12 credits. (M. McMenamin, personal communication, August 30, 2020). At Lorain County Community College in Ohio, the students enrolling in over 13 credits do not pay extra tuition (Klempin, 2014). The legislature in West Virginia capped the tuition cost. The full-time tuition is calculated per credit up to 12 credits. Beyond that, students do not pay for extra credits taken (Klempin, 2014).

Korn (2016) noted that the UH System incentivized students who take 30 credits their first year with a yearly drawing to receive free textbooks. BSCC organized a day in the semester where students signed a pledge of taking 15 credits in the next semester (C. Scott, personal communication, September 21, 2020). The institution offered incentives for students who pledged, such as having their name posted on the website, having a picture taken with the mascot, and enjoying free pizza.

Motivational incentives may only be needed when first launching the 15 to Finish campaign. At BSCC, incentives are no longer needed, and it is no longer a campaign (C. Scott, personal communication, September 21, 2020). Now, 15 to Finish is a strategy that has been ingrained in the institution's culture. Taking 15 credits per semester or 12 credits per semester and 6 credits over the summer are normal conversations students have with their advisors and financial aid staff during registration (C. Scott, personal communication, September 21, 2020).

Continuous Improvement

After the campaign has taken place, the institution must assess the campaign's outcome to see if it was successful. Specifically, it is important to assess effectiveness in terms of student performance, student experience, and narrowing equity gaps (L. Hagood, personal communication, August 26, 2020). Data analysis can determine changes in enrollment patterns and determine if there is an increase in students enrolling in at least 15 credits over the previous semester.

When the UH System implemented its 15 to Finish campaign, they saw a big rise in the percentage of students taking 15 credits (CCA, 2017a). They went back to the data, making sure those students who were taking 15 credits were still performing well (CCA, 2017a). They kept validating and revalidating their data (CCA, 2017d). Jenkins & Bailey (2017) proposed using early momentum Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) to examine the success of the reforms at many institutions, such as the 15 to Finish strategy. KPIs are leading indicators that use short-term measurements to predict longer-term outcomes to assess the effects of the reform being implemented (Jenkins & Bailey, 2017). For example, KPIs based on first-year students' performance metrics can be correlated to long-term outcomes like higher completion rates. Belfield et al. (2019) created early momentum metrics for colleges to assess and measure

their students' progress during educational reforms. By disaggregating data of student' demographics in subgroups, they examined momentum measures that formatively assessed the effectiveness of institutional reforms such as a 15 to Finish strategy. For example, they analyzed transcript data for first-time college students that had entered between 2010 and 2012 from three community college systems and followed them for six years. The researchers looked at the credit momentum metrics (CMM) to determine students' progress towards completing their degrees on time when taking 15 credits per semester in their first academic years. Student success was measured by credential completion using two subgroups to study if the equity gap would close when there was early momentum. The study investigated how many students met each of the CMM, how strong the association was between CMM and student success, and the predicted outcomes if students were to meet CMM. The study showed that CMM accurately indicated future degree completion regardless of the subgroup. If more students meet the CMM, the predicted outcome through this study was a substantial improvement in college-level outcomes.

Change in higher education is not easy, and thus changing the cultural mindset of students and college professionals cannot happen without significant intervention and will take time. Cathy Bio reveals that at the community colleges in Hawaii (UHCC), the culture of taking 15 credits is more ingrained at four-year institutions as compared to the community colleges (personal communication, September 15, 2020). Although there has been a shift, advisors at UHCC still sometimes ease students into the college experience. The onboarding works, she says, but there are not enough advisors to help them once the student is taking classes. She considers having coaches as a solution to encourage and remind students they need 15 credits to finish on time.

Benefits of the 15 to Finish campaign must be expressed through data to the stakeholders, especially at community colleges (CCA, 2017b). CCA (2017c) implied in their scaling standards that measuring, monitoring, and mending are an important part of making sure the campaign continues to be successful. Using the data, the institution can make adjustments to achieve the maximum impact of the campaign (S. Evenbeck, personal communication, August 26, 2020).

In 2013, Union County College (UCC) in New Jersey had the lowest graduation rate (6.8%) of the state's 19 community colleges (M. McMenamin, personal communication, August 30, 2020). To remedy this, UCC implemented a 15 to Finish strategy. In 2019, UCC had the 6th highest graduation rate (33%) in the state (M. McMenamin, personal communication, August 30, 2020). UCC President McMenamin voiced that the work is not done. When disaggregating the data, there are still attainment gaps within race and ethnicity, even though each subgroup's completion rate went up. This is when institutions must refine their 15 to Finish strategy. Jim Koch, president of the Gardner Institute, explained that it is important to convey the message of taking the "right" 15 credits to finish on time and therefore refine the campaign when assessing data with the course and curriculum redesign (personal communication, September 22, 2020). BSCC took action, adding strategies when they noticed attainment gaps between White students and Black students taking 15 credits did not close even though credit attainment and GPA for Blacks increased (C. Scott, personal communication, September 21, 2020). BSCC reassessed the data and noticed that the majority of students in developmental courses

were Black. They decided to refine their 15 to Finish strategy by creating academic maps and offering corequisites aligning with the first-year college math and English courses. When Scott showed the 2019 data to college professionals, they were astounded how these strategies were making such a difference (personal communication, September 21, 2020). The corequisite passage rate for the Black students increased dramatically to 60%. BSCC is starting to see the early momentum gap narrowing (C. Scott, personal communication, September 21, 2020).

Kathy Johnson stated that when the University of Georgia System measured data from their campaign, they showed that there were students enrolled in 15 or more credits who did not complete those credits within the semester (CCA, 2016e). The University of Georgia System broke down these data into withdrawals, D and F grades, and used the information to better advise students. They found the biggest predictor of students not completing courses was the amount of non-academic unmet need. This allowed them to increase need-based aid and support programs at the institution.

CONCLUSION

The 15 to Finish campaign is a game-changer strategy that works. The literature review and conversations with practitioners and administrators provided insight into key factors contributing to the successful implementation of a 15 to Finish campaign. Students have and will continue to benefit academically and financially thanks to the post-secondary institutions that recognize the advantages of launching a 15 to Finish campaign.

Colleges who wish to implement such a campaign should begin by seeking the commitment from internal stakeholders across the institution and offering professional development where evidence-based data proving the strategy works is shared and discussed (D. Elston, personal communication, September 4, 2020). This professional development is critical in order to change the internal stakeholder mindset (CCA, 2016a). College professionals who are fully aware of the benefits of and evidence for the 15 to Finish campaign are more likely to encourage students to enroll in 15 credits per semester (Headlam et al., 2019). Institutions will need to establish clear campaign messages tailored to the external stakeholders such as students and parents so that the benefits of enrolling in 15 credits resonate with them (D. Elston, personal communication, September 4, 2020). Financial and other incentives offered by the institutions can contribute to students taking 15 credits per semester (Waiwaiole & Elston, 2017).

Implementing the features identified through this review will greatly contribute to a successful 15 to Finish campaign. As a result, all students will receive valuable and critical information about getting to the finish line on time. It will position students to make better choices that will positively affect their future career, earnings, and savings. Institutions that use the 15 to Finish strategy are committing to creating an environment where students perform better academically and where race, ethnicity, and family income are no longer the predictors of student success (A. Koch, personal communication, September 22, 2020).

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