

The UAF Faculty Senate passed the following at Meeting #183, May 7, 2012:

RESOLUTION:

The UAF Faculty Senate respects the goals of, but nevertheless rejects joining “Complete College America.” Instead, the UAF Faculty Senate urges the Alaska State Legislature and the administration of the University of Alaska to support and encourage programs that recognize Alaska’s considerable regional diversity and are tailored to address the goals of Alaska’s students, rather than to bind Alaska to a rigid set of one-size-fits-all national education rules. Our best strategy is to provide support, preparation, and access to programs and degrees without any real or implied penalty for length of time to degree completion and without compromising the quality of our programs or individual classes.

Motivation

- The entire faculty, staff, and administration of the University of Alaska Fairbanks support measures to increase the ability of students to make use of UAF's educational opportunities.
- We note that 40 percent of incoming UAF students are non-traditional, enrolling after a gap of more than one year after high school graduation. A significant number of UAF students hold jobs, are raising families, and juggle a number of other life concerns while attempting to earn a degree, making graduation in four years as a measure of "success" an unrealistic ideal, yet their graduation after a longer time period is a major accomplishment and success for them.
- A large percentage of students enrolled at UAF transfer in or out at some point, complicating both one-size-fits-all program design and quantitative measures of student completion rates.
- The UAF Faculty Senate holds that no student should be denied the experience of higher education that meets the student’s own definition of success or learning goals, and holds that we should be celebrating the graduation of all our students, not just those who are able to graduate the fastest.
- The University of Alaska Fairbanks should continue to work towards finding better ways to provide accessibility and flexibility for ALL our students to realize their educational goals.
- The one-size-fits-all approach of Complete College America is not appropriate for our student body. The University of Alaska Fairbanks is in the best position to evaluate the needs of its own students and determine ways to meet those needs.
- Complying with the additional reporting requirements of Complete College America would be an additional, unproductive burden on university resources.

Background and Discussion

The Complete College America program was initiated in 2009 by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation in an effort to enlist state governments, principally the governors, to reform higher education. The program now has additional foundation sponsors. Its goal is to increase completion rates for a “college degree or credential of value” from ~40% to ~60% by 2020. It recruits governors and state legislatures to its cause, seeing the universities and colleges themselves as the impediment to reform. At present, 30 states have joined this program, adopted its goals, and pledged to follow its requirements.

The stated national problem is insufficient completion of higher education degrees in the context of an increasing need for workers with post-secondary education. Specific problems cited are a national ~40% graduation rate in college degree and certificate programs, increasing time-to-degree, increasing student debt which grows with time-to-degree, and persistent attainment gaps for traditionally underrepresented populations.

The premise of the Complete College America program is that best practices/essential steps for increasing completion rates have been identified, but that recalcitrant colleges and universities are invested in current practices and will not change unless paid or forced to do so. State governments, in contrast, have a vested interest in actual success of students and higher education, and also have a great deal of leverage over public colleges and universities. CCA recommends that state governments should force change by requiring their public higher education institutions to adopt these best practices/essential steps. In other words, the idea is to shift higher educational policy-making away from the educational institutions and governing boards (e.g., Board of Regents) to the state legislative and executive branches which would be more responsive to the needs of the state and its students. From the CCA document “The Path Forward”:

- “Institutions have strong incentives to shape reporting to mask failure and avoid confronting problems. States are much more likely than individual institutions to share and publish data to drive reform.”
- “States are the best positioned to ensure reform across systems and campuses by setting goals, establishing uniform measures, and monitoring progress. They can also serve as the most efficient clearinghouses of best practices, allowing for rapid scaling of successful reforms.”
- “Higher education attainment is inextricably linked to future economic success. State leadership will ensure stronger linkages between each state’s economic needs and higher education delivery.”

The Complete College America program issued the 2011 publication *Time is the Enemy*, which primarily advocates for full-time rather than part-time enrollment as a way to decrease time-to-degree, increase graduation rates, and decrease student debt. It also criticizes “excessive course-taking” and remedial coursework as factors that discourage students or hinder students’ ability to complete degrees.

The Complete College America program also issued the 2012 publication *Remediation: Higher Education’s Bridge to Nowhere*. The main theme of this publication is that most students who start in remedial classes ultimately do not graduate, and therefore remediation does not work and represents a dead end for students. It asks “Can an ‘open access’ college be truly open access if it denies so many access to its college-level courses?” Their research “shows that students who skip their remedial assignments do just as well in gateway courses as those who took remediation first.” The report advocates either mainstreaming these students in full-credit courses with intensive tutoring support or redirecting them to “high-quality career certificate programs that embed extra help in the context of each course and lead to jobs that pay well.”

From the CCA document “Structure and New Models”:

“New models are needed to significantly increase the number of students completing and completing on time. **This is systemic reform.** While colleges can implement these approaches differently, focusing on different programs and/or segments of the student population, colleges should be encouraged to **be responsive to all of these principals, not pick and choose among them.**”
(emphasis in the original)

The specific recommendations range from the mundane to quite dramatic. The full list is many pages long. Below are examples (some are paraphrased):

- Replace semesters with 4-8 week terms, “with fewer courses per term and fewer weeks away from school between the terms.”
- “Utilize year-round attendance; no summers off.”
- Require a prescribed set of courses and course sequencing for each program to reduce the complexity of registration, course selection, and the need for course advising.
- “Compress classroom instruction to reduce seat-time requirements and allow students to proceed at an accelerated pace.” Classroom instruction is to be supplemented by other resources, e.g., online technology.
- “Embed remediation” in regular courses.
- "Require a certain number of credit hours be taken through online courses."
- "Offer prior learning assessments that allow students to demonstrate mastery of college-level content and test out of and/or earn credits for demonstrated mastery."
- "Require formal, on-time completion plans for every student upon enrollment, updated annually."
- "Require that students transferring with associate degrees have junior-level status at the four-year universities."
- “Enact credit caps of 120 credit hours for a Bachelor’s degree and 60 credit hours for an associate degree so students do not earn excessive numbers of credits to complete a degree (allow exceptions only when necessary to maintain program accreditation).”
- “Charge students more for taking excess coursework of more than 12 additional credit hours beyond the credit caps...” [120 credits]

Some of the practices discussed by CCA are already in place in Alaska. For example, students who complete general education requirements at any of the three MAUs (UAA, UAF, UAS) can transfer to another MAU with that completion recognized. This is UA Regents’ Policy. Other CCA practices are currently under discussion at UAF. One is the possibility of allowing students to demonstrate mastery of college-level content and waive certain general education (core) requirements, in order to allow students greater flexibility in selecting courses and designing their education while ensuring the intended learning outcomes.

However, some of the CCA requirements would directly contravene educational policies at UAF and systemwide. CCA requires a cap of 120 credit hours for Bachelor’s degrees. In the UA system, Regents’ Policy sets 120 credits as the minimum, not the maximum. Half of UAF’s bachelor’s degree programs currently exceed 120 credit hours, including some of its most prominent and successful undergraduate programs. Examples: Education 130 credits, Alaska Native Studies 130 credits, Earth Science 130 credits, Engineering and Mining programs 131-135 credits. There is necessarily a balance between the number of credits/courses to meet the intended learning outcomes for a degree, and the investment of time and resources this requires from both the university and the student. Undergraduate engineering programs nationwide have a higher course requirement and less room for electives than other majors; this is driven by the technical requirements of engineering, and for CCA to arbitrarily mandate that engineering programs (for example) must cap credit requirements at 120 credits would not be in the best interest of our engineering graduates, potential employers, or the State of Alaska. While engineering programs are accredited and might fall under the exception allowed by CCA, they serve as an easily understood example. Other programs also have discipline-specific reasons for their course requirements.

The Complete College America program is designed to interfere in a major way in the design of education programs in colleges and universities. It is deliberately designed as an inflexible, one-size-fits-all program in order to prevent states or higher education institutions from picking and choosing among what it sees as an essential set of prescribed practices. This structure is an attempt to remove options and

to direct the educational system from outside, to reorient it toward a specific set of priorities and “uniform metrics.”

Like Complete College America, No Child Left Behind sets an ambitious goal for an educational system and imposes a rigid structure and set of requirements to force institutions to adopt its priorities and approaches. For Alaska, many of its provisions are impractical, counterproductive, and distract from other, locally developed solutions that would be more effective. They also crowd out educational experiences that are not deemed to be “essential.” Similarly, the Complete College America program would eliminate much flexibility and choice both in terms of how UAF adapts to a changing world and changing needs of its students, and in terms of options that the students themselves have at UAF.

UAF needs to be able to respond to the needs and goals of its own students, without being constrained by mandates developed for students elsewhere. Ultimately, our priority is to graduate well-prepared students, and we will continue to be proactive in looking for good solutions for our students and our university.

Catherine F. Cahill 5/7/12

President, UAF Faculty Senate Date