Completion by Design: Concept Paper

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This concept paper states that Completion by Design is the “next major step” (p.3) in community college reform – a five-year “investment” to design and implement a “model pathway to completion.” (p.3)

It is apparent that this concept paper’s primary purpose is to provide the basis for a large grant request-for-application. This paper outlines the grant’s purpose, expectations, deliverables, partnership framework, and key administrator positions. In so doing, the concept paper also provides insight into the salient features of Completion by Design, along with best practice examples that serve to enlighten avenues to accomplish its intent.

The grants will be awarded through competitive rounds to nine states – Oregon is NOT one of them. There will be three levels – a managing institution, at least four cadre colleges, and a state policy lead agency. Applications will be assessed based on their ability to commit to increasing completion, their experience implementing success strategies, ability to monitor success of a cohort, commitment to data use, ability to employ technology for improvement, and ability to lead an upscale of initiatives. (p.6)

Completion by Design is a key part of the foundation’s ambitious postsecondary success strategy, which will invest $475 million over four years with the goal of doubling the number of low-income young adults who earn a postsecondary credential with labor market value by age 26. This will be done by 1. Improving postsecondary institutional student-centered approaches, 2. Supporting students through enhanced services, and 3. Building public support. (p.3)

Completion by Design is necessary because students (especially low-income) face high-risk moments, which are concentrated early in the college experience. The three foci of Completion by Design in this respect are 1. College entry, 2. Academic catch-up, and 3. Program of study. Along with these “loss points,” are momentum points, which may parallel the loss points. So Completion by Design seeks to minimize loss points and maximize momentum points. Two keys for this to happen are colleges’ success in making early connections between academic programs and career or transfer goals, and clearly identifying loss points and plan interventions accordingly. Completion by Design is meant to take completion to the next level by addressing the full continuum of student experience by analyzing the full spectrum of institutional factors. (p.4)

To achieve this, colleges must analyze their systems to see where they failing and succeeding to create a model pathway for student completion. The framework contains four key “moments:” connection, entry, progress, and completion. While a guide to proven best practices is under development, some examples are given. Success can be defined as: finishing a certificate, completing a two-year degree, and/or successful transfer. (p.5)

Colleges will be expected to develop pilot cohorts of at least 100-200 students. At college entry, it is assumed that “promising practices” will be implemented, including mandatory orientation, no-late-
registration policies, contextualized testing for placement, pre-placement test preparation, and tighter processes to link testing and advising. This includes better individualized placement strategies. (p.7)

As the cohort progresses through developmental and “gatekeeper” courses (foundational math and writing), promising completion strategies include mandatory student success courses, accelerated development coursework, peer and cohort learning communities, early intervention, tutoring, self-paced learning and academic plans. When the cohort progresses into its programs of study, student enrollment tracking, minimum course load expectations, and joint academic and financial aid counseling are recognized best practices. Finally, intensive career counseling is seen as key to the success of any Completion by Design model pathway. (p.8) Features of this include progress check-ins, and providing world-of-work connections (e.g. service learning, job shadowing). (p.9)

The timeline will be three phases over five years. A Completion by Design Assistance Team (CDAT) composed of nationally-recognized experts will provide strategic support for all awardees. They will assist in pathways/systems analysis that is based on the loss and momentum point framework. Phase I will be a one-year planning cycle. The Gates Foundation will assess the plan before awarding funding for Phase II: Implementation. This phase includes the building of a state advisory board that involves K-12, the business community, and non-profits. (p.10)

As Phase II shows success through increased rates of academic success, pace of progress, and completion, phase III funding can be awarded for implementation of a scaling strategy to involve a larger proportion of students. Through all phases, learning objectives will be monitored and documented. These include the ability of cadres to design viable model pathways, navigate policy and funding issues, develop realistic plans, consensus decision-making by advisory boards, building of credible completion processes, active information sharing, and improved student outcomes. (p.11)

The Completion by Design Concept Paper concludes by naming and describing the necessary entities to accomplish the requirements of the grant. The local campus or college will combine with at least three others to form a cadre. The cadre will represent the state effort and will be managed by a lead college called the managing partner. At the state level, the cadre will work closely with a state policy lead and with their statewide advisory board. Above this will be the CDAT and the Gates Foundation personnel to provide a national platform for the improvements that the program will bring.

The Completion by Design Assistance Team has a website at:
http://www.completionbydesign.org/

The full Completion by Design Concept Paper can be found at:
http://www.completionbydesign.org/sites/default/files/CBD_Concept_paper_.pdf