



The New Fill-in-the-Blank Agenda:

How Doublespeak and Paperwork are Threatening the Future of Community Colleges

By Jeffrey Michels, Ph.D.

In 1970s China, a story was told of three mangos that Chairman Mao one day “donated” from his own table to help “feed the proletariat” during a time of widespread famine. The mangos were sent out on tour and put on display in town after town where the villagers were compelled to gather and give speeches affirming the generosity of the Great Leader and the bounty that Communism provides. Although starving, people lined up to praise the symbolic gift and to see the famous mangos. Those who grumbled or stayed at home, after all, risked punishment.

In California today, our education system is starving. Public schools (K-12) have been cut more than \$18 billion in the last three years, and per-student funding in California has dropped to among the lowest in the nation. Our universities are now turning away students in droves (40,000 qualified applicants were denied admission to the CSUs over the past two years), and our community colleges, amid unprecedented student demand, are rushing to slash programs and cancel classes as a result of funding cuts. We turned away approximately 140,000 students last year, and the State Chancellor’s Office estimates as many as 350,000 may be turned away this year.

Class sizes and wait-lists are up; counseling hours and student services are down; and looming future funding reductions are being exacerbated by rising health care and insurance costs. And yet, our leaders and administrators seem to gather with alarming regularity these days to salute and endorse a spate of new agendas that come like Mao’s mangos, not to feed us but to symbolize our loyalty and conformity.

The “new completion agenda,” the “student success” mantra, the “new accountability focus,” the “Student Learning Outcomes” (SLO) project, and most recently, the “2020 Vision for Student Success” proffered by the Community College League of California’s “Commission on the Future,” all reflect connected statewide and national efforts to convince a supposedly tax-weary public that education reform is underway despite unprecedented funding cuts. However, the reforms themselves are in many cases flawed and inadequate; what’s worse, they often seem to undermine the very goals they purport to advance. As governing boards embrace the new agendas and colleges throughout the state struggle to implement reforms under terrific pressure from the Accrediting Commission for Community and Junior Colleges (ACCJC), not only do we mask our genuine need for public investment, we also squander shrinking resources.

The SLO Project and the new focus on accountability provide an excellent case in point. Accountability and so-called “data-driven” approaches to education policy are at the heart of most reform movements today. “Accountability for student performance is one of the two or three - if not the most - prominent issues in policy at the state and local levels right now,” says Professor Richard F. Elmore of Harvard University’s Graduate School of Education.

Not surprisingly, most educational leaders in the community college system publicly support accountability. For example, State Chancellor Jack Scott calls the current accountability movement “in general a good idea.” Accountability, as Judith Eaton, President of the Council for Higher Education Accreditation explains, is directly connected these days to “the tax dollars we receive.” Voters expect an accounting for the money they invest in education. In theory, being accountable leads to better performance.

In fact, there is little data to suggest that an increased focus on accountability improves teaching or is good for students. The most recent “report card” issued by *Education Week* scores California’s public K-12 schools, where the shift to accountability measures came earlier than it did for community colleges, an A- for “assessment and accountability.” Our public schools, the report affirms, have become experts in tracking and demonstrating student scores and teacher performance. But the same report scores California schools a D- for “achievement indicators.” Our meticulously collected student scores are terribly low! So much for the notion that teacher and school accountability leads to student success!

What’s more, the focus on testing in the public schools has come at the expense of more creative and innovative approaches, while efforts to question or evaluate the STAR (testing) program, such as Tom Torlakson’s AB 476 last year, which would have mandated an independent investigation, have met with political roadblocks (Governor Schwarzenegger vetoed the bill).

So too with SLOs in community colleges: the goal of enhancing program reviews by tracking student learning in each course sounds terrific. To quote a recent Academic Senate report, “the use of assessment [SLO] data as a basis for decision making can empower the faculty voice in planning and budgeting discussions.” But pressure from the ACCJC and “its 2012 deadline for SLO proficiency,” as the Senate report further notes, has caused “many colleges and faculty to think of SLO assessment only as a quantitative task to complete for accreditation purposes rather than focusing on the quality of their assessment activities.” In practice, SLOs have become a quagmire for many faculty: an externally imposed burden that seems more bureaucratic than pedagogical.

For most faculty, assessing student learning has always been an integral part of the teaching process. Thus to many, the SLO Project seems to offer little that’s new in terms of pedagogy but rather a shift in emphasis away from content to form. SLOs must fit into certain guidelines, reflect certain patterns, meet certain time lines; and one could hardly overestimate the volume of work that faculty have produced and the time they have spent (and are spending) identifying and complying with these parameters.

Obviously, time spent in SLO meetings or documenting assessment is time not spent working with students, responding to student work or developing lesson plans. Beyond that, the pressure to conform and to demonstrate compliance, like STAR testing in the public schools, may actually inhibit creative teaching. A recent survey in the Contra Costa Community College District showed not only that most faculty reject the notion that SLOs are improving teaching, but that many (51% of those full-timers responding) now feel that SLOs are interfering with teaching.

Implementing the SLO Project has also been a huge distraction for managers, put unfair pressure on part-time faculty who are too often bullied or cajoled into participating in ways for which they are not compensated, and in many cases has proved a divisive element. But of course, SLOs are not optional, and although discontent seems to be growing, there are few who have publicly challenged the Project; such efforts have usually morphed into studies of “best practices” in order to suggest ways faculty might more fully take ownership of the process. Suggestions for a systemwide audit to determine how much the SLO Project is costing and to evaluate its effectiveness have met, not surprisingly, with stiff opposition. (Last year, for example, FACCC suggested a system-wide audit to evaluate accreditation costs, including how much districts are spending to comply with ACCJC standards for

SLOs and program review, but FACCC found few allies in this effort, and the plan did not move forward.) SLOs, after all, were a response to public (or political) demands for accountability, and in these times of reduced funding, many seem convinced that the public needs reassurance in this area of the sort best provided by our unity and dedication regarding assessment.

Our efforts to unify behind new agendas and to tell the public what they want to hear, however, are becoming increasingly problematic. Consider, for example, our system's reaction to the "American Graduation Initiative," a plan announced by President Obama on July 14, 2009, to invest roughly \$12 billion in federal money over 10 years to "increase college graduation and close achievement gaps." The funding for this program, unfortunately, was not approved by Congress (a decision that came as part of the Health Care Reform package). Rather than \$12 billion, the colleges were promised \$2 billion, and details have just recently been announced (in January of 2011): over the next four years, the US Department of Labor, in coordination with the US Education Department, will award about \$500 million per year in competitive grants to colleges and for-profit institutions that offer two-year degrees. The grants, according to the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, will reward "projects that find ways to bolster the economy," including "career training" and "openly available online courses" that "publish learning materials free on the web."

Whether one views the grant program, to quote David Moltz of *Inside Higher Education*, as a "consolation prize [that is] better than nothing" or as "unlikely to bring about much change at all," clearly it is not a plan for large-scale federal investment in increasing graduation rates or closing achievement gaps. But oddly, this has not stopped community college leaders from wholeheartedly embracing both of those goals as though the funding were unimportant.

Many districts have accepted the "completion agenda" as a "national imperative" and have signed a "National Call to Action Resolution Accepting the College Completion Challenge." The resolution is aimed at promoting "the development and implementation of policies, practices, and institutional cultures that will produce 50% more students with high quality degrees and certificates by 2020."

The Community College League of California's "2020 Vision for Student Success," a report produced by the League's "Commission on the Future" (and presented in detail elsewhere in this issue) is itself a direct response to "the American Graduation Initiative's call to increase community college completions by five million nationally by 2020." The Report estimates "California's share of the goal . . . as 1,065,000" and suggests that to "achieve California's share of the national goal . . . will require that the system increase completions, an average increase of 29,316 (13%) each year."

With this annual progress, the Report concludes, "the system can triple the number of annual degree and certificate completions than otherwise would be awarded. On a per college basis, on average each of the 112 colleges will need to increase annual completions from 1,200 to 3,500." By embracing Obama's goals even after the collapse of the \$12 billion funding plan (which would have been the largest federal investment ever in community colleges), community college leaders may seem to be championing their dedication to students, even in the face of adversity. Indeed, the Report admits that "current budget constraints leading to reduced access, lost purchasing power and student service program cuts make the goal daunting," but bravely concludes that it is nonetheless "necessary to establish a goal that meets the economic needs of the state and nation."

Unfortunately, the 2020 Report is not a description of working (but underfunded) programs like Extended Opportunities Programs and Services (EOPS) nor an optimistic list of new initiatives presented in hopes that legislators might eventually come through with funding once they see the plan. Rather, the Commission "was asked to constrain its recommendations within reasonably available state resources." So the Report accepts a goal that the President thought would cost \$12 billion, and suggests we can do it for nothing. This certainly makes Congress' decision not to fund AGI look prudent!

Even more disturbing is the Report's second goal: "eliminating [by 2020] the achievement and participation gaps among demographic and socioeconomic groups." Again, it's a noble cause. Anyone who has reviewed the data should be appalled by the achievement gaps in California. Certainly, eliminating these gaps by 2020 would be a terrific achievement and a great boon to the economy. But to suggest that we can make progress without additional resources (indeed with severely diminishing resources) is questionable at best. Maybe we can do some good by raising the profile of this problem, by raising awareness and discussing options. But any new initiative will probably require new investment. And at the moment, much of what we know works to offset the challenges of students who come to college underprepared or economically disadvantaged is disappearing! (It's a long list that includes more individual attention in smaller classes; extended hours in tutoring centers, at the library and in computer labs; more choices of class times and subjects; increased access to full-time faculty, etc.)

To suggest that the colleges will "eliminate" achievement gaps entirely by 2020 is simply to lie to the public. One may argue that it's just an optimistic exaggeration, a way of setting the bar high.

Certainly the Commission meant it to motivate us. But not only does it dangerously mask our need for resources, saying that colleges will (or even can) eliminate all performance gaps between rich and poor falsely implies that the main problem lies with the colleges, that we have always had the ability to fix the gap between rich and poor but just haven't cared enough to do it. Education at any level can certainly transform lives, and we take on the absolute responsibility to work with every student who steps into our classes, to invest in his or her success, to aim for 100% completion. We have a responsibility to root out racism and to offer support to all students. However, we cannot and we should not promise to make up for economic disparities all by ourselves.

By setting unrealistic goals, we set ourselves up to fail, and worse, we accept a wager that was never fair to begin with. After all, we have more to lose than we stand to win. As we shift from defining education as a process to the results-based corporate emphasis on product, we put our ability to serve all students at risk in several ways.

First, we empower those who support "performance-based funding," who believe as Senator Carol Liu writes in SB 1143 that colleges need a "fiscal incentive . . . to help students complete their courses" (as if without this fiscal incentive, we really don't care how students do in class). Although funding colleges based on "completion rates" or "student success" has obvious and probably insurmountable problems - it would unfairly penalize urban colleges, where students are less prepared and/or challenged by increased home and work responsibilities that can undermine studies; it would create a disincentive for colleges to offer difficult classes, where completion rates might be lower; it would lead to grade inflation, to name just a few - performance-based funding seems to be coming these days like a freight train heading for derailment.

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At its January 2011 meeting, the California Community College Board of Governors appointed 21 individuals (few of them faculty) to a “Student Success Task Force” whose stated purpose includes identifying funding models to “incentivize completion rates.” Says task force chair Peter MacDougall, “the only possible way for improving graduation rates is to realign funding priorities to coincide with academic performance.” As MacDougall explains, “courses and programs geared toward helping students walk across a stage wearing a cap and gown on graduation day must be our first priority.”

Graduation rates are certainly important, but quality education has always been more about process than product. Colleges need to be places where one can experiment and discover. When we prioritize results, we prevent our students from taking risks, from changing direction, and so perhaps from finding themselves and their vocations. Failure isn’t popular, but it’s a key component of learning; William Saroyan called failure the path to goodness and wisdom. If we stop funding failure, we may as well stop funding education.

Second, when we focus primarily on product, we mostly eliminate faculty from the equation. It’s not surprising that the *2020 Vision* report and the Student Success Task Force are being criticized for a general lack of faculty representation and involvement. Their focus is not on the classroom. Where education reform really should be about improving what happens in class or in those interactions between faculty (including counselors) and students, today’s results-based approach clearly reflects an administrative perspective.

From cataloging and chronicling SLOs to the *2020 Vision* report’s recommendations for more “visible high level leadership across districts and colleges,” education reform today is coming from outside the classroom. Faculty are continually being presented with new agendas and accountability measures as fully complete plans that seem to guarantee improvement (the *2020 Vision’s* report includes a “College Kit” that comes complete with a “Resolution of Support,” which some districts have signed without any local dialog at all). The effects of this bureaucratic approach can be seen everywhere.

This year, the Academic Senate for California Community Colleges is sponsoring an institute called “Student Success Across the Curriculum” dedicated, according to their promotional material, to informing and equipping faculty to “address student success.” The first question that will be covered: “How do I know that my model content review is up to date?” Now I’m not sure what my “model content review” is, but I’m reasonably certain it’s paperwork. And I can say with confidence that having my paperwork up-to-date will have no effect whatsoever on student success in my classes this semester. Back when “paperwork” referred to a syllabus or comments on student essays, it would have meant a lot. These days, we are constantly filling out forms in the name of “student success” that seem to serve everything but.

“Student success” needs to be more than a slogan. Along with its *2020 Vision* report, the League distributed buttons to some administrators that read: I (heart) Student Success. It’s a nice thought, but wearing the buttons will not improve student performance any more than Mao’s three mangoes could feed a starving China. We need to get back to real pedagogical/andragogical discussions, to reforms that begin inside the classroom, to reminding the public what good investment colleges are in the State’s economy (a \$3 return in added tax revenue for every \$1 spent on higher education), and to telling the truth that funding cuts are lowering the quality of education and overwhelming our passionate commitment and our best efforts. If we let this story become lost in a sea of paperwork and glittering generalities, our students will be the losers in the end.

FAST *FACCCTS*

by Jonathan Lightman

FACCtivism in Washington, DC

It’s not surprising that California’s congressional delegation isn’t closely monitoring developments on the state budget, or that state legislators aren’t current on events in Washington.

That’s a problem for community colleges as decisions in either capitol can help or harm our faculty, our students and our institutions.

On February 14-16, FACCC joined over 100 California Community College representatives (mostly CEO’s, deans, trustees and students) to provide a faculty voice in an overall 1,000–person national community college advocacy effort. FACCC’s second objective was to educate congressional representatives on state budget deliberations, explaining how decisions in Washington could mitigate or magnify the fiscal reductions in Sacramento. The timing could not have been better as it coincided with the introduction of the Continuing Resolution (CR), the budget mechanism for keeping the federal government operational.

Preservation of Pell Grants was the dominant conversation, with the leadership in the House of Representatives proposing a reduction in this program to Fiscal Year 2008 levels. This would negatively impact more than 418,000 California Community College students who rely on Pell Grants to go to college – many of whom would receive a \$700 hit to their individual financial aid awards.

FACCC urged members of congress to reject these cuts to Pell, especially when state legislators are poised to raise community college student fees by 38%. The combined impact of fee hikes and Pell Grant reductions could reach over \$1,000, a figure way too high for many of our students to sustain. (At every step along the way, FACCC also emphasized how these decisions undermine educational opportunity for veterans – a population deserving greater assistance.)

Thankfully, *FACCtivism* can be felt in Congress, where long-time FACCC member, Rep. Judy Chu (D – East Los Angeles) introduced an amendment to the CR to maintain full funding for Pell. While the amendment was ultimately ruled out of order pursuant to the House “Cut/Go” rule (mandating that one set of cuts can only be restored by another set of cuts), her efforts galvanized higher education advocates to keep fighting.

Other priorities on FACCC’s federal agenda included preservation of Perkins funding for career technical education, and the Career Pathways Innovation Fund, a Department of Labor grant program to expand the capacity of community colleges to train workers for jobs in high demand industries. These issues also demonstrated the interplay between federal and state policy, impacting California’s workforce and economic development.

As our institutions transform to meet the growing the demands of a changing workforce and struggle to survive on fewer dollars, *FACCtivism* is needed across America. This is the year to raise your voice. Call your members of congress today: say yes to Pell, yes to career technical education, and yes to veterans.

Contact FACCC Executive Director Jonathan Lightman to discuss other federal concerns, including reauthorization of the Workforce Investment Act, jlighman@facc.org; (916) 447-8555.