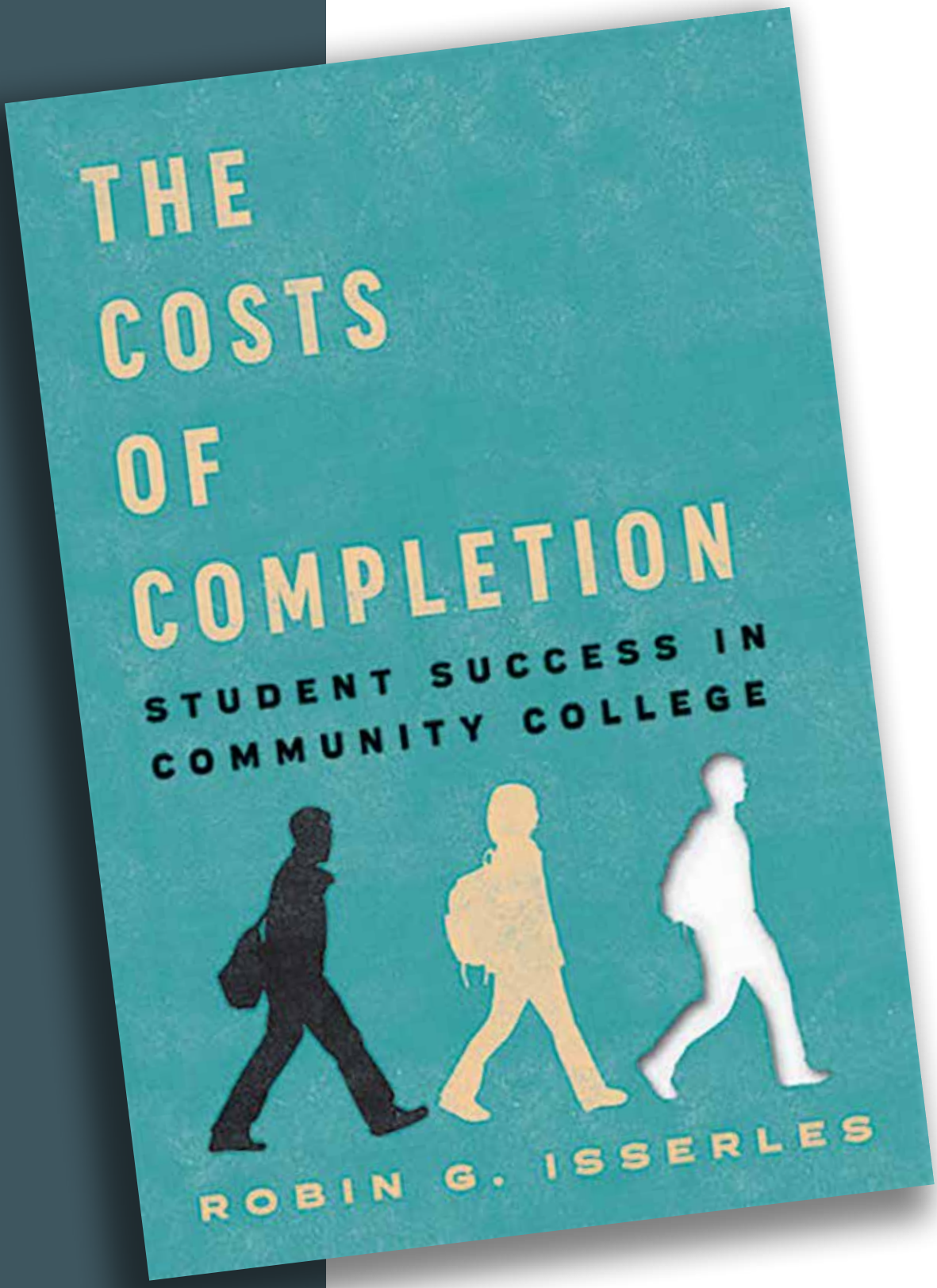
BOOK REVIEW



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Reviewed by John Fox

I am baffled by the incessant community college reform initiatives, including Student Learning Outcomes, the Associates Degree for Transfer, the Student-Centered Funding Formula, changes in remedial education in the form of AB 705, and most recently Guided Pathways. Champions of these reforms often proclaim "research says…" while providing no analysis of the research, no citation, and no identification of who is funding the research. Many reforms are backed by politically powerful educational philanthropists outside the community college system, including the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation and Lumina Foundation, complete with a neoliberal agenda.

Robin G. Isserles' *The Costs of Completion: Student Success in Community College* is a powerful pushback against this agenda. Isserles skillfully unpacks several neoliberal initiatives, critiquing studies that supposedly justifies the reforms, and proposes how community colleges could increase student success by creating caring institutions that don't treat students as "widgets in a knowledge factory." While much of the book highlights her experience at the City University of New York, California community college instructors will recognize the neoliberal agenda as it is manifested in our state.

Isserles' central argument is that the so-called completion crisis will not be solved by the neoliberal education philanthropists because their research ignores the subjective reality of students' lives, especially our most precarious students. "Neoliberal ascendance" (a term from Wendy Brown) is further possible by manufacturing a crisis in the manner of Naomi Klein's concept of the "shock doctrine" in which the solutions "are market-driven and anti-democratic."

One example of the market-driven orientation toward community colleges is an ideology called "College for All," in which the path toward building a strong workforce is a college education for everyone. Low completion rates provide the opportunity for educational philanthropists and politicians to manufacture a crisis. Consequently, policies are implemented based on either no solid research, research that doesn't justify the solution, or research that ignores students' lived experiences.

Isserles shows that performance-based funding, like California's Student Centered Funding Formula, is not an effective path to degree completion. Additionally, educational philanthropists fund research organizations, such as the Community College Research Center and Complete College America. Studies produced by these organizations are often used, and misused, to shape policy. For example, while CCRC's 2015 book *Redesigning America's Community Colleges* is often cited to show that remedial education is a failure, the authors explicitly state that "we do not advocate… the elimination of developmental education, the placing of all students into college courses, or the wholesale conversion of developmental education into a co-requisite model." Finally, Isserles critically analyzes the research that led to the development of Guided Pathways, which also emerged from the CCRC's book:

> ***But here is what happens in the neoliberal era of austerity-ravaged public universities: problems are identified, research is conducted by those external to the college, and partnerships are forged with expensive consultants who come up with very enticing ways to fix problems. These investments come without much direct knowledge of educating community college students, and with little respect for the essential features of an academic environment such as shared governance, deliberation, an openness to dissenting viewpoints, and most importantly, pedagogical expertise.***

One organization assisting colleges in implementing Guided Pathways is EAB, an educational consulting firmed owned by Vista Equity Partners. EAB's online toolkit Navigate produces student profiles that are based on quantitative data, such as GPA and credits earned to predict success. EAB targets faculty to buy into Guided Pathways uncritically.

A white paper on Guided Pathways included one section with this introduction by a community college president: "Change is scary. But if you think change and failure are so scary that you don't want to improve our ability to serve students, then get a dog. It's not my job to comfort you, it's my job to educate our

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students." The narrative: administrators and companies know more than faculty members about educating students.

Much of the neoliberal agenda is based on the theory of academic momentum, or the idea that "the more integrated a student is (academically and socially) the more likely the student will persist and complete a degree." Theoretically, momentum is created by "behaviors and choices" that will "snowball" into integration. While this is an individual approach, colleges play a role by encouraging behaviors that lead to integration, such as encouraging students to take 15 units per semester and a summer class.

To assess Academic Momentum, Isserles participated on a research team at the City University of New York (CUNY) that tested the theory through three interventions: summer remediation, becoming full-time in the second semester, and taking a summer course after the first year. While some of this research showed positive effects, many students dropped out of the study completely and others did not follow the plan of the researchers. Additionally, Isserles analyzed a CUNY program called Accelerated Study in Associate Programs, which helps students succeed in community college by providing financial and academic support. The results were again positive, yet 40% of students did not graduate. The research favored by educational philanthropists does not, empirically, show why students leave.

Isserles introduces the concept of "student sensibility," which examines how students' lives intersect with the social structures in which they live, or "link these individual situations with the larger world of higher education." As opposed to the "consumer sensibility" that emerges out of neoliberalism, student sensibility has much to do with how students see their educational experiences.

Specifically, Isserles focuses on three "layers": the validation of students' experiences (borrowed from Laura Rendón), a sense of belonging, and developing an identity as a college student. Her analysis of student emails shows how students are experiencing college, including internalized pressure to finish quickly; dealing with school bureaucracy; and the social conditions outside of college that interfere with completion, such as work, homelessness, and domestic violence. Isserles provides these most precarious students a voice.

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To serve these precarious students, Isserles proposes a caring institution: "Care theory places the labor and practice around care at the center of all our human interactions and activities." Care is not only an individual orientation but a system of institutional practices. Institutions can care, and not just by creating a "culture of care," but "[f]or an institution to be truly caring, there must be structural inclusion in every facet of the organization, not just at the individual level." In other words, colleges must be organized around care, and care is a collective responsibility. To that end, Isserles proposes initiatives, such as addressing mental health and training for faculty advisors, expanding work opportunities on campus, adding more value to vocational programs, and refining our pedagogies that create caring communities.

Throughout these 330 pages Isserles is reflective regarding her assumptions about students, admitting that she often applied middle-class values to her students who couldn't finish the class or turn in assignments. It is no surprise then that her pedagogy is influenced by Paulo Freire, John Dewey, and Bell Hooks. Because the book is so rich with detail and theory, I am omitting many important points in this limited space. When we see reforms on the horizon it is our responsibility as educators to interrogate these reforms, the research on which it is based, and the political agenda of the sponsors. The Costs of Completion does this superbly. I invite my colleagues, especially those who might support the neoliberal agenda, to read this book with an open mind and critical eye. ■