

The Costs of Completion: Student Success in Community College

Danielle Gardiner Milln

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BOOK REVIEW

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THE COSTS OF COMPLETION: STUDENT SUCCESS IN COMMUNITY COLLEGE

Robin G. Isserles. JHU Press, 2021, 352 pages.

In *The Costs of Completion*, Robin G. Isserles unpacks the journey to “success” for non-traditional students embedded within a broader discussion of increasingly exclusionary higher education in the United States. Isserles draws on her 30-plus years of community college teaching experience to examine contemporary barriers to higher education, using the context of a community college to point to sociopolitical inequities that are increasingly enshrined in government and institutional practices. Through rich first-hand accounts from students, colleagues, and fellow scholars, Isserles humanizes data and high-level policies that often ignore the lived realities of non-traditional students. Non-traditional students are broadly understood in the book as first generation, low-income, and/or students from equity-deserving groups. Isserles problematizes the focus on credential attainment and completion along a pre-determined timeline, arguing that non-traditional students who lack the familial or social capital to seamlessly enculturate into higher education are poorly served by sweeping policies and procedures that focus on quantifiable metrics of success.

The first half of the text provides a detailed background about the development of performance-based metrics and describes how these individualistic policies fail to consistently provide higher education access for non-traditional students. The second half of the book employs robust storytelling to center student accounts of how performance-based metrics and associated institutional practices impact their student experience and academic success. These compelling voices illuminate the substandard education environment created through the focus on a linear path to credential completion with insufficient attention paid to the overall student experience. The most critically and dangerously misaligned policies, according to Isserles, rely on performance-based metrics such as timely completion of studies and graduation rates to determine financial resource allocation.

Isserles pulls no punches in problematizing the history of performance-based funding, highlighting the ominous writing on the wall regarding increased exclusion of non-traditional students via reformation of higher education policies and structures. The lack of institutional recognition for differentiated capabilities and experiences is highlighted as a core reason that students are unable to complete their studies in a prescribed amount of time and meet predetermined academic metrics laid out by edu-philanthropists and institutions. Describing the adoption of academic momentum practices as a “neoliberal fetishization of ‘getting it done’”, Isserles argues that “the qualitative benefits of intellectual growth are [reduced] down to ‘Finish in Four’ or ‘Out in Two’” (p. 109).

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Central to the book is the omnipresent question of what purpose community college can and should serve in today's neoliberal landscape. In credentializing and institutionalizing knowledge, the opportunity for students to seek education for the sake of improving their critical thinking skills, developing soft skills required to foster positive professional and interpersonal relationships, and learning in service of curiosity is at significant risk. Isserles' positionality on neoliberal performance-based metrics is clear throughout the text, though she highlights several successes from both governmental and edu-philanthropic initiatives, demonstrating a relatively balanced view of ongoing efforts to address inequity in higher education attainment (p. 64–71). Though performance-based models can bridge the gap for a subset of non-traditional students, Isserles demonstrates that they overwhelmingly fail to support students' holistic success. For example, allowing students to take breaks throughout a program with no academic or financial ramifications when they have responsibilities outside of school to attend to may facilitate higher performance over the course of the student's time of study (p. 244–245). The ability to support fluidity between educational routes is absent from performance-based metrics that draw strict timelines for completion with little to no regard for an unpredictable element of student growth.

The "costs of completion" therefore refer to the human costs, individual and collective, of neoliberal performance-based funding measures in higher education. These costs, unsurprisingly, most stringently affect equity-deserving students of low income, racialized, and otherwise systemically disadvantaged backgrounds. Considering the connection of credential attainment with improved labor market access, impeding students' access to higher education significantly impacts the long-term socioeconomic wellbeing of the students whether a credential is earned within a predetermined timeframe or not. Isserles concludes the text with a call to enshrine an ethic of care into every post-secondary institution as a matter of priority, using firsthand examples to illustrate the role that every post-secondary staff member, advisor, professor, or stakeholder can have in altering the course of a student's educational journey. In one such example, a decade-old grade caused a student to lose financial aid, requiring the student to jump through a series of increasingly complex hoops to simply be able to enter into and retain her place in college. Isserles skillfully identifies miles-thick red tape within higher education to invoke the reader's compassion and indignation at the multiplicity of ways that students can be failed by simply falling outside of a traditional mould.

Overall, Isserles provides a rich and nuanced argument towards rethinking academic progression with a student-centric approach rather than attempting to judge student success through a neoliberal lens. Though lengthy and meticulously detailed, the language throughout the text is plain and easily navigable, making it accessible to a breadth of audiences. The book follows a logical progression of guiding the reader through the development of neoliberal policies in community college along to the nuts and bolts of how college students are negatively impacted by contemporary institutions and performance-based metrics. By employing individual stories and personal experiences, Isserles offers her local context as a microcosm of a larger, sinister shift in higher education that fails to meet the needs of current students and offers suggestions for an alternate future that would better serve future generations. Isserles takes care to consider a multifaceted view to the issue, outlining the ongoing efforts to improve access to post-secondary education while remaining cognizant of those who the system routinely fails to support. The book provides a thorough, thought-provoking resource for those working or studying in post-secondary education

in numerous capacities, and those interested in the broader issues of social inequities and educational policies.

Danielle Gardiner Milln
University of Alberta