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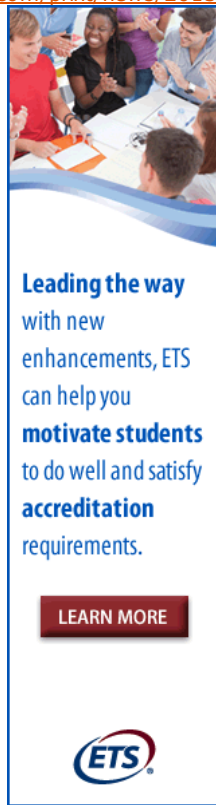


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 students sign a pledge to
 complete college at a
 completion event last fall.


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Culture of Completion

October 18, 2013
 By [Megan Rogers](#)

Joshua Trader dropped out midway through his first semester at Delta College because the "timing wasn't right." In doing so, he became another statistic of the sort often used to bemoan the performance of community colleges: of those pursuing two-year associate degrees, only 18.8 percent of full-time students graduate within four years, as do 7.8 percent of part-time students, according to a [report \(http://www.completecollege.org/docs/Time_Is_the_Enemy.pdf\)](http://www.completecollege.org/docs/Time_Is_the_Enemy.pdf) from Complete College America.

But Trader returned to the Michigan community college six years later, and when he did, he reached out to professors, attended tutoring sessions and became involved with student organizations.

Trader's new approach yielded an associate degree in science, another in art, and a certificate in communications. By the time he graduated Delta, Trader was a member of the Community College Completion Corps and advising other students to make similar choices to ensure completion.

Members of the Community College Completion Corps -- an initiative of the honor society Phi Theta Kappa, one of the six national organizations that [pledged \(http://www.insidehighered.com/news/2010/04/21/aacc\)](http://www.insidehighered.com/news/2010/04/21/aacc) in 2010 to increase community college completion by 50 percent over the decade -- have held signing events in which students vow to complete college. Phi Theta Kappa has collected 111,625 such pledges from members. Members have solicited commitments from more than 150,000 of their peers, said Rod Risley, executive director and CEO of Phi Theta Kappa.

Phi Theta Kappa has asked colleges to earmark the names of students who sign the pledge so they can begin to measure the effectiveness of the corps, Risley said. He said the organization has asked colleges to report whether students who signed the pledge and are supposed to graduate in the spring of 2014 complete their studies on time.

And now, those students are turning to faculty and staff members in a grassroots campaign. Students who commit to complete are given a [pledge \(http://www.ccccompletioncorps.org/ccccorps/sites/default/files/pdfs/c4-admin_fac_staff-pledge-sheet.pdf\)](http://www.ccccompletioncorps.org/ccccorps/sites/default/files/pdfs/c4-admin_fac_staff-pledge-sheet.pdf) for faculty and staff members and urged to find a completion champion. Faculty and staff members pledge to create a positive learning environment, mentor students and provide developmental opportunities.

"My professors from Delta College are some of my friends, mentors and people I look up to professionally, and it's because I took the time to ask them questions and get to know them and go to their office hours," Trader said. "I just spent time doing more of what other students should do: taking an interest and getting help."

Some professors are using the pledges -- often displayed prominently in the college or as the focus of a completion day event -- to spark conversations about the benefits of completion.

At Mesa Community College, in Arizona, some professors and their students take a trip to the college's main hallway to sign the pledge. "If we don't see the value of helping students complete, we're missing the boat," said Duane Oakes, faculty adviser for the PTK chapter at Mesa.

But faculty action must go beyond conversation, Oakes said. Students who are involved on campus are more likely to graduate college, he said, and more administrators and faculty could focus on giving resources to organizations.

"The discussion is there," he said. Now we have to translate it into tangible realities."

At Northeast Community College in Nebraska, 400 faculty and staff members signed the pledge at the request of students. In addition to signing the pledge, the faculty and staff members each indicated two specific ways they could foster students' success. The goal, Risley said, was to focus on cost-effective measures. Signees wrote they would increase their accessibility to students or seek professional development opportunities to strengthen their teaching skills, he said.

"It started spurring ongoing conversations about what each could do and what collectively they could do to help increase students' success," he said.

Administrators can help students complete college by setting clear pathways to completion and developing stackable credentials so students can reach success along the way to graduation, as well as working with transferring students to ensure a seamless transition to a new college, said Kent Phillippe, associate vice president of research and student success at the American Association of Community Colleges.

Community colleges in New Jersey will host completion events at each campus in mid-October and will hold a rally at the state capitol in May, said Larry Nespoli, president of the New Jersey Council of County Colleges.

Some administrators are discussing how to take the pledges a step further and offer more assistance to help students overcome the obstacles between signing the pledge and walking across the stage at graduation. Administrators at Monroe Community College in New York and other colleges have discussed tracking the records of students who signed the commitment to identify points of assistance. Phi Theta Kappa encourages colleges to communicate consistently with students who have pledged and to send along information about the next steps, whether that's declaring a major or meeting with an adviser, Risley said.

But the best conversations about college completion stem from students, Monroe President Anne Kress said. Conversations about the importance of college completion have "much more authenticity and a greater sense of authority" if they are peer-to-peer, she said.

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