

Strategic Scheduling Intelligence White Paper

# Adding Course Access to your Student Success Strategy

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## *Improve Academic Outcomes through Scheduling*

**A**s an industry, there is consensus on the need to improve outcomes. Everyone, from President Obama to front-line staff on most campuses, is focused on increasing completions. While access and retention gains have been made, they have not translated into significant improvements in completions. Results are needed, and they're needed now. It's time to put more emphasis on progression and completion.

Improving student outcomes is a complex, multi-dimensional challenge. No single strategy or area of focus can create the progress we need. Simply put, it's not a "simple" problem. Progress will only come when we embrace its complexity. Quality student services, student engagement, solid financial aid strategies, and an environment where students can learn and thrive are all essential. Knowledgeable, proactive advising and planning are needed to help students stay on an efficient path to completion.

Even when all of these strategies are embraced, many institutions fail to dramatically increase completions. We believe that this is due to the many obstacles students face on the path to completion. The path has many curves and potential potholes. Support systems must help students adjust and refocus on completion while minimizing potential barriers. This means having both a robust retention strategy and a commitment to removing completion roadblocks.

### **What Are The Roadblocks?**

Experience shows that many have grown to accept the antiquated process for rolling out course schedules that allocate faculty and academic space. It is often assumed that the process can't possibly change because it would be too difficult to change the culture.

Complete College America recently released a white paper – *Four-Year Myth: Make college more affordable. Restore the promise of graduating on time*. In this piece, they cite nine common causes for delayed

completion and dropouts, including: poor advising, poor planning and issues with course access and schedule alignment. These problems predispose students to wander the course catalog and take unneeded courses. The white paper noted that 75 percent of students juggle school, family and work. Therefore, "unpredictable class schedules mean college takes longer than it should." Additionally, the "dead end" cause, as stated in the CCA white paper, is that "20 percent of community college students say they were unable to get into a class needed for their degree; 33 percent stated that they had not gotten into a class they wanted to take."<sup>(1)</sup>

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According to the *Higher Education Scheduling Index™*<sup>(2)</sup>, a course offering and resource allocation benchmark database, only 32 percent of courses offered in a schedule are actually aligned with student need. This means that more than two-thirds of courses taught in a schedule are not aligned with student need. In turn, resources are not appropriately assigned to courses. This problem is the most common during the critical freshman year, when 37 percent of the entry-level courses are bottlenecked on most campuses.

Listening to students, arguably a no-brainer in a student success dialog, corroborates these findings. Students have been pleading for better course access and an improved registration experience for years. Noel-Levitz has confirmed this annually in its *National Student Satisfaction and Priorities Report*<sup>(3)</sup>, yet few in the industry appear to be paying attention.

The absence of a student-friendly schedule results in a potential single point of failure in the effort to improve completions. Even if everything else is accomplished – retaining students into their second year, helping them secure adequate financial aid, fully engaging them in and out of the classroom, advising them to follow a clear completion roadmap and securing great instruction – students can't succeed if they can't get the courses they need.

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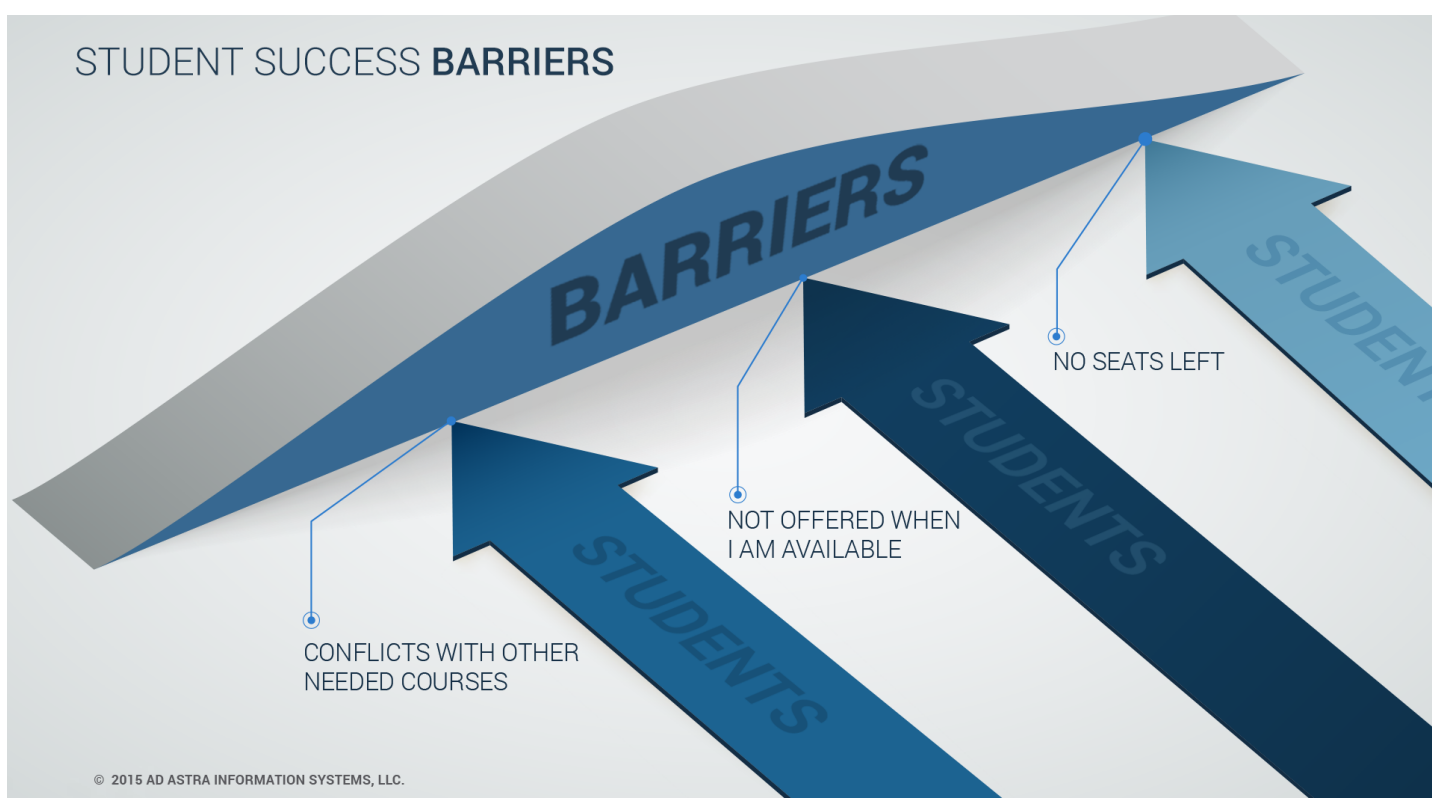
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## Why This Must Change

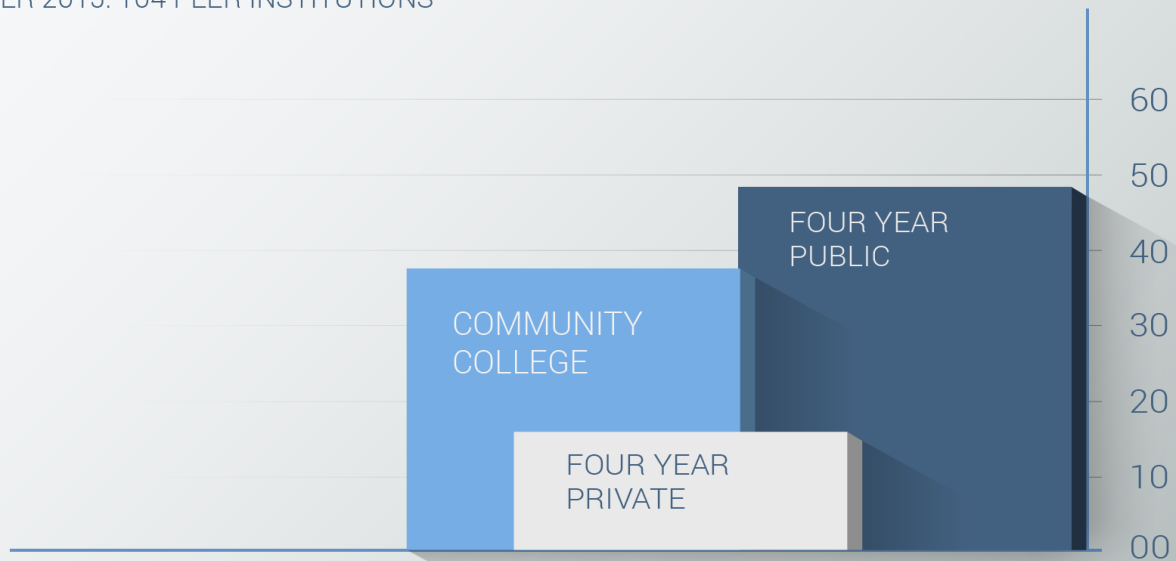
Why hasn't higher education focused on course scheduling as a student success strategy? A research paper focusing on strategies to improve affordability and college outcomes for low-income students – *Maximizing Resources for Student Success by Reducing Time- and Credits-to-Degree* – sheds some light on this question. Its authors, Nancy Shulock and Jolene Koester, cite improved course availability as having a “large” impact but a “low” ease of implementation and scalability.<sup>(4)</sup>

In our experience, institutions can implement and scale this strategy. When academic units use data to inform schedule refinements, improvements are seen in students' velocity to completion. This intervention does not typically require wholesale changes to schedules, but necessitates data-informed refinements targeted to affect the majority of students. Refinement,



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however, must be coupled with strong leadership, change management and communication strategies.

Successful implementations start with transparency and collaboration. Honoring the faculty as the most valuable resource requires thoughtful allocation and alignment with student needs. Full and productive student course schedules will enable institutions to see improvement in student completions as cited by Complete College America's *15 to Finish*<sup>(5)</sup> plan.

### Improving Outcomes

In summary, improved scheduling benefits all stakeholders. Students benefit from improved course access, the institution graduates more

students more quickly, and significant financial savings are realized through efficient allocation of faculty and space resources. As student outcomes, financial sustainability and affordability improve, buy-in is strengthened and the needle continues to move. While focusing on the schedule alone will not solve the entire problem, higher education should not ignore this essential strategy in the effort to improve student completions. Doing so perpetuates a single point of failure. An industry-wide focus on improving access to required courses will, ultimately, help us achieve the critical goal of increasing completion.

### Endnotes

1. Complete College America. (2014). *4-Year-Myth. Make college more affordable. Restore the promise of graduating on time.* Retrieved from <http://completecollege.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/11/4-Year-Myth.pdf>
2. Ad Astra Information Systems, L.L.C. Access to Completion. Retrieved from <http://accesstocompletion.com/>
3. Noel Levitz, LLC. Retrieved from <https://www.noellevitz.com/papers-research-higher-education/2014/2014-national-student-satisfaction-and-priorities-report>
4. Shulock, N., & Koester, J. (2014). *Maximizing Resources for Student Success by Reducing Time- and Credits-to-Degree.* Retrieved from [http://www.hcmstrategists.com/maximizingresources/images/Maximizing\\_Resources\\_Paper.pdf](http://www.hcmstrategists.com/maximizingresources/images/Maximizing_Resources_Paper.pdf)
5. Complete College America. (2014). *Full-time is fifteen.* Retrieved from <http://completecollege.org/the-game-changers/#clickBoxGreen>

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