

Dr. Rhodes: Most people don't understand how they calculate graduation rates. But it only looks at first time, full time students. When you think about a population of students at Austin Community College – we have 45,000 credit students and what percentage are first time, full time, that they've never taken a college class before and they come here as a full-time student, that's less than 5% of our students.

I use myself as an example when we talk about that group of students. When I graduated from high school, I started as a first-time, full-time student at a community college in Alamogordo, New Mexico. I attended that institution for one full year, and I took about 36 college credit hours during that year. Then I transferred to a university and ultimately then received a bachelor's degree. So if you take a look at those two institutions – the community college that I started at, and that gave me my best start; when I think back about my greatest teachers who inspired me to higher learning, it happened at the community college, that very first year. So I look at that and say if we look at graduation rates, those two institutions, Alamogordo (the community college) and New Mexico State University where I received my bachelor's degree, at the community college I started as first time, full time and did not graduate; so therefore I'm in the denominator but I'm not in the numerator. So I actually count against them in their graduation rate computation. At New Mexico State University, since I was a transfer student, I don't count at all. I'm not in the numerator; I'm not in the denominator because I was not a first time, full time student at that institution.

So people have to really understand the metrics and the data behind the metrics. There's a much larger story when we think about community college students and what their intent is and why they come here and what should we measure. As an open door institution, what should we measure our students, and how should we help them get from point A to point B to C, and ultimately to allow them to achieve their dreams.

A great way to measure success in community college and the metrics, really comes out – and this is my personal opinion – comes out of some research and work that has started through funding with the Gates Foundation in the state of Washington. In the state of Washington they came up with some metrics to measure student success for community colleges. Because we're open door institutions, where did the student enter the college and what skills did they have and what skills did they need in order to be successful?

So we'll have students who enter the community college who need adult basic education and did we help them become successful in attaining their goal of getting a GED? And if we did, that should be a metric for the measurement of our success. If they came needing adult basic education and we get them to a GED, then we should celebrate that; that's a good metric. If a student comes in and they need ESL, English as a Second Language, did we help that student acquire English as a Second Language? If we did, that's a celebration point, a momentum point is what it's called, and we should reward that and celebrate it. If a student comes to Austin Community College and they need developmental education, they need some help in reading, writing or mathematics before they're ready for the rigor of a college-level course, then if we

help them get through whatever the diagnostics reveal that they need help in as far as developmental, then we should celebrate that and reward that.

When you take a look at students who enter a community college or university and they reach what some people refer to as “gatekeeper courses” (they’re the hard courses – freshman composition or college algebra), those types of courses that when a student enters and really struggles with it, if we help them get through that gateway course – I call it a gateway not a gatekeeper – if we help them get through that, then that’s a success. That’s a momentum point for that student and we need to celebrate that. From there you look at, did they complete 15 college credit hours? That’s a momentum point. 30 college credit hours? That’s a momentum point. The achievement of a certificate – that’s a momentum point. The achievement of an associate degree is a momentum point. Or transfer from the community college to a university – that’s a momentum point.

Now the one thing that we don’t have in the momentum points criteria that, quite frankly, I think should be there, but the hard part is to gather accurate data, and that is, did we help a person get a gainful employment job because of what we helped them achieve while they were at ACC?

When we go back and say graduation rates, is that a good measure? Not according to a growing member of a business and industry. What they’re interested in is, did we give them the skills necessary to be successful in the employment.