

Seeing the personal side of the completion agenda

Commentary

By Zora Mulligan, Published May 28, 2013

As the executive director of the [Missouri Community College Association](#), I spend a lot of time thinking and talking about “completion.” In my world, the completion agenda is a higher education policy issue, a political issue and it’s a financial issue now that Missouri is implementing performance funding.

But attending commencement ceremonies on college campuses around the state reminds me that completion is, first and foremost, a personal issue. Looking out from the platform at a commencement ceremony, you see into students’ lives, if only briefly, and in those flashes you get a glimpse of what it’s taken for them to make it to commencement—and what the day means to them.

At a small college in a small town in northern Missouri, one of the few black graduates accepts his diploma. He is cheered by a dark-skinned man and woman whose clothes suggest recent immigration—and by the small group of Mennonites who stand beside the couple in their long skirts and bonnets, clapping just as joyfully.

As a middle-aged woman accepts her diploma, one person stands to clap for her—a teenage boy who applauds so wildly that at first I wonder if he’s all there. Then I see that he’s just a regular kid, so proud of his mom, and cheering almost loud enough to make up for the fact that he’s the only one there to honor her.

[Celebrating freshly minted college graduates](#)

At a suburban school in an affluent community, a man in his late 20s crosses the stage. Something about him—his eyes, his gait, the difficulty he has shaking the president’s hand—suggests he faces difficulties. In the audience, a well-dressed couple rises and stands clutching each other. You can see the hope and relief on their faces, like they’re praying that this is the moment their child’s life gets a little easier.

At a school in the deep south part of the state, three broad-chested young men who look like they’ll spend their summer working on a road crew or bailing hay jump up from their seats in the bleachers to holler for their buddy as he gets his diploma. They’re proud of their friend, and they see now that it can be done.

A wounded warrior recovering from trauma suffered in the Iraq war crosses the stage with her service dog by her side. The soldier is disciplined and serene, but her dog’s happy tail nearly wipes out a row of potted plants.

At [North Central Missouri College](#), many of the nursing students wear scrubs under their gowns and clogs on their feet. They look like they’d walk out the gymnasium doors and straight into the clinic if they could, and they stand in stark contrast to the other young women, most of whom are clattering across the stage in high heeled shoes that look both uncomfortable and unsafe.

Rod Risley, executive director of [Phi Theta Kappa](#), asks the graduates at [St. Charles Community College](#) to close their eyes and recall the fear and uncertainty they felt on their first day of college classes. In the front row, a woman closes her eyes, tears streaming down her cheeks as she follows Risley through the exercise of remembering the challenges she’s overcome and the joys of each small success along the way.

[Photos from recent commencements at community colleges across the country](#)

Mark Kennedy Shriver tells the graduates at [Three Rivers College](#) to stand and give their families a round of applause. The students rise, clapping and pointing to moms and dads, communicating in that way what might have been hard to say with words. The audience is visibly excited that an American royal has come so far for their big day, but Shriver’s message is profoundly humble. He emphasizes the importance of treating everyone with respect and asks each student to do his or her best with what God gave them. In the third or

fourth row, a graduate says, “Amen.”

After the ceremony is over, two men stand alone in the crowd and embrace. The son—the graduate—says to his father, “I didn’t think you were gonna come.”

I’ll be thinking about these vignettes as I talk to legislators and policy-makers throughout the year. These stories remind me that for all of our talk about affordability and access, the return on investment of a community college education, increased earning power, and higher lifetime wages, much of the real value of getting an associate degree or certificate is in the simple act of completion itself.

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