Achieving the Dream was created to help more community college students succeed — complete courses, earn certificates and earn degrees. The initiative is built on the belief that broad institutional change — informed by student achievement data — is critical to achieve this result.

Community colleges offer broad access to higher education through open admissions. When their students succeed, the benefits are far-reaching. Community colleges educate new workers so our nation can stay competitive, and they retrain current workers to address evolving jobs or circumstances. In the process, community colleges prepare students for lives as productive, engaged members of society — preparation that serves both the students and their communities.

But today, many students leave college without meeting their educational goals and there are significant achievement gaps for low-income students, students of color and others. Community colleges have to do more. Achieving the Dream is designed to help.

A multiyear national initiative with 84 colleges in 15 states, Achieving the Dream acts on multiple fronts. The initiative:

- Provides planning and implementation grants to colleges and state policy efforts
- Helps colleges develop and implement strategies to improve student success and build a culture of evidence in which decisions are based on data about student achievement
- Conducts research about effective practices and student achievement at community colleges
- Works to influence public policy so it supports colleges’ improvement efforts
- Engages communities, businesses and the public

Participating colleges enroll high percentages of low-income students and students of color, who are less likely to attain their educational goals. These colleges are working to close achievement gaps while maintaining open access and increasing student success overall. To do so, colleges will have to make lasting changes in their practices and cultures.
Achieving the Dream asks colleges to focus on a student-centered vision, build a culture of evidence and promote the twin goals of equity and excellence.

A student-centered vision. Achieving the Dream colleges have made specific commitments to improve student achievement on their campuses. They have pledged to maintain open access while working to increase the percentage of first-time credential-seeking students who:

- Complete developmental courses and move on to credit-bearing courses. Now, 27 percent of students referred to developmental education courses complete those courses.
- Enroll in and complete gatekeeper courses, such as introductory math and English. Now, 11 percent complete gatekeeper courses in both math and English.
- Complete the courses they take, earning a grade of C or higher. Our data allow us to measure course completion with any grade. Now, 59 percent of credits attempted are completed with any grade.
- Re-enroll from one semester to the next. Now, 70 percent of first-semester students re-enroll for the second semester; 44 percent of first-semester students re-enroll for both the second and third semesters.
- Earn certificates and degrees. Now, 11 percent earn some type of credential (certificate or degree).1

To improve student achievement, colleges have agreed to use data to drive strategies, monitor progress and evaluate outcomes; develop strategies to close performance gaps among students; involve their faculty, students, staff and communities in their efforts; report data and outcomes broadly, both on and off campus; form partnerships with their communities, local businesses and others; and advocate for state and national policy changes as needed.

A culture of evidence. All Achieving the Dream participants are committed to understanding and using student achievement data to improve student outcomes. Colleges that were accustomed to basing decisions on anecdotal evidence now are developing strategies based on data, implementing those strategies and then evaluating whether they help students succeed.

Colleges describe this process as working within a culture of evidence. They are referring to a collective mindset, one in which critical decisions affecting students—from selecting educational strategies and allocating resources to scheduling classes and organizing student services—are informed by data and evaluated in light of whether student achievement increases.

Central to this work is being open and forthright about current performance; setting measurable goals that consider outcomes of all students, not just the top performers; and making lasting, institutional change to attain them. Because there are disparities in student outcomes, this work includes disaggregating student achievement data—breaking it down by race, age, income level and other demographic characteristics—to better understand and begin to close performance gaps.

Equity and excellence. Assumptions about who can achieve, and at what level they can achieve, are at the heart of student success. They also are at the heart of Achieving the Dream.

In the context of closing achievement gaps, many people believe that equity can be advanced only with a corresponding decrease in excellence. Achieving the Dream, by contrast, does not believe in a tradeoff between equity and excellence. The initiative establishes equity and excellence as twin goals—both of which must be met to help students succeed.

Achieving the Dream data

While many colleges look at data at single points in time, Achieving the Dream colleges use longitudinal data—data that track cohorts (groups) of students over a period of time. The 2005 cohort, for example, is made up of students who started college in fall 2005. A longitudinal study identifies a group of students and tracks their educational progress over a number of years. As a result, researchers can accurately gauge, for example, what percentage of students are persisting, completing courses, earning credentials and leaving college.

The initiative also collects these data from colleges and assembles them in the Achieving the Dream database. The database includes all part-time and full-time students seeking degrees at Achieving the Dream colleges. Achieving the Dream researchers use these data to track and analyze the students’ progress and to examine trends across the initiative.
Community Colleges: Challenges and Benefits

Almost half (45 percent) of all undergraduate students attend community colleges. Americans turn to community colleges to provide the education that leads to greater economic opportunity and improved quality of life. This work is becoming more critical — and more challenging — as we strive to maintain a sound, competitive economy and a well-functioning democracy.

Globalization is driving changes in our economy, and our need for an educated workforce is increasing. Sixty-three percent of the 18.9 million new jobs that will be created by 2014 will require some postsecondary education. New jobs are more demanding, and the demographics of the workforce are changing. As a result, employers increasingly rely on the very students who currently are least likely to complete their education.

As a nation, we need to educate a competitive workforce and stimulate local economies. To achieve these goals, we must provide opportunity and maximize success for everyone. This is the critical work of community colleges. Helping these colleges — making sure they are places where everyone can find educational opportunity and achieve educational success — is the critical work of Achieving the Dream.

Community College Characteristics and Challenges

Community colleges educate a diverse mix of students with dramatically varying goals, including getting a better job, earning a community college certificate or an associate degree, and earning a bachelor’s degree.

Many community college students face academic, personal and financial challenges. They are adults returning to education after a long period of time as well as individuals who work, care for dependents and juggle other commitments.

If students aren’t well served by their community colleges, many of them won’t have other opportunities for education — and are likely to drain resources from society rather than contribute to it. However, when students do attain their educational goals (complete courses, earn certificates and earn degrees), they improve their own lives and benefit the nation.

Achieving the Dream participants

Achieving the Dream has 19 funders and eight national partner organizations that contribute diverse strengths and expertise to helping community colleges better serve their students.

Funders

Florida, New Mexico, North Carolina, Texas and Virginia

Lumina Foundation for Education www.luminafoundation.org

Lumina Foundation for Education provided funding for the initiative’s startup, funds the 204 colleges and provides ongoing support for other elements of the initiative.

Arkansas Colleges

Winthrop Rockefeller Foundation www.wrfoundation.org

Connecticut Colleges

Nellie Mae Education Foundation www.nmefdn.org

Hawaii Colleges

Kamehameha Schools www.ksb.edu
Office of Hawaiian Affairs www.oha.org
The University of Hawaii Community Colleges www.hawaii.edu/offices/cc/index.html

Houston-Area Colleges and Universities

Houston Endowment Inc. www.houstonendowment.org

Massachusetts Colleges

The Lloyd G. Balfour Foundation www.bankofamerica.com/grantmaking/solutions
The Boston Foundation www.btf.org
TERI www.teri.org
The Irene E. & George A. Davis Foundation www.davisfdn.org

Michigan Colleges

W.K. Kellogg Foundation www.wkkf.org
The Kresge Foundation www.kresge.org

Ohio Colleges

KnowledgeWorks Foundation www.kwfon.org

Oklahoma Colleges

Oklahoma State Regents for Higher Education www.okhighered.org

Pennsylvania Colleges

The Heinz Endowments www.heinz.org

South Carolina Colleges

Palmetto Institute www.palmettoinstitute.org
South Carolina Technical College System www.sctechsystem.com

Washington State Colleges

CollegeSpark Washington www.collegespark.org

National Partner Organizations

American Association of Community Colleges www.aacc.nche.edu

Community College Leadership Program, University of Texas-Austin www.utexas.edu/academic/college

Community College Research Center, Teachers College, Columbia University ccrc.columbia.edu

Institute for Higher Education, University of Florida www.education.ufl.edu/Leadership/ihelInstitute.html

Jobs for the Future www.jff.org

MDC (managing partner) www.mdcinc.org

MDRC www.mdrc.org

Public Agenda www.publicagenda.org

State Policy Organizations

Community Colleges by the Numbers

Student Characteristics

41% Students who are first-generation college students

29% Students who have household incomes less than $20,000

35% Students who are parents or have other dependents

17% Students who are single parents

79% Students who work (full time and part time) in addition to taking classes

41% Students who work full-time jobs in addition to taking classes

69% Students who attend college part time

35% Students who are at least 30 years old

Student Achievement

45% Students seeking an associate degree or higher who earn an associate degree, earn a bachelor’s degree or transfer to a four-year institution within six years

41% Students enrolled in a certificate program (study oriented toward a particular job or industry) who achieve that goal, earn a degree or transfer to a four-year institution within six years

Employment Needs

60% Jobs that are held by workers with at least some postsecondary education or training

63% Percentage of the 18.9 million new jobs to be created by 2014 that will require some postsecondary education

Economic and Societal Impact

20–30% The difference in earnings of people who hold associate degrees as compared with those who hold only high school diplomas. Higher levels of education lead to higher earnings for all racial and ethnic groups and for both men and women.

Higher education yields other benefits, including access to health care and better opportunities for the next generation. Higher levels of education also correlate positively with higher levels of civic participation, including community service, voting and charitable giving.

5–15% Economic growth that results from increasing a state’s or country’s average level of schooling by one year

3:1 Ratio of state and local tax dollars (from regional economic development and growth) to taxpayer dollars invested in a community college. Investing in community colleges also leads to economic benefits that result from lower poverty rates, reduced crime and incarceration rates, improved health habits, reduced unemployment, and reduced dependence on welfare and other social safety-net programs.

Findings from the 1980s and 1990s (CCRC Brief No. 23).

New York: Columbia University, Teachers College, Community College Research Center.


For more information or additional copies of this brochure, e-mail atd@mdcinc.org.

For media inquiries, contact Bonnie Gordon, 919.968.4531 x314; bgordon@mdcinc.org.
Strategies for Improvement

Achieving the Dream colleges are identifying practices that will help more students — particularly students of color and low-income students — succeed. Examples of colleges’ strategies include:

Developmental education. Developmental education in reading, writing and math (often called remedial education) either refreshes students’ skills or helps them acquire the core skills they need for college-level work. Students who enter college underprepared for college-level coursework (as determined by a placement test) are referred to developmental education.

Achieving the Dream colleges enroll large numbers of students who require developmental education, and nearly three-quarters (73 percent) don’t complete these courses. But when students successfully complete developmental education, they have at least the same chances of completing a degree or transferring as their peers who began their studies in college-level courses.

Colleges’ strategies include refining course placement so students enroll in the courses they need, incorporating study skills into the developmental education curriculum and making individual education plans for students.

The first-year experience. Community colleges typically lose about half of their students prior to the beginning of the sophomore year. Engaging students, however, helps students build connections and motivates them to stick with their studies. To improve retention, some colleges are implementing strategies such as making orientation mandatory; requiring courses that focus on time management, study techniques and other key skills; and other tactics that increase contact between the college and students early in their collegiate experience.

Instructional techniques, such as collaborative learning and learning communities. Learning communities, for example, are combinations of two, three or four courses that usually have related or linked content. Students in the learning community take the classes together as a group, creating a more intensive learning environment and one in which students typically get high levels of support from one another and from the faculty.

Advising services. For many community college students, academic planning and advising make the difference between succeeding and dropping out. Strategies include developing case management systems, creating early warning systems that identify students at high risk of failure, and professional development to help more faculty and staff serve as advisers.

K-14 strategies. Data at some Achieving the Dream colleges reveal that large numbers of recent high school graduates enter college underprepared for college-level work. In response, colleges have planned collaborative efforts with K-12 education leaders to improve students’ college readiness. Strategies include working with local schools to align high school curricula with college curricula, offering college success classes for high school seniors, and developing summer college prep courses for high school students.

Supporting the colleges

In addition to receiving planning and implementation grants, Achieving the Dream colleges are supported by partner organizations that help the colleges lead change, analyze data, identify strategies, involve stakeholders and influence policy.

- Coaching. Each college receives at-the-elbow support from a coach and a data facilitator experienced in community college administration. Coaches and data facilitators guide colleges as they analyze their student data, set priorities, develop strategies, and implement and evaluate institutional improvements. Many coaches are former college presidents. Data facilitators typically are trained as institutional researchers. Colleges also receive assistance with reaching out to their communities’ stakeholders and other audiences.

- Public policy. Achieving the Dream is working in its colleges’ states to influence policy so it becomes more supportive of student success. The initiative provides state policy teams with research, strategic consultation and opportunities for peer learning. Policy priorities focus on how state data systems can be better designed and used to drive student success, how states can strengthen incentives and supports for quality developmental education, and how states can engage community colleges to help improve the alignment of college and high school expectations.

- Research. Achieving the Dream partner organizations are conducting research related to improving student outcomes at community colleges. To date, the body of research includes a national assessment of institutional research at community colleges; an analysis of how college success courses affect graduation and transfer rates; a series of studies on the relationship between institutional practices associated with a culture of evidence and student outcomes; and a survey of faculty and administrators at Achieving the Dream colleges to examine how they use data to design and deliver programs and services.
Achieving the Dream includes 80 community colleges in 15 states and four Texas universities. These institutions should be commended for having the courage to be open and straightforward about their current performance and taking bold action to improve it.

2004 INSTITUTIONS

FLORIDA
Brookhaven College, Dallas
Coastal Bend College, Beeville
El Paso Community College District, El Paso
Galveston College, Galveston
Houston Community College System, Houston
South Texas College, McAllen
Southwest Texas Junior College, Uvalde

NEW MEXICO
Central New Mexico Community College, Albuquerque
New Mexico State University-Dona Ana, Las Cruces
San Juan College, Farmington
Santa Fe Community College, Santa Fe
Southwestern Indian Polytechnic Institute, Albuquerque
University of New Mexico-Gallup, Gallup

NORTH CAROLINA
Durham Technical Community College, Durham
Guilford Technical Community College, Jamestown
Martinsville Community College, Martinsville
Wayne Community College, Goldsboro

TENNESSEE
Murray State University

TEXAS
Alamance Community College District, San Antonio
Brookhaven College, Dallas
Coastal Bend College, Beeville
El Paso Community College District, El Paso
Galveston College, Galveston
Houston Community College System, Houston
South Texas College, McAllen
Southwest Texas Junior College, Uvalde

WASHINGTON
Big Bend Community College, Moses Lake
Highline Community College, Des Moines
Renton Technical College, Renton
Seattle Central Community College, Seattle
Tacoma Community College, Tacoma
Yakima Valley Community College, Yakima

2006 INSTITUTIONS

ARIZONA
Avondale College of Nursing

CALIFORNIA
College of the Mainland, Texas City
Lee College, Baytown

COLORADO
Metropolitan State College of Denver

CONNECTICUT
Capital Community College, Hartford
Housatonic Community College, Bridgeport
Norwalk Community College, Norwalk

DELAWARE
Delaware County Community College, Media
Montgomery County Community College, Blue Bell

DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA
Hillwood Community College, Washington, D.C.

FLORIDA
Jefferson Community College, Steubenville
North Florida Community College, Jackson

GEORGIA
Cratty Technical College, Abbeville

IDAHO
Boise State University

ILLINOIS
Chicago Community College

INDIANA
Ball State University

IOWA
Cedar Rapids Community College

KANSAS
Kansas State University

KENTUCKY
Eastern Kentucky University

LOUISIANA
Southeastern Louisiana University

MASSACHUSETTS
Bunker Hill Community College, Boston

MONTANA
Montana State University

NEBRASKA
University of Nebraska at Omaha

NEVADA
University of Nevada, Las Vegas

NEW JERSEY
Rutgers University

NEW MEXICO
New Mexico State University-Dona Ana, Las Cruces

NEW YORK
City University of New York

OHIO
Cuyahoga Community College, Cleveland

OKLAHOMA
Bryan College

OREGON
University of Oregon

PENNSYLVANIA
Community College of Philadelphia, Philadelphia

RHODE ISLAND
Providence College

SOUTH CAROLINA
Aiken Technical College, Aiken

TCHE NSE
Texas A&M University

VERMONT
University of Vermont

VIRGINIA
Virginia Commonwealth University

WASHINGTON
University of Washington

WEST VIRGINIA
West Virginia University

WISCONSIN
University of Wisconsin-Madison

WYOMING
University of Wyoming

2007 INSTITUTIONS

ARKANSAS
National Park Community College, Hot Springs

COLORADO
Metropolitan State College of Denver

FLORIDA
Jefferson Community College, Steubenville

GEORGIA
Mr. Robert C. Wright Community College

INDIANA
Indiana University

IOWA
Iowa State University

KANSAS
Kansas State University

KENTUCKY
University of Kentucky

LOUISIANA
Louisiana State University

MASSACHUSETTS
Bunker Hill Community College, Boston

MONTANA
Montana State University

NEBRASKA
University of Nebraska at Omaha

NEW JERSEY
Rutgers University

NEW MEXICO
New Mexico State University-Dona Ana, Las Cruces

NEW YORK
City University of New York

OHIO
Cuyahoga Community College, Cleveland

OKLAHOMA
Bryan College

OREGON
University of Oregon

PENNSYLVANIA
Community College of Philadelphia, Philadelphia

RHODE ISLAND
Providence College

SOUTH CAROLINA
Aiken Technical College, Aiken

TENNESSEE
Vanderbilt University

TEXAS
University of Texas at Austin

UTAH
University of Utah

VIRGINIA
Virginia Commonwealth University

WISCONSIN
University of Wisconsin-Madison

WYOMING
University of Wyoming

JULY 2007 / ACHIEVING THE DREAM Success Is What Counts 5