BUILDING STUDENT SUCCESS FROM THE GROUND UP

A Case Study of an *Achieving the Dream* College

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September 2009

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mdrc
BUILDING KNOWLEDGE
TO IMPROVE SOCIAL POLICY

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Overview

In 2003, Lumina Foundation for Education launched a bold, national initiative aimed at improving community college students' success — that is, helping students remain in school, improve their performance, and ultimately graduate with certificates or degrees — particularly among low-income students and students of color. Now encompassing 102 institutions in 22 states, Achieving the Dream: Community Colleges Count supports colleges through an institution-wide improvement process focused on the use of evidence to inform decisions about programming and practice. The goal for colleges is to develop a "culture of evidence" in which a broad spectrum of faculty, staff, and administrators review data on student outcomes to identify priority areas for reform, develop strategies for improvement, implement and evaluate those strategies, and institutionalize those that yield evidence of increasing student success. The initiative provides both funding and expert consultation to help colleges through this process.

Guilford Technical Community College, in Jamestown, North Carolina, joined the first cohort of colleges to participate in Achieving the Dream in 2004. In line with the objectives of the initiative, Guilford has made great strides over the past five years in becoming a data-driven, success-oriented institution. Its numerous strategic interventions were developed to address identified priorities for student success, especially for developmental education students and first-year students. Furthermore, these strategies have been systematically evaluated and improved based on evidence of student achievement. This case study draws from Guilford's experience implementing Achieving the Dream to highlight what colleges may achieve and the challenges they may face in undertaking a similar process of institutional reform.

Key Findings

- Building a culture of evidence: Guilford overcame initial setbacks with data collection and analysis by investing in its institutional research (IR) capacity, including both technological systems and staff expertise. Its IR department now informs decision making with systematic program evaluations and disseminates knowledge about data analysis across the college.

- Developing strategies and engaging stakeholders: Guilford's strategic interventions reinforce its identified priorities for student success and are augmented by professional development opportunities for faculty and staff. Several of these strategies have been sustained and expanded based on promising trends in persistence and course completion.

- Institutionalizing Achieving the Dream: High-level commitment from Guilford's leadership has helped the college to embed its student success agenda into institutional decision-making processes. Strategic planning is now informed by the college's "scorecard," which establishes goals for institutional performance and monitors progress against these benchmarks. Guilford has observed promising increases along some of the performance indicators in its scorecard, including increased persistence and graduation rates.

Each chapter in the report concludes with lessons, both for colleges and for the Achieving the Dream initiative, about how to build a culture of evidence to increase students' rate of success.

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Preface

This is an exciting time for community colleges. President Barack Obama's American Graduation Initiative creates both challenges and hope for the schools that, in his words, "are an undervalued asset in our country." Observing the rapid growth of jobs that require at least an associate's degree, while noting the low completion rates at community colleges, the president has emphasized the need to "figure out what's keeping students from crossing that finish line — and then put in place reforms that will remove those barriers."

Since it was conceived in 2003, Achieving the Dream: Community Colleges Count — Lumina Foundation for Education's groundbreaking project to help community college students remain in school, improve their performance, and ultimately graduate with a certificate or degree — has reflected the goals of the American Graduation Initiative. At community colleges, data on students' outcomes can tell us much about why students do or do not complete their studies, yet these data have not traditionally been used to create or strengthen programs. Achieving the Dream guides community colleges through an institution-wide process of "evidence building" in which they make a long-term commitment to analyzing data in order to make programming decisions that are designed to increase students' success.

Guilford Technical Community College in North Carolina, the Achieving the Dream college that is the subject of this report, presents an encouraging picture of what can happen when a school's leaders roll up their sleeves and commit to using a data-driven approach to programming. During its participation in Achieving the Dream, Guilford has strengthened the capacity of its institutional research department to generate strong and useful data; piloted, evaluated, and scaled up a number of interventions to help its students; and worked to engage faculty, administrators, and staff in its efforts to establish a "culture of evidence." While challenges remain — not all faculty and staff are engaged with the reform process, and the high-intensity, higher-cost strategies are not easily scaled up — several positive trends have emerged in students' persistence, successful course completion, and graduation rates among targeted student groups since the initiative began.

Qualitative studies such as this one are an excellent way to gather information about promising strategies for increasing student success rates in community colleges. MDRC is also conducting quantitative studies at Guilford and at other Achieving the Dream colleges in order to generate hard data on causal relationships between specific interventions and positive student outcomes. It is our hope that this case study will offer useful lessons for schools that are trying to change their culture in order to help their students succeed — and that it will help to spur an effort among community colleges nationally that will lead to more graduates and, ultimately, to a stronger and more diverse American workforce.

Gordon Berlin
President

Acknowledgments

Executive Summary

Crowding the lawns and parking lots of their expansive campus in Jamestown, North Carolina, the students at Guilford Technical Community College are as diverse as they are numerous. Over 10,000 undergraduates enrolled in fall 2008 to become civil engineers, auto technicians, paralegals, hotel managers, and nurses, to name a few of the dozens of programs offered at the college. These students range from recent high school graduates with plans to transfer to four-year institutions, to middle-aged workers pursuing career advancement. They hail from over 30 countries, representing multiple racial and ethnic groups. Fifty-five percent receive some form of financial aid, while 47 percent attend college part time, often because of full-time jobs and family commitments. As at many community colleges, the majority of these students place into developmental, or remedial, education, and far fewer graduate than they or Guilford would like.

In 2004, Guilford applied to Achieving the Dream: Community Colleges Count, a national initiative launched the year before by Lumina Foundation for Education. The initiative was designed to mentor colleges through an institution-wide improvement process focused on helping students succeed, particularly low-income students and students of color, by building a "culture of evidence" — that is, using data on student outcomes to make better-informed institutional and programming decisions. More specifically, colleges are asked to follow Achieving the Dream's five-step improvement process, in which they (1) commit to institutional reform aimed at improving student success rates; (2) analyze data on student outcomes in order to identify barriers to student achievement and prioritize areas for reform; (3) engage a broad base of stakeholders in developing strategies to address priority problems; (4) implement, evaluate, and improve student success strategies; and (5) institutionalize and "scale up" effective policies and practices.

As colleges undertake this process, they are expected to improve their overall student success rates as measured by five key indicators: (1) completion of developmental education courses; (2) completion of introductory-level, or "gatekeeper," college courses; (3) completion of courses with a C or higher; (4) persistence from term to term and year to year; and (5) attainment of a degree or certificate. The initiative provides a number of supports to assist colleges in these endeavors, including professional coaching, annual initiative-wide conferences, and grants totaling up to $450,000 over five years.

Since joining Achieving the Dream, Guilford has transformed into a data-driven, success-oriented institution focused on systemic efforts to improve student achievement. Most of its numerous strategic interventions — ranging from a supplemental instruction program for developmental education students to a revamped orientation and streamlined intake process for

first-year students — have each been implemented and evaluated over time. Furthermore, several strategies have been scaled up based on promising student outcomes to reach increasing numbers of students.

Unlike many MDRC studies that use a random assignment methodology — in which members of a study sample are randomly assigned to either a program group, which receives the intervention being evaluated, or a control group, which does not, in order to measure the program's impact — this analysis is based on qualitative interview data and trend data from Guilford. Trends in student outcomes are discussed in this report to illuminate the information that was available to the college as it made programming decisions and to highlight promising reforms. However, they are not experimentally derived program impacts, and thus should be interpreted as suggestive rather than causal proof of program effectiveness.

Key Findings

Achieving the Dream has defined a rigorous set of steps for helping colleges build a culture of evidence and develop strategies for increasing student success. First, colleges are asked to develop tools to track student outcomes with sufficient accuracy and specificity to inform decision making. This step often requires colleges to build up both their technological and human research capacities, and generally results in a stronger focus on colleges' institutional research (IR) departments. Colleges are then expected to use data to identify priority areas for reform and develop interventions for institutional improvement. Initiative leaders hope that colleges will engage a broad spectrum of faculty, staff, and administrators in this planning stage. Additionally, colleges are expected to implement, evaluate, and refine their intervention strategies as part of a continuous process that guides the institution's decisions about strategic planning and resource allocation.

- **Despite initial setbacks with data collection and analysis, Guilford committed to three priorities for improving student success rates: (1) establishing a culture of evidence; (2) improving the experience of first-year students; and (3) improving developmental courses through the creation of learning communities.**

Like many Achieving the Dream colleges, Guilford joined the initiative with a limited IR capacity and unreliable data systems. The college was making the transition to a new data system and searching for a new IR director, both of which hindered its efforts to collect and analyze data. Furthermore, Guilford's faculty and staff remained largely detached from the college's IR department, viewing its main function as providing compliance reports for state and federal funding. These early difficulties hampered Guilford's ability to use its own institutional data to identify target student groups, develop interventions, and engage the campus

community in data analysis during its first two years in the initiative. In response, Guilford first turned to available national and state data to support its efforts. After data analysis revealed challenges with students' retention, persistence, course success rates, and graduation rates, the college's leaders identified improving these success measures as their primary goal.

Guilford's numerous Achieving the Dream interventions were designed strategically around its three priority areas, leading to an array of new programs and supports for students in developmental and gatekeeper courses, as well as for first-year students generally. The college ultimately piloted 15 different strategies seeking to improve students' success rates and achievement. Several of these strategies were part of a menu of academic options targeting different types of developmental education students. For example, low-level developmental education students might benefit from an intensive reading, writing, and math program or from a slower-paced developmental math course spread over two semesters. Other developmental education students could also choose from an array of strategies, such as "student success" courses that teach skills to help students navigate through college; "learning communities," which strengthen classroom engagement by fostering peer relationships and building thematic connections across subject areas; self-paced math courses; courses paired with supplemental instruction; and a tutoring lab. Additional strategies focused on gatekeeper courses and enhanced supports for first-year students and other student subgroups.

- **Guilford's substantial investment in professional development for faculty and staff helped foster their commitment to and involvement in the college's student success strategies.**

Guilford used a significant portion of its grant money to send its faculty and staff to conferences and on trips to other community colleges that had achieved success in a particular area of interest. This and other professional developmental activities generally built faculty and staff skills in connection with the development of particular interventions and helped foster faculty and staff engagement with these intervention strategies.

- **Guilford has made substantial progress in building its institutional research capacity to support a robust culture of evidence. The simultaneous development of technological systems and staff knowledge has allowed Guilford to make decisions about whether to continue, modify, eliminate, or scale up its student success strategies based on evidence of program effectiveness.**

One of Guilford's central goals was to build a stronger, more capable IR department. This capacity building began by hiring an adept IR director, who led the creation of a "data warehouse" that could track both institutional and individual student performance. Guilford has conducted ongoing, detailed evaluations of the majority of its strategies, even as the number of

strategies implemented has grown over time. In many cases, its IR department has identified an appropriate comparison group to document differences in student success for a particular intervention, and then used the results of those evaluations to inform programming decisions. The college has also scaled up a number of its interventions and modified others based on its findings. For instance, the college experimented with a three-credit success course after its previous one-credit version proved promising.

Furthermore, the college established a committee of faculty and staff to advise the IR department and administrators on critical issues, such as the expansion of intervention strategies and the selection of institutional performance indicators. A strengthened IR department has also encouraged faculty and staff to use data more regularly to assess their own programs and practices as part of a broader student success agenda.

- **Several of Guilford's evaluations of its intervention programs have revealed promising trends in student persistence, successful course completion, and graduation rates among targeted student groups; one intervention also showed promise for reducing the achievement gap among African-American males.**

While based on nonexperimental research, this case study reveals increased persistence among students who participated in Guilford's success courses, learning communities, revised student orientation, and special classes for low-level developmental education students. Learning communities, supplemental instruction, and the two-semester developmental math course also were associated with promising trends in course completion, while the student success course was associated with promising increases in graduation rates. Furthermore, and of particular relevance to Achieving the Dream's objective of closing racial achievement gaps, Guilford found that increases in persistence and graduation among participants in the success course were especially evident among African-American males. However, while encouraging, these findings should be interpreted as promising trends rather than causal program impacts.

Institutionalizing Achieving the Dream

When they join Achieving the Dream, college leaders are expected to commit to lasting institutional change on their campuses by adopting a new model of decision making in order to sustain and integrate successful reforms institution-wide. Colleges are encouraged to develop overarching committees to monitor their progress in improving student success rates. Moreover, the leaders of the initiative hope that colleges will see measurable improvement in their students' persistence, achievement, and, ultimately, graduation as a result of their efforts. The final goal is that colleges will institutionalize their progress under Achieving the Dream such that their learning and commitment to student success will survive long after their initiative funding ends.

- **Spurred by high-level commitment from the president, senior leaders, and the board of trustees, as well as support from an Achieving the Dream coach and data facilitator, Guilford has successfully institutionalized its student success agenda across the college during its participation in the initiative.**

Guilford has taken meaningful action to integrate its student success agenda into its leadership structure, including presenting reports to its board of trustees and revising its strategic planning and budgeting processes. Its overall approach to management of the initiative has been to overlay the committees prescribed by Achieving the Dream with its pre-existing leadership committees so that Achieving the Dream planning occurred alongside other high-level institutional decision making. These committees also engaged faculty and staff on a rotating basis, thus encouraging wider institutional involvement in initiative activities.

The strong, committed leadership at Guilford has been crucial to these institutional reform efforts. The president has remained connected with Achieving the Dream throughout the college's participation in the initiative and has committed skilled senior administrators to leading its activities. Inputs from Achieving the Dream, including guidance from an expert coach and technical assistance from a data facilitator, reinforced this leadership commitment.

- **As a result of Achieving the Dream, Guilford's leaders have established specific benchmarks for institutional performance, and they continuously monitor the college's progress against those goals in an institutional "scorecard."**

With guidance from its data facilitator, Guilford began to track its progress more systematically against specific benchmarks for institutional performance, using indicators such as college graduation rates, student persistence, student engagement, and achievement of developmental education students. The college has now created an institutional "scorecard" that allows it to track its performance relative to specific targets and to identify successes and areas for improvement.

- **Guilford observed promising increases in student success rates across some of its institutional performance measures during the course of its participation in Achieving the Dream.**

Since Guilford began to track its performance in 2003, it has seen nearly a 6 percentage point increase in its student persistence rates and a 3 percentage point increase in its graduation rates. While encouraging, these trends are not definitive evidence that improvements in student outcomes are attributable to Guilford's Achieving the Dream interventions. Because the initiative is institution-wide, it is not possible to create a "control college" to assess what would

have happened in its absence. Nonetheless, upward movement in Guilford's student success indicators is promising.

Continuing Challenges

- **Guilford is still working to engage segments of its faculty and staff in data analysis.**

Guilford has found effective ways to engage parts of the campus community in monitoring student success, but it has yet to reach all faculty and staff. While most are aware of the college's growing focus on student retention, some reported being too busy to spend time tracking their students' performance and implementing reforms. Still others thought that some students faced too many personal challenges to achieve academic success, and they doubted their ability to influence students' performance by improving their own practices. Thus, while Guilford has successfully garnered support from some faculty and staff in its efforts to improve student achievement, others remain unaware of or uninterested in this agenda.

- **Guilford faces a challenge in synthesizing its institutional student outcome measures with those from the Achieving the Dream database.**

All Achieving the Dream colleges are required to submit student outcomes information to the initiative's data system. Guilford struggled with some aspects of that system, primarily because of differences among measures of student success. While the college regularly submitted data to the Achieving the Dream database, the IR department generally relied on its own institutional database and internally defined measures of student achievement to track its institutional progress and the success of its intervention strategies.

- **Guilford has struggled to scale up some of its high-intensity, high-cost programs.**

By the fall of 2008, Guilford had expanded most of its 15 intervention strategies. Three of these — a new student orientation, a streamlined intake process for new students, and a College Transfer Advising Center — had been scaled up to reach 25 percent or more of their target populations. While one other strategy — the student success course — was reaching 10 to 25 percent of its target population, many of the college's strategies were still reaching less than 10 percent of their target populations, despite promising trends in the academic outcomes of those students who were reached. These smaller-scale strategies tended to be higher intensity and were often more costly to implement. The high cost of these more intensive interventions posed a challenge for Guilford as it strove to sustain and expand its most effective strategies.

Key Lessons for Colleges

- **In building a culture of evidence, focus first on building strong data systems, which can then be leveraged to engage broader segments of faculty and staff.**

Colleges with less mature IR departments may need to seek alternate sources of data as they work to build their internal systems and research capacity. Leaning on a strong data facilitator, mining state and national data systems, and gathering qualitative data from faculty, staff, and students are a few ways colleges may build their knowledge while data systems are still in flux. These colleges may also want to hire staff who have both the quantitative skills to conduct sound data inquiries and the interpersonal skills to communicate their findings effectively to faculty and staff. Finally, colleges may want to carefully consider the types of data and measures that are most useful for their own institutional needs and build systems that allow these indicators to be tracked.

- **Investing resources in training faculty and staff can help to cultivate a sense of responsibility and commitment to individual programs.**

Strategic professional development proved to be an important way for Guilford to learn about new ideas and develop its interventions. Additionally, the college allowed for a significant amount of faculty and staff ownership in the creation and management of new interventions, thus fostering more interest and engagement in this work within the larger campus community. Involving faculty and staff in higher-level data analysis and decision making helped bring the modification and expansion of these strategies full-circle.

- **Align the leadership and management of Achieving the Dream with existing institutional committees.**

Overlaying Achieving the Dream decision making with larger college planning may make it easier to integrate the initiative within the larger institution. Additionally, colleges may wish to consider ways to move toward increasingly embedding data analysis into divisions and departments as a way of fostering faculty and staff leadership.

Key Lessons for Achieving the Dream

- **Achieving the Dream leaders may wish to consider how colleges might balance the competing demands of program scale and intensity.**

Those programs that are most likely to significantly increase students' achievement might also be the most time-intensive and costly. These issues are particularly pressing for

institutions nearing the end of their implementation grants, as some may have relied upon initiative funding to sustain and expand strategies.

- **Achieving the Dream leaders may wish to consider how colleges analyze their student success data.**

Guilford tracked its performance using its institutional data rather than data from the Achieving the Dream database. The initiative partners may wish to consider how they will weigh colleges' own internal measures of institutional performance against results from the Achieving the Dream database.

- **The leadership of Achieving the Dream may wish to provide some guidance to colleges about how to communicate with their external stakeholders about the initiative.**

Promoting open discussion about student outcomes can be risky, particularly when colleges must compete for enrollment. Additionally, some Achieving the Dream colleges may not yet see evidence of overall improvements in student achievement, which can be disheartening after having worked intensively to improve their programs. When sharing student success data with the community, it may help to acknowledge that the initiative is ambitious, that difficult state or economic environments can complicate student outcomes data, and that colleges might need more time to see improvements in student success. Furthermore, because Achieving the Dream is an institution-wide effort, it is difficult to establish a good comparison to know what would have happened in its absence.

Regardless of the improvements they have made with student achievement, colleges like Guilford that have rigorously applied the tenets of the initiative should be commended for their work. There is no magic bullet for student success. However, Guilford's experience suggests that with strong commitment and strategic, data-based decision making, community colleges can make important strides as they push all students to achieve.

Chapter 1

Introduction

The desire to become a learning college, involving all faculty and staff in student success, has been a strong current below the surface that AtD funds will enable to emerge and actualize.

— Guilford Technical Community College,
Achieving the Dream (AtD) Implementation Proposal

Crowding the lawns and parking lots of their expansive campus in Jamestown, North Carolina, the students at Guilford Technical Community College are as diverse as they are numerous. Over 10,000 undergraduates enrolled last fall to become civil engineers, auto technicians, paralegals, hotel managers, and nurses, to name a few of the dozens of programs offered at the college. These students range from recent high school graduates with plans to transfer to four-year institutions, to middle-aged workers pursuing career advancement. They hail from over 30 countries, representing multiple racial and ethnic groups. Fifty-five percent receive some form of financial aid, while 47 percent attend college part time, often because of full-time jobs and family commitments.[1] As at many community colleges, the majority of these students place below college level into developmental education courses (61 percent in math; 28 percent in reading; 29 percent in English), and far fewer graduate than they or Guilford would like. (See Table 1.1.)

Guilford applied to the Achieving the Dream initiative in 2004 with the same goal as many other colleges: to improve the success rates of its students. Created to help colleges accomplish this goal through the use of an evidence-based, institutional improvement process, Achieving the Dream was an excellent fit for Guilford. When it joined the initiative, the college committed to establishing a "culture of evidence" — an institution-wide reform process that focused on using data to make informed decisions about programming and practice. This process began with Guilford's expansion of its data capabilities so that the college could move toward making key decisions about its interventions and programs based on student outcomes data. Since beginning with Achieving the Dream, Guilford has implemented 15 strategic interventions, many of which are targeted to address the needs of developmental education students and first-year students. Over the past few years, most of these interventions have been systematically evaluated and incorporated into the college's institutional planning processes. These strategies range from a revamped orientation and streamlined registration process for new

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[1]U.S. Department of Education (2009).

Achieving the Dream: Community Colleges Count

Table 1.1

**Selected Characteristics of Students Enrolled
at Guilford Technical Community College, Fall 2007**

Characteristic	Students
Total enrollment (N)	10,571
Enrollment by race/ethnicity (%)	
White, non-Hispanic	53
Black, non-Hispanic	35
Hispanic	3
Asian/Pacific Islander	3
American Indian/Alaskan native	1
Students enrolled full time (%)	53
Students receiving some form of financial aid[a] (%)	55
Students placing into developmental education[b] (%)	
Mathematics	61
Reading	28
English	29
First-time fall-to-fall retention rate[c] (%)	
Full-time students	57
Part-time students	40
Overall graduation rate[d] (%)	12
Transfer-out rate[d] (%)	21

SOURCE: Data on developmental placement were provided by Guilford's institutional research department; all other data were drawn from the National Center for Education Statistics.

NOTES: [a]Data are for first-time, full-time students seeking a certificate or degree.
  [b]Developmental education percentages are calculated based on the placement outcomes of all new, entering students in the fall 2008 term.
  [c]Retention rates measure the percentage of first-time students beginning their programs in the fall of 2006 who continue into the following fall term.
  [d]Graduation and transfer-out rates are calculated for full-time, first-time students who began their program in 2004. Students are considered to have graduated if they completed their program within 150 percent of the normal time to completion; they are considered to have transferred out if they transferred to another institution within that same time period.

students to a supplemental instruction program and "student success" courses designed to help developmental education students learn the skills they need for college.

The goal of this study is to use Guilford's experience to highlight the successes and challenges colleges may experience in undertaking an institutional reform process like the one outlined by the Achieving the Dream partners. Guilford was selected as an exemplar of the institutional learning and continuous improvement promoted by the initiative. It has transformed from a college with minimal data analysis into a data-driven, success-oriented institution focused on systemic efforts to improve student achievement. This reform process has helped Guilford to identify promising strategies, to bring these interventions up to scale to reach increasing numbers of students, and to see promising changes in student outcomes within select pockets of its population (described in Chapter 3 of this report). Additionally, the college has experienced a measure of success in increasing its overall institutional persistence and graduation rates (as discussed in Chapter 4). However, while meeting with many successes, Guilford's experience also reveals a number of challenges colleges might face in the process of building a culture of evidence. For instance, Guilford still struggles with choosing which strategies to bring to scale, particularly in tight economic times (as discussed in Chapter 3). These difficulties can serve as lessons for colleges as well as for the Achieving the Dream partners as they move toward expanding the initiative nationally. This report seeks to illuminate those successes and challenges and to provide lessons for other colleges as they undertake a similar institutional reform process.

The Initiative

Achieving the Dream is a multiyear initiative founded in 2003 by the Lumina Foundation for Education. The central goal of Achieving the Dream — which began in 27 colleges in five states ("Round 1" of the initiative) — is to increase student success rates by involving the larger campus community in analyzing data on student outcomes, developing strategies for improvement, and institutionalizing practices that prove effective. Colleges participating in the initiative are also expected to advance educational equity by identifying and addressing any achievement gaps that exist among their students, particularly for low-income students and students of color.

The initiative was motivated by the fact that, before Achieving the Dream existed, most community colleges did not track student progress over time. They also did not know if particular subgroups of students — whether defined by ethnicity, gender, socioeconomic status, or academic preparation — were falling behind with respect to others. This lack of knowledge about student success was in large part related to the nature of funding at community colleges: community colleges receive money largely on the basis of "head counts" at the beginning of the semester, and thus they have little incentive to invest in tracking student success rates. Further-

more, effective longitudinal tracking and analysis of student outcomes require data systems, staffing, and expertise beyond the scope available at most community colleges. Achieving the Dream was created to provide colleges with both the resources and the skills to undertake this work, based on the theory that greater institutional awareness would propel community colleges to act on their concerns about student achievement.

In an effort to guide participating colleges away from their traditional emphasis on student enrollments, the initiative's partners outlined a five-step process aimed at helping colleges focus on student success:

- **Step 1:** The president and senior leadership commit to improving student outcomes through changes in policy and resource allocations, and they establish a team to oversee the college's reform process.

- **Step 2:** The college analyzes longitudinal student data to identify achievement gaps and priority areas for reform.

- **Step 3:** The college engages a broad range of stakeholders, including faculty, staff, and external community leaders, in developing strategies to address priority problems.

- **Step 4:** The college implements its improvement strategies, evaluates their effectiveness at increasing student achievement, and uses evidence to make further improvements.

- **Step 5:** The college institutionalizes effective policies and practices by bringing successful strategies to scale; it modifies planning and budgeting processes to incorporate evidence of what works best for improving student achievement.[2]

The Achieving the Dream partners expect that this process of institutional reform will result in improved student outcomes as measured by the following five indicators: (1) progression from developmental to credit-bearing courses; (2) completion of "gatekeeper" courses, defined as introductory college-level courses with high student enrollments; (3) completion of all attempted courses with a grade of C or better; (4) persistence across terms; and, ultimately, (5) attainment of certificates and degrees. (See Figure 1.1.)

To facilitate the process outlined above, the Achieving the Dream partners recommend that each college create two committees to guide its efforts under the initiative: a core team responsible for overseeing decision making about programs and resource allocations, and a data

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[2]MDC, Inc. (2008).

Achieving the Dream: Community Colleges Count

Figure 1.1

Five-Step Institutional Improvement Process for the Achieving the Dream Initiative

Actions by the College

1. Commit to improving student outcomes

2. Identify and prioritize problems

3. Engage stakeholders in developing strategies for addressing priority problems

4. Implement, evaluate, and improve strategies

5. Institutionalize continuous improvement of programs/services

Investments by the College

Supports from Achieving the Dream

Improve student outcomes and reduce achievement gaps between subgroups of students based on five indicators:

- Completion of developmental courses and progression to credit-bearing courses
- Completion of "gatekeeper" courses, particularly first college-level, credit-bearing courses in math and English
- Completion of attempted courses with a "C" or better
- Persistence from term to term and year to year
- Attainment of credentials

SOURCE: Elizabeth Zachry, *Promising Instructional Reforms in Developmental Education: A Case Study of Three Achieving the Dream Colleges* (New York: MDRC, 2008).

team charged with analyzing and disseminating student outcomes data. The initiative has also provided several key supports to assist colleges that are embarking upon this model of institutional reform. First, most colleges receive a $450,000 grant distributed over the course of five years.[3] Each college also receives technical assistance from two consultants: a data facilitator, who helps with data processing and management; and a coach, who assists college leaders in spearheading a movement toward institutional improvement. Finally, the Achieving the Dream initiative hosts several professional development meetings. These meetings include a kick-off event for newly entering colleges and an annual Strategy Institute, where colleges can meet, plan, and share information about their progress and challenges. Now encompassing 102 colleges in 22 states, Achieving the Dream has become a national movement for community college reform.

The Story of Guilford: Methodology and Report Structure

Guilford was one of two Achieving the Dream participants selected from a pool of 26 Round 1 colleges for a short case study analysis.[4] Previous research at the college, including a survey of faculty and administrators, reports from the coach and data facilitator, and recommendations from the initiative's partners, helped to identify Guilford as a college that has sustained progress throughout its implementation of the initiative. Case studies for Guilford and a second Achieving the Dream college, El Paso Community College, were designed to supplement a larger analysis of Achieving the Dream across all 26 Round 1 colleges. A baseline report on these Round 1 colleges was published in May of 2007,[5] and a second report is scheduled for the summer of 2010.

This case study is based on analyses of two site visits to Guilford. The first occurred in the spring of 2006, during the college's first year implementing Achieving the Dream, and the second occurred in the fall of 2008, when the initiative was in its final year of implementation at Guilford. For both waves of site visits, a standard set of research questions was established and subdivided for individual interviews with various college personnel. Interviewees included the college president, senior administrators, core and data team members, institutional research

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[3]Over the four rounds of the demonstration phase (see note 4 below), 18 funders have joined the initiative, some of whom have negotiated different funding agreements with and for their colleges. Additionally, eight colleges are using their own institutional resources to pay for some or all of their participation in *Achieving the Dream*. The majority of sites, however, are participating under the funding formula described above.

[4]Colleges have entered the Achieving the Dream initiative during multiple years and are identified by the "round" in which they joined. Currently, there are four rounds of Achieving the Dream colleges: Round 1 schools entered *Achieving the Dream* in 2004; Round 2 entered in 2005; Round 3, in 2006; and Round 4, in 2007. One of the original 27 Round 1 colleges dropped out of the initiative, bringing the total to 26.

[5]Brock et al. (2007).

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(IR) and information technology (IT) staff, faculty members, student services staff, external partners, and board members. Students involved in the college's most important strategies and interventions also participated in focus groups led by researchers. (See the Appendix.) In addition to the data from these site visits, this study draws from Guilford's official reports to the Achieving the Dream initiative, including its 2005 implementation proposal and annual reports from 2006 through 2008.

It is important to note the scope and limitations of the analysis that follows. Because Achieving the Dream is an institution-wide initiative, it is difficult to establish a "comparison college" against which to measure the progress of participating institutions. Unlike many MDRC studies that use random assignment methodology,[6] this case study is based on qualitative interview data, as well as trend data drawn from Guilford. Trend data are presented in figures and tables throughout the report to complement the narrative of Guilford's experience; they are intended to illuminate the information that was available to the college as it made programming decisions, as well as the evidence it has gathered about changes in student outcomes. However, the data presented here are merely trends, not experimentally derived program impacts, and thus should not be interpreted as definitive proof of program effectiveness. Guilford's story should also not be understood to represent all colleges that join the initiative. Instead, this case study was designed to highlight promising directions for the Achieving the Dream partners and colleges based on the experiences of a single participating college.

The remainder of this report is organized according to three key dimensions of Guilford's implementation process:

- Chapter 2 discusses Guilford's experience building a culture of evidence, as it developed new data systems to undertake the analyses of student outcomes encouraged by the initiative.

- Chapter 3 assesses the college's efforts to develop and implement targeted strategies to improve students' success rates, as well as its ability to engage a broad cross-section of faculty and staff in this process.

- Chapter 4 examines Guilford's efforts to institutionalize Achieving the Dream and presents trends in student achievement over the past four years.

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[6]In random assignment, study participants are randomly assigned to a program group and a control group, in order to compare the outcomes for each group and assess the impact of a particular intervention. See Box 3.1 in Chapter 3 for a more detailed explanation of random assignment.

Each chapter illustrates Guilford's progress along these dimensions through snapshots of the college in 2006 (after the Round 1 colleges completed their first year of implementation under Achieving the Dream) and 2008 (as the Round 1 colleges entered their final year of initiative funding). After discussing continuing challenges, each chapter concludes with key lessons from Guilford's experience that might prove useful to other colleges and the larger initiative as it looks to expand to community colleges across the nation.

Chapter 2

Building a Culture of Evidence

Developing a "culture of inquiry, evidence, and accountability" is meant to be at the core of an Achieving the Dream college's experience.[1] In the words of the Achieving the Dream framing paper:

> Institutions should make decisions and allocate resources based on evidence of what is working and what is not. A data-driven decision-making process is most effective when administrators, faculty and staff across the institution examine evidence and engage in frank discussions about outcomes for different student populations. The college then sets measurable goals for improvement and uses data to assess its progress.[2]

The expectation is that colleges will be motivated by student outcomes data to commit to improving student performance. Not only will evidence of disappointing student achievement serve as an impetus for action, but it will also empower colleges to address their challenges through targeted changes in institutional planning and programming.

The Achieving the Dream partners have set out a rigorous process for establishing an operational culture of evidence. First, colleges are asked to develop tools to track student outcomes with sufficient accuracy and specificity to inform decision making. This often requires colleges to build up both their technological and human research capacities, and generally results in a stronger focus on colleges' institutional research (IR) departments.[3] Once adequate data systems are in place, colleges are then expected to develop processes for translating data into strategic action plans and to develop interventions for institutional improvement. Initiative leaders hope that colleges will engage a broad spectrum of faculty, staff, and administrators in this planning. Additionally, colleges are expected to evaluate and refine their intervention strategies as part of a continuous process that guides the institution's decisions about strategic planning and resource allocation.

Given these multifaceted demands, the initiative provides several supports to colleges that undertake this process. First, the college is assigned a data facilitator, who provides technical support to Achieving the Dream colleges as they develop the various elements of a culture

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[1]Brock et al. (2007).

[2]MDC, Inc. (2006), 3.

[3]Colleges' institutional research departments are generally tasked with managing their data systems and disseminating information about institutional performance.

of evidence. The initiative also provides a coach, who helps the college to consider how to use data in its institutional reform process. Additionally, the initiative has created an Achieving the Dream student outcomes database, which is intended to help colleges track the longitudinal progress of entering student cohorts as they move through the institution. Finally, the initiative provides technical training for colleges through Web-based seminars and an annual conference called the Strategy Institute.

Despite these supports, many Achieving the Dream colleges initially faced obstacles to building a culture of evidence. Among the initial cohort of Round 1 Achieving the Dream colleges, only 6 of 27 had made significant progress toward institutionalizing a culture of evidence after their first year of implementation.[4] The rest continued to struggle with weak data management, inexperience and under-staffing, personnel turnover, and resistance to data-based decision making.[5]

This chapter reveals that such challenges were also evident at Guilford Technical Community College (GTCC) as it started with Achieving the Dream. Like many states, North Carolina's funding is driven by a full-time equivalent (FTE) standard, meaning that the institution receives monies based on the number of students enrolled rather than the number of students who graduate. As Guilford's Achieving the Dream coach explained, "Building a culture of evidence based on student retention, learning, and success required a new set of institutional technical competencies, and GTCC found itself on a steep learning curve." However, despite this difficulty, Guilford's story reveals that such challenges can be overcome if a college takes a systematic approach to improving its data systems and capabilities.

Snapshot 2006: Early Implementation

As Guilford entered its second semester of implementation in spring 2006, its data systems were plagued by disorder. The former director of institutional research had left the college in January after a prolonged struggle to retrieve data from an outdated system. All that remained were a single research assistant and two open positions for a department director and research associate. The original data facilitator provided by the initiative had also proven to be a poor fit, leading the college to request a replacement during this time.

Even more troubling than the shortage of personnel was the absence of reliable data. The college was attempting to make a transition to a new data system in order to meet its increased institutional research demands; however, rather than facilitating its data analysis, this transition made data entry, retrieval, and analysis more difficult. Many faculty and staff distrusted data

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[4]One of the original 27 colleges dropped out of the program.
[5]Brock et al. (2007).

from this system to such an extent that one department resorted to tabulating its student outcomes data by hand. Given the limited accessibility and reliability of institutional data at this time, Guilford began conducting analyses using student data from the state warehouse in Raleigh and national data from the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS).

It is not surprising that without the ability to fulfill its most basic internal functions, the institutional research department drew minimal involvement from the broader campus community. A handful of individual faculty members had begun to track outcomes for their programs, particularly within the developmental education department, but these efforts remained disjointed. Guilford did create a Data Team, called its Learning Evidence Committee, which sought to involve faculty members and staff in an assessment of its strategies. However, most college personnel were just beginning to understand how the Learning Evidence Committee could influence program development, and many did not yet recognize the relevance of the team's work to their own responsibilities at the college.

Despite these challenges, Guilford quickly established the goal of improving students' success rates as a major priority for the college. Using state and national data, Guilford analyzed its students' achievements and noted challenges with retention, persistence, course success, and graduation rates. This analysis helped the college to identify three top priorities for its efforts to improve student success rates under Achieving the Dream:[6] (1) establishing a culture of evidence; (2) improving the experience of entering students; and (3) improving developmental math, reading, and English through the creation of learning communities.[7] Guilford's leadership was also conducting a thorough search to hire a new institutional research director, who could help the college build a data warehouse for analyzing student outcomes. Thus, while Guilford made a rocky start on a long road to effective, evidence-based decision making, the college was able to establish some key targets for improving students' success rates.

Snapshot 2008: Advanced Implementation

While Guilford's institutional research department was initially mired in difficulties, the college emerged by fall 2008 as a model for progress in the development of a culture of evidence. Over the course of the intervening three years, the college's capacity for institutional research had been dramatically expanded through improvements in the collection, analysis, and dissemination of data, as well as the involvement of the broader campus community in evaluating student outcomes.

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[6]Guilford Technical Community College (n.d.[a]).
[7]Guilford Technical Community College (n.d.[b]).

Two changes had a major impact on Guilford's culture of evidence. First, in May of 2006, the college hired a new institutional research director, and she brought with her a wealth of skills in data analysis. Second, this new IR director initiated a plan to overhaul Guilford's data system and create an institutional data warehouse that would replace its previous, ineffectual system. This data warehouse (see Box 2.1) helped address the college's concerns about data integrity and accessibility as it tracked students' progress longitudinally along various measures of achievement, including its three priority outcomes: students' semester-to-semester persistence, students' successful completion of developmental and curriculum courses, and college graduation rates. It also allowed the college to analyze students' progress and persistence at particular high-risk points throughout the semester (for example, withdrawal deadlines) to see whether and when students were struggling in their classes.

Box 2.1

What Is a Data Warehouse?

In order to monitor its intervention strategies and institutional performance, Guilford chose to set up a new "data warehouse" to track student success. This warehouse was designed such that it could track the achievement outcomes of individual students across a multitude of indicators. Guilford's data warehouse contains information about a variety of student characteristics, including:

- Background demographics, such as race/ethnicity, gender, and age
- Entering placement test scores
- Course enrollments
- Within-semester course retention
- Course grades
- Persistence from semester to semester
- Receipt of a degree or certificate

This database has allowed Guilford to track students' achievement longitudinally from semester to semester, as well as to examine indicators of overall institutional performance, including student persistence, course completion, and graduation. Additionally, it has been used to evaluate particular intervention strategies to determine whether and how they have influenced students' success — such as students' persistence, achievement, and progression to higher course levels.

SOURCE: Information provided by Guilford's institutional research department.

Improvements in Guilford's data collection also allowed for more sophisticated analyses of students' progress. The new data warehouse tracked individual, student-level data, making it possible for researchers to produce trend reports for specific programs, often comparing outcomes of students receiving an intervention with those of students not receiving the intervention. It also allowed institutional researchers to more easily disaggregate data for student subpopulations (for example, by gender, age, ethnicity, and course) and track those of particular interest, such as developmental education students and students of color. Finally, the college used Achieving the Dream funds to support intensive statistical training for two assistants in the institutional research department, which helped increase the department's capabilities and analysis.

Beyond its data warehouse, Guilford also pursued several other measures to learn about its students and track institutional performance. Guilford began conducting surveys, such as the Community College Survey of Student Engagement (CCSSE), which provided more information about students' connection to and participation in the college's programs and services. It also held several focus groups to learn about students' experiences in various Achieving the Dream interventions. Finally, the college hired an external evaluator in the fall of 2008 to conduct additional focus groups, track its progress in Achieving the Dream, and provide an outside perspective on how institutional leaders could continue to improve the college's policies and practices.

While building the college's data capabilities, Guilford's institutional research director also devoted energy to helping faculty and staff members understand how to use and interpret data. The development of the college's Learning Evidence Committee was an early step in this process. This committee involved a large number of faculty and staff and played a substantial role in helping the college to track its performance. The committee has routinely reviewed data on the college's larger institutional progress as well as specific data on its Achieving the Dream strategies. As it has become more established in the past few years, the committee has served as the main reviewing and advisory body for the IR department. It has played an integral role in making recommendations for the expansion of particular Achieving the Dream strategies, selecting key indicators to track the college's performance, and analyzing data on student engagement. Guilford has promoted wide involvement in this committee by rotating faculty and staff appointments every two years, thereby gradually increasing the number of personnel who have intimate knowledge of the college's institutional performance.

While building a committee to oversee the college's data analysis, institutional researchers also had to work to regain faculty and staff members' trust of institutional data after the college's difficult experience switching to a new data system. In order to do this, the college's IR director began meeting with skeptical faculty members and demonstrating the alignment between her institutional reports (based on data from the new data warehouse) and

faculty members' own hand-tabulated data. After gaining the trust of these faculty members, the IR director then began holding individual meetings with division and department heads to help them learn how to use the data that her office provided. These meetings were further supported by growth in IR staffing and training, as research assistants trained in statistical methodology could now take over some of the technical analysis and reporting. The IR director now reports spending more time in meetings familiarizing college personnel with data usage than she spends conducting analyses herself.

The fruits of her work can be seen in faculty and staff members' increased interest in data, as evidenced by the striking upsurge in requests for data from division heads, faculty members, and staff. From the summer of 2006 to the summer of 2008, the college experienced more than a fivefold increase in one-time requests for reports on students' performance in specific classes and programs, as well as a smaller increase in requests for ongoing departmental and program reports. The director of institutional research expects yet another increase in 2009 as the leaders of Achieving the Dream interventions seek evidence that their programs should continue on the college budget after Achieving the Dream funding ends.

This interest in data has touched traditionally data-hungry subject areas such as business, but its impact has been even more noteworthy in unexpected areas such as industrial construction engineering technology. Some faculty leaders have sought increased collaboration with the institutional research department as they develop their own studies. For instance, one faculty member is testing out a new instructional method and is working with the IR office to analyze its success in the hope of publishing his results. Such examples suggest that faculty members are increasingly aware of the importance of student success data to inform their own teaching and instruction.

Continuing Challenges

Guilford's accomplishments in developing a culture of evidence can be instructive to other community colleges, but so, too, can its continuing challenges. While Guilford has made major strides toward involving some faculty and staff members in its data analysis, it has still had difficulty garnering the engagement of the entire campus community. Faculty and staff who were less directly involved with the college's Achieving the Dream work knew less about the efforts to improve student success and reported less knowledge about student outcomes data. While many faculty and staff reported an increased awareness of student retention, some reported being too busy or overworked to spend time tracking their students' performance and implementing reforms. Still others thought that some students faced too many personal challenges to achieve academic success, and they doubted their ability to influence students' performance by improving their own practices. Thus, while Guilford has made progress in

engaging faculty and staff in its efforts to improve student achievement, some faculty and staff remain unaware of or uninterested in this agenda.

The college leadership hopes that its effort to bring division and department heads on board with data analysis will encourage these faculty and staff to become more aware of the student success issues in their respective areas. Additionally, IR staff plan to develop division and departmental "scorecards," which will track indicators of student success that the department or division finds most useful. (See Chapter 4 for more about the scorecards.)

The college's difficulty completing its required submissions to the Achieving the Dream database should also be noted. When Guilford first joined Achieving the Dream, it was in the midst of a major transition between data systems and did not have the capability to submit all of the data reports required by the initiative. Instead, it hired an external organization to collect and organize these data at a cost of $10,000 during its first year, $8,000 the following year, and $2,500 in each subsequent year. Even after the new IR director and institutional data warehouse were in place, the college decided to continue to contract out its data submissions. It found that the Achieving the Dream cohort database served a different purpose from its institutional warehouse. While the initiative's cohort data were useful for tracking institutional trends,[8] Guilford was particularly interested in using its own data warehouse to track the progress of the college's interventions and strategies. An additional complication was that the college had different definitions for some of the success indicators than those used by the initiative. (See Chapter 4 for more details.) Despite major advances in its capacity, Guilford's IR department has sometimes found it difficult to meet the simultaneous demands of these two data systems.

Key Lessons for Colleges from Guilford's Experience

Guilford's story brings hope that with hard work and smart planning, Achieving the Dream colleges can make great headway in developing a culture of evidence. There is no "magic bullet," and each college will face its own unique challenges. However, the following lessons from Guilford's experience might prove useful to other colleges as they enter the initiative:

- **Focus inward before expanding outward.**

  Get yourself some form of data warehouse up and running from the start. Have it going and tested to make sure you have good, clean, solid data.…

  — Director of Institutional Research, 2008

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[8]The Achieving the Dream cohort data only tracks first-time, degree-seeking, entering student cohorts.

Guilford's experience building a culture of evidence reveals that colleges may first need to focus on developing their own internal IR capacity before extending outward to reach the broader college community. While Achieving the Dream encourages colleges to engage faculty members and staff in data analysis, Guilford's institutional research department needed time to develop its own data warehouse, hire staff to manage the college's increasing data needs, and undertake the statistical training needed to manage this data system. Only after these systems were in place could the college begin to shift its focus toward training faculty and staff in data usage and analysis. While the initiative recommends that these processes occur in tandem, Guilford's experience reveals that some colleges' institutional research departments may need some additional time to focus inward on increasing their data capacity before reaching out fully to faculty and staff.

- **Develop data systems that best reflect the needs of the college in tracking student success.**

    At GTCC, we really want to know if our initiatives are working or not — or to what extent they are working. It may take years to reach a point where this fully shows in the [Achieving the Dream] data sets… Going forward, GTCC is focusing on trying to match the proper student with the right initiative for optimal gain.

    — Director of Institutional Research, 2009

After its initial challenges with data analysis, Guilford's institutional research department created a new data warehouse to follow individual students' progress throughout the institution. The college was particularly interested in tracking the successes of its many strategic interventions, which required building a data system that had individual identifiers for each of these strategies. Additionally, Guilford worked toward building several internally defined measures of institutional performance to be tracked in its database as well. Guilford's internally defined data measures did not always align neatly with those tracked in the Achieving the Dream database, which has posed some continued challenges for the college, both analytically and monetarily. Colleges participating in Achieving the Dream may need to weigh the challenges and benefits of their own internal data systems with those measures that are reported to the initiative. Additionally, the initiative partners may wish to consider how to make this database more user-friendly for the colleges. Finally, both Achieving the Dream partners and colleges may need to consider what types of data are most reliable when reporting on student success, and why initiative reports may differ from individual colleges' reports of student success.

- **Leverage a data facilitator's expertise on best practices in IR to build a solid foundation for a culture of evidence.**

  [Our data facilitator] has been a dream!... The whole idea of this [score-card] came from her. She said, "A few schools are beginning to use this right now, and I think you ought to really take a look at it for your data team."

  — Director of Institutional Research, 2008

There is great potential for Achieving the Dream, and data facilitators in particular, to have an impact on the development of a college's culture of evidence. While Guilford had difficulties with its initial data facilitator, the college's new designee proved invaluable to the development of the IR department. Guilford's new IR director and recent data facilitator worked together closely to develop a map and indicators for the new data warehouse, along with a set of tools to communicate the department's findings to faculty and staff. For example, one of the data facilitator's greatest contributions was to suggest that the college build a template for tracking its institutional progress through an institutional "scorecard" (discussed in Chapter 4). Colleges that are starting an institution-wide improvement process may be well advised to employ the resources of outside experts who can provide guidance on how to build internal data systems and move toward data-driven decision making.

- **Make relationship building an IR function.**

  I think [the campus's exposure to student outcomes data] has changed a great deal in the past few years. I know who [our institutional research director] is now. I know what her office does. I know that she's accessible. I know that if I want data, all I have to do is just tell her or work with her to try to explain what kind of data I'm looking for, and she'll be able to collect it and get it... I had no awareness of that being a possibility before I was involved the way I am in Achieving the Dream.

  — Faculty member, 2008

The relationships that Guilford's institutional research director has developed with faculty and staff have been an important asset to the college's culture of evidence. Once viewed largely as an isolated compliance reporting office, the college's institutional research department is now widely respected for its competence and relevance. After helping the college develop a functional data warehouse, the institutional research director focused much of her energy on helping train faculty and staff to interpret and use the data that her office provides. This direct contact has helped faculty and staff to build connections with the IR office, to gain appreciation for the relevance of student outcomes data, and even to begin their own investigations of student success.

While Achieving the Dream focuses heavily on the skills of institutional researchers, Guilford's experience reveals that IR directors' interpersonal skills can be just as important to building an institution-wide culture of evidence. Colleges undertaking similar reform processes may be well served by focusing on data practitioners' ability to communicate and encourage faculty and staff to analyze and use student outcomes data. The development of these personal connections was a crucial stepping stone for Guilford as it built its own culture of evidence.

Key Lessons for the Initiative from Guilford's Experience

- **Offer guidance to colleges about how to best utilize the coaching resources provided by the initiative.**

The Achieving the Dream initiative invests substantial resources in providing a variety of supports to participating colleges, including guidance from an assigned coach and data facilitator. These individuals have a great deal to offer by way of expertise on community college policy and practice, but colleges may not always have a thorough understanding of how this knowledge can be maximally leveraged. Initiative leaders might observe a greater impact from coaching if they offered more guidance about how and when their coach and data facilitator are most likely to be useful. For example, Guilford's IR director benefited immensely from the support of the college's data facilitator as she developed new systems for data analysis and dissemination, including the college's data warehouse and institutional scorecard. Sharing such stories about successful coaching relationships, perhaps during the initiative's annual Strategy Institutes, could inform entering Achieving the Dream colleges and coaches alike about how best to cooperate in their efforts to improve student success rates.

Chapter 3

Developing Strategies and Engaging Stakeholders

Building a culture of evidence is one of the central expectations of Achieving the Dream, but the ultimate goal of the initiative is for colleges to leverage their enhanced data capabilities to address achievement gaps and improve student success rates. Only when a college translates evidence into strategic action will its students experience the full benefits of the initiative. The primary vehicle for enacting this change is the development of new programs and policies that help students to remain in school, improve their performance, and ultimately graduate with certificates or degrees. Colleges' strategies can range from revising administrative procedures to changing instructional practices in specific subject areas. The initiative encourages colleges to involve a wide variety of faculty and staff at each stage of the process, from strategy design to implementation, assessment, and refinement. This broad engagement ensures that all aspects of the initiative will become more prominent across the campus as students and employees from each area contribute their diverse insights and perspectives.

While Achieving the Dream supports are provided to assist college personnel throughout this process, colleges are expected to be creative in designing or selecting strategies to address the specific needs of their student populations. Using their new data capabilities to identify achievement gaps and target areas for student success, colleges are asked to begin discussions about possible interventions to advance their strategic priorities. After one or more key strategies has been selected under each priority, the college is then expected to proceed to its implementation phase by piloting new interventions and programs. The college should then collect and analyze outcomes data from each strategy and use these data to inform changes in the way the strategy is implemented. The expectation is that colleges will scale up those strategies that yield improvements, while modifying or phasing out those that do not.

Many Round 1 colleges in Achieving the Dream struggled to apply this model for strategy development during their first year of implementation. All 26 had begun to pilot at least one strategy,[1] and many were choosing similar interventions. For instance, 11 colleges had chosen to develop learning communities,[2] and 16 had chosen to implement student

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[1]There were originally 27 Round 1 colleges, but one dropped out.

[2]Learning communities are an intervention designed to strengthen classroom engagement by fostering peer relationships and building thematic connections across subject areas. A small group of students enrolls in two or more classes together as a "community." Meanwhile, the instructors of these "linked" courses work together to build integrated syllabi and develop mutually reinforcing themes (Visher et al., 2008).

success courses.[3] As would be expected for this stage in their development, most of these programs remained in the pilot stage, and few had been fully implemented. The 2007 baseline report for the initiative suggests that few used their data analysis to inform their strategy development. Furthermore, most colleges had a long way to go toward building broad campus engagement beyond their designated core and data teams.[4] These challenges set the context for Guilford's own experience developing and implementing its strategies over the course of the initiative.

Snapshot 2006: Early Implementation

After a careful planning period during the 2004-2005 academic year, Guilford hit the ground running with several strategies aimed at improving students' achievement. The breadth and quantity of interventions that were already being implemented by 2006 was remarkable. In the fall of 2005, almost 900 of Guilford's 3,000 freshmen attended the college's newly expanded orientation, over 300 students enrolled in one of its student success courses, and many others participated in programs ranging from learning communities to mentoring. Table 3.1 gives an overview of these strategies, trends in student achievement, and the implementation status of each strategy by spring 2006 and fall 2008. As shown in the table, most strategies were designed to reach Guilford's primary target populations: developmental education students and first-year students.

Developmental Education

Hoping to improve developmental education students' success rates, Guilford implemented a number of courses and services to reach this struggling population. One of the college's most important strategies was to implement learning communities linking courses in developmental math, reading, and English. The college was also beginning to pilot a student success course in developmental education, a strategy that had already proven effective with students in several gatekeeper courses. Finally, Guilford began plans for offering modified versions of its introductory algebra courses in developmental math, including a class with voluntary supplemental instruction and self-paced classes. The college hoped that these varied strategies would help raise the success and persistence rates of its developmental education population.

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[3]Success courses are designed to provide students with the fundamental tools needed to do well in college, including time management and study skills, knowledge about campus support services, and general life-coping tactics.

[4]Brock et al. (2007).

Table 3.1

**Achieving the Dream Strategies, Guilford Technical Community College,
Progress in Spring 2006 and Fall 2008**

Strategy Name	Strategy Description	Implementation Status (Spring 2006)	Promising Trends from Strategy Evaluations (through Fall 2008)[a]	Implementation Status (Fall 2008)
Strategies targeting students in developmental courses				
Student success course	3-credit course to build study and interpersonal skills	Piloting	• Student persistence[b]	Implemented; scaled up
Learning communities	Paired courses linking two developmental education and/or student success courses	Piloting	• Course completion • Student persistence	Implemented; scaled up
Two-semester developmental math course	Slows pace of introductory algebra course by extending it over two semesters	Piloting	• Course completion • Student persistence	Rejected by state of North Carolina; discontinued
Supplemental instruction	Additional instructional hour in introductory algebra	Planning	• Course completion	Implemented; scaled up modestly
Self-paced developmental math course	Introductory algebra students work at own pace with instructor facilitator	Planning	—	Piloting
Transitions program	Specialized reading, writing, and math program for low-level developmental education learners	—	• Student persistence • Progression through developmental course levels	Implemented
Tutoring lab	Walk-in tutoring provided by developmental education instructors	—	—	Piloting

(continued)

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Table 3.1 (continued)

Strategy Name	Strategy Description	Implementation Status (Spring 2006)	Promising Trends from Strategy Evaluations (through Fall 2008)[a]	Implementation Status (Fall 2008)
Strategies targeting first-year students				
COMPASS workshops	Reviews and prepares students for COMPASS placement testing[c]	Implemented	• High student satisfaction	Implemented
Student orientation	Revised to introduce students to campus surroundings, services, and registration process	Piloting	• Student persistence	Implemented; scaled up
Front-door center	Consolidates scattered intake services (admissions, records, financial aid, placement testing, disability services, counseling) into a renovated reception area	Planning	• Positive feedback from focus groups	Implemented; scaled up
Strategies targeting students in gatekeeper courses				
Student success course	1-credit study skills class for gatekeeper courses	Piloting	• Student persistence • Graduation rate	Implemented; scaled up
Learning communities	Paired courses linking two gatekeeper courses and/or student success courses	Piloting	• Course completion • Student persistence	Implemented; scaled up

(continued)

Table 3.1 (continued)

Strategy Name	Strategy Description	Implementation Status (Spring 2006)	Promising Trends from Strategy Evaluations (through Fall 2008)[a]	Implementation Status (Fall 2008)
Other strategies				
Professional development	Individual and institution-wide professional development for faculty and staff focused on increasing student success	Implemented	• High faculty and staff satisfaction	Implemented
Minority male mentoring	Targets minority male students	Piloting	• Student persistence (limited evidence)	Piloting
College Transfer Advising Center	Center for students hoping to transfer to four-year colleges and universities	Planning	• Student satisfaction and knowledge of transfer process	Implemented

SOURCES: Guilford's Achieving the Dream Implementation Proposal; Guilford's Achieving the Dream Annual Report from 2006; Achieving the Dream Intervention Reports for Guilford; MDRC interviews with Guilford faculty and staff in 2006 and 2008.

NOTES: [a]The evaluation results summarized here are from Guilford's analyses using its instituional data warehouse; they are not from MDRC experimental studies. Blank cells indicate that there is no formal program evaluation in place.

[b]Guilford has worked in collaboration with MDRC to conduct an impact study of its developmental student success course using random assignment. Upon completion in the spring of 2011, MDRC's report will provide a rigorous evaluation of the quantitative impact of the course on student outcomes.

[c]COMPASS review workshops in English, reading, and math were already taught by volunteer instructors in 2001, before the Achieving the Dream initiative had begun. However, Achieving the Dream grant funds were later used to compensate instructors for their time and thus maintain the continuity of the program. The workshops are designed to help incoming students review for the COMPASS college placement test, which Guilford uses to assess students' academic skill levels in order to place them into appropriate classes

First-Year Students

Another major push in Guilford's Achieving the Dream plan was to create a more welcoming experience for first-year students. One of the main strategies the college undertook was a revision and expansion of its orientation for new students. The pre-existing, one-hour session was replaced by a more comprehensive, three-hour orientation that introduced students to the various services and resources available at the college. This expanded orientation became

mandatory for new students, and an online orientation was also devised for students who could not attend in person. The college also restructured its existing placement test review workshops so that instructional hours were more regular and staff members were paid for time on task.

Early Implementation Challenges

While Guilford piloted a number of strategies, not all of them were so easily implemented. For instance, Guilford also implemented a "split math" course sequence in developmental math, which spread the content of its introductory algebra course over two semesters for students who needed slower-paced instruction. This innovative program yielded promising results during its pilot phase, but it was quickly discontinued when North Carolina objected to this new course format.[5] Guilford was also interested in developing a streamlined "front-door experience" for new students in order to make the enrollment process less intimidating for them. The college hoped to develop a new reception area that would house staff from assessment, counseling, financial aid, and intake in one area. However, the school had difficulty locating funding for this project and was forced to postpone its efforts.

As with its strategy implementation, Guilford's initial strides in engaging faculty and staff also presented new challenges. A small number of faculty members had received release time to spearhead various strategies, while growing numbers of student services staff were being trained as instructors for the college's new student success courses. Even more noteworthy, the leader of Guilford's Achieving the Dream core team had dedicated half of the year's grant money to professional development for faculty and staff. This money was used to sponsor small groups of faculty and staff to visit other colleges that were piloting interventions of interest to Guilford, including intake procedures at Valencia Community College and learning communities at Evergreen State College. Yet, despite pockets of involvement, the campus at large was slow to accept the process of data-based decision making in many areas. Some academic departments lagged behind in their use of data, while others experienced difficulty tracking the data they desired. In truth, Guilford's culture of evidence was not sufficiently established at this time to allow for thorough program evaluations. Any assessments that occurred tended to be very broad, and access to accurate assessments of specific Achieving the Dream interventions remained limited.

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[5]North Carolina has developed a statewide system for categorizing community college courses. Guilford's "split math" course did not fit into any of the system's predetermined categories, and thus the state did not approve this new course format.

Snapshot 2008: Advanced Implementation

By the fall of 2008, Guilford's approach to implementation had matured substantially as it expanded effective strategies and launched new ones. The renovations for a front-door intake area that had been stalled in 2006 were now complete, allowing students to navigate the enrollment process much more easily. Similarly, students with an interest in transferring to four-year colleges and universities now benefited from the support of the new College Transfer Advising Center. This Center provided improved advising for the majority of Guilford's transfer student population, who numbered over 3,000. The new student orientation had been scaled up to reach over 1,700 students in the fall of 2008 (affecting nearly half of the college's total first-year class), while enrollment in the college's one-credit student success courses had doubled to reach over 600 students in the business division, as well as hundreds more in developmental education. Dozens of students had participated in five learning communities for both developmental and college-level courses, and these courses were now overseen by an official learning community committee and coordinator. This coordinator used her release time to organize training opportunities, market the program to instructors and students, and oversee a new proposal process for creating additional links.

Using Data to Inform Programming: The Student Success Course

Guilford was also making greater use of data to make programming decisions. Drawing student outcomes data on specific strategies from its new warehouse, the college found promising trends in student achievement and used this information to guide its decisions about modification and expansion. One powerful example is the college's one-credit student success course, which was designed to improve retention and course completion for new business technology students by teaching them time management, career planning, and general college preparatory skills. The program began as a pilot in the fall of 2005 with entering students in two business programs. Trend data from this pilot were promising (see Figure 3.1); the college found that students taking this success course persisted into the spring term at a higher rate (75.4 percent) than students not taking the success course (60.8 percent), and this increase in persistence continued into subsequent terms. Three-year graduation trends also revealed that business students taking the success course had higher college completion rates (23 percent) than other students (14 percent). Additionally, the student success course revealed a potential to reduce racial achievement gaps for African-American male students. As seen in Figure 3.2, the college noted that fall-to-spring persistence for African-American males who had taken the success course (71.0 percent) was closer to that of the overall cohort (75.4 percent) than for students who had not taken the success course (55.1 percent and 60.8 percent, respectively).

Achieving the Dream: Community Colleges Count

Figure 3.1

Persistence and Graduation Rates for New Students, by Enrollment Status in One-Credit Student Success Course, Guilford Technical Community College, Fall 2005 Cohort
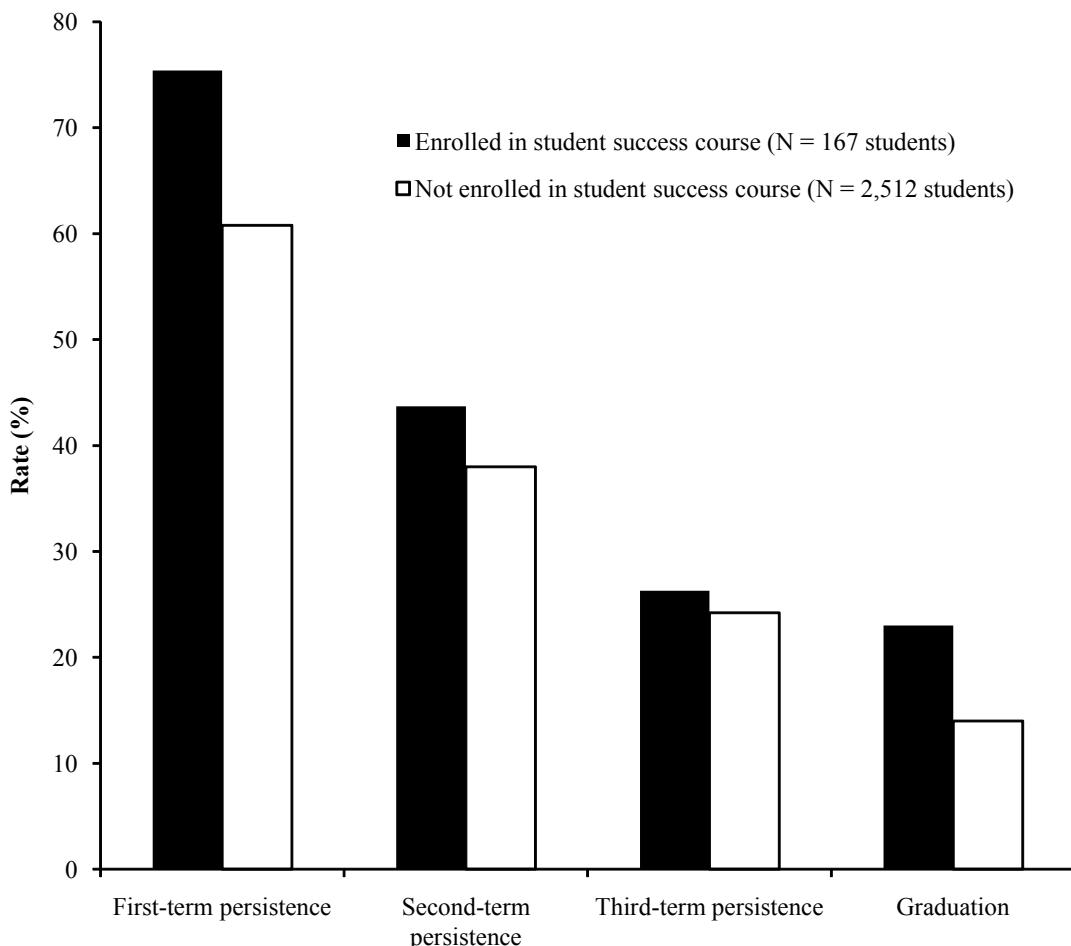
SOURCE: Reports generated with data from Guilford's institutional database.

NOTES: During the fall 2005 pilot, all students in two business technology programs (paralegal and office systems technology) were required to take the success course. The comparison, non-success course group includes all other new students expected to persist at the college.

Guilford measures first-term persistence for the fall 2005 cohort as the percentage of students expected to persist who remain at the college at the first census date in spring 2006 (fall-to-spring persistence). Second-term persistence gives the percentage who remain at the beginning of fall 2006 (fall-to-fall persistence), and third-term persistence gives the percentage who continue into spring 2007 (fall-to-second spring persistence). Guilford uses a three-year graduation rate measured for a cohort of entering, degree-seeking students who indicate an intention to graduate.

Achieving the Dream: Community Colleges Count

Figure 3.2

**Fall-to-Spring Persistence Rates for All and African-American Male
New Students, by Enrollment Status in Student Success Course,
Guilford Technical Community College, Fall 2005 Pilot**
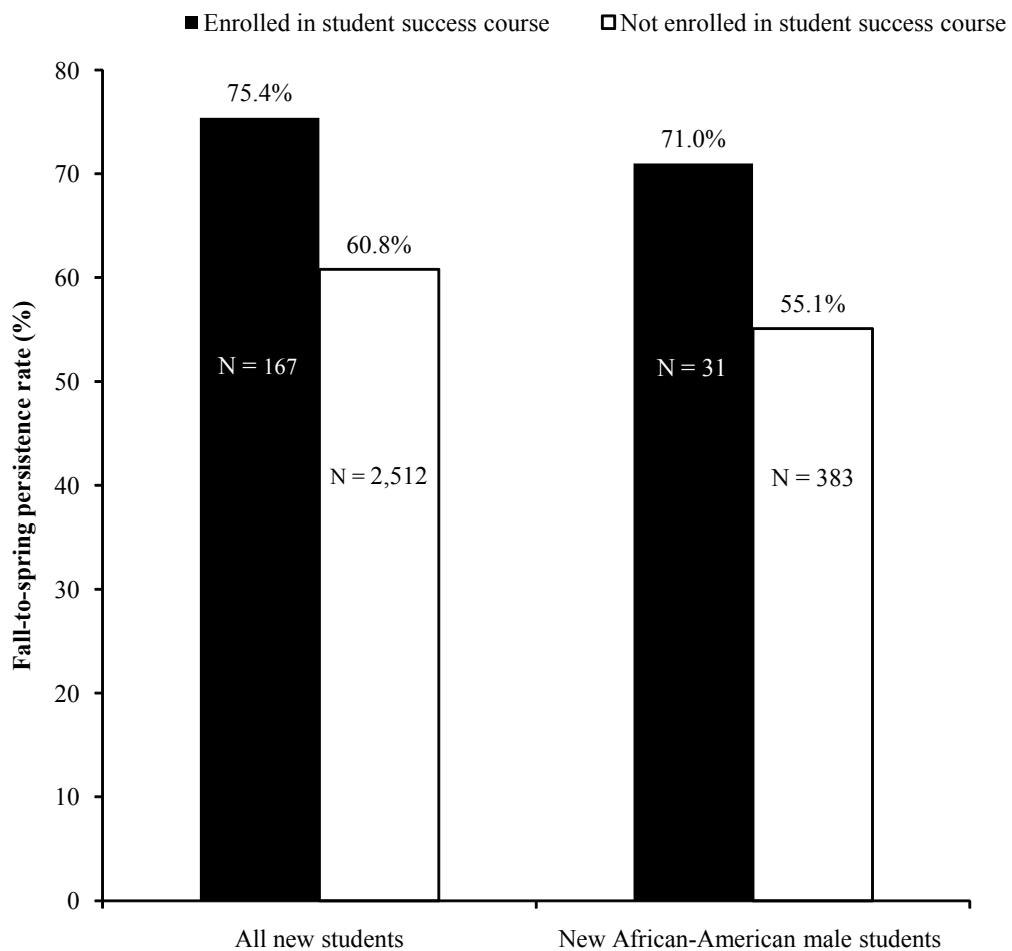
SOURCE: Reports generated with data from Guilford's institutional database.

NOTES: During the fall 2005 pilot, all new students in two business technology programs (paralegal and office systems technology) were required to take the success course. The comparison, non-success course group includes all other new students expected to persist at the college.

Guilford's first-term persistence rate measures the percentage of students enrolled during a given semester (fall 2005) who remain at the college through the first census date of the following semester (spring 2006). It is calculated only for those students whose applications indicate an intention to persist, thus excluding students who do not intend to pursue a degree.

Based on these findings, Guilford proceeded to scale up this one-credit success course to reach as many students as possible. New business technology programs joined each year, listing the course as a requirement for new students, until the course was institutionalized division-wide in 2008-2009. (See Figure 3.3.) The college also looked toward expanding the success course to other departments and began piloting a new three-credit version of the course in its developmental education division. By the spring of 2009, over 400 developmental education students had taken the new three-credit student success course.

The scale-up within the business technology programs met with continued success as the results from the fall 2005 pilot were replicated year to year. Success course students continued to persist at higher rates than other students, particularly among African-American males. In fact, the college found that African-American males taking the course tended to persist at higher rates than the overall cohort by 2007. (See Figure 3.4.) Given the promising trends that Guilford noted for business students in its initial evaluations, the college chose to work with MDRC to undertake a more rigorous study of its three-credit success courses in the developmental education department. Because this study uses random assignment methodology, it will allow MDRC and Guilford to make a more confident assessment of the impact of the strategy on student achievement. (See Box 3.1.) The results of this study are expected to be published in 2011.

Targeting First-Year Students: Orientation

Promising trends have also emerged for Guilford's strategies targeting first-year students. The best example of this success can be seen in Guilford's revised new student orientation, later known as "Student Orientation, Advising, and Registration" (or SOAR). When it joined Achieving the Dream, Guilford offered only a minimal, one-hour new student orientation session, which students could attend voluntarily. The college's leadership quickly identified this approach as an area of weakness and proceeded to develop a more comprehensive three-hour session, which it piloted in the fall of 2005. The program has since undergone a continuous process of evaluation and modification, and the college now requires all new students entering the college to attend this orientation. Student feedback from the pilot year was used to integrate registration with orientation beginning the following year. Meanwhile, based on increased persistence trends among orientation attendees (see Figure 3.5), the college committed to scaling up the program to reach an increasing percentage of its incoming students (as shown in Figure 3.6).

Improving Developmental Education

Perhaps Guilford's greatest advances were made in the sphere of developmental education. The college had established a centralized division devoted exclusively to developmental education, hired a division chair, and trained 75 instructors in developmental advising.

Achieving the Dream: Community Colleges Count

Figure 3.3

Program Scale-Up for One-Credit Student Success Course, Business Technology Division, Guilford Technical Community College, Fall 2005 to Spring 2009
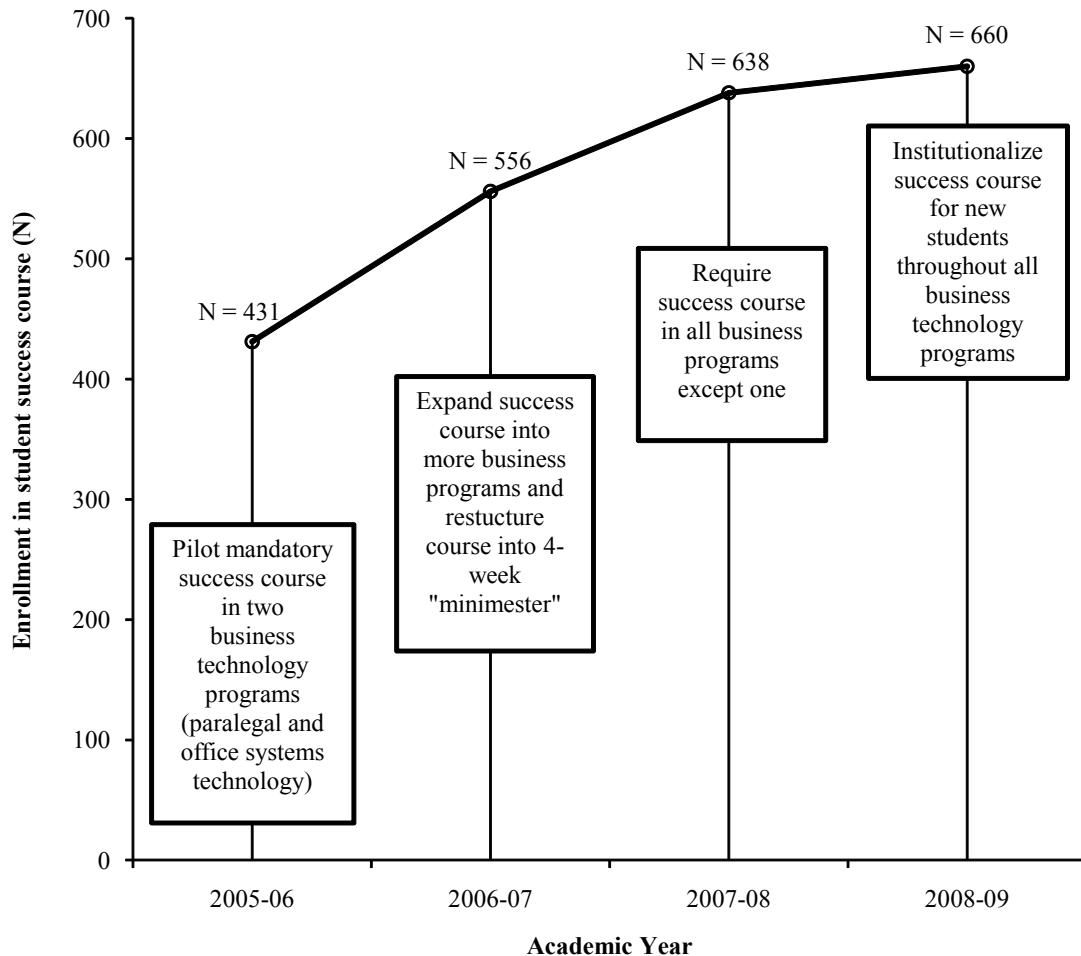
SOURCE: Course enrollment counts generated from Guilford's institutional database.

Achieving the Dream: Community Colleges Count

Figure 3.4

Fall-to-Spring Persistence Rates for All and African-American Male New Students, by Enrollment Status in Student Success Course, Guilford Technical Community College: Fall 2005, Fall 2006, and Fall 2007 Cohorts
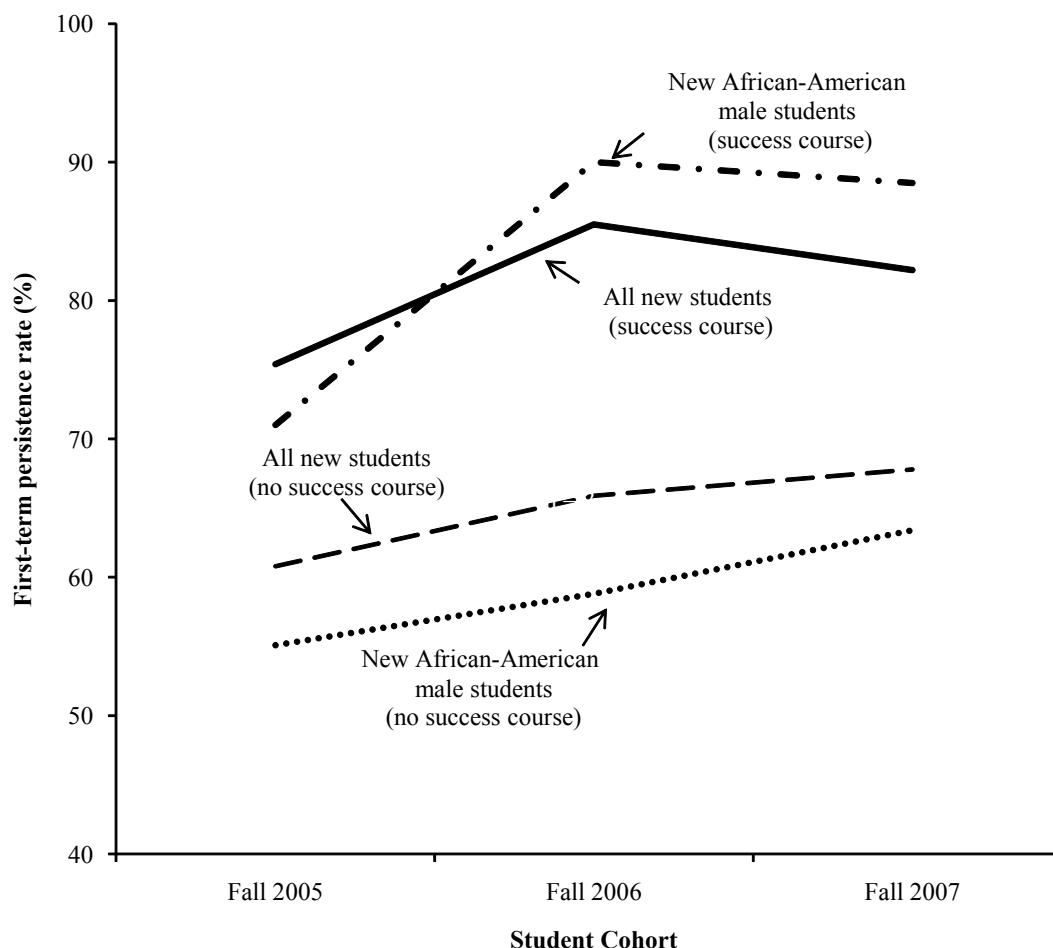
SOURCE: Reports generated with data from Guilford's institutional database.

NOTES: The first-term persistence rate measures the percentage of an entering fall cohort who remain at the college at the first census date of the following spring semester (including only those students whose applications indicate an intention to persist). The success course group includes those students taking the success course (paralegal and office systems technology students in 2005, and students from additional business programs in subsequent years). The non-success course persistence rates are measured for the comparison group of all new students who are not taking the student success course.

Box 3.1

Why Random Assignment?

Achieving the Dream encourages colleges to continuously evaluate and reassess their intervention strategies implemented under the initiative. In the beginning stages, colleges are encouraged to undertake **formative evaluations**. Formative evaluations analyze the implementation of an intervention and help to answer questions such as whether an intervention is reaching its intended target population and whether it is functioning as its designers intended. Once colleges begin to scale up their interventions, Achieving the Dream encourages them to undertake **summative evaluations**, which help colleges to answer questions about whether an intervention changed students' achievement levels. Colleges are encouraged to employ comparison groups to assess what difference a program or policy has made in student outcomes, with respect to what would occur in the absence of the program or policy. Colleges are generally expected to undertake simple comparisons between program participants and nonparticipants, given the high levels of time and cost involved in conducting more rigorous analyses such as random assignment designs, which are described below.

While Guilford evaluated most of its strategies using a simple comparison method, the college has also worked closely with MDRC to conduct a more rigorous analysis of its student success courses for developmental education students using random assignment. Random assignment methodology is frequently compared to a coin toss or lottery system, whereby study participants are randomly assigned to either a program group or a nonprogram (control) group. Because each student has an equal chance of being placed into either group, the program and control groups should have similar characteristics at the outset of the study (assuming that the sample of participants is sufficiently large to minimize random variation). As such, a well-designed and carefully implemented random assignment study helps protect against a number of methodological problems. One of the most common of these problems is selection bias, whereby the most motivated students sign up for the program group, making it difficult to disentangle the impact of the intervention from the effect of motivational differences. Because random assignment helps control for selection bias and differences in background characteristics, it allows researchers to conclude that different outcomes between the program and control groups are caused by the intervention itself, rather than by preexisting differences between groups.

Achieving the Dream: Community Colleges Count

Figure 3.5

**Fall-to-Spring Persistence Rates for New Students, by Attendance at
Orientation, Guilford Technical Community College:
Fall 2005, Fall 2006, and Fall 2007 Cohorts**
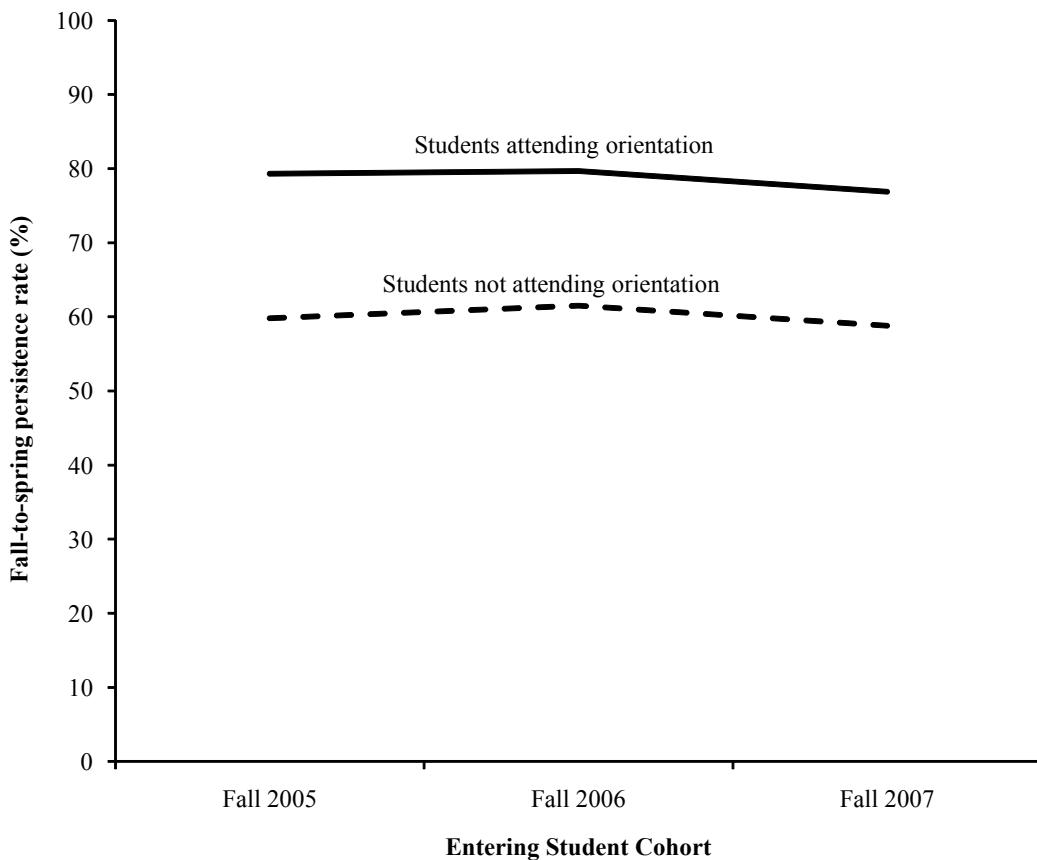
SOURCE: Reports generated from data in Guilford's institutional database.

NOTES: Fall-to-spring (or first-term) persistence measures the percentage of new students (expected to persist) enrolled in the fall who remained at college at the beginning of the following spring term.

   Students who voluntarily registered for orientation may differ from those who did not. For example, the college found that those attending orientation in fall 2005 were disproportionately female and white, though the distribution of their academic placement scores was similar to that of students not attending orientation. Differences between the orientation and comparison groups (such as different levels of motivation) may be reflected in this graph.

Figure 3.6

**Program Scale-Up for New Student Orientation, Guilford Technical
Community College, Fall 2005 to Fall 2007**
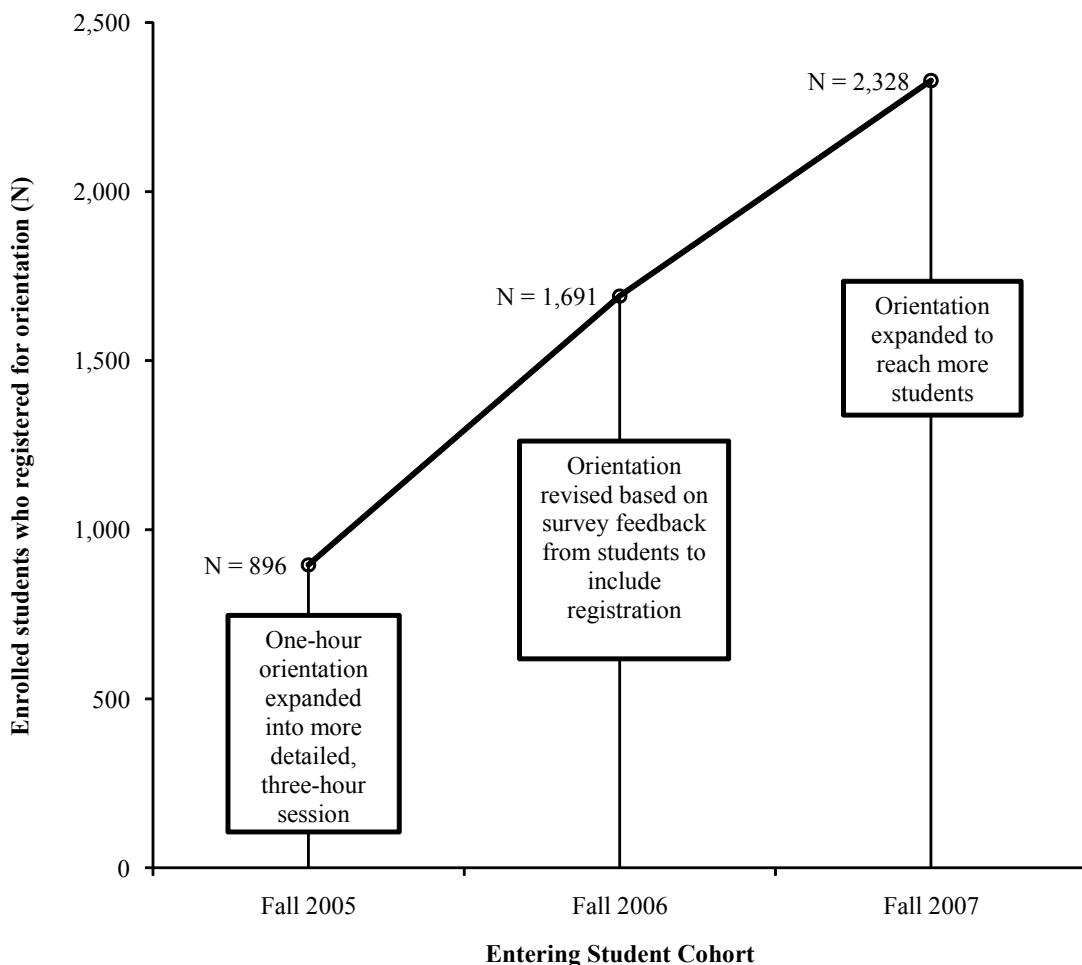
SOURCE: Orientation attendance counts generated from Guilford's institutional database.

Developmental education leaders also attempted seven different strategies targeting developmental students' success, six of which were still in place in the fall of 2008. As Guilford's core team leader explained, "I am increasingly sure that we need to have a menu of things. Students are so different and have such different needs — they need to have guidance to help [them make] the best choice to meet their needs." The compendium of strategies developed at Guil-

ford aimed to create a holistic system of individualized support and instruction for different types of developmental education learners. These ranged from instructional interventions to increased student support systems to revised administrative procedures. The Transitions program, for example, is an intensive intervention designed for students who place into low-level developmental classes in all three subject areas.[6]

Supplemental instruction stands out among Guilford's developmental education strategies for the promising gains achieved in course completion. The program began in the spring of 2007 as a voluntary, walk-in program for students who needed additional help in the college's introductory algebra developmental math course. When evaluating the success of the course, student outcomes data showed that students who received supplemental instruction tended to remain in the course throughout the semester (81.2 percent) and had higher rates of course completion (68.8 percent) than those who did not (72.3 percent and 58.3 percent, respectively).[7] This evaluation led the college to restructure its voluntary system into a mandatory, one-hour weekly session attached to select sections of the introductory algebra course. Additionally, as of fall 2008, students who failed the course twice were required to enroll in an introductory algebra section with supplemental instruction. Follow-up evaluations showed that the promising trends in course completion (see Figure 3.7) and persistence from the pilot continued into the spring of 2008 and beyond as the college expanded its new mandatory format.

Interpreting the Evaluations

While Guilford's evaluations have shown that many of its strategies are promising, these evaluations cannot be used to make causal attributions, as the students in the program group might differ from those in the comparison group in ways other than their participation in the strategy. For example, though the college eventually made its orientation mandatory for new students, it did not have a strict mechanism for enforcing attendance. Thus the students who attended orientation might have been more motivated to succeed in college than those who did not. Another consideration is that many of these evaluations follow a relatively small sample of students, which implies that the IR department has to exercise caution in interpreting and generalizing its results. Despite such limitations, trends from these strategy evaluations suggest promise for these interventions to make a real difference in student achievement.

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[6]Zachry (2008).

[7]While the course showed promising results, the college was unable to fully scale up the program because of the intervention's sizeable cost. (Instructors were compensated for the additional hour of instruction each week.)

Figure 3.7

**Rates of Successful Course Completion for Students Taking Introductory Algebra
With and Without Supplemental Instruction, Guilford Technical Community College,
Spring 2007 to Fall 2008**
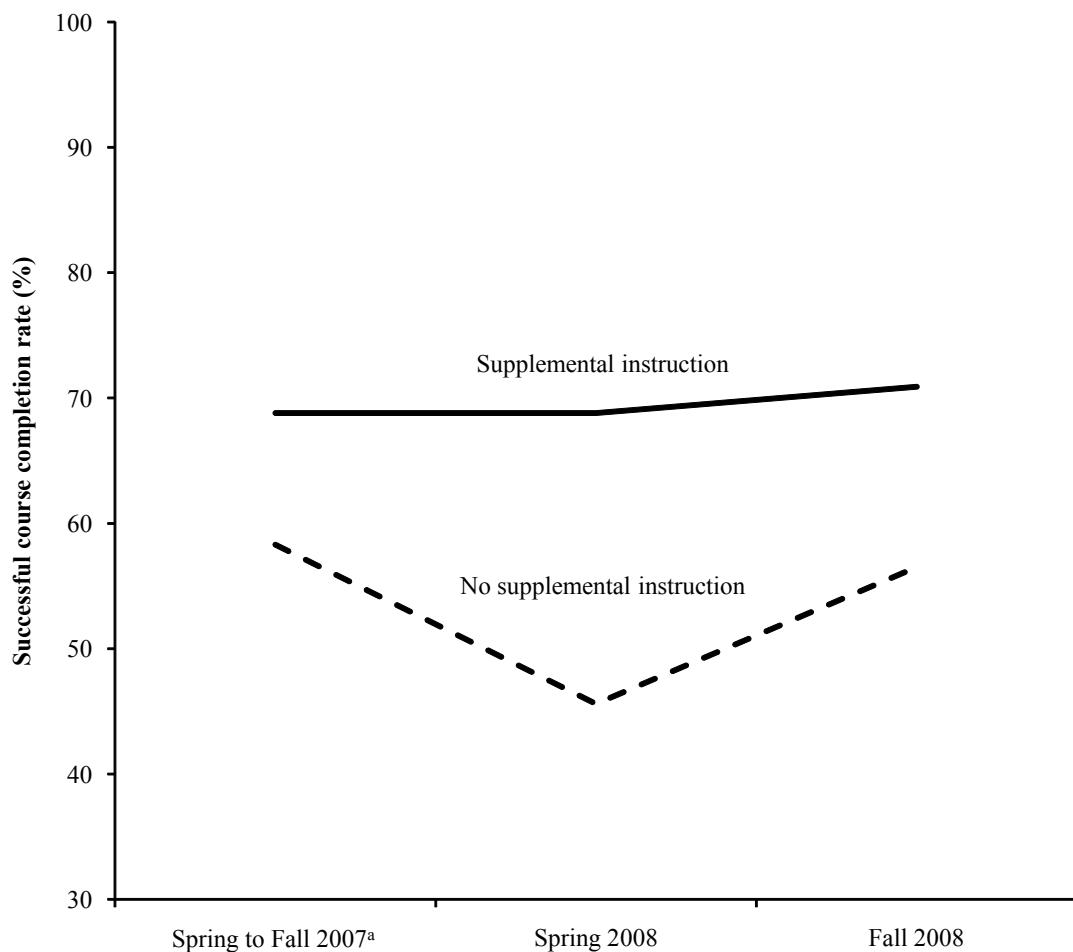
SOURCE: Reports generated from data in Guilford's institutional database.

NOTES: Successful course completion is defined as completion of introductory algebra with a final grade of C or better.

[a]In spring 2007 through fall 2007, supplemental instruction (SI) was a voluntary, walk-in progam. Any introductory algebra student who attended at least once is included in the SI group. Data for these two terms are available only in combined form. In spring 2008 and beyond, SI became a mandatory component of select sections of introductory algebra. SI students are those who enrolled in these sections and attended one hour of SI per week, while all other Math 070 students are in the non-SI group.

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Campus Engagement

In addition to improving its programming, Guilford has also matured in its campus engagement. Professional development at the college has become increasingly focused on student success, with speakers and trainers arriving from outside the college to share new ideas and skills. Many faculty and staff also participated in strategy development, implementation, assessment, and refinement. Taking learning communities as an example, faculty members were involved at every stage from designing and teaching linked courses, to evaluating the program as members of the Learning Evidence Committee, and finally modifying its structure to increase consistency and organization. Increasing numbers of faculty have also been involved in other strategies, such as the college's student success courses and supplemental instruction, as these strategies have been scaled up. Furthermore, with the new data warehouse in place, those faculty and staff members charged with leading Achieving the Dream strategies could more accurately assess their progress by tracking student outcomes for specific programs over time. Data requests increased steadily from 2006 through 2009 as college personnel sought feedback on their programs.

Continuing Challenges

While Guilford developed numerous strategies over the course of the initiative, its ability to scale up and sustain promising programs has been variable. Some interventions have already been brought to scale, reaching over one-fourth of their targeted populations and continuing to grow. Additionally, some programs, such as Guilford's student success courses, have sustained their own expansion by generating increased full-time equivalent (FTE) funding. Other programs, such as the college's orientation, have been funded through already existing budget allocations, as they are revised versions of pre-existing programs. However, other programs have failed to reach their desired scale because of funding limitations. Strategies such as supplemental instruction and learning communities require significant investments of staff time and resources that are not covered by the college's normal operating budget. For this reason, the college has been limited in the size and scale to which it can take these programs. For instance, while supplemental instruction has shown very promising results, it only reached a peak of four sections of introductory algebra in the fall of 2008. Further scaling up these programs continues to be a budgetary challenge, a situation that is likely to become even more problematic in light of the current economic recession.

This situation reveals an unfortunate dilemma for colleges as they seek to scale up their interventions: a trade-off between intensity and scale. All three of Guilford's programs that have been scaled up to reach 25 percent or more of their target populations (new student orientation, the front-door intake center, and the College Transfer Advising Center) are also low-intensity, meaning that they reach students for only five or fewer hours per semester. These "light-touch"

interventions are frequently less expensive than more intensive ones, which may cause colleges to lean toward scaling them up. However, because they also reach students for fewer hours, they may have a smaller impact on students' success.

On the other hand, more intensive learning programs are generally more difficult to expand and maintain. Of Guilford's six high-intensity strategies that affect students for more than 10 hours per semester,[8] five reach fewer than 10 percent of their targeted populations.[9] The leaders of these strategies expressed well-grounded concern about the future of their programs after Achieving the Dream funding ends, and administrators have noted the difficulty in continuing these strategies given their high cost. This concern has only intensified with the declining economy as Guilford's president shared sobering views of the college's financial status in the coming academic year. These concerns reveal the challenges colleges like Guilford face in sustaining and expanding promising programs that have higher price tags.

Key Lessons for Colleges from Guilford's Experience

Guilford's progress under Achieving the Dream owes much to its commitment to strategic action. The college has engaged stakeholders from across its campus to develop and implement its 15 interventions, each of which is tied to one of its goals for the initiative. Following is a summary of four of the most important lessons learned by faculty members, staff, and administrators through their involvement in this process.

- **Use grant money to spur creativity and action.**

  The budget comes down to a complex formula which provides a core amount for administration, but if you want to do imaginative things, you have to have outside money to do it.

  — Vice President of Educational Support Services, 2006

Guilford employees were nearly unanimous in emphasizing the importance of the Achieving the Dream grant to jump-start their initiative activities. While $450,000 might appear trivial within the total budget of a large community college, it is far more significant when compared with a college's pool of flexible spending. Many community college budgets are tied up with staff salaries and personnel costs, leaving few discretionary funds for creative interven-

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[8]The six high-intensity strategies are the student success courses, Transitions program, learning communities, supplemental instruction program, self-paced developmental math, and split developmental math.

[9]The five high-intensity, low-scale strategies are the Transitions program, learning communities, supplemental instruction, self-paced developmental math, and split developmental math (no longer implemented). The student success course is categorized as medium scale, reaching between 10 and 25 percent of targeted students.

tions.[10] By providing unfettered seed money to pursue specific student success objectives, Achieving the Dream opened doors for Guilford's faculty and staff to realize new ideas for strategies that were previously unfundable.

- **Invest in faculty and staff knowledge and leadership.**

   Across the campus, the focus has been [to develop] a common vocabulary, a common purpose… [and] educational opportunities for the faculty…so that we are not silos. [We want to have] an overall approach across all of the different departments.

   — Faculty member, 2008

One of the distinctive aspects of Guilford's approach to Achieving the Dream has been its intensive investment of grant money to cultivate faculty and staff leadership. The core team leader at Guilford invested in professional development as a way to help shift the culture and practice at the college. Observing that very little of the regular budget was available for such activities, she set about leveraging grant money to create cadres of individuals who had the training and commitment to develop Guilford's new interventions. One prominent example of this strategy was to provide intensive training to prepare over 40 faculty and staff members to teach the new student success course. The college also invested in higher-level training for select faculty and staff so that these individuals could later become on-site trainers themselves. This forward thinking reduced the ongoing cost of teacher training while fostering employee dedication to the program.

- **Look beyond your own backyard.**

   We would never have gone to visit Sinclair Community College if it hadn't been for Achieving the Dream…. We've looked at their library, which is a learning center; we've looked at their intake process; we've looked at their counseling area… [In the past], we didn't…go to other colleges in the nation to look at best practices, and we have done that as a direct result of Achieving the Dream.

   — Dean of Student Services, 2008

Before 2004, Guilford tended to spend any discretionary money it received internally rather than looking to learn from other institutions. However, with encouragement from the Achieving the Dream initiative to exchange ideas across colleges, Guilford began looking at interventions and ideas on other campuses. Its approach was to send groups of faculty and staff

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[10]Katsinas (2005).

to community colleges such as Valencia and Sinclair that had successfully implemented strategies similar to Guilford's. These groups returned with fresh perspectives about how to implement new programs under Achieving the Dream and beyond. Guilford's dean of student services described this approach humorously as the "CASE Method: Copy and Steal Everything." For example, the success of the ambitious front-door renovation owes largely to the knowledge that Guilford employees acquired during their visits to Valencia Community College, Sinclair Community College, and Midlands Technical College. From their learning, the college revised its administrative system into a cohesive four-tier model in which students pass from general first-encounter services to more in-depth advising and management. Not only had exposure to other college's successful experiences quelled any lingering doubts about the possibility of progress, but it had also created a collective momentum to carry change forward at Guilford.

- **Engage a broad coalition of faculty and staff from the beginning of the initiative.**

    Even before we applied for the grant, we had 20 people…representing different areas of the college come and brainstorm what we would put into a grant. I've always tried to approach it that way. Even if they're not on the management team or the core team, bring in the people who will be working with something and talk to them about their ideas.

    — Vice President of Educational Support Services, 2008

At Guilford, involving faculty and staff in the planning and implementation of strategies served as a key mechanism for engaging the broader campus community. While they may not have been as involved in Guilford's initial forays into data analysis, faculty and staff were the main drivers of the college's Achieving the Dream interventions. They helped develop plans for supplemental instruction, taught the student success courses, and maintained enthusiasm for learning communities, among other strategies. Furthermore, working on Achieving the Dream has helped faculty and staff to break down the traditional divisions between their respective areas. The College Transfer Advising Center is one example of a joint venture in which faculty and staff worked together to improve the experience of transfer-bound students. This intensive campus involvement has been pivotal for Guilford to move beyond administrative plans toward real changes that affect student life.

Key Lessons for the Initiative from Guilford's Experience

Guilford's experience also provides important lessons for the leadership of Achieving the Dream. As the initiative moves toward national expansion, it may wish to consider ways to further guide colleges through their strategy implementation and decision making.

What Strategies Should Be Brought to Scale…and at What Cost?

One of the primary aims of Achieving the Dream is for colleges to expand promising strategies to reach a significant proportion of their target populations. The initiative hopes that this increase in scale will translate into improvements in student achievement as more and more students receive the support and instruction that has proven to be effective. Guilford has generally followed this theory of action, first monitoring the progress of students who receive a pilot intervention before expanding some programs based on promising evidence. However, the college also confronted difficulties with scaling up its most intensive strategies, even when those strategies showed promise.

Given Guilford's experience, the initiative might wish to consider how colleges should balance competing demands when allocating limited funds to new programs and interventions. This situation is of particular importance for institutions that are nearing the end of their implementation grants, as some may have relied upon initiative funding to sustain and expand their strategies. The Achieving the Dream leaders could provide recommendations about how colleges could better manage their resource allocations so that intensive or high-cost strategies could be developed on a wider scale. For example, perhaps they could offer workshops led by college administrators who have succeeded in finding ways to incorporate new interventions within their college budgets. Alternately, the initiative might recommend specific low-intensity, low-cost strategies that have shown promise for increasing student achievement at other colleges. While grant funding can never be a permanent solution, future Strategy Institutes might include workshops on how to identify and apply for special project funding available through the federal government or private foundations. Such advice could benefit Achieving the Dream colleges seeking to further develop their student success strategies, whether they are in the early planning stages of the initiative or nearing the end of their grant funding.

Chapter 4

Institutionalizing Achieving the Dream

One thing I will say about Achieving the Dream is that everyone who is involved is truly dedicated to the initiative.... Achieving the Dream involves everybody and changes the structure of the college and the way we work. It brings cohesiveness to faculty and staff and who we are.

—Marketing Director, 2006

Over the past four years, Guilford has made strong progress toward institutionalizing Achieving the Dream and its student success agenda across the college. Achieving the Dream has served as a unifying mechanism at the college and allowed Guilford a common language when discussing efforts to improve student success rates. Such cultural shifts are among Achieving the Dream's greatest hopes for colleges. The initiative leaders hope that colleges will build a culture of evidence that permeates the institution and becomes ingrained in the college's decision making so that effective programs and policies are supported and sustained. Achieving the Dream's ultimate goal is that colleges institutionalize the progress they made with the initiative such that their learning and commitment to student success will survive long after their initiative funding ends.

With this goal in mind, Achieving the Dream colleges are encouraged to institutionalize their student success agendas by establishing standing committees to guide various aspects of their institutional reform processes. The leaders of the initiative hope that colleges will integrate the work of their data team to engage a broad spectrum of the campus community in analyzing student outcomes data. Meanwhile, Achieving the Dream expects colleges to embed the work of the core team into larger institutional decision making as the college's senior leadership guides the institution toward a greater focus on student success. These committees are expected to work in tandem as college leaders rely increasingly on student data to assess institution-wide goals and reallocate discretionary funds to effective programs. It is hoped that their influence will permeate the institution, affecting everything from hiring practices to professional development for faculty and staff.

Colleges' efforts to uphold institutional change remain closely tied to the central driver of the initiative: student outcomes. Achieving the Dream has established five key indicators by which participating colleges measure progress. These indicators include the rates at which students reach the following benchmarks:

1. Complete developmental education courses and progress to credit-bearing courses.

2. Complete "gatekeeper" courses, particularly the first college-level or credit-bearing courses in math and English.

3. Complete all attempted courses with a grade of C or better.

4. Persist in college from term to term and year to year.

5. Attain credentials, including an associate's degree or certificate.[1]

While colleges set their own benchmark goals, they are expected to make incremental progress along each of these indicators over the course of the initiative. Additionally, they should strive to narrow any achievement gaps that exist for students of differing backgrounds, races, and income categories.

At the end of their first year of implementation, most of the Round 1 colleges had made slow progress toward institutionalizing Achieving the Dream. Though all presidents supported the central principle of student success, the extent and form of their involvement varied widely. Some appointed senior administrators to spearhead the initiative while continuing to participate on the core team, make presentations to the board, and advocate the ideals of Achieving the Dream across the campus. However, about half of the college presidents delegated initiative leadership to lower-level staff and administrators. To further complicate matters, about a third of the Round 1 colleges had experienced recent leadership turnover. Finally, while many colleges had established the core and data teams recommended by the initiative, most had made only cursory progress toward aligning their strategic planning processes with student outcomes data.[2]

Snapshot 2006: Early Implementation

Like many Round 1 colleges that were just beginning in Achieving the Dream, Guilford remained in the formative phase of its effort to reorganize strategic management during its first year of implementation. Guilford's stable leadership and presidential support for Achieving the Dream had contributed to early signs of progress. The college had begun advertising and communicating about the initiative across the campus while senior leadership had committed to informing the board of trustees about the initiative's progress during its board meetings.

Guilford's Achieving the Dream coach also played an important role in helping senior leaders get on board with these institutional changes. As a well-established leader in the community college arena, the coach worked with the college's president to help him understand the key tenets of the initiative and foster connections with other community college leaders. He

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[1]Brock et al. (2007).
[2]Brock et al. (2007).

also offered good critical feedback, and Guilford's core team leader felt that he was "a good cheerleader" as the college pushed forward with its Achieving the Dream plans.

Outside of the president's office, Guilford had quickly begun to formulate a broader management plan for implementing Achieving the Dream. This effort was spearheaded by the vice president of educational support services, who had already proven herself a well-respected and capable leader of Guilford's core and management teams. Members of the core team included the president, two board members, and several key administrative staff and faculty members. This commitment of senior leadership allowed the college to closely align the work of its pre-existing Institutional Effectiveness Committee (IEC), the head administrative body charged with strategic planning for the college, with its goals under Achieving the Dream.

While the core team contributed high-level guidance and oversight, the college also developed an Achieving the Dream management team, which was tasked with leading day-to-day implementation activities. Its broad membership included faculty and staff representing different areas of the college. Finally, the college established a data team, its Learning Evidence Committee (LEC), to begin the process of analyzing its student outcomes data.

Snapshot 2008: Advanced Implementation

Guilford has demonstrated a strong commitment to Achieving the Dream since the beginning of its participation, but its success at institutionalizing effective programs and practices is a more recent accomplishment. In the words of the president, Guilford has taken "big steps going forward" and is currently in the process of finding "a way to sustain them" as the college nears the end of its grant funding. The college accordingly listed Achieving the Dream as the number one critical issue in its strategic plan for the upcoming academic year. In a document to be presented to the board, which outlined Guilford's priorities and objectives for the year, the president marked his commitment to the ideals of Achieving the Dream through sustained efforts to improve student access, success, progress, and completion.

The Board's Role

In line with its partners' vision for Achieving the Dream, Guilford's board members reinforced the college's continuing commitment to a student success agenda. They emphasized the value of the regular updates they received from the core team leader, including trends in the college's graduation and retention rates, as well as department-specific reports that allowed them to see which programs were most and least successful. They also reinforced the president's statement that the money and supports from Achieving the Dream helped the college to "more clearly focus on the issues we needed to focus on." College leaders noted that the initiative had contributed to a new and lasting board culture that recognized the importance of

student success and equity. The core team leader at Guilford also observed a shift in the board's outlook as members increasingly inquired about students' retention and success rates, not just enrollment and graduation rates. As one board member expressed it, Achieving the Dream had helped them make the transition from "looking at all the students as a monolith" to realizing "that everybody comes with different issues and different preparation." He felt that this new mind-set helped the college to identify and remedy structural barriers that were allowing some student groups to fall behind.

The Institutional Scorecard

In tandem with its growing leadership commitment to student success, Guilford made strides in implementing planning and policy procedures that strengthen its focus on tracking student outcomes. One of the college's greatest strides was in creating an institutional "score-card" (see Figure 4.1), which provides well-articulated, written goals for student achievement, engagement, and institutional progress. Each row under "Measure/Index Title" tracks an indicator of Guilford's performance. These indicators include various measures of students' success, such as their rates of successful course completion (row 1), graduation (row 4), fall-to-fall persistence (row 6), and progression from developmental to higher-level courses (row 12). Other indicators measure the extent to which graduates ("completers") and non-returning students achieved their personal goals at Guilford (rows 2 and 3) as well as satisfaction rates for employers and students (rows 7 through 9). Finally, the scorecard measures the college's enrollment growth (rows 5 and 10) and Pell Grant rate (row 11). Guilford's scorecard documents a target range for each of these indicators (column 5), a measure of the college's actual performance (column 4), and a rating of its progress in meeting these target goals each year (columns 1 through 3). It also contains electronic links to more detailed charts so that Guilford can track its progress for each indicator in greater depth.

The scorecard now serves as an important strategic planning tool as Guilford assesses its goals and progress. Each year, the college analyzes and adjusts each indicator based on its performance. If a particular target range is met, then the college evaluates its expectations and often increases its target goals for the next year. If a performance indicator is found to be in need of improvement, then the college discusses ways that the goal can be met in coming years. This type of detailed evidence on institutional performance represents a major stride in Guilford's institutional planning, which was virtually impossible at the beginning of its tenure in Achieving the Dream.

A greater focus on data and analysis has also made inroads into the college's budgeting process. Like many community colleges, much of Guilford's budget is already allocated to staff salaries and institutional programming, leaving what the president described as only "10 percent wiggle room." For its limited discretionary funds, Guilford has had a strategic budgeting

Achieving the Dream: Community Colleges Count

Figure 4.1

Guilford Technical Community College's Institutional Scorecard

Measure/Index Title	1. Superior	2. Successful	3. Needs Improvement	4. Score or Level[a]	5. Target Range	6. Cohort Term Year	7. Updated
1. Student success (all courses)[b]			X		66-68%	Fall 2008	Feb-09
2. Goal completion of completers	X				97-99%	2007-2008	Feb-09
3. Goal completion of non-returners			X		65-70%	2007-2008	Feb-09
4. Graduation rate (Guilford's definition)[b]			X		20-21%	Fall 2003	Sep-08
5. Annual unduplicated headcount growth[c]	X				2-4%	0607-0708	Sep-08
6. Developmental education students: fall-to-fall persistence[b, d]			X		55-60%	Fall 2007-Fall 2008	Sep-08
7. Employer satisfaction	X				95-97%	2007-2008	Feb-09
8. Satisfaction of completers			X		97-99%	2007-2008	Feb-09
9. Satisfaction of non-returners			X		90-95%	2007-2008	Feb-09
10. Earned fall full-time equivalent (FTE) growth[c]	X				3-5%	Fall 2008	Feb-09
11. Pell Grant rate					30-35%	2007-2008	Feb-09
12. Developmental progression[b, d]			X		47-50%	Fall 2007	Sep-08

SOURCE: Information based on data from Guilford's institutional database and student and faculty surveys.

NOTES: [a]Actual scores/levels have been removed from this figure for confidentiality purposes.
  [b]These measures are related to Guilford's Achieving the Dream goals.
  [c]Changes in student enrollment can be measured in terms of headcount growth, which does not distinguish between full-time and part-time students, or FTE growth, which is adjusted for students' attendance status.
  [d]Persistence and progression here are measured for an entering cohort of degree-seeking students enrolled in developmental education courses (according to the Achieving the Dream definition).

process in place for many years. Each department is given the opportunity to bid for new programs and services that will further its progress toward accomplishing its identified objectives. After division heads rank departmental requests, they justify their proposals to the IEC during two days of presentations. Finally, the IEC chooses its top priorities for the year's available funding and advises the president on his budgetary decisions.

Since the inception of Achieving the Dream, this process has evolved to reflect Guilford's improved culture of evidence. The core team leader credits the initiative with the college's "awareness that we need measurable goals and targets" in the planning process. As such, decisions made by the IEC are now informed by detailed presentations from the Learning Evidence Committee about student outcomes data. The increased prominence of data in strategic planning underscores the increasing connection between the college's institutional research and its budgeting. As noted in Chapter 3, Guilford has now made several strategic funding decisions based on promising evidence of improvements in student achievement, including expanding its orientation, student success courses, learning communities, and supplemental instruction programs. At the same time, academic departments have increasingly requested ad hoc reports of student outcomes when seeking funding for their programs.

Involvement of Faculty and Staff

The expansion of Guilford's commitment to improving student outcomes has not been limited to its board and senior leadership. Instead, the college had made significant advances by the fall of 2008 toward spreading a culture of evidence across its campuses. The Learning Evidence Committee, made up of a rotating membership of vice presidents, faculty members, division chairs, administrators, and staff, has played a critical role in analyzing and disseminating evaluation findings to the college at large. This committee helped create the college's institutional scorecard and is now working to create division-level and department-level scorecards that will track measures of interest for each academic area. Committee members hope that these more specific measures will prove useful to individual faculty members and staff as they adopt the ideals of data-based decision making.

Persistence and Graduation: Internal Measures

When looking at Guilford's own internal measures of student success, the college has seen some promising trends in persistence and graduation. The college tracks student persistence by looking at the ongoing enrollment of all degree-seeking students at the college semester by semester. Overall, the college has seen a striking increase in its student persistence, with an improvement in fall-to-spring student persistence from 69 percent to nearly 75 percent in the past three years (as shown in Figure 4.2). Guilford also analyzes its graduation rates in three-, four-, and five-year increments, and it has noticed promising trends in each of the rates over the

Figure 4.2

**Trend in Fall-to-Spring Persistence Rate, Guilford Technical Community College,
Fall 2005 to Spring 2009**
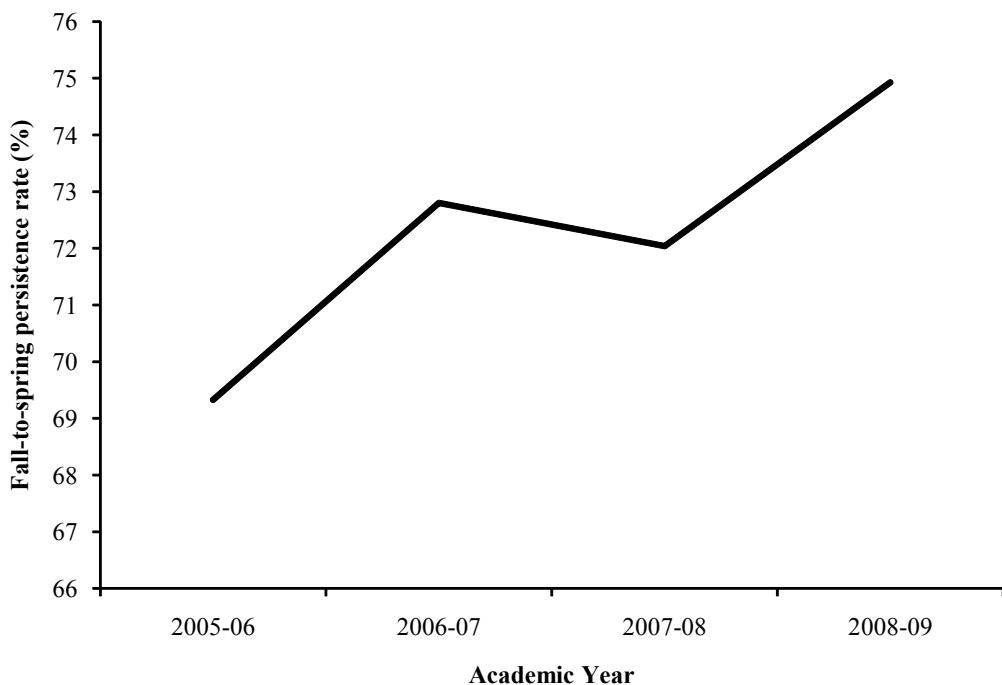
SOURCE: Data drawn from Guilford's institutional database.

NOTES: Guilford's institutional measure of fall-to-spring persistence includes all degree-seeking
students enrolled at the institution who are expected to persist (total N = 37,278) and excludes students
who are not expected to persist (for example, students who are enrolled full time at another institution).

past few years. The college has seen a nearly 3 percentage point increase in its three-year
graduation rate since 2005: 15.6 percent of the college's fall 2005 cohort graduated in spring
2008, while only 12.9 percent of the college's fall 2002 cohort graduated within three years, as
shown in Figure 4.3.

Continuing Challenges

While Guilford found exciting successes in its institutional measures of student
achievement, these indicators did not always align clearly with other research. For instance,

Figure 4.3

Trend in Three-Year Graduation Rate, Guilford Technical Community College, Fall 2002 to Fall 2005 Entering Cohorts
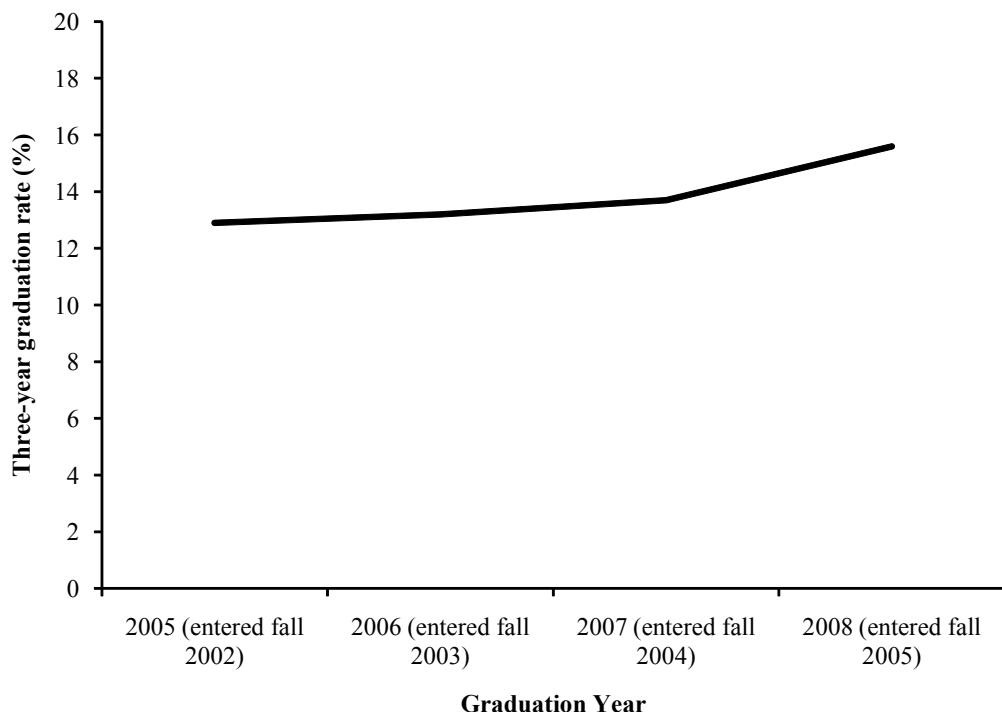
SOURCE: Data drawn from Guilford's institutional database.

NOTES: Guilford's institutional graduation rate is measured for a cohort of entering, degree-seeking students (total N = 8,190). It excludes students with undeclared majors and special students, such as those enrolled full time at another institution.

analyses of data from the Achieving the Dream database revealed lower student persistence and graduation rates than those tracked by Guilford internally. Much of the divergence between Guilford's institutional measures and those tracked by Achieving the Dream stems from the different ways that they measure and track student success. For example, while Guilford's measures track the larger degree-seeking student body, Achieving the Dream's measures tend to focus primarily on entering student cohorts. Therefore, though Guilford and Achieving the Dream both track indicators such as student persistence and graduation, their findings may diverge because they are tracking these measures for two different student populations.

These tensions highlight the challenge that both colleges and the Achieving the Dream leadership face with respect to collecting and analyzing data on student outcomes. First, these divergent analyses underscore the important ways that study samples can influence institutions' findings on student success, as excluding or including particular groups of students can produce marked differences in student success indicators, such as persistence or course completion. Additionally, the identification of appropriate groups for comparisons of student outcomes can also influence how data are interpreted, as student outcomes may look more or less positive when compared with different student groups. For instance, the persistence of developmental education students may look poor when compared with that of high-achieving freshman students, but it could appear much higher when compared with students on academic probation.

Challenges such as these are common in research and are one of the key reasons why policymakers increasingly call for rigorous, random assignment analyses of social programs and policies. Random assignment methodologies create a more controlled environment of study, as each participant has an equal likelihood of being selected for an intervention. This method minimizes differences between the program and comparison groups for measured characteristics such as race/ethnicity or educational history, as well as unmeasured characteristics such as student motivation, thus isolating the effect of the program itself. Other types of quasi-experimental research, such as multiple regression and survival analyses, also attempt to control for these factors and provide a more stable comparison of student outcomes.

While the challenges of sampling and comparison groups are ever present in research, Guilford should be commended for creating ways to look at the effect of its strategies and its institutional progress over time. Undertaking a longitudinal analysis of student outcomes is a key recommendation of Achieving the Dream, and Guilford met this challenge head on. Additionally, the college moved further in its analyses as its institutional research department examined the performance of different student subgroups and sought to find appropriate comparison groups to allow for more sophisticated analyses. Such work is rare in the world of community colleges, where there has not been a long tradition of data collection and analysis and where funding for research is often limited.

One final challenge Guilford faced was in striking a balance between the push for colleges to share student success data with the broader community, and their fear that such data could be used punitively if taken out of context. Guilford's president praised Achieving the Dream for giving the college "the initiative we needed to get over the hurdle of talking about at-risk students and doing something about it." However, promoting open discussion about student outcomes, especially among low-performing student groups, is a risky endeavor in some college environments. While Achieving the Dream hopes that colleges will be open about their successes and challenges, many colleges may be rightfully concerned about the reactions that such

data might elicit. For example, analyses that reveal achievement gaps between different racial or ethnic groups could be politically and socially sensitive.

Key Lessons for Colleges from Guilford's Experience

Through its integration of Achieving the Dream ideals with decision making and management, Guilford has illustrated the following lessons for other colleges in the initiative.

- **Embed Achieving the Dream into the college's daily processes.**

  Achieving the Dream is not just another layer of committees, but it is part of our assessment committees and others. That was a big message that convinced people that we were serious about this.

  — Vice President of Educational Support Services, 2006

Guilford sent a strong message to faculty and staff about the importance of Achieving the Dream when it began restructuring its high-level committees to undertake the work of the initiative. This commitment began with public support from the president, including announcements about the college's participation at major events such as convocation. It was later reinforced by the college's choice to revamp its committee system. Rather than leaving Achieving the Dream on the sidelines, Guilford integrated its leadership with the existing Institutional Effectiveness Committee and revised some of the tasks that the committee would undertake. These changes sent an important signal to the campus community that Achieving the Dream would not be a "flash in the pan," but rather a lasting transformational presence at the college.

Guilford also realized that, in its then-current state, the institutional research office would not accomplish its fundamental goal of engaging faculty in data analysis. On this basis, the college recommissioned a preexisting assessment committee to form a more active Learning Evidence Committee, which would involve numerous staff and faculty members in assessing students' challenges and helping them achieve. Through this committee, faculty and staff contributed to institutional decisions, such as the expansion of successful programs, thus creating an environment in which faculty and staff could directly influence programming. The rotating membership of the LEC has allowed Guilford to reach growing numbers of staff and faculty from different areas of campus.

- **Spread engagement through "cascading leadership."**

  Last year we . . . tried to bring the department chairs up to speed in terms of looking at the data and analyzing it. So this year the focus has been on get-

ting the department chairs to take it down to the faculty within their depart-
ment because that's where the change is going to occur.

— Vice President of Instruction, 2008

The dissemination of data analysis training from department chairs to their faculty members is just one among several manifestations of "cascading leadership" at Guilford. As Guilford's Achieving the Dream coach explained, this concept of leadership holds that "changing behavior is best received from the direct supervisor in the chain of leadership." Thus, when the director of institutional research communicates the value of a culture of evidence to a division head, she sets in motion a chain of influence that cascades down to department heads and faculty members.

Guilford's approach to developing division-level and department-level scorecards may be its most compelling example of this model. Communicating about data to the wider college community was a challenge at Guilford, as it is at many other Round 1 colleges. After creating a sophisticated system for analyzing the success of the college's policies and strategies, Guilford worked to spread its culture of data analysis from the institutional level to the divisional, departmental, and individual levels. Disaggregated scorecards provided an accessible way for faculty members to understand student outcomes in their specific areas and to think about how to meet students' challenges.

- **Colleges need to choose their outcome measures carefully and consider the implications of including or excluding certain groups of students from these measures.**

  Some presidents are … in an environment where … a reporter is hell-bent to knock the community college down and put some of these data out on the street in a negative way. You can present data a lot of different ways, but when you're putting out on the street what your losses are, [the way in which the data are received] is somewhat of a concern. I've never seen it … affect what they were trying to do. It just affected how transparent they wanted to be with an unsophisticated audience as to what was going on in the institution.

  — Achieving the Dream coach, 2008

Since beginning with Achieving the Dream, Guilford has found promising trends in student persistence and graduation. Unfortunately, these successes have not always aligned neatly with other types of research, often because institutions use different samples and methods in measuring student achievement. This situation highlights the importance of carefully choosing student success indicators and the population among whom success will be measured.

Additionally, colleges may wish to consider employing comparison groups or more advanced quantitative methods that will allow for a clearer picture of how students are performing.

Guilford's challenges also put into relief how important methodology and sampling can be when communicating with the larger world about student outcomes. As noted by Guilford's coach above, data on student outcomes can be sensitive, and Guilford was highly aware that this information can be taken out of context. When sharing their student success data, colleges may want to weigh how they communicate publicly about their students' success and seek to contextualize their findings within the larger framework of community college success.

Lessons for the Initiative from Guilford's Experience

- **Help colleges consider the most appropriate methods for evaluating student success, and provide recommendations for colleges about how to share their data with external audiences.**

Promoting open discussion about student outcomes, especially among low-performing student groups, can be a risky endeavor in some college environments, particularly when colleges are located in areas where they must compete with other colleges for enrollments. Additionally, as Round 1 Achieving the Dream colleges near the end of their implementation grants, many may struggle with finding that they have yet to make measurable differences in improving student achievement. Such realizations may be disheartening after colleges have worked intensively to improve their programs over the past five years.

Achieving the Dream may wish to provide some guidance to colleges that are considering how to communicate with their communities, particularly if they are struggling with disappointing findings. One strategy may be to acknowledge Achieving the Dream's ambitious goals and the need for more time to see larger improvements. Another may be to consider issues that may hinder dramatic changes in student achievement, such as difficult state or economic environments or difficulties with strategy scale-up. Such recommendations may help colleges feel more secure about their work to improve student success rates and more comfortable sharing their knowledge with the outside world.

Regardless of the improvements they have made with students' achievement, colleges like Guilford that have rigorously applied the tenets of the initiative should be commended for their work. As many have acknowledged, colleges that are moving toward a focus on student success have daunting challenges to face, and their dedicated focus on this process should be highlighted as they progress. There is no panacea for student success. However, Guilford's experience suggests that with strong commitment and strategic, data-based decision making, community colleges can make immense strides as they push all students to achieve.

Interviews and Focus Groups Conducted at Guilford Technical Community College

Senior Administrators

- College President
- Vice President of Educational Support Services
- Interim Vice President of Instruction
- Director of Institutional Research
- Director of Information Technology
- Finance Controller

Faculty Members

- Faculty who are directly involved with Achieving the Dream strategies (focus group)
- Faculty who are less involved with Achieving the Dream strategies (focus group)
- Faculty who are responsible for developing and leading Achieving the Dream strategies
- Faculty who are participating on the college's Achieving the Dream data team

Student Services Staff Members

- Staff who are directly involved with Achieving the Dream strategies (focus group)
- Staff who are less involved with Achieving the Dream strategies (focus group)
- Staff who are responsible for developing and leading Achieving the Dream strategies

Students

- Students participating in the college's student success course (focus group)

Board Members

- Current and former board chairs

Achieving the Dream Personnel

- Initiative coach for Guilford

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A Case Study of Three Achieving the Dream Colleges
2008. Elizabeth M. Zachry, with Emily Schneider.

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