INVESTING IN CHANGE

How Much Do Achieving the Dream Colleges Spend — and from What Resources — to Become Data-Driven Institutions?

Executive Summary

Elizabeth M. Zachry
Erin Coghlan

June 2010

Achieving the Dream™
Community Colleges Count

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BUILDING KNOWLEDGE TO IMPROVE SOCIAL POLICY

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Overview

Achieving the Dream: Community Colleges Count provides a comprehensive model for colleges interested in investing in improved student outcomes. Started in 2003 by Lumina Foundation for Education, Achieving the Dream encourages colleges to undertake a rigorous process of self-examination and to develop concrete goals and priorities for institutional reform based on an analysis of their student outcomes data. In an effort to assist colleges in accomplishing these goals, Achieving the Dream provides a number of supports, including coaching, annual initiativewide conferences, and grants totaling $450,000 over five years. However, colleges are also expected to find other sources of funding — either from external grants or their own institutional funds — to pilot and implement successful institutional reform strategies.

This report analyzes the experiences of five community colleges and the investments they made in implementing an institutionwide improvement process aimed at increasing students' success. The colleges in this study are located in the southeastern and southwestern United States and include Valencia Community College in Orlando, Florida; Tallahassee Community College in Tallahassee, Florida; El Paso Community College in El Paso, Texas; South Texas College in McAllen, Texas; and the University of New Mexico in Gallup, New Mexico. The report examines how, where, and with what resources these colleges supported their reforms, as well as the key activities driving their overall expenditures.

Key Findings

- **On average, these colleges spent $6.3 million on their broad institutional reform process.** While their investments were substantial, they represented less than 5 percent of their overall institutional revenues during this five-year period. Colleges tended to support much of their work through the reallocation of existing employee time; however, flexible institutional funds and external grants also played an important role, especially for the small college in the study.

- **Colleges' $450,000 grants from Lumina provided an important impetus for change.** However, these grants tended to be the smallest resource supporting colleges' spending.

- **Colleges' investments over time revealed a ramp-up in spending during the final period of their five-year participation in the initiative.** Colleges tended to spend few funds early in their institutional reform process while investing 50 percent to 60 percent of their resources in the final two years of their implementation of Achieving the Dream.

- **Colleges' spending on reform activities — such as leadership and management, institutional research, and intervention strategies — tended to differ by institution.** Colleges invested heavily in all three areas, spending an average of 47 percent on implementing their intervention strategies, 33 percent on leadership and management activities, and 20 percent on upgrading their institutional research capacity.

- **Colleges' committee work and professional development tended to be key drivers of expenditures in leadership management, while institutional research costs tended to be driven by data analysis and staffing.** Faculty and staff involvement tended to be the key drivers of colleges' intervention strategies. Colleges that involved faculty and staff more heavily also tended to have higher levels of spending.

Preface

There is growing interest among community college administrators and faculty in improving the quality and timeliness of information on the students they serve. Until recently, most community colleges were able to do little more than provide the most basic data on enrollment and student demographics. Now, community colleges are increasingly focused on tracking the progress of students as they move through their educational programs and on understanding the reasons why some students get ahead while others stall or drop out. Ideally, administrators and faculty can use such information to make changes in instruction and other services that will lead to greater success for individual students and the college as a whole.

Achieving the Dream: Community College Count is a bold, national initiative that aspires to help community colleges become "data-driven" institutions. Launched by Lumina Foundation for Education in 2003, it provides participating colleges with grants totaling $450,000 and technical support to help them gather and analyze student records and other data for the purposes of institutional improvement. MDRC and its partners at the Community College Research Center are examining both the implementation and the effectiveness of the initiative in changing college practices. This report focuses on the *cost* of the initiative to participating institutions. Specifically, what activities do colleges spend money on, and why do they invest in them? How and where do colleges find the resources to cover these expenses?

To answer such questions, the report takes an in-depth look at the financial decisions made by five Achieving the Dream colleges located in Florida, New Mexico, and Texas. The colleges differ in size and research capacity, but they share a deep commitment to analyzing data and developing programs to increase student success. Two of the most striking findings are how much money the colleges invested in their efforts — spending far more than their $450,000 grants — and how resourceful they were in finding ways to cover their expenses. For example, the colleges reallocated administrator and faculty time to perform various research and program development tasks, and they leveraged funds from federal grant programs or other foundations. They also combined Achieving the Dream activities with tasks that they needed to perform to maintain their regional accreditation.

Our hope is that community college leaders who are interested in strengthening their research capacity and piloting programs to increase student success will benefit from the experiences of the colleges profiled in this report. The stakes are high; policymakers and the general public are demanding greater accountability from community colleges, even as institutional budgets are increasingly lean. The administrators and faculty who were interviewed for this report were generous in sharing their views on what they accomplished, what they would do differently next time, and what they feel they gained from their investments.

Gordon L. Berlin
President

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The evaluation of Achieving the Dream: Community Colleges Count is made possible by the support of Lumina Foundation for Education. We are grateful for Lumina's generous and steadfast support for this evaluation, as part of the Achieving the Dream initiative's effort to improve outcomes for community college students.

MDRC appreciates the cooperation of the colleges represented in this report: Valencia Community College in Orlando, Florida; Tallahassee Community College; South Texas College in McAllen, Texas; El Paso Community College; and the University of New Mexico-Gallup. In particular, for meeting with us individually as we learned about these colleges' work in Achieving the Dream, we thank our site contacts, who have been an essential resource to this study: Joyce Romano, Julie Phelps, and Kurt Ewen at Valencia Community College, Janita Patrick and Sharon Jefferson at Tallahassee Community College, Luzelma Canales at South Texas College, Lydia Tena at El Paso Community College, and Dr. Christine Marlow at the University of New Mexico-Gallup. We also thank all the faculty and staff who met with us in interviews and focus groups to help us understand how Achieving the Dream has affected their experiences at the college.

Additionally, we thank David Seith, who led the planning, data collection, and early analysis phases of the study. We also appreciate assistance from Christopher Coogan, who was a consultant during the primary stages of the project.

We are thankful to the many people who read and reviewed this report. We are particularly grateful to those individuals who gave feedback during the conceptualization of this study, including Thomas Brock and Johanna Walter at MDRC. We are also thankful for the written comments received from Fred Doolittle, Thomas Brock, Johanna Walter, and John Hutchins at MDRC; we are grateful to Monica Cuevas, who was the report coordinator. We would also like to thank others who provided feedback for the study: Maggie Shelton and Carol Lincoln at MDC, Inc., a nonprofit corporation that is managing the initiative and is dedicated to helping organizations and communities close the gaps that separate people from opportunity; and Nushina Mir at Lumina Foundation.

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The Authors

Executive Summary

Imagine walking into the first day of your presidency at a renowned community college knowing that 60 percent of your freshman students have placed into one remedial course or more and are not yet ready for college-level work.[1] Imagine also that over 50 percent of your student body is expected to drop out before completing a degree or certificate program and that only 35 percent will attain a certificate or degree within six years.[2] Even more daunting, the enrollment at your college has risen 28 percent in the past 14 years and is projected to grow by another 13 percent in the next 8 years — while your budget is expected to markedly decline because of a difficult economy and decreasing state support.[3] Despite these challenges, however, imagine that the leader of your country and several important funders of your work have called for you to double the number of students graduating from your college over the next decade.[4]

Statistics like these reveal the unprecedented challenges facing community college leaders today. While community colleges have traditionally been focused on increasing student enrollments, or students' access to college, there has been an increasing movement over the past several years for community colleges to improve students' success while enrolled.[5] Monitoring student success often requires sophisticated technological systems and staff know-how, both of which tend to be underfunded in community college settings. Thus, while striving to increase students' achievement, many community colleges are also facing significant costs related to improving their institutional technology and research capacities. Sadly, while community colleges are tackling these issues, they are also facing one of the most extreme budget crises in decades, as the U.S. recession tightens state finances and threatens the foundation of community college funding.[6]

Achieving the Dream: Community Colleges Count provides a comprehensive model for colleges that want to invest in improving student outcomes. Started in 2003 by Lumina Foundation for Education, this initiative encourages colleges to undertake a rigorous process of self-examination and to develop concrete goals and priorities for institutional reform based on an analysis of their student outcomes data. On joining the initiative, colleges are expected to follow Achieving the Dream's five-step improvement process in which they (1) commit to an institutional reform agenda aimed at improving student outcomes; (2) analyze data on student outcomes to prioritize their actions; (3) engage a broad range of stakeholders in developing

[1] Jenkins and Bailey (2009).
[2] Brock (2010); Jenkins and Bailey (2009).
[3] Hussar and Bailey (2009); Katsinas and Tollefson (2009).
[4] Office of the Press Secretary (2009); Lumina Foundation for Education (2009); Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation (2009).
[5] Wolff (2005).
[6] Strauss (2009); Blumenstyk, Sander, Schmidt, and Wasley (2008).

strategies to address their priority problems; (4) implement, evaluate, and improve their student success interventions; and (5) establish a culture of continuous improvement and institutionalize successful practices.

The initiative expects that these institutional improvements will ultimately result in increases in student success along five key indicators: completion of developmental education courses; completion of introductory-level, or "gatekeeper," college courses; completion of courses with a grade of C or higher; persistence from term to term and year to year; and attainment of a degree or certificate. As colleges undertake this work, they are provided with a number of supports from Achieving the Dream, including expert coaching, annual initiative-wide conferences, and grants totaling $450,000 over five years.

This report analyzes the experiences of five community colleges and the investments they made in implementing an institutionwide improvement process aimed at increasing students' success over the course of five years. The five Achieving the Dream colleges in this study are located in the southeastern and southwestern United States and include Valencia Community College in Orlando, Florida; Tallahassee Community College in Tallahassee, Florida; El Paso Community College in El Paso, Texas; South Texas College in McAllen, Texas; and the University of New Mexico in Gallup, New Mexico (UNM-Gallup). The report examines how, where, and with what resources these colleges supported their reforms, as well as the key activities driving their overall expenditures, in order to provide lessons for colleges, policymakers, and funders interested in embarking on a similar path toward community college improvement.

The report seeks to answer the following questions:

- How much did colleges spend on implementing a student success-oriented, institutional improvement process at their schools?
- What types of resources did colleges access in supporting their reforms?
- How did colleges' spending change across their five-year participation in Achieving the Dream?
- In what activities did colleges invest most heavily, and which of these were the key drivers of colleges' investments?
- What are the overall lessons learned for other colleges and funders considering a similar model of institutional improvement?

How Much Did Colleges Spend on Implementing a Student Success-Oriented, Institutional Improvement Process at Their Schools?

- **On average, colleges in this study spent $6.3 million, or 13 times their Lumina grants, over the course of five years in implementing their institutional reforms.**

One main theme might sum up colleges' overall investments in Achieving the Dream: Colleges took seriously the initiative's push for them to invest heavily and widely in institutional change. In this study, colleges' investments ranged from a low of $2.9 million for the smallest college (UNM-Gallup) to a high of nearly $11 million (South Texas) for midsize and large institutions. The investments of the other colleges (Tallahassee, Valencia, and El Paso) ranged from $4.5 million to $7.3 million.

- **While their investments were substantial, colleges' institutional reform expenditures represented less than 5 percent of their overall institutional revenues during this time period.**

Colleges' spending on their Achieving the Dream reforms represents a fraction of their overall finances. The midsize and large colleges in this study (Tallahassee, Valencia, El Paso, and South Texas) invested less than 2 percent of their overall revenues in their institutional reform process. The smallest college in this study (UNM-Gallup), for which reform spending represented a larger percentage of its overall finances, still invested less than 5 percent of its overall budget in these reforms.

What Types of Resources Did Colleges Access in Supporting Their Reforms?

To support their work, the colleges in this study drew on a number of different resources, including the reallocated time of current personnel, flexible institutional funds, external grants from foundations and government agencies, and the $450,000 Lumina grants given to support their Achieving the Dream work. Colleges' use of these resources varied depending on their institutional size.

- **Colleges' own institutional resources, in the form of reallocated employee time and flexible institutional funds, proved to be the key to supporting midsize and large colleges' institutional reform process.**

The midsize and large colleges in this study spent $3.5 million to $9.5 million in institutional resources (including both reallocated employee time and flexible institutional monies) to support their Achieving the Dream reforms, or 88 percent of their overall reform budgets. Colleges' use of institutional funds and reallocated staff time far outweighed their use of other resources and represents an investment of 8 to 21 times the value of their Lumina grants.

- **The smallest college in this study (UNM-Gallup) invested far fewer institutional funds to support its work, instead depending more heavily on outside resources.**

In implementing its institutional reforms, UNM-Gallup invested approximately $900,000, or 30 percent of its overall reform expenditures, while external grant dollars and Lumina monies made up 55 percent and 15 percent of its support, respectively. This suggests that smaller colleges may have significantly different financial profiles than larger colleges and thus may need to draw on different resources when undertaking a large-scale institutional improvement process.

- **Colleges' $450,000 Lumina grants proved to be the smallest resource supporting their institutional reforms.**

Regardless of institutional size, the Lumina grants accounted for a fraction — averaging only 8 percent — of the colleges' overall support for institutional reform work. This finding reveals that colleges took seriously the initiative's call to identify supplemental funding to support their implementation of Achieving the Dream, with many of the colleges using their Lumina grants to leverage other funds.

How Did Colleges' Spending Change Across Their Five-Year Participation in Achieving the Dream?

- **Colleges' investments over time tended to mirror Achieving the Dream's expectations for the implementation of their reforms, with a ramp-up in spending during the final period of their five-year participation in the initiative.**

Colleges tended to spend relatively few dollars in the early years of their work, with four of the five colleges in this study spending less than 20 percent of their overall budgets during their first two years in the initiative. Colleges tended to make the heaviest investments in their institutional reforms during the final two years of implementation (spending approximately 50 to 60 percent of their reform dollars).

In What Activities Did Colleges Invest Most Heavily, and Which of These Were the Key Drivers of Colleges' Investments?

This report examines colleges' expenditures across three broad activities, including (1) the leadership and management of their institutional reforms, (2) changes in their institutional research capacity, and (3) the development of their intervention strategies.

- **Colleges' spending on reform activities tended to differ by institution. However, with one exception, colleges' heaviest investments were on their intervention strategies and in the leadership and management of their reforms.**

Although colleges' expenditures differed depending on their institutional priorities, they tended to spend most heavily on their intervention strategies and their management of the reform process. On average, colleges spent about $3 million (47 percent of their budgets) on their intervention strategies, $2 million (33 percent) on their leadership and management activities, and $1 million (20 percent) on institutional research.

- **Committees and professional development were the key drivers of colleges' expenditures in leadership and management; however, the level of investment depended on how broadly colleges engaged their faculty and staff.**

While leadership and management activities included employees' participation in committees, professional development, the involvement of external stakeholders, and non-institutional research staff's involvement in analyzing data on student outcomes, investments in professional development and committees were the key drivers of these costs. Colleges that followed Achieving the Dream's model of broad stakeholder engagement tended to have higher levels of spending on leadership and management.

- **Colleges' heavy investments in institutional research were driven by technology purchases, the hiring of new staff, and ongoing evaluations.**

While many of the colleges already had strong institutional research departments, most devoted substantial funds to hiring new staff, undertaking ongoing evaluations, and/or upgrading their technology to better track their students' progress. This heavy level of investment reveals that even colleges that start with strong research skills may further improve their ability to monitor students' achievement and track their institution's progress in making these reforms.

- **Colleges made substantial investments in developing, implementing, and scaling up their interventions. These costs were driven primarily by faculty and staff development and the implementation of these reform strategies.**

Colleges developed a number of strategies aimed at improving students' achievement; interventions ranged from modest changes in course curricula to such ambitious endeavors as implementing new courses or advising programs. Colleges spent disproportionately more on their interventions (91 percent) during the final three years of the initiative, suggesting that the bulk of colleges' monies were devoted to scaling up these interventions. Colleges depended heavily on both internal and external funds to support this work, revealing that colleges may need external support to scale up their strategies.

What Are the Overall Lessons Learned for Other Colleges and Funders Considering a Similar Model of Institutional Improvement?

Lessons for Colleges

- **Carefully consider the deployment of current faculty and staff, and support their leadership of the college's institutional reforms over time.**

While colleges' investments in their institutional reforms were hefty, colleges were able to fund an average of 56 percent of their Achieving the Dream work by reallocating employee time. Additionally, faculty and staff involvement in committee work, professional development, and strategy implementation tended to be key drivers of costs for each of the colleges in this study, with colleges spending an average of $4 million on these activities. Given these expenses, colleges interested in undertaking an Achieving the Dream-like reform process will be well served to consider carefully the expertise and availability of their current faculty and staff when planning their improvement agenda. Furthermore, because these expenditures are sustained over time, colleges need to develop a long-term plan for funding faculty and staff involvement.

- **Prioritize areas for new investments, and identify funding sources to cover these expenses.**

Many of the investments that these colleges made, such as purchasing new technology or developing interventions, required an outlay of hard cash. Both flexible institutional funds and external funds were an important resource for colleges, with these monies making up 17 percent and 18 percent of their resources, respectively. Outside funds may be particularly important for smaller colleges, as external resources made up 55 percent of the funds for the small colleges in this study. Therefore, small institutions, in particular, may benefit from exploring how external grants and funds can help support their overall institutional reform agenda.

- **Investments in additional institutional research staff and data systems are likely to be key areas for hard-cost investments.**[7]

The majority of the colleges in this study made significant investments in hiring new institutional research staff and purchasing new information technology systems, revealing these to be two key areas for hard-cost expenditures. With institutional research costs increasing incrementally over five years, colleges should plan wisely for these investments. Careful forethought could save unnecessary expenditures and allow colleges to better navigate the complexities and costs associated with new data systems.

- **Develop efficient mechanisms for supporting high-cost activities, such as professional development and technology purchases, to avoid overspending budgets.**

Just a few, key activities tended to be the main drivers of costs for these colleges. When planning their institutional reform agenda, colleges should seek to identify big-ticket expenses and then consider multiple ways that these costs can be managed more efficiently or more effectively to serve the college's needs. Such careful planning could allow colleges to better sustain their most necessary improvements.

Lessons for Funders

- **Smaller grants supporting an institutional reform process can provide important leverage for colleges' undertaking of such work. However, linking with other foundations or government agencies may also help provide more broad-based support for institutional reform.**

Grants like Lumina Foundation's $450,000 award to Achieving the Dream colleges can provide an important resource to help colleges plan their work and leverage other funds. While small investments are important, colleges need broader-based support when developing and scaling up some of their reforms. Given that one foundation or funder may be unable to provide such wide-scale support, funders might consider linking their resources with other organizations to provide coordinated support for colleges' endeavors. For example, regional or community foundations might link with corporate foundations to support different aspects of a reform agenda. Additionally, if federal interest in community colleges continues and funding measures are implemented, opportunities may exist for foundations to partner with government funders. Such coordinated efforts could allow funders to support specific college reforms while also helping forward these schools' overall efforts to improve student success.

[7]The term "hard costs" is used to represent the external funds that colleges drew on (such as federal and state grants) as well as the reallocation of flexible institutional general funds (excluding employee time).

- **Consider how institutional size and location affect colleges' work, and make modifications as appropriate.**

While larger colleges in this study were able to depend on their discretionary funds, smaller colleges, such as UNM-Gallup, had few of these supports, in part due to their small size and rural location. Thus, outside funds may be particularly important for supporting smaller schools. Funders should consider carefully how their monies affect large versus small institutions and should plan their investments accordingly.

- **Contemplate the timing of targeted funding: Smaller amounts of money early on can prove effective for planning and piloting programs, while later funding is useful for program scale-up and the institutionalization of reforms.**

Early in Achieving the Dream, the colleges in this study tended to spend moderately and then use significantly more funds in later years. Foundations and other funders might want to consider for what purposes their investments will be used and might time their investments accordingly. A smaller grant for planning and pilots followed by a larger grant for scale-up and institutionalization may provide the best means for helping colleges sustain their reforms.

Final Considerations for Funding Institutional Reform

Substantial investments in institutional research, planning committees, and professional development activities reveal that the colleges in this study took seriously much of Achieving the Dream's recommended framework for change. However, the key principles of Achieving the Dream are also consistent drivers of colleges' overall reform expenses. Thus, while Achieving the Dream's model for institutional improvement resonates with community colleges, it also requires them to have substantial resources on hand to undertake these reforms.

Given that these colleges made substantial investments in their institutional reforms, Achieving the Dream might help these schools consider concrete ways to manage and allocate their resources toward funding a large-scale reform process. For instance, the initiative could hire a financial planner or other financial adviser to provide advice and support as colleges enter the initiative and begin planning their work. Such a consultant might help colleges take a longer-term view of their expenses and resources and help them plan more carefully for a staged rollout of their reforms. Concrete advice would go far in helping community college presidents sift through the myriad financial obligations and priorities on their plate. The recommendations in this report provide the first steps toward this goal; however, the key next step is helping colleges harness their financial resources to create sustainable change that will last over time.

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Founded in 1974 and located in New York City and Oakland, California, MDRC is best known for mounting rigorous, large-scale, real-world tests of new and existing policies and programs. Its projects are a mix of demonstrations (field tests of promising new program approaches) and evaluations of ongoing government and community initiatives. MDRC's staff bring an unusual combination of research and organizational experience to their work, providing expertise on the latest in qualitative and quantitative methods and on program design, development, implementation, and management. MDRC seeks to learn not just whether a program is effective but also how and why the program's effects occur. In addition, it tries to place each project's findings in the broader context of related research — in order to build knowledge about what works across the social and education policy fields. MDRC's findings, lessons, and best practices are proactively shared with a broad audience in the policy and practitioner community as well as with the general public and the media.

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- Improving Public Education
- Raising Academic Achievement and Persistence in College
- Supporting Low-Wage Workers and Communities
- Overcoming Barriers to Employment

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