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AHEAD WITH
INSTITUTIONAL
CHANGE
Lessons from the
First Round of
Achieving the Dream
Community Colleges

Executive Summary

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**Alexander K. Mayer
Oscar Cerna
Dan Cullinan
Kelley Fong
Elizabeth Zachry Rutschow
(MDRC)**

**Davis Jenkins
(Community College Research Center)**

with

**Donna Chan
Phoebe Richman
(MDRC)**



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Overview

In 2004, Lumina Foundation launched Achieving the Dream, a national initiative aimed at cultivating systemic change in community colleges, with the ultimate goal of increasing student success, particularly among low-income students and students of color. Now encompassing nearly 200 institutions across the country, Achieving the Dream aims to help community colleges build a “culture of evidence” by increasing their capacity to collect and use data in order to identify barriers to success and to subsequently develop intervention strategies.

In 2011, MDRC and the Community College Research Center published *Turning the Tide: Five Years of Achieving the Dream in Community Colleges*. That report described the implementation of the initiative and student outcome trends, through 2009, for the first 26 colleges that joined Achieving the Dream in 2004 (called the “Round 1” colleges). This report builds on *Turning the Tide* in two ways. First, it extends the analyses of student outcomes through 2011, to include students who were entering the Round 1 institutions during the latter period of the colleges’ five-year implementation grants, when institutions were expected to have more fully implemented many of their Achieving the Dream initiatives. Second, the report explores variation in student outcome trends in Round 1 colleges and reanalyzes the implementation data, seeking lessons to inform other colleges that are undertaking reforms.

Overall, this report finds that average institution-wide student outcome trends remained relatively stable during the period of study, including during the prolonged recession that began in the United States in late 2007. Three colleges, however, stood out for gains on multiple indicators of student success. Although this report cannot directly link practices at these colleges to gains in student outcomes, their experiences do suggest lessons for community college practitioners, in addition to new directions for research. In particular:

- Each college focused on specific student subgroups, and each coordinated multiple reform efforts around their chosen subgroup.
- In later years, after gaining experience with the initial subgroups, each college expanded the reach of new practices to include larger groups of students or faculty. This focus was supported by targeted professional development for faculty and staff involved in the work.
- One college also used its reaccreditation process to help coordinate its reform efforts toward achieving a common set of goals.

This report marks the end of a long-term study on the first colleges to join Achieving the Dream. The initiative was designed to tackle persistently low rates of student success in community colleges. The Round 1 colleges have demonstrated that even while change can occur at the institutional level, for example, becoming a more data-driven college, substantially improving institution-wide student outcomes is more challenging and much harder than was envisioned at the start of the initiative.

Preface

Traditionally focused on increasing access to higher education in the United States, community colleges currently serve millions of low-income, minority, and nontraditional students, yet student success remains elusive. Almost half of all first-time community college students are not enrolled in any institution and have not received a degree or certificate six years after first entering college. Moreover, until relatively recently, most community colleges had neither the capacity nor the incentives to collect data on student performance and to analyze it to inform college practices and policies. Ten years ago, Lumina Foundation and a group of partner organizations — the American Association of Community Colleges; the Community College Leadership Program at the University of Texas; the Community College Research Center (CCRC) at Columbia University; Jobs for the Future; MDC, Inc.; MDRC; and Public Agenda — set an ambitious agenda for change.

In 2004, Lumina and the partner organizations launched Achieving the Dream, a national initiative designed to help community colleges collect and analyze student performance data and apply the results to help students succeed. The initiative focused on building a “culture of evidence” — one in which colleges routinely use evidence to help their students succeed academically. An earlier report published by MDRC and CCRC found that most of the “Round 1” colleges — the first 26 colleges to join the initiative — made important progress in establishing a culture of evidence on their campuses. However, it also found that institution-wide student outcome trends generally remained unchanged.

This report follows up on the earlier report and adds to the analysis an additional two years of data on student outcomes. As in the previous report, trends in student outcomes did not change appreciably. The report also finds, however, that some of the Round 1 colleges made gains on multiple indicators of student success, and the report describes those colleges’ stories in greater depth to suggest lessons for the field to explore. As a whole, Round 1 colleges have demonstrated not only that change in community colleges can occur at the institutional level, but also that the challenges to improving institution-wide student outcomes remain substantial.

Achieving the Dream has evolved into an independent organization that now includes nearly 200 colleges, 15 state policy teams, and more than 100 coaches and advisers who participate across 32 states and in Washington, DC. There is much work to be done to improve the prospects of students entering community colleges, and Achieving the Dream has established a solid data-driven foundation in a strong network of colleges to embark on that work, becoming an engine of innovation and experimentation.

Gordon L. Berlin
President, MDRC

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The Achieving the Dream evaluation was made possible by the support of Lumina Foundation. We are grateful for Lumina's generous and steadfast support for this evaluation, as one component of Achieving the Dream's effort to improve outcomes for community college students.

MDRC and the Community College Research Center (CCRC) appreciate the cooperation of the colleges represented in this report: Alamo Community College District, Brookhaven College, Broward College, Central New Mexico Community College, Coastal Bend College, Danville Community College, Durham Technical Community College, El Paso Community College, Galveston College, Guilford Technical Community College, Hillsborough Community College, Houston Community College, Martin Community College, Mountain Empire Community College, New Mexico State University-Doña Ana, Patrick Henry Community College, Paul D. Camp Community College, Santa Fe Community College, South Texas Community College, Southwest Texas Junior College, Southwestern Indian Polytechnic Institute, Tallahassee Community College, Tidewater Community College, University of New Mexico-Gallup, Valencia Community College, and Wayne Community College. We are especially grateful for the openness of the college administrators, faculty, staff, board members, and students who generously gave their time to be interviewed for this report. In addition, the coaches and data facilitators working on Achieving the Dream offered invaluable support in arranging and facilitating our field visits to the college campuses during earlier periods of the evaluation. We also thank the larger Achieving the Dream family.

Our partners at Achieving the Dream, Inc., and Lumina Foundation read the report with care. We are particularly grateful for comments received from Bill Trueheart and Carol Lincoln of Achieving the Dream and from Courtney Brown of Lumina Foundation.

The Achieving the Dream evaluation represents a collaborative effort between CCRC and MDRC. The research team that conducted interviews with us at the 26 sites included Thomas Brock, Melissa Boynton, Erin Coghlan, and Christian Geckeler of MDRC; Katherine Boswell, Aaron Doyle, Todd Ellwein, and John Wachen of CCRC; Monica Reid Kerrigan of CCRC and Rowan University; and Kasey Martin and Susan Gooden of Virginia Commonwealth University. Many staff members have contributed to the Achieving the Dream evaluation and to this report. Jessica Gingrich coordinated the report production process and conducted fact-checking, and Erin Coghlan assisted in conducting qualitative research. Early drafts of this report benefited from careful review by Gordon Berlin, Thomas Brock, Thomas Bailey, John Hutchins, Lashawn Richburg-Hayes, William Corrin, Colleen Sommo, Dan Bloom, and Jean Grossman. Leslie Bachman edited the report, and Stephanie Cowell prepared it for publication.

The Authors

Executive Summary

Each year, millions of Americans enroll in community colleges, seeking to develop the skills necessary to pursue a career or to transfer to a four-year institution. Community colleges serve large proportions of nontraditional, low-income, and minority students,¹ and they are designed to provide access to a postsecondary education at a low or relatively affordable cost. Yet for most students who enter these institutions, academic success remains elusive. Six years after entering community college, almost half of first-time students are not enrolled at any institution and have not received a degree or certificate.² In response to these low rates of student success, Lumina Foundation identified community college as a “high-need area” that is ripe for systemic reform and direct assistance.³

In 2004, Lumina Foundation and a group of partner organizations — the American Association of Community Colleges; the Community College Leadership Program at the University of Texas; the Community College Research Center (CCRC) at Columbia University; Jobs for the Future; MDC, Inc.; MDRC; and Public Agenda — launched Achieving the Dream, a bold, multiyear national initiative aimed at improving student outcomes in community colleges, particularly among low-income students and students of color. The partner organizations were selected to help Lumina design and operate Achieving the Dream, which set out to foster fundamental changes in the culture and operations of community colleges. Lumina and the founding partners sought to spur a process of institutional change through monetary and professional supports from the initiative, combined with colleges’ own investments. This process centered on building a “culture of evidence” — one in which colleges routinely use evidence to help their students succeed academically. The partners theorized that undertaking broad-based institutional efforts would ultimately lead to improvements in student outcomes.

Twenty-six colleges (called the “Round 1” colleges) were the first to join the initiative in 2004. In 2011, MDRC, in partnership with CCRC, published *Turning the Tide: Five Years of Achieving the Dream in Community Colleges*.⁴ That report described the implementation of the initiative and trends in student outcomes among these 26 colleges from 2004 through 2009.

¹Stephen Provasnik and Michael Planty, *Community Colleges: Special Supplement to the Condition of Education 2008*, NCES 2008-033 (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics, 2008).

²A. W. Radford, L. Berkner, S. C. Wheelless, and B. Shepherd, *Persistence and Attainment of 2003-04 Beginning Postsecondary Students: After 6 Years* (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2010).

³Lumina Foundation, “Community College Initiative Overview,” unpublished paper (Indianapolis: Lumina Foundation, 2002).

⁴Elizabeth Zachry Rutschow, Lashawn Richburg-Hayes, Thomas Brock, Genevieve Orr, Oscar Cerna, Dan Cullinan, Monica Reid Kerrigan, Davis Jenkins, Susan Gooden, and Kasey Martin, *Turning the Tide: Five Years of Achieving the Dream in Community Colleges* (New York: MDRC, 2011).

This report, the final publication from MDRC and CCRC on the Round 1 colleges, builds on *Turning the Tide* in two ways. First, it extends the analyses of institution-wide outcomes to students who were entering the Round 1 institutions during the latter period of the colleges' five-year implementation grants, when institutions were expected to have more fully implemented many of their Achieving the Dream initiatives. Second, the report explores variation in student outcome trends at Round 1 colleges and reanalyzes the implementation data in order to inform other institutions that are undertaking reforms. This report is a retrospective study of Achieving the Dream as it was implemented between 2004 and 2009 at the first 26 colleges to participate, rather than an assessment of the initiative's direct impact on its student outcomes or current activities and programs. Indeed, the initiative now includes nearly 200 participating colleges.

Overall, this report finds that average institution-wide trends in student outcomes remained relatively stable during the period of study, including during the prolonged recession that began in the United States in late 2007. Three colleges, however, stood out for gains on multiple indicators of student success. The practices of these institutions suggest possible lessons for community college practitioners, in addition to new directions for research. In particular:

- Each college focused on specific student subgroups, and each coordinated multiple reform efforts around their chosen subgroup.
- In later years, after gaining experience with the initial subgroups, each college expanded its new practices in order to reach larger groups of students and faculty. Targeted professional development for faculty and staff involved in the work supported this focus.
- One college used its reaccreditation process to help coordinate its reform efforts and to work toward establishing a common set of goals.

Although this report cannot directly link such practices to the three colleges' gains in student outcomes, the practices themselves are especially relevant in the context of new reforms currently being undertaken across the field. Future research can be integrated into similar reforms to investigate their impacts. This report concludes by discussing the lessons gleaned from the experiences of Round 1 colleges with Achieving the Dream.

Community Colleges and the Achieving the Dream Model

Traditionally focused on increasing access to postsecondary education, particularly for low-income students, most community colleges did not initially have the capacity or the incentives to gather information about their students' performance over time or about the possible barriers to their success.

At the time Achieving the Dream was launched, most community colleges across the country gathered large amounts of data on students through enrollment forms, placement tests, and academic transcripts. Because community colleges typically derive their funding based on enrollment numbers, they were adept at compiling information on the number and characteristics of students who were enrolled in the institutions overall as well as in specific academic programs. Community colleges also documented the number of certificates and degrees conferred each year. It was much less common, however, for these colleges to track students over time to determine whether they stayed enrolled and made steady progress toward attaining a degree. In addition, these institutions generally did not conduct more detailed analyses to discover whether some groups of students experience more difficulty than others in completing courses or finishing degrees.⁵

In this context, the vision of Lumina and of the Achieving the Dream founding partners represented a significant challenge to community colleges. First, as part of the initiative, participating colleges were asked to use data in a different way than they normally did. This involved examining data more closely to learn whether students are staying in school and meeting other critical benchmarks, and to break down these data to determine whether there are “achievement gaps” among some segments of the population, such as students of color and low-income students. Second, Achieving the Dream aimed to foster fundamental changes in community college culture and operations, with the ultimate aim of increasing the academic success of these students.

From its inception, Achieving the Dream emphasized efforts intended to help increase the capacity of community colleges to collect and use data to guide institutional improvements. The vision of the initiative was to encourage colleges that were relatively inexperienced in using data to engage in systematic, data-driven — or data-informed — decision making. As part of this vision, broad groups of faculty, staff, and other employees of the colleges would be involved in identifying needs, in implementing interventions, and in continuously improving practices based on evaluation results. The expectation was that this would give colleges a better idea of students’ challenges, thereby enabling them to enact programs and interventions that might improve students’ performance. Five key outcomes were targeted: (1) progression through developmental education, (2) completion of gatekeeper (introductory college) courses in math and English, (3) completion of courses with a grade of “C” or better, (4) persistence, and (5) attainment of credentials. Achieving the Dream also emphasized this process as a means to overcome achievement gaps, particularly among students of color and low-income students.

⁵Thomas Brock, Davis Jenkins, Todd Ellwein, Jennifer Miller, Susan Gooden, Kasey Martin, Casey MacGregor, and Michael Pih, *Building a Culture of Evidence for Community College Success: Early Progress in the Achieving the Dream Initiative* (New York: MDRC, 2007); Vanessa S. Morest and Davis Jenkins, *Institutional Research and the Culture of Evidence at Community Colleges*, Culture of Evidence Series, Report 1 (New York: Community College Research Center, 2007).

As Figure ES.1 shows, the initiative outlined the following steps to guide participating institutions in this process of change:

- First, **leaders commit** to both making policy changes and allocating resources to support efforts aimed at increasing student success.
- Second, colleges **use data** to understand how students are performing, to identify groups that may need extra support, and to prioritize actions.
- Third, colleges **engage faculty, staff, and other stakeholders** in using data and research to develop intervention strategies designed to address problems that the colleges identify as priorities.
- Fourth, colleges **implement and assess strategies by** using evaluation results to make decisions about whether to expand or refine the strategies.
- Finally, colleges **establish an infrastructure to support continuous, systemic improvement** by institutionalizing effective policies and practices. Program review, planning, and budgeting are driven by evidence of what works best for students.

Thus, the colleges were asked to make significant changes in a relatively short time and, considering the overall operating budgets that were available, with relatively limited additional funds. The five steps outlined above were expected to build on and reinforce one another, such that participating colleges needed to master the earlier steps in order to complete the later steps and to ultimately engender large-scale institutional change. Moreover, this process was envisioned as iterative. For example, after bringing to full scale an intervention strategy found to be successful, a college would repeat the initial steps of the process to identify and to address new problem areas.

Building on *Turning the Tide*

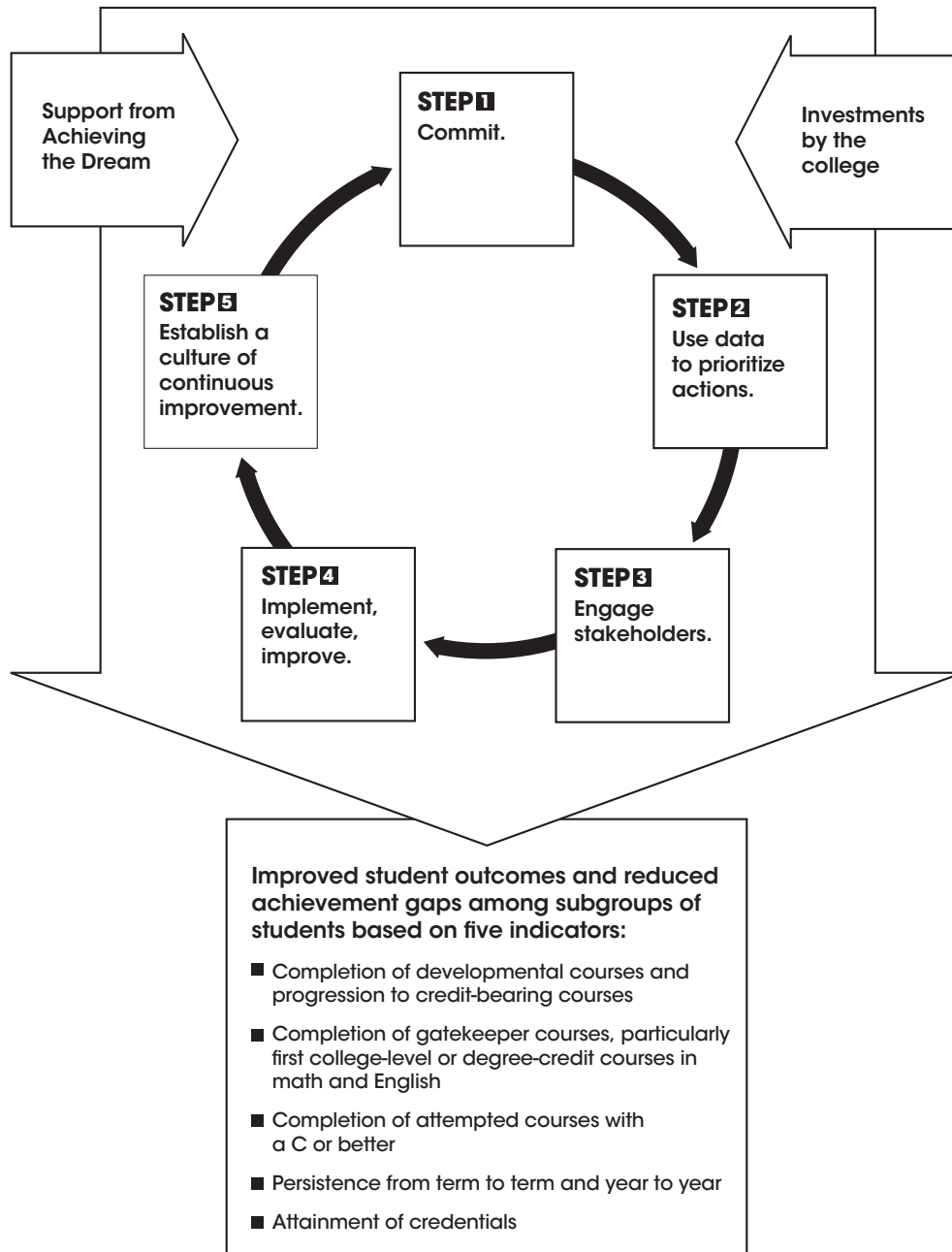
The *Turning the Tide* report found that most Round 1 colleges made important strides in building a culture of evidence — progress that most colleges attributed to Achieving the Dream as well as to such forces as accreditation processes and other grants.⁶ While colleges varied in their implementation of the Achieving the Dream model, many enhanced their leadership commitment to student success, increased their research capacity, and implemented a wide range of strategies aimed at improving student achievement, as indicated below:

⁶Findings summarized in this paragraph and in the next are from Rutschow et al. (2011).

Achieving the Dream: Community Colleges Count

Figure GU3

Achieving the Dream's Five-Step Process for Improving Student Success



SOURCE: *Field Guide for Improving Student Success* (2009), p.11, from the Achieving the Dream: Community Colleges Count initiative. Copyright 2009 by Lumina Foundation. Reprinted with permission. Available online at www.achievingthedream.org/docs/Field_Guide_for_Improving_Student_Success.pdf.

- Altogether, 21 of the 26 Round 1 colleges (81 percent) improved their culture of evidence over the course of their five-year participation in Achieving the Dream.
- By the end of this period, 11 Round 1 colleges (42 percent) had implemented most of the practices associated with a strong culture of evidence. These colleges featured broad-based involvement of college administrators, faculty, and staff; strong institutional research departments that produced readily understandable reports on student achievement; regular evaluations of interventions to improve student success; and attention to scaling up program strategies that enhanced student success.
- Ten colleges (38 percent) had instituted many aspects of the improvement process suggested by Achieving the Dream, though not to the same degree as those described above.
- Five colleges (19 percent) were still struggling to implement a number of the practices recommended by Achieving the Dream by spring 2009. Weak institutional research departments were the primary obstacle to the ability of the schools to institute a broad data-driven culture.

In summary, *Turning the Tide* documented the important institutional and cultural changes that took place at Round 1 colleges during the Achieving the Dream grant period. The research also revealed a number of areas for improvement, including the need for an increased focus on faculty and staff engagement, particularly among adjunct or part-time faculty; more clearly developed guidelines regarding the initiative's efforts to reduce achievement gaps by race and by income level; and a more systematic effort to help colleges expand and institutionalize their efforts to encourage student success. In particular, a key task remained at the end of the five-year period: bringing these system-level reforms to the individual level, such that they meaningfully changed the experience of large numbers of students.

This report is the final publication from MDRC and CCRC on Achieving the Dream Round 1 colleges. It builds on *Turning the Tide* by extending student outcome trends to include those who were entering these institutions during the latter period of the colleges' five-year implementation grants, when they were expected to have more fully implemented many of the practices outlined by Achieving the Dream. In addition, this report describes reanalysis of the implementation data and of student outcome data to assess whether variations in student outcome trends were associated with colleges' differing patterns of implementation.

As in *Turning the Tide*, the analyses of student outcomes in this report are not causal: they do not evaluate the impact of Achieving the Dream. Instead, they describe trends in key

indicators of student success across diverse institutions for eight cohorts of students. Three of these cohorts entered college before the implementation of the initiative, from fall 2002 through fall 2004, and five began college after the implementation of the initiative, from fall 2005 through fall 2009. In addition to the colleges' implementation of Achieving the Dream, several important changes occurred during this time period that might have affected students and exerted pressures on community colleges, making it difficult to isolate the effect of the initiative. Notably, the Great Recession started toward the end of 2007 and, during the period of study, colleges experienced large population shifts. For example, the average full-time enrollment at Round 1 colleges increased from just over 6,200 students in fall 2002 to over 8,500 students in fall 2009 — a gain of over 37 percent — with the biggest increases occurring in 2008 and in 2009. Rising enrollments were accompanied by shifting demographics, and the proportion of minority students gradually increased. In addition, state funding for higher education was cut during this period, driving lower per-student revenue.⁷ Finally, nine of the twenty-six Round 1 colleges did not provide data for the full period of the study, so the information provided here does not fully reflect student outcomes for all Round 1 colleges for all cohorts.⁸ The colleges that did not submit all of the data tended to have lower student outcomes in the earlier cohorts, for which they did submit data.

Achieving the Dream started out with big ambitions. The initiative encouraged colleges to develop new interventions, to examine their effectiveness, and to institutionalize those that were most promising. While Achieving the Dream emphasizes the importance of disaggregating data to inform this process, the partners involved believed that the process as a whole would lead to stronger interventions that would together positively affect college-wide student outcomes. They also believed that the cultural and institutional changes themselves would engender changes in student outcomes. Consequently, the partner organizations collectively decided that broad, institution-wide outcomes would best reflect these outcomes and that these should be used for the evaluation.

Scaling, however, proved particularly difficult within the five-year grant period. The analyses in *Turning the Tide* showed that relatively small proportions of students experienced intervention reforms undertaken by Achieving the Dream during this time frame. Despite the notable efforts of colleges to scale up their programs and services, the majority of strategies that were carried out remained small in scale, reaching less than 10 percent of their intended target populations. This was particularly true when the strategies involved the kind of intensive contact that might be expected to meaningfully influence students' performance. The benefits of promising interventions, therefore, were frequently extended to only a fraction of students. Consequently, institution-wide trends may not reflect the impact of these reforms on the smaller

⁷Rita J. Kirshstein and Steven Hurlburt, *Revenues: Where Does the Money Come From?* A Delta Data Update, 2000-2010 (Washington, DC: American Institutes for Research, 2012).

⁸Some multi-campus districts, such as Alamo Community College District, are counted as one college.

group of students who experienced them. For this report and for *Turning the Tide*, however, the partners' early decisions about using institution-wide student outcome measures meant that additional data on individual students were not collected. This made it impossible to identify and to analyze outcomes for subgroups of students, such as those who participated in Achieving the Dream interventions.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, then, this report shows that with an additional two years of data, average college-wide trends in student outcomes at Round 1 colleges remained relatively unchanged from pre- to post-initiative cohorts. One exception was that there were modest improvements over time in the rates for completion of gatekeeper English, but other outcomes remained substantially the same. As with the colleges' implementation experiences, however, there was considerable variation in student outcome trends across Round 1 colleges: some colleges improved on certain outcomes over the five years, and some declined.

The variation in student outcome trends was also explored through deeper analysis of field visit implementation data and survey data. This information was used to investigate the relationship between changes in student outcomes and a variety of institutional factors that might affect these outcomes, including core activities related to Achieving the Dream. These factors included colleges' leadership strength, alignment between institutional goals and reforms, institutional data and research capacity, and professional development training. Although changes in student outcomes were not found to be systematically related to such factors, the analysis identified three colleges that stood out for their gains on multiple indicators.

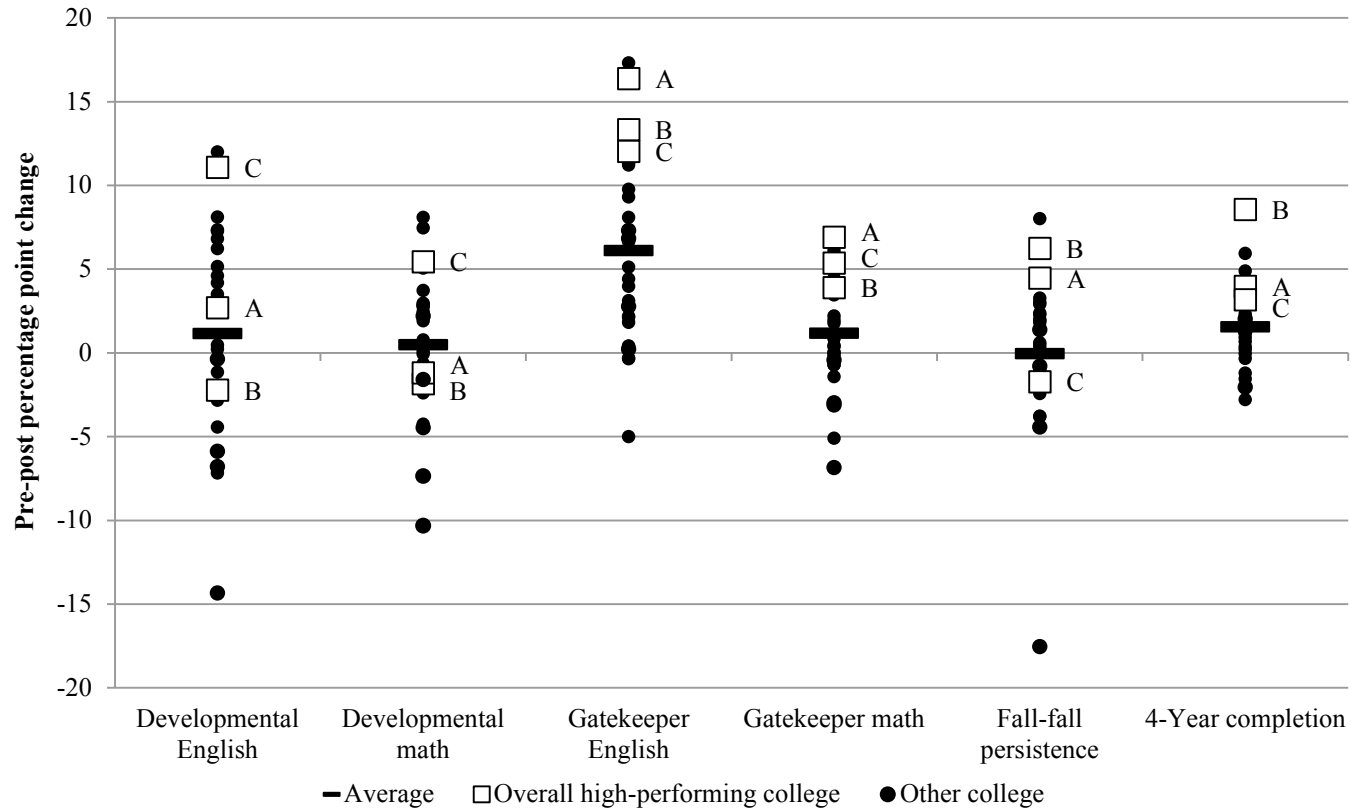
Figure ES.2 shows the distribution of all of the colleges' gains or declines on each of six outcomes. These were (1) completion of developmental English within two years, (2) completion of developmental math within two years, (3) completion of gatekeeper English within two years, (4) completion of gatekeeper math within two years, (5) persistence from fall-to-fall semesters, and (6) attainment of college credentials within four years. Each point in Figure ES.2 represents the average change for an individual college for each outcome. The average change is calculated by subtracting the average for the outcome for cohorts who entered the college in the pre-initiative period (2002-2004) from the average for cohorts who entered the college after the start of implementation (2005-2009). Figure ES.2 also identifies where the three colleges that stood out — labeled A, B, and C — ranked for each outcome. The gains of these colleges are concentrated in the gatekeeper courses, in fall-to-fall persistence, and in four-year completion.

The three colleges represent a diverse set of schools with differing student contexts, implementation strategies, and experiences with Achieving the Dream. They range in size from

Achieving the Dream: Community Colleges Count

Figure ES.2

Pre-Post Percentage Point Change for Round 1 Colleges,
by Outcome, 2002-2004 Versus 2005-2009



(continued)

Figure ES.2 (continued)

SOURCE: MDRC calculations using the Achieving the Dream database maintained by JBL Associates.

NOTES: Calculations for these figures used institutional means for all available data for sample members in the fall 2002 through fall 2009 cohorts at Achieving the Dream Round 1 colleges. Percentage point change is calculated by subtracting the preintervention (2002 to 2004) average from the postintervention (2005 to 2009) average. For the developmental English, developmental math, gatekeeper English, gatekeeper math, and fall-to-fall persistence measures, 1 site was excluded from cohort 2002, 2 sites from cohorts 2007 and later, 4 sites from cohorts 2008 and later, and 12 sites from cohort 2009 because of insufficient data for 2-year outcomes. For the 4-year completion measure, 1 site was excluded from 2002, 2 sites from cohorts 2005 and later, 5 sites from cohorts 2006 and later, and 12 sites from cohort 2007 because of insufficient data for the 4-year outcome.

small rural colleges to a large multicampus institution located in a metropolitan area. The institutions are located in three different states and have distinctive student populations, ranging from a school that serves a largely Hispanic population to a relatively racially and ethnically diverse college.

Lessons for the Field

Implementation data for each of the three colleges were analyzed in an effort to discern common patterns that might be associated with the gains the schools realized. While the colleges shared some similar implementation features and challenges, their experiences during the grant period were more different than similar. Although no clear patterns emerged, the diversity of these experiences suggests lessons for other community colleges that are undertaking reforms.

Aligning Reform Efforts for Systematic Change

It may not be enough for colleges to implement a variety of programs and services if they are not well aligned. Research in kindergarten through twelfth grade (K-12) education emphasizes the importance of implementing instructional programs in a coherent, cohesive, and aligned way, so that reforms work toward the same goals and interact with one another to be mutually reinforcing.⁹

Surrounding targeted students with the necessary supports may require such coordination. Moreover, the integration of multiple initiatives, policies, and practices may require a general redesign of programs and support services. The literature on organizational effectiveness and improvement suggests that no one practice, or even set of practices, may be sufficient to improve the performance of an operation as complicated as educating students in a wide variety of program fields and types.¹⁰ Improving performance may therefore require fundamental systemic reform — reviewing and redesigning practices, policies, and processes over time and realigning them with new organizational goals.¹¹

⁹Fred M. Newmann, BetsAnn Smith, Elaine Allensworth, and Anthony S. Bryk, “Instructional Program Coherence: What It Is and Why It Should Guide School Improvement,” *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis* 23 (2001): 297-321; Geoffrey D. Boreman, Gina M. Hewes, Laura T. Overman, and Shelly Brown, “Comprehensive School Reform and Achievement: A Meta-Analysis,” *Review of Educational Research* 73, 2 (2003); Anthony S. Bryk, Penny Bender Sebring, Elaine Allensworth, Stuart Luppescu, and John Q. Easton, *Organizing Schools for Improvement: Lessons from Chicago* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2010).

¹⁰Bryk et al. (2010); Davis Jenkins, “Redesigning Community Colleges for Completion: Lessons from Research on High-Performance Organizations,” CCRC Working Paper No. 21 (New York: Community College Research Center, 2011); Adrianna Kezar, “What is the Best Way to Achieve Broader Research of Improved Practices in Higher Education?,” *Innovative Higher Education* 36, 4 (2011): 235-247.

¹¹Jenkins (2011).

There were some instances in which Achieving the Dream colleges brought about more systemic changes to programs and services. However, most of the initiative's efforts focused on the early stages of students' college experiences and did not address challenges students might face in later courses or in staying on track toward graduation. For example, a number of colleges redesigned their student intake process (for instance, orientation, placement testing, initial advising) or enhanced instruction in developmental education or in gateway college-level math and English courses (for example, supplemental instruction, learning communities). However, few schools focused on curricular and instructional reforms in college-level courses beyond math and English, though some did so under the aegis of other initiatives such as accreditation or other grant programs.

A number of Round 1 schools found it difficult to engage large groups of faculty in the reform agenda. This limited engagement may be due partly to colleges' emphasis on the early stages of students' experiences, which may be relevant to only a small proportion of faculty, such as those teaching developmental education courses or introductory math or English courses. Similarly, the broad institutional performance measures used in Achieving the Dream, such as persistence and completion, may not resonate with faculty who focus on issues related to curriculum and instruction in their own disciplines.¹²

Building on Accreditation Processes

Some of the colleges encountered difficulty in their attempts to engage faculty. One college successfully used the accreditation process to engage faculty by focusing on student success measures and by using data to inform improvements in classroom practice. This college's model, which also emphasized the measurement of learning outcomes, was eventually used by other departments as well as by the initial group of faculty. Learning more about how colleges can integrate a focus on student learning as well as on student progression and completion may help to identify ways of engaging faculty as central actors in future reform efforts. This approach may also illuminate strategies to incorporate research and data, as well as to implement interventions that are data-informed, more fully into the reform process.

Engaging Leaders Throughout Community Colleges

This report also highlights colleges' efforts to broaden their leadership framework to include faculty leaders and middle managers in the reform process. Effective leadership can occur at multiple levels within a college. Presidents and high-level administrators play a key role in institutional reform. However, given the decentralized organization of many colleges, the involvement of deans and department chairs can also be critically important for mobilizing faculty

¹²Jenkins (2011); Rutschow et al. (2011).

and staff.¹³ Cultivating leaders among the faculty and student services staff may also be an essential step toward institutional change; such leaders can sometimes spur change more effectively among their peers and within their departments. Colleges that cultivate strong leaders throughout their institutions may have a greater chance of long-term success, even when some leaders move on and must be replaced by others.¹⁴

Starting with Key Student Subgroups

While improvements in institution-wide student outcomes are likely to require changes that affect a large proportion of students, different students may be better served by different reform efforts. The three colleges that are analyzed in greater detail in this report demonstrated varying approaches to reform, and they often tailored new practices to the specific needs of targeted students. They also focused multiple strategies on high-need subgroups of students — primarily those placed or enrolled in developmental courses. Consequently, these colleges reached smaller groups of students and provided them with diverse and coordinated services and practices, such as academic assistance provided through advising or through the use of supplemental supports in the classroom.

Integrating Research with Reform

In general, there is a continued need for research on community colleges that is focused on reform strategies. Developing future reforms in tandem with rigorous research designs could help fill this need. Although institution-wide student performance is unlikely to change substantially if large numbers of students do not experience something different, even large-scale reforms will not produce institution-wide change if new innovations are ineffective. Further, there is a need to prioritize ongoing, careful, and rigorous evaluations to help college leaders, faculty, and staff determine which reforms are effective. Knowledge about program effectiveness and common drivers for organizational change is growing, but there is still much to learn — especially with respect to institutional change in organizations as complex as community colleges. Rigorous research is needed on the causal aspects of specific interventions that directly affect the experiences of students. The results of this research (that is, reliable estimates of student outcome gains resulting from the new practices) can inform the field in general and individual colleges in particular. Such studies can provide colleges with specific and accurate feedback that they could use to inform decisions about programs and services. Sharing this knowledge, in turn, could help other institutions implement and scale up more effective practices. When reforms primarily target institutional change and reach students only secondarily — such as reforms that promote increased institutional research capacity and data use — changes in stu-

¹³Kezar (2011); W. Norton Grubb, *Basic Skills Education in Community Colleges: Inside and Outside of Classrooms* (New York: Routledge, 2013).

¹⁴Jenkins (2011).

dents' experiences may occur less directly. In such cases, research on both the process itself and on measures of institutional change may be more helpful.

Conclusion

Achieving the Dream was founded on a belief in evidence-based decision making that resonated with colleges across the country and that persists today. The initiative has helped community colleges establish a solid foundation for change. Moreover, it has helped colleges to enhance their institutional research and data collection capacities, to develop stronger cultures of evidence, and to pursue a variety of new reforms. Many faculty and staff are increasingly focused on collecting and analyzing data and on the implications for student success.

The experiences of the Round 1 colleges, described here and in *Turning the Tide*, represent an important piece of the broader story of Achieving the Dream. Yet, the significance of the initiative extends beyond the stories of these colleges as recounted in these reports. In general, Achieving the Dream has sought to change a number of spheres, from those concerned with public policy to those affecting the general public. The initiative has grown in the decade since its founding: Achieving the Dream now stands as an independent organization and has expanded to nearly 200 colleges, 15 state policy teams, and more than 100 coaches and advisers who participate across 32 states and in Washington, DC. Because the initiative has modified, expanded, and codified many of its practices and supports over the years, students in colleges that joined the initiative in later rounds of Achieving the Dream may have benefited from the lessons learned in the earlier rounds.

The 26 Round 1 colleges were leaders in this effort, learning alongside the partner organizations about institutional change in community colleges. The innovations made by Round 1 colleges, and their willingness to publicly share their experiences, have pushed the field forward and helped advance reform efforts in community colleges nationwide. Other system reform initiatives, such as the Developmental Education Initiative and Completion by Design,¹⁵ have been heavily influenced by lessons learned from the early experiences of the Round 1 colleges. Colleges, policymakers, funders, and researchers across the United States are building on these lessons as they think about ways to hasten community college reform.¹⁶

¹⁵Janet C. Quint, Shanna S. Jaggars, D. Crystal Byndloss, and Asya Magazinnik, *Bringing Developmental Education to Scale: Lessons from the Developmental Education Initiative* (New York: MDRC, 2013); Rutschow et al. (2011).

¹⁶Quint, Jaggars, Byndloss, and Magazinnik (2013).

This report marks the end of a long-term study of the first colleges to join Achieving the Dream. The experiences of the Round 1 colleges have demonstrated not only that change can occur at the institutional level, but also that substantially improving institution-wide student outcomes is much harder than was envisioned. There is still much work to be done to improve the prospects of students entering community colleges in the United States, but Achieving the Dream has established a solid foundation and a strong network to embark on that work.

About MDRC

MDRC is a nonprofit, nonpartisan social and education policy research organization dedicated to learning what works to improve the well-being of low-income people. Through its research and the active communication of its findings, MDRC seeks to enhance the effectiveness of social and education policies and programs.

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.

Over the years, MDRC has brought its unique approach to an ever-growing range of policy areas and target populations. Once known primarily for evaluations of state welfare-to-work programs, today MDRC is also studying public school reforms, employment programs for ex-offenders and people with disabilities, and programs to help low-income students succeed in college. MDRC's projects are organized into five areas:

- Promoting Family Well-Being and Children's Development
- Improving Public Education
- Raising Academic Achievement and Persistence in College
- Supporting Low-Wage Workers and Communities
- Overcoming Barriers to Employment

Working in almost every state, all of the nation's largest cities, and Canada and the United Kingdom, MDRC conducts its projects in partnership with national, state, and local governments, public school systems, community organizations, and numerous private philanthropies.

