



# PROMISING INSTRUCTIONAL REFORMS IN DEVELOPMENTAL EDUCATION

A Case Study of Three  
*Achieving the Dream* Colleges

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THE DREAM<sup>SM</sup>

COMMUNITY

COLLEGES

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BUILDING KNOWLEDGE  
TO IMPROVE SOCIAL POLICY



## Executive Summary

A large proportion of first-time community college students enter schools each year in need of developmental education, but few succeed in making it through these programs to college-level courses, let alone earning a certificate or a degree. Such discouraging outcomes have spurred many colleges across the country to focus on improving developmental education through a variety of interventions, including increased student advising, more professional development for faculty, and revision of the instruction and curriculum within developmental education courses themselves. In recent years, much of this work has been undertaken as part of Achieving the Dream: Community Colleges Count, a bold, multi-year, national initiative launched in 2003 by Lumina Foundation for Education. Achieving the Dream seeks to help more community college students succeed by reshaping the culture and practices inside community colleges and the external forces that affect their behavior. More specifically, the initiative encourages colleges to:

1. Commit to improving student success
2. Identify and prioritize problems
3. Engage stakeholders in developing strategies for addressing priority problems
4. Implement, evaluate, and improve strategies
5. Institutionalize effective policies and practices

To assist in this work, Achieving the Dream provides colleges with a number of supports, including professional coaching and grants totaling \$450,000 over the course of five years.

This report examines the experiences of three of the eighty-three colleges currently involved in Achieving the Dream: Guilford Technical Community College in Greensboro, North Carolina; Mountain Empire Community College in Big Stone Gap, Virginia; and Patrick Henry Community College in Martinsville, Virginia. Using the Achieving the Dream model as a framework, each of these colleges chose to focus on improving developmental education as one of its priority areas, and each developed interventions to reach developmental learners who have a variety of skill levels and experiences.

In detailing these instructional interventions, this report has three primary aims: (1) to highlight the components of several instructional reforms in developmental education, (2) to examine how colleges used the Achieving the Dream model of institutional reform to

implement these interventions, and (3) to document ways in which such interventions can be implemented at other colleges across the nation. Unlike many MDRC studies, this analysis is based not on a random assignment evaluation of these instructional reforms but, rather, on a qualitative study of the implementation of these reforms. As such, the instructional reforms highlighted here are suggestive of promising practices in developmental education, rather than definitive judgments about their effectiveness.

## **Key Findings**

Guilford Tech, Mountain Empire, and Patrick Henry each took a unique approach to reforming developmental education instruction. Their reforms sought to meet the varied needs of their student populations, including techniques to increase the success of developmental education students who have low skill levels, techniques to reach developmental education students with higher skill levels, and techniques suitable for learners with a variety of abilities.

When instituting new reforms on their campuses, each of the colleges closely followed the three broad steps recommended by Achieving the Dream. Each undertook an analysis of their students' achievement and developed specified priority areas for reform, around which they then instituted interventions to improve students' success. Most of the instructional reforms that these colleges implemented were still in the pilot stages, but each of them showed promising trends in increasing students' achievements, as evidenced by evaluations undertaken by the colleges. Though their programs varied, their experiences hold many lessons for the implementation of instructional reforms in developmental education, both for colleges hoping to institute similar reforms as well as for policymakers and leaders who hope to help colleges undertake this work.

### **Considering Change: Analyzing Student Success, Developing Priorities for Improvement, and Researching Strategies for Reform**

The colleges in this report tended to have similar experiences with using Achieving the Dream as a model for implementing instructional reforms in developmental education.

- **Achieving the Dream's focus on a culture of evidence helped the colleges become more comfortable with analyzing student outcomes data and using this analysis as a basis for reform.**

Each of the colleges in this report undertook a data analysis process similar to that suggested by Achieving the Dream. The colleges analyzed the student cohort data that they submitted to the Achieving the Dream database and examined such matters as graduation, persistence, and course pass rates. The colleges also undertook more detailed analyses, us-

ing state data or their own institutional data on programs and students to investigate the success of particular courses and groups of students.

- **As encouraged by the initiative, the colleges analyzed student outcomes data for subgroups defined by income status and by race or ethnicity. This analysis did not prove to be particularly useful.**

National studies have shown that low-income students and students of color tend to have lower persistence and graduation rates than upper-income and white students. Achieving the Dream encourages colleges to disaggregate student data by race and income to see whether similar trends exist on their campuses and, if so, to develop interventions that try to “close the gap.” The colleges profiled in this report did not always find an analysis of differing racial and income student subpopulations to be useful, either because low-income and minority students made up a majority of their overall student population or because the achievement of these students differed little from the rest of the student body.

- **The identification of priority areas for reform grew fairly naturally from the colleges’ analyses of student outcomes. However, they found that they needed more time for intensive research and planning in order to identify and develop strategies that met these priorities.**

The first year of Achieving the Dream was intended to be a planning year, with the primary focus to be on analyzing student outcomes data to identify areas of improvement. In subsequent years, colleges were expected to pilot interventions designed to make students more successful. Some of the colleges emphasized the need for a longer planning and development period before implementing strategies. The choice and development of interventions continued to take place after the colleges’ initial planning year in Achieving the Dream, with some strategies being piloted during the second and third year of their implementation grant period.

### **Implementing Change: Piloting Interventions to Improve Student Success**

Although the colleges in this report implemented differing instructional reforms, several themes can be seen in their goals and experiences.

- **The colleges’ instructional reforms sought to accelerate students’ progression through developmental education, to reduce their financial aid challenges, and/or to increase student engagement.**

The colleges identified three key challenges to address: students’ slow progress through developmental education course levels, the depletion of their financial aid, and the lack of engagement in their learning. Two colleges developed interventions aimed at in-

creasing students' progression through developmental education, by accelerating instruction (Mountain Empire's Fast Track Math) or by providing more intensive instruction and revising the assessment of students' progress (Guilford Tech's Transitions program). These programs also had the added benefit of preserving students' financial aid for college-level courses; students could move more quickly through the programs, or, in the case of Guilford Tech's Transitions program, instruction was provided tuition-free. Two colleges also focused explicitly on increasing students' engagement in their learning, by providing more interactive instructional models (Mountain Empire's Peer-Led Team Learning and Patrick Henry's Cooperative Learning).

- **The colleges developed instructional models with differing levels of timing and intensity to meet the needs of lower- and higher-skilled developmental education students.**

The colleges' interventions provided different levels of instruction depending on students' needs. One college (Mountain Empire) developed more rapid, review-like instruction to better suit the needs of developmental education students with higher-level skills. Colleges also created more intensive instructional programs for developmental education students with lower skills, such as the Transitions program at Guilford Tech and the Peer-Led Team Learning program at Mountain Empire.

- **Faculty leadership was critical for developing and implementing instructional reforms in developmental education. The colleges' support of faculty, through paid leave time and professional development, also played an important role in the implementation of these interventions.**

The colleges highlighted the important role that faculty members played in developing and implementing the instructional reforms in developmental education. While a supportive administration was important, the colleges emphasized that instructional reforms were most successful when developed and led by faculty members. Faculty members also emphasized the important role that paid leave time and professional development played in their ability to plan and implement these instructional reforms at their schools.

### **Scaling Up or Scaling Down: Monitoring Program Success as an Achieving the Dream College**

After implementing pilot interventions, Achieving the Dream colleges are expected to monitor and evaluate the success of these strategies. The Achieving the Dream initiative provides a set of guidelines to assist colleges in this process, since evaluation and research are new undertakings for many community colleges. The initiative lays out a sequential plan for developing evaluations, moving from (1) more qualitative, formative feedback

evaluations, which provide preliminary information on the implementation of an intervention, to (2) more sophisticated summative evaluations — quantitative analyses of student outcomes within an intervention. Regardless of their abilities on entering the initiative, Achieving the Dream hopes to help colleges improve their evaluation capacity. As described below, the three colleges in this report had similar experiences with evaluating their instructional strategies:

- **The colleges tended to have moved beyond the formative evaluation stage to the early stages of summative evaluation, which track the success of an intervention by comparing the outcomes of a group of students who received the intervention with the outcomes of an analogous group of students who did not receive the reform.**

*Formative evaluations* are typically conducted when a program is brand-new, to determine whether services are being delivered as intended and to offer suggestions for improvement. *Summative evaluations* try to measure program effects on student achievement or other outcomes. While their methods differed, the colleges generally compared the achievement of students who received an instructional intervention with the performance of students who did not receive the reform.

- **Based on their own evaluations, the colleges found that their instructional reforms were meeting with some level of success. Generally, the colleges found that their reforms had increased student persistence, improved their advancement through developmental education, and/or improved their engagement in their learning.**

In their evaluations of their interventions, the colleges found that the students who had received the instructional intervention tended to have greater success than a comparable group of students who had not received the intervention. The colleges examined a variety of achievement measures when looking at students' success, including students' advancement through developmental course levels, their persistence from semester to semester, and course pass rates. The colleges found that students who received their intervention had improved success in at least one of the benchmarks.

### **Implications for Institutional Reform: Revising Developmental Education Instruction as an Achieving the Dream College**

A number of lessons can be gleaned from these colleges' experiences implementing new instructional reforms in developmental education. The implications for practice, policy, and Achieving the Dream are discussed below.

*Implications for Practice: Being Faculty-Focused in Order to Become Student-Focused*

- **Fostering faculty leadership was critical in the development and implementation of instructional reforms in developmental education.**

While a supportive administration was seen as important, each of the colleges emphasized the role that faculty members had in instituting instructional reforms at their colleges. Faculty leaders were seen as the main instigators in bringing new instructional and curricular reforms to the school, and they generally played a critical role in the development of the reforms. The importance of faculty leadership may have been even more pronounced with these types of reforms, given that they sought to revise classroom practices and instruction.

- **Supporting professional development for faculty, either through trainings or through release time for curriculum development and planning, was also a necessity for the successful implementation of instructional reforms.**

Supporting faculty through professional development also played an important role in the implementation of instructional reforms at these schools. The colleges tended to give faculty members leave time to research and develop their instructional interventions, and they supported the growth of these initiatives through supplemental training.

*Implications for Policy: The Importance of Flexibility*

- **Flexible course-credit systems may enhance colleges' ability to implement new instructional interventions.**

A flexible course-credit system, which allowed the colleges to implement courses at various levels of intensity, helped one college (Mountain Empire) to develop instructional reforms that were tailored to the needs of its student population. The State of Virginia permits colleges to create developmental courses ranging from one to five credits, which, in turn, allowed Mountain Empire to develop one- and two-credit Fast Track Math courses along with its other, more intensive three- to five-credit developmental math courses. States that have more restrictive credit systems may potentially limit this instructional flexibility.

- **Increased flexibility in the use of state funds may assist in colleges' ability to build bridges across programs and departments.**

One college (Guilford Tech) was able to develop bridges between its developmental and adult basic education departments in an attempt to better assist lower-skilled develop-



mental education students. This connection was aided by the flexibility in North Carolina's adult basic education funding, which allows a subset of students who have low skill levels to be educated using adult education funds, even if these students already have a high school diploma or a General Educational Development (GED) certificate. Such flexibility in funding streams may aid other colleges in connecting programs and departments that serve similar types of students.

*Implications for Achieving the Dream: Reflections on the Initiative's Support and Guidelines*

- **Achieving the Dream grants played an important role in colleges' ability to pilot new interventions and strategies.**

Each college that joins Achieving the Dream receives \$450,000 over the course of five years to support the implementation of the initiative and its goals at their schools. Guilford Tech, Mountain Empire, and Patrick Henry each discussed how the Achieving the Dream grant provided important seed money for developing new interventions at their colleges. They emphasized that the grant gave them greater flexibility to support staff in researching and implementing new strategies at their schools.

- **The colleges emphasized that Achieving the Dream had given them a more structured framework for tackling the challenges facing their institutions. The colleges found that they had a greater focus on student success than they had had before joining the initiative.**

While each of these colleges had some level of experience with institutional research, they all emphasized that Achieving the Dream had helped them create a broader interest in student achievement and the results of new reforms. The colleges believed that Achieving the Dream had helped them better focus on student success and the development of specific interventions toward this end.

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Many colleges are looking to improve the success rates of developmental education students, and Achieving the Dream has played an integral role in helping colleges undertake this work. This report is a beginning look at specific type of reforms that colleges undertook in developmental education: the revision of instruction and curriculum as a means of increasing student success. Subsequent reports will examine the implementation and trends in student achievement at all 26 Round 1 Achieving the Dream colleges (in Florida, New Mexico, North Carolina, Texas, and Virginia) and at 13 Round 3 Achieving the Dream colleges (in Pennsylvania and Washington State). In addition, specialized reports will focus on

the costs, student perceptions, and impacts of specific educational interventions or student services at selected Achieving the Dream colleges.