# Changing COMMUNITY COLLEGES

## Early Lessons from Completion by Design

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Community colleges enroll almost half of the undergraduates in the United States and provide students the option to earn a degree at a lower cost and offer more flexible class schedules than four-year colleges.[1] However, among first-time, full-time degree-seeking students entering public two-year schools, only about 20 percent graduate with a degree within three years.[2] In this context, community colleges are under pressure:

- To significantly increase the number of students who attain their educational goals (obtain a degree or certificate or complete a program of study);

- To ensure that the college "works" for a diverse group of students (all ages; ethnic, racial, and socioeconomic backgrounds; and college-readiness levels); and

- To do so in a cost-efficient manner. (Competition for public funds is fierce and the state funding formulas used to provide most of a community college's income are changing.)

To address these challenges, community college leaders and concerned funders typically focus efforts on a single institutional component that they consider to be most problematic or as presenting the most pressing needs. For example, they may institute a reform that promises to improve developmental education outcomes. The designers of Completion by Design (CBD) at the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, however, believe that these types of piecemeal interventions cannot fix the problem of low community college graduation rates. Evaluations of postsecondary reforms that narrowly address just one or two of the barriers students face corroborate this belief.[3]

The idea behind CBD is that in order to dramatically increase graduation rates, a community college must change policies, programs, and practices across the entire institution so that all

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**1** Kolesnikova (2009).

**2** Snyder and Dillow (2015).

**3** For example, see Scrivener and Coghlan (2011) and Visher et al. (2012).

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BUILDING KNOWLEDGE
TO IMPROVE SOCIAL POLICY

components and services work synergistically to strengthen pathways to completion for students from the time they enter college until the time they leave.[4] (See Box 1 for more details.) However, given the current political and economic climate, these changes should not increase a college's budget, dilute educational quality, or undermine community colleges' historical commitment to open access.[5] To achieve this daunting goal, CBD asks colleges to change their mindset from "fixing a problem" to "designing new or dramatically different systems." This type of comprehensive approach to reform requires systemic change.[6]

While the designers of CBD had many ideas about *what* had to change, they knew little about *how* this type of transformational change happens.[7] How can one transform an entire institution in such a comprehensive manner? What does it take to implement deep multifaceted change and ensure that the change will last by shifting the institutional culture to embrace this new way of doing business? The MDRC project team sought answers to these central questions in the experiences of the CBD colleges.

This brief aims to provide college and higher education system leaders, as well as concerned funders and policymakers, with a framework for thinking about systemic change. It also provides insights from the CBD experience that can help

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4    Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation (2010).

5    Completion by Design website (www.completionbydesign.org).

6    Watson and Watson (2013). CBD, as a broad initiative, not only aims to systemically change individual community colleges, but also scale this change to many colleges. This brief focuses on the process of systemic change at the individual community college level.

7    People use a variety of terms for this type of comprehensive, deep change. In this brief, the authors use the terms "systemic change" and "transformational change" interchangeably.

others considering similar initiatives to develop implementation plans that are sufficiently broad and appropriately staffed, structured, and resourced. The brief first explains how systemic change is different from other, more incremental changes that colleges often implement and why systemic change is difficult but necessary. It then draws lessons from the experiences of CBD case study colleges during the first two years of implementation.

Research on community colleges and institutional change has shown that the transformational change that the CBD colleges are pursuing can take a decade to achieve.[8] Accordingly, nothing conclusive can be said about CBD's potential to substantially increase completion rates at this point — only three years into the colleges' implementation of the CBD initiative. What *can* be learned, however, are the steps that the colleges have taken both to build consensus among faculty and staff around a mission to substantially improve completion rates and to implement college-wide reforms aimed at advancing the mission. In other words, researchers can analyze the specific processes these institutions have undergone and are undergoing to enact systemic change.

## WHAT IS SYSTEMIC CHANGE?

Institutions experience many types of changes. It is therefore important to understand how systemic change differs from other types of change. Institutional change can be thought of as characterized by two dimensions: the extent to which students throughout the entire college experience a change ("diffusion to students" or "diffusion"); and the extent to which college faculty and staff modify their norms and beliefs to align with those underlying the change ("ac-

ceptance"). As defined in this brief, successful systemic change is change that most students across the entire college experience *and* that fundamentally shifts staff's beliefs about their actions or the mission. (Box 2 provides a figure that helps distinguish systemic change from other types of change, and Box 3 lists factors often underlying systemic change.) CBD is a systemic change effort because its goals are to comprehensively change the way a college interacts with students across the institution and to transform the culture of the college to one that regards completion as a primary mission of the institution. If faculty and staff believe in the underlying goal of the reform process, the hope is that the new way of doing business will be sustained even after the president or CBD lead leaves.

Most people think of change as doing things differently, but to achieve systemic change at a college, not only must most students in the institution experience the change, but faculty and staff at an institution must buy into the goals of the change initiative. The framework illustrated in the figure in Box 2 suggests that systemic change is as much about getting people to see their job in a different light as it is about having them behave differently. Thus, the findings in this brief are organized around these two dimensions: acceptance and diffusion to students across the college.

## CBD CASE STUDY COLLEGES AND THE RESEARCH DESIGN

In order to develop nuanced lessons about what it takes to create systemic change, researchers conducted an in-depth examination of the change process in five CBD colleges, located across three states. These "case study" colleges were selected to include a diverse set of community colleges to ensure that the findings would

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8   Eckel and Kezar (2003); Mayer et al. (2014); Duffy (2010).

## BOX 2

## A Typology of Institutional Change
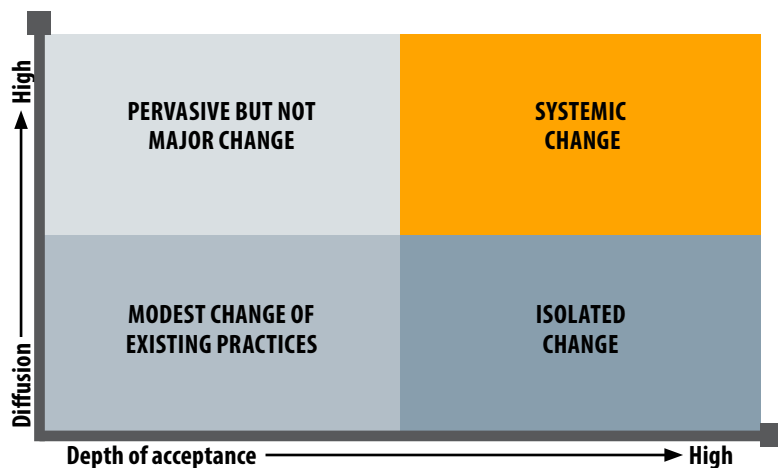


Source: Eckel and Kezar (2003), p. 31.

This figure shows how systemic change differs from other types of common changes. **Modest changes** are small adjustments made to a very limited aspect of the college, such as changing the way orientation information is presented to new students. This type of change is restricted to one area of a student's experience and does not fundamentally alter faculty's beliefs about what registration should do. **Pervasive but not major change**, such as putting syllabi online, is change that affects students across the college but that does not change any of the faculty's underlying beliefs. This type of change affects all students, but it does not change the degree to which faculty incorporate online tools into their teaching style. **Isolated change** is a major change that occurs in one area of the college but is widely embraced and accepted by affected faculty. An example of this type of change is an agreement among faculty in one department to arrange their courses so that all lectures are delivered online and classes are reserved for discussion. While the faculty's beliefs about pedagogy and consequent practices would profoundly change, the new teaching tradition would be isolated in that department. Only **systemic change** affects most students and is widely accepted by faculty across the institution.

be relevant to a broad range of colleges. The case study colleges include large and small colleges, rural and urban colleges, colleges with average or higher-than-average proportions of Pell Grant recipients, colleges with differing emphasis on career preparation versus transfer degrees, and colleges with different student demographics. Across the five case study colleges, 20 percent of the students graduate in three years (150 percent of the "normal" two-year time frame for community colleges), which is similar to the national community college average. Table 1 provides an overview of the characteristics of the case study colleges and students.

Researchers conducted site visits to the case study colleges three times between summer 2013 and fall 2014, and spoke with college presidents, administrators, faculty, and advisers. A survey of 1,500 faculty and staff was conducted starting in fall 2013. The research team reviewed documents, such as board minutes and college

websites. Finally, a sequence of three in-depth interviews between spring 2013 and spring 2014 were conducted with 16 students entering the college for the first time in spring 2013.

This brief draws lessons from patterns that were observed across colleges. To make these lessons more useful, it focuses on areas that all five case study colleges are attempting to reform. At the start of the study, there were three reform areas in common. Colleges in all three states were planning to restructure the sequence and delivery of developmental education courses; streamline and make more explicit the course sequences needed for academic programs; and improve academic advising systems.

## FINDINGS

Unlike other types of change in which successful implementation is the main issue, CBD's systemic change is successful only if it touches

**BOX 3**

## Important Factors for Systemic Change

Previous literature and MDRC research identified eight key factors that contribute to systemic change.[*] Systemically changing the experiences of students, as envisioned by CBD, entails changing both college systems and the roles and practices of faculty, advisers, and other members of the campus community with whom students come in contact. These role changes involve changes in *actions*, to be sure, but they are likely to involve changes in *attitudes* and *beliefs* as well, as people come to a new understanding of their institution's missions and of how their own work promotes that mission. Organizational change theorists refer to this process of changing attitudes as "sense-making."[†] Thus, the eight factors listed below include both those pertaining to strong implementation and those pertaining to changing attitudes and beliefs.

1  **FLEXIBLE VISION.** The vision of leaders expresses the desired goal and paints a positive and compelling picture of what the college will look like when the goals are achieved. Flexibility is important, as external events may impinge upon plans.

2  **SENIOR LEADERSHIP.** The college president sets the initial vision, but also needs to provide resources for the effort. Other strong senior leaders oversee the day-to-day planning and implementation of the new practices and help faculty and staff view their jobs differently.

3  **DISTRIBUTED LEADERSHIP.** A broad leadership base is necessary, as systemic change entails altering a myriad of practices as well as (usually) reshaping the values of faculty and staff — a large endeavor that requires many engaged and dedicated individuals.

4  **COMMUNICATION AND ENGAGEMENT.** To create buy-in among rank-and-file staff, they need to know about the changes, understand how the separate reforms work toward the same overarching goal and how that goal is aligned with goals that they already hold, and have the opportunity to get involved in planning and shaping the reforms.

5  **INCENTIVES.** Incentives, both financial (including continued employment) and nonfinancial (such as responsibility), can induce people to do things in new ways.

6  **PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT.** Because change often entails different job responsibilities, another key ingredient of successful systemic changes involves providing faculty and staff with opportunities to acquire the new skills they need to do the new work effectively and confidently.

7  **VISIBLE ACTIONS.** It is easy for enthusiasm about systemic change initiatives to wane unless there are visible and publicized markers of progress.

8  **RESOURCES.** Resources establish the parameters under which systemic change is possible.

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[*] Completion by Design (2014).

[†] Gioai and Chittipeddi (1991); Kezar (2013).

**TABLE 1**

**Fall 2011 College and Undergraduate Student Characteristics**

| CHARACTERISTIC | CBD COLLEGES | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | A | B | C | D | E |
| **College characteristics** | | | | | |
| More than 20,000 undergraduate students | No | No | No | Yes | Yes |
| Urban college | No | No | Yes | Yes | Yes |
| **Student characteristics (%)** | | | | | |
| Race/ethnicity[a] | | | | | |
| White | 71.3 | 71.8 | 45.1 | 65.7 | 7.5 |
| Black | 19.0 | 16.9 | 29.9 | 13.8 | 16.3 |
| Hispanic | 0.8 | 3.8 | 6.1 | 1.8 | 70.3 |
| Received Pell Grant in 2011-2012 school year | 60.3 | 73.8 | 41.8 | 44.0 | 55.6 |
| Degree-/certificate-seeking | 83.9 | 87.4 | 90.2 | 90.3 | 93.5 |
| Graduated within 150 percent of normal time[b] | 15 | 32 | 11 | 10 | 25 |

SOURCE: MDRC calculations using Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS) data.

NOTES: [a]Not all race categories are shown.

   [b]The graduation rates were reported in IPEDS as of August 2011 and are based on first-time, full-time degree- or certificate-seeking students (2005 cohort for four-year institutions and 2008 cohort for less-than-four-year institutions). IPEDS reports these values to the nearest whole percent.

most of the students in the institution, and staff understand and accept that the multiple reforms are linked and work together to increase completion rates. As a result, in addition to implementing changes across multiple systems, college leaders must change the beliefs of staff and faculty to ensure that they accept the overarching goal to increase completion rates and believe that the reforms help to advance this expanded mission of the college. Accordingly, this section begins with a description of the attitudes that faculty and staff held about the reforms early on in the change process, then describes the activities that college leaders used to promote staff's acceptance of the reforms. The section concludes with a discussion of actions and factors that affect the implementation and diffusion of the reform throughout the college.

### Early Attitudes of Staff and Faculty Toward Completion-Related Reforms

To gauge early attitudes toward the reforms, MDRC conducted an online survey of a randomly selected sample of 1,500 faculty members, advisers, and administrators across the five case study colleges between November 2013 and March 2014, about a year and a half into the change process.[9] The survey found that early

9   The sample was assembled in fall 2013, stratified by college and six occupational categories: full-time developmental education faculty, part-time developmental education faculty, full-time non-developmental education faculty, part-time non-developmental education faculty, advisers, and administrators. The number sampled within each cell was chosen to equalize within-cell estimated standard errors. In addition, the 10 individuals most involved in the CBD initiative ("CBD leads") were surveyed. Four of the five colleges had response rates of 70 percent or more. The response rate at the fifth college was 48 percent.

attitudes of college personnel toward completion-related reforms were neutral — they were neither in favor of nor against the reforms that the colleges were either beginning to implement or considering. However, while attitudes did not differ on average by college, they did differ by occupational category to which respondents belonged. Predictably, across all colleges, CBD leaders (individuals involved in the day-to-day planning and implementation of the initiative at each case study college) were most favorably disposed toward the reforms, followed by administrators. Among the staff that directly interacted with students, advisers at the five colleges were also relatively positively disposed.

Faculty members, on the other hand, whether they were full time or part time, or in departments offering developmental courses or not, were more likely to have a neutral or slightly negative opinion of the reforms. Open-ended responses suggest that many instructors worried that some of the CBD reforms, such as accelerated developmental education classes and more restrictive course offerings, may be incompatible with their view of the mission of community college, and of their own role, to provide the best education they can to their students.[10] For example, many faculty members expressed concern that the focus on getting students through their studies more quickly ignores the need for students to develop critical thinking skills, reduces academic quality of the classes, and cheapens the value of a community college credential. This kind of reservation is common in systemic change initiatives, and researchers have offered various solutions to overcome this challenge.[11] Below are the activities that the case

study colleges undertook and are engaging in to promote acceptance among faculty and staff.

## Activities that Affect Acceptance

CBD leaders understand the importance of having faculty and staff buy into the reform process. They have been making a considerable effort to influence staff attitudes. Several of their activities appear to be useful at increasing staff acceptance.

### Communication by Senior Leadership

At the case study colleges, many individuals mentioned the importance of the president and senior leadership in communicating a compelling case for CBD's completion goal. In general, the case study college leaders have sought to gain traction for the initiative by situating it as part of a long-term core goal of the college, often linking it to earlier reform efforts. They have emphasized the ways that a goal to increase completion rates strengthens, rather than replaces, other institutional goals. For example, one president highlighted the need for much higher completion rates as a reflection of the college's commitment to greater social justice. Leaders at other colleges talked about pathways in courses of study as a means to accomplish the colleges' traditional mission of meeting the needs of local employers.

Leaders were also careful not to associate the reforms with a particular grant; for instance, they did not refer to them as "CBD." They explained that they chose this strategy because of faculty's and staff's negative perceptions and wariness of "the initiative of the month" that will disappear quickly.[12] Thus, institutional stakeholders made

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10  Two-thirds of the respondents answered the open-ended questions.

11  Kezar (2014); Zachry Rutschow et al. (2011).

12  Some of the responses to the open-ended questions on the faculty survey questions mentioned people's distrust of "these new initiatives" that come and go.

a conscious effort to avoid linking a systemic change process to a particular funder or funding source, and thought it important to communicate that the college had undertaken the reforms for its own purpose and not just to get money.

Finally, leaders explicitly linked the various reforms — of developmental education, the advising system, and course requirements — to the systemic change's overarching goal of increasing the likelihood that students complete their intended academic goal.

**Shared Responsibility for Planning**
At all of the case study colleges, important tasks have been delegated to many individuals below the level of the CBD leads, thereby creating more champions and credible spokespeople for the initiative. By distributing work in this way, the colleges have been cultivating a group of individuals who are "closer to the ground" and who may have greater credibility with their colleagues than some senior college staff. As other research has shown, this type of active engagement is more difficult with adjunct and part-time faculty and staff.[13]

Several colleges provided staff with incentives to participate in CBD planning committees by allowing them to count it toward their institutional service requirements or providing a small stipend. At one college, one of the key individuals in the CBD initiative also plays an important role in faculty personnel decision making. Since the start of the initiative, faculty members up for promotions, bonuses, and tenure have been asked to indicate what they have done to help the college reach its goal to increase completion rates, and these responses are included as part of the candidate's assessment. A large number

of faculty members are thus prompted to think about the college's student success mission and about how their work contributes to student completion. This creates a "win" not only for the individual faculty member, but also for the college's CBD initiative.

Having staff participate in planning committees can slow down the change process, but it is associated with acceptance of the reforms. The data collected from in-person interviews with college personnel over the past two years indicate that reforms that engaged faculty and staff in planning were better accepted than those that did not. For example, several colleges created committees to craft credential or program "pathways," a sequence of courses selected from a reasonably narrow list that serves as the default or suggested course sequence for students desiring a degree in a particular program of study (such as psychology). While interview respondents at one college often characterized many of the committees' discussions as "tough," researchers were told that individuals who were initially resistant to the narrowing of student choice came to appreciate that it was useful in order to provide students with better guidance on course selection and college completion.

Information from the faculty and staff survey also supported the view that involvement in planning was related to having more favorable attitudes toward the reforms. Regression analysis of these data show that those who were formally involved in a completion or student success committee had more positive attitudes about the CBD reforms than did those who were not. Respondents who were formally involved in a committee were also more likely to report that they were doing parts of their job differently as a result of the college's new focus on student success.

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**13**  Zachry Rutschow et al. (2011).

**Hiring Individuals with Compatible Views**

While colleges do not hire many new faculty members each year, filling open positions with individuals who agree with the broader mission, specific reforms, or both was a technique used at a couple of colleges. At one college, developmental education instructor candidates were asked to read an article about completion and write a short essay about it as it related to the position they were seeking, an exercise that has proven to be revealing about applicants' attitudes with regard to the role of faculty in promoting student success. At another college, which was shifting its developmental education instruction to a computerized format, only candidates for adjunct positions who expressed a willingness to teach in this way were hired.

## Factors that Affect Diffusion

For a reform to change a student's outcomes, it must first touch that student. Several factors have shaped the diffusion of the CBD reforms at the five case study colleges.

**Changes by Regulatory Bodies**

When state policymakers mandate a reform, college leadership must prioritize the policy's mandates and allocate the resources needed to implement that reform. For example, all five colleges are shifting to modularized developmental courses,[14] but in one state this shift was mandated. CBD leads in that state thought the mandate made implementation easier in some respects. First, the mandatory nature of the reforms meant that the college needed to implement the reform and thus had to allocate the necessary resources to plan and implement the change. Second, "blame" for the reform

was deflected from college leaders to the state board of education. However, as is discussed earlier in more detail, staff were less accepting of externally imposed changes than those they had been involved in planning.

**Resource Adequacy**

Ensuring that the necessary resources are available on an ongoing basis is essential for implementing initiatives at scale. Yet, reallocating resources to new endeavors within an institution is difficult. As a result, diffusion can stall once changes that did not require major reallocations of existing resources (such as requiring that faculty and staff do their job differently) or that did not need new resources (such as developing course pathways) have been made.

Three years into implementing CBD, it appears that the colleges have made all the major changes they can within the existing allocation of resources, namely changes that can occur by directing existing staff to work differently (such as retraining developmental staff to teach college-level courses and requiring faculty to do more advising or allocating advisers differently).[15] A pattern observed across colleges and reform areas over this early phase was that less expensive reforms have been diffused more widely (such as the pathway reforms), while more expensive ones (such as adding advisers) have occurred in fewer colleges, have not been fully implemented, or

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14 Modularized developmental education courses are separate competency-based units ("modules"). Completion of each module confers credit.

15 Two colleges reallocated resources by hiring additional advisers over this time period. One college used a windfall gain of staff positions that occurred when the state lifted a hiring freeze. The other reallocated funds to hire two more advisers. Colleges did not use the foundation grant to fund ongoing activities because the grant was both small relative to the overall college budget and temporary. The grant was mostly used to fund one-time start-up costs and to support the full-time administrator who managed the initiative.

both. Within an area that was more expensive to reform, many colleges implemented less expensive options, such as those that used existing resources differently (adding faculty advisers or reorganizing the professional advisers into subject areas). Currently, the initiatives are at a critical point. Further diffusion of the reforms is likely to slow or stall until either the college boards and top leaders decide to shift resources from "nice to have, but not essential" programs to support the expansion of the reforms (such as hiring more advisers), or the reforms are refined or delivered in a more targeted and cost-effective manner (such as delivering proactive advising only to students whose outcomes could be significantly improved by such an intervention).

### Prior Experience with Reform

In some cases, among the reforms that were more resource intensive, those that had begun to be implemented before CBD were widely implemented. Greater diffusion resulted because both the college had received prior grants to fund the change and faculty and staff were more familiar with the particular reform. For example, one of the colleges far along in reforming its developmental education program had begun implementing various developmental education reforms prior to CBD as part of the Developmental Education Initiative.

### Pilot, Refine, Expand

A common pattern of implementation that the case study colleges pursued was to run a small pilot of a new reform before scaling it up, especially if a change had never been tried before. For example, one college piloted mandatory orientation for a segment of students before expanding it. While piloting new reforms may seem like an obvious step since it is widely considered a good management practice, such small-scale operations seem inconsistent with systemic change. Indeed, a main tenet of CBD

is to shift college reforms from those that at most affect only a few students (such as many of the reforms undertaken as part of Achieving the Dream) to those that affect most students. That said, most of the case study colleges chose to pilot their reforms for several reasons. First, piloting allows administrators to identify and resolve implementation problems — in hopes of keeping the reform process in good standing with the student body, faculty, and staff. Second, full-scale implementation is often unaffordable, whereas more limited implementation can be well within the resource constraints that exist, thus enabling the college to make some progress in an area. Third, piloting a reform can generate critical information, which can be used to broaden support and perhaps increase resources. For example, piloting the use of multiple eligibility measures generated strong evidence that students with high school grade point averages greater than 3.0 who are allowed to take college-level courses without taking a placement test do as well as or better than students who pass the placement test. This information was instrumental in winning support for the reform.[16]

## THE INTERACTION OF DIFFUSION AND ACCEPTANCE GOALS

The research on the first two years of the CBD initiative resulted in three core findings about systemic change:

**1** The same factors do not necessarily lead to both wide diffusion and broad acceptance of a reform.

For example, state mandates related to both accelerating developmental instruction and using

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**16** This pilot not only won support for the "multiple measures policy" in the state where the college is located, but in another state within the CBD network as well.

multiple criteria to exempt more students from remedial instruction have been implemented and have affected, or soon will affect, all developmental students and faculty. These mandates, however, have also generated considerable resentment among faculty, who perceive students as struggling to master remedial material in a shorter time period and who worry whether exempted students will succeed in college-level courses. Administrators in some states worry that the mandates divert resources away from reforms they believe are higher priorities. On the other hand, most staff believe that students should receive proactive advising, but colleges for the most part have not hired the number of advisers needed to make this reform a reality.

**2** Widespread diffusion of a reform is not dependent on faculty and staff acceptance when mandated by a college's regulating body.

Depending on the state regulatory context, governing bodies may have authority over community colleges and many of the processes CBD aims to reform. Thus, mandated policies can be scaled up regardless of whether faculty and staff agree with it.

**3** Two powerful activities aimed at promoting acceptance — staff involvement in planning and modifying reforms and running pilots to generate data to overcome resistance or garner support — slow diffusion early on.

As discussed earlier, faculty and staff who were engaged in planning were more likely to view reforms favorably and champion them at their college. CBD leaders also found that the data they collected from pilots helped them demonstrate the value of the reforms. While these activities were the two most commonly used

to gain buy-in, both lengthened the planning period. By the same token, the resulting reforms are more likely to be implemented well and viewed as "of the college." If systemic change is the goal, increasing acceptance in this way may be well worth the additional time.

## BROAD LESSONS FOR COLLEGES CONSIDERING SYSTEMIC CHANGE

The research MDRC conducted on CBD provides leaders engaged in or considering systemic change with the following lessons:

**REFORM TAKES TIME.** Systemic change initiatives are generally put in place because stakeholders believe that implementing multiple reforms will have synergistic effects. But for the reasons discussed earlier, it takes time to implement all the reforms at the level needed to effect meaningful change in student outcomes. In other words, one should expect systemic change processes to have a gestation period during which reforms are vetted, piloted, and refined.[17]

**GAUGING EFFECTIVENESS TAKES TIME.** Because multiple reforms need to be operating at the same time and synergistically to create an impact large enough to be observed institution-wide, it is unlikely that institution-wide student outcomes will change early on. Even during the middle stages of the change process, it may be difficult to discern whether student outcome changes are due to random variation or to the reform itself. However, for those seeking early evidence that the reforms are likely to produce wide-scale improvement in student outcomes down the line, evaluations to determine whether key individual reform components are affecting students as expected could be used as interim indicators.

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**17** Curry (1992); Kezar (2007).

**EXPECT DIFFERENCES ACROSS INSTITUTIONS.**
This and other research suggests that a multi-college systemic change initiative, such as CBD, will likely not look the same across colleges. Indeed, even when colleges identify the same area as problematic, such as developmental education, they are likely to address the problem in different ways. For systemic change to be fully realized, the reforms must become part of an institution's value system. For this result to happen, the individual reforms that are put in place need to fit into the institution's history, traditions, and culture.[18] Thus, when scaling these initiatives to other colleges, stakeholders should plan in terms of adaptation, not strict adoption, of particular reforms.

**MANAGE LOFTY EXPECTATIONS.** Colleges should do all they can to help students reach their educational goals. While not discussed in this brief, the study's qualitative interviews with students indicate, however, that many factors outside the control of community colleges play large roles in completion. Completion rates at community colleges will therefore never reach 100 percent.

While lofty goals can be motivating, care should also be taken not to seed the demise of a systemic change process. For instance, unrealistically high expectations of change early on could negatively affect how college faculty and staff view even substantial progress made in key performance measures, say the completion rate, over five or ten years and lead them to abandon the effort prematurely.

## CONCLUDING REMARKS

According to one CBD lead, "the process has been exciting, challenging, thorny, exhilarating, empowering, frustrating, and completely fulfilling." Systemic change is hard and takes persistence. However, when successful, an institution not only achieves the systemic change's overarching goal (for CBD, it is to substantially improve student success rates), but often experiences a secondary outcome. This byproduct, as it were, is that the college community understands and appreciates the need for ongoing reforms to support and improve student success. Studies of successful colleges show that over the course of the systemic change they developed a culture in which faculty and staff are never "quite satisfied with their performance" and want to continue improving.[19] Students, their needs, the labor market, and learning technologies are always changing, and so must institutions. The outcomes of any single reform process may be less important than creating an institutional culture that values ongoing improvement. ■

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[18]  Kezar and Eckel (2002).

[19]  The authors thank Adrianna Kezar for this insight. Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, and Whitt (2005, 2011).

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