

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

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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.

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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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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*

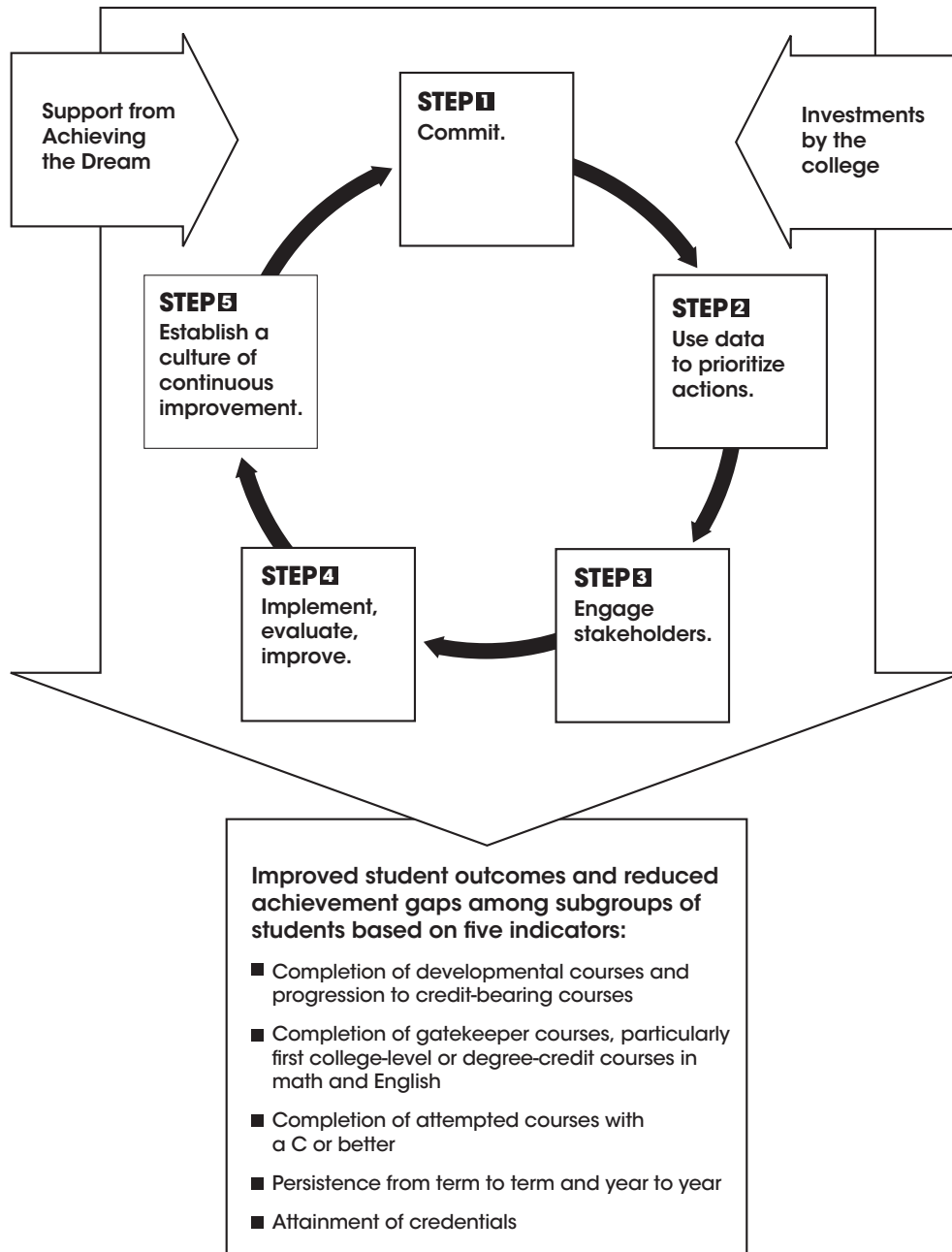
The *Turning the Tide* report found that most Round 1 colleges made important strides in building a culture of evidence — progress that most colleges attributed to Achieving the Dream as well as to such forces as accreditation processes and other grants.⁶ While colleges varied in their implementation 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. Con-

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.

sequently, institution-wide trends may not reflect the impact of these reforms on the smaller 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.

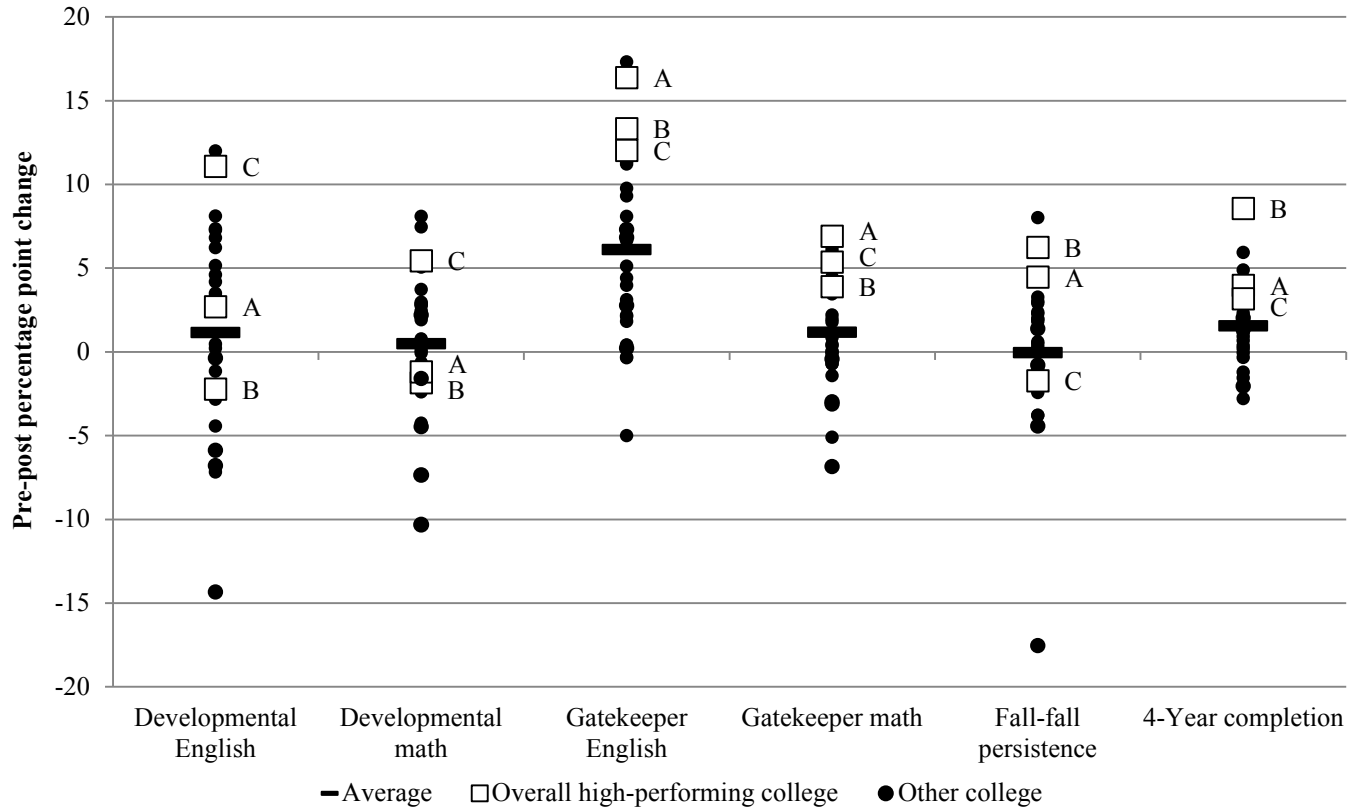
Figure ES.2 shows the distribution of all of the colleges' gains or declines on each of six outcomes. These were (1) completion of developmental English within two years, (2) completion of developmental math within two years, (3) completion of gatekeeper English within two years, (4) completion of gatekeeper 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



ES-9

(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.

Chapter 1

Introduction

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 college. Community colleges serve large proportions of nontraditional, low-income, and minority students,¹ yet for most of these students 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, shortly after its founding in 2000, Lumina Foundation identified community colleges as a “high-need area” that was ripe for systemic reform and direct assistance.³ In 2004, Lumina Foundation and a group of partner organizations launched Achieving the Dream, a bold, multiyear national initiative aimed at improving student outcomes in community colleges, particularly for low-income students and students of color. Seven partner organizations were selected to help Lumina design and operate the initiative. They were 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.⁴

From the outset, Lumina Foundation and the partners had considerable ambitions for Achieving the Dream. The initiative set out to change the culture and practices inside community colleges, as well as external factors that shape institutional behavior, such as public policy, research, and public engagement. Colleges that participated in Achieving the Dream received multiyear grants and technical assistance to undertake institutional reform directed toward building a “culture of evidence” — one in which colleges routinely use evidence to help their students succeed academically. This involved leveraging leadership commitment, using data and research, and enlisting stakeholders to develop interventions for students to bring effective programs to scale and to create an infrastructure for continuous improvement.

MDRC and CCRC studied the work of the first 26 colleges (called the “Round 1” colleges) that participated in Achieving the Dream during the five-year grant period. These colleges made substantial progress toward realizing this vision. In 2011, MDRC and CCRC reported on the implementation of the initiative and on institution-wide trends in student outcomes at these 26 colleges from 2004 through 2009. That report, *Turning the Tide: Five Years of Achieving the Dream in Community Colleges*,⁵ found that (1) most colleges made important strides in

¹Provasnik and Planty (2008).

²Radford, Berkner, Wheelless, and Shepherd (2010).

³Lumina Foundation (2002).

⁴For information on their responsibilities in Achieving the Dream, see Rutschow et al. (2011).

⁵Rutschow et al. (2011).

building a stronger culture of evidence, (2) colleges instituted a wide range of strategies to improve student achievement, though a majority of them remained small in scale, and (3) with a few exceptions, institution-wide trends in student outcomes remained relatively unchanged. The Round 1 colleges made impressive progress in carrying out the daunting task of transforming complex organizations amidst resource and other constraints. The colleges' experiences highlighted a critical next step in realizing the initiative's ambition: leveraging the institutional and cultural changes facilitated by Achieving the Dream to meaningfully alter the experience of large numbers of students. Supporting colleges in their quest to identify, to implement, and to bring to scale effective practices remains a key challenge for policymakers, funders, and researchers committed to improving outcomes for community college students.

This report, the final publication from MDRC and CCRC on Achieving the Dream, builds on *Turning the Tide*. First, it extends the analyses of institution-wide outcomes to students who were entering Round 1 institutions during the latter period of the five-year implementation grants, when colleges were expected to have more fully implemented many of the objectives of Achieving the Dream. Second, the report explores variation in student outcome trends at these colleges and reanalyzes the implementation data in order to identify lessons that could 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 group of colleges to participate, rather than an assessment of the initiative's current activities and programs. The report adds two more years of data to capture outcomes for the cohort that entered college in 2009 and four-year outcomes for the cohort that began college in 2007. As with *Turning the Tide*, the student outcome analysis describes college-wide trends. Qualitative implementation data that were analyzed in *Turning the Tide* are reanalyzed in this report; no new implementation data were collected.

A thorough, detailed analysis of the colleges' implementation of Achieving the Dream is provided in the *Turning the Tide* report.⁶ A list of publications that examine other aspects of Achieving the Dream — including those that feature case studies of participating colleges and results from random assignment evaluations of Achieving the Dream strategies — is included at the end of this report.

The remainder of this chapter describes the context in which Achieving the Dream was launched, the Achieving the Dream model, the Round 1 colleges, the evaluation charge and previous findings, and the contents of this report.

⁶*Turning the Tide* is available through MDRC's Web site, www.mdrc.org.

Community Colleges and the Achieving the Dream Model

Traditionally focused on increasing access to postsecondary education, particularly for low-income students, community colleges began turning more attention to improving the academic success of their students in the early 2000s.⁷ Most of these institutions, however, had neither the capacity nor the incentives to gather information about the performance of students over time and the possible barriers to their success.

At the time Achieving the Dream was launched, most community colleges across the country gathered data on students through enrollment forms, placement tests, and academic transcripts. Because these colleges typically derive their funding based on enrollment numbers, they were adept at compiling information on the number and characteristics of students attending the college overall and of students in specific academic programs. Community colleges also document the number of certificates and degrees conferred each year.⁸ It was much less common, however, for colleges to track students over time to see whether they were staying enrolled and making steady progress toward attaining a degree. In addition, community colleges rarely performed more detailed analyses to determine whether some groups of students experienced more difficulty than others in completing courses or in attaining degrees.⁹

In this context, the vision of Lumina and of the Achieving the Dream founding partners represented a significant, and important, challenge. First, participating colleges were asked to use data in a different way — as a tool to determine whether students were staying in school and meeting other critical benchmarks. The initiative also asked colleges to break down data in order to investigate whether there were “achievement gaps” among some segments of the population, such as students of color and low-income students. Beyond this, Achieving the Dream aimed to foster fundamental changes in the culture and operations of community colleges, with the ultimate aim of increasing the academic success of these population segments. Participating colleges were tasked with trying to improve five key outcome measures:

- Completion of developmental courses and progress to credit-bearing courses
- Completion of gatekeeper (introductory college) courses in English and math
- Completion of attempted courses with a grade of “C” or better
- Persistence from semester to semester and from year to year
- Attainment of a college credential

⁷Rutschow et al. (2011).

⁸Brock et al. (2007).

⁹Morest and Jenkins (2007).

To work toward this goal, Lumina and the founding partners sought to bring about a process of institutional change by providing multiyear grants and technical assistance through Achieving the Dream, combined with colleges' own investments. This process centered on building a "culture of evidence": the partners theorized that creating systemic institutional change would ultimately lead to institution-wide improvements in the five outcome measures. In particular, Achieving the Dream was envisioned as a means to engage colleges in systematic, data-driven decision making. This was to be accomplished by enlisting broad groups of faculty, staff, and others to identify needs, to implement interventions, and to continuously improve practices based on evaluation results. This approach, in turn, would give colleges a better idea of the performance levels of students and of how the reforms enacted might be affecting students. This information would help provide increasing numbers of students with more effective programs and services over time, ultimately leading to improvement in the five key outcomes listed above. The initiative outlined five steps to guide participating institutions in this process of change, as shown in Figure 1.1:

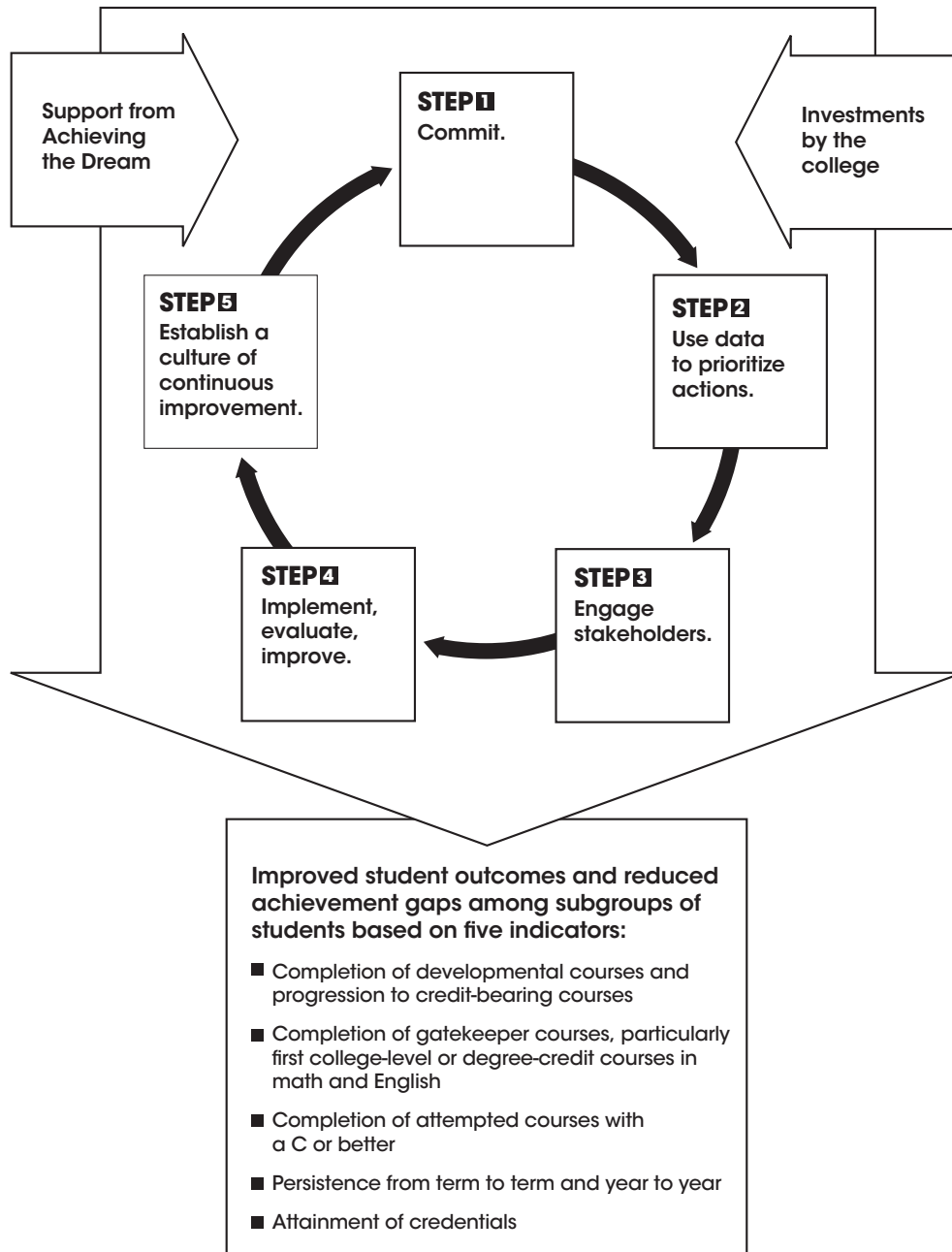
- First, **leaders commit** to making policy changes and to allocating resources to support efforts aimed at increasing student success.
- Second, colleges **use data** to ascertain how students are performing, to identify groups that may need extra support, and to prioritize actions.
- Third, colleges **engage faculty, staff, and other stakeholders** in the use of data to develop intervention tools to address problems that they identify as priorities.
- Fourth, colleges **implement and evaluate strategies** and use results to make decisions about whether to expand or refine the strategies.
- Finally, colleges **build an infrastructure to support continuous, systemic improvement** by institutionalizing effective policies and practices. This is based on the premise that 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 period and, considering the overall operating budget that was available, with relatively limited additional funds. The five steps outlined above build on and reinforce one another. Theoretically, 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 that had been found to be successful, colleges would repeat the initial steps of the process to identify and to address new problem areas. Achieving the Dream also emphasized this process as a means to overcome

Achieving the Dream: Community Colleges Count

Figure 3.3

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.

achievement gaps, particularly among students of color and low-income students. The initiative encouraged colleges to analyze the performance of these students and to develop interventions aimed at increasing their success.

Lumina Foundation and the partner organizations also developed a plan to coordinate efforts to target policymakers, researchers, individuals, and national organizations that represent, support, and study community colleges. In the area of public policy, the plan called for encouraging state lawmakers and higher education officials to adopt policies that could help community colleges to serve their students more effectively, and to build consensus on state reporting requirements and measures of student success. In regard to research, the plan called for the investigation of factors that contribute to or that impede the success of community college students. Also explored were factors that enhance the effectiveness of programs designed to boost achievement. On an individual level, the plan aimed to increase awareness of the work community colleges do, and to engage people in supporting the mission of Lumina Foundation and of the partner organizations. Finally, among national organizations, the goal of the plan was to promote regular meetings, information sharing, and collaboration.

Achieving the Dream Round 1 Colleges

From the beginning, Lumina Foundation and its partners envisioned Achieving the Dream as a national initiative that would involve many states and institutions. Rather than spread resources too thinly, however, Lumina and the partners agreed to concentrate on particular regions of the country and to expand gradually. They also believed that it would be advantageous to create a “critical mass” of institutions within certain states that could work together on state budget issues and other legislative priorities. Florida, New Mexico, North Carolina, Texas, and Virginia were chosen for the first round of Achieving the Dream efforts, largely because they were perceived as having favorable climates for policy change, including stable funding and high-level support for community colleges. Particular emphasis was placed on the promotion of an equity-based agenda and the inclusion of institutions with high concentrations of low-income students, of students of color, and of nontraditional students.

Twenty-six colleges in these states — known as the “Round 1” colleges — were selected to participate in the initiative beginning in 2004.¹⁰ Lumina was willing to invest in a diverse group of colleges to learn how enduring reform could be successfully accomplished, and the Round 1 colleges were ready, at varying levels, to take on reform work. *Turning the Tide* re-

¹⁰Community colleges in these states that served large proportions of students of color and low-income students were invited to apply, and 27 colleges were selected based on their proposals. One college withdrew after the first year, leaving 26 colleges in Round 1. Some multicampus districts, such as Alamo Community College District, are counted as one college. For more information about the selected colleges, see Brock et al. (2007) and Rutschow et al. (2011).

ported on the implementation and student outcome trends at the Round 1 colleges and districts listed in Table 1.1, and this report also focuses on those colleges.

The Round 1 colleges are diverse in size, location, and student characteristics. They range from Houston Community College, with a full-time equivalent (FTE) enrollment of over 38,000 students in 2009-2010, to Martin Community College, with an FTE enrollment of under 1,000 students. The 26 colleges are located in both large and midsized cities, as well as in suburbs and small towns. White students make up a majority, or plurality, of students at most of the institutions, but nearly all of the colleges enroll substantial numbers of African-American, Hispanic, and Native American students.¹¹

Achieving the Dream provided financial support and technical assistance to support Round 1 colleges. The schools received an initial year-long planning grant of \$50,000 each, followed by annual grants of \$100,000 for four years.¹² Additionally, they received support from two outside consultants: a coach, who helped them to set priorities, to build consensus, and to implement strategies for improvement, and a data facilitator, who helped with data collection, analysis, and interpretation. During both the planning year and the first year, these consultants visited their assigned colleges four times, for a total of about 12 days. During their final year, the consultants made one three-day visit. Achieving the Dream also sponsored a kick-off conference and annual conferences in which teams from participating colleges convened to share ideas and lessons.

In analyzing the work and progress of the Round 1 colleges, it is important to note that Round 1 schools joined Achieving the Dream as it was still evolving. Since its inception in 2004, the initiative has expanded, modified, and codified many of its practices and supports. Round 1 colleges received less intensive versions of these conventions during the early phases of the implementation. As such, their progress should be seen as a glimpse into the initiative's influence during its early development, when its practices and supports were still being solidified.

Evaluation Charge

MDRC and CCRC were charged with studying the implementation of Achieving the Dream, as well as institution-wide trends in student outcomes at the 26 Round 1 colleges during the five-year grant period.

¹¹For more detail on the characteristics of individual colleges when they entered Achieving the Dream, see Brock et al. (2007).

¹²Colleges joining Achieving the Dream from 2005 to 2010 sometimes received smaller amounts of money over a shorter period, depending on the funders that supported them. The majority received the same amount as did Round 1 colleges. As of 2010, to support the sustainability of Achieving the Dream as an independent nonprofit entity, colleges were required to pay to participate, though some institutions did find sponsors. For more information, see Rutschow et al. (2011).

Achieving the Dream: Community Colleges Count

Table 1.1

Round 1 Colleges, Academic Years 2004-2005 and 2009-2010

State/College	Location	2004-2005 Enrollment ^a	2009-2010 Enrollment ^a
<u>Florida</u>			
Broward College	Ft. Lauderdale	22,540	27,862
Hillsborough Community College	Tampa	16,157	19,397
Tallahassee Community College	Tallahassee	9,819	11,550
Valencia Community College	Orlando	20,727	29,872
<u>New Mexico</u>			
Central New Mexico Community College	Albuquerque	14,955	19,200
New Mexico State University-Doña Ana	Las Cruces	3,656	5,412
Santa Fe Community College	Santa Fe	2,307	1,948
Southwestern Indian Polytechnic Institute	Albuquerque	699	2,771
University of New Mexico-Gallup Campus	Gallup	1,814	1,948
<u>North Carolina</u>			
Durham Technical Community College	Durham	4,028	4,044
Guilford Technical Community College	Jamestown	7,513	12,393
Martin Community College	Williamston	717	597
Wayne Community College	Goldsboro	2,911	3,315
<u>Texas</u>			
Alamo Community College District Central Office ^b			
Northwest Vista College	San Antonio	3,448	15,828
Palo Alto College	San Antonio	3,416	9,274
San Antonio College	San Antonio	9,027	27,935
St. Philips College	San Antonio	5,521	12,776
Brookhaven College	Farmers Branch	6,629	7,431
Coastal Bend College	Beeville	2,893	2,820
El Paso Community College	El Paso	17,084	18,848
Galveston College	Galveston	1,583	1,440
Houston Community College System	Houston	26,341	38,035
South Texas College	McAllen	11,478	17,924
Southwest Texas Junior College	Uvalde	3,488	3,860
<u>Virginia</u>			
Danville Community College	Danville	2,470	2,854
Mountain Empire Community College	Big Stone Gap	1,846	2,136
Patrick Henry Community College	Martinsville	2,242	2,629
Paul D. Camp Community College	Franklin	821	982
Tidewater Community College	Norfolk	15,078	21,507

SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS).

NOTES: ^aFull-time equivalent 12-month enrollment numbers are shown.

^bFour colleges in the Alamo Community College District are participating in Achieving the Dream. The district is the recipient of the Achieving the Dream grant.

With respect to the student outcome measures, Achieving the Dream partners had high hopes of “moving the needle” at participating colleges. Some of the partners thought the colleges’ cultural and institutional changes would affect student outcomes in a relatively short time frame; others believed it was a long-term process. As the initiative represented a fundamental shift in practices for many colleges, some of the partners believed that full implementation could take longer than the five years of grant funding, carrying implications for the expected time frame of improvement in student outcomes. Moreover, even if the Achieving the Dream model were effective in improving short-term outcomes, external factors unrelated to the initiative might impede measurable improvements. Some partners invoked the metaphor of turning a ship to describe the work of the initiative: while they firmly believed it would set community colleges on a better course, they recognized that changes would likely occur gradually and might not be apparent for several years.

Overall, Achieving the Dream was envisioned as a large-scale process designed to achieve systemic, institution-wide change. In line with this vision, MDRC and CCRC were asked to analyze student outcome trends at the institutional level. That is, for each cohort, they were to describe college-wide outcomes, as well as developmental course completions for students who placed into developmental education. Student outcome trends in particular subgroups, such as those defined by race, ethnicity, and receipt of a federal Pell grant (a proxy for low-income status), were also identified for analysis. This approach reflects the ambition and scope of the initiative: the Achieving the Dream outcomes analysis was designed to take a broad view of institutional change and to examine the progress of entire cohorts of students attending college.

The Achieving the Dream model involved implementing and ultimately bringing to scale interventions that would directly affect students. It also required laying the groundwork for a culture of student success and continuous improvement, for example, by involving higher-level administrators and spurring reforms in institutional research departments. While the initiative emphasized the importance of disaggregating data, the partners believed that the process as a whole would lead to stronger interventions that together would positively affect college-wide student outcomes. They also believed that the cultural and institutional changes themselves would engender changes in student outcomes. Consequently, the partners 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. As a result, many students at Round 1 institutions were unlikely to experience the intervention reforms undertaken during this time frame. Consequently, institution-wide trends may not reflect the impact of these reforms on the smaller group of students who did experience the reforms. For this report and for *Turning the Tide*, however, the partners’ early decisions about using in-

stitution-wide student outcome measures meant that additional data on individual students were not collected, making it impossible to identify and analyze outcomes for subgroups such as students who participated in Achieving the Dream interventions.

Previous Findings on Achieving the Dream

Released in early 2011, *Turning the Tide* examined the efforts of Round 1 colleges to build a culture of evidence during the five-year grant period (2004-2009), as well as trends in student outcomes during that time across the 26 colleges. Overall, the report found that most Round 1 colleges made important strides in building a culture of evidence — that is, they had strengthened the components of the initiative’s institutional improvement model. Most colleges attributed this progress to Achieving the Dream as well as to other forces, such as accreditation processes and other grants.¹³ While colleges varied in their implementation of the 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.

- 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 their five-year participation, 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, of faculty, and of 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 helped students to become more successful.
- Ten colleges (38 percent) had instituted many aspects of the suggested improvement process of Achieving the Dream by the end of the five-year period, though not to the same degree as those described above.
- At the completion of the grant period, five colleges (19 percent) were still struggling to implement a number of the recommended practices by spring 2009. Weak institutional research departments hindered the ability of most of these schools to institute a broad data-driven culture.

¹³Findings summarized in this paragraph and the next three are from Rutschow et al. (2011).

Round 1 colleges also implemented a large number of strategies under the auspices of Achieving the Dream. Most of these involved the implementation of programs and services designed to improve students' success. Characteristics of the strategies are detailed below.

- While the strategies ranged widely, from low-intensity orientation activities to more intensive curricular reforms, a large majority were designed to increase academic and social support systems; only about one-fourth changed the content and delivery of classroom instruction itself.
- Nearly half of the strategies targeted developmental education students, and one-third focused on students in their first year of college.
- Nearly all of the colleges succeeded in expanding at least one strategy to reach at least 25 percent of its intended target population. However, despite the institutions' notable efforts to scale up their programs and services, the majority of strategies reached less than 10 percent of the intended target populations. This was particularly true when the strategies involved the kind of intensive contact that might be expected to influence students' performance to a meaningful extent. The benefits of promising interventions, therefore, were frequently extended to only a fraction of students.

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 (1) the need for an increased focus on faculty and staff engagement, particularly among adjunct or part-time faculty; (2) further definition of efforts to reduce achievement gaps by race, by ethnicity, and by income level; and (3) a more systematic effort to help colleges expand and institutionalize their efforts to improve student success. In particular, a key task remained at the end of the five-year period: bringing these system-level changes to the student level in order to change the experience of large numbers of students in a significant way. As noted above, relatively small proportions of students experienced the strategies that colleges implemented as part of Achieving the Dream.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, then, average college-wide trends in student outcomes across Round 1 colleges remained relatively unchanged from pre-initiative to post-initiative cohorts, with a few exceptions. Though there were modest improvements over time in the rates for completion of gatekeeper English and in overall course completion, other outcomes remained substantially the same in the years immediately before and after Achieving the Dream began. As with implementation, there was considerable variation in student outcome trends across Round 1 colleges; some schools improved on certain outcomes over the five years and some declined. As mentioned, since these student outcome analyses relied on institution-wide, descriptive trends over time, they cannot address the impact of Achieving the Dream on participating col-

leges, or any of the outcome trends for those students specifically exposed to any interventions implemented as part of Achieving the Dream.

MDRC and CCRC also studied the effects of Achieving the Dream on the six colleges in Washington State that joined the initiative in 2006 as part of the third round of colleges. As with Round 1 colleges, most of the institutions in Washington laid the groundwork for systemic reforms. However, many strategies for improving student success continued to reach relatively small proportions of students. Likewise, the analysis of trends in student outcomes did not reveal clear patterns of improvement for the Washington State colleges since they joined Achieving the Dream.¹⁴

Report Organization

The implementation data in *Turning the Tide* cover the full five-year grant period (2004-2009). However, as a result of the timing of data reporting, processing, and analysis, the student outcome data reported therein did not capture the outcomes of students who entered college toward the end of the grant period. To include outcomes for these students — and thus align the time frame of the outcome data with the implementation data — this report adds two more years of student outcomes data to the analysis of Round 1 colleges, examining the period through 2011. This more extended duration allows for the analysis of two-year outcomes that include the cohort entering in 2009, when changes in Achieving the Dream were likely to be more established and students entering college were thus most likely to experience such changes.¹⁵ However, since the analysis reported in *Turning the Tide* found that, as of 2009, large proportions of students were not yet directly affected by the initiative, notable changes may not be apparent even with an additional two years of follow-up data.

Nevertheless, Achieving the Dream has emphasized the importance of collecting and analyzing student outcomes data. This report was conceived to analyze these outcomes using follow-up data beyond the data analyzed in *Turning the Tide*. Doing so provides an important perspective on the success rates for community college students across diverse institutions. The additional data permit the tracking of two-year outcomes for five successive cohorts of students, and four-year outcomes for three successive cohorts, all of whom entered college after the Round 1 institutions began implementing Achieving the Dream.

Chapter 2 discusses the analyses of these data, in addition to student outcome data previously collected for the three cohorts of students who entered college before the initiative. It

¹⁴Jenkins, Wachen, Kerrigan, and Mayer (2012).

¹⁵The additional data also enable the analysis of four-year outcomes through the cohort beginning college in 2007. *Turning the Tide* analyzed two-year outcomes, through the cohort that started in 2007, and did not examine four-year outcomes.

draws on student records data that the colleges submitted to the Achieving the Dream database,¹⁶ in order to track student performance over time on the five key outcome measures. The analyses in this chapter and throughout the report are not causal — they do not evaluate the impact of Achieving the Dream — but rather describe the colleges’ performance over time with respect to these key outcome measures.

Chapter 2 also explores the variation in student outcome trends first documented in *Turning the Tide*. It leverages the additional two years of student outcome data to identify colleges that consistently improved more than others in order to examine their experiences more fully. As with *Turning the Tide*, the descriptive research design cannot address the effects of Achieving the Dream, nor can the institution-wide trends provide insight into outcome trends for students who received Achieving the Dream intervention services.

The descriptive analysis in Chapter 3 is based on implementation research conducted on Round 1 colleges during the five-year grant period. This chapter examines those implementation themes and patterns at the colleges identified in Chapter 2 that showed the greatest consistent improvements in student outcomes across multiple indicators. While this evaluation cannot explain why some colleges saw greater improvements than others, or whether the improvements were attributable to the institutions’ involvement in Achieving the Dream, Chapter 3 recounts some interesting stories of implementation successes, challenges, and lessons learned from these colleges. (More detail on the implementation of the initiative at Round 1 colleges can be found in *Turning the Tide*.)¹⁷

Chapter 4 summarizes and synthesizes the findings and offers recommendations and considerations regarding more systematic integration of program development and research in community colleges.

This Report in the Context of Achieving the Dream

The experiences of the Round 1 colleges described in the following chapters, and in *Turning the Tide*, represent an important piece of a broader story. The meaning and import of Achieving the Dream extend beyond these experiences, making it useful to consider this report in the context of the full initiative.

While this evaluation is limited to efforts undertaken inside community colleges, Achieving the Dream sought to influence a number of spheres, with implications for a range of areas, from those concerned with public policy to those affecting the general public. Achieving the Dream has grown in the decade since its founding. In 2010, it made the transition from be-

¹⁶JBL Associates, a higher-education consulting firm under contract with CCRC, managed the database.

¹⁷Rutschow et al. (2011).

ing managed by a group of partner organizations to achieving status as an independent nonprofit organization: Achieving the Dream, Inc. The initiative has expanded to nearly 200 other schools, though this report cannot address the experiences of these other colleges. Achieving the Dream has expanded, modified, and codified many of its practices and supports over the years. Consequently, students in colleges that joined in later rounds may have had different experiences and may have benefited from lessons learned from the involvement of those who took part in the early rounds of the initiative.

Although the implementation data for this report cover only the five-year grant period of Achieving the Dream, for the most part the process set in motion by the initiative did not end with the grant. In 2009, most Round 1 colleges reported that the progress they made in building a culture of evidence and in developing intervention strategies would continue. Together, the capacity they built, the culture they fostered, and the strategies they launched as part of Achieving the Dream may serve as an important foundation for efforts to improve student outcomes in the years to come. Some colleges are building on the work they accomplished in the Achieving the Dream project by participating in other large-scale initiatives. Fifteen colleges that took part in the early stages of Achieving the Dream received funding from one such program, the Developmental Education Initiative, to develop and to scale up developmental education reforms. Another effort, Completion by Design, allows participating colleges to design and to implement comprehensive reforms to support students through completion of community college.¹⁸

The experiences of the Round 1 colleges during the five-year grant period of Achieving the Dream provide valuable lessons for the field. As with the Achieving the Dream model itself, developing and supporting large-scale institutional reforms will likely prove to be an iterative process that relies on a continuous and honest assessment of progress and challenges. This report is a contribution to that effort. It reflects on lessons learned from the first colleges to participate in the initiative and offers recommendations to funders, practitioners, researchers, policy-makers, and other stakeholders in an effort to continue working toward improvement.

¹⁸See Quint, Jaggars, Byndloss, and Magazinnik (2013); www.completionbydesign.org.

Chapter 2

Student Outcomes

This chapter analyzes trends in student outcome measures. It compares the outcomes for three cohorts of students who entered college before the implementation of Achieving the Dream, from fall 2002 through fall 2004, to the outcomes for five cohorts who began college after implementation began, from fall 2005 through fall 2009. The analyses examine six outcomes identified by Achieving the Dream: (1) completion of developmental English courses within two years, (2) completion of gatekeeper (introductory college) English courses within two years, (3) completion of developmental math courses within two years, (4) completion of gatekeeper (introductory college) math courses within two years, (5) persistence from semester to semester, and (6) attainment of college credentials within four years.

The analyses in this chapter are not causal: they do not evaluate the impact of Achieving the Dream. However, the initiative has emphasized the importance of collecting and analyzing data on student outcomes. This report was conceived to analyze student outcomes using two years of additional follow-up data subsequent to the publication of *Turning the Tide*,¹ an earlier report on Achieving the Dream, and to use additional data to examine trends in four-year graduation rates. Doing so provides an important perspective on success rates for community college students across diverse institutions. The analyses in this chapter describe the colleges' performance with respect to the six key student outcome measures identified above. They illustrate where student outcome measures have improved and where they have not.

The key findings are:

- **The average student outcome trends for Round 1 colleges remained largely unchanged over time, with one exception.** As in *Turning the Tide*, the average student outcome trends for gatekeeper English showed continued gains. Outcome trends in developmental English and math, in gatekeeper math, in persistence, and in four-year completion rates showed little or no improvement. Because these descriptive analyses cannot account for the many changes in the external environment that occurred during this period, these findings cannot be interpreted as being caused by Achieving the Dream.
- **The colleges exhibited a wide range of gains and declines for each student outcome measure.** However, changes in student outcomes were not

¹Rutschow et al. (2011).

found to be systematically related to practices at the colleges or to other institutional factors. Over the evaluation period, some colleges made gains on individual indicators and others declined. Generally, though, colleges that made the greatest gains on one indicator did not do so on other indicators.

- **Three colleges stood out for their gains on multiple student outcomes.** These institutions consistently ranked among the top five. As measured by subtracting the average for the outcome for cohorts who entered college in the pre-initiative period (2002-2004) from the average for cohorts who began college after the start of implementation (2005-2009), these schools showed the greatest gains on at least three student outcome measures.

Methodology

This chapter uses student data from the Achieving the Dream database,² which includes outcomes for all degree- or certificate-seeking students who entered the institutions for the first time each fall. The data include student-level characteristics but do not identify students' participation in different strategies implemented as part of Achieving the Dream. Consequently, this report examines college-wide outcomes and developmental course completions for students who placed into developmental education, as well as outcomes for particular subgroups, such as those defined by receipt of a federal Pell grant (a proxy for low-income status), by race, and by ethnicity.

The analyses in this chapter are descriptive. This chapter does not seek to determine whether the initiative as a whole had an effect on student performance, nor whether specific Achieving the Dream strategies led to changes in student outcomes. Such conclusions require rigorous causal research designs, such as randomized controlled trials or designs that use a valid comparison group, neither of which are well-suited to the evaluation of Achieving the Dream.³ Moreover, as documented in *Turning the Tide*, most Achieving the Dream strategies did not reach large proportions of students by the time the last cohort in this analysis entered college. Consequently, even if the strategies that colleges implemented did affect smaller proportions of students, the potential effects on those students' outcomes would probably not be apparent in the college-wide trends described in this report. Since the student-level data in the Achieving the Dream database do not identify which students were exposed to Achieving the Dream strategies, the analyses here cannot address trends for these students only. Reform efforts, moreover, were typically directed toward smaller, targeted populations, whereas the measures reported

²JBL Associates, a higher-education consulting firm under contract with the Community College Research Center, managed the database.

³For findings from randomized controlled trials of strategies fostered through Achieving the Dream, see Visher, Butcher, and Cerna (2010); Weiss, Visher, and Wathington (2010); Weissman et al. (2011); Rutschow, Cullinan, and Welbeck (2012).

here are restricted to institution- and initiative-wide trends, in addition to some subgroup trends. Any effects that may have been experienced by the targeted populations could be difficult to detect in institutional averages.

Several other important changes also occurred during this period that might have affected students and exerted pressure on community colleges, also contributing to difficulties in isolating the effects of Achieving the Dream. Notably, the Great Recession started toward the end of 2007, and during the course of the study the colleges witnessed 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. The rising enrollments were accompanied by shifting demographics, with the proportion of minority students gradually increasing over time. In addition, state funding for higher education was also cut during this period, driving lower per-student revenue.⁴ These and other changes, such as financial pressures, may have influenced the colleges in a way that affected student outcomes.

Finally, nine of the 26 Round 1 colleges did not provide data for the full study. Therefore, the data provided in this report do not fully reflect student outcomes for all Round 1 colleges for all cohorts. As noted below, the colleges that did not submit all of the data tended to have lower student outcome levels in the earlier cohorts for which they did submit data.

Trends in Student Outcomes

The analyses in this section of the report show average institutional outcome trends for six major indicators of student success.

Developmental and Gatekeeper Math Completion

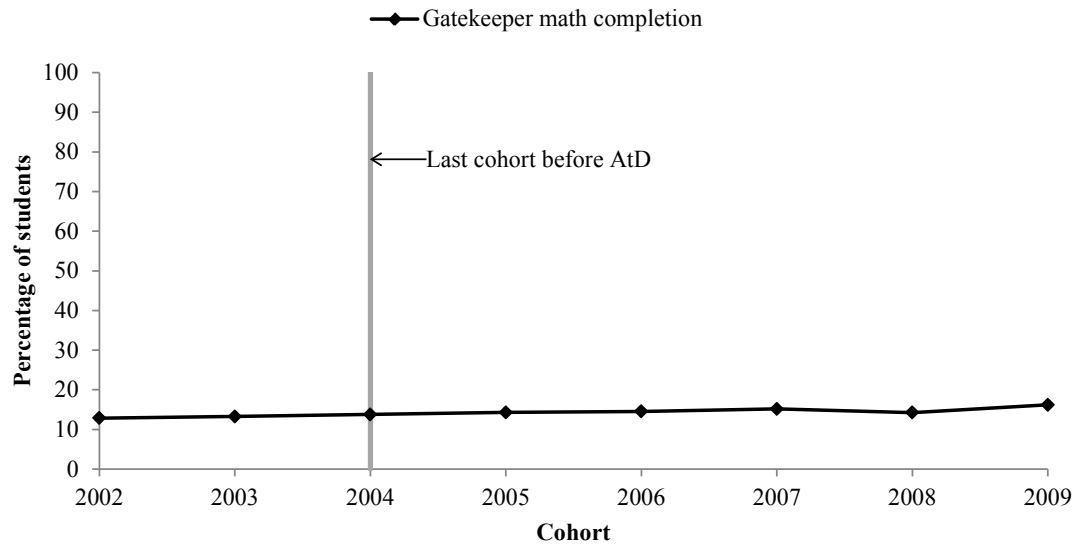
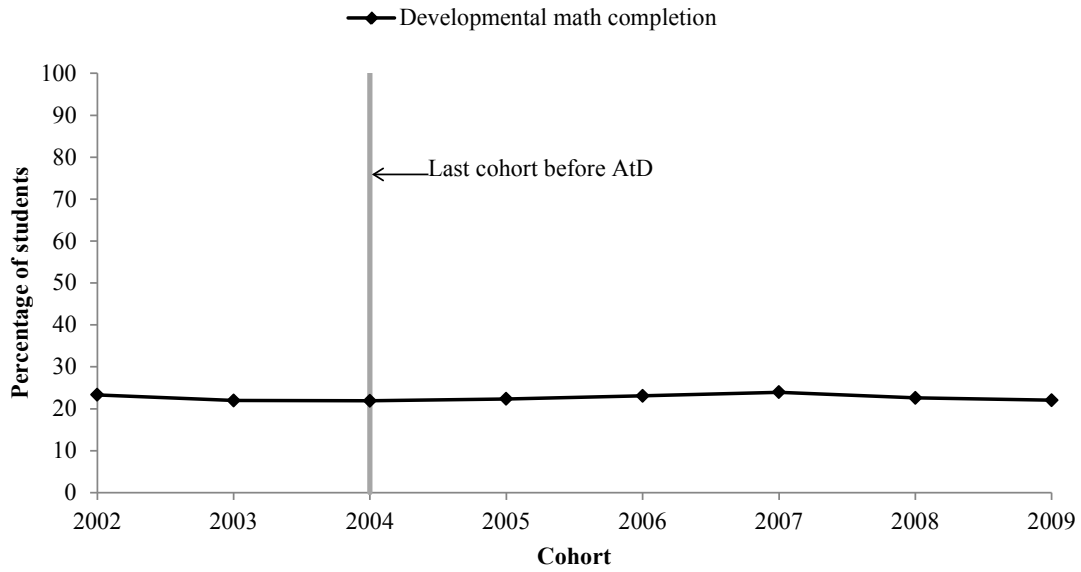
Figure 2.1 shows the trends in student completion of key math courses. The top panel shows the average two-year completion rate for the developmental sequence in math for students referred to developmental math. The vertical lines in Figure 2.1 and in the two subsequent figures represent the 2004 cohort — the last cohort to enroll before the colleges began implementation of Achieving the Dream. For the three cohorts that entered college before implementation of Achieving the Dream — the 2002 through 2004 cohorts — the developmental math completion rate stays very close to 23 percent. For the cohorts that entered college after implementation of Achieving the Dream had begun — the 2005 through 2009 cohorts — the

⁴Kirshstein and Hurlburt (2012).

Achieving the Dream: Community Colleges Count

Figure 2.1

Trends in Developmental Math Among Students Referred to Any Developmental Math Course and Gatekeeper Math Completions Among All Students, 2002-2009: Two-Year Outcomes for Achieving the Dream Round 1 Colleges



(continued)

Figure 2.1 (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 fall 2002 through fall 2009 cohorts at Achieving the Dream Round 1 colleges. The vertical line shows the last cohort to enroll before the implementation of Achieving the Dream. For the developmental math and gatekeeper math completion 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.

completion rate also averages around 23 percent. It gradually rises for three cohorts immediately following the start of implementation before falling back to pre-initiative levels in the 2009 cohort, the last cohort for which two-year outcomes are available in these data.

The bottom panel of Figure 2.1 shows the completion rates for gatekeeper math for all students; this trend is also relatively stable. For the 2002 through 2004 cohorts that entered college before implementation, the completion rate for gatekeeper math stays close to 14 percent. Immediately following implementation, it remains relatively steady around 14 percent, up through the 2008 cohort. Although a slight increase in completions is shown for the 2009 cohort, several colleges did not report sufficient data to be included in the 2009 averages. The upward trend appears to be due primarily to the fact that colleges that did submit sufficient data tended to have higher completion rates in gatekeeper math in prior years.

Developmental and Gatekeeper English Completion

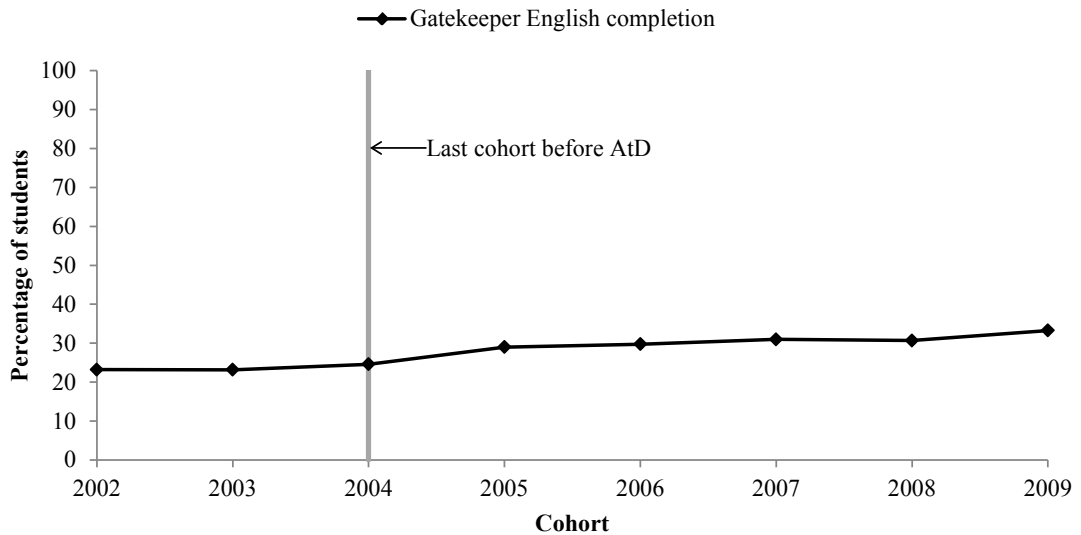
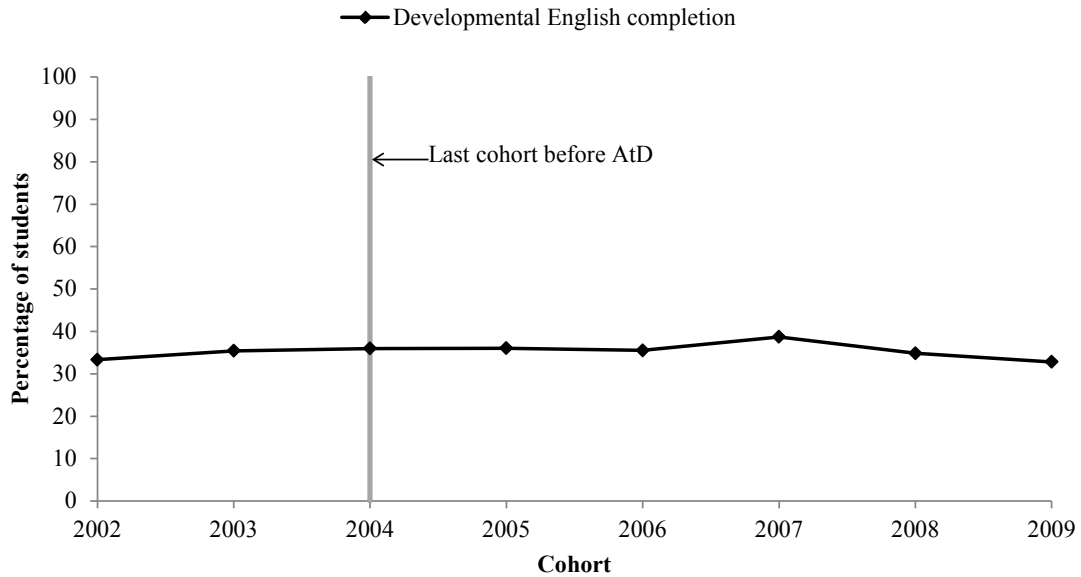
Figure 2.2 shows the trends in student completion of key English courses. The top panel shows the average two-year completion rate for the developmental education requirements in English for students who placed into developmental English. The completion rate here is less stable than that in developmental math. For cohorts that entered college before implementation of Achieving the Dream, the average is close to 36 percent. After implementation, the developmental English completion rate moves up and down more frequently, but also averages about 36 percent. Improvements are apparent for some cohorts, but they are offset by declines in other cohorts.

The bottom panel of Figure 2.2 shows the completion rates for gatekeeper English for all students. In the pre-initiative period, the completion rate for gatekeeper English shows a slight increase, rising to nearly 25 percent. Contrary to other outcomes that remained relatively flat, the trend in gatekeeper English shows steady increases after implementation began, as documented in *Turning the Tide*. By the end of the follow-up period, the average completion rate is over 30 percent. As with gatekeeper math, a slight increase in gatekeeper English completions is

Achieving the Dream: Community Colleges Count

Figure 2.2

Trends in Developmental English Among Students Referred to Any Developmental English Course and Gatekeeper English Completions Among All Students, 2002-2009: Two-Year Outcomes for Achieving the Dream Round 1 Colleges



(continued)

Figure 2.2 (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 fall 2002 through fall 2009 cohorts at Achieving the Dream Round 1 colleges. The vertical line shows the last cohort before the implementation of Achieving the Dream. For the developmental English and gatekeeper English completion 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.

shown for the 2009 cohort. However, several colleges did not report sufficient data to be included in the 2009 averages. Those colleges had lower outcomes in previous years, which appears to skew the average upward.

Fall-to-Fall Persistence and Four-Year Completion

Figure 2.3 shows the trends in fall-to-fall persistence and in four-year college completion rates for any credential. The top panel shows the average fall-to-fall persistence rate for students' first full year in college. This rate is also relatively stable, hovering around 47 percent for the cohorts that entered college before implementation. After implementation, the persistence rate shows more fluctuations, with slight improvements again offset by declines.

The bottom panel of Figure 2.3 shows the average rate of college completion in four years. The four-year completion rate averages around 14 percent for the pre-implementation cohorts, but rises slightly for the post-implementation cohorts. As with other outcomes, the slight gain for the 2009 cohort appears to arise largely because several colleges with lower completion rates in earlier years did not submit sufficient data for inclusion, thereby skewing the average upward.

Subgroup Analyses

One of the goals of the Achieving the Dream initiative was to reduce achievement gaps by race, by ethnicity, and by income level. As in *Turning the Tide*, trends for several subgroups of students were analyzed to look for differences in improvement patterns over time. The subgroups were defined by receipt of a federal Pell grant (used as a proxy for low-income status), as well as race/ethnicity (black, Hispanic, and white). No notable differences in trends on the six main outcomes were found after incorporating the additional two cohorts of data collected since the release of *Turning the Tide*.

Achieving the Dream: Community Colleges Count

Figure 2.3

Trend in Fall-to-Fall Persistence Among All Students, 2002-2009, and Trend in Completion of Any Credential Among All Students, 2002-2007: Four-Year Outcomes for Achieving the Dream Round 1 Colleges

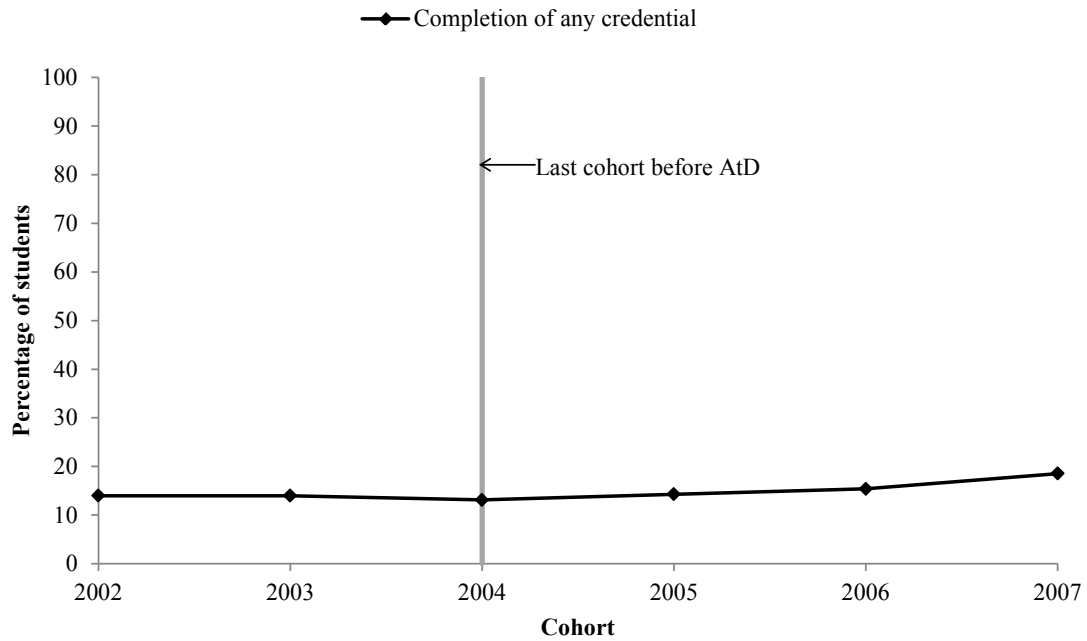
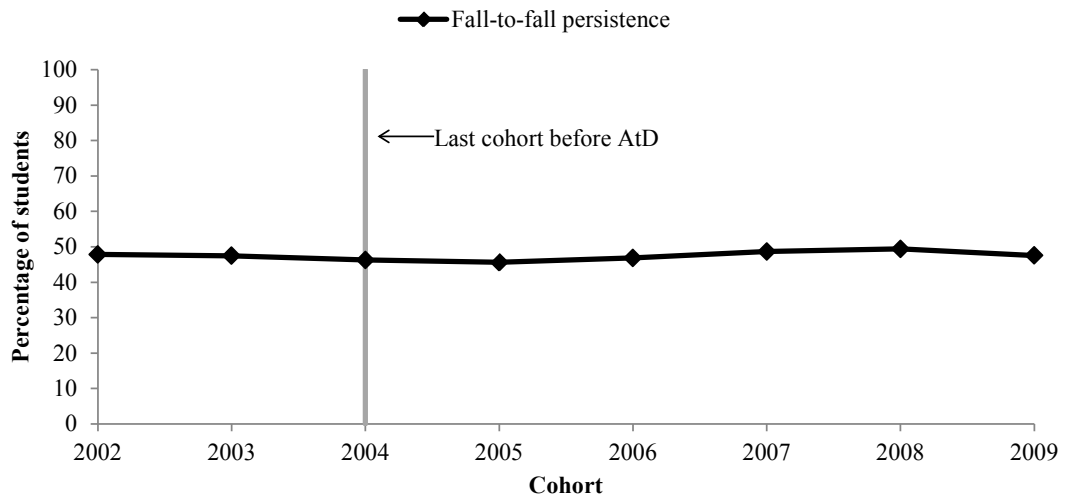


Figure 2.3 (continued)

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. The vertical line shows the last cohort before the implementation of Achieving the Dream. For the fall-to-fall persistence measure, 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 completion of any credential measure, 1 site was excluded from cohort 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.

Exploring Variation in the Outcome Trends

Although the trends analysis suggests that, on average, initiative-wide student outcomes remained largely unchanged over time, the analyses in *Turning the Tide* suggested variation across the colleges with respect to gains and declines on many indicators. This variation was still evident after adding the two additional years of student outcome data collected for this report. The variation was analyzed to examine whether theoretically important factors were associated with gains in student outcomes. Data from several sources — including notes from site visits to each of the colleges and a survey of faculty and administrators — were coded. The factors analyzed included colleges' leadership strength, alignment between institutional goals and reforms, institutional data and research capacity, and professional development training. Changes in student outcomes were not found to be systematically related to such factors.⁵

Cohort data for 2002 through 2009 were used to determine whether the trends at some colleges stood out for gains on multiple outcomes. For each of the six indicators analyzed above, colleges were ranked by comparing their average outcomes after the beginning of Achieving the Dream implementation with their averages in the pre-initiative period. Colleges with the greatest average percentage point gains after implementation were ranked highest, and colleges with the smallest gains (or greatest declines) were ranked lowest.

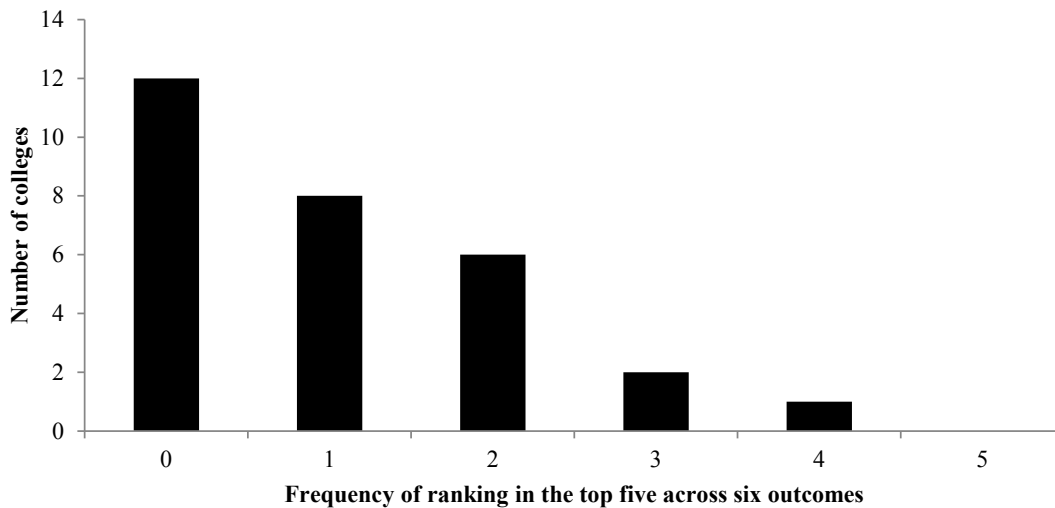
Figure 2.4 shows how often colleges ranked among the top five institutions with the greatest gains on each of the six outcomes. Three colleges figured prominently. One college (College A) ranked among the top five on four out of six outcomes. Two other colleges (College B and College C) ranked in the top five on three of six measures three times each. The majority of colleges ranked in the top five less frequently, either two times (six colleges), one time (eight colleges), or never (twelve colleges).

⁵More detail about these analyses is available in the Appendix.

Achieving the Dream: Community Colleges Count

Figure 2.4

**Frequencies of Colleges Ranking in Top Five
Across Six Pre-Post Percentage Point Change Outcomes**



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 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.

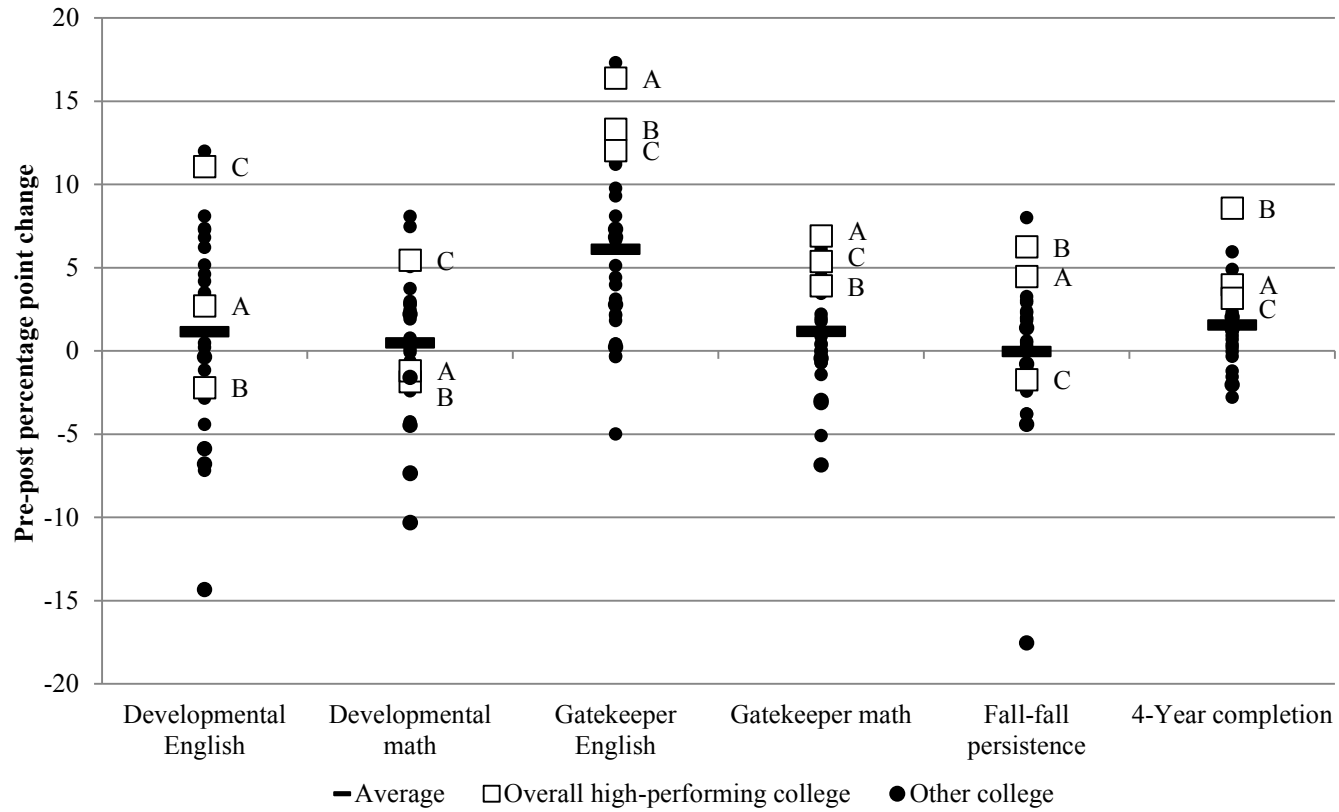
Figure 2.5 shows the distribution of all the colleges' gains or declines on each of the six outcomes and identifies where these three colleges (A, B, and C) ranked for each outcome. Each point in Figure 2.5 represents the average change for an individual college for each outcome. The figure shows that the gains of these three colleges are concentrated in the gatekeeper courses, in fall-to-fall persistence, and in four-year completion.

The first column in Figure 2.5 illustrates the distribution of average changes in developmental English completion across the colleges. The college with the greatest gains improved an average of about 12 percentage points after implementation of Achieving the Dream began compared with its average in the pre-initiative period. Conversely, the college with the largest decrease fell an average of almost 15 percentage points. Only one of the consistently improving colleges — College C — ranked among the top five. College A showed a small average improvement in percentage points in developmental English completion, while College B saw a general decrease on average on this outcome measure.

Achieving the Dream: Community Colleges Count

Figure 2.5

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



25

(continued)

Figure 2.5 (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 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.

The experiences of the colleges are similar for the distribution of changes in developmental math completion, as shown in the second column in Figure 2.5. Again, there is a wide range of colleges that improved and those that did not. Of the three colleges, only College C ranked among the top five, improving by about 5 percentage points. On average, both College A and College B declined slightly, by around 2 percentage points. For the other outcomes — gatekeeper English completion, gatekeeper math completion, fall-to-fall persistence, and four-year completion — the three colleges appear among the top colleges more frequently; only College C shows a decline on any of the remaining outcomes (for fall-to-fall persistence).

In gatekeeper English, all three colleges improved by over 10 percentage points, and two (A and B) ranked among the top colleges. Likewise, in gatekeeper math, all three colleges improved by between 3 and 7 percentage points, and two (A and C) ranked among the top five. With respect to fall-to-fall persistence, two of the colleges (A and B) improved by about 5 percentage points and ranked among the top five, while one decreased (C). On the outcome measure of four-year completion, all three of the colleges improved, while two (A and B) ranked among the top five.

Figure 2.5 illustrates the wide range of increases and decreases in student outcome measures and also shows how these three colleges stand out on multiple outcomes. While these colleges demonstrate that consistent improvement is possible, the overall trends in the previous section show that, on average, changes in student outcomes were more modest. In addition, as mentioned earlier, the improvements at these three colleges were not necessarily caused by — or related to — the Achieving the Dream initiative. The next chapter examines the stories at these three colleges in greater detail.

Summary

It is important to interpret the analyses in this chapter in the context of the colleges' implementation of Achieving the Dream. As noted earlier, few strategies were reaching large proportions of students by the time the last cohort entered college, making the absence of notable changes unsurprising. Although these analyses incorporate an additional two years of data on student outcomes, institutional changes at community colleges may have either been insufficient to change institutional trends or may take longer to ultimately reach a large proportion of students. Factors external to Achieving the Dream may also have played an important role in student outcomes. In any case, the trends analyzed here do show some areas of improvement but they also indicate that more work is needed: except for gatekeeper English, the trends in average student outcomes remained largely unchanged over time. Analysis of the performance of individual schools across multiple outcomes, however, shows that some colleges consistently improved more than others. The following chapter describes some of the implementation experiences of these colleges.

Chapter 3

Implementation Stories at Selected Colleges

One of the key goals of Achieving the Dream is to understand the process by which colleges implemented new programs and strategies. The initiative has dedicated significant resources to provide a better understanding of how colleges have developed and maintained efforts to improve their data and institutional research functions, to bring pilot programs to scale, and to facilitate deeper faculty and staff involvement in the efforts of community colleges to realize institutional goals.

While Achieving the Dream has made important strides over the past 10 years, the previous chapter shows that improving institution-wide indicators of student success remains a challenge. Most of the initiative's Round 1 colleges attempted to implement various new programs designed to address student needs. Yet they also faced obstacles in their attempts to gain wide-scale support and buy-in from faculty and staff to develop and sustain these programs amid limited resources and personnel. In addition, colleges provided newly implemented programs to smaller groups of students than they originally intended. Developing a coherent set of strategies for a targeted group of students also proved difficult when institutions had multiple priorities and sought to carry out numerous initiatives, many of which competed for limited resources.¹

This chapter considers how the three colleges identified at the end of Chapter 2 approached such challenges, and it also describes some of their implementation successes with specific reform efforts. Implementation data for the three colleges were first analyzed in an effort to discern common patterns that might be associated with their success. A clear set of patterns did not emerge. In fact, the three colleges look fairly distinct from one another in size, in execution of strategies, and in implementation of Achieving the Dream, as might be expected from the analyses described in Chapter 2 and in the Appendix. Those analyses codified the implementation data and looked for associations between a wide array of institution-level factors and student outcomes, but they did not find any. For these and other reasons that will be described, the improvements in the student outcomes in these institutions cannot be explained by the specific practices at the colleges analyzed in this report. Despite these challenges, the diversity of the colleges' experiences may present lessons for other community colleges undertaking reforms. The main findings from this investigation are:

¹Rutschow et al. (2011).

- **The colleges profiled represent a diverse set of schools with differing student contexts, implementation strategies, and experiences in Achieving the Dream.** While the colleges shared some similar implementation successes and challenges, their experiences during the grant period were more different than similar. No one pattern of program reform and implementation emerged from the analysis.
- **The colleges made a concerted effort to use multiple strategies with specific subgroups of students.** After gaining experience with these initial subgroups, the colleges began to expand the use of these practices to reach larger groups of students and faculty.
- **The colleges described in this chapter supported multiple individuals in leadership roles, regardless of their official positions.** In addition, the colleges adopted the reform process of Achieving the Dream during periods of high-level turnover in leadership. At the same time, new leaders emerged at multiple levels within the institutions.
- **In one case, the college leveraged its accreditation process to focus on and to coordinate its reform efforts.** This college coordinated the accreditation process with Achieving the Dream and used the process to foster early buy-in, to motivate its faculty to focus on the success of math students, and to become a more data-driven institution.

Data Sources

The analyses in this chapter are based on implementation research conducted on the Round 1 colleges during the five-year Achieving the Dream grant period. Research team members of MDRC and of the Community College Research Center visited each college in spring 2006, during the first year of implementation, and again during the fall 2008 and spring 2009 terms — the last year of the Achieving the Dream grant. The visits lasted two to three days and included interviews with senior administrators, institutional research staff, the Achieving the Dream coordinator, and faculty members and student services staff involved in their institution’s efforts to implement the initiative. Researchers followed a standard protocol across the 26 colleges to ensure that people in comparable positions were asked similar questions, and that measures of the culture of evidence and of adherence to the five-step process of institutional improvement were being documented at each college.

In addition to the field visits, data on the colleges’ progress in implementing the initiative’s principles and strategies were obtained from internal documents related to Achieving the

Dream, including annual reports submitted by the colleges and reports submitted by Achieving the Dream coaches and data facilitators. No new implementation data were collected since the 2009 field visits to the colleges, as the central analysis for this report focused on student outcomes for cohorts who entered college during the original Achieving the Dream grant period. The existing data, however, were re-coded and reanalyzed along with the additional data on student outcomes, in an effort to provide new insights into practices at the identified colleges.

The Colleges

The three colleges identified in Chapter 2 and analyzed in this chapter are more diverse than they are similar, both in their institutional contexts and in the approach they adopted to implement strategies and principles related to Achieving the Dream. These institutions range in size from small rural colleges to a large multicampus institution located in a metropolitan area. The colleges are located in three different states and have distinctive student populations, ranging from primarily Hispanic to racially and ethnically diverse. Similarly, while these schools were instructed to focus on the initiative's principles — such as increasing data use and engaging more faculty and staff — each executed implementation approaches with their unique institutional contexts in mind. The following sections describe the three institutional contexts in which these Achieving the Dream efforts were carried out.

College A

College A is a large multicampus institution located in an urban region in the Southeast. It serves a diverse population of over 10,000 students who are primarily of white, African-American, and Hispanic ethnicities. Before implementation of Achieving the Dream, faculty and staff were concerned about the increasing lack of preparedness among incoming students in addition to low retention of rates in developmental courses: nearly 8 in 10 students who enrolled in developmental English or math courses did not successfully complete the developmental English or math sequence. Consequently, College A's Achieving the Dream efforts focused on providing extra support to students in need of remediation, particularly those required to take college preparatory courses in all three developmental education areas (reading, English, and math).

When the initiative began, the college was going through many changes, including the development of a new institution-wide education plan and of strategies to target underserved students of color. In addition, there was turnover in high-level leadership positions. At the same time, College A sought to cultivate greater collaboration across different departments, and it took steps to increase the use of data and institutional research functions to support institutional goals and strategies.

College B

College B is a midsize institution located in a sprawling suburban region in the Southwest that serves between 2,000 and 10,000 students. It joined Achieving the Dream with a goal to improve student success in developmental mathematics. Another objective was to improve success rates for Hispanic students, a population that makes up a substantial proportion of all students enrolled.

Like most community colleges, the majority of students who enroll at College B are not prepared for college-level work and need remediation. However, in interviews, administrators noted that many such students did not typically seek out additional academic assistance: few students utilized the college's computer lab or tutoring center. As part of its Achieving the Dream efforts, the college attempted several pilot strategies that were created to make academic support more accessible both inside and outside of class, especially for students struggling through developmental math courses. These interventions provided in-class tutoring, software to explain and to reinforce content, and refresher workshops.

The college also wanted to increase its data collection and communication capabilities, particularly among faculty. This was partly motivated by a desire to use data to inform developmental education practices: because the college already had a well-resourced institutional research department that conducted large volumes of data processing, these goals were directed mainly at expanding and enhancing these capabilities among faculty and staff who worked directly with students.

College C

College C is also a midsize college with multiple campuses that is centered in a rural region of the South. A majority of students at College C are Hispanic and attend school part time. Similar to those in Colleges A and B, students who enroll in College C are often under-prepared academically and require developmental education courses. When the college joined Achieving the Dream, administrators reported that students in developmental math courses had the lowest performance rates across the student population.

College C entered Achieving the Dream after developing goals that were focused on improving student learning outcomes and on strengthening the college's institutional effectiveness. The institutional research department was thinly staffed and lacked the capacity for robust gathering and analysis of qualitative data. This college coordinated its Achieving the Dream efforts with its accreditation goals. For example, as part of the accreditation process, the college identified two priorities — improving institutional data capacity and student performance in gatekeeper (introductory college) math courses — that aligned well with its Achieving the Dream goal of improving students' math performance. In order to carry out this objective, the

college developed a supplemental instruction program to give students additional support and extra time with math content.

Differences in the Profiled Colleges

As noted, the three colleges profiled in this chapter had a number of diverse attributes that make it difficult to discern larger patterns based on their experiences. These differences may be attributed to the distinct approaches that each college took to implement Achieving the Dream policies and practices, or to differences of procedures that each institution typically endorsed based on their overall structures and operational systems. Nonetheless, these differences provide further insight into the varied institutional experiences that community colleges may have, even when they attempt to implement a similar vision oriented toward improving student success.

First, Colleges A, B, and C varied in the strength of their implementation of Achieving the Dream. College A had a relatively strong culture of evidence, a heavily engaged faculty and service staff, and a very strong institutional research staff that grew even stronger during the course of the initiative. Conversely, at the beginning of Achieving the Dream, both College B and College C had difficulty implementing the initiative. They encountered a number of barriers, such as leadership turnover and challenges clarifying the goals, vision, and focus of the initiative. It was only in the final years that these schools were able to make more substantial progress. However, while each of these colleges made some strides in affecting program-level change, all three were still facing challenges in relation to their strategic management and vision at the end of their first five years in Achieving the Dream. For the most part, the development of a larger, institution-wide strategic plan had been hampered by the colleges' continuous leadership turnover, as the presidents and higher-level administrators were often responsible for developing and enacting this vision.

Second, as described in Chapter 2, the colleges also tended to differ on the outcome measures on which they saw improvements. There was no indicator on which all three schools ranked among the top colleges; in other words, in an area where one or two colleges ranked highly, the third did not, and in three out of six of the indicators, at least one college actually decreased. In addition, despite the focus of all three colleges on developmental education, only College C ranked among the top in improvement of developmental education outcomes. The improvements at Colleges A and B were centered on gatekeeper courses, persistence, and graduation rates. At these colleges, increases in student outcomes sometimes began earlier than the institution's efforts to implement policies and practices for improving success. For instance, gains in student outcome were seen early on in Colleges B and C, where implementation progress was slower, while College A saw gains later. These disconnects between outcome gains and implementation — and the inconsistent pattern of improvements for the targeted subgroups

— further underscore the challenge of connecting the increased achievements of students with the reform efforts of colleges.

Third, though all of the colleges used similar, multi-intervention approaches to target developmental education students, the specific interventions that were implemented tended to vary. For example, Colleges B and C were heavily focused on supplemental instruction, while College A concentrated more on intensive case management. In addition, other strategies that were implemented at these schools differed, with College A focused on learning communities and early registration; College B on preparing students for placement assessment tests and technology-aided instruction; and College C on a revised developmental education curriculum, a summer bridge program, and technology-aided instruction. Finally, the timing of implementation differed across the schools: while one school implemented a number of different interventions at the beginning of Achieving the Dream, the other two schools implemented most interventions during the final two years of the grant period.

Common Themes

The diverse experiences of these colleges suggest that there is no common set of practices for achieving reform. Nevertheless, some of the practices revolved around themes that were shared across all three institutions. The diversity provides an opportunity to explore how colleges with differing institutional contexts and foci approached some of these common themes. Two of these themes are discussed in the next section. First, all three colleges implemented Achieving the Dream reforms while focusing their efforts on a targeted group of students. Although their strategies and particular target groups differed in various ways, the colleges all maintained an emphasis on targeted implementation. Second, all of the colleges faced difficulties with leadership turnover during the Achieving the Dream grant period. Their diverse methods for addressing this common challenge help illustrate different approaches to tackling an issue prevalent in community colleges.

Narrow Focus on Student Subgroups

While most of the Round 1 Achieving the Dream colleges implemented numerous strategies targeted at different student subgroups, each of the three schools in this analysis focused more narrowly on a particular subset of students. College A targeted those with multiple remedial needs, College B focused specifically on improving the outcomes of developmental math students, and College C focused on both developmental math and college-level math students.

In tandem with their more focused aims, all three colleges in this analysis also coordinated multiple reform efforts around their chosen student subgroup. Many of the Round 1 colleges faced challenges in scaling more intensive strategies (that is, those that reached students for long-

er amounts of time).² All three of the institutions in this analysis, however, ranked among the schools that reached higher proportions of students with a more intensive strategy. Each had implemented a set of strategies at medium scale (reaching 10 percent to 25 percent of the target group) or a relatively high scale (reaching more than 25 percent of the target population). In addition, their strategies tended to have a similar focus, which centered on providing more intensive academic support strategies, such as one-on-one guidance, to students in their targeted classes. These colleges also implemented at least one other strategy aimed at improving the success of these student groups. Among these were a summer bridge program, preparation for placement tests, technology-aided instructional supports, success courses,³ and learning communities.

While Colleges B and C focused their efforts on instructional supports like tutoring and supplemental instruction, College A placed more emphasis on student services. Despite these differences, all three remained highly focused on a targeted group of students early in the initiative. Their strategies for expanding these targeted programs to more student groups are also outlined below.

Emphasis on Instructional Support

Colleges B and C focused specifically on math students and implemented a few key strategies aimed at improving students' progress at multiple places in the developmental sequence. College C identified a target group of students at both ends of the gatekeeper threshold in math (the highest level of developmental math and the first college-level math course). Math was selected because both data analysis and student focus groups identified it as a major barrier to success. As part of Achieving the Dream, College C decided to implement supplemental instruction (SI) to increase the amount of time spent on math tasks and to provide student support connected to the classroom.⁴ In the beginning, the college implemented SI in a small number of sections of the highest-level developmental math course and required a math lab for some students in the first college-level course. In each successive semester, the school expanded its SI program and required SI for increasing numbers of students. Math sections with SI also incorporated a flexible curriculum of success components, including an orientation provided by counseling staff, in order to provide additional classroom support.

This college also adopted several other reforms based on the target population of math students, including curriculum revision to incorporate software, a new placement assessment test aligned with the curriculum, and a pilot summer "boot camp" to prepare students in multiple levels of developmental math for college-level work. These additional efforts further reinforced the college's attempt to provide extra instructional support to math students.

²Rutschow et al. (2011).

³Success courses are aimed at introducing students to college life and enhancing their study skills.

⁴SI provides support through additional review sessions outside of the lecture period.

College B initially focused broadly in the area of math before deciding to align multiple interrelated strategies around developmental math students; these students received additional academic supports from college entrance through successful completion of the developmental math sequence. These supports included (1) in-class tutors to assist students with assignments and to answer questions during lecture; (2) mathematics software integrated into developmental math courses; (3) case managers to monitor students' attendance and academic performance, and to provide additional in-class and out-of-class tutoring and support for students; and (4) a weeklong "Fast Track" workshop to help students whose math placement scores were close to the college level to bypass developmental math.

Enhanced Student Services

Unlike Colleges B and C, College A focused on the most underprepared developmental education students. College A changed its practice to allow early registration for such students and developed learning communities to target them. Many of the learning communities linked a developmental education course with a student success course. In the initiative's early years, "success coaches" — faculty or staff tasked with providing case management to the students — were embedded in the learning communities. College A later transitioned from the case management approach to a holistic advising model and hired eight full-time "success specialists" to mentor the students. All of these strategies aimed to surround the targeted students with multiple service supports connected to their academic activities.

Broader Target Groups

Over the course of Achieving the Dream, the three colleges gradually began to extend their targeted work into other areas of the curriculum. College A revised its strategy midway through the grant so that slightly more prepared developmental education students could be served. College B began to incorporate many of the developmental math strategies, such as tutoring, into college-level courses. Similarly, College C hoped to extend and scale up SI to all developmental education courses (including reading and writing), if financially feasible. In these ways, the targeted Achieving the Dream focus of colleges became the starting point for broader influence across the institution.

Management of Implementation Leadership Turnover

All three colleges profiled in this chapter faced difficulties with turnover in leadership, including at the presidential level and in the higher-level leadership team (for example, vice presidents of instruction and of student services). Additionally, the leadership of Achieving the Dream changed multiple times at each of these three institutions: each school had at least three different Achieving the Dream coordinators during the first five years of implementation. While

each of the colleges confronted significant changes in high-level administration, they were able to manage these obstacles by designating a set of leaders and by developing a cadre of faculty that could help oversee various pieces of the implementation process. The work of the colleges represents different approaches to dealing with this issue. At the same time, all of the approaches typically included similar elements. Among these were encouraging more faculty and staff to step up into leadership roles, providing them with incentives and support to do so, and organizing their larger institutional accreditation efforts to leverage multiple initiatives in order to support their student success agendas. Each approach is described in further detail below.

Expanded Faculty Engagement

All three colleges incorporated broad engagement structures to include more stakeholders in their Achieving the Dream work, though their specific approaches varied. College A serves as a particularly strong example of faculty coordination, as it established faculty leaders at each campus to manage the implementation of interventions and to oversee coordination across campuses. College B boosted engagement by compensating faculty to provide additional tutoring and by hiring new staff to provide other services. College C facilitated faculty engagement by developing faculty leadership councils that made specific recommendations to the president's cabinet.

College A had three different presidents and multiple vice presidents during its first five years in the initiative. The institution established a developmental education task force made up of faculty leaders across the college's different campuses. These leaders helped facilitate and sustain college-wide conversations about the goals and practices of developmental education. They were charged with hosting a series of conversations for faculty across campuses about the types of practices that might help improve the success of students. As a result, the college established a unified voice about potential changes to programs and policies relatively early in the initiative, despite the fact that high-level leadership changed multiple times.

Some administrators at College A were able to make an important impact on faculty and staff despite their short tenure. For instance, an earlier president promoted greater collaboration by restructuring his cabinet to include students, nonadministrative staff, and a faculty union representative. The establishment of a college-wide strategic plan also facilitated expanded involvement: broad-based strategy sessions for internal and external stakeholders at all three campuses helped inform goals and approaches. Another president later formed focus groups composed of faculty, students, and staff. In addition, monthly cabinet meetings were made public and often attracted an audience of 40 to 50 attendees who gathered to hear faculty and staff leaders present reports. Such practices helped build and maintain the voices of faculty and staff in the larger institution's management and implementation of reforms.

Promotion of Direct, Inclusive Leadership

Unlike College A, Colleges B and C had greater challenges establishing this type of faculty-centered leadership during the early years of Achieving the Dream. These difficulties may have resulted from the colleges' decision to focus on the involvement of high-level administrative leaders, particularly because of their excessive turnover rate. In addition, institutional characteristics, such as location and resource constraints, may have made it more difficult to recruit and sustain faculty leaders in the face of such turnover. Regardless of the cause, both Colleges B and C had implemented few new reforms after their initial years in the initiative.

However, both Colleges B and C made substantial implementation progress when a higher-level leader (either a president or a vice president) provided a vision for the work, as occurred during the last two to three years of the initiative. Within both institutions, these individuals retained enough authority to take charge of reform efforts and to provide direction. At College B, progress in implementation occurred when an associate vice president, who offered a pronounced vision, was put in charge of the implementation of Achieving the Dream. At College C, the president was the key figure who instigated a turn toward data-driven decision making. He began to reorganize teams into councils that worked on specific items and that made recommendations to his cabinet. Neither school, however, made much progress toward implementing reforms until this leader was established at the college and it was clear that his tenure would be stable.

Once this leadership had been established, Colleges B and C moved to engage a set of middle-level managers (for example, directors and department chairs) along with faculty and staff to help implement specific interventions. For instance, at College C, the president was very intentional about gathering information and feedback from the faculty, staff, and students. The president and his cabinet drew on issues raised in community forums to inform the development of a strategic plan that did not previously exist. Faculty expressed particular appreciation for having ownership of this process.

College B used monetary incentives to engage faculty and staff in reform efforts. A number of faculty members were paid to spend an additional hour a week in the student success center, where they tutored students, or in the advising center, where they helped place students into the correct math courses. In addition, the college hired a number of part-time class tutors and case managers to support the implementation of their advising and supplemental instruction interventions. Further, they also brought on part-time data analysts to track students' use of these services. Without the monetary support provided by the Achieving the Dream grant, the college believed that it could not have motivated staff to do the extra work or have hired additional staff.

Targeted Faculty Development

College A instituted its faculty developmental education task force around the same time as Achieving the Dream began. Faculty representatives were charged with setting annual goals and collaborating on strategies on a college-wide basis. Some of their activities included working on adjunct faculty handbooks and adjusting cutoff scores that determined which students would have to take developmental math courses. College B supplemented direct academic support strategies with targeted professional development for faculty and staff involved in those strategies. This brought together all math faculty each semester, including tutors and managers, and eventually evolved into a training day focused on strategies that were determined to have shown promise or success. Through these types of indirect efforts, the colleges worked to build capacity, engagement, and continuity in order to deliver services to their targeted students.

Building on Accreditation

Accreditation played an important role in supporting broader-based institutional support for reform at College C. This institution coordinated the accreditation process with Achieving the Dream and also used the process to foster strong early buy-in, to motivate faculty to focus on the success of math students, and to become a more data-driven institution. College C hired a data analyst and began to measure course-based learning outcomes in its targeted math courses, in addition to student outcomes like retention and persistence.

As part of the accreditation process, the college also began to use a formal development model, required for new strategies or policy changes that called for concrete, measurable outcomes and evaluation activities. The faculty in each department became responsible for the process and the data. Each department was also responsible for developing outcomes specific to its goals but connected to the overall mission of the college. The model emphasized the use of multiple measures to gauge success beyond students' final grades or course completion. The formal model also emphasized measuring student learning outcomes within individual courses. The faculty team identified learning outcomes for each course and used department-wide exams to test the outcomes.

The math faculty's enthusiasm for this process inspired other departments to try it, and by the end of the study period faculty members had established a set of core competencies for each of the general education departments. Each set learning outcomes for their courses that link to the general education competencies and developed common departmental exams for core courses that test these learning outcomes. Full-time faculty also gathered periodically to review student outcomes on departmental exams and to discuss how to strengthen their efforts for the given competency.

Key Lessons

The different approaches adopted by the institutions analyzed in this chapter present some overarching lessons for other community colleges. First, the colleges' ability to manage the reform process during periods of leadership turnover suggests that leadership can be effectively leveraged at multiple levels. Committed, engaged leadership among senior administrators can drive successful initiatives, but turnover at this level is also a reality for many community colleges. The colleges described in this chapter worked within their unique contexts and supported multiple individuals who showed leadership capacity, regardless of those individuals' official positions.

Additionally, the colleges made a concerted effort to focus on important student subgroups. Each college also began to expand the reach of these practices to larger groups of students or faculty after gaining experience with the initial subgroups. Targeted professional development for faculty and staff involved in the initiative supported this focus. In one case, the college also leveraged the accreditation process to coordinate its reform efforts.

The three colleges highlighted in this chapter had diverse experiences and operated in disparate institutional contexts while participating in Achieving the Dream. Their stories exemplify how different institutions can work toward improvement in a variety of ways. Despite considerable challenges, community colleges are thinking creatively about their leadership models and are building support for targeted reforms.

Chapter 4

Conclusion

In many respects, Achieving the Dream can be thought of as a continuous improvement model for institutional reform. Colleges that use this model commit to establishing a culture of evidence, to engaging faculty and staff broadly in developing strategies that support student success and institutional reform, and to adopting an iterative process of program improvement using data. As documented in an earlier report on Achieving the Dream, *Turning the Tide*,¹ many of the 26 Round 1 colleges demonstrated progress in building a culture of evidence. In particular, college leaders committed to investing time, personnel, and resources to endorse the core tenets of the initiative, and they focused on a student success-oriented agenda. The colleges strengthened their capacity for institutional research, which improved their ability to collect and analyze student data and to use these data more frequently to inform policies and practices. Most colleges also implemented a variety of strategies designed to improve student success.

In other ways, however, Round 1 colleges did not fully realize the vision of Achieving the Dream. Many of these colleges, for example, were still working toward firmly establishing important facets of the model at the end of the implementation grant period. In particular, strategies to encourage students' success generally had not yet reached large proportions of students. A number of colleges also struggled to engage faculty in using and applying data and research, despite their commitment to this key tenet of Achieving the Dream. For instance, surveys of faculty and administrators suggest that faculty tended to use data on student progression and completion much less frequently than did administrators.² Similarly, though colleges generally improved their institutional research capacity, they were not expected to — and generally did not — rigorously evaluate new interventions to better understand the effectiveness of reform efforts.

In short, translating institutional reform into practices that substantially change the experiences of large groups of students — and observing changes in institution-wide student outcomes — may simply be more difficult, and may take more time, than first anticipated. This realization, however, is not unique to Achieving the Dream. A number of related interventions in kindergarten through twelfth grade (K-12) schools have promoted the use of data as a strategy to improve schools. Research on these interventions has found that (1) the underlying theories that translate data use into school improvement are under-conceptualized, (2) the evaluation designs for these efforts are generally weak, and (3) there is little evidence that student out-

¹Rutschow (2011).

²Jenkins and Kerrigan (2013).

comes improve following these interventions.³ Increasing the capacity of schools and colleges to gather and analyze data may be a necessary condition for improvement, but it does not appear to be sufficient. More work is needed to understand how such reforms might translate into institution-wide gains in student outcomes.

Achieving the Dream encouraged colleges to focus their strategies on subgroups of students, faculty, and staff — for example, revised orientations for first-year students or reforms in developmental math — and to scale up the strategies following indications of effectiveness. This process takes time and, given the targeted focus, improvements resulting from Achieving the Dream efforts may have occurred on a smaller scale than the institution-wide analyses of student outcomes in this report can detect. Several other important changes also occurred during this period that might have affected students and exerted pressure on community colleges, making it more difficult to isolate the effect of Achieving the Dream. Notably, the Great Recession started toward the end of 2007, and during the course of the study the colleges experienced large population shifts. Rising enrollments were accompanied by state funding cuts and shifting demographics, with the proportion of minority students gradually increasing over time. These and other changes may have exerted pressure on the colleges that could have affected student outcomes.

Lessons for the Field

Despite these competing challenges, individual colleges made important strides in improving institution-wide student outcomes, as illustrated by the experiences of the three colleges profiled in Chapter 3. In many respects, the lessons that emerge from these experiences correspond with — and also build upon — conclusions from *Turning the Tide*, which made recommendations covering four broad areas:

- **Improve the leadership model**, including broadening the model to include faculty, staff, and lower-level administrators in order to focus more directly on improving instruction and student services, and providing more support to colleges that are experiencing leadership turnover.
- **Bolster the data analysis model**, including developing stronger supports for colleges with weak institutional research capacity and incorporating more nuanced measures of student outcomes that relate directly to classroom practices and students' learning and progress.

³Coburn and Turner (2012); Turner and Coburn (2012); Marsh (2012).

- **Advance the broader engagement model**, including concentrating efforts to involve adjunct faculty and staff and to provide in-depth and meaningful professional development to all college personnel.
- **Enhance policy**, including developing a more systematic approach to evaluating community colleges' strategies and interventions.

This report extends these recommendations and illustrates promising approaches designed and implemented by the Round 1 Achieving the Dream colleges. These approaches are now considered important practices in the field, as highlighted by the stories of the colleges profiled in Chapter 3.

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 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.⁴ Supplying targeted students with necessary supports may require such coordination. Further, the integration of multiple initiatives, policies, and practices may require a more 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.⁵ Improving performance may then require more fundamental systemic reform — reviewing and redesigning practices, policies, and processes over time and realigning them with new organizational goals.⁶

While there were some instances in which Achieving the Dream colleges brought about systemic changes to programs and services, most of this work 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 example, orientation, placement testing, initial advising) or enhanced instruction in developmental education or gateway college-level math and English courses (for instance, providing supplemental instruction and introducing learning communities). However, few colleges focused on curricular and instructional reforms in college-level courses beyond math and English, though some did under the aegis of other initiatives such as accreditation or other grant programs. This is significant because, like developmental college students, the ma-

⁴Newmann, Smith, Allensworth, and Bryk (2001); Boreman, Hewes, Overman, and Brown (2003); Bryk et al. (2010).

⁵Bryk et al. (2010); Jenkins (2011).

⁶Jenkins (2011); Kuh et al. (2005).

majority of students who are assessed as “college ready” when they enter college do not end up completing credentials. Moreover, many such students, particularly those in transfer programs, report being confused by the array of choices available to them and lack strong guidance from their institution on how to negotiate college successfully.⁷

A number of Round 1 schools also found it difficult to engage large groups of faculty in the reform agenda. This limited engagement may be partly due to colleges’ emphasis on early stages of students’ experiences, which may be relevant to only a smaller proportion of faculty, such as those teaching developmental education courses or introductory math or English courses. Similarly, the broad institutional performance measures 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.

Building on Accreditation Processes

In contrast, one college used the accreditation process to engage faculty by focusing on measures of student success and by using data to inform improvements in classroom practice. This college’s model also emphasized the measurement of learning outcomes and eventually spread beyond the initial group of faculty into other departments. Learning more about how colleges can link and 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. Those types of experiences 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.⁸ Presidents and high-level administrators play a key role in institutional reform, but given the decentralized organization of many colleges, deans and department chairs can also be critically important for mobilizing faculty and staff. Cultivating leaders among the faculty and student services staff, however, may also be an essential step in 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 for long-term success, even when some leaders leave and must be replaced by others.

⁷Grubb (2006); Gardenhire-Crooks, Collado, and Ray (2006); Scott-Clayton (2011); Karp (2013).

⁸Kezar (2011); Grubb (2013).

Starting with Key Student Subgroups

While improvements in institution-wide student outcomes likely require changes that affect large proportions of students, different students may be better served by different reform efforts. The three colleges analyzed in greater detail in Chapter 3 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 — and consequently reached those smaller groups of students by means of diverse and coordinated services and practices, such as academic assistance provided through advising or supplemental supports offered in the classroom.

Integrating Research with Reform

In general, there is a continued need for research on community colleges that is well aligned with reform efforts, in order to understand whether reforms are working. Developing future reforms in tandem with rigorous research designs would 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 change if new innovations are ineffective. Furthermore, ongoing, careful, and rigorous evaluations need to be prioritized in order for college leaders, faculty, and staff to learn whether 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 focused on the impacts of specific interventions that directly target student experiences can inform colleges and the field about the effectiveness of these new efforts. Such research can provide colleges with specific and accurate feedback that they can use to inform decisions about programs and services. Sharing this knowledge could help other colleges implement and scale up more effective practices. When reforms more directly target institutional change and only reach students secondarily — such as those that promote increased institutional research capacity and data use — changes in student experiences may occur less directly. In such cases, research on the process itself and on measures of institutional change may be more useful.

Looking Ahead

Achieving the Dream was founded upon a belief in evidence-based decision making that has resonated with colleges across the country and that persists today. The initiative has helped community colleges establish a solid foundation for reform. It has helped colleges to enhance their institutional research and data capacities, to develop stronger cultures of evidence, and to pursue a variety of new reforms. This is an important development in that many faculty and staff are increasingly focused on data and its implications for student success. Achieving the

Dream also serves as an important learning network that can be used to share lessons about reform efforts. Through this network, colleges can build on successful efforts that have been undertaken elsewhere, and they can also learn from past mistakes made at other colleges.

Achieving the Dream has grown considerably since its founding in 2004. The initiative now stands as an independent organization, stretching to nearly 200 colleges, 15 state policy teams, and more than 100 coaches and advisers who participate across 32 states and in Washington, DC. The 26 Round 1 colleges were leaders in this effort and learned alongside the Achieving the Dream partners about institutional change in community colleges. The Round 1 colleges' innovations and their willingness to publicly share their experiences have pushed the field forward and helped advance reform efforts in community colleges. Other system reform initiatives, such as the Developmental Education Initiative and Completion by Design, have been heavily influenced by lessons from the early experiences of Round 1 colleges. Indeed, Achieving the Dream colleges continue to be leaders in new programs now under way in the field, including in initiatives that, like Completion by Design, emphasize focused pathways for students. Among these programs are the Statway™ and Quantway™ Networked Improvement Communities and the New Mathways Project,⁹ all focused on rethinking traditional approaches to mathematics. Colleges, policymakers, funders, and researchers across the United States are building on lessons from Achieving the Dream colleges as they think about community college reform.

This report marks the end of a long-term study of 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, though change can occur at the institutional level, substantially improving institution-wide student outcomes is much harder than was envisioned at the start of the initiative.

There is still much work to be done to improve the prospects of students who enroll in community colleges in the United States, but Achieving the Dream has established a solid foundation and a strong network to embark on that work.

⁹Statway™ and Quantway™, created by the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, are one-year courses that fulfill college-level developmental math requirements by focusing on statistics and qualitative reasoning, respectively. The New Mathways Project, developed by the Charles A. Dana Center at the University of Texas at Austin, is built around three accelerated mathematical pathways and a supporting student success course.

Appendix

Additional Analysis

As indicated in Chapters 2 and 3, researchers conducted analyses to investigate factors that are potentially associated with changes in student outcomes at Round 1 colleges. Using field visit implementation data and survey data, this analysis examined the core activities related to the Achieving the Dream initiative, whether the influence of certain activities was associated with student outcomes, and whether other findings emerged from the reanalysis of the field data.

Theoretical and empirical research literature was reviewed to establish hypotheses about institutional characteristics and external influences relevant to community colleges that may serve as key factors for reform. First, factors associated with institutional progress and student success were identified, and then qualitative data collected on Round 1 colleges were coded into measures reflecting these key factors. The following factors were operationally defined, coded, and analyzed:

- *Leadership capacity* — Evidence that an institution has strong, active administrators who communicate clear goals and plans for improvement and who support faculty and staff leaders to help them carry out these goals and plans
- *Institutional alignment* — Evidence that an institution’s reforms are planned and implemented around well-aligned common goals across different initiatives and processes
- *Data capacity* — Evidence of an institution’s ability to manage, analyze, and report on data
- *Academic support systems* — Evidence of an institution’s ability to offer coherent academic programs and services aimed at improving learning and student success

Evidence of the above hypothesized factors was investigated through the reanalysis of data sources available from college field visits and data submissions, including:

- Qualitative field data collected by MDRC from 2006 and 2009 at Round 1 colleges
- Annual reports submitted by colleges to Achieving the Dream from 2006 to 2008
- Results from a survey of faculty and administrators at Achieving the Dream colleges¹

¹For more information on the methodology of this survey, see Appendix A of Rutschow et al. (2011).

A list of the measures that were part of this analysis follows. Analysis of these factors using the five main outcomes yielded no clear relationships between implementation and changes in student outcome.

Faculty/Administrator Survey Scale

A selection of survey items from the faculty and administrator survey, listed below, were used as part of a correlation analysis to determine whether any survey items relevant to the factors listed previously were associated with student outcomes. Confirmatory factor analysis was employed in order to reduce the number of items that measured common variables. All survey items were standardized before being summed into scales.

- *Data structures* — whether data in the college’s student information system is accurate; whether the college’s institutional research department is adequately staffed and is responsive to requests for information; whether data and reports are user-friendly, clear, and provided in a timely manner
- *Data procedures* — use of data in decision making; professional development on data and research; perceived usefulness of, and buy-in to, data and research. (These subfactors were also analyzed individually and are detailed further below.)
 - Use of data in decision making — whether the college evaluates the effectiveness of its educational programs and practices; whether the respondents’ departments use data and research on students to make decisions about curriculum, teaching practices, academic support, program planning, academic program review or evaluation, advising, and/or identification of students who are struggling academically
 - Professional development on data and research — involvement in training or professional development related to institutional research, data analysis, program evaluation, or assessment
 - Perceived usefulness of, and buy-in to, data and research — whether respondents believe that research provided by the college is helpful; whether they believe that asking faculty to participate in regular discussions about data on student outcomes is useful; whether respondents do not use data or research because they feel it is outside of their job responsibilities

- *Organized discussions* — frequency of participation in organized discussions held at the college on the improvement of academic achievement or closing achievement gaps, on the academic needs and performance of students of color, and on the academic needs and performance of low-income students

Implementation Data

The following items are based on an analysis of qualitative field visit data from each college, as well as from annual reports submitted by colleges to Achieving the Dream.

- *Presidential stability* — lack of president/chancellor turnover between 2004 and 2009
- *Accreditation alignment* — alignment of Achieving the Dream goals and efforts with accreditation goals, processes, or requirements
- *Initiative alignment* — alignment of Achieving the Dream goals and efforts with other institutional reform initiative(s)
- *Collaboration* — increase in collaborative efforts among divisions or departments
- *Integrated institutional research* — presence or development of an institutional research department that is integrated with other departments, such as information technology, institutional effectiveness, or planning and assessment
- *Intervention strategy target* — implementation of an intervention strategy that is targeted to developmental education or first-year students
- *Curricular strategy* — implementation and scaling of an intervention strategy that focuses on changes to classroom curriculum or instruction
- *Student support services strategy* — implementation and scaling of an intervention strategy that provides student support services
- *Required orientation* — presence or development of a policy that requires that all students, or an identified group of students, participate in orientation
- *Required student success course* — presence or development of a policy that requires that all students, or an identified group of students, enroll in a student success course

Implementation Codes

Following implementation field visits in 2009, the researchers who conducted the visits devised a series of quantitative codes for each college. Each college was coded on a five-point scale in 47 areas, indicating level of implementation of Achieving the Dream principles and influence of Achieving the Dream. Two researchers coded each college and then cross-checked codes for reliability. Researchers also looked across colleges to ensure codes were applied consistently.

- *Leadership commitment* — level of support for a focus on improving student success from the president, from the senior leadership, and from faculty leaders (for example, department/division heads)
- *Institutional alignment* — level of collaboration between student services and faculty/instructional staff; extent to which the college has a strategic planning process that uses data to inform measures and goals for student success; extent to which external grants and the college’s accreditation process support efforts to improve student success; extent to which meetings, organizational units, and work groups regularly focus on student success
- *Data structures* — ability to meet the demands for data and institutional research; integrity of policies and practices used to collect and securely store data
- *Data procedures* — extent to which faculty and staff receive training on using data and research; extent to which college evaluates its programs and services to see if they improve student success; extent to which college uses data on student outcomes to develop or refine policy and strategies
- *Professional development* — extent to which professional development training reinforces efforts to improve student success

Key Intervention Strategies

The following items are based on an identification and analysis of colleges’ three primary strategies (referred to as “key strategies”). Prior to the 2009 field visits, Achieving the Dream team leaders at the colleges were asked to identify and rank the top three strategies — those in which their institutions had invested the most time and resources. These strategies were selected from a list of all strategies undertaken during their five-year tenure with Achieving the Dream.

- Number of key strategies that focused on changes to classroom curriculum or instruction

- Number of key strategies that provided student support services (including instructional supports)
- Number of key strategies that reached students for 10 or more hours per semester (“high intensity” strategies)
- Number of key strategies that reached over 25 percent of their intended target populations (“large scale” strategies)
- Presence of at least one key direct program and services strategy that was of high intensity and large scale
- Presence of at least one key direct program and services strategy that was designed to last longer than a single semester

Variation in Pre-Post Change Between Colleges

The following two-level model was run to estimate the significance of variance for the change in outcome means from pre-period to post-period. Level 1 is for the student cohorts, and Level 2 is for the individual colleges or sites:

$$\text{Level 1: } Y_{ij} = \sum_{j=1}^J \alpha_j \text{SITE}_j + \beta_j T_{ij} + s_{ij} T_{ij} + t_{ij}(1 - T_{ij})$$

$$\text{Level 2: } \beta_j = \gamma_{10} + v_j$$

Y_{ij} is the average outcome for cohort i in site j

T_{ij} is the postintervention time indicator for cohort i in site j

β_j is the average pre-post change for site j

SITE_j is an indicator for site j

$t_{ij} \sim N(0, \phi_j^2 I)$ and $s_{ij} \sim N(0, \phi_j^2 I)$ are two separate Level 1 residuals, for those in the preintervention cohorts and postintervention cohorts, respectively

$v_j \sim N(0, \tau_j^2)$ is a Level 2 residual

The estimated cross-college variance in pre-post change scores ($\hat{\tau}^2$) was found to be statistically significant for all five main outcomes in this report. In other words, there is evidence that $\tau^2 \neq 0$; that is, the pre-post changes in outcomes varied across the colleges in the study.

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