



## Lessons from Achieving the Dream for Federal Efforts to Improve College Completion Rates

Achieving the Dream Partners  
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Achieving the Dream is a community college student success initiative experience that has involved 82 community colleges in 15 states during the last five years.\* This ambitious initiative, launched by the Lumina Foundation for Education and now supported by close to twenty national and regional funders, is designed to be a catalyst for significant improvement in the college outcomes of community college students, particularly low-income and students of color.

ATD colleges are seeing a culture of data-driven decisionmaking take root on campus, are focusing internal discussions more regularly on data and its use, and are improving their ability to assess and analyze outcome data and to have hard conversations about where improvement is needed. Some are showing real progress in reducing achievement gaps between different groups of students and are expanding successful pilot projects to reach more students in need of greater support and more effective programming.

Achieving the Dream's emphasis on institution-wide change and data-driven improvement strategies is totally aligned with the Obama Administration's FY 2010 budget proposal for a federal-state partnership to help more needy students complete credentials that can help them succeed economically. The proposed College Access and Completion Fund presents a significant opportunity to build upon important work underway in colleges—and in states—around the country to help make student success as important a national goal as access to postsecondary education. It represents a bold federal effort to help states, institutions, and individuals make innovation and the assessment of what works a routine part of their responsibilities.

Four lessons from Achieving the Dream's experience promoting and testing innovative approaches to persistence and completion are particularly relevant to the design and implementation of this proposal. The federal government should use this fund to:

- 1. Promote the scale up of innovations that are rooted in broad institutional change efforts, not small and narrow programs with limited impact on institutional culture and priorities.**

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\* The fifteen Achieving the Dream states are: AR, CT, FL, HI, MA, MI, NC, NM, OH, OK, PA, SC, TX, VA, WA. For a list of participating colleges and more information, go to [www.achievingthedream.org](http://www.achievingthedream.org).

There is power in efforts to reorganize the priorities of higher education institutions to put student success and completion first. But these efforts must be targeted to change strategies that are intended to effect the central decisions of higher education institutions, not the margins of practice. Funds should be targeted and used in ways that promote institutional change and minimize investment in either business as usual or in small pilot programs.

- 2. Promote the expansion or deepening of research and analytic capacity at both the state and the institutional level, investing in both necessary data systems and infrastructure and in the human resources needed to analyze and use data effectively to drive improved outcomes.**

Efforts of postsecondary institutions and state agencies to effect a culture of evidence are often thwarted by the lack of adequate data systems and the lack of staff who can analyze and draw out the implications of available data for improving institutional practice. Data systems and analyses should incorporate multiple outcome measures and should be disaggregated so that the results for low-income and underrepresented students are highlighted. A proportion of available funds should be targeted to help build and strengthen state and institutional research capacity and data systems. Investments in data systems should help build state and institutional capacity to do student cohort tracking over time. Without such investment, there is a risk that innovations funded under this program will not be adequately and effectively researched for lessons for scale up and adoption elsewhere.

- 3. Promote rigorous collaboration and communication among colleges and state agencies that builds and accelerates the progress of a broad community committed to identifying and refining strategies for improving student persistence and completion.**

One of the most powerful aspects of Achieving the Dream has been the learning communities that have been facilitated by the initiative—across colleges, between state agencies and the institutions in their states, and across states. This has helped accelerate learning from effective—and less effective innovation efforts—and has created a stronger voice in institutional and state policy planning for resource allocations that can help more promising and effective practices scale up more quickly and broadly. A proportion of funds should be invested in structured and rigorous methods of sharing innovations and their results and disseminating implications to other institutions and agencies. This argues for a national approach to complement state-by-state investment strategies. National funds could be used to support the efforts of not-for-profit organizations or consortia of organizations that have a proven track record of working with higher education institutions to promote innovation that improves student success.

- 4. Design program to target significant resources to innovations to help low-income and traditionally underrepresented students complete college.**

The achievement gaps in college among different demographic groups are persistent and significant. Efforts to improve student completion should be targeted to institutions and strategies that hold the greatest promise of changing the educational outcomes and economic prospects of those at the bottom of the income ladder. Funds should be distributed in ways that reward institutions that serve those students most at-risk of dropping out and not completing. Funds should be distributed in ways that require institutions to demonstrate their commitment to addressing the needs of those most likely to fail to complete.

The rest of this memo addresses two topics in greater detail:

- Lessons from Achieving the Dream colleges and states about innovative approaches to improving student outcomes; and
- Recommendations for the design and implementation of the College Access and Completion Fund based on the experience of Achieving the Dream.

We would be happy to discuss these lessons and recommendations in greater depth.

## **How Achieving the Dream Colleges Pursue a Student Success Agenda**

Achieving the Dream Colleges commit to a model of institutional performance improvement whose four principles are designed to help colleges build a “culture of inquiry and evidence” that will support continuous improvements in student success.

**Committed leadership.** The president or chancellor, as well as the Board and faculty leadership must mobilize broad support for a vision of improving student outcomes.

**Use of evidence to improve programs and services.** Decisions about how to organize, manage and fund instruction and student support services should be made based on evidence of what works to facilitate student success.

**Broad engagement.** Institutions should encourage faculty and staff to take responsibility for student success and should create opportunities for collaborative professional development on strategies for improving student outcomes. Student and community engagement are also important.

**Systemic institutional improvement.** Significant outcome improvements requires institutionalization of a process of continuous, systemic improvement, building a data-driven culture and reallocating resources (financial, human, etc.) in support of policies and practices that are shown to be effective in addressing achievement and attainment gaps.

## How Achieving the Dream States Support College Efforts to Improve Outcomes

State policy support has been an integral part of Achieving the Dream strategy. States in the initiative (led most typically by state community college system offices or Departments of Higher Education) have explored ways to alter resource allocation, rules, and procedures to be more supportive of colleges' student success initiatives. They have also promoted sharing of data, promising practices, evidence from Achieving the Dream college innovations to accelerate learning and increase the impact of participating colleges' experience. A subset of states have formed a Cross-State Data Work Group that has engaged as a group to collect comparable student outcome data, benchmark against data from other participating states, and use the data to inform policy discussions and strategies.

State policy efforts have focused on development or strengthening of:

- Clear public policy commitment to student success
- Strong data-driven accountability systems, with emphasis on intermediate measures of success that track with increased odds of completion and success
- Incentives for improving success for underprepared students (with particular focus on policies related to developmental education assessment, placement, delivery)
- Aligned expectations, standards, and assessments across education sectors (K-12 and four-year higher education) and
- Financial aid policies that promote persistence.

## Priorities for Improving Outcomes: Lessons from Achieving the Dream

Community college student persistence and completion is the result of a series of decisions made by individual students, driven by a complex combination of financial, academic, social, and time-related factors. These factors are often experienced as barriers to progress by students who typically have had limited success in educational institutions. Achieving the Dream has learned a lot about the kinds of actions colleges and states can take to help change student perceptions and, most importantly, behaviors related to persisting and finishing what they started. Some of these targets of opportunity can be addressed by colleges alone; others need state support to overcome policy barriers to innovation and change or to encourage statewide changes and investments that can help innovation take root and spread.

Here are some of the most important targets of opportunity identified by the initiative to date:

- **Academic preparation:** Among Achieving the Dream colleges, 60 percent of students require one or more remedial courses upon enrolling. More important, while taking developmental education helps some students succeed, it is the first step to dropping out for many others. Among students at one Achieving the Dream college who began their developmental math sequence at the lowest level, fewer

than 15 percent went on to enroll in a college-level math course within three years. Closer relations with feeder K-12 systems and better alignment of expectations can improve preparation of those entering college from K-12. More within the direct control of colleges, the improvement of developmental education delivery and outcomes is critical. This is an area where great gains for underprepared low-income students can be made. And the research and evidence base for “what works” is woefully inadequate.

- **Curricular change and flexibility:** Achieving the Dream colleges have developed and tested a range of curricular changes to help students proceed more smoothly, rapidly and successfully. Learning communities that link several courses, often a developmental course and a credit-bearing course, have shown promise. Given the barrier that developmental math poses to many students, much innovation has focused on restructuring course sequences, more flexible and customized strategies to help students move more quickly through the math they need, greater attention to the professional development of developmental math teachers, etc. Research on technology-rich course redesign efforts led by the National Center for Academic Transformation has demonstrated the potential for course redesign to improve course completion and to reduce delivery costs.
- **Time to degree:** For many students, time is the enemy of completion. Needing to work to make money, most community college students study part-time. Yet, there is solid evidence that full-time students are far more likely to complete their program of study than similar students who attend part-time. The longer it takes to move through developmental requirements or the more difficult it is for students to get credit for prior courses taken elsewhere or the more inflexible the course schedules, the more likely it is that “life will intervene.” For this reason, Achieving the Dream colleges have experimented with a range of approaches to trying to speed students’ progress. These range from efforts to encourage students to go full-time if they can to the redesign of developmental math courses to pinpoint students’ needs and accelerate their learning what they need in less than semester formats. State and institutional policies related to transfer of credits is also a critical area for improvement and research. Although Achieving the Dream institutions have not focused on this approach, some states are taking a hard look at degree program requirements to see if the course requirements might be cut back without compromising program quality.
- **Student supports:** As in K-12 reform, where the close connection to at least one caring adult has a powerful impact on retention, community colleges are finding that the support systems provided students — academic, social, and financial — are essential to helping weaker and more at-risk students succeed. Supplemental instruction, using cohorts to build engagement and support, peer tutoring, first year orientation and support programs, intrusive advising, rapid early warning systems that identify students struggling early in a course are a few of the strategies that colleges are using and testing to help students weather difficult moments. Given emerging research that many students leave community college after having successfully completed a developmental or other course (as opposed to leaving

because of academic failure), the importance of effective advising and engagement of students and how best to accomplish that is an area worthy of experimentation and research.

- **Financial aid:** MDRC’s Opening Doors project has spawned new research on the structure of financial aid and how tying aid to performance can affect student decisions to stay enrolled. States and institutions have experimented with other, less ambitious innovations: small emergency funds to help students weather specific personal crises; clearer and simpler procedures for informing students about aid possibilities; structuring aid packages so they “nudge” students toward going full-time or taking more courses. Experiments testing different approaches to disbursement of aid, communication about aid, and understanding conditions that make students more likely to apply for, accept, and use aid well would help fill important gaps in knowledge about the relationship between access to aid and persistence and completion.
- **Institutional commitment to evidence and accountability:** For innovation efforts to succeed, they must be built upon an institutional commitment to take a hard look at the results of the intervention and to follow the data. As Achieving the Dream institutions and states have recognized, this takes more than good intentions. It requires institutional research capacity and a leadership commitment to a culture of evidence that uses data to initiate and structure focused conversations about what is working, what isn’t—and for which students. A federal effort to promote institutional innovation will have to include provision for strengthening institutional research. Making data more easily and readily available for use by administrators and faculty has been a priority of Achieving the Dream, but much more development and capacity-building is needed. Benchmarking student outcomes across similar peer institutions in a state can identify “high flyer” institutions whose strategies are worth emulating and disseminating. Experiments should be encouraged in how university-based or non-profit research entities might help augment state and institutional efforts, particularly in states or colleges where resources are limited and capacity weak.

## **Recommendations for the Design of Federal Efforts to Improve College Completion**

To maximize innovation, effective use of data and evidence, learning among grant recipients and other institutions, and targeting to those institutions that can benefit the most, we recommend the following design principles and specifics for the proposed College Access and Completion Fund. These recommendations relate to how funds should be allocated and used, from the federal government to states; from state government to higher education institutions; and within institutions to achieve the administration’s goal of increasing and institutionalizing the capacity of states and institutions to evaluate the results of innovative efforts and to build on the results to promote the adoption and diffusion of promising and effective innovations at greater scale.

**Promote the scale up of innovations that are rooted in broad institutional change efforts, not small and narrow programs with limited impact on institutional culture and priorities.**

- The federal government should provide clear guidance to states that this initiative is primarily about the completion agenda (as opposed to access-focused activities).
- In addition, the federal government should signal to states and institutions that this program is designed to encourage bold and creative efforts to innovate at the institutional level in ways that can have significant positive impact on persistence and completion. There should be no penalties or disincentives for ambitious efforts that fail to generate change, provided that the design is sound, the research rigorous, the research data made public, and the lessons learned disseminated widely.
- The federal government should specify, as it is doing in its current K-12 innovation strategy, a limited number of areas in which innovation and experimentation are to be encouraged, based on research evidence on promising practices and on significant gaps in knowledge.
- Colleges should have broad flexibility to use funds to experiment and innovate within a set of categories defined in statute (see the list above). Based on Achieving the Dream's experience, examples of categories to prioritize include: course redesign, with a particular focus on developmental education and gatekeeper courses; program redesign that includes modularized learning, clearer pathways to completion, accelerated time to degree; improved student support systems; stronger data collection and analysis and greater availability of data for use to improve student outcomes; use of financial incentives to students and financial aid policies to incent persistence and/or completion.
- The federal government should consider making grants in several rounds, as was done in distributing the School to Work Opportunities Act of 1994 funds to all 50 states. States were required to apply for the formula-driven funds, submitting a proposal for how they would use the grant, distribute funds, and maximize impact in their state. The states that were most motivated and ready to implement received funding in a first wave of grants. A second and third wave followed with some lag time. This enabled less ready states to learn from the experience of the early round states and, in some cases, to leapfrog them. Indications of institutional motivation and readiness should include participation in an existing student success initiative within a state or nationally and receipt of non-governmental support for efforts to improve completion and success.
- The program should encourage innovative efforts that engage more than one college and/or more than one state. Single-institution innovations are important; but more is likely to be learned from a concerted and coordinated multi-site

innovation and research effort than from a number of uncoordinated attempts to design and test a particular innovation. States should be encouraged or required to offer incentives for multi-institution efforts, i.e., several institutions agreeing to test the same innovation and compare results. States should also be encouraged to work with other states to test similar strategies and compare results. A National Activities component would help the federal government support ambitious approaches and maximize the impact of its investments.

**Promote the expansion or deepening of research and analytic capacity at both the state and the institutional level, through investments in data systems and human resources.**

- The federal government should encourage comparability of data elements for reporting from colleges and states (“apples to apples”). The Department of Education should recommend or require reporting of the set of measures that have been developed and refined by Achieving the Dream over the past five years in an effort to expand available outcome data beyond what is required by IPEDS and to generate useful information that can inform and drive meaningful improvement.
- Importantly, these measures include not just completion and persistence but also important intermediate measures of success, including completion of developmental education, successful completion of a first gatekeeper math or English course, and successful course completion. The Department of Education should also consider adding data on transfer and earning an industry-recognized skill credential to the reported measures of success, since these are particularly important measures of success for two-year institutions and their students.
- Measures of improvement should be used, not absolute targets for increases in completion. Data on student outcomes should also be disaggregated by race and ethnicity, income, gender, age and full-/part-time status.
- Many colleges (and many states) have limited capacity to structure rigorous research efforts, to conduct careful assessment and analysis of research data, and to help administrators, faculty, staff, and Boards understand the implications for resource allocation or policy change. The program should ensure that states are able to retain a certain percentage of the state grant to build and deepen state-level capacity to collect the right data and to help colleges and others participate in a transparent and effective process of using data to guide improvement and maximize learning.
- In addition, states should be encouraged or required to help strengthen institutional research capacity in institutions that lack adequate capacity to design and deliver sufficiently rigorous research on their innovation efforts, since this is a necessary precondition for an effective systemic focus on credential completion. States should expect colleges that apply for funds to describe and budget for the



design, delivery, and assessment of research on the effectiveness of proposed innovations. .

### **Promote rigorous collaboration and communication among colleges and state agencies to maximize and accelerate learning.**

- The federal government should require states to build into their efforts a learning program that creates opportunities for colleges to learn with and from each other and to look at the evidence emerging from innovation investments with an eye toward expanding what works and reassessing but learning from disappointing results.
- This can be done by using a small percentage of the funding to build the capacity of state higher education agencies or of university-based or other independent entities to organize peer learning, professional development, etc. for the state's higher education institutions.
- The federal government should consider reserving a proportion of the Fund for National Activities to accelerate and promote learning from the innovation activities funded by the initiative. National activities should include:
  - A knowledge development agenda to learn from the program as a whole and disseminate findings;
  - Funding for a number of existing not-for-profit organizations or consortia that are focused on and have a track record supporting institutional efforts to improve persistence and completion, that have built cross-state learning networks, and that have the capacity to generate tools for their networks that can accelerate learning from this program
  - Multi-state, multi-institution initiatives on a limited number of key knowledge gaps (as described above)
  - National outreach and support activities to build awareness among the public, potential and current students, non-participating students, and state business and civic leadership.
- Given the extensive and growing amount of private investment on this area, National Activities efforts should be coordinated with existing and emerging student success efforts funded by non-governmental sources such as foundations. In general, the impact of this initiative—nationally, in states, and at the institutional level—can be enhanced by strategic leveraging of non-governmental initiatives and resources.

### **Target significant resources to innovations that can help low-income and traditionally underrepresented students complete college.**

- Funds to states should be allocated by a formula that is biased toward states with higher percentage of low-income students enrolled in higher education. Formula

should factor in: population; enrollment in higher education; enrollment of Pell Grant recipients/low-income students

- The federal government should enable states to keep some percentage of funds for high-impact state-level strategies, such as development of data systems that track important outcomes and state level capacity to analyze and support institutional research efforts; support for learning networks within the state; and greater interaction between state officials and institutions on how state policy might help lower obstacles to innovation faced by institutions.
- States should target new federal resources to institutions in their state through a competitive RFP process. Institutions will submit a proposal and work plan specifying the problem being addressed, the innovation and its research-based rationale, the target population, expected outcomes, and research strategy. This RFP process should give priority to:
  - Institutions (or higher education sectors) that have a relatively higher proportion of low-income students
  - Institutions that have shown a commitment to student success and a track record of moving toward more deliberate use of data to drive institutional change and decision-making
  - Institutions that can demonstrate a concrete plan for testing certain innovations, conducting research, and learning from the data
  - Institutions that have identified capacity gaps and identified and estimated costs for strategies to address those gaps