



Achieving the Dream™

Community Colleges Count

Collaborating to Create Change: How El Paso Community College Improved the Readiness of Its Incoming Students Through Achieving the Dream

by Monica Reid Kerrigan and Doug Slater



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Community Colleges Count

Achieving the Dream: Community Colleges Count is a multiyear national initiative to help more community college students succeed. The initiative is particularly concerned about student groups that traditionally have faced significant barriers to success, including students of color and low-income students. Achieving the Dream works on multiple fronts, including efforts at community colleges and in research, public engagement and public policy.

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Introduction and Overview

Launched in 2003, Achieving the Dream: Community Colleges Count is a multiyear national initiative designed to improve educational outcomes for community college students, particularly students of color and low-income students. Supported by Lumina Foundation for Education and other funders, the initiative has grown to include 98 community colleges and 4 universities in 22 states. This report describes one community college's participation in Achieving the Dream. Along with 26 other colleges that were the first to enter the initiative, El Paso Community College (EPCC) joined Achieving the Dream in the summer of 2004 (colleges have joined the initiative through competitive selection in five rounds, the last of which started in summer 2009).

Most students who enroll at EPCC for the first time earn scores on the college's assessment test that require them to take developmental courses, often in more than one subject area. Nearly all students place into EPCC's developmental math program. Like many colleges, EPCC uses the ACCUPLACER test to assess incoming students' academic skills in particular subject areas. The test scores determine whether students place into entry-level college courses or into various levels of developmental education. Students who score poorly on the math, reading, or writing section of the placement test are required to enroll in a sequence of one or more developmental courses before enrolling in college-level courses in that subject area (EPCC has four developmental levels in math, three in reading, and two in writing).

Developmental education programs are designed to strengthen the academic skills of students so that they can perform well in college-level courses, but students do not earn college credit by taking and passing developmental courses. One of the unfortunate consequences of developmental programs at EPCC and elsewhere is that they can delay the accrual of college credit by struggling students. Indeed, many such students depart college before completing degrees or certificates or even before completing their developmental sequences.

In accord with the design of the Achieving the Dream initiative, EPCC has over the past five years implemented a number of interventions aimed at boosting student

success, most of which focus on two interrelated goals. The first goal is to help prospective students improve their readiness for college so that when they do start college at EPCC, they can avoid enrollment in developmental courses and begin immediately taking credit-bearing, college-level offerings. The second goal is to help entering EPCC students who are required to take developmental courses to successfully complete that coursework in a much shorter period of time.

This report focuses on what we as part of the team evaluating the Achieving the Dream initiative see as the most significant accomplishment of EPCC's Achieving the Dream work to date. In collaboration with the University of Texas at El Paso (UTEP) and 12 local independent school districts in the El Paso area, EPCC developed and brought to scale an improved process for helping high school students prepare for entry into college. Typically during their junior and senior years, El Paso area high school students now participate in what is known as the "college readiness protocol." Before they graduate from high school, virtually all students: (1) complete a joint admissions application to EPCC and UTEP, (2) learn about and prepare for the ACCUPLACER test, (3) take the ACCUPLACER test, (4) review scores with counselors, and (5) refresh skills and take the test again if needed. Some students also (6) enroll in a summer bridge program to strengthen their basic skills, if necessary.

Since the college readiness protocol was established, fewer entering EPCC students have placed into developmental programs. According to EPCC's analysis, in the two-year period between fall 2005, the year before the protocol was first piloted, and fall 2007, when the protocol was used with a majority of incoming EPCC students, the proportion of students who scored in the college-ready range on the ACCUPLACER assessment increased from 3 to 5 percent in math, from 30 to 35 percent in reading, and from 51 to 66 percent in writing. The proportion of students who placed into higher levels of developmental courses also increased over this same period. For example, among students in the 2005 cohort, 31 percent placed into the lowest level of developmental math, and only 28 percent placed into the highest level of developmental math. Among the 2007 cohort, just 22 percent placed into the lowest level of developmental math, while 41 percent placed into the highest level.

Few Achieving the Dream colleges have, as part of their work with the initiative, collaborated with feeder high schools to better prepare high school students for the academic demands of college. EPCC was chosen for a case study analysis because its approach to Achieving the Dream has been so distinctive. Based on a study involving two sets of interviews by CCRC researchers with college personnel in the summer of 2006 and in the spring of 2009, this report recounts the path EPCC took in implementing the college readiness protocol.

The Achieving the Dream initiative is based on a five step improvement process — (1) commit to change; (2) use data to prioritize actions; (3) engage stakeholders; (4) implement, evaluate, improve; and (5) establish a culture of continuous improvement. This report uses that framework to discuss EPCC’s participation in the initiative. We focus a good deal of attention on how EPCC faculty and staff and especially stakeholders outside the college became involved with these efforts, because the development of strong working relationships among El Paso educators both within and outside the community college is central in understanding the progress EPCC has made over the past several years. In a final section, we sketch out lessons learned by key individuals involved in EPCC’s Achieving the Dream work. These lessons may have relevance for other colleges considering similar plans for increasing student success.

The Achieving the Dream Process

In the years prior to joining Achieving the Dream, EPCC had launched a number of interventions — a student success course and a developmental learning communities program, among others — in order to help its struggling students. EPCC applied to participate in Achieving the Dream because its leadership wanted to do more to increase student success. The EPCC president and senior administrators felt that the initiative’s approach, and especially its emphasis on using data to diagnose problems and garnering broad support to address those problems, recognized key challenges in effecting change at a large, multiple-campus college.

The goal of Achieving the Dream is to increase student success rates among community college students and to close achievement gaps among groups that have traditionally faced significant barriers to success, including low-income students and students of color. The initiative emphasizes evidence-based decision making as well as broad-based organizational change. It calls on participating colleges to collect, analyze, and disaggregate data on student progress as the central means to understand and improve inadequate achievement among particular subgroups of their student populations. In particular, colleges are asked to collect longitudinal data on entering cohorts of students to identify how well students attain certain critical milestones, such as completing developmental education and the initial college-level or “gatekeeper” courses, persisting from term to term and year to year, and earning certificates and degrees. The long-term aim is to establish a “culture of inquiry and evidence” throughout the college that supports continuous improvement in student success.

Colleges are expected to follow a five-step process to build effective, sustainable institutional practices that promote student achievement. The steps outlined below are found in the Achieving the Dream publication, *Field Guide for Improving Student Success* (Achieving the Dream, 2009), where they are discussed in greater detail.

Step 1. Commit. The college’s senior leadership, with support from the board of trustees and faculty leaders, commits to making changes in policy and resource allocation necessary to improve student outcomes, communicates the vision widely within the institution, and organizes teams to oversee the process.

Step 2. Use data to prioritize actions. The college uses longitudinal student cohort data and other evidence to identify gaps in student achievement. A key premise of Achieving the Dream is that once faculty and staff see that students overall are not achieving at desired levels and that certain groups of students are not doing as well as others, they will be motivated to try new approaches to improve student success. To ensure that they use their resources to greatest effect, colleges are encouraged to prioritize the student achievement issues they plan to address.

Step 3. Engage stakeholders. The college engages faculty, staff, and other internal and external stakeholders in developing a limited set of focused strategies for remedying priority problems with student achievement, based on a diagnosis of the causes and evaluation of the effectiveness of previous attempts by the institution or others to address similar problems.

Step 4. Implement, evaluate, improve. The college implements the strategies for increasing student success, making sure to evaluate the outcomes and using the results to make further improvements.

Step 5. Establish a culture of continuous improvement. The college takes steps to institutionalize strategies for improving the impact of programs and services on student outcomes. Attention is given to how resources are allocated, in order to bring proven strategies to scale and sustain them. Processes for program review, planning, and budgeting are driven by evidence of what works best for students.

To carry out such an ambitious agenda, Achieving the Dream provided colleges that joined in the first round, including EPCC, with grants totaling \$450,000 over five years to support data-based planning and implementation of improvement strategies. A coach, often a former community college president, and a data facilitator were assigned to help each institution, and the colleges received further guidance through participation in an annual strategy institute, where they shared experiences and findings with other colleges. Participating colleges also created two teams to guide efforts under the initiative: a core team for overseeing decision making and resource allocations, and a data team for analyzing student outcomes data and disseminating those findings.

The five-step process outlined above serves as a useful framework for understanding how EPCC's college readiness strategy, which is the focus of this report, was established. We note, however, that while these steps represent an idealized approach to institutional improvement, they do not prescribe a strict sequence of actions. We use the five steps to organize the key events described in this report, most but not all of which appear in chronological order.

Study Methodology

This report is based largely on two sets of interviews conducted by the Community College Research Center (CCRC) as part of an evaluation of Achieving the Dream being carried out by CCRC and MDRC. In the summer of 2006, researchers from CCRC conducted interviews with more than 30 personnel at EPCC (sometimes individually and sometimes in groups) to understand the college's work on the initiative in the 2004-05 "planning year" and in 2005-06, the first year of implementation. In spring 2009, after EPCC had completed nearly five years of work on Achieving the Dream, CCRC researchers returned to conduct additional interviews. In the second round of interviews, some of which were conducted individually and others in groups of two or more discussants, researchers interviewed 33 personnel from EPCC. These included:

- the president and senior administrators
- financial officers
- IR and IT personnel, several of whom were on the data team
- faculty, staff, and administrators who were on the core team
- faculty and student services staff who were otherwise involved in the initiative
- faculty and student services staff who were not involved in the initiative.

In addition, CCRC met with an EPCC board of trustees member, the UTEP provost and vice president for academic affairs, and an El Paso area school district associate superintendent. We also conducted a focus group with EPCC students from a variety of program areas. Information gathered from both sets of interviews was examined alongside relevant documents, including EPCC's annual reports to Achieving the Dream.

This report focuses on EPCC's Achieving the Dream efforts to collaborate with UTEP and local high school districts to strengthen the college readiness of prospective local college students. We chose to concentrate on this topic for two reasons: first, we want to call attention to a strategy that few other Achieving the Dream colleges have taken in their work on the initiative, and, second, we regard this work as EPCC's

most significant Achieving the Dream accomplishment to date. El Paso undertook several other interventions as a result of Achieving the Dream, including strategies aimed at improving developmental education outcomes and accelerating student progress in English-as-a-Second-Language (ESL) courses. However, this report focuses primarily on EPCC's college readiness initiative and the strategies related to this movement rather than the other Achieving the Dream interventions that EPCC has undertaken.

El Paso Community College and Its Student Population

The city of El Paso is located on the western edge of Texas, across the river from the large city of Juarez, Mexico. El Paso County, from which EPCC draws most of its students, has a population of more than 730,000,

of whom 80 percent are Hispanic. Twenty-seven percent of the population lives below the poverty line, compared with 16 percent for the state of Texas as a whole.

Established in 1969 as a community college, EPCC has five campuses and three training centers and serves more than 30,000 credit and noncredit students annually. It employs 2,900 persons in total, including 1,050 full-time and 390 part-time faculty.

The average age of credit students at EPCC is 25; about half of credit students are less than 21 years of age. About 86 percent of EPCC's students are Hispanic; 8 percent are White and 2 percent are Black. Nearly 60 percent are Pell Grant recipients. Approximately 60 percent of EPCC students attend college part time, and about 60 percent work in addition to taking classes. Most are first-generation college students unfamiliar with how to succeed in postsecondary education.

EPCC's Achieving the Dream Course of Action

Step 1. Commit to improving student outcomes.

The president and senior leadership shared and effectively communicated a vision for change.

A great deal of the enthusiasm for the Achieving the Dream model for change at EPCC has been generated by its current president, Dr. Richard Rhodes. Until his appointment in 2001, EPCC had experienced substantial turnover in its top leadership. Indeed the college had had seven presidents in the 10 years prior to Rhodes' appointment. The quality of presidential leadership is now seen as a major strength of the college. In our interviews, administrators, faculty, and staff were uniformly positive and enthusiastic in describing the president's leadership. Several administrators and faculty members told us that the current president has dramatically improved faculty morale and the overall climate at the college.

Rhodes has encouraged administrators and staff to make decisions based on "what is best for the student." This philosophy, which aligns well with the Achieving the Dream model, has spread throughout the administrative team. The president and senior administrators have voiced strong support for Achieving the Dream since the beginning of EPCC's participation in the summer of 2004. Rhodes often remarks that Achieving the Dream has been "the best thing that happened to EPCC." In our spring 2009 interview, the president said that using data to make improvements—a key principle in the initiative's approach—is something that the college should have been doing long ago.

Responsibilities for key tasks and processes were established through the formation of core and data teams. Achieving the Dream requires each participating college to create a core team made up of senior leaders at the college to oversee the improvement process, as well as a data team comprised of institutional researchers and others responsible for collecting, analyzing, and sharing data relevant to the initiative.

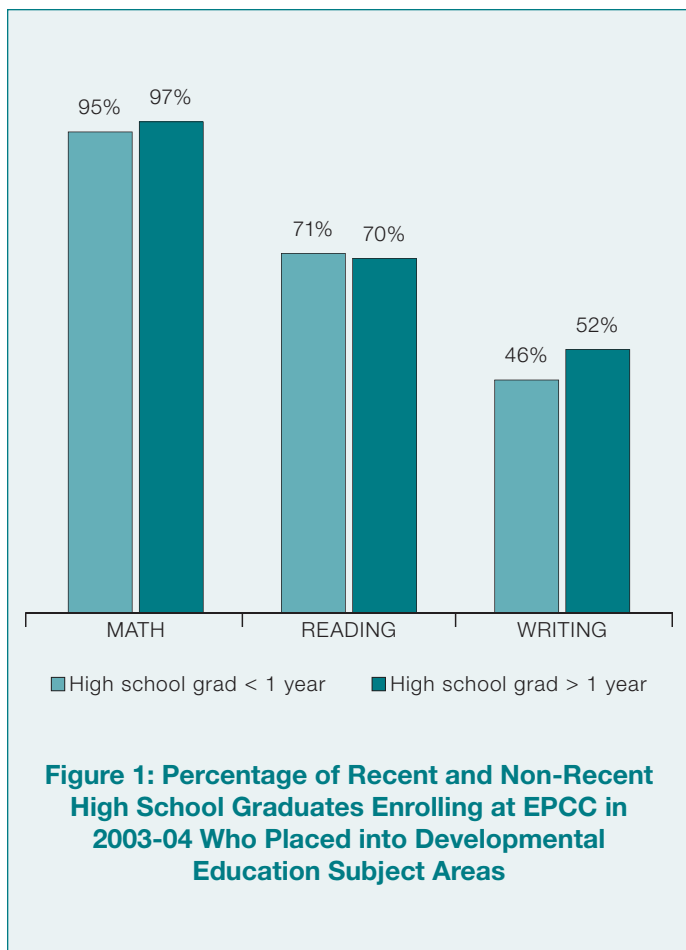
In the summer of 2004, the senior leadership of EPCC appointed leaders and established some of the membership in its Achieving the Dream core and data teams. The data team works closely with the institutional research (IR) staff to identify data needed for the initiative and to collect and analyze data from institutional student information systems, surveys, and placement test records. The core team includes members of the president's cabinet and has representation from the information technology (IT) and institutional research (IR) offices; developmental education and ESL faculty; counseling, testing, resource development, and grants management personnel; as well as students. According to several persons we interviewed at the college, the responsibility to see that Achieving the Dream tasks are carried out almost always lies with the vice president in charge of a given area. This approach was taken to ensure that activities and policies implemented as part of the initiative would be seen as institutional priorities and become a core part of the way the college does business.

Step 2. Use data to prioritize actions.

ACCUPLACER scores indicated poor college readiness among high school seniors. As its top priority for improving student success through Achieving the Dream, EPCC chose to focus on systems and practices that negatively affect students' readiness for college (as measured by ACCUPLACER placement test scores). While this priority area necessarily demanded close coordination with the K-12 sector and in particular El Paso's feeder high schools, it was a relatively easy choice to make—it is where EPCC felt it could make the greatest impact on student success.

According to 2003-04 ACCUPLACER test data, 98 percent of first-time college students at EPCC placed into at least one developmental course in math, reading, or writing; 46 percent placed into all three developmental subject areas. Following the Achieving the Dream approach, the college disaggregated the placement test data to identify gaps in achievement by different groups of students. At El Paso, disaggregating by race or ethnicity made little sense because the student body is so predominantly Hispanic.

The college did however gain useful insight when it disaggregated data on the amount of time that had elapsed since entering students completed high school. While many at the college assumed that entering students who came directly from high school had much lower rates of developmental placement, this was not the case (see Figure 1). Of those entering students with a diploma who had been out of high school for less than one year, 95 percent, 71 percent, and 46 percent placed into developmental math, reading, and writing, respectively. Of those with a diploma who had been out of high school for more than one year, 97 percent, 70 percent, and 52 percent placed into these developmental subject areas. The rates for these two student groups were quite similar: recent graduates were not placing into college-level courses at substantially higher rates. The data thus suggested that collaboration with the local school districts was needed to better align high school outcomes with the academic skills that are needed for college.



Lengthy developmental education sequences were shown to thwart student progress. EPCC has four developmental levels in math, three in reading, and two in writing. Nearly half the 2003-04 placements in developmental math among all entering students, including those without a high school diploma or GED, were made to the lowest level course. Students who place into developmental programs generally have to postpone taking college-level courses in those relevant subject areas for a long time—at least four semesters for the many who place at the lowest level in developmental math (and who may not successfully complete each course in the sequence each term).

Indeed, when the college examined what happens to students who enroll in developmental classes, it found that the failure rates for development students in their first courses were 30 percent in math, 19 percent in reading, and 26 percent in writing. Such mediocre completion rates cause additional setbacks for students. In surveys and focus groups conducted by the college as part of Achieving the Dream, many students reported that the significant delay they experienced before beginning college-level courses is often the reason why some students drop out of EPCC. They also voiced frustration with the placement test process itself.

In light of this evidence, EPCC decided to focus its Achieving the Dream efforts on two main goals: (1) decreasing the number of entering students who place into developmental education courses and (2) decreasing the time required to complete developmental education coursework. Since so many recent high school graduates place into developmental education courses, the achievement of these goals necessarily involves changes in practices for high school students who have not yet arrived at EPCC.

Step 3. Engage stakeholders.

Internal stakeholders: Key faculty members led efforts to formulate strategies. The engagement of internal actors that occurred at EPCC, particularly among the faculty, has extended far beyond familiarizing the college community with the college’s goals or plans for Achieving the Dream. The core team made a deliberate

effort to get help from a wider group of persons than those on the Achieving the Dream core and data teams. The core team decided to create a developmental education council in fall 2005 made up of faculty, staff, and administrators. This council leads efforts to improve developmental education and includes standing committees for developmental math, reading, and writing, each of which consists of one faculty member from each campus plus a college-wide coordinator. Faculty representatives on the Achieving the Dream core team also participate in council standing committees.

In a group interview we held with faculty who are very active in the initiative, participants said that they — the faculty in general — “owned” the work on the initiative. Student services personnel we interviewed, who typically understand their role as providing support for instructional services, agreed with this perspective, as did the EPCC college leadership. Rather than being directed primarily by student affairs, as is the case at some other Achieving the Dream colleges, at EPCC, faculty representatives on key teams and committees drove the process. They were the ones who began asking for data on student outcomes and who took initiative to design and try out strategies for improving student success, especially in developmental education. The faculty were strongly supportive of the early data analyses that led to the establishment of the College Readiness Consortium and of efforts to engage K-12 educators.

Some of the developmental standing committees that were formed as part of the initiative have been particularly engaged and influential. In 2006, for example, the developmental math committee held a math summit attended by UTEP representatives and more than 100 participants from area school districts that focused on improving alignment of the K-16 math curriculum. The summit facilitated policy discussion in the College Readiness Consortium, and by 2008 all the area school districts began requiring four years of math in high school instead of just three. The same committee showed how the curriculum of the EPCC math sequence could be reformulated so as to be offered in three courses instead of four. In spring 2006 the committee recommended this change. This restructuring in developmental instruction has been approved by the college-wide math discipline and will be offered as early as fall 2010.

External stakeholders: Data shared with high school education leaders served as a motivator for strong action. Choosing to focus much of the Achieving the Dream work on high school students who were not yet EPCC students required special attention. Once the data about the 2003-04 ACCUPLACER results were compiled, the findings regarding recent high school graduates (less than one year out of school) were disaggregated by both school district and high school and then shared with the superintendents of the districts. It was the first time superintendents had seen such data. Previously, high school educators had typically used state exit exam results (either from the Texas Assessment of Academic Skills [TAAS] or its 2003 replacement, the Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills [TAKS]) as a measure of college readiness, believing that passing the state’s standardized test indicated an ability to place into and to succeed in entry-level college coursework.

In spring 2005, the EPCC president asked key education and business leaders from the community to serve as a standing advisory committee to the Achieving the Dream initiative at EPCC. The committee included the president of UTEP, superintendents of the four largest El Paso County independent school districts (ISDs), the publisher of a local newspaper, the chairman of the board of a local bank, a member of the SACS accreditation board, the leader of the local chamber of commerce, and representatives from local businesses and community organizations. The first meeting of this community advisory committee, which meets twice a year, helped to generate discussion about the extent of misalignment between high school outcomes and the skills that are needed to enter college, and it helped to nourish the desire to work collaboratively to address this issue.

In that meeting, EPCC shared with this larger group the findings from the analysis of ACCUPLACER results outlined above. EPCC’s president emphasized that discussion of the poor placement test results should not lead to assigning blame (see p. 8, *Creating a Blameless Environment*). The discussion that ensued ended in a consensus among the education and community leaders present that students graduating from high school in the El Paso area did not have a good understanding of what being college ready means.

Creating a Blameless Environment

Bringing together leaders from different educational sectors to talk about the lack of preparedness for college among El Paso high school students could have easily turned into an unproductive exercise in finger pointing, with the university blaming the community college and the high schools, the community college blaming the high schools, and the high schools blaming the elementary schools. Instead, the initial meeting of the standing advisory meeting in spring 2005 served as a key turning point that brought each educational sector, as well as other stakeholders, together around a common issue.

The presidents and vice presidents of EPCC and UTEP had agreed beforehand to model “no finger pointing” behavior during the meeting. And the high school superintendents had already been shown the placement data, so there were no big surprises to be revealed for these key attendees. During the meeting itself, when EPCC’s president began to discuss the findings with

the group as a whole, he emphasized that the goal was not about finding someone to blame but rather about finding a solution. Additionally, the issue was placed in the context of a national problem of college readiness, citing a recent announcement of a coalition of state governors to deal with the problem of the misalignment of high school outcomes with college expectations.

The effort to establish a non-threatening environment helped the attendees discuss the problem more openly. During the meeting, superintendents from the three largest school districts came to agree that the current situation with regard to poor placement results was unacceptable and had to be changed. In order to ensure that the progress they had just gained would not be lost, the vice president of instruction at EPCC suggested the creation of a college readiness consortium through which the high school sector, EPCC, and UTEP could continue to work collaboratively on the issue.

The shared acceptance of this problem and the declaration to act to address it was considered a breakthrough moment by some of our interviewees.

External stakeholders: UTEP, EPCC, and the high schools agreed to establish a working group whose members have broad authority. At the same meeting, the vice president of instruction at EPCC, Dennis Brown, suggested the creation of a “college readiness consortium” made up of representatives from EPCC, UTEP, and the high school districts in order to enhance collaboration on the college readiness issue and develop the means to get many more college-bound high school graduates to begin their initial college enrollment in college-level rather than developmental courses. The idea was widely supported, and an agreement was made to share student data and to work together to better understand why so many students were entering college needing developmental instruction.

To ensure greater continuity of participation in the consortium, the group decided to select representatives from EPCC and UTEP who were at the vice president and

provost levels rather than the presidents themselves. For the same reason, they also decided to involve associate superintendents rather than the superintendents of the school districts. It was also noted that associate superintendents are more strongly connected to the school principals, who have direct influence on classroom practice, which participants agreed would be advantageous. All 12 school district associate superintendents are members of the consortium.

The College Readiness Consortium was launched in fall 2005; it meets quarterly and is co-chaired by Dr. Brown of EPCC and by Dr. Richard Jarvis, the provost and vice president for academic affairs at UTEP. According to several persons we interviewed, the consortium “took on a life of its own.” As will be discussed below under Step 4, the collaboration has facilitated a great deal of progress not only in helping students understand the placement process, but in making fundamental changes in how the ACCUPLACER test is administered and in offering interventions that help students place into higher levels of developmental education or avoid it altogether.

Step 4. Implement, evaluate, improve.

The college implemented the college readiness protocol. The first major decision the consortium made in November 2005 was based on preliminary research conducted for Achieving the Dream that confirmed the belief among consortium members that high school students were not well-informed about college readiness. EPCC conducted focus groups with its students to appraise what they knew about the ACCUPLACER test and its impact on their college career. It turned out that the students knew very little. Because of the lack of knowledge and understanding about the placement process, members of the consortium reasoned that an important change was in order. They felt that a great deal of the confusion could be eliminated if, while still in high school, students were given an orientation about the college placement test, were encouraged to refresh skills through prescribed interventions, and were then given the opportunity to actually take the ACCUPLACER exam.

Thus the consortium decided to conduct a pilot study to test this idea. The pilot was originally to be implemented in three local school districts, but three other school districts decided that they also wanted to be involved. So in the end all high school seniors in 6 of El Paso's 12 school districts, about 4,000 students, participated in the first pilot in spring 2006. The students were given an overview about the ACCUPLACER and told what the exam is used for, why it is so important, and how to prepare for it. Practice materials were also made available. Then these students took the exam at testing centers at EPCC and UTEP. Those who did not pass one of the three content areas of the test participated in sessions to refresh skills and were then retested. The costs for the pilot were shared equally by EPCC, UTEP, and the school districts. This experience showed that students who attended the orientations and took or re-took the ACCUPLACER had better placements at EPCC than previous-year students from the same districts, with more of the former placing directly into college-level courses.

The fact that some students did better without substantial instructional interventions confirmed what many members of the consortium believed: the lack of understanding about the ACCUPLACER and the lack of preparation for it is a significant reason why many recent

high school students do not place into college-level courses. The pilot study demonstrated that a substantial number of students did not really lack requisite skills; with some nominal practice those students were in fact found to be ready for college, at least in some subject areas. Using the practice materials helped the students recall what they had already learned in high school. When the consortium members, especially the associate superintendents of the school districts, saw that this orientation, preparation, and early testing procedure had positive effects, they advocated having the school districts themselves become ACCUPLACER test sites for high school students. In 2006 the El Paso area school districts were among the first in the nation to carry out ACCUPLACER testing at high schools.

The transition to ACCUPLACER testing at high school sites was fairly smooth. EPCC and UTEP testing centers provided training and support to high school test site administrators, proctors, and counselors, and they continue to do so on a mostly annual basis. They also provide support for uploading the ACCUPLACER scores to UTEP and EPCC. EPCC stores the test scores. The school districts now pay for the testing. To cover these costs, they use legislatively approved funds, totaling \$250 per student, that are intended to promote college readiness.

Because of the success of the pilot, the consortium established a comprehensive college readiness protocol for high school students, which consists of the following components:

1. Students complete a joint admissions application to EPCC and UTEP.
2. Students and their parents attend a comprehensive orientation about the ACCUPLACER in which they learn about its purpose, how scores are used, how not doing one's best can add time and cost to degree completion, and how to prepare for the exam.
3. Students take the test.
4. Counselors review the test scores with each student.
5. Students not passing all areas of the placement test are given interventions that focus on refreshing skills, and then are retested.
6. Students who still need help may enroll in a summer bridge program (described below).

Today roughly 10,000 El Paso area high school students take the ACCUPLACER each year. Virtually all El Paso students take the test before finishing high school, and many districts offer the test to juniors (high school students who apply to EPCC’s dual enrollment or early college programs may take the test even earlier).

Data on EPCC placement test scores show improved results over time.¹ Figures 2, 3, and 4 compare placement results of the first-time-in-college cohorts of 2005, the year before the pilot’s apparent effects were realized, and 2007, the first year the protocol had been used for most incoming students (72 percent of students in the 2007 cohort took the ACCUPLACER while still in high school). These figures show that the proportion of college-ready students increased from 3 to 5 percent in math, from 30 to 35 percent in reading, and from 51 to 66 percent in writing. Students also placed into higher levels of developmental education over this same period. For example, among

students in the 2005 cohort, 31 percent of students placed into the lowest level of developmental math, and only 28 percent placed into the highest level of developmental math. Among the 2007 cohort, just 22 percent placed into the lowest level of developmental math, while 41 percent placed into the highest level.

While these results provide encouraging evidence that the intervention improved college readiness, this methodology cannot rule out other explanations for this improvement. For example, because this methodology does not control for student characteristics, it is possible that the increases in college-ready students actually reflect changes in the EPCC entering student population. Additionally, the methodology does not account for possible improvements in students’ college readiness independent of their participation in the protocol. A more rigorous design would be needed to evaluate the actual effects of this intervention.

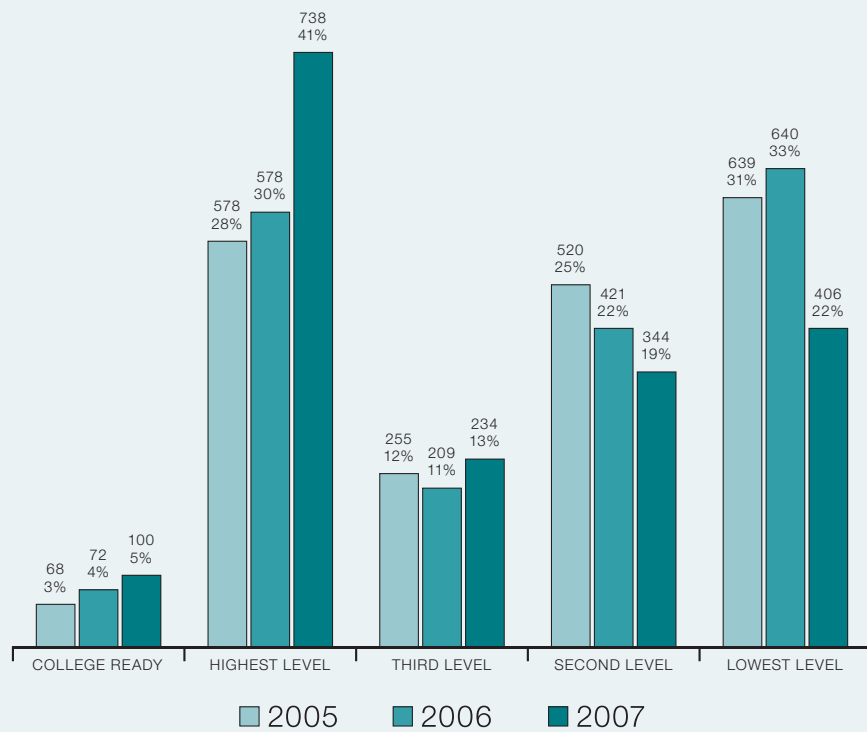


Figure 2: Percentage of Fall 2005, 2006, and 2007 First-Time-in-College Enrollees at EPCC Who Placed into Various Levels of Developmental Math

¹ These data were collected and analyzed by EPCC.

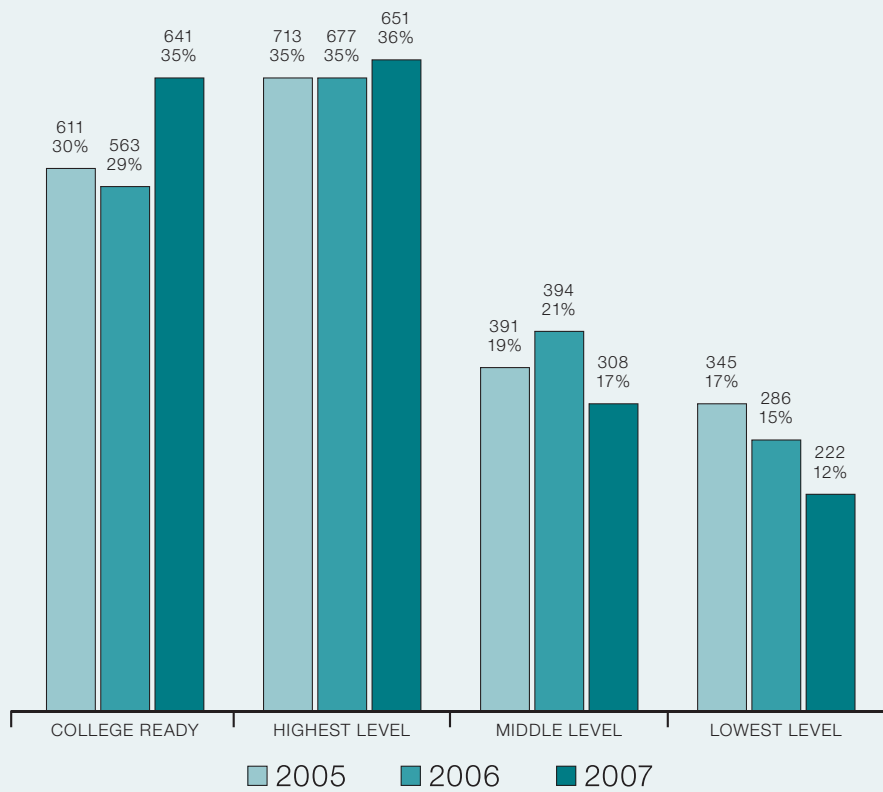


Figure 3: Percentage of Fall 2005, 2006, and 2007 First-Time-in-College Enrollees at EPCC Who Placed into Various Levels of Developmental Reading

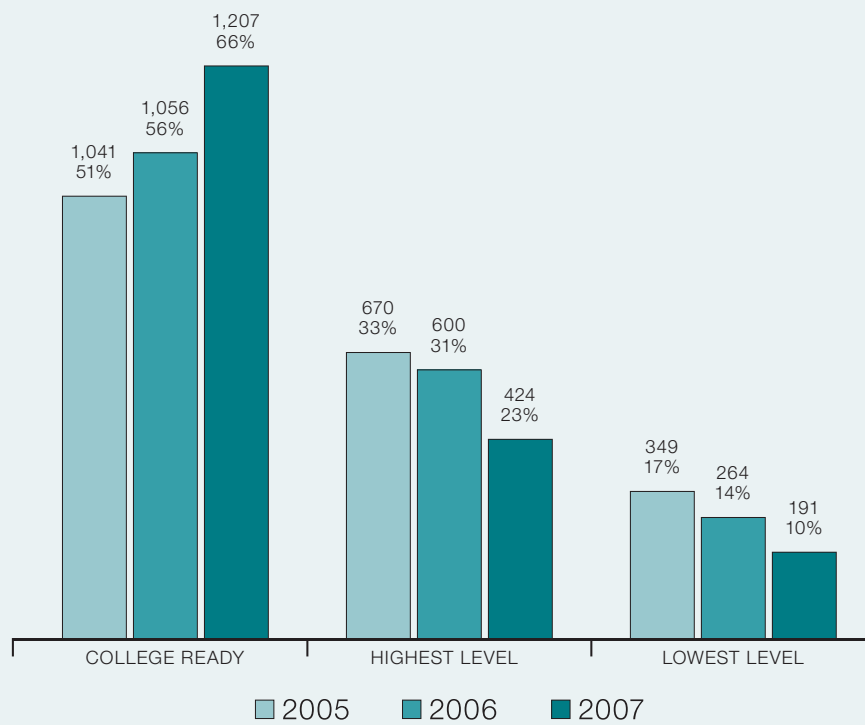


Figure 4: Percentage of Fall 2005, 2006, and 2007 First-Time-in-College Enrollees at EPCC Who Placed into Various Levels of Developmental Writing

The college implemented a summer bridge program.

As an outgrowth of its work on the College Readiness Consortium and as part of Achieving the Dream, EPCC launched a program for recent high school graduates who need help to become prepared for college. We describe it here because this program serves as a final component in the college readiness protocol. Students who do not pass the ACCUPLACER by the time they graduate high school are eligible for the summer bridge program, which began in 2006 with 64 students. Since then, the program has been restructured. The program now offers three noncredit courses in reading, math, and writing in a five-week intensive program, which is taught by EPCC faculty. At the end of the program, students take the ACCUPLACER again.

In 2008, 133 students enrolled in the summer bridge program, 113 completed it, and 98 enrolled in college in the fall. The majority of participants increased their level of developmental placement by at least one course level in both the math and writing subject areas, and more than 40 percent of participants did so in the reading subject area. Beginning in 2009, the summer bridge program was granted three years of support from the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board. The 2009 cohort who enroll in the program will be followed for two years by researchers from the National Center for Postsecondary Research (NCPR) to examine the program's impact on student success.²

The college retained and enhanced the college PREP program. Launched as a Title V program in 2002, this program, whose name stands for Pretesting Retesting Educational Preparation, helps incoming students prepare for the ACCUPLACER. It is especially appropriate for older students prior to their first semester of college enrollment who were not exposed to the college placement test in high school. We mention the program here because it functions much like the college readiness protocol used in the high schools. A two-hour overview to the ACCUPLACER test is offered, a diagnostic assessment of each student is made, and a case management approach is used to get students ready for the test. While multiple aids

are available, including instructional workshops and tutoring, students increasingly use computer-based instructional modules to refresh or boost skills in order to achieve better placements on the test. After having taken the ACCUPLACER, students may continue to use PREP services and may retake the exam after 30 days. In the 2007-08 academic year, the program served about 2,500 students.

Step 5. Establish a culture of continuous improvement.

EPCC has worked toward systematizing efforts for increasing student success. Several EPCC representatives we spoke with in 2009 characterized the college as being “halfway there” in terms of establishing a culture of evidence and inquiry whereby data use is habitual, experimental pilots are tested to gauge their effects, and proven strategies are brought to scale and continuously monitored for possible improvements. Our interviews suggest that faculty and administrator enthusiasm for using data to make decisions is growing, and that data on student progression are shared broadly, not just within small groups that are most directly involved in the initiative.

Several attributes of EPCC's Achieving the Dream work suggest that practices that were established during the initial five years of EPCC's involvement with Achieving the Dream will be sustained and expanded after the final year of funding.

First, with respect to the activities that are the focus of this report, the college has strengthened working ties with UTEP and the K-12 system through the College Readiness Consortium, which have already yielded strong benefits. Equally important, those appointed to the consortium, in particular the high school associate superintendents, represent a level of leadership that has enough authority to implement decisions while not being subject to rapid turnover. So far their efforts have remained secure and steady.

² NCPR is funded by the Institute of Education Sciences of the U.S. Department of Education. It is a partnership between CCRC, MDRC, the Curry School of Education at the University of Virginia, and faculty at Harvard University. For a more detailed explanation of this research see www.postsecondaryresearch.org.

Second, new councils and standing committees of faculty and staff and new areas of responsibility within traditional job positions, particularly among vice presidents, have been established that have begun to formalize processes for analysis of student progression as a means to better understand problem areas.

Third, the senior leadership at EPCC acknowledge the advantage of having greater numbers of faculty with a strong understanding of data collection and analysis, and, perhaps more so now than at the beginning of their participation in the initiative, they recognize the need to have an evaluation design in place before launching a pilot or increasing the scale of a chosen strategy. They are currently working to strengthen EPCC's position in this regard. In spring 2009 the president and other key administrators established a faculty-led "data and research" team that began work in fall 2009 to map out a more common, broader process of evaluation for programs and projects at the college.

Conclusion: Lessons Learned

In our interviews, EPCC staff and partners made a number of observations about their experience on the Achieving the Dream work that may serve as lessons for other colleges. Organized by theme and using some of the interviewees' own words, we conclude this report by sketching out lessons that resonated most strongly with what we learned about EPCC's efforts under the initiative to improve the college readiness and success of prospective college students before they complete high school.

Leadership and Commitment

- **Set priorities clearly, and do so early on.** EPCC's president emphasized this point repeatedly, advising: "First establish the priority and make sure everyone understands that it's a priority." Our interviews suggest that the president's emphasis on the high school-UTEP-EPCC partnership and on improving developmental education at EPCC was well-understood throughout the college.
- **Presidential commitment is critical.** Several of our interviewees held this view, which was voiced strongly by the vice president of instruction: "The president is as engaged as any president could possibly be in Achieving the Dream. He doesn't come after the fact. He is there up front and center and leading the charge."
- **Plan for leadership turnover.** Among others, the special assistant to the president acknowledged the role of strong personalities in creating the conditions for success at EPCC and underscored the importance of putting structures in place with specific layers of responsibility and involvement ascribed to particular personnel positions so that the departure of any one person, including the president, will not undo the work that has been completed. Several other interviewees commented on the importance of the president, but they often

noted that a critical mass of effort and success has been reached that would preserve gains and that provide momentum for future work. As an EPCC trustee explained, "The change started with personalities and it expanded. We have grown beyond that. Once they go on to the next level it will be seamless. I don't think the community will allow it to go back to the way it was. There would be an uproar."

Accountability and Stability

- **Make senior administrators accountable and require regular reporting.** Several interviewees felt that the fact that vice presidents were made responsible for plans outlined in the Achieving the Dream grant was a key factor in making progress. One administrator elaborated on this point: "The responsibility for anything in the [Achieving the Dream] implementation plan rests with the vice presidents. We wanted this initiative to be a core part of what happens at the college so that it wouldn't be a project sitting off to the side. Every time there is a designation of responsibility, a vice president is there. The status reports are requested from the vice presidents in appropriate areas." By making the vice presidents accountable for the Achieving the Dream work going on in their respective areas, the president ensured that they could not delegate their work on the initiative to junior administrators and then claim a lack of knowledge about the progress of the initiative.

Broad-Based Involvement

- **Efforts that are faculty led may gain greater support.** Several interviewees remarked that EPCC is a faculty-driven institution, and that this fact had strong implications for who would carry out the Achieving the Dream work and for how it would be viewed by the community. The fact that faculty were involved as key participants helped gain support for the initiative.

External Engagement

- **Building relationships takes time and effort.** Both the president and the vice president of instruction emphasized that relationship building requires significant effort. The vice president of instruction stated, “It can’t work without significant time. [The UTEP provost and I] spend a lot of time on these projects. That is the bit that’s unusual. If you try to cut corners on that it will not work.” Likewise, the president noted, “Partnerships are fragile and you don’t have control. Trying to get momentum from different sectors, one with 12 different structures, can be frustrating. I’d like to see it move more quickly, but the relationship-building can’t be rushed.”
- **Relationships should permeate partner organizations.** While many interviewees emphasized the importance of leadership in establishing relationships, others noted the necessity of creating strong relationships between parallel positions throughout cooperating institutions. The vice president of instruction put it this way: “The first thing is engagement by the president. The relationship between EPCC and UTEP is key. But it can’t just be at the presidential level; it has to permeate throughout the community college and the university. The provost and vice president must have a relationship. The deans must have a relationship.”

Efficacy

- **Capitalize on each other’s strengths.** As EPCC and UTEP have worked together, they have sought ways to benefit from each others’ strengths and expertise. For example, the UTEP provost reported that the university relies on EPCC’s experience in working with older students. “We are not as knowledgeable when it comes to adult re-entry. I look to our partnership to address some of those issues.”
- **Leverage what is learned.** The EPCC president suggested that strategies effective in helping one group of students can sometimes be applied to help

others. He noted that what the college learned about the experience of recent high school graduates taking the ACCUPLACER was applied to older students who enter EPCC and participate in the PREP program.

The lessons outlined here stem from the substantial progress EPCC has made in developing an improved process for helping high school students prepare for entry into college. Achieving the Dream was a catalyst for these activities: the initiative calls on colleges to collect and analyze data to design strategies for improving student outcomes on a substantial scale.

After gaining the commitment of key faculty and staff to improve student outcomes at the college, EPCC analyzed student placement data and found poor college readiness among entering students who had recently graduated from high school. EPCC chose to focus on remedying this problem, which was clearly an impediment to student success. EPCC addressed the problem by developing a strong collaboration with both the nearby public four-year college and the local high school districts. Because the strategy they adopted for better preparing high school students for the college placement test made such practical sense and appeared to be so successful, it was quickly brought to scale through the participation of all 12 high school districts that serve the college.

EPCC’s efforts have led to improvements in institutional practices at both the college and high school levels that show promising results for entering students, especially underprepared students who may be unfamiliar with college practices such as placement testing and college standards for academic success. Recognizing how EPCC and its leadership worked to establish and sustain the College Readiness Consortium with its UTEP and high school district partners is central in understanding the progress EPCC has made in helping students succeed.