



Achieving the Dream™

Community Colleges Count

Using Achieving the Dream to Meet Accreditation Requirements

PRINCIPLES AND PRACTICES OF STUDENT SUCCESS

Terri Mulkins Manning, Ed.D.

The fundamental concepts of Achieving the Dream — using evidence to develop and evaluate strategies for improving student learning and success — are also important to successful efforts to meet accreditation requirements. Following the Achieving the Dream approach can help community colleges organize and document improvement efforts in ways that are a natural fit with the expectations of the regional accrediting agencies.

During the past decade, the six regional accrediting agencies have changed their requirements and now encourage colleges to adopt processes and practices that demonstrate effectiveness in teaching and learning and improvements in institutional quality. Those processes and practices involve planning, evaluation, and outcomes assessment with the goals of enhancing student learning, strengthening programs, and improving services.

This guide is designed to show how colleges can use the methodology of Achieving the Dream to provide evidence of compliance with key accreditation standards and to drive their institution's quality improvement agenda.

The Accreditation Process

All regional accrediting agencies have a similar compliance certification process. Colleges prepare an in-depth self-study once every ten years to evaluate their progress against a set of established criteria or standards. A broad and diverse team from the college spends a considerable amount of time assessing the college in relation to these

criteria and writing the self-study document. A team of peer evaluators selected by the accrediting agency reviews the self-study documentation, visits the campus, and makes suggestions or recommendations to the college and the accrediting agency about what, if anything, the college needs to do to meet the accreditation standards.

Responding to the national climate of increased accountability, accrediting agencies are taking seriously their responsibility for ensuring that their member institutions meet rigorous performance standards. All of the agencies have increased their standards for evidence of student learning and their requirements that colleges use learning outcomes assessment data to improve classroom strategies, programs, and support services. Colleges are finding that they can no longer gear up for the self-study process a couple of years before an accreditation visit, but instead must demonstrate that improvement efforts are ongoing, documented, and integrated into the way they do business.

While there are some differences among the accrediting agencies, all of them follow institutional quality improvement frameworks that require colleges to:

- Determine the conditions that affect the college’s faculty, staff, and students, and the local community through needs assessment and environmental scanning
- Establish appropriate goals and outcomes, with an emphasis on learning outcomes for courses, programs, and support services
- Measure progress toward attaining the goals and desired outcomes
- Analyze the results of assessments and evaluations to document the need for improvements in programs and services
- Develop interventions or strategies to increase student, faculty, staff, and community success, and improve programs and services
- Demonstrate how these interventions and strategies have improved institutional quality

These steps are familiar to Achieving the Dream colleges. In the Achieving the Dream approach, colleges are expected to analyze data to determine barriers to student success, adopt strategies designed to remove those barriers, evaluate the strategies, and use the results to further improve programs and services. Through this process, Achieving the Dream seeks to help colleges institutionalize procedures and practices for improving student success and institutional effectiveness that are fully consistent with those expected for accreditation.

Comparing Accreditation Criteria and Achieving the Dream Performance Measures

Accrediting agencies work with diverse institutions, from barber colleges to theological seminaries to research universities. As a result, they have not established common learning outcome measures for all institution types. Neither do accrediting agencies typically set benchmarks for standard indicators of student success, such as retention, completion, and graduation rates. Accrediting agencies allow individual institutions the

freedom to create their own indicators of student learning and success based on the mission of the institution and the characteristics of the student population they serve. Achieving the Dream colleges are able to use the measures for student success they develop through the initiative, and the processes and strategies for improving those measures, to meet accreditation needs.

Achieving the Dream has established a set of performance measures to guide colleges in their work. These include the rates at which students:

- Successfully complete the courses they take
- Advance from developmental to credit-bearing courses
- Enroll in and successfully complete initial college-level, or “gatekeeper” courses
- Continue enrollment from one semester to the next
- Earn degrees and/or certificates

(*Field Guide for Improving Student Success*. Achieving the Dream, 2009.)

While a few of the six regional accrediting agencies have criteria that specifically address these measures of student success, all have criteria that encourage colleges to develop strategies, programs, and services that improve the following measures:

Successful course completion

- All accrediting agencies want institutions to determine what barriers exist for their students, collect and analyze data about student learning to guide program development and service delivery, evaluate programs and services, use the evaluation results to improve programs and services, and finally, observe increases in course completion rates.
- Southern (SACS) and New England (NEASC) explicitly address course completion in their standards.

Advancement from developmental education to credit courses

- All accrediting agencies are interested in institutions developing special services, based on analysis of student outcome data, to help students attain the learning outcomes in their courses, including developmental courses. Since developmental courses prepare students to master essential basic skills required for success in college-level courses, analyzing their effectiveness is an essential part of the institutional effectiveness processes required for accreditation.
- Northwest (NWCCU) is the only regional agency that cites developmental coursework in its accreditation criteria. Western (WASC) and NEASC mention student ability levels, and programs and services designed to improve deficiencies.

Successful gatekeeper course completion

- All six agencies are very concerned about student success in general education courses, including gatekeeper courses. Their major concern is not simply with the numbers of students who complete the courses, but with the rates of success based on tracking the progression of cohorts of students over time. The latter is a key focus of Achieving the Dream.

- Accrediting agencies also want colleges to measure their students' learning outcomes to ensure that they are mastering college-level competencies in the gatekeeper and general education courses. Much variation exists among agencies in the detail required to measure student learning outcomes. Southern and North Central give colleges the freedom to define their student learning outcomes. Middle States, New England, Northwestern, and Western list specific outcomes the colleges must measure.
- SACS and NEASC criteria directly address course completion.

Term-to-term persistence

- All six agencies want colleges to take steps to strengthen course content, classroom strategies, student orientation, and counseling, advising, and other student support services to improve learning and encourage student persistence.
- New England and Middle States specifically address student persistence.

Completion of degrees and certificates

- All six agencies are interested in whether students attain program outcomes, which can include completion of credentials as well as licensure, employment, and baccalaureate transfer.
- NEASC is the sole agency that explicitly mentions attainment and other measures of successful completion in its standards.

Using Achieving the Dream to Meet Accreditation Needs

The following is an example of how one college, by following the Achieving the Dream approach to improving student success and institutional performance, developed strategies to improve gatekeeper course outcomes. This same approach could be used to meet the accreditation requirement that colleges establish processes for assessing and improving student learning outcomes.

DEFINING LEARNING OUTCOMES TO INCREASE STUDENT SUCCESS IN GATEKEEPER COURSES: Westmoreland County Community College (WCCC), Youngwood, PA

Prior to Achieving the Dream, WCCC published a catalog description for each of its courses, but did not require a common course outline, syllabus, or set of learning outcomes. While faculty received a suggested format for their courses, the content could be changed depending upon the individual interests, expectations, and strengths of the faculty member. When the college analyzed its data during its Achieving the Dream planning year, it discovered low success rates as measured by grades in many of its “gatekeeper” courses; that is, college-level courses that are required for graduation. It also began to understand that student outcome competencies varied greatly depending on who taught the course.

Faculty members concluded that to improve the success of students in gatekeeper courses and increase consistency in the competencies acquired, the learning outcomes that students must acquire to successfully complete each course had to be identified and aligned among the courses in every sequence. Thus, all students taking any course could be assured that they would receive instruction aimed at the same learning objectives and that at each step they would be prepared for the next course in the sequence. The faculty began with English, reading, and mathematics courses. They came together in content groups to discuss placement test cut scores and the learning outcomes they expected for students in each course. Faculty worked on revising the placement test cut scores to better align with course content, then created a common course outline, syllabus, set of learning outcomes, and assessment to measure the learning outcomes in each course.

When learning outcomes assessment results were analyzed, faculty discovered that students were doing well on some objectives and having difficulty with others. In the process of analyzing student learning, they also learned that every faculty member had high student scores on some outcomes and lower scores on others. Faculty shared effective teaching strategies to improve student learning for those outcomes with lower scores. After the new course alignment was implemented, the college compared term-to-term retention rates with those from previous years, and found that retention had improved by between 1 and 7 percent, depending on the course.

In seeking to increase the number of students who successfully completed gatekeeper courses, WCCC identified and created an effective general process for improving student learning outcomes in the college’s general education core courses. WCCC was able to use its improved process not only to increase student success, but also to document a workable learning outcomes assessment process for its next round of accreditation.

Institutional Effectiveness and the “Culture of Evidence”

Institutional effectiveness consists of a set of ongoing and systematic institutional processes and practices that include planning, the evaluation of programs and services, the identification and measurement of outcomes across all institutional units (including learning outcomes in instructional programs), and the use of data and assessment results to inform decision-making. All of these activities are accomplished with the purpose of improving programs and services and increasing student success and institutional quality.

Achieving the Dream’s “culture of evidence” strongly supports institutional effectiveness. A culture of evidence can be described as a “collective mindset, one in which critical decisions affecting students — from selecting educational strategies and allocating resources to scheduling classes and organizing student services — are informed by data and evaluated in light of whether student achievement increases” (*Success is What Counts*. Achieving the Dream, 2007.) More simply stated, a culture of evidence is the practice of using data to identify opportunities for improvement, diagnosing the causes of student achievement problems before creating solutions, and then evaluating the solutions to ensure they are effective. Colleges must first look at their students’ current achievement rates, establish measurable goals and outcomes for all students, including underserved populations, and make improvements in programs and services to help more students succeed. This work involves disaggregating data on student learning outcomes, achievement, and student success by variables such as race, age, income level, and other important demographic characteristics in order to better understand barriers to student success and identify opportunities for improvement.

Institutional effectiveness is now addressed in the accreditation standards or language of all six regional accrediting agencies, and is becoming more important to the accreditation process.

Improving Institutional Quality

Indicators of institutional quality are critical to all six regional accrediting agencies. Because all six include language such as “strengthening educational quality” or “improving institutional quality,” it is critical that institutions document their processes for improving student success. The Achieving the Dream improvement process involves engaging faculty and staff on a broad

scale in a thorough analysis of achievement gaps, and evaluating the effectiveness of academic programs and student support services. Achieving the Dream colleges use this process to develop strategies to close achievement gaps and evaluate and improve strategies to observe improvements in student outcomes. If a college documents its work in implementing the Achieving the Dream process, this work can easily be used in its accreditation self-study.

Two accrediting agencies (North Central and Southern) have developed more in-depth processes to evaluate institutional quality. An institution accredited by the Higher Learning Commission of the North Central Association participates in either the Program to Evaluate and Advance Quality (PEAQ, a self-study process) or the Academic Quality Improvement Program (AQIP). An institution accredited by the Commission on Colleges of the Southern Association must complete both the self-study process called Core Requirements and Comprehensive Standards and the Quality Enhancement Plan (QEP). Both agencies adopted these processes to emphasize evidence-based improvements in institutional quality as a central goal of reaffirmation. The AQIP and QEP processes require institutions to choose an institutional improvement initiative for which the institution can demonstrate evidence of progress.

AQIP is a process for continuous quality improvement. Community colleges currently comprise most of the pool of AQIP institutions. AQIP began in 1999 to “introduce the principles and benefits of continuous improvement into the culture of colleges and universities by providing an alternative process through which an already-accredited institution can maintain its accreditation from the Higher Learning Commission” (AQIP Home Page, 2009).

The QEP, which began in 2003, allows colleges to address an issue they deem relevant and critical to student learning. While the self-study is being completed, a separate team works on the QEP. The student improvement strategies that Achieving the Dream colleges develop, implement, and evaluate through the initiative’s improvement process are precisely the sort of improvement initiatives called for under both AQIP and QEP.

The profiles on the following pages describe how Achieving the Dream colleges used the initiative’s approach in meeting AQIP and QEP requirements.

ACHIEVING THE DREAM STRATEGIES AS AQIP ACTION PROJECTS: Jackson Community College, Jackson, MI

When Jackson Community College (JCC) joined the Achieving the Dream initiative in 2007, it was well into its AQIP process. The college noted that the process of “building a culture of evidence” encouraged by Achieving the Dream was similar to the AQIP process. Both processes are intended to help colleges develop strategies for improving student success that are cost-effective and benefit students on a substantial scale. Both processes involve evaluation and assessment to determine what is working, making it possible to document progress on institutional improvement.

JCC developed a new AQIP Action Project in the “helping students learn” category to support its Achieving the Dream work. Titled “Improving the Success of High-Risk Students,” the project was designed to increase student success as measured by grades, and the term-to-term persistence of students in developmental math and reading.

The college used the qualitative and quantitative analyses completed through Achieving the Dream as the justification for this Action Project. Among the things it discovered through this process were major barriers for students, low success rates in courses, and lack of preparedness among entering students. It also identified at-risk groups, including minority males under 25. The college made sure that this new initiative was aligned with its strategic plan, the president’s vision, and other ongoing major initiatives at the college. Achieving the Dream core team members created strategies addressing the barriers, and identified outcomes and an evaluation process to determine effectiveness. After only one year of focused work using learning communities, supplemental instruction, and a new program called Men of Merit, which addressed minority males under 25, the college has documented improvements in grades and increases in term-to-term retention.

The AQIP Quality Checkup team commended Jackson Community College for successfully aligning its major student success strategies and institutional improvement processes. The team submitted a report to the Higher Learning Commission noting no accreditation issues and recommending continued accreditation.

**INTEGRATING ACHIEVING THE DREAM AND THE QUALITY ENHANCEMENT PLAN
TO INCREASE MOMENTUM ON DEVELOPMENTAL STUDENT SUCCESS:
Wayne Community College, Goldsboro, NC**

Wayne Community College began work on its Quality Enhancement Plan at the same time it started analyzing data and writing its Achieving the Dream implementation plan. The Achieving the Dream core team became convinced that the area of greatest need for improved student success at the college was developmental math. At the time of the proposal, 84 percent of entering students tested into at least one developmental course (78 percent in math). Only 62 percent of entering students who took these courses passed with a grade of C or higher. The success rates were lower for students in high-risk groups. WCC discovered that by reorganizing and improving all entry points where new developmental students first made contact with the college, it could improve student success in a substantial way. The college decided to combine the funding, staff time, energy, and planning required for two major initiatives (the QEP and Achieving the Dream), thus ensuring a greater likelihood of success.

This led the college to obtain the broad-based involvement and support from faculty and staff needed to make sweeping changes. The college split the position of vice president for instruction and student services into two separate positions, organized a consolidated developmental studies area at the college, established a transfer advising center, and improved student support services along the continuum from point of entry to being firmly established in classes (testing, academic skills center, developmental courses, college-level courses, and supplemental instruction). The college also purchased new computers and software (My Math Lab) for the math lab.

The college has an annual planning process where departments submit proposals for funding new initiatives, which are reviewed and prioritized by a committee according to the college's areas of strategic emphasis. In this process, the college gives efforts related to Achieving the Dream or the Quality Enhancement Plan a higher priority for funding.

Thanks to these efforts, over a three-year period, successful course completion for developmental math increased by between 11 and 14 percent, including for students identified as high-risk.

Suggestions for Meeting Accreditation Expectations

The following are suggestions for colleges on how to implement and evaluate their Achieving the Dream strategies to meet accreditation requirements.

Use the Achieving the Dream improvement process as the basis for your self-study and quality improvement efforts. The Achieving the Dream process is designed to help your college assess needs for improvement in student success, identify strategies for addressing those needs, and monitor the effectiveness of strategies in improving student success. This is precisely what the accreditation agencies require for the self-study and quality improvement processes.

Include on the self-study team people who are familiar with or serve on the Achieving the Dream core team, data team, or strategy implementation team. Faculty and staff serving on these teams are often more familiar with the college's recent efforts to improve student outcomes. As such, these individuals will help to ensure that the college's self-study or quality improvement projects build on and learn from the college's ongoing work on student success.

Obtain broad institutional involvement in strategy development and implementation. This is a good practice for any institutional improvement effort, but is especially important for the self-study process, AQIP, or the QEP. Broad-based involvement allows an institution to analyze a problem or strategy from multiple points of view, obtain buy-in from faculty and staff, and promote broad ownership of the strategies implemented.

Ensure that Achieving the Dream strategies will help the college further its mission and strategic goals. Because accrediting agencies want to ensure that all of a college's major activities are mission-driven, make sure your Achieving the Dream strategies and activities are aligned with the mission and strategic goals of the college.

Establish outcomes for each Achieving the Dream strategy, assess whether the outcomes are met, and use the assessment data to document improvements in programs and services (thus closing the loop). Establishing outcomes for each strategy provides evidence of compliance with the requirements of all accrediting agencies that colleges measure outcomes for learning,

programs, and administrative activities. Accrediting agencies are more concerned that colleges use the results of their assessments to improve programs and services than in the actual assessment process itself.

Don't confine your assessment measures to grades and retention. Grades measure what percentage of the course requirements the student met (often including attendance, turning in homework, etc.), and retention indicates that a student chose to persist. But neither tells you why some students succeeded and some did not. In addition to grades and retention, colleges should measure changes in students' knowledge, attitude, behavior, and skill over the course of their interventions (as measured, for example, through pre- and post-tests or through documentation of attainment of competencies). If your interventions are designed to increase student engagement or teamwork skills, measure changes in engagement and teamwork skills. Measures such as these provide the evidence needed by accrediting agencies of the use of assessment results to improve programs and services. Also, because grades are so subjective and measure more than classroom learning, most accrediting agencies will not let colleges use grades as indicators of student learning or for outcomes assessment.

Use and document formative evaluation (indicators that occur along the way) to inform programmatic changes. Too often evaluations of student success strategies focus only on the summative question "Did it work?" rather than on the formative questions of "How was it implemented?" and "How might its implementation be improved?" For example, a math lab created to increase completion rates in developmental math should measure the summative question, "Did completion rates improve over time?" Formative evaluation indicators might include whether students actually used the lab, how often they used it, the quality of their experience, and other variables that might impact completion rates. The analysis of formative data will help colleges explain why an intervention worked or did not work.

Cite the evaluation reports for Achieving the Dream strategies as sources in your accreditation report. These reports can serve as written documentation in various sections of the compliance certification or quality improvement processes.

Use one of the Achieving the Dream strategies for the QEP topic if it has the potential for improving student learning in a significant way. If you do, select a strategy that will affect a significant number of students and be sustained by the institution.

Use one of the Achieving the Dream strategies as an Action Project for AQIP. Many Achieving the Dream strategies, processes, and activities would qualify in the areas of helping students learn, understanding students' needs, measuring effectiveness, planning continuous improvement, and building collaborative relationships.

Use the Achieving the Dream "culture of evidence" continuous improvement process as the basis for the college's institutional effectiveness function. This will ensure that the process for measuring and improving student outcomes really is continuous, as required by the accreditation agencies.

Use Achieving the Dream as an "umbrella" for student success efforts across the college. Accreditation agencies encourage colleges to align and coordinate their student success efforts so that the institution's resources and energy are mobilized efficiently to bring about improvements in student outcomes on a substantial scale.

Integrate Achieving the Dream into the college's strategic planning process. This helps to ensure that efforts to improve student success are guided by the college's mission and strategic directions, and provides a means of measuring progress toward strategic goals.

Terri Mulkins Manning, Ed.D. is a data facilitator for three Achieving the Dream colleges and the Associate Vice President for Institutional Research at Central Piedmont Community College. She consults with colleges on accreditation issues and hosts an annual Institute on Best Practices in Institutional Effectiveness.

Additional Resources

AQIP Home Page (2009). Retrieved April 15, 2009, from North Central Higher Learning Commission: <http://www.aqip.org>

Field Guide for Improving Student Success. Achieving the Dream (2009). http://www.achievingthedream.org/docs/Field_Guide_for_Improving_Student_Success.pdf

Quality Enhancement Plan Handbook (2009). Retrieved April 15, 2009, from Commission on Colleges: <http://sacscoc.org/pdf/handbooks/Exhibit%2031.Resource%20Manual.pdf>

Success Is What Counts. (2007, October). Retrieved April 15, 2009, from Achieving the Dream: <http://www.achievingthedream.org/docs/SUCCESS-counts-FINAL-11.6.pdf>

Websites for the Regional Accrediting Agencies:

Middle States Commission on Higher Education

www.msche.org

Serving: Delaware, the District of Columbia, Maryland, New Jersey, New York, Pennsylvania, Puerto Rico, and the U.S. Virgin Islands

New England Commission on Institutions of Higher Education

cihe.neasc.org

Serving: Connecticut, Maine, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, Rhode Island, and Vermont

North Central Higher Learning Commission

www.ncahlc.org

Serving: Arizona, Arkansas, Colorado, Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Kansas, Michigan, Minnesota, Missouri, Nebraska, New Mexico, North Dakota, Ohio, Oklahoma, South Dakota, West Virginia, Wisconsin, and Wyoming

Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities

www.nwccu.org

Serving: Alaska, Idaho, Montana, Nevada, Oregon, Utah, and Washington

Southern Commission on Colleges

www.sacscoc.org

Serving: Alabama, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, and Virginia, and in Latin America

Western Commission for Community and Junior Colleges

www.accjc.org

Serving: California, Hawaii, Guam, the Commonwealth of the Northern Marianas, American Samoa, the Federated States of Micronesia, the Republic of the Marshall Islands, and East Asia.

© 2009 Lumina Foundation for Education

Funding for this guide was provided by Lumina Foundation for Education as part of Achieving the Dream: Community Colleges Count. For more information, see www.achievingthedream.org. Davis Jenkins of the Community College Research Center at Teachers College, Columbia University, served as executive editor and Ellen Frishberg of JBL Associates as managing editor. The author would like to express thanks to Alice Villadsen for editing assistance. Rick Voorhees of the Voorhees Group and Barry Christopher of JBL Associates reviewed earlier drafts.