LEVERAGING PARTNERSHIPS

HOW NEBRASKA INDIAN COMMUNITY COLLEGE GOT ON BOARD WITH THE POSTSECONDARY DATA PARTNERSHIP

Achieving the Dream™

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

DISCLAIMER

In the fall of 2019, Nebraska Indian Community College became the first tribal college to participate in a new data service of the National Student Clearinghouse called the Postsecondary Data Partnership (PDP). A small college with high aspirations for its students, NICC was in the process of building data capacity and adopting data-driven decision making to improve student retention and outcomes. The college leadership was drawn to the potential trove of actionable information on current and former students that only the PDP could produce. Plus, with the data to be delivered in interactive dashboards, the college would be saved from having to arduously build its own dashboards. The PDP would make it easy to release and act upon the stories the data might hold. The following case study describes how the NICC made it happen.

SUMMARY

The PDP builds on the Clearinghouse's massive collection of student records regularly submitted by nearly every institution in the country. To participate, a college enters into a legal partnership agreement with the Clearinghouse (reliably maintaining the integrity of the student records) and submits two files in addition to its regular Clearinghouse data files: a student cohort file for each semester and a course file of student performance. After processing and validating the data, the Clearinghouse generates analytical and interactive dashboards and an analysis-ready file for the college. With key performance indicators and early momentum metrics related to access, progression, and completion, the dashboards allow anyone at the college to slice and dice the data to gain insights and find equity gaps that can be addressed through structural, attitudinal, and process changes.

Despite these clear rewards, NICC did have to consider the labor involved with creating new extracts for the PDP and uploading at least five years of past data. This would require the college's leadership, including the president, to prioritize these efforts and allow the college registrar—the key data person on campus—to take the lead on the PDP. The college president and academic dean already had been pushing staff and faculty to think in terms of breaking down information silos and involving more people in data-informed decision making. Still, the logistics of executing the

PDP onboarding process could be time intensive and thus challenging for the small college. Also, as the first tribal college to join the PDP, NICC would be leading the way for its sector, but also going it alone. The nation's 35 accredited tribal colleges and universities (TCUs) often work collaboratively to problem solve and troubleshoot issues they share in common.

This case study details how leadership and partnerships were crucial elements to PDP onboarding. Key members of the college's leadership team shared the vision that the PDP was an important tool for the college to use proactively to support its students. NICC found key allies in its Achieving the Dream data and leadership coaches, a Clearinghouse liaison and implementation support team, and the college's contracted student information system partner, Empower. Colleges in the ATD Network working with their own educational technology partners may find similar help is available.

What is the PDP?

The Postsecondary Data Partnership is a response to two important but conflicting realities in higher education:

1. Research shows that improved data gathering and analysis provides the foundation for designing effective strategies to close gaps in achievement, completion, or other measures of student success. (This understanding fueled Achieving the Dream's creation 15 years ago.)

2. There is an increasing need to collect and provide key (and often similar) data and metrics to multiple agencies and organizations, state and federal governments, accrediting bodies and funders. The reporting work is overwhelming institutions and interfering with their ability to analyze data and strategically apply what they've learned to address student needs.

The PDP simplifies, streamlines, and enhances data gathering and reporting using existing resources. At the national level, almost all institutions use the Clearinghouse for student reporting, education verifications, and outcomes research. This includes tracking student enrollments and degree completions, and students who transfer across institutions and states. By building on its current capacity, the Clearinghouse can serve as a hub to collect, verify, and quickly turn around data reports for participating institutions and organizations. This service will help colleges and universities:

- become more efficient;
- gain a fuller picture of student momentum, progress, and outcomes;
- meet various reporting requirements; and
- focus more of their resources on using data to help students.

To join, institutions enter into an agreement with the Clearinghouse and begin by submitting two files in addition to the data they submit on a regular basis, a cohort file and a course file. A cohort file includes data fields such as entry status, high school GPA, first- generation status, race/ethnicity, dual enrollment status, transferred credits, and readiness in math and English. A course file includes Pell status, program intent, GPA, course information, course grades, and reverse transfer information.

A SMALL COLLEGE WITH A
BIG CHARGE

Nebraska Indian Community College serves 200 credit-enrolled students, three-quarters of whom attend part time. Nearly all of the students (98 percent) are American Indian/Alaska Native and two-thirds are women. The college offers associate degree and certificate programs at three campuses spread out within a 120-mile span in northeast Nebraska. As with most TCUs, the campuses are located on or near reservations: The main campus in Macy is on the Omaha Tribe Reservation, the west campus in Niobrara is on the Santee Dakota Reservation, and the third campus is in South Sioux City, an urban center between the two reservations. The college has 20 noninstructional staff, 14 full-time faculty, and 18 part-time faculty.

NICC's mission is to provide quality higher education and lifelong educational opportunities for Umoⁿhoⁿ (Omaha), Isanti (Santee Dakota), and all learners. A central focus is to "integrate, revitalize, and preserve Umoⁿhoⁿ and Isanti culture throughout the college environment, including but not limited to history, Umoⁿhoⁿ language, Dakota language, games, songs, arts/crafts and way of life." For TCUs, protecting Native cultures and languages is essential not only to ensure tribal survival, but to promote student success. They have found that fostering strong Native identity, self-esteem, and purpose cultivates a mindset that leads to student success.
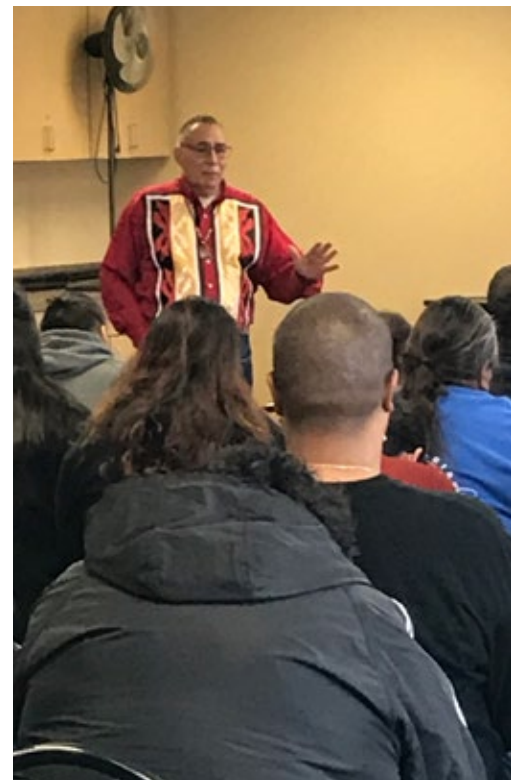
DISMANTLING
BARRIERS TO STUDENT SUCCESS

ATD Network colleges are committed to success for all students and especially for those most underserved—low-income and first-generation students, students of color, underprepared students, and adult learners. Statistically, Native Americans have the highest average poverty and unemployment rates in the country. In 2018-2019, 84 percent of TCU students qualified for Pell grants. Many work and support families and are at high risk for dropping out. The typical NICC student is low-income, a single parent, and most often female, says NICC Registrar Troy Munhofen (pictured above). She faces obstacles at every turn. These may include insecure housing, food, transportation, and daycare; challenges due to her own or others' mental health issues, alcohol, or substance abuse; family members who are not supportive of her college plan; and finding the time to meet the responsibilities of family and tribe.

CHALLENGES

"Coming to college is not students' number one priority most of the time," Munhofen observes. "They have to work, they have to put food on the table. Sometimes we can lose them within the first weeks." Given that scenario, the college knew it needed good tools to monitor student progress, identify problems when they arise, and move swiftly to help students cross the finish line.

Dealing strategically with tight budgets

Building a culture of inquiry and compiling the materials for evidence-informed decision making is labor intensive. And generating the many reports necessary for accountability or funding review purposes is time consuming, even for colleges with a dedicated institutional research department or IR personnel. NICC does not have either. Like its students, the college is underresourced and budgets are tight.

What the college does have is Munhofen, he has become NICC's primary data handler. He is enterprising: In addition to being registrar, he is the go-to person to generate internal and external reports. He also wears other hats, doing extra duty in the areas of admissions, student records, financial aid, and student billing. When the PDP opportunity arose, with the promise of making data gathering and reporting easier, Munhofen was willing to marshal the extra work necessary for onboarding. And his supervisor, Dean of Student Services Dawne Price, was willing to allow him the time to do the work.

STREAMLINED
DATA GATHERING
AND REPORTING

Along with other TCUs, NICC has taken important steps to better serve its distinctive student population. These include:

Tailoring education to meet Native student needs. TCUs are a bright light in a challenging picture. They emerged from the 1960s Native American grassroots movement for self-determination and tribal sovereignty. They provide academic and vocational programs in response to changing community needs; affirm Native culture, language, and identity; and prepare Native populations to produce future leaders and active citizens on reservations and in the country at large. "For tribal colleges, success is for the tribal nation," says Carrie Billy, president of the American Indian Higher Education Consortium (AIHEC). "It is in strengthening our communities; protecting our land, water, and air; and rebuilding our language and culture--nation building."

Decentralizing access to information. When NICC welcomed a new academic dean, Kristine Sudbeck, in 2016, one of the first goals she and NICC President Michael Oltrogge conveyed to the staff was a different, more empowering approach to information. She suggested that data should be moved from silos and shared across the college, perhaps through the medium of dashboards. The next year, NICC was part of a group of 33 TCUs that joined Achieving the Dream, solidifying its interest in decentralizing access to and use of data. The following summer, at an annual AIHEC meeting for TCUs, one of the colleges made a presentation on Power BI dashboards, a Microsoft program for building the elaborate platform Sudbeck had in mind. An exciting idea, Munhofen thought, but wondered where he'd find the time.

Taking advantage of the PDP opportunity. Not long after, Achieving the Dream sponsored a regular retreat for its stable of leadership and data coaches. There, ATD leadership coach Omero Suarez and data coach Bobbie Frye learned about the Postsecondary Data Partnership. On their next site visit to NICC in early 2019, they shared what they learned, and Oltrogge and Munhofen hardly hesitated. It was a solution they jumped to embrace.

SOLUTIONS

NICC understood that the PDP could help it to:

- become more **efficient**;
- better **understand the impact** of college policies, processes and practices on students;
- more **quickly identify** which student groups are and are not succeeding, and why;
- **leverage insights** to offer students help; and
- **benchmark** its progress alongside peer institutions.

The value of partnerships

When Munhofen heard about the PDP's signature feature, the Tableau dashboard, he knew that the ready-built dashboard alone made joining the partnership worth the effort. The college had been part of the Clearinghouse since 2013, so at least six years of the regular data was already loaded. What needed to happen next was figuring how to produce the extracts for six years of student cohort and course data and successfully submit them to the Clearinghouse.

Bobbie Frye, the college's ATD data coach, had worked with Munhofen on getting NICC on board the Clearinghouse's Student Tracker program. For PDP, she brought extra skills to the table. ATD's coaches are experienced mentors, often practicing leaders or recently retired from successful professional academic careers. Before joining ATD, Frye had led Central Piedmont Community College's Institutional Research Department, where she became well versed in extracting data from student information systems. Coincidentally, Central Piedmont was one of a handful of pilot colleges participating in PDP's startup. With that familiarity, she could ensure NICC would not get bogged down. "My approach is just to save as much time for the college as possible, recognizing that it's the college that is taking this on," she says.

Munhofen had another asset in the technical data preparation process, its student information system vendor, Empower. To prepare files for PDP data collections, NICC used course and cohort templates provided by the Clearinghouse, and query extraction scripts developed by Empower. Munhofen cleaned the data files that resulted, addressing errors and information gaps. Finally, the ATD data coach further processed the files using SAS software. Munhofen estimates that this data collection and submission part of the initial PDP onboarding process took about 40 hours, executed from September to November 2019. The specific technical details and data query coding scripts are available in a companion document to this case study, "Facilitating Postsecondary Data Partnership Data Submissions at Nebraska Indian Community College."

Of course, this brief summary of the process does not capture its complexity. Files must adhere to formatting and data field requirements,

or they will be rejected. The more effort invested in understanding coding directions and being precise the first time through, the greater the payoff in future submissions when extract preparation becomes much easier.

Knowing this, the National Student Clearinghouse is a hands-on partner working with colleges to ensure their success. For example, NICC's experience was typical. At the start, Michelle Blackwell, Clearinghouse manager of data partnerships, worked with Munhofen and the college to explain the PDP and the legal agreement. Then, an implementation team reached out to the college and invited it to attend a webinar. The team was on call to provide assistance until the college had successfully submitted its files. Going forward, the college is in the hands of a customer care team to take care of issues that might come up.

Working with data may be dry, says Blackwell, but what it reveals through the PDP can be thrilling. "A lot of the time, colleges look at data to help them improve something that is going wrong. But PDP also lets them see what they're doing right. Oftentimes, colleges know there is an issue, but don't have the data to back them up. Or, they'll make a change, but don't have the data to see if it's made a difference."

The PDP changes the time equation of educational research and early intervention, she adds. "In the past, we've had to wait for research so we can look six years back. That is too late! Those students are long gone, and even current students aren't having the same experience." Being able to track early momentum indicators for currently enrolled students not only allows for immediate adjustments, it can help predict longer-term outcomes like completion and transfer with baccalaureate degree attainment.

ATD and AIHEC have partnered to support all TCUs that take advantage of the PDP opportunity and are collaborating to provide a strong community of practice for using PDP data.

Is the PDP for you?

What aspects of the PDP would your institution find most valuable?

What partnerships can your college leverage as it onboards to the PDP?

Who at the institution would be involved in onboarding and training others to use the information?

Would the college's leadership be supportive of providing the staff resources (time and data entry) necessary to onboard?

Is there someone at the college able to do the onboarding work who proactively problem solves, leverages partnerships as needed to support the work, and can use the dashboards once they are available?

LEVERAGING
DATA'S INSIGHTS

NICC is at the beginning of being able to use PDP tools to guide early interventions or longer-term program fixes, but Munhofen describes some of the rewards that are already evident. For example, struggles with the Internet in the time of Covid-19 could be a reason a student gives up early in the semester. With PDP's early momentum indicators, NICC can quickly identify students who need early interventions to get them back on track.

Other benefits of PDP participation include:

- **Data on a broader range of students,** not just the first-time, full-time fall freshman cohorts reported in most other data collections. This is very important for colleges serving nontraditional students starting at different times in the academic year and juggling a varied set of challenges.

- **Outcomes disaggregated by student characteristics,** such as gender, race/ethnicity, Pell grant recipient status, first-generation status and the ability to explore the intersectionality of those characteristics. As Laurie Heacock, ATD's senior advisor for data analytics, says, "Students bring their whole selves to the college, not segments of themselves, and we must look at them holistically to identify and eliminate any barriers to success."

- **Actionable early momentum indicators** that institutions can monitor to see if large-scale reforms, such as pathways programs, are having a positive effect.

- **The ability to meet reporting requirements** from voluntary initiatives, boards, accrediting agencies, the Tribal Council, and other third-party PDP partners, such as ATD.

- **Benchmark comparisons, transfer, and reverse transfer data** are very important to colleges of all types of Carnegie classifications. When the PDP has the minimum number of five colleges in a classification, benchmarking becomes available. Since NICC joined PDP, 15 more tribal colleges have entered into PDP agreements, so benchmarking is possible.

- **Interactive dashboards** make it easy to measure outcomes and as more people on campus are trained in how to use them, dashboards will lead to the democratization of data. At NICC, one other faculty member has taken the dashboard training offered via webinar by Achieving the Dream. The plan is for others to learn from him or take the training.

- **The ability to redirect resources** based on data analysis to enable program improvements that facilitate better outcomes for students.

- **Summary reports** on topics such as access, progression, and completion disaggregated by key student characteristics.

Tips for Other Colleges

Munhofen and Achieving the Dream coaches have these tips for colleges considering or beginning the PDP onboarding process.

1. Act now to take advantage of a fee waiver the Clearinghouse has provided to tribal colleges to onboard before July 2021.

2. Don't be deterred by the upfront time investment necessary to participate. The PDP ends up helping with time management because it reduces time spent generating reports, becomes easier after initial onboarding, and lets you move more quickly to help students in danger of dropping out.

3. Use the templates the Clearinghouse provides on its website and follow the instructions carefully to avoid mistakes.

4. Find colleges that use the same student information system software and work together to work out some of the formatting challenges of moving data into the template.

5. Build a strong relationship with your student information system vendor and take advantage of all the training it offers to help you know your software.

6. If legal review is required by your institution to join, start that process as early as possible.

7. Agree on which college-level math and English courses are gateway courses.

8. Build in efficiencies so you can replicate the process for subsequent submissions.

9. Pay attention to changes that were made in the past, such as a system migration, data definitions, and data elements that impact consistency in historical reporting.

For more information about the Postsecondary Data Partnership, please contact data@achievingthedream.org

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