

# Achieving the Dream: State Policy Changes for Community Colleges

## Lessons from a multi-state, multi-year initiative

MICHAEL COLLINS AND LARA K. COUTURIER

The American higher education system considers itself a primary avenue to opportunity. As providers of broad access to postsecondary education, community colleges are arguably the most vital organ in that pulsing system. But there is a growing acknowledgment that access alone is no longer enough. *Achieving the Dream: Community Colleges Count* is a national initiative focused on helping more community college students succeed. *Achieving the Dream* firmly embraces and supports the critical role that community colleges play in U.S. society. The initiative also recognizes that community colleges could be doing more to help students succeed and meet their educational aspirations. The initiative is primarily focused on increasing success outcomes for students who have historically faced significant barriers to reaching their higher education goals, including students of color and low-income students.

*Achieving the Dream* began in 2004 with five states and funding from the Lumina Foundation for Education. The initiative has added new states, colleges and funders every year since, and now includes 79 community colleges in 15 states and four Texas universities. In New England, both Connecticut and Massachusetts are involved (entering in 2005 and 2007, respectively). The other participating states are Arkansas, Florida, Hawaii, Michigan, New Mexico, North Carolina, Ohio, Oklahoma, Pennsylvania, South Carolina, Texas, Virginia and Washington.

Institutional change is the primary focus of *Achieving the Dream*. Participating colleges commit to building a “culture of evidence” among administrators, faculty, and staff, meaning that decisions about programs and resources are based on rich data about student achievement. In addition to helping the colleges enhance their data capacity, resources are leveraged to help colleges develop and implement unique strategies that can be used to improve student success, such as creating study skills courses and learning communities. A number of partner organizations work together to assist the community colleges in their efforts, supporting the colleges in everything from conducting

research on student outcomes to setting priorities and guiding data analysis.

But institutions cannot go it alone. Thus, a robust multi-state policy component, led by Boston-based Jobs for the Future, augments the colleges’ efforts and spreads successful institutional practices from participating colleges across the states. The long-term goals of the policy work are to make success among community college students an explicit public policy goal; to create a policy culture that routinely uses evidence on student outcomes in decision-making; and to identify and implement specific policy changes that can promote improved outcomes for underprepared students in community colleges.

As a first step, initiative participants collaborated to identify the most important policy levers for driving institutional improvements and dramatically improving success for community college students. Each state is implementing a policy action agenda to develop new or to redesign existing policies in these areas.

- A clear public policy commitment to improving student success in the community college;
- Data and performance measurement systems that support informed decision-making and create a strong data-driven accountability system;
- Student success initiatives, including developmental education innovations;
- Improved alignment between K-12 and postsecondary education and two- to four-year colleges; and
- Need-based financial aid that adequately supports community college students.

Some of the highest-impact policy developments have been in the area of data and performance management. Echoing long-held concerns that current U.S. Department of Education Intergrated Postsecondary Education Data System accountability measures lend themselves more to four-year institutions than to community colleges, a sub-group of seven *Achieving the Dream* states has collaborated to develop and test alternative measures that better reflect the community college experience. For example, the group is testing and tracking intermediate benchmarks that are predictive of final success outcomes, such as the percent of students passing math and English “gateway” courses. In the spirit of ensuring that the initiative can be helpful

to a wide audience, the group has identified the key features of a strong data and performance management system and designed an assessment tool for states that want to develop similar data capacity.

As “student success” gains traction as a higher education mantra around the nation, a number of states have also used the initiative to affirm their commitment explicitly to student success. For example, in the Connecticut Community College System, *Achieving the Dream* goals have been endorsed by the Council of Presidents and have been embedded into the system’s strategic plan so that all colleges across the system are focused on using data to improve outcomes. The Virginia Community College System is using the initiative as a way to focus attention, resources and action to reach performance goals set in the system’s strategic plan, *Dateline 2009*.

*Achieving the Dream* states are also exploring strategies to reward colleges for improving student outcomes, not just for increasing enrollments. In one innovative approach, the Washington State Board for Community and Technical Colleges is currently implementing the Student Achievement Initiative, a performance-based incentive system that rewards colleges for getting students through a set of empirically identified intermediate benchmarks, or “momentum points,” that are predictive of a successful final outcome. Calling for a new “Compact with the State,” the Texas Association of Community Colleges proposed incentive funding and support for developmental education innovations based on *Achieving the Dream* principles. The compact, though not yet funded, has laid the foundation for a statewide conversation about how to fund community colleges differently to increase student success.

Other milestones include the state of New Mexico’s securing \$97 million in need-based aid since 2005, and Connecticut increasing access to need-based aid by centralizing certain financial aid processes, enabling institutional aid staff to be more aggressive in getting eligible students to apply for aid. Virginia has created financial incentives lowering upper-level tuition for community college students who earn an associate degree and transfer to four-year institutions. Both Connecticut and North Carolina have streamlined their placement assessment policies by choosing specific assessment instruments to be used and identifying common placement cut scores on those assessments, thereby increasing the consistency and clarity of the systems’ expectations for entering students. [See *Common Placement Standards*, page 16.]

As these examples demonstrate, the states have cast their nets wide, and made changes large and small. Some of these ideas predated the initiative; others have stemmed from the collaboration and conversations of *Achieving the Dream*. In that context, what have the initiative’s early years revealed about changing state policy to be more supportive of student success and

institutional change? It’s too early for definitive results, but here are some of the most important themes and lessons learned thus far:

1. State and college interaction provides important synergy and compelling evidence of the need and motivation to act. The focus, collaboration, and resources of *Achieving the Dream* are creating a result that is greater than the sum of the ideas, resources, and political will of the individual states and colleges involved in the effort:
2. The conversation about student success is becoming far more common, routine and integral to the priorities of colleges and state systems;
3. Policy work can be fragile. It takes time, and sometimes slides backward with changes in leadership, with budgetary challenges, and with new legislative priorities. But as the earlier examples indicate, there has been progress; and
4. States greatly value the opportunity to share strategies and tactics, to learn with and from each other, and to adapt what has been successful in one state to the realities of a different state. The initiative has fostered a spirit of cooperation rather than competition.

States that wish to redesign their policies in ways that can increase student success do not have to start from scratch. The experiences and lessons of the *Achieving the Dream* state policy work are captured in a set of tools that can help states that wish to adopt similar policies. The policy framework assessment tool, which specifies high-leverage policies that can promote student success within the *Achieving the Dream* policy levers, is a great place to start. State policy decision makers can assess their existing policy environment for strengths and weaknesses by answering a series of questions gleaned from the *Achieving the Dream* experience. The tool can help states identify gaps and set policy priorities. States that combine their policy development efforts with the development of robust data and performance measurement systems are in the best position to improve student success by benchmarking outcomes and leveraging the lessons of the highest-performing institutions across their respective states.

---

*Michael Collins* is program director at *Jobs for the Future*. *Lara K. Couturier* is a higher-education consultant and doctoral candidate in the Brown University history department. E-mails: [mcollins@jff.org](mailto:mcollins@jff.org), [lara\\_couturier@brown.edu](mailto:lara_couturier@brown.edu).

*The Achieving the Dream Web site offers a variety of resources for those interested in student success. For briefs on policy issues, a quarterly newsletter, names of participating organizations and colleges, further examples of policy changes, and to use the assessment tools, please visit [www.achievingthedream.org](http://www.achievingthedream.org).*