Measuring Success in Outreach and Engagement: Arizona State University and the American Dream Academy

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This article describes the 2009 C. Peter Magrath University/ Community Engagement Award winning project, The American Dream Academy, which has had a significant impact on Phoenix, Arizona's K-12 educational community.

Introduction

L eaders in territorial Arizona envisioned the future of the region as full of promise. They foresaw the desert transformed into fertile soil irrigated by water carried through canals originally dug by an ancient indigenous people, the Ho Ho Kam or "the people who have gone." In February 1885, an act to establish a normal school was introduced in the 13th Legislature Assembly of Arizona Territory. The following February, 33 students met in a single room on 20 acres of donated cow pasture south of the Salt River, in what is now Tempe, Arizona.

The institution that became Arizona State University (ASU) was charged with the broad obligation to provide "instruction of persons . . . in the art of teaching and in all the various branches that pertain to good common school education; also, to give instruction in the mechanical arts and in husbandry and agricultural chemistry, the fundamental law of the United States, and in what regards the rights and duties of citizens" *(More ASU History, n.d.)*.

In the succeeding years, the school grew from a teacher's college to a Research Extensive institution (formerly Research I) engaged in providing educational excellence and access to a diverse student population. Today, ASU has more than 67,000 students at its four campuses, and *U.S. News & World Report* ranked it in the top tier of national universities in 2008, 2009, and 2010.

On July 1, 2002, Michael M. Crow joined the university as its 16th president, and ASU entered a new era. President Crow's vision of the New American University became a blueprint for reinventing higher education by identifying eight design aspirations unlike those found at most other universities *(A New American University, 2009)*.

Figure 1. ASU's Eight Design Aspirations

1. Leverage Our Place	ASU embraces its cultural, socioeconomic, and physical setting.
2. Transform Society	ASU catalyzes societal change by transcending its physical location.
3. Value Entrepreneurship	ASU uses its knowledge to encourage innovation and economic development across the region.
4. Conduct Use-Inspired Research	ASU research has purpose and impact, enhancing the quality of life for society as a whole.
5. Enable Student Success	ASU is committed to the success of each student, and seeks greater diversity in the student body.
6. Fuse Intellectual Disciplines	ASU creates solution-focused knowledge relevant to real-world problems by transcending academic disciplines.
7. Be Socially Embedded	ASU is connected with communities in mutually beneficial partnerships that strengthen their capacity and resources.
8. Engage Globally	ASU engages with people and issues locally, nationally, and internationally.

In 2004, Raul Yzaguirre stepped down after 30 years as president and CEO of the National Council of La Raza (NCLR). President Crow offered him an opportunity to continue his work in Arizona. The Center for Community Development and Civil Rights (CDCR) in the College of Public Programs is the result of the collaboration between these two visionary leaders. They, along with other university leaders, believe that in addition to teaching and conducting research, a great university has the resources and responsibility to solve problems in communities, both local and global. President Crow and Professor Yzaguirre understand that the community has the capacity to solve problems for itself when supported by "bridges" between the university and the community. Partnerships designed to strengthen low-income, marginalized populations enable communities to become knowledgeable about education, finance,

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health care, and the basics of housing, transportation, and local ordinances. These connections are the foundation of social embeddedness: the kind of transformation that the American Dream Academy, a parent education program, was designed to engender. "Our challenge," according to Professor Yzaguirre, "and the challenge of our children's children, is to make American ideals more real in each lifetime" *(A New American University, 2009).*

Arizona's Educational Challenges

Education for America's underserved populations was a focus of Professor Yzaguirre's work at the National Council of La Raza and became a priority initiative at the Center for Community Development and Civil Rights. Faculty in ASU's Morrison Institute for Public Policy wrote a report titled *How Arizona Compares: Real Numbers and Hot Topics (2005)* that clearly outlined the challenges of educating Arizonans:

- Arizona's state superintendent of public instruction reported that, in 2003, 51% of the state's K-12 public school students qualified for free or reduced-price lunches—a standard indicator of disadvantage.

- Approximately half of the state's K-12 students (49%) come from minority groups, which suffer disproportionately from low incomes and poor preparation for school.

- Sixteen percent of elementary and secondary students were "English language learners" in 2003. Spanish is the most prevalent native language other than English, but as many as 43 languages are spoken by K-12 Arizona students.

- According to a 2002 U.S. Department of Education survey, Arizona ranks second only to California in the percentage of teachers who reported working with students who had little or no proficiency in English.

- To meet student needs, Arizona has emphasized before- and after-school programs and is ranked 8th in the nation for the number of elementary schools providing such support, according to National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) data for 1999–2000.

- Arizona ranked 47th in per-pupil spending in 2001–2002. This expenditure represents half the amount of state funds

spent by either New Jersey or New York as reported by NCES in 2004.

- The Arizona Department of Education reports that Arizona's four-year high school graduation rate has hovered around 71% in recent years, and reported it at 72.7% for the class of 2002—although this number did not include 10.9% of students classified as "status unknown." NCES reported that Arizona had a completion rate of 68.3% for the school year 2000–2001, second lowest after Louisiana, although not all states were included in that count.

These statistics characterize the student population of the Phoenix metropolitan area. This student population is at an elevated risk of dropping out prior to completing high school, a trend that has been called the "invisible crisis" by the Urban Institute *(Orfield, Losen, Wald, & Swanson, 2004)* and a "silent epidemic" in a report for the Gates Foundation *(Bridgeland, DiIulio, and Morison, 2006)*. It is most serious for African American, Hispanic, and Native American males, with nearly half failing to graduate from public high school, even though many had less than 2 years remaining to complete their education. Despite having been documented and studied, this exit from the education pipeline continues.

The American Dream Academy

Attitudes toward education (including the recognition that both graduation from high school and a college education are important) begins early in a child's life. Parent involvement in a child's education is critical. An intervention-type course that focuses on adult life skills can empower parents as effective advocates who act as partners in their child's education. The observable effect is that when parents instill the value of education in themselves, they also instill it in their children. In poor communities, where children have limited access to role models who have a formal education, skill-building programs are especially important *(Epstein, 1987)*. In such programs, parents commit to the educational success of their children, and learn that they already possess the ability to transform their children's lives. The success

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of such programs centers on the realization by parents that they can make a difference *(Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler Model of Parental Involvement, 2005).*

Parent skill-building programs inform parents about the difference a college education makes in their child's life. For example, data clearly show that a university education leads to significant income gains over time. CollegeBoard *(2007)* reports that "over a working life, the typical full-time year-round worker with a four-year college degree earns more than 60 percent more than a worker with only a high school diploma."

Arizona State University recognized the importance of parents in helping children graduate from high school, prepared for a successful university education. To address the challenges faced by Arizona's students and parents, ASU established a parent education program called the American Dream Academy (ADA). To instill an understanding of the value of attaining a high school and college education, the program focuses on retention, graduation, and academic success.

In 2006, the program was piloted in two Maricopa County public schools, an elementary school in Phoenix, and a junior high school in Mesa. The Center for Community Development and Civil Rights staff tailored the California-based curriculum provided by the Parent Institute for Quality Education (PIQE) to Arizona academic standards. Although initially skeptical, teachers and administrators were won over by the transformation of a parent-student population that had previously been difficult to reach. From a modest beginning of 251 parent-graduates in the fall of 2006, the total number of graduates in the fall of 2009 was 1,710, and 3,814 graduated from the program in the spring of 2010.

Program Content

Through a 10-week program, parents of K-12 students enrolled in underserved or underperforming schools gain the knowledge and skills necessary to improve the educational and personal development of their children. The program is available to all parents whose children are enrolled in participating Phoenix metropolitan area public and charter schools. It connects parents, schools, ASU, and the community as partners in the educational and personal development of elementary, middle, and high school students. Participants learn that taking a proactive role can improve parent-child relationships, keep more children in school, reduce dropout

rates, improve classroom performance, and put children on track to attend a college or university and earn a diploma.

The program is offered at no cost to participants. ASU has invested nearly $1 million in the American Dream Academy through annual underwriting support at the $250,000 level, and by subsidizing significant indirect costs. Grants and funds from private organizations include a multiyear grant from the Helios Education Foundation totaling $3 million. Partnering schools also pay an average fee of $110 per parent graduate.

The American Dream Academy program offers sessions in the morning and evening to accommodate parents' schedules, and cur-

Figure 2. Sample of the Program's Weekly Schedule

Week 1		Letter from Principal goes out to parents and ADA Call Center Campaign begins
Week 2		Introductory Session
Week 3	Lesson 1	You Make the Difference
Week 4	Lesson 2	Being a Partner with Your School
Week 5	Lesson 3	Academic Standards and Performance
Week 6	Lesson 4	Communication and Discipline
Week 7	Lesson 5	Self-Esteem and Motivation
Week 8	Lesson 6	Reading, Together Time, and Motivation
Week 9		Academic Success Planning
Week 10		Principal's Forum
Week 11		Graduation

rently conducts classes in both English and Spanish. Parents learn how to navigate the school system, collaborate with teachers and administrators, and plan for academic success. Ultimately parents are their children's first and most important advocates. During the program, parent participants learn how to become active partners with their child's school. Activities like a "Principal's Forum" enable parents to communicate their needs and concerns to school administration and teachers, and encourage feedback on how the school can better support students.

For many parents, American Dream Academy "graduation" ceremonies mark the first time they have graduated from any pro-gram. As a tangible reminder that a college education is within the grasp of students from all backgrounds, graduates of the program receive a symbolic "Certificate of Admission" to ASU signed by President Crow along with specially crafted "Future ASU Student" ID cards.

Program Staffing

The American Dream Academy program is staffed by the ADA Volunteer Corps (see Figure 3). Volunteers come from all walks of life and professions, including ASU students, faculty, and staff members. ASU's Doran Community Scholars, from the Phoenix Union High School District, produce curricula to train parents and volunteers while developing their leadership skills through community projects.

ASU faculty members collect, analyze, and publish data on the program. Taken together, the program's volunteers represent more than a dozen nationalities, with most being native speakers of Spanish. All have a singular commitment to education and contribute their time as facilitators who lead weekly workshop discussions, coordinators who manage on-site logistics, or Contact Center agents who talk with parents by telephone each week.

Figure 3. American Dream Academy Team Members

Center Director	ASU staff responsible for day-to-day operations, staff supervision, funding sources, program development, policies, goals, objectives, liaison to university and exterior constituents, and training
Program Director	ASU staff responsible for working directly with school administrators, coordinating with internal team members on training, implementation of program, documentation, recruitment, and evaluation
Field Program Manager	ASU staff responsible for delivery of program and oversight to assigned schools, coordinating with facilitators, school personnel, and parents, problem solving, technical advice
PRISMMS Program Manager	ASU staff responsible for support of Field Program Manager in delivery of program and oversight to assigned schools, data entry and documentation, logistics of curricula, and related instructional materials
Logistics/ Production Manager	ASU staff responsible for technical support of PC-related hardware and software issues, coordination and training of Contact Center agents, assisting in production of various program print materials
Facilitators	Certified community volunteers trained to deliver curricula off-site for 10-week duration, weekly in-service training, modest stipend in compensation
Coordinators	Trained community volunteers to assist on-site coordination between ADA team, school administration, teachers, parents and students (i.e., classroom availability, child care space), modest stipend in compensation
Contact Center Agents	Trained community volunteers place outgoing calls from center to recruit parents to planning meeting at their student's school, reminder calls for weekly classes, modest stipend in compensation

ADA facilitators are recruited from the community through social and professional networks. They have Bachelor's degrees

or equivalent education, and many have teaching or other professional credentials. After an interview process and training, they are matched with a school, language, day, and time as the primary instructor for the duration of that 10-week program. They are supported and evaluated on site to ensure uniform and quality program delivery.

Program facilitators are modestly compensated for their roles as instructors; however, these women and men often speak of the intangible rewards they receive from engagement with diverse participants. For example, Terri J. passionately articulated for continuation of a local high school program after the school principal decided not to continue it due to the expense of holding class for 15 people. A major portion of the class was made up of immigrants from Iraq, Somalia, and three families from Thailand who all carpooled in one vehicle.

> My most favorite place to facilitate has become Alhambra High School. What a place of diversity, and what wonderful stories! Stories of oppression, escape from wars and persecution from refugees who have acquired asylum will send chills up your spine. Their stories are of fear and of great triumph. We are family, so how do you look your family in the eye, in front of their children, a total of 15 people, and tell them that the principal has decided to eliminate their class because of low participation? In my opinion, a grave injustice has occurred and I would do anything to right this wrong.
> *(T. Jennings, personal communication, February 19, 2010)*

Upon receipt of the facilitator's plea, classes were continued with the costs borne by the program. The transformations engendered by the American Dream Academy occur on both sides of the bridge connecting the university and community.

Program Delivery

The American Dream Academy program employs innovative technologies to facilitate operations, including a call center, a data management system, and social networking.

Call center.

Located in the Center for Community Development and Civil Rights on the ASU Downtown Phoenix campus, the Contact Center is a virtual voice over IP (VOIP) "software as a service" (SAAS) that

automates all of the calling functions into one package. By using SAAS call center technology, which itself uses the Internet to carry all of its voice and data traffic, ADA is freed from the capital and technical requirements of traditional call center infrastructures. Furthermore, the predictive dialing capabilities of this technology allow ADA to fully maximize the availability of agents for calls. Finally, such a system permits ADA agents to read from tens of thousands of customized scripts that are pushed to each agent desktop on a call-by-call basis regardless of geographic location, so that parents appropriately feel that the invitation is specifically for them.

Research from Vanderbilt University found that a fundamental difference in parental engagement results from an invitation from the school to participate *(Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 2005)*. This is what the ADA call center is doing at scale. In its first 3 years of operation, the Contact Center has reached approximately 20% of all households with school-aged children in Maricopa County.

Data management system.

Leaders of the American Dream Academy program are measuring the medium- and long-term outcomes of the program using Program for Information Systems Management and Measurements (PRISMMS). PRISMMS is a custom enterprise management system, designed to manage all aspects of the program while capturing data about the performance of all key aspects of the program. PRISMMS provides a process to convert data into useful and usable management information to accomplish four specific objectives:

1. to determine the effectiveness of the ADA's programs;

2. to grow, diversify, and expand the ADA programs;

3. to make the ADA programs scalable in response to changing community needs; and

4. to attract interest from future funders.

PRISMMS specifically helps ADA decision makers organize their work in a stream that flows from beginning to end. While it is not a perfect answer to all aspects of performance measurement, it is a helpful tool in the pursuit of a more meaningful system for managing a public program. Some particularly effective functions include evaluation, control, budgeting, and learning.

Evaluation. PRISMMS is the central repository of data both for workflow and content. ADA administrators can evaluate the effectiveness of staff by measuring how much work an individual employee is able to accomplish in a reasonable period of time. By standardizing tasks they can measure the work output of each individual and compare it to that of his or her peers in a fair and consistent manner. PRISMMS also enables evaluation of the program's effectiveness with parents and children. For example, the system is the central repository of parent attendance data, and of the school performance of every child associated with the program, as reported by parents. Using this data, administrators can study the effect of the program on children by looking at their parents' marginal utilization of program services.

Control. With the programming of processes into the PRISMMS system, the ADA program directors can ensure that processes are repeated consistently from day to day. For example, the system's algorithms help staff forecast how many parents are expected to attend any given session, based on a variety of variable inputs. Because the system helps staff allocate resources efficiently and predictably, the program is able to serve more individuals per staff member than would ever be possible without such a system.

Budgeting. The ADA directors take seriously their obligation to be responsible stewards of the philanthropic investments the program receives. Thus, they are constantly in search of data that can be used to inform their decisions on programming so that a maximum return can be made for each dollar the program receives.

Learning. PRISMMS is especially helpful in learning what works and what does not work. For example, measurements of the week-by-week retention rate of parents in a class for any given facilitator are evaluated. An example would be a facilitator whose attendance retention falls from one week to the next. A drop in attendance from 90% to, say, 50% is not the end of a program, but left unattended it might mean that of 100 parents enrolled, only 50 ultimately finish. With PRISMMS, program managers know within 36 hours if the retention rate of a particular program or facilitator falls below a certain threshold, and a series of additional resources can be deployed to improve attendance. That is one of the reasons for the program's 85% graduation rate.

The ADA program's mission is about social change. "Back office" operations, however, are a necessary part of what the program directors do. Thus, measurement tools that help them focus more completely on their mission, rather than on internal processes, are employed. Analysis of measurement data results in more economical achievement of program goals. For nearly four years, ADA has focused on understanding this process through the hundreds of thousands of data points generated by PRISMMS. These analyses have allowed a relatively small staff to serve ever increasing numbers of participant families.

Social networking.

In an effort to learn more about staff performance and deploy staff training resources and supervision, ADA uses the popular social networking system Twitter. Using Twitter's open application programming interface, event triggers were placed on key process screens throughout PRISMMS. Thus, when a team member executes a key system task, such as completing attendance for a specific class, the system passively triggers a Twitter notification that communicates the event's occurrence to the rest of the team.

For some this may seem intrusive. Can this methodology be considered spying on employees? No. All program staff know that Twitter is used and why. Moreover, everyone has access to the Twitter feed and receives the information simultaneously. By analyzing trends in the feed, a supervisor is able to know immediately, not just that the work is being done, but more importantly that the pattern of work is consistent with good practices. Already, employees have benefited from this system because better practices in workflow lead to better results.

The American Dream Academy
Impact and Outcomes

The impact of the American Dream Academy has been captured anecdotally and in statistical analysis of the program. Postparticipation data indicate that parents greatly increased their knowledge of the school system and how to help their children succeed academically. Nearly all parent graduates said that following the program, they felt informed about how to help their children attend the university, beginning at the elementary school level (97%), and more prepared to understand the school system and help their children (96%) *(American Dream Academy, 2009).* At graduation, each class chooses a parent to speak for them to the

assembled family, friends, and school staff. The parents' speeches are sincere, articulate expressions of gratitude and filled with enthusiasm for their children's academic success. Postparticipation data are collected from the school principals in addition to letters of support for the program. Teachers, counselors, and school administrators report increased parental involvement in the classroom and improved communication between the school and family in a community previously difficult to reach.

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The future of the program is promising. To be sure, financing is a significant hurdle. However, schools themselves have demonstrated great interest in engaging ADA's help in serving their families, and in paying for that service. There are numerous other possible program "additions" that will help families achieve the American dream through education. Already, ADA has taken financial literacy programs to elementary school children.

ADA has also worked with middle and high school students on the Novelas Educativas program, a curriculum based on short film vignettes. Latino families from educationally disadvantaged backgrounds do not possess the necessary "college knowledge" that enables many middle- and upper-middle-class parents to prepare their children for college. The film series uses culturally appropriate situations and conversations to inform viewers about the academic requirements that students must meet in middle school and high school in order to go on to college, as well as the process for applying to college and receiving financial aid.

As ADA revises its curricula, there will be additional opportunities for service expansion, both around the core educational curriculum and around additional topics of importance to the communities served by ADA, including health and wellness, civic engagement, and others.

In addition to Hispanics from this hemisphere, the Phoenix metropolitan area and Maricopa County are becoming home to a

variety of refugee groups. These include Bhutan exiles that live in Arizona as part of a U.S. resettlement program, as well as refugees from war-torn Africa and Iraq. New migrants face overwhelming challenges adjusting to life in the United States. Currently the CDCR is exploring opportunities for additional collaboration with these newcomers to Arizona.

The American Dream Academy:
Lessons Learned and Best Practices

The creation of the American Dream Academy posed a fundamental challenge: attempting to integrate a nonprofit model into a large bureaucratic institution. Program creators resolved this issue by placing it in an entrepreneurial unit—the Center for Community Development and Civil Rights. ASU recognized a need to invest in the early stages of the program, and the university's firm commitment to the program's stabilization allowed time for the American Dream Academy to grow and establish roots within the community.

The challenge of scaling the American Dream Academy without proportional increases in staffing and capital investment has been met by innovative use of technology, by eliminating friction in processes, and by designing systems that free key staff to work on the mission and not the process. A daily focus on identifying inefficiency has led to thousands of additional hours available to staff to concentrate on mission-related activities. A careful approach to analyzing process allows ADA to zero in on program refinement instead of organizational workflow. By paying such careful attention to detail and process, the organization can streamline and scale its procedures, and thus reach greater numbers of families more effectively, with greater impact, and for less cost per parent graduate. A key lesson in the growth of the organization is that solutions to 21st-century challenges are met with 21st-century processes, and with 21st-century technology.

Conclusion

At Arizona State University, access and exellence are core values that have drawn new groups of students to higher education. First-generation college students are enrolling at ASU from all over the region, and the university has built structures and programs to support them.

ASU and the American Dream Academy look forward to continued success in engaging the community in the education of all

children. The success of the program demonstrates ADA's effectiveness in helping to prepare students for the future and ensure their place in the American dream. It is one of the significant challenges ASU has chosen to meet through innovation and implementation of the new design aspirations that the Center for Community Development and Civil Rights and Arizona State University embrace as a New American University.

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