



TURNING THE TIDE  
Five Years of  
Achieving the Dream  
in Community Colleges

*Executive Summary*

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## Overview

In 2004, Lumina Foundation for Education launched “Achieving the Dream: Community Colleges Count,” a national initiative aimed at improving success among community college students, particularly low-income students and students of color. Now encompassing more than 130 institutions in 24 states and the District of Columbia, Achieving the Dream helps community colleges build a “culture of evidence” by using student records and other data to examine students’ performance over time and to identify barriers to academic progress. From there, community colleges are expected to develop intervention strategies designed to improve student outcomes; conduct further research on student progress; and bring effective programs to scale. As a result, it is anticipated that colleges will see measurable improvements over time in student outcomes, including increased progress through developmental education and college-level “gatekeeper” (introductory) courses, grades, persistence, and completion of credentials.

This report examines the first 26 colleges to join Achieving the Dream in 2004 (known as the “Round 1” colleges), and tracks their progress through spring 2009. The key findings are:

- **Four out of five Round 1 colleges adopted practices associated with a moderate to strong culture of evidence.** These colleges made important enhancements to their institutions, including more sophisticated methods for data analysis and more efficient systems for monitoring their efforts to improve students’ achievement. Conversely, about one-fifth of the colleges still struggled to implement many of the initiative’s recommended practices, hindered primarily by weak institutional research capacity.
- **Colleges that made the greatest strides shared several key characteristics,** including broad-based involvement of college administrators, faculty, and staff; strong institutional research departments that produced accessible reports on student achievement; regular evaluations of their programs; and scale-up of successful programs.
- **Colleges instituted a wide range of strategies to improve student achievement, but a majority of them remained small in scale.** The most popular strategies were tutoring, supplemental instruction, advising, success courses, and learning communities. However, a majority of these reforms reached less than 10 percent of their intended target populations.
- **Achieving the Dream had an important influence on most colleges.** Representatives from three-fourths of the colleges said that the initiative had at least some influence on their development of a culture of evidence. Other important influences included accreditation systems, grants in addition to those from Achieving the Dream, and visionary college leaders.
- **Trends in student outcomes remained relatively unchanged, with a few exceptions.** On average, after Achieving the Dream was introduced, colleges saw modest improvements in the percentage of students completing gatekeeper college English courses and courses completed. In contrast, students’ persistence and the percentage of students completing developmental math, developmental English, developmental reading, and gatekeeper math courses remained substantially the same.

A final report on the Round 1 colleges, with a follow-up on the trends in student outcomes, is planned for 2012-2013.



## Preface

Today, more students than ever are enrolling in community college, but nearly half of them never go on to earn a degree or certificate. Until recently, most community colleges did not have the capacity or the incentives to gather information about their students' performance over time and the possible barriers to their success. Traditionally focused on increasing *access* to postsecondary education, particularly for low-income students, community colleges are now turning more attention to improving the academic *success* of their students. But without concrete evidence to illuminate how and why their students are underperforming, colleges have been hard-pressed to take steps to help them improve.

Enter “Achieving the Dream: Community Colleges Count,” an ambitious national initiative launched by Lumina Foundation for Education in 2004, with support from a number of other philanthropies and organizations. The initiative helps community colleges learn how to collect and analyze student performance data in order to build a “culture of evidence” — a culture in which colleges routinely use solid evidence to develop institutionwide reform strategies that are aimed at helping their students succeed academically. Achieving the Dream has grown into a national movement; more than 130 community colleges are now participating.

This interim report takes stock of the experiences among the first 26 colleges from five states to join the initiative (the “Round 1” colleges). It offers a look at the influence of the initiative in its early stages, while its practices and supports were still evolving. The study shows that after five years in Achieving the Dream, four out of five of the 26 Round 1 colleges had adopted some or all of the practices associated with a culture of evidence. While the colleges instituted a wide range of strategies to help their students succeed, increasing student achievement and persistence levels in the colleges remains a huge challenge.

What are we to make of Achieving the Dream at this juncture? On the one hand, it represents an unprecedented effort to help community colleges change their institutional cultures so they can continuously pinpoint where, how, and why their students are underperforming, and then implement reforms to help them improve. Achieving the Dream was at the vanguard, anticipating — and helping spur — the growing national focus on institutional accountability in community colleges. After five years in the initiative — the first two years of which were spent planning and setting up strategies for reform — a majority of the Round 1 colleges are collecting data on their students' performance and are committed to using those data to design and implement effective reforms. On the other hand, trends in student outcomes — such as course completion, persistence, maintaining good grades, and earning college credentials — have remained relatively unchanged at these colleges, underscoring the depth of the challenge facing all community colleges.

One lesson from Achieving the Dream is that simply understanding the problems is not enough to solve them. Nevertheless, Achieving the Dream has provided a better sense of where the colleges have to go to improve and how to get there, creating an infrastructure through which change can occur. What remains is

for colleges to harness the potential power of that infrastructure — and for Achieving the Dream itself to further refine its approach in order to better help colleges focus systematically on the issues that affect student achievement.

Achieving the Dream is not a static intervention, but a living, organic process — and many of the Round 1 colleges are now moving into the next stage of that process. A final report on the Round 1 colleges is planned for 2012-2013, by which time they will have had more time to institutionalize their reforms.

Gordon Berlin  
President

## Acknowledgments

The Achieving the Dream evaluation is made possible by the support of Lumina Foundation for Education. We are grateful for Lumina's generous and steadfast support for this evaluation, as one component of Achieving the Dream's effort to improve outcomes for community college students.

MDRC and the Community College Research Center (CCRC) appreciate the cooperation of the colleges represented in this report: Alamo Community College District, Brookhaven College, Broward College, Central New Mexico Community College, Coastal Bend College, Danville Community College, Durham Technical Community College, El Paso Community College, Galveston College, Guilford Technical Community College, Hillsborough Community College, Houston Community College, Martin Community College, Mountain Empire Community College, New Mexico State University-Doña Ana, Patrick Henry Community College, Paul D. Camp Community College, Santa Fe Community College, South Texas College, Southwest Texas Junior College, Southwestern Indian Polytechnic Institute, Tallahassee Community College, Tidewater Community College, University of New Mexico-Gallup, Valencia Community College, and Wayne Community College. We are especially grateful for the openness of the college administrators, faculty, staff, board members and students who generously gave their time to be interviewed for this report.

We also thank the larger Achieving the Dream family. Our national partners were kind enough to read and critique the report with care. We are particularly grateful for written comments received from Bill Trueheart, Carol Lincoln, and Katie Loovis of Achieving the Dream; Nushina Mir and Mary Williams of Lumina Foundation for Education; and Maggie Shelton of MDC, Inc. In addition, the coaches and data facilitators working on Achieving the Dream offered invaluable support in arranging and facilitating our field visits to the college campuses.

The ambitious work of the Achieving the Dream evaluation represents a collaborative effort between CCRC and MDRC. The research team that conducted interviews with us at the 26 sites included Melissa Boynton, Erin Coghlan, and Christian Geckeler of MDRC; and Katherine Boswell, Aaron Doyle, Todd Ellwein, and John Wachen of CCRC. At MDRC, early report drafts benefited from careful review by Gordon Berlin, Thomas Bailey, John Hutchins, and Robert Ivry. Alice Tufel edited the report, and David Sobel and Stephanie Cowell prepared it for publication.

The Authors



## Executive Summary

Across the United States, enrollments at community colleges are soaring. In fall 2009, approximately 8 million students took courses for credit — nearly a 17 percent increase from two years before.<sup>1</sup> Community colleges tend to be welcoming and accessible institutions, particularly for nontraditional, low-income, and minority students. But while community colleges do a good job of helping students get a foothold in higher education, close to half of the students who begin at community colleges with the intention of earning a certificate or degree do not achieve their goal and are not enrolled in any college or university after six years.<sup>2</sup> A growing number of policymakers and educators are calling upon community colleges to do better.

“Achieving the Dream: Community Colleges Count” is a national initiative that was launched in 2004 and was designed to increase the academic success of community college students, with a special emphasis on low-income students and students of color. Its approach is to help community colleges build a “culture of evidence” by using student records and other data to examine how students are performing over time and to identify barriers to academic progress. From there, community colleges are expected to develop intervention strategies designed to improve student outcomes, conduct further research on student progress, and bring effective programs to scale. Lumina Foundation for Education launched Achieving the Dream and was its principal funder, with a large group of philanthropies and other organizations joining Lumina to support the initiative. Today, more than 130 community colleges in 24 states and the District of Columbia are involved in Achieving the Dream (see Figure ES.1).

MDRC — a nonprofit, nonpartisan education and social policy research organization — and the Community College Research Center (CCRC) are evaluating the work of the first 26 colleges to join the initiative from Florida, New Mexico, North Carolina, Texas, and Virginia (called the “Round 1” colleges here). This report covers a five-year period, beginning in the 2004-2005 academic year. Because the process of building a culture of evidence is envisioned as a long-term effort, a future report will examine trends in student achievement after the colleges have had more time to institutionalize reforms that began under Achieving the Dream.

Overall, the report concludes that:

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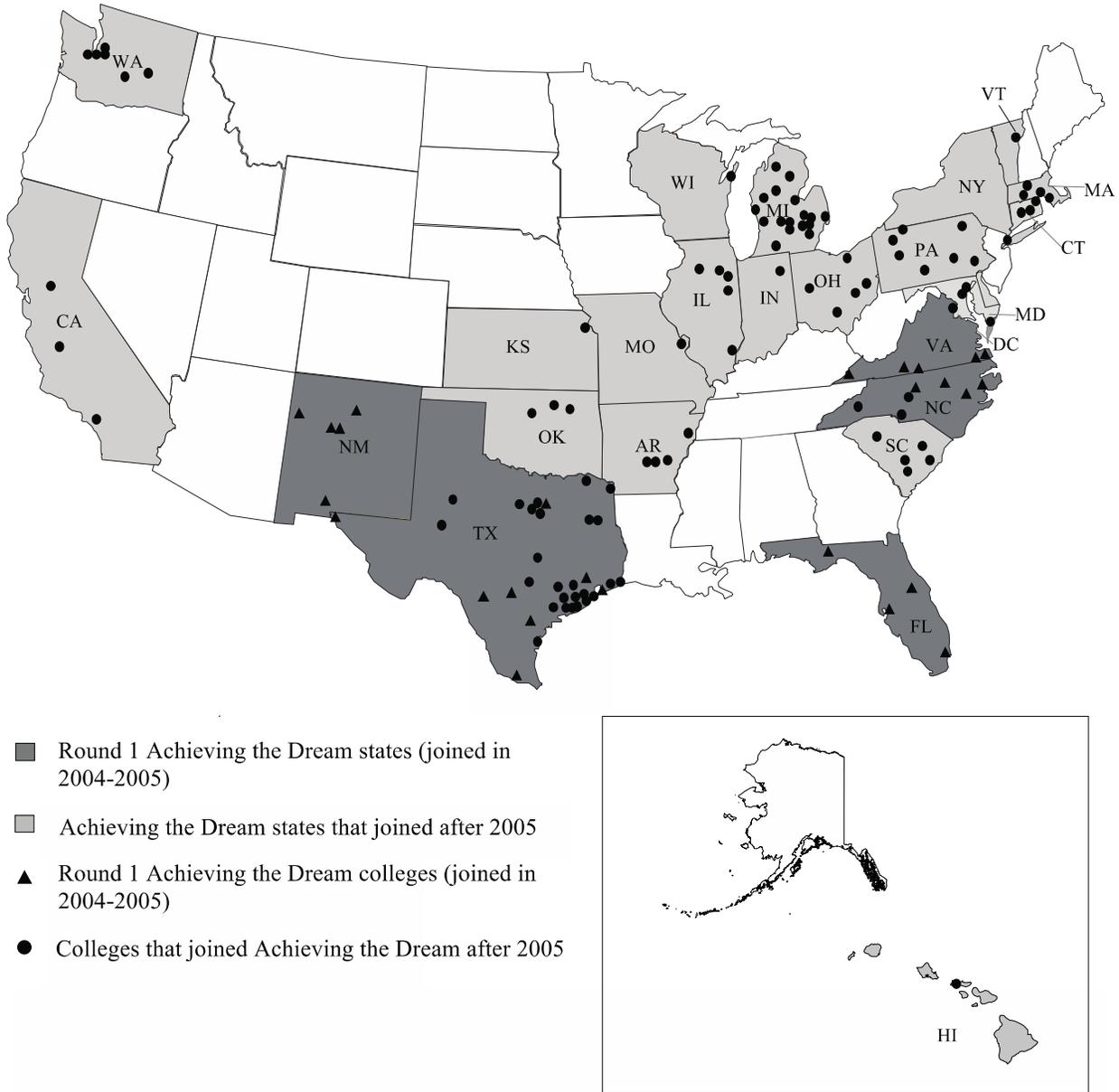
<sup>1</sup>American Association of Community Colleges (AACC), *Community College Enrollment Survey: An Analysis of Estimated Fall 2009 Headcount Enrollments at Community Colleges* (Washington, DC: AACC, 2009).

<sup>2</sup>Stephen Provasnik and Michael Planty, *Community Colleges: Special Supplement to the Condition of Education 2008*, NCEES 2008-033 (Washington, DC: National Center for Education Statistics, Institute of Education Sciences, U.S. Department of Education, 2008).

Achieving the Dream: Community Colleges Count

Figure ES.1

States and Colleges Involved in Achieving the Dream, 2004 to 2010



NOTE: Multi-college districts are represented with one dot on this map.

- Many Round 1 colleges made important strides in building a stronger culture of evidence during their five-year participation in the initiative. In particular, colleges enhanced their leadership commitment to student success, increased their research capacity, and developed a number of interventions aimed at improving their students' achievement.
- By spring 2009, four out of five Round 1 colleges had adopted a number of practices associated with a strong culture of evidence, with one-fifth of the colleges still facing major challenges in undertaking this work.
- While colleges instituted a wide range of strategies to improve student achievement under the auspices of Achieving the Dream, a majority of these reforms reached less than 10 percent of their intended target populations — likely too few to make demonstrable progress on improving student achievement overall.
- Other forces besides Achieving the Dream sometimes helped the colleges build a culture of evidence, including accreditation processes and grants other than those from the initiative. However, about three-fourths of the colleges indicated that Achieving the Dream had at least some influence in helping them develop a culture of evidence.
- Trends in student outcomes remained relatively unchanged, except for modest improvements in gatekeeper (introductory) college English courses and the completion of courses attempted within the first two years.

## **The Theory of Action Behind Achieving the Dream**

From the earliest conversations, it was clear that Lumina Foundation and the partners had big ambitions for Achieving the Dream. They spoke about fostering fundamental changes in the culture and operations of community colleges — changes that would lead to measureable and lasting improvements in student outcomes. They also spoke about changing the context in which community colleges operate — everything from the rules governing their accreditation and funding to public awareness and support for community colleges.

On the ground, participating colleges were expected to enact a five-step process of institutional reform, which included (1) securing leadership commitment; (2) using data to prioritize actions; (3) engaging stakeholders; (4) implementing, evaluating, and improving intervention strategies; and (5) establishing a culture of continuous improvement. To help colleges institute their reforms, Achieving the Dream provided them with both monetary and technical support. The Round 1 colleges were awarded an initial year-long planning grant of \$50,000 each, followed by annual grants of \$100,000 for four years (\$450,000 total). In addition, the colleges

were aided by two consultants: a data facilitator, who helped them perform the data collection and analysis and interpret the results; and a coach, who helped them set priorities, build consensus, and implement strategies for improvement. The initiative also sponsored a Kick-off Institute and annual Strategy Institutes for all the Achieving the Dream colleges, where they learned more about the Achieving the Dream process, made plans for their own campuses, and shared ideas and lessons with other colleges on how to help students be more successful. Colleges also received technical assistance from the initiative's eight founding partner organizations, led by MDC, Inc., the managing partner of Achieving the Dream.

All Achieving the Dream colleges were asked to try to “move the needle” on five measures of student success: (1) completion of developmental courses and progression to credit-bearing courses; (2) completion of so-called gatekeeper courses, including introductory college courses in English and math; (3) completion of attempted courses with a grade of “C” or better; (4) persistence from semester to semester and from year to year; and (5) attainment of college credentials. Colleges were expected to track these outcomes for each fall cohort of entering students and to make comparisons with past cohorts to determine whether the outcomes improved over time. As noted above, colleges were also expected to break down the results for subgroups of students defined by race, ethnicity, and income.

Throughout the history of Achieving the Dream, there was some tension between those who believed that gains in student outcomes should come quickly and those who believed it was a long-term process. The initiative's “Integrated Action Plan” was vague on this point, indicating that colleges should see “measurable improvement in success rates” after four years and have “achieved their long-term targets for student success” after eight years. What was clear was that the five-step process was iterative, so any improvements in student outcomes depended on the colleges' ability to master the initial steps. Even if colleges did all that was asked of them, it could still take time for improvements to show up in the data, given the longitudinal nature of the measures. Some of the partners cited the oft-used metaphor of turning a ship to describe the work of Achieving the Dream. On the one hand, they firmly believed that the initiative would set community colleges on a better course; on the other hand, they recognized that changes would likely occur only gradually and might not be fully apparent for several years' time.

In analyzing the work and progress of the Round 1 colleges, it is also important to note that these schools began their work in Achieving the Dream as the initiative was still evolving. Indeed, since its beginning in 2004, the initiative has expanded, modified, and codified many of its practices and supports, with the Round 1 colleges receiving less intensive versions of these messages during the early phases of their implementation. As such, the Round 1 colleges' progress should be seen as offering a look at the initiative's influence during its early development, while its practices and supports were still being solidified.

The Round 1 colleges are diverse in size, location, and student characteristics. The largest institution is Houston Community College, which had a full-time equivalent 12-month enrollment of over 32,000 students in 2008-2009. The smallest institution is Martin Community College in North Carolina, which had a full-time equivalent enrollment of 410 students. The colleges are located in large and midsize cities, suburbs, and small towns. White students make up a majority or plurality of students at most of these institutions, but nearly all the colleges enrolled substantial numbers of African American, Hispanic, or Native American students.

## **How Was the Research Conducted at the Round 1 Colleges?**

A research team comprising MDRC and CCRC staff studied the Round 1 colleges over several years to learn how they implemented Achieving the Dream and whether they made progress in developing a culture of evidence on campus. The team visited each of the 26 colleges two times: once during the first year of implementation, in spring 2006, and again during the last year of implementation, either in fall 2008 or spring 2009. The visits lasted two to three days and included interviews with the administrators, faculty members, and institutional research staff, among others. The research team also conducted a survey of college administrators and faculty at 23 of the 26 colleges in 2007-2008. In addition, the research team reviewed annual reports that the colleges submitted to Achieving the Dream, as well as reports prepared by the coaches and data facilitators. Finally, the research team analyzed student records data that the colleges submitted to the Achieving the Dream database, which allows researchers to track student performance over time. The analysis examines student outcomes at the institutional level for students who began college each fall between 2002 and 2007 (three years before the initiative began and three years after its implementation). Each entering cohort is tracked for two years.

## **Have the Round 1 Colleges Created a Culture of Evidence?**

The bulk of this report assesses the Round 1 colleges' success between spring 2006 and spring 2009 in developing a culture of evidence — that is, their progress in instituting the five main steps of the Achieving the Dream model, described above.

As Table ES.1 shows, most of the Round 1 colleges made substantial progress in developing more evidence-based systems aimed at improving student success during their participation in Achieving the Dream. Eighty-one percent (21) of the Round 1 colleges improved their culture of evidence over the course of their five-year participation in the initiative, and 19 percent (five) of the colleges continued to have major challenges implementing the initiative's model for institutional improvement. Indeed, most of the Round 1 colleges made a number of enhancements to their institutions, including the use of more sophisticated methods for data

**Achieving the Dream: Community Colleges Count**

**Table ES.1**

**Culture of Evidence at Achieving the Dream Round 1 Colleges,  
Spring 2006 and Spring 2009**

Culture of Evidence Rating	Spring 2006		Spring 2009	
	Number of Round 1 Colleges	Percentage of Round 1 Colleges	Number of Round 1 Colleges	Percentage of Round 1 Colleges
Strong or very strong culture of evidence	6	23	11	42
Some culture of evidence	5	19	10	38
Weak or very weak culture of evidence	15	58	5	19
<b>Total</b>	<b>26</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>26</b>	<b>100</b>

SOURCE: Information collected from faculty, staff, and administrators during two rounds of implementation research across all 26 Round 1 colleges, cross-referenced against reports submitted by college representatives, Achieving the Dream coaches, and data facilitators.

NOTE: Percentages may not add to 100 because of rounding.

analysis, numerous interventions aimed at increasing students' success, and more efficient systems for monitoring their efforts to improve students' achievement. The colleges can be divided into three categories, based on their success in institutionalizing a culture of evidence.

**Strong Culture of Evidence**

Eleven Round 1 colleges (42 percent) had implemented most of the practices that are associated with a strong culture of evidence by the end of their five-year participation in Achieving the Dream. These colleges had excelled at building or further strengthening all five aspects of the initiative's institutional improvement model — that is, they (1) had strong leadership systems committed to improving student success; (2) had well-developed institutional research departments that conducted intensive, in-depth analyses of their students' achievement; (3) involved faculty, staff, students, and external stakeholders in multiple aspects of their reform agenda; (4) had used well-developed strategies, with one or more strategies reaching substantial proportions of their target population; and (5) had instituted multiple processes for strategic planning and program review, and made financial and programmatic decisions based on evidence of improved student achievement. As described in Box ES.1, the colleges that made the greatest strides in developing an evidence-based approach to improving student achievement shared several important characteristics, including the broad-based involvement of college administrators, faculty, and staff; strong institutional research departments that produced reports on student achievement that people could readily understand; regular evaluations of interven-

### Box ES.1

#### **“Star” Colleges in Achieving the Dream: Institutions that Made Solid Progress in Building a Culture of Evidence**

Four of the 26 Round 1 colleges stood out because they had a weak culture of evidence at the start of the initiative and made great strides in building up their culture over five years. These colleges made changes that set them apart from the other colleges that made less progress, including:

- **Multiple senior administrators who were deeply involved in the colleges’ reforms.** Each college had a cadre of senior leaders, including the vice presidents of instruction and student services and the head of institutional research (IR), leading its Achieving the Dream work. Two colleges also had presidents who were very involved.
- **Active IR departments that produced accessible reports on students’ achievement.** Each school focused sharply on increasing IR capacity by hiring new IR staff and upgrading its data management system, which allowed it to better manage multiple IR demands. Each school also produced institutional- or department-specific reports on students’ success, with clearly delineated target goals for students’ achievement.
- **Regular evaluations of their interventions to improve student success.** Each college systematically tracked its interventions, often comparing students who were participating in a particular program with nonparticipants. These findings were disseminated widely throughout the school, with a number of faculty and staff commenting on the results.
- **Strong faculty and staff leaders who played an active role in leading the colleges’ reforms and interventions.** Each of the four colleges had strong participation from faculty and staff, who were involved in leadership and policymaking committees at their colleges and led the implementation of numerous strategies that were aimed at improving students’ success.
- **Integrated committee structures that allowed for regular communication among administrators, faculty, and staff.** Each of the four schools developed numerous standing committees to monitor its reform efforts. These committees brought faculty, staff, and administrators together through regular communication, providing a clear and consistent voice in their colleges’ larger policy- and institutional decision-making.
- **Consistent attention to financial supports for strategy scale-up and numerous strategies operating at scale.** Each of these college developed systematic ways to support broad-scale reforms, often by using federal or state grants to support the additional costs. All four colleges had strategies that were reaching substantial proportions of their remedial students or students who were in college for the first time.
- **Heavy investment in professional development.** Each of the four schools dedicated significant funds to training faculty and staff.

tions to improve student success; and attention to scaling up program strategies that helped students be more successful.

### **Some Culture of Evidence**

Ten Round 1 colleges (38 percent) had instituted many of the aspects of Achieving the Dream's suggested improvement process in their schools, though not to the same degree as the colleges described above. Most schools had built (or started with) relatively capable institutional research departments, and most undertook longitudinal analyses of student outcomes and tracked the progress of at least some of their student success interventions. However, they also continued to have limitations in their data capacity that hindered their ability to undertake broader-based analyses. Other stakeholders, such as faculty and staff, also reported increased awareness of student achievement or had some exposure to reports on students' success in particular interventions. Faculty and staff were also generally involved in some aspects of the reform agenda at many of these schools, most often around implementing the colleges' student success strategies, although their participation tended to be more limited than at colleges that had a better-developed culture of evidence. Finally, most colleges had some form of strategic planning process in place, which at times used student achievement data to inform decision-making, though the use of data was not consistent across these colleges.

### **Weak Culture of Evidence**

As observed earlier, five colleges (19 percent) were still struggling to implement a number of Achieving the Dream's recommended practices by spring 2009. Very weak institutional research departments were the primary difficulty hindering most of these schools' ability to institute a broad data-driven culture. Most of these schools did not employ an institutional researcher continuously during their time in the initiative, relying instead on outside consultants or other, less well-trained staff to fill these positions. Sometimes these challenges were the result of a poor economic situation, which kept the college from being able to attract good technical support. Some schools also had difficulty implementing Achieving the Dream across multiple campuses and providing sustained leadership to bring these disparate groups together.

## **How Much Did Achieving the Dream Influence the Round 1 Colleges?**

Many of the Round 1 colleges attributed their improvements to Achieving the Dream. As can be seen in Table ES.2, 19 out of 26 (73 percent) of the Round 1 colleges reported that Achieving the Dream had at least some influence on their development of a culture of evidence. However, they also noted other systems that were important in helping them develop a culture of evidence. For instance, a number of the schools discussed how their accreditation processes

**Achieving the Dream: Community Colleges Count**

**Table ES.2**

**Influence of Achieving the Dream on the Culture of Evidence at Round 1  
Colleges and Progress Made from Spring 2006 to Spring 2009**

Number of Colleges	Spring 2006 Culture of Evidence <sup>a</sup>	Spring 2009 Culture of Evidence	Progress Made from Spring 2006 to Spring 2009 <sup>b</sup>
<b><u>Heavy influence: 8 colleges</u></b>			
3 colleges	Strong	Very strong	+1
1 college	Some	Strong	+1
3 colleges	Weak	Strong	+2
1 college	Very weak	Strong	+3
<b><u>Some influence: 11 colleges</u></b>			
2 colleges	Strong	Very strong	+1
1 college	Very weak	Some	+2
6 colleges	Weak	Some	+1
2 colleges	Very weak	Weak	+1
<b><u>Little influence: 7 colleges</u></b>			
1 college	Strong	Very strong	+1
1 college	Weak	Some	+1
2 colleges	Some	Some	0
1 college	Very weak	Very weak	0
2 colleges	Some	Weak	-1

SOURCE: Information collected from faculty, staff, and administrators during two rounds of implementation research across all 26 Round 1 colleges, cross-referenced against reports submitted by college representatives, Achieving the Dream coaches, and data facilitators.

NOTES: While some of the colleges in the "Little influence" category made progress in developing their cultures of evidence, they did not consider Achieving the Dream to be a primary motivator for these changes.

<sup>a</sup>Spring 2006 culture of evidence ratings are based on implementation findings from MDRC and CCRC's baseline report on the Round 1 Achieving the Dream colleges (Brock et al., 2007, pp. 96-97).

<sup>b</sup>Progress ratings reflect changes in colleges' cultures of evidence between spring 2006 and spring 2009, as measured by movement across the following rating scale: very weak, weak, some, strong, very strong. For example, a college that received a "very weak" rating in spring 2006 and a "very strong" rating in spring 2009 would receive a progress rating of "+4," indicating that it had progressed 4 levels in the rating scale.

or grants other than those from Achieving the Dream, such as federal Title V or TRIO grants, were the main drivers of the reforms at their colleges. Achieving the Dream was seen as “complementing” or “reinforcing” this agenda, but not necessarily as the primary inspiration for the colleges’ efforts to improve student achievement or to use data. Additionally, a few colleges said that the motivation for their reforms stemmed from an internal push to increase student achievement, often from a strong leader who was already committed to improving student success.

## **What Program Strategies Were Developed for Students, and to What Effect?**

Colleges can expect real changes in student outcomes only when they extend meaningfully improved programs and services to significant numbers of students. In other words, a strategy will make an observable impact on institutional performance only if it (1) improves academic outcomes among the students who are served, and (2) reaches enough students to “move the needle” on collegewide measures.

Overall, the Round 1 colleges implemented a large number of strategies under the auspices of Achieving the Dream. Most of those strategies involved the implementation of direct programs and services that were designed to improve students’ college success. While the strategies ranged widely, from light-touch orientation activities to more intensive curricular reforms, several common themes emerged across the 26 colleges:

- A large majority of strategies were designed to increase academic and social support systems for students, while only about one-fourth changed the content and delivery of classroom instruction itself.
- Nearly half of the colleges’ strategies targeted developmental education students, and one-third focused on students in their first year of college. Very few strategies targeted students based on their race, ethnicity, or economic status, though some colleges addressed achievement gaps indirectly through programs aimed at a broader group of students.
- Despite colleges’ notable efforts to scale up their programs and services, the majority of strategies reached less than 10 percent of their intended target populations. Intensive strategies, such as curricular reforms or intensive advising, which were defined by longer periods of contact time with students, were particularly unlikely to reach large numbers of students. Student success courses (courses aimed at introducing students to college life and enhancing their study skills) were the sole high-intensity strategy to reach a

large number of students at a majority of colleges. This finding suggests that colleges often faced a trade-off between the intensity and scale of their interventions.

Most colleges had several additional strategies that did not reach students directly, but rather through (1) changes in college policies, and (2) collaborative relationships with external stakeholders, including local school districts and community members.

Besides improving upon the programs, services, and policies that affect students, Achieving the Dream colleges are expected to leverage engagement among faculty and staff and improve their skills as part of the effort to increase student success. Indeed, the initiative highlights the importance of professional development in creating more systemic changes in community colleges' improvement efforts. This proved to be an important area of college activity under Achieving the Dream, with every college reporting at least one professional development strategy and several reporting that this was a key focus of their work. Findings from an MDRC cost study of Achieving the Dream further highlight the centrality of this work: investments in professional development averaged \$654,000 across the five Round 1 colleges in the study, representing an important share of colleges' spending on activities related to the initiative.<sup>3</sup>

On average, each college implemented seven strategies, with all 26 colleges implementing over 200 strategies in total, representing an enormous investment of time and work by college personnel. Also, even though, as already noted, most strategies reached less than 10 percent of their intended target, the colleges made noteworthy progress toward scale-up, as nearly all succeeded at expanding at least one direct strategy to reach at least 25 percent of its intended target population. However, a majority of strategies across the Round 1 colleges remained small in scale, particularly when they involved the kind of intensive contact that might be expected to meaningfully influence students' performance. The result is that the benefits of promising interventions were frequently extended to only a fraction of the students who were in need of more intensive assistance.

It should not be surprising then, that the trends in student outcomes across the Round 1 colleges remained relatively unchanged across the pre-initiative and post-initiative periods. The analysis suggests that the average rates of persistence and graduation as well as the rates for completion of developmental math, developmental English, developmental reading, and gatekeeper math courses remained substantially the same throughout the pe-

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<sup>3</sup>Elizabeth Zachry and Erin Coghlan with Rashida Welbeck, *Investing in Change: How Much Do Achieving the Dream Colleges Spend — and from What Resources — to Become Data-Driven Institutions?* (New York: MDRC, 2010).

riod, with modest improvements over time in the rates for completion of gatekeeper English and completion of coursework.

In addition, few changes were seen in the outcomes of specific college and student subgroups. For instance, a separate analysis of the outcomes for several colleges that made the most progress in building a culture of evidence during their time in Achieving the Dream revealed no significant differences from the trends of the Round 1 colleges overall. Similarly, few changes were seen in the achievement gaps by race, ethnicity, and income. Though African American students showed some improvements in course completions and white students showed improvements in both course completions and gatekeeper English pass rates, those improvements over time were not large enough to close the achievement gap between the two groups.

While these descriptive trends seem to suggest that Achieving the Dream had few positive effects on student outcomes, the results must be interpreted with caution. While the lack of movement in student outcomes may occur largely because the interventions affected a small proportion of students in a cohort, the stability of student indicators over time may also reflect the short time span over which outcomes were analyzed. That is, the analysis of two-year outcomes for students may not provide a long enough window to adequately reflect the changes in institutional capacity and the implementation of specific strategies given the very low levels of student achievement that most colleges faced initially.

## **Conclusion**

While community colleges are a prominent part of the national conversation today, few organizations were concentrating on these institutions before 2004, and even fewer were devoting substantial funds toward their improvement. Moreover, before Lumina Foundation for Education launched Achieving the Dream, few colleges or other postsecondary organizations focused on community college students' success; rather, they focused more often on providing open access to postsecondary education.

In 2010, Achieving the Dream became an independent nonprofit entity, and it is undergoing a marked shift in its leadership and organization as a result, seeking to involve an even wider range of community colleges in its work. In a change from the past, community colleges will have to pay to participate in Achieving the Dream, though it is expected that some institutions may find sponsors. Many of the core activities that Achieving the Dream provides — such as coaching, data facilitation, and annual Strategy Institutes — will also be subsidized so that colleges do not have to cover the full cost of participation.

As Achieving the Dream moves into this new phase, the initiative, like its participating institutions, may need to refine its approach to make a stronger impact on students' success. For instance, outside of implementing colleges' strategies, the faculty and staff at many of the Round 1 colleges tended to be less involved than administrators in the colleges' overall improvement work. Similarly, only a handful of colleges made attempts to engage their part-time faculty and staff, who most often lead the developmental and gatekeeper courses that are so important to students' ultimate success in college. Additionally, while most colleges had expanded at least one strategy, the majority of strategies at these schools remained small in scale, leaving large proportions of students relatively untouched by the colleges' Achieving the Dream work.

These issues represent important challenges to Achieving the Dream's vision for improved student achievement; however, they should also be placed in the context of the overall struggles facing the U.S. education system as a whole. Elementary and secondary schools have long faced an uphill battle in their efforts to improve students' achievement, with only a relative few achieving large-scale reforms that successfully increased students' academic skills or graduation rates. Far more have been mired in many of the same struggles that Achieving the Dream colleges face, including students with major academic challenges, poor funding streams, and a lack of faculty or staff engagement in larger school reform efforts. Indeed, school systems working with adolescents, such as middle and high schools, tend to have the most struggles with large-scale reform, mirroring many of the key challenges that community colleges are facing.

As Achieving the Dream continues to expand, it might look to revise its framework for action by drawing on some of the lessons from efforts by K-12 stakeholders to improve students' outcomes. Some of these steps include a more rigorous focus on changing the practices that are most likely to affect students — namely, the interactions that occur between students and instructors in the classroom. As K-12 schools have learned, changing such practices can be difficult and often requires heavy engagement with faculty and staff, strong and continuous professional development, and a carefully researched plan detailing how new practices will affect students' achievement. Given this scenario, Achieving the Dream might look toward more definitive ways to involve larger proportions of faculty and staff in the change process while also aiming to develop a larger evidence base about what practices work to increase community college students' achievement. Similarly, the initiative might also seek to incorporate classroom-based measures of learning, which more clearly document students' attainment of particular skills and practices, in its model for institutional improvement. Such measures might help bridge the gap in Achieving the Dream's theory of action, which currently focuses on broad institutional changes in student outcomes that may take many years to manifest.

While larger changes in students' achievement may not yet have been realized, Achieving the Dream has begun an unprecedented movement toward helping colleges improve their student outcomes and develop systems to sustain those efforts. Bringing faculty and staff voices

more concretely into colleges' reform work and focusing more directly on improvements to classroom instruction and services may reap benefits for the next stage of the initiative's work. Given the successes they have already had, the initiative and its participating colleges stand poised to move forward with this agenda and make the changes needed to help more community college students accomplish their goals.

## EARLIER PUBLICATIONS ON ACHIEVING THE DREAM

### *Investing in Change*

*How Much Do Achieving the Dream Colleges Spend — and from What Resources — to Become Data-Driven Institutions?*

2010. Elizabeth M. Zachry and Erin Coghlan with Rashida Welbeck.

### *Terms of Engagement*

*Men of Color Discuss Their Experiences in Community College*

2010. Alissa Gardenhire-Crooks, Herbert Collado, Kasey Martin, and Alma Castro with Thomas Brock and Genevieve Orr.

### *Collaborating to Create Change*

*How El Paso Community College Improved the Readiness of Its Incoming Students Through Achieving the Dream*

2010. Monica Reid Kerrigan and Doug Slater.

### *Guiding Developmental Math Students to Campus Services*

*An Impact Evaluation of the Beacon Program at South Texas College*

2010. Mary G. Visher, Kristin F. Butcher, and Oscar S. Cerna with Dan Cullinan and Emily Schneider.

### *Building Student Success From the Ground Up*

*A Case Study of an Achieving the Dream College*

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### *Achieving the Dream Colleges in Pennsylvania and Washington State*

*Early Progress Toward Building a Culture of Evidence*

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### *Faculty and Administrator Data Use at Achieving the Dream Colleges*

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### *Promising Instructional Reforms in Developmental Education*

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### *Evidence-Based Decision Making in Community Colleges*

*Findings from a Survey of Faculty and Administrator Data Use at Achieving the Dream Colleges*

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### *Building a Culture of Evidence for Community College Student Success*

*Early Progress in the Achieving the Dream Initiative*

2007. Thomas Brock, Davis Jenkins, Todd Ellwein, Jennifer Miller, Susan Gooden, Kasey Martin, Casey MacGregor, and Michael Pih with Bethany Miller and Christian Geckeler.

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MDRC is a nonprofit, nonpartisan social and education policy research organization dedicated to learning what works to improve the well-being of low-income people. Through its research and the active communication of its findings, MDRC seeks to enhance the effectiveness of social and education policies and programs.

Founded in 1974 and located in New York City and Oakland, California, MDRC is best known for mounting rigorous, large-scale, real-world tests of new and existing policies and programs. Its projects are a mix of demonstrations (field tests of promising new program approaches) and evaluations of ongoing government and community initiatives. MDRC's staff bring an unusual combination of research and organizational experience to their work, providing expertise on the latest in qualitative and quantitative methods and on program design, development, implementation, and management. MDRC seeks to learn not just whether a program is effective but also how and why the program's effects occur. In addition, it tries to place each project's findings in the broader context of related research — in order to build knowledge about what works across the social and education policy fields. MDRC's findings, lessons, and best practices are proactively shared with a broad audience in the policy and practitioner community as well as with the general public and the media.

Over the years, MDRC has brought its unique approach to an ever-growing range of policy areas and target populations. Once known primarily for evaluations of state welfare-to-work programs, today MDRC is also studying public school reforms, employment programs for ex-offenders and people with disabilities, and programs to help low-income students succeed in college. MDRC's projects are organized into five areas:

- Promoting Family Well-Being and Children's Development
- Improving Public Education
- Raising Academic Achievement and Persistence in College
- Supporting Low-Wage Workers and Communities
- Overcoming Barriers to Employment

Working in almost every state, all of the nation's largest cities, and Canada and the United Kingdom, MDRC conducts its projects in partnership with national, state, and local governments, public school systems, community organizations, and numerous private philanthropies.