Engaging Faculty in the Achieving the Dream Initiative
PRINCIPLES AND PRACTICES OF STUDENT SUCCESS

Lara Birnback and Will Friedman, Public Agenda

Stakeholder engagement is critical to the success of Achieving the Dream. Broad-based support for the college’s student success agenda and institutional change efforts requires engaging faculty, staff, students, community members, and others in the change process. These stakeholders can bring to light critical obstacles to student success and help generate solutions that close achievement gaps. When done skillfully, involving stakeholders in planning and implementing institutional change minimizes resistance and fosters a sense of shared responsibility. It can also create “distributed leadership” that complements leadership from the Achieving the Dream core and data teams and can help maintain momentum in the face of presidential transitions and other potential “derailers.” The experiences of Achieving the Dream colleges show that it is especially important to involve faculty in efforts to improve student success. Faculty are well positioned to know what works and to design and implement innovations to better help students reach their goals.

By “engagement” we mean more than simply communicating with faculty to keep them informed about the initiative and encourage their “buy-in.” Rather, we mean involving faculty early, often, creatively, and authentically in the change process, because “institutional change means changing behavior of people across the institution, and their support will come most readily when they share responsibility for diagnosing the problems and crafting solutions.”

This guide offers principles and strategies for engaging faculty in efforts to create a culture of evidence and student success, along with specific examples from Achieving the Dream colleges.

Challenges to Faculty Engagement
Evaluation research on Achieving the Dream indicates that colleges that are more successful in engaging faculty are able to make much faster progress on their success agenda than are those where faculty engagement is limited. At the same time, research and the experiences of Achieving the Dream colleges indicate that there are a number of challenges to engaging faculty. A few of the most common ones are:

Reaching beyond early enthusiasts Expanding beyond a select group of faculty “early adopters” (such as those who are participating on core and data teams or whose work is directly connected to the college’s Achieving the Dream intervention strategies) can be challenging. In addition, bringing part-time or adjunct faculty on board always poses special challenges.
Breaking down silos Many Achieving the Dream colleges have noted that it can be very challenging to break down the silos that often exist among academic departments, between academic and student services units, and across different campuses.

Strategically making use of convocations and professional development opportunities Many colleges do make an effort to communicate to faculty and staff about the initiative through college-wide student success convocations or faculty in-service days. If not designed strategically, however, and with appropriate follow-up, these efforts by themselves are unlikely to break through the skeptical mind-set with which some faculty greet new and ambitious initiatives.

Effectively engaging faculty in using data to improve student outcomes A recent study from the Community College Research Center and MDRC found a great deal of variation among faculty members at Achieving the Dream colleges in the degree to which they use data, with some admitting they were unsure how to use achievement data to improve instruction and others indicating a strong resistance to doing so at all. In many cases, this lack of familiarity with using student achievement data is coupled with faculty concern that the data could be used punitively to blame them for poor student performance. Such fears can exacerbate any discomfort that already exists about designing evidence-based interventions.

Changing entrenched attitudes Research on faculty attitudes suggests that while faculty support the goal of student success, many feel that the main obstacles have more to do with the students themselves than with anything they or the institution can do. Some faculty are ambivalent about Achieving the Dream’s special focus on students of color and low-income students, while others believe that substantial improvements in student outcomes can only be achieved by watering down standards of quality.

Examples of successful faculty engagement initiatives and efforts at Achieving the Dream colleges Several Achieving the Dream colleges have developed innovative ways to engage faculty more broadly in efforts to improve student success and have overcome some of the challenges highlighted in the previous section. A few of those colleges, and a description of their efforts, are included here.

Engaging Faculty in Data Collection and Analysis and in Redesigning Courses at Sinclair Community College Even before joining Achieving the Dream, Sinclair Community College had an active institutional research (IR) department. However, faculty rarely saw the data that the IR office collected and even more rarely discussed or thought about how to use the information. One of the first things the college did after joining the initiative was to bring faculty and staff together at a “data retreat” to examine and discuss student success data. Participants in the retreat found that their most at-risk students were especially struggling with math and English and decided to involve faculty from developmental

FACULTY INVOLVEMENT Faculty can be involved in Achieving the Dream in many different ways, including:

- Participating on core and data teams, as well as student success-related committees and task forces
- Providing leadership as initiative co-directors, champions, and coordinators
- Serving as student advocates, advisors, success coaches, and mentors
- Working in collaborative groups commissioned to redesign courses, curricula, and assessments
- Participating in faculty retreats to discuss and analyze Achieving the Dream data
- Attending Achieving the Dream Kickoff and Strategy Institutes
- Participating in focus groups, stakeholder dialogues, and campus and community-wide conversations on student success
- Attending convocations on Achieving the Dream and student success and participating in faculty development experiences linked to strategic improvements in student success
studies, along with the math and English departments, in a problem-solving group to address the challenge. Ultimately, they merged the work of faculty in these priority areas into two AQIP (Academic Quality Improvement Program) projects the college developed for reaccreditation: math and writing success. The work teams for these two AQIP projects were led by faculty and were composed of faculty and staff from across the college.

While most of the attention at the initial data retreat and other planning meetings was on quantitative data, it became clear that there was also a need to collect qualitative data from students to help design appropriate strategies. Sinclair’s Achieving the Dream project director asked permission to interview students in ten developmental math and English classes to find out about their experiences in these courses. The faculty were assured that all information collected would remain confidential. Students were asked about various aspects of their experience in the given class, such as where their needs were being met, where they were struggling, and how the course could be improved. After the notes were compiled, the Achieving the Dream project director met individually with each faculty member to discuss what was heard, and finally, the entire group met together to look for patterns in the data and discuss possible solutions to the problems identified.

The developmental course faculty who had been involved in these interviews greatly valued hearing what students were saying about their classes, and for their part, students appreciated the opportunity to talk about their experiences. Despite some early fears that students would focus on personal problems and gripes, responses focused on practical ways in which students thought things could be improved, such as the suggestion that students be allowed to work in the computer lab and that faculty post notes and worksheets online.

The faculty concluded that these class interviews should be held during the middle of the term, so that instructors would still have time to make changes before the end of the course. They also believed that other faculty members would enjoy learning about their students’ experiences. They became the first faculty to become interview facilitators and note-takers for Sinclair’s mid-quarter student interviews, a process that had a faculty grassroots beginning. Each quarter, all full- and part-time faculty are invited to participate in a mid-quarter class interview. The interviews are facilitated by two faculty volunteers who ask the class ten questions and share the responses with the faculty member.

At the request of the writing success AQIP team, faculty interviewed the students in all sections of developmental English as well as those enrolled in the first credit-bearing English course — more than thirty classes in all. The English and developmental writing faculty created a “best practices” Web site where they could share what they had learned with the larger college teaching community. In addition, they worked together to write a successful “learning challenge grant” that enabled them to hire an outside expert on the teaching of grammar for professional development sessions.

Next, the Achieving the Dream project director suggested to the math AQIP team that it use mid-quarter interviews to gather student information to guide a revision of “MAT 101—Introduction to College Algebra,” a course with a high failure rate. A team of four math faculty developed a questionnaire to ask students about computer-based instruction. Faculty also visited twenty-five sections of MAT 101 to interview students and to complete the questionnaire. The Achieving the Dream project director met with four math faculty to review the raw data, ensuring that there would be no misinterpretation and empowering the faculty to perform the analysis themselves. Based on the data, the course was substantially reworked, and faculty designed a pilot course to improve student success by using computer software, class tutors, lab time, and other student engagement activities. Ultimately, as part
### MAT 191 Series Success Rates

<table>
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<th></th>
<th>Number Enrolled</th>
<th>Overall Success Rate</th>
<th>Students of Color Success Rate</th>
<th>Pell Recipient Success Rate</th>
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<td>308</td>
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of the math AQIP work, the curriculum was revised into a new, slower-paced three-course series — MAT 191, 192, and 193 — which produced a measurable, if modest, increase in student success.

Following the pilot year, full-time math faculty members formed a learning community where they discussed changes in how the course sequence was taught. These faculty met with the Achieving the Dream project director to standardize the MAT 191–193 course sequence so that every faculty member who taught the courses was covering the same units, administering the same tests and quizzes, and using standardized grading procedures. This faculty collaboration has produced positive changes in success rates in these courses. The process of regular meetings to discuss what was working and what was not, and to constantly make improvements, has been well received by faculty who participated. These same faculty are now training other full- and part-time math faculty on this new math series.

Sinclair reports that the process of working together on student success has been valuable for the math faculty who have been involved to date, improving working relationships and collegiality within the department and producing concrete results for students. The next step is for the college to find ways to engage faculty through its new Center for Teaching and Learning, which will provide support for faculty to learn more about effective teaching methods.

### Using Large Format Meetings to Strategically Engage Faculty in Achieving the Dream

**Houston Community College (HCC)** At the beginning of the college’s first implementation year, the Houston Community College system focused its annual all-college meeting on Achieving the Dream. Attendees included everyone from the chancellor to the maintenance service staff, and the meeting provided an opportunity to build on growing interest in Achieving the Dream among the faculty and staff. The college’s Achieving the Dream coach was invited as the keynote speaker and was able to let the entire college community (numbering into the thousands) know more about the initiative’s overall goals and processes, as well as begin a discussion of the college’s specific Achieving the Dream implementation strategies while sharing some preliminary data. The meeting also included smaller breakout sessions where attendees could discuss each strategy with a facilitator and their colleagues.

HCC also partnered with the faculty senate for its annual conference, attended by roughly 60–70 percent of the faculty. Capitalizing on good relationships with the city and the Chamber of Commerce, the college secured the free use of the local convention center and invited the surrounding Gulf Coast colleges who also were Achieving the Dream participants to attend the meeting, share successful strategies, and “compare notes” on their Achieving the Dream work. Speakers were invited from other, non-Achieving the Dream colleges and universities to share their knowledge with the group in plenary session; for example, a representative from Kingsborough Community College spoke about his institution’s success with learning communities. HCC was awarded an additional grant from the Houston Endowments to support this meeting.
Valencia Community College’s “Big Meeting”
Valencia Community College in Orlando, Florida, offers an additional example of how a college can strategically use a large meeting format to effectively engage college stakeholders in decision-making and data analysis. At the end of the college’s Achieving the Dream planning year, Valencia held what they called a “Big Meeting,” inviting faculty, staff, students, and stakeholders from across the college (including a few community members) to present and discuss the strategies the college was considering for its Achieving the Dream implementation phase and for input into the strategic plan.

The day-long meeting was comprised of several plenary sessions, each setting the stage for small group table discussions with a facilitator and someone taking notes on a flip chart. Participants were asked to help narrow down roughly 100 possible strategies into a final three based on the following criteria: were the strategies ripe, scalable, and effective? The core team presented work it had done ahead of time to narrow the strategies and cluster them into three categories (supplemental learning, learning communities, and student success initiatives), but participants were still free to discuss any of the possible options.

In the end, the notes from the small group discussions were collected and the data from the meeting were a part of the final decision-making by the core team and college leadership. Valencia’s Achieving the Dream director, who attended the meeting in her capacity at that time as professor of mathematics, reported that because of the meeting’s structure, people felt that their opinions were actually heard and their input would have an effect on the process.

Faculty Led Task Forces and Engagement in Student Advising at South Texas College
South Texas College (STC) has worked hard to involve a diverse group of faculty in its Achieving the Dream work. Much of the college’s success can be traced to the attitudes of college leaders who told faculty early on, “We are going to transform this institution and we want you to play a big role in that.” Faculty were actively involved in the initial data collection work that was part of the early Achieving the Dream planning process and most attended a college-wide professional development day that focused on conducting a SWOT analysis of the college.

Other ways in which faculty were engaged in planning for institutional change from the beginning of the college’s Achieving the Dream work include the following:

- Faculty leadership positions were established on the college’s Planning and Development Council (STC’s equivalent of a data team).
- Leaders from the faculty senate, Council of [Department] Chairs, and others were included on the Academic Council (which includes the vice president for academic affairs, academic deans, and other key academic leaders).
- Key faculty leaders were asked to serve as co-chairs of the original Achieving the Dream task forces (comprehensive advising and student accountability), and the subcommittees that were formed as part of those task forces.

At STC, faculty members have led task forces on topics such as advising, assessment, placement and matriculation, and student accountability. The college has developed a very structured approach to task-force creation and function that involves five key steps: (1) identify the issue; (2) conduct a literature review to find out what the experts say; (3) identify promising practices at other colleges, sometimes directly contacting other institutions to find out what they are doing that is working; (4) examine the relevant data on student success and review current STC practices; and (5) make a series of formal recommendations to college leadership and other faculty on how to make progress on the issue at hand.

Rather than signaling the end of faculty engagement in the process, such task-force recommendations mark the beginning of a new and broader round as task-force co-chairs work with the vice president of information services and planning to take the recommendations to all five campuses. There they hold dialogue sessions on the recommendations with a much larger group of faculty and staff, and explain the process by which the recommendations were developed. This serves at least two purposes. First, it informs a much wider swath of the college community about the issue and what is being done to address it, building awareness and, hopefully, a degree of consensus at the same time. Second, during the dialogue sessions, the task force gains ideas from a broader group of colleagues about how to effectively implement their recommendations.
After this broader process of engagement and problem solving, the task force will present its findings and recommendations to the Achieving the Dream core team, along with an implementation and assessment plan. In almost every case, the college has implemented the recommendations of these committees, validating the effort that faculty and others have devoted to the process, and cementing their commitment to the Achieving the Dream student success agenda.

STC has also used the power of faculty engagement through its work on faculty advising. One of the recommendations of the Comprehensive Student Advising task force, co-chaired by the dean of student support services and the chair of the faculty senate, was that the college should develop a faculty advising training program. Acting on this recommendation, the college instituted a new program to train faculty in advising, which also allows faculty to fulfill the service requirement in their contracts. Since 2006, more than 400 faculty have completed “level-one” advising training. Faculty members suggested putting a “level-two” program in place for those who wanted more advanced professional development on the topic. The faculty involved in the advising program meet with an assigned number of students at least three times throughout the term to make sure they are progressing and to offer support and assistance with problems.

The faculty advising training was the first large-scale collaborative strategy between academic affairs and student affairs. Aside from the semester-long training program, faculty also worked alongside the advisors in the advising center. The faculty advising training also was used to train all student affairs staff who hold a baccalaureate degree, so that they could serve as Beacon Mentors (staff assigned to gatekeeper courses for a semester). The Beacon Mentors must work closely with faculty, as they are required to meet with students in the class a minimum of four times per semester. During this time, student affairs also modified the job description for the counselors to include teaching one College Success course per semester as part of their 40-hour week. STC believes that this effort has accelerated the breaking down of silos between academic and student affairs, resulting in greater collaboration in addressing issues and producing new strategies to support students both in and outside of the classroom.

Faculty/student dialogues and campus conversations at Coastal Bend (TX), Capital (CT), Cuyahoga (OH) and Bunker Hill (MA)

Achieving the Dream has recently developed a set of tools for structured “faculty/student dialogues” and “campus conversations” to help engage faculty and other stakeholders in problem-solving to help more students succeed. These tools and processes were piloted at four diverse Achieving the Dream colleges: Coastal Bend (TX), Capital (CT), Cuyahoga (OH) and Bunker Hill (MA). The faculty/student dialogues are designed as a series of three, separate two-hour sessions, each with a facilitator/recorder team and comprised of some combination of faculty, staff, and students. In these groups, participants work through discussions about obstacles to student success, selected student achievement data, and various solutions that might improve student outcomes. The campus conversations involve a larger number of participants from the entire campus community, with a combination of large group plenary sessions and smaller moderated discussion groups. The results are then reported to the Achieving the Dream core and data teams and incorporated into strategic planning.

In some instances, colleges reported that the data they received from the dialogue groups helped to confirm and/or legitimize the strategies they were already planning to pursue as part of their Achieving the Dream implementation efforts, giving them greater confidence to proceed. In other cases, administrators were made aware of new areas where they could address issues or problems relatively quickly, without a big infusion of resources. For example, students at one college complained that they had no place to store their lunches if they were going to be on campus for the greater part of the day, meaning that they either had to spend money to buy food or go without. Immediately, the college bought a refrigerator that would be available for students, saving them both time and money. By addressing such “low-hanging fruit” issues promptly, the college leadership was able to provide concrete assistance to address students concerns and signal its seriousness about helping students succeed and establishing a culture of continuous improvement.
Many of the colleges that participated in the pilot described seeing meaningful attitude changes in how faculty related to students. In one case, a full-time professor who had participated in a series of faculty/student dialogue groups told an evaluator, “I used to be able to use my office hours as quiet time to get my work done. Since being in the dialogue group, the word has spread that I’m actually a pretty OK guy, and can help. Now I’ve got students coming to my office to talk to me who aren’t even in my classes!”

Finally, the faculty/student dialogue and campus conversation processes can contribute to building a culture of evidence at the college. For example, at Coastal Bend College, the college’s institutional research department completed a full content analysis of the qualitative data revealed in the dialogues and campus conversations they held on each of four campuses. The IR staff created a detailed presentation for the president, the core and data teams, and the board of trustees. The data are being used to inform the college’s new strategic plan. At Cuyahoga, the Achieving the Dream core team is using the data from its dialogues and conversations in deliberations as the college ends the “demonstration” phase of Achieving the Dream and moves toward policy decisions that will facilitate more widespread implementation of student success strategies. The core team created a final report based on the engagement experiences that were shared with the strategic planning team, which is using the results to create action plans for the FY09–14 strategic plan.

Overall, the dialogues and conversations were a positive way to promote understanding and build relationships between students and faculty. Participants in the conversations were excited to be involved in a respectful dialogue in which their concerns, suggestions, and strategies for action were taken seriously. Faculty and students both expressed great appreciation for the opportunity to interact with each other outside of the classroom environment and said they would like more opportunities for this kind of relationship building.

Tips for Successful Faculty Engagement

Here are several tips and core principles that tend to apply to whatever set of strategies a college might wish to employ:

1. **Begin by listening.** Whether through carefully structured interviews and focus groups, more informal “listening sessions,” online “suggestion boxes,” or other means, it is useful to spend some time listening before beginning to engage stakeholders. What are faculty’s preexisting concerns and priorities, and how do these play against the student success agenda and continuous improvement you are seeking to create at your institution? What language do faculty members use to discuss student success? What are their assumptions about the potential for improving student outcomes, and what are their likely areas of openness and resistance to the kind of transformation you are aiming for? This kind of insight will help you engage faculty, or any stakeholder, more effectively.

When organizing listening sessions such as interviews, focus groups, and small group dialogues, make sure you provide refreshments and snacks and have ready all the needed tools, such as flip charts, markers, tape recorders, etc. Be organized so that things start on time and go smoothly. Finally, take time to make sure attendees understand why you have asked them to participate, what your goals are, and how the information will be used.

2. **Involve faculty leaders and union representatives from the start.** Beginning a dialogue early on with faculty leaders about the work you plan to do around engaging faculty can help avoid misunderstandings or power struggles later on. And continuing the dialogue as the work evolves is just as important. At Cuyahoga Community College, a special invitation was sent to faculty union and senate representatives inviting them to participate in the campus conversation. They were consulted well in advance of other efforts the college made to engage faculty, such as a series of faculty/student problem-solving dialogues on student success.

3. **Reach beyond the “usual suspects.”** Including groups and individuals who have important contributions to make but who are rarely heard from is a challenging proposition, but one that has great payoff. A personal invitation goes a long way, and will get far better results than a blast e-mail or flyer. While it may be tempting to turn only to faculty members who you know will be supportive, it is critical to try to find ways to involve those who may be resistant or negatively inclined towards the initiative. Simply allowing those voices to be heard, and involving them in your efforts, can go a long way toward bringing on board those who may be initially negative.
4. **When presenting student achievement data to faculty, make sure the data are relevant, user-friendly, and non-threatening.** It is not very difficult to overwhelm, frustrate, or even antagonize faculty with student achievement data, so care must be taken to present it in ways that are engaging and productive. First of all, not all data are relevant for a given purpose or audience, and it is important to be selective — not because you are hiding anything, but simply out of consideration for people’s time and attention spans. Some early discussion or test runs about which data are particularly useful to faculty and to the problem at hand will inevitably help you to be more successful when presenting to the faculty at large.

It is also important to take the time to make the data as user-friendly as possible, all the more so if you are not solely engaging faculty who are used to crunching numbers. Extra care should be taken to minimize defensiveness and to reassure faculty that a culture of evidence and inquiry that seeks to inform decisions through data is not about pointing fingers and apportioning blame. It is about creative problem solving, student success, and empowering faculty with tools that can help them do what they do better.

5. **Find multiple ways to engage faculty, not just one.** A strong engagement initiative will give faculty and other stakeholders multiple and varied opportunities to learn about, talk about, think about, and act on the problem at hand. Focus groups, small group dialogues, task forces, professional development opportunities, campus and community conversations, and online strategies such as Listservs and blogs are a few of the possibilities. Incorporating interested faculty (including adjuncts or part-time faculty where possible) into new and existing efforts can broaden the pool of people available to help “do the work” and show that you are serious about reaching out to and involving new faces in change efforts.

6. **Meet them where they are.** To wait until a fall convocation or other big event in an academic calendar to engage faculty is to forfeit other opportunities that occur throughout the year. For example, consider getting on the agenda at departmental or divisional meetings to make brief presentations about the student success agenda and to share institutional data. These encounters could either serve as “warm ups” prior to convocations, or allow follow-up on issues raised in larger settings.

7. **Make sure you close the loop.** It is critical that you respond to input offered by those you have chosen to engage. This is partly a matter of taking care to promptly “close the loop” in any given round of engagement. For instance, participants in college-sponsored discussions should be informed of the ways their ideas and concerns are being incorporated into decisions by the college leadership. Importantly, it also means taking the time to explain why some ideas are not being pursued. Doing so deepens people’s understanding of the issues and fosters mutual respect.

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**Public Agenda** serves as a national partner to Achieving the Dream, providing technical assistance and consulting on community, faculty, and student engagement to numerous colleges involved in the initiative since 2005.
**Additional Resources**


For information on teacher engagement and labor-management partnerships in the K–12 context that might offer useful lessons and strategies for community colleges, please see the following:


**Resource for setting ground rules for collaborative dialogue and sharing group knowledge. Built on the continuous quality improvement process model:**


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