



Postsecondary  
State Policy



JOBS FOR THE FUTURE

## TEXAS STUDENT SUCCESS COUNCIL

FINDING COMMON GROUND TO INCREASE COMMUNITY COLLEGE  
COMPLETION

By Michael Lawrence Collins  
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## **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

**Michael Lawrence Collins** is associate vice president for Postsecondary State Policy at Jobs for the Future, where he is part of a team that provides strategic consultation and technical assistance to states that seek to accelerate community college reform to dramatically improve the number and share of students who attain credentials with value in the labor market. His work has focused on assisting states to develop and implement public policies that increase success for low-income students and students of color through national initiatives such as Achieving the Dream, the Developmental Education Initiative, and Completion by Design.

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In 2011, a prominent Texas business group erected provocative billboards in Austin and Dallas condemning low completion rates at the state's community colleges and questioning the value of tax dollars spent there. The Texas Association of Business, an advocacy group for business owners and 200 local chambers of commerce, put up the signs to prod community colleges to do more to increase student success and help create a better educated workforce. College leaders were outraged at the vitriolic public attack. Yet, just a year and a half later, the once apparent adversaries were working together to help community college students across the state. They cosigned a letter urging the Texas Legislature to support outcomes-based funding, a controversial strategy that provides financial incentives for institutions that increase the number of students who make progress toward and complete a postsecondary credential.

This brief tells the story of how Texas education leaders accomplished a rare feat—joining forces with business, philanthropic, and nonprofit organizations, sectors whose agendas have not always aligned—to improve the state's low community college completion rates. Through the Texas Student Success Council (the Council), formed in 2011, these disparate groups met frequently, hashed out their differences where possible, and emerged unified in support of significant policy and funding proposals to promote student success. In 2013, the Texas Legislature adopted most of their recommendations, including the implementation of outcomes-based funding, a redesign of developmental math education statewide, a competency-based education pilot program, and new transfer policies.

While all states have a unique political and cultural context, we believe the Council's success is replicable in other states. In this brief, we describe how and why the Council was created, its accomplishments, its challenges, and its most effective strategies. We conclude with recommendations for other states interested in exploring a similar approach to increasing the number of students who complete community college with a meaningful credential.

## WHAT IS THE TEXAS STUDENT SUCCESS COUNCIL?

The Council is a diverse group of education leaders and stakeholders that plays a crucial role in ongoing efforts to improve the success of students in the state's 50 community colleges. The Council's 36 members represent all of the key players in Texas higher education, including the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board, the Texas Association of Community Colleges, two-year and four-year college and universities, public school districts, employers, workforce agencies, community-based organizations, philanthropy and the legislature. The chair is Richard Rhodes, president of Austin Community College and the immediate past chair of the community college association.

The Council identifies and attempts to resolve policy and funding challenges that are barriers to student success, through recommendations at the institutional, state agency, and legislative levels. Specifically, the Council aims to create the policy conditions that can build momentum for developing clear routes through college for more students, often referred to as "accelerated, structured pathways to completion." These strategies aim to minimize the time it takes for students to earn credentials with labor market value or transfer to a four-year institution to pursue a Bachelor's degree. This requires helping students enroll early in program streams that lead to a major, keeping students engaged in coursework, and encouraging students to progress efficiently toward a credential. Interventions include eliminating extraneous requirements, improving curriculum alignment, closely monitoring student progress, and providing better guidance.

## HISTORY

The Council was created as part of the national Completion by Design initiative. Funded by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, CBD works with community colleges and their state partners to significantly increase graduation rates and credential completion for low-income students. In 2011 and 2012, CBD worked with five Texas colleges—accounting for nearly one-third of the state's community college enrollment—to begin making systemic changes in policies, programs, and practice.

Recognizing the need for greater collaboration across sectors to succeed in this work at a large scale, CBD required participating states to create strategic advisory committees to forge alliances among diverse stakeholder groups. In Texas, the Council was created to fill this role (known then simply as the strategic advisory board for Texas CBD).

The board's work continued under the auspices of Completion by Design until July 2012, when the Gates Foundation declined to fund CBD implementation in Texas. The colleges that had participated in the Texas CBD cadre decided to form a new entity called Texas Completes, with their own resources, to implement the work they had been planning for a year. Texas Completes worked closely with the public-private partnership Educate Texas, which had been the state policy partner of CBD, to continue the strategic advisory board, considered a key element of the statewide student completion efforts, under the new name the Texas Student Success Council.

## ACCOMPLISHMENTS

The Council focused on four key policy areas, and the Legislature approved policies, programs, or appropriations related to all of them. These accomplishments have been particularly significant because they include important community college innovations, such as adoption of curricular and funding models that can help students complete a college credential more quickly.

## Outcomes-based Funding

The Council advocated that the state's community college funding formula be changed to reward student outcomes rather than just enrollment, as it had in the past. This was part of a broader funding reform proposal led by the Texas Association of Community Colleges that the Council supported to create a more fair method of allocating state funds to community colleges. The new funding system sets aside \$500,000 per college each year of the 2014-2015 biennium for core operations. Ninety percent of the rest of each college's budget is based on enrollment, and the remaining 10 percent is based on student performance. The outcomes-based funding portion rewards a range of "success points," such as completion of developmental education requirements, completion of first college-level courses, earning 15 to 30 college credits, and certificates and degrees awarded.

## Redesigning Developmental Math

Increasing success in developmental math is crucial to increasing overall student success, because of the large number of students required to take remedial math classes who get stuck there, never moving on to credit-bearing courses. The Council endorsed a \$2.4 million appropriations request to support a systemwide effort to improve and accelerate developmental math education at all Texas community colleges. The goal of the New Mathways Project is to better meet the wide range of student needs by providing three curricular options, rather than the single, traditional progression, which is based on algebra and prepares students for calculus. The New Mathways Project will offer two brand-new strands—quantitative reasoning and statistical reasoning—both of which are more relevant to the education and work goals of many community college students. A revamped STEM-prep pathway, based on the algebra-through-calculus curriculum, will be available for students entering science, technology, engineering, or math programs of study. All three pathways feature a new developmental math design intended to accelerate entry into credit-bearing courses—a course in foundational math skills and a corequisite student success course that develops learning strategies and study skills.

## Improving Transfer Policy

The Council was instrumental in legislative changes to the state's reverse transfer policy and supported several other transfer policy changes intended to increase student success. Under the new reverse transfer policy, community colleges students who have transferred to four-year institutions without an Associate's degree, but with sufficient credits to be eligible for one, can be awarded the degree retroactively, while en route to a Bachelor's degree.

## Piloting Competency-based Education

The Council also was a key supporter of the creation of a pilot program in competency-based education. This was an essential first step toward exploring an innovative approach to increasing student success by allowing students to progress through college by demonstrating mastery of a subject, rather than by spending a certain amount of time in class. The program builds on the state's strong dual enrollment and early college pathways by adding career and technical education pathways that lead to accelerated completion of credentials that meet workforce needs.

## STRATEGIES

### Engaging Policy Influencers Across the Completion Continuum

Creating effective pathways into and through community college to completion requires strengthened connections across education and workforce sectors. The historic lack of alignment negatively affects students at key transition points all along the completion continuum, causing unnecessary and costly delays in progress or derailing students altogether. The Council strategically selected members who work at different points along the completion continuum in order to strengthen its ability to examine policy barriers that pose challenges to institutions reaching across the K-12, postsecondary, and workforce sectors.

### Identifying a Small Set of Focused Goals

Members wanted to adopt an agenda with the potential to make a significant difference but also that would be achievable. The Council deliberately



identified a small set of focused goals that built on existing momentum for policy change, based on the policy agendas of member organizations and the interests of individual members.

### Embracing a “Big Tent” Philosophy

The Council decided early that it was essential to embrace a “big tent” philosophy as it developed its membership. This meant engaging a wide range of stakeholders, including some who differed on key policy issues and even some who were critical of community colleges, such as the Texas Association of Business, which erected the billboards criticizing community college completion rates. Students were also involved early on.

## OPERATIONS

### Crafting Meeting Agendas

Council leaders meet in advance of each quarterly Council meeting to create a game plan and to develop the agenda, based on time-sensitive policy issues and important ongoing issues. To help stay focused on the work colleges are doing, each meeting includes updates from the Texas Completes community colleges and the Texas Success Center, which was created in October 2013 to help put student success policies into practice at each college. Council members from other fields share news about their own related work. Meetings also include information on national policy developments.

### Distilling the Issues

The Council’s primary focus areas are complex policy issues with many components. It has been important to simplify and distill each subject so that all members, with their varied levels of knowledge of particular topics, would understand the issues and the consequences of different policy options before deciding on recommendations.

### Leveraging External Partners

Educate Texas partners with external organizations, such as Jobs for the Future and the Community College Research Center at Teachers College, Columbia University, that provide information about

recent state and national policy developments and evidence from recent research studies.

## CHALLENGES

### Maintaining Cross-organizational Synchrony

The priorities and goals of the organizations represented on the Council are well aligned, but each also has a unique mission and policy agenda that is separate from the Council’s. Council Chair Rhodes, the former chair of The Texas Association of Community Colleges and the current chair of the Association’s Student Success Committee, which participates in Texas Completes, plays a key role in ensuring alignment across the groups’ multiple agendas. However, relying on the leadership of one person is a limited long-term strategy. The interrelatedness of the organizations is a strength but there is inherent tension that must be identified and carefully managed through regular and ongoing communication and transparency.

### Maintaining Focus and Action Orientation

There is pressure to add priorities to the Council’s list from time to time, as there are many facets of the community college completion agenda, and even groups that are closely related can have different priorities. Council leaders are adamant about preventing the Council from becoming a place of endless debate that does not result in unified action.

### Sustainability

Members agree that the Council will be sustainable as long as the members can continue to find common ground, maintain their focus and action orientation, and preserve the Council’s independence. Educate Texas is credited with creating a neutral platform for collaboration that would not be possible if the Council was convened by a state agency or legislative mandate.

As the Council looks ahead, it is developing a strategy to build momentum in advance of the next legislative session, which begins in 2015. There is general agreement that the Council must deepen its engagement of four-year institutions, particularly regional universities, to further its transfer



policy goals. Council members also identified the importance of engaging faculty, trustees, and workforce representatives.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

Council members offered the following advice for other states that are considering a similar approach to increasing student success at community colleges:

- 1. Engage each of the stakeholder groups that influence postsecondary education.** Cross-sector collaboration is essential to creating, scaling, and sustaining innovative pathways to increase community college completion. Key sectors include K-12 education, community colleges, and regional employers, as well as four-year colleges and universities and nonprofit organizations that support public education.
- 2. Embrace a “big tent” philosophy.** Ensure that members include people with different points of view, including individuals and organizations that have traditionally not participated in postsecondary policy conversations.
- 3. Include student voices.** Ground advocacy efforts in the experiences of students, whose voices are typically absent from policy deliberations.
- 4. Build on existing momentum for policy change.** Focus on issues where some agreement and momentum for change already exist. This dramatically increases the likelihood of success.
- 5. Focus on a small number of actionable goals.** Resist the urge to take on all of the important issues at once. It is far more effective in the near term to zero in on three or four actionable goals and build strong consensus recommendations to propose to policymakers.
- 6. Sync practice and policy.** Ensure that policy is informed by exemplary college practice, based on the work of institutions that have sustained innovative reforms and can increase understanding of policy barriers.
- 7. Anticipate and manage inherent tensions associated with diverse membership.** Develop clear and transparent protocols for communication of data and other evidence to manage the inherent tensions associated with diverse stakeholders, each with their own agendas and pressure points.
- 8. Anticipate the ways in which the group might evolve.** Assess trends in policy development and anticipate how the composition and priorities of the group might need to evolve in order to be effective.



# INTRODUCTION

The billboard shouted from the side of Texas Interstate 35, proclaiming the failings of Austin Community College: “4% of ACC STUDENTS GRADUATE IN 3 YRS. IS THAT A GOOD USE OF TAX \$ ?” The Texas Association of Business, an advocacy group for business owners and 200 local chambers of commerce, erected the Austin sign and a billboard in Dallas in 2011 to provoke community colleges to do more to increase student success. The state needs a better-educated workforce, the business leaders reasoned, and community colleges are too focused on access rather than outcomes. Community college leaders were outraged. They could not understand why any group would launch such a vitriolic public attack, using statistics they said were taken out of context.

Yet, just a year and a half later, the once apparent adversaries were working together to help community college students across the state. The leaders of Lone Star College System, Austin Community College, and Educate Texas co-signed a letter with the statewide business group urging the Texas Legislature to support outcomes-based funding, a controversial strategy that provides financial incentives to community colleges for increasing the number of students who make measurable progress toward and complete a credential. The legislature did pass a performance funding measure for community colleges in 2013, and made several other high-impact postsecondary policy changes the education and business groups supported.

## **How did this happen?**

This brief tells the story of how Texas education leaders joined forces with business, philanthropic, and nonprofit organizations sectors—whose agendas have not always aligned—to improve the state’s low community college completion rates. Through the Texas Student

Success Council (the Council), formed in 2011, these disparate groups met frequently, hashed out their differences where they could, and emerged unified in support of significant policy and funding proposals to promote student success. In addition to outcomes-based funding, the Council advocated for a redesign of developmental math education statewide, a competency-based education pilot program, and new transfer policies. Their rare collaboration, which grew out of the national Completion by Design initiative, was instrumental in convincing the legislature to enact changes that remove barriers to community college completion. Educate Texas, a public-private initiative of the Communities Foundation of Texas, in its role as the state policy partner of CBD, convenes and staffs the Council and provides strategic guidance for the Council's work. Jobs for the Future, in its role as the national policy partner of CBD, provided policy research and technical assistance, as well as documentation of the Council's work. When CBD

ended its relationship with Texas in mid-2012, the participating colleges formed a new entity called Texas Completes to continue their completion efforts, including the work of the Council. JFF and Educate Texas continued their national and state policy roles as well.

While all states have a unique political and cultural context, we believe the Council's success is replicable in other states. In this brief, we describe how and why the Council was created, its accomplishments, its challenges, and its most effective strategies. The information comes from JFF's experiences advising the Council, as well as from interviews with Council members. We conclude with recommendations, based on the Texas experience, for other states interested in exploring a similar approach to increasing the number of students who complete community college with a meaningful credential.

# WHAT IS THE TEXAS STUDENT SUCCESS COUNCIL?

The Council is a diverse group of education leaders and stakeholders that plays a crucial role in ongoing efforts to improve the success of students in the state's 50 community colleges. The Council's 36 members represent all of the key players in Texas higher education, including the state coordinating body known as the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board, the Texas Association of Community Colleges, two-year and four-year colleges and universities, public school districts, employers, workforce agencies, community-based organizations, philanthropy, and the legislature. (See *appendix, "Texas Student Success Council Members"* on page 26.) The chair is Richard Rhodes, president of Austin Community College.

The Council identifies and attempts to resolve policy and funding challenges that are barriers to student success, through recommendations at the institutional, state agency, and legislative levels. Specifically, the Council aims to create the policy conditions that can build momentum for developing clear routes through college for more students, often referred to as "accelerated, structured pathways to completion." These strategies contain elements unique to each college, but all aim to minimize the time it takes for students to earn credentials with labor market value or transfer to a four-year college to pursue a Bachelor's degree. This requires helping students enroll early in program streams that lead to a major, keeping students engaged in coursework, and progressing efficiently toward a credential. To that end, interventions include eliminating extraneous

requirements, improving curriculum alignment, closely monitoring student progress, and providing better guidance.

The pathways approach began expanding in Texas through the national Completion by Design initiative, funded by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, to work with community colleges and their state partners to significantly increase graduation rates and credential completion for low-income students. In 2011 and 2012, CBD worked with five Texas colleges, accounting for nearly one-third of the state's community college enrollment, to begin making systemic changes in policies, programs, and practice.

Recognizing the need for greater collaboration across sectors to succeed in this work at a large scale, Completion by Design required the four participating states to create strategic advisory committees to forge alliances among diverse stakeholder groups. In Texas, the Council was created to fill this strategic advisory role.

The Council's work continued under the auspices of CBD until July 2012, when the Gates foundation declined to fund CBD implementation in Texas. The colleges that had participated in the Texas CBD cadre decided to form a new entity called Texas Completes, with their own resources, to implement the work they had been planning for a year. Texas Completes worked closely with Educate Texas to continue the strategic advisory board, considered a key element of the statewide completion efforts, under the new name the Texas Student Success Council. (See "*The Origin Story*" on page 7.)

# A TEXAS-SIZE PROBLEM, A TEXAS- STYLE SOLUTION

College completion is a national problem and the problem is particularly acute for community college students. Out of every 100 certificate or degree-seeking students attending public community colleges in the United States, only 20 complete a postsecondary credential in three years.<sup>1</sup> Increasing the rate at which community college students earn certificates and degrees that have labor market value is at the center of state and national postsecondary reform efforts.

Community colleges are well positioned to help students earn the credentials they need to be competitive for high-demand middle-skill jobs and to provide access to Bachelor's degrees through successful transfer. However, as in most states, Texas has been much more effective in encouraging enrollment than supporting students to finish their programs of study and earn credentials. With more than 700,000 students enrolled in fall 2013, Texas has one of the nation's largest enrollments in community college but ranks 44th out of all states in attainment of Associate's degrees. Only 14.5 percent of full-time community college students earn a degree or credential within three years (see box, "Fast Facts" on page 6). Outcomes improve the longer

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<sup>1</sup> U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS), fall 2001 and spring 2002 through spring 2012, Graduation Rates component.



## Fast Facts: Texas Two-Year Public Institutions, 2013

### Number of Colleges

- > 50 Community Colleges
- > 4 State Technical Colleges

### Enrollment

- > 732,112 students
  - > 72% are enrolled part time
- Enrollment has grown 70% since fall 2000—an increase of more than 300,000 students.

### Student Population by Race/Ethnicity

- > 14.1% African American
- > 37.9% Hispanic
- > 38.1% White
- > 7.6% Other
- > 2.9% International

### Graduation Rates (full-time students)

- > 3-year 14.5%
- > 6-year 31.1%
- > 10-year 36%

*Note: Enrollment includes approximately 12,000 students who attend a Texas State Technical College.  
Sources: Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board's 2013 Texas Public Higher Education Almanac.  
Enrollment increase estimate from The Texas Association of Community Colleges.*

students are enrolled; about 31 percent complete a degree or credential within six years. But success remains unacceptably low and slow.

Scaling accelerated, structured pathways to completion requires substantial collaboration across the K-12 and postsecondary education sectors, workforce agencies, and employers. The lack of connection among these sectors historically is partially to blame for far too many students leaving school, particularly at crucial transition points, such as between developmental education and entry into credit-bearing courses. Gaps in high school exit requirements and college entrance standards result in a large number of new students being placed into developmental education, where many

students struggle with math or English as much as they did in high school. This delays students from entering critical gateway courses, which then delays their entry into a program of study—a critical turning point. Failure to enter into a program of study within the first year of college dramatically reduces students' chances of completion. Other problems arise when college curricula do not keep pace with changes in the field; earning a credential cannot lead to a family-supporting career unless the coursework underlying it is current. The cumulative impact of this misalignment across education and work sectors requires the attention and action of policy influencers, such as the Texas Student Success Council.

## The Origin Story: How the Texas Student Success Council was Created

Three organizations that played key roles in the Texas Completion by Design initiative were essential to the Council's formation—Lone Star College System, Educate Texas, and the Texas Association of Community Colleges.

Lone Star College System, the fastest-growing community college system in the state, was the managing partner of Texas CBD and selected the public-private partnership Educate Texas as its policy partner.

Educate Texas, originally known as the Texas High School Project, and part of Communities Foundation of Texas, is dedicated to strengthening secondary and postsecondary public education across the state. Educate Texas's executive director, John Fitzpatrick, who has a track record of building productive relationships across education sectors, business, and philanthropy, was an appealing partner for his potential to help Lone Star broaden and diversify its relationships to help CBD succeed. This connection opened doors to Texas funders such as the Houston Endowment, Greater Texas Foundation, and Meadows Foundation, all of whom were well positioned to support efforts to create a policy environment conducive to scaling the accelerated, structured pathways developed through CBD.

Lone Star charged Educate Texas with creating the statewide strategic advisory committee required by the national CBD initiative. However, the Texas Association of Community Colleges shared a leading role in the Council's launch. (See box, "Council Leadership Organizations" on page 13.)

Lone Star's chancellor, Richard Carpenter, was chair-elect of the Texas Association of Community Colleges, at the time the advisory group was formed. This created a direct relationship between the organizations. TACC was deeply familiar with large-scale student completion efforts, having served as the state lead organization for both Achieving the Dream and the Developmental Education Initiative, two high-visibility philanthropic initiatives funded by Lumina Foundation, Houston Endowment, Meadows Foundation, and the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, which were precursors to Completion by Design. Given their history of leadership in national completion initiatives, TACC had a strong incentive to maintain a central role in the new initiative.

Educate Texas, in communication with Lone Star and the Texas Association of Community Colleges, did the legwork to bring the idea of the strategic advisory committee to fruition. Richard Rhodes, the immediate past chair of TACC, was tapped to chair the strategic advisory board. Rhodes is the president of Austin Community College (and former president of El Paso Community College, which previously participated in CBD). Prospective committee members were identified and invited to participate from November 2011 through March 2012.

### **Founders sought business participation**

In setting the Council's membership, Educate Texas requested representatives from the full spectrum of state education stakeholders—the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board, public school districts, two-year and four-year colleges and universities, employers, workforce agencies, community-based organizations, philanthropy, and the Legislature. Members are from organizations as different as Toyota, the Pharr-San Juan-Alamo Independent School District, El Paso Community College, the University of Texas System, the online university WGU Texas, the Texas Community College Teachers Association, and the Houston Endowment, a charitable foundation. (See appendix, "Texas Student Success Council Members" on page 26.)

College presidents invited to the Council were asked to nominate additional members from their regions so that the diverse areas of the state were represented. In addition, recognizing that the Texas Association of Business played a key role in the student completion policy dialogue, Council leaders invited the group to join even after it erected the controversial billboards in Austin and Dallas, believing it would be better to try to find common ground than to work at cross purposes. This strategy proved fruitful as the business association and community college leaders worked more closely together than ever before and successfully advocated for meaningful policy change.

#### **Gates funding decision fueled efforts**

The newly formed advisory committee convened for the first time in March 2012 started working on identifying barriers to student success. Just a few months later, between the second meeting in June 2012 and the third meeting in September 2012, however, an unexpected development altered the committee's course. Lone Star and the Gates Foundation's postsecondary team could not agree on the details of the implementation phase of Texas CBD and Gates denied Lone Star's funding proposal, ending the state's participation in the national initiative. The Texas efforts had received less than \$1 million for planning, and would not receive the \$4.3 million for implementation and scaling.

Council member William Serrata, president of El Paso Community College, says that the Gates funding decision was unfortunate, but it had unexpected positive consequences. "It probably lit a fire under the Texas folks to say, not only are we ready, but we want to prove that we are ready," Serrata says. "Not moving forward in Completion by Design was an unintended outcome that was wonderful for the Council, the state of Texas, and for students. It allowed the Council to get stronger."

#### **New group Texas Completes continued work**

Lone Star and the other former Completion by Design cadre college systems collected themselves and in little time declared they would continue their pathways development work without the Gates Foundation. They created a new statewide college completion and credentials initiative, which they named Texas Completes, to continue the work and asked Lone Star to stay as managing partner. They used their own resources to fund the new initiative.

In a July 2012 press release announcing the creation of Texas Completes, Lone Star cites the "state policy board" as a key element of the work moving forward. The policy board retained the same priorities and membership, but decided on a new name—the Texas Student Success Council. Council leaders took the opportunity to broaden its reach and influence by adding representatives of three colleges and nationally recognized higher education experts Byron and Kay McClenney. Educate Texas continued its policy lead role with support from the Gates Foundation and Houston Endowment.

Since the decision not to fund CBD implementation in Texas, the center of gravity for the Council has been Texas Completes, Educate Texas, and the Texas Association of Community Colleges. The arcs in the three organizations' evolution—Texas Completes' emergence as a built-for-purpose organization to carry on the work of the Texas CBD; Educate Texas's expansion into the postsecondary sphere; and the Texas Association of Community College's transition to a singular focus on student success—created powerful incentives to find common ground and join forces to secure policy wins in support of structured pathways and student completion more broadly.

The intricate connections within and across these leader organizations, some of which predate CBD, converged in the time leading up to the 83rd legislative session of 2013 and created momentum that contributed to the Council's accomplishments in its first year.

# ACCOMPLISHMENTS: ACHIEVING MEANINGFUL POLICY CHANGE

Demonstrating that any particular advocacy effort made the difference in convincing a legislature to take certain action can be complicated. However, the Council's influence on the 2013 legislative session in Texas appears clear in the number of its specific goals the Legislature adopted, in full or in part.

The Council focused on four key policy areas, and the Legislature approved policies, programs, or appropriations related to all of them:

- > Outcomes-based funding of community colleges
- > Redesign of developmental math programs
- > Transfer policies
- > Competency-based education

Each has implications for all 50 community colleges across the state.

## IMPLEMENTING OUTCOMES-BASED FUNDING

The Council advocated that the state's community college funding formula be changed to reward student outcomes rather than just enrollment, as it always had in the past. This was part of a broader funding reform package led by the Texas Association of Community Colleges that the Council supported to create a whole new method

for allocating state funds to community colleges. The goal was to ensure that every college would be funded adequately, based on basic operating costs, in addition to the number of students they serve and how well the students perform. The Council's efforts contributed to outcomes-based funding for community colleges—and the entire funding reform package—being included and funded in the state's appropriations bill (SB1) for fiscal year 2013-14, which began September 1, 2013. The approval of outcomes-based funding for Texas's public two-year colleges, but not for the state's four-year institutions, further illustrates the impact of the Council's collaborative advocacy efforts.

In sharp contrast to the traditional funding model, which is based solely on the number of students enrolled in community college in a base year, the new funding system has three parts: \$500,000 set aside per college each year for core operations, 90 percent of the rest based on enrollment; and 10 percent of the rest based on student performance at each college. The performance-funding model provides financial incentives for student progress along the completion continuum. It rewards a range of "success points": near-term measures,

such as completion of developmental education requirements and completion of first college-level courses; intermediate measures, such as earning 15 to 30 college credits; and final outcome measures, such as certificates and degrees awarded. The other success points are certificates and degrees awarded specifically in STEM fields and transfer to university after completion of 15 semester-credit hours. (See *Figure 1. "New Student Success Model for Funding 2014-15" below.*)

The change to outcomes-based funding is a major shift in Texas higher education policy and reflects a significant commitment by the Legislature to increasing student completion. Although the Legislature had endorsed the idea of performance funding in its previous session, in 2011, legislators did not attach an appropriation, so the state could not implement the change. The specific success indicators may change in the future, if a review finds that alternatives are more effective. But after years of advocacy, performance funding has finally arrived in Texas higher education. While the Legislature did not approve outcomes-based funding for public universities during the 2013 legislative session, expanding the model to four-year institutions is

**Figure 1. New Student Success Model for Funding 2014-15**

**10 PERCENT** of community college funding is allocated based on student success outcomes after \$500,000 is appropriated to each college district for core operations; the remaining **90 PERCENT** is allocated based on enrollments.

<b>Developmental Education</b>	<b>Gateway Courses</b>	<b>College Credit Attainment</b>	<b>Credentials Awarded</b>	<b>Transfer to a General Academic Institution</b>
Completion of developmental education in math, reading, and writing  <i>(1 point for math; 0.5 points each for reading and writing)</i>	Completion (with a C or better) of first-level math, reading, or writing course  <i>(1 point for math; 0.5 points each for reading and writing)</i>	Completion of first 15 college credits, and first 30 college credits  <i>(1 point each)</i>	Completion of an Associate's degree, certificate, or Bachelor's degree (where offered)  <i>(2 points each; 2.25 points for STEM credentials)</i>	Transfer to a general academic institution after having completed 15 hours of coursework  <i>(2 points)</i>

expected to be a focus for legislators in the next session, which will begin in 2015.

## REDESIGNING DEVELOPMENTAL MATH

The Council endorsed a substantial appropriations request in support of the New Mathways Project, a systemwide effort to improve and accelerate developmental math education at all Texas community colleges, led by the Dana Center at The University of Texas at Austin in partnership with the Texas Association of Community Colleges. The Legislature approved \$2.4 million in state appropriations to The University of Texas at Austin in support of the collaboration.

The goal is to better meet the range of student needs and increase success in both developmental math and college-level math by providing several curricular options. The premise is that the traditional math pathway, which is based on algebra and prepares students for calculus, should not be the default pathway for all students, regardless of their program of study. The New Mathways Project will offer two brand-new strands—quantitative reasoning and statistical reasoning—both of which are more relevant to the education and work goals of many community college students. A revamped STEM-prep pathway, based on the traditional algebra-through-calculus curriculum, will be available for students entering science, technology, engineering, or mathematics programs of study.

The new program is significant because of its potential to increase student completion by increasing success in developmental math, which many community college students are required to take and where far too many stumble because it is based on the same algebra framework they did not understand in high school. All three math pathways each feature a new developmental math design—a course in foundational math skills and a corequisite student success course that develops learning strategies and study skills. The new developmental courses are designed to be more relevant to students' interests and provide more effective academic support, in order to minimize the time

it takes students to complete remedial math and enter the new credit-bearing classes in statistics, quantitative reasoning, or STEM preparation. TACC requested that the Council support state funding for the project after it began, and the Council agreed, making it a top priority.

## IMPROVING TRANSFER POLICY

The Council was instrumental in legislative changes to the state's reverse transfer policy and contributed support to several other transfer policy changes intended to increase student success. Under the new reverse transfer policy, community college students who have transferred to four-year institutions without an Associate's degree but with sufficient credits to be eligible for one can be awarded the degree retroactively, while en route to a Bachelor's degree. The Council successfully advocated for the credit threshold of the reverse transfer policy to be changed from 90 hours to 66 hours to more accurately reflect the number of credits needed for an Associate's degree at two-year institutions. This change may be most helpful to students who need to leave college before earning a Bachelor's degree, because they are likely to find a job more easily with a two-year credential than with none.

The Council was also a strong voice for increasing use of the state's common course numbering system. The Council had advocated for requiring all two-year and four-year institutions to use common course numbering, which is an important tool for increasing the number of transferable courses and minimizing credit loss. Successful credit transfer is critical to the completion equation so that students maintain their momentum when they move on from community college to a four-year institution. For now, using the common course numbering catalog will remain optional, but universities are required to provide more timely information about courses included in the common course numbering system, and the Council intends to revisit this issue.

## PILOTING COMPETENCY-BASED EDUCATION

The Council also was a key supporter of the creation of a pilot program in competency-based education—a first step toward exploring an innovative approach to increasing student success by allowing students to progress by demonstrating mastery of a subject rather than by spending a certain amount of time in class. The Legislature approved House Bill 3662, which created the Workforce Innovation Needs program. The program creates opportunities for school districts, and community colleges, either in partnership or independently, to develop competency-based models including career and technical education (CTE) pathways that accelerate student progression to credentials and degrees that have value in the labor market.

The new law allows the Texas Education Agency, which governs K-12 public school districts, and the Higher Education Coordinating Board to grant waivers to successful program applicants that allow innovative approaches that are currently not allowed under current state laws, administrative rules, and regulations. Institutions that receive waivers are required to provide legislative recommendations, based on the lessons learned from participating in the program, in advance of the 2015 session, that provide guidance on policy issues that need to be addressed to fully implement competency-based approaches across the state.

The Workforce Innovation Needs program builds on the state's strong dual enrollment and early college programs and policies, which are primarily academic

pathways, by adding CTE pathways that lead to completion of credentials that meet workforce needs. The program allows for the piloting of a competency-based approach to CTE pathways to accelerate the completion of credentials.

## IMPLICATIONS

The Council's accomplishments have been particularly significant because they include incentives for community college innovations, such as adoption of curricular and funding models that can help students complete a college credential much more quickly. Taken together, these policy improvements can move Texas and the field forward by breaking down silos across K-12 education, two-year and four-year institutions, and employers. They also can move the state closer to modernizing its education system by increasing knowledge on the practice and policy implications of decoupling seat time and mastery of content. Council Chair Richard Rhodes, president of Austin Community College, attributes the Council's accomplishments last session to the group's diversity and its collective impact. On outcomes-based funding, for example, Rhodes says "When Richard Carpenter, Bill Hammond, and I signed a joint letter advocating support, the legislators took that seriously. . . and when you have people like George Grainger [Houston Endowment] and Wynn Rosser [Greater Texas Foundation] having the same conversations with individuals and legislators, it really makes a big difference. And that happened last session like I've never seen before."



## Council Leadership Organizations

### **Educate Texas**

Educate Texas was the state policy partner for Texas Completion by Design and fills the same role for the successor organization Texas Completes. The public-private initiative of Communities Foundation of Texas strategically connects diverse stakeholder groups to build collective action for program and policy innovation to increase K-12 and postsecondary student success. Formerly known as the Texas High School Project, the organization successfully engaged K-12, postsecondary, the business community, philanthropy, and policymakers to scale high school redesign models, including early college high school and STEM academies.

### **Texas Completes**

Texas Completes was created in 2012 by the Completion by Design colleges in Texas to implement model pathways to community college completion and scale CBD lessons across the state after their proposal for implementation was denied financial support from the Gates Foundation. The self-funded initiative, led by Lone Star College System, which also led Texas CBD, has expanded from five to eight college systems, which cover 43 percent of the community college population in the state. The institutions are: Alamo Colleges, Austin Community College, Dallas County Community College District, El Paso Community College, Kilgore College, Lone Star College System, Odessa College, and South Texas College.

### **Texas Association of Community Colleges**

The Texas Association of Community Colleges is a nonprofit organization that represents the interests of all 50 public community colleges across the state. Each community college CEO is a voting member. In addition to advocating for increased state funding and favorable policies, TACC has established a 501-c-3, the Texas Community College Education Initiative, which cultivates philanthropic support for student success initiatives. In this role, TACC has served as the state lead for Achieving the Dream, the Developmental Education Initiative, and The Kresge Foundation Student Success Center initiative, which co-funds the newly established Texas Success Center.

### **Texas Success Center**

The Texas Success Center is a new entity within the Texas Association of Community Colleges whose purpose is align the multiple completion initiatives in the state into a coherent framework for institutional and policy change that results in dramatic increases in completion. The Center, created in October 2013, disseminates evidence-based best practices to colleges and aggregates the colleges' needs for policy support into an advocacy agenda.

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### **Strategic Connections**

The Council's leadership organizations are interconnected by design.

The Council's chair is Richard Rhodes, president of Austin Community College, who fills key positions across organizations and plays a unifying role. Rhodes also chairs the Student Success Committee of the Texas Association of Community Colleges. Because the Student Success Committee establishes TACC's student completion policy agenda, his leadership of the two organizations helps to create synchrony between their priorities.

Both Texas Completes and the Texas Success Center also have direct links to TACC. TACC's chair is Richard Carpenter, chancellor of Lone Star College System, which leads Texas Completes. In addition, the Texas Success Center operates under TACC's governing structure.

It is easy to see how the policy agendas of Texas Completes and the Texas Success Center sync naturally with TACC's broader policy agenda, and how the Council's policy agenda came to include top priorities of all three groups.

# STRATEGIES: ENGAGING BROADLY, FOCUSING TIGHTLY

How did the Council succeed in making a difference in all of these important areas? The Council's strategies emerged as it did its work, always focused on engaging a broad range of stakeholders and reaching consensus on its recommendations. Looking back on their accomplishments, three strategic components stand out:

- > Engaging policy influencers along the community college completion continuum, with special attention to those with influence at transition points.
- > Focusing on a small number of strategically selected goals for which there was already significant support across Council members, in order to take advantage of momentum for specific policy change.
- > Embracing a “big tent” philosophy, involving a diverse mix of individuals and organizations, some of whom had not typically been involved in community college policy deliberations and had different perspectives on which solutions to adopt.

## ENGAGING POLICY INFLUENCERS ACROSS THE COMPLETION CONTINUUM

Creating effective pathways into and through community college to completion requires strengthened connections across education and workforce sectors. Outreach to K-12 systems, enrollment, developmental education, gateway courses, programs of study, transfer, and job placement services each operate independently

within community colleges. This lack of alignment has negative impacts at transition points all along the completion continuum, causing unnecessary and costly delays in progress or derailing students altogether.

The Council strategically selected members who work at different points along the completion continuum in order to strengthen its ability to examine policy barriers that pose challenges to institutions reaching across the K-12, postsecondary, and workforce sectors. The Council members drew on their diverse perspectives to develop solutions to the problems students face as they exit one sector and enter another. “So much of what we are trying to do on the student success front has roots in policy, so we sought input from K-12, higher education, business, and labor to help us form our policy priorities that we communicated to the Legislature,” says Council member Richard Carpenter, chancellor of Lone Star College System and chair of TACC. Notable examples are the Council’s deliberations on the New Mathways Project developmental math redesign, which will have implications for high school math programs, and the Workforce Innovation Needs competency-based education pilot, which will begin in high school, progress through college, and aims to end in a job placement.

## IDENTIFYING A SMALL SET OF FOCUSED GOALS

The Council deliberately identified a small set of focused goals in advance of the 83rd Texas Legislature, which was in session during the first half of 2013. Members wanted to adopt an agenda that had the potential to make a significant difference, but would be achievable. To develop its goals, the Council considered the innovations that the Texas Completes (originally, the Texas CBD) colleges were implementing and identified the highest-leverage policy changes that would accelerate and scale the colleges’ work. “The priorities that bubbled up from the five [CBD] cadre colleges were brought forth on the agenda,” says William Seratta, president of El Paso Community College. “It gave us an opportunity to discuss and

debate the best direction to move forward on key legislative priorities.”

The Council also analyzed the policy agendas of member organizations—and the interests of individual members—and developed collective priorities into a single powerful voice for policy change. The Council’s initial goals took the form of recommendations to the 83rd Legislature. (See box, “*Council Recommendations*” on page 16.) “Setting specific goals is critical,” says Dominic Chavez, senior director for external relations at the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board. “Establishing a group that focuses on student success may get people in the room the first time—and maybe even a second time. But if you don’t have focused goals and a plan, you are not going to keep people engaged, and you are not going to accomplish much.”

The Council identified outcomes-based funding and transfer as the policies that could do the most to accelerate the innovations being implemented by the Texas Completes colleges and speed the scale of the cadre’s lessons to the state’s other colleges. The Texas Completes colleges are redesigning their programs to create model pathways that accelerate students from entry into college through programs of study to graduation, employment, and transfer. Outcomes-based funding creates incentives at each of these points along the completion continuum to create momentum for completion. Financial incentives tied to student progress can drive institution- and state-level conversations about effective strategies to accelerate student transition from one momentum point to the next.

Council leaders attribute part of their success to not starting from scratch. The Council leveraged existing momentum for policy change. Outcomes-based funding is a good example. “The groundwork for outcomes-based funding was laid prior to the Council being convened. The community college presidents had been wrestling with a momentum-points approach for over three years, so by the time the Council was formed, there was significant support for outcomes-based funding by the community college presidents,” says Council Chair Rhodes. Following the community college presidents’ support for outcomes-based funding,

## Council Recommendations to the 83rd Texas Legislature

The Texas Student Success Council recommends that:

**1. The reverse transfer credit threshold should be reduced from 90 semester credit hours to 66.**

This change would more closely align the policy with the number of hours required for an Associate's degree, and put the power in the hands of students to make the most informed choices possible about degree attainment, whether Associate's or Bachelor's.

**2. The use of the Texas Common Course Numbering System should be made mandatory for all public Texas institutions of higher education.**

While there are real challenges posed by implementing and maintaining a common course numbering system, such a policy would be consistent with the Council's goal of creating more streamlined pathways for students to completion.

**3. The Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board shall implement field of study legislation (Education Code, 61.823), and urges the Coordinating Board to seek the necessary resources to refine and implement a sustainable tuning process for all fields of study, to be completed within five years.**

"Tuning" is a faculty-driven process that identifies what a student should know and be able to do in a chosen discipline when a degree has been earned—an Associate's, Bachelor's, or Master's. Because this process brings faculty together to develop pathways by field of study, it enhances the common course numbering system and is a mechanism for the changes needed to keep that system current.

**4. 10 percent of community college state funding should be allocated based on outcomes, with the metrics as recommended by the Texas Association of Community Colleges, the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board, and the Texas Association of Business, with remaining differences reconciled.**

Measuring and funding success creates incentives and mechanisms so that institutions of higher education focus more heavily on student success.

**5. An outcomes-based funding metric should be recommended for universities that would allocate a point for admitting students transferring in with an Associate's degree.**

While the metrics should be as clear as possible, this creates incentive for collaboration between community colleges and universities to streamline the transfer process and is a win for the student (particularly low-income students), the community college, and the university.

*Source: Educate Texas*

the Texas Association of Community Colleges made performance funding a top priority for the legislative session. The Council's endorsement provided momentum for outcomes-based funding to be passed by the Legislature. The Legislature also took notice when the CEO of the Texas Association of Business, Bill Hammond, cosigned the letter in support of outcomes-based funding with Council leaders, and when the Higher Education Coordinating Board collaborated to work out slight

differences in the recommended indicators. "We appreciate the opportunity to work hand in hand with community college leaders on this and other issues through the Council," says Bill Hammond, president and CEO of the Texas Association of Business. "I believe that our ability to come to the Legislature united in our support for outcomes-based funding played a role in our success, and I applaud their leadership."

## EMBRACING A “BIG TENT” PHILOSOPHY

The Council decided early on that it was essential to embrace a “big tent” philosophy as it developed its membership. This meant engaging stakeholders who were not as familiar with community colleges, stakeholders who were familiar with community colleges but who differed on key policy issues, and even stakeholders who were critical of community colleges. The strategy was to sit across the table and work out differences in advance of the legislative session, as opposed to attempting to work out differences during the session, which is pressure packed because it is only about five months long.

Including an eclectic mix of organizations that historically have not worked in close collaboration on community college policy required a concerted effort to bring all of the Council members up to speed quickly. For example, Council members from the business sector lacked deep knowledge of the complicated issues surrounding transfer policy, while higher education members were expert in the details. “The difficulties in bridging this type of knowledge gap is one reason higher education advocates all too often take a ‘friends and family’ approach to their legislative advocacy,” says Melissa Henderson of Educate Texas.

The Council decided it was worth investing the time needed to provide a more diverse group of stakeholders with enough background knowledge for them to be able to enrich the dialogue and add new perspective from their unique expertise. “We wanted input and guidance from a good cross-section of people from education, the community, chambers of commerce, and the workforce to get us to think about things we in community colleges may not think about. We wanted them to ask the really courageous questions that we need but sometimes glaze over and don’t dig deep enough,” says Rhodes, the Council chair. “Sometimes that’s going to be people who appear to be your adversary. . . . That was an early lesson for us, and it was a successful strategy.”

The diversity of the group contributed to deeper understanding of organizational positions on key

issues. On transfer policy, for example, William Serrata, president of El Paso Community College says “discussing transfer policy with an eclectic group made up of more than community colleges gave us a broader perspective than when we discuss transfer in house. When it is just ‘us’ we can come to consensus. But outside people question whether we have thought about this or that, which gave us insight that we did not have before.”

The “big tent” philosophy factored into the Council’s strategy of resolving differences between members who have deep knowledge of the issues and are actively engaged but who are not on the same page on policy solutions. The more people under the tent, the more differences that have to be resolved. “You can’t paint the picture of consensus as some kind of glorious thing that everybody just kind of comes to at the end,” says Council member Mark Milliron, co-founder and chief learning officer of Civitas Learning. “What we ended up doing was picking the few clear things where we had strong agreement and started acting on those things.”

Even though the Council initially focused on areas where there was already some degree of consensus, this did not eliminate challenges in adopting and advocating for its policy recommendations. There were divergent views on the policy solutions even for the Council’s top priority goals—transfer and outcome-based funding—as a result of the “big tent” approach.

On transfer, Martha Ellis, the representative from the University of Texas System, made thoughtful and important contributions to the deliberations, but ultimately she had to abstain from voting in support of the Council’s transfer policy recommendations. Ellis describes the complexity and tensions that are associated with transfer policy: “I had to abstain even though I was very much in favor of it, [because] I was representing the University of Texas System, and I knew that some of the institutions within the system would not agree with the recommendations, so I could not represent The University of Texas System in voting for it.” Ultimately, the Council’s policy recommendations on transfer were only partially adopted by the Legislature.

While it appeared that there was momentum through the legislative session on a common course numbering bill and creating incentives for Associate's degree completion, neither effort succeeded. This was not a surprise. The Council knew that it could take more than one session to be successful. Seratta of El Paso Community College explains: "Part of our strategy was to get these particular transfer issues on the radar because sometimes you have to get a bill on the radar first and then next session you get back to it and ultimately you may end up getting it passed." Still, the fact that a key ally could not go on record in support of the Council's recommendations on transfer reflects the difficulty of finding common ground on policy issues even when well-informed, well-intentioned people are around the table.

A second example of the challenges of a "big tent" is the debate on outcomes-based funding, though this ended more successfully than the transfer discussions. There was significant support for outcomes-based funding from the community college leaders and business representatives on the Council, but Richard Moore, executive director of the Texas Community College Teachers Association, was not convinced that outcomes-based funding was in the best interest of student success. His organization's membership—community college faculty—were concerned that an outcomes-based funding structure could place tremendous pressure on institutions and instructors to pass students who had not sufficiently mastered the course content so as not to lose funding under the new appropriations model. The Council deliberated to address these concerns and, while the teachers association did not endorse the proposal (it abstained from the final vote), it has been actively and constructively engaged in the implementation of the new funding system.

The Council's "big tent" strategy also required engaging stakeholder groups that appeared to be openly critical of community colleges. A prime example is the Council's engagement with the Texas Association of Business, the sponsor of the billboards decrying low graduation rates in community colleges. The Council's leadership—Chair Richard Rhodes; Richard Carpenter, the Lone Star chancellor who leads Texas Completes and chairs

TACC; and John Fitzpatrick, the executive director of Educate Texas—decided to invite the Texas Association of Business to join the Council because they realized that it made more sense to engage the group in an attempt to find common ground before the legislative session began than to try to resolve differences during the pressure of the session.

It is not surprising that many community college supporters did not initially understand the Council leaders' logic. "Some felt that I had absolutely lost my mind," says Carpenter, "but I was thinking that we are not going to win them over by leaving them outside of the tent . . . and our relationship transformed over the course [of deliberations]. By the time we were in session, we had the Council, the Higher Education Coordinating Board, the Texas Association of Community Colleges, and the Texas Association of Business, all unified, delivering the same message, supporting each other, and it absolutely baffled the Legislature." Sitting down and talking together revealed that the Council and the business group wanted the same thing—increased postsecondary attainment and a well-educated and competitive workforce. They simply were using different tactics to reach the goal.

Council leaders determined that sitting down at the same table, pouring over student outcomes data, talking with community college representatives, and—most importantly—talking to students, could go a long way in aligning the tactics to how to accelerate completion. Dominic Chavez, the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board's senior director for external relations, points out that this type of alignment has currency with the Legislature: "The Legislature loves consensus, especially on higher education policy. They want to see stakeholders united in their vision and policy recommendations for higher education in Texas, and we are all in agreement." Chavez notes that did not happen in the previous session, the 82nd Texas Legislature: "We were all over the place. But this session [the 83rd Texas Legislature] it did happen—at least with respect to our work on community colleges. Having this entity establish an effective framework for true collaboration was a benefit and certainly went a long way toward achieving our collective goals."

# OPERATIONS: STRUCTURING FOR ACTION

The Council meets quarterly, whether or not the Legislature is in session, and each three-hour meeting is structured for action. Topics are organized around the Council's policy goals, and members receive clear, detailed information in advance to help them understand the issues thoroughly. Over the course of 2012, one full meeting was dedicated to each policy priority area during which members engaged in knowledge building, and discussing and developing draft recommendations before being asked to vote on recommendations at a later meeting. The complexity of the issues and the vastly different levels of knowledge of the members made this a challenge at first. The Council developed protocols for considering each issue to maximize informed discussion and decision making.

## CRAFTING MEETING AGENDAS

Council leaders Rhodes, Carpenter, and Fitzpatrick meet in advance of each meeting to create a game plan and to develop the agenda. The large number of organizations represented on the Council and the diversity of the membership creates the chance of friction between competing organizational priorities. In planning the agenda, Council leaders consider the group's overarching goals and the ongoing policy developments in the state. While topics vary based on time-sensitive policy issues, meetings also include standard agenda items on important ongoing issues. First, to keep the agenda grounded in the work the institutions are doing, each quarterly meeting includes



updates from the Texas Completes community colleges and the Texas Success Center, which was created in October 2013 to help put student success policies into practice at each college. Second, council members from other fields share news about their own related work. Third, the meetings also include information on national policy developments.

## DISTILLING THE ISSUES

The Council's primary focus areas—outcomes-based funding and transfer—are complex policy issues with many components. It was important to simplify and distill each so that the members, with their varied levels of knowledge, would understand the issues and the consequences of the Council choosing among multiple policy options.

Educate Texas developed and executed a meeting protocol that provided a consistent structure and sequence to digest the content. The first meeting introduced a set of policy options for the Council's consideration. The recommendations were informed by the Texas Completes colleges' work to create model pathways to increase student success. Subsequent meetings provided basic information about each issue. Melissa Henderson of Educate Texas condenses the Council's information processing protocol into four simple questions: "What is it? How does it work? What has been proposed? Where might we want to weigh in as a council?"

Following the initial learning period, recommendations in each area were presented at a future meeting based on members' prior discussions and deliberations. The Council organized the policy recommendations according to institutional, agency, and legislative audiences. After each meeting, a detailed summary of the discussion and actions taken is distributed to council members for reflection and comment.

## LEVERAGING EXTERNAL PARTNERS

Educate Texas partners with external organizations, such as Jobs For the Future and the Community College Research Center at Teacher's College, Columbia University, to provide information about recent state and national policy developments and evidence from recent research studies. JFF provides cross-state comparisons on a range of issues that include developmental education redesign, assessment and placement policy, structured pathways, transfer and articulation, and outcomes-based funding. JFF also provides information on national and federal developments related to postsecondary attainment.

"I think it is really important to have outside partners with us to give us a more objective perspective," says Council member Martha Ellis, "but also to provide national perspective and help us see how our work in Texas fits with what is going on nationally—maybe even internationally. But also to keep us on track and to provide us with valuable feedback and evaluation because we can sometimes get a little self congratulatory, and we need to come back to reality."

The Council also benefits from the research expertise of the Community College Research Center. For example, the Center provided an analysis of transfer outcomes to inform the Council's recommendation to the Legislature. The participation of national partners also provides third-party validation, which is important to the policy development process. JFF, for example, testified before the Legislature on transfer policy, providing the committee with examples of policy developments outside of Texas.

# CHALLENGES: MAINTAINING MOMENTUM

## MAINTAINING CROSS-ORGANIZATIONAL SYNCHRONY

The priorities and goals of the organizations represented on the Council are well aligned. But each has a unique mission and policy agenda that is also separate from the Council's. The Council, Texas Completes, the Texas Association of Community Colleges, and the Texas Success Center, do work that is interrelated, but they differ in their missions, roles, and scope. Maintaining tight alignment between and across their respective agendas is challenging.

This intricate relationship illustrates the need for clarity of roles, scope, and authority. The Texas Association of Community Colleges has a role and mission that is broader than Texas Completes and the Texas Success Center. Texas Completes currently includes 8 of the 50 community colleges in the state, while the Texas Success Center is charged with serving all community college districts. Part of its role is to spread the lessons of Texas Completes to the other colleges across the state, in addition to disseminating evidence-based practices from other state and national initiatives in Texas.

Council Chair Rhodes, president of Austin Community College, is the former chair of TACC and the current chair of TACC's Student Success Committee, which participates in Texas Completes. His leadership in these roles and his relationships with the Legislature

ensure alignment across the organizations' multiple agendas. However, relying on the leadership of one person is a limited long-term strategy. The interrelatedness of the organizations is a strength but there is inherent tension that must be identified and carefully managed through regular and ongoing communication and transparency.

## MAINTAINING FOCUS AND ACTION ORIENTATION

Maintaining the focus and action orientation of the Council is a challenge. There are many issues the group can address, as there are many facets of the community college completion agenda. As noted earlier, even the priorities of groups that are closely related can differ. Consequently, there is pressure to add priorities to the Council's list from time to time. This presents a challenge to keeping the agenda short, focused, and actionable. Without vigilant attention to the top priorities on which there is consensus, there is the potential for circular debates for which there is no agreement and no resolution. This risks the Council becoming a place of endless debate that does not result in unified action. "Yes, we have presentations, but we stress to the group the need to act," Carpenter says. "We ask them to endorse policy recommendations and testify before committees, as opposed to just having a bunch of presenters talking at people. Asking the members to do something rather than sit and listen has been a key factor in our success." Disciplining itself to a small number of focused goals upon which it can act is an ongoing challenge for the Council.

## SUSTAINABILITY

Members agree that the Council will be sustainable as long as the members can continue to find common ground, maintain their focus and action orientation, and—perhaps most important of all—preserve the Council's independence. Much of the Council's success can be attributed to the fact that members meet on equal footing. Neither the two-year nor the four-year institutions dominate the agenda, nor are any organizations required to participate. Educate Texas is credited with creating a neutral platform for collaboration that would not be possible if the Council was convened by a state agency or legislative mandate.

Serrata of El Paso Community College says: "Educate Texas has a proven track record of bringing people together—and a lot of the credit goes to John [Fitzpatrick]. He has an amazing ability to bring people together in a non-threatening way, and Educate Texas understands collective impact more than most of us, and I think that is what has allowed them to play such an important and key leadership role."

Council members say they will continue to participate to the extent that they feel it remains independent, that they have the opportunity to influence its direction, and that it continues to make an impact. "The bottom line is they will continue as long as they add value," says Mark Milliron of Civitas Learning. "And if they don't add value, people will just stop coming to them or it will be another one of those meetings that people go to . . . and they feel good that they've talked about the problem, but nothing happens out of it. Nobody wants Texas Student Success Council to be that. Everyone wants it to be a place where something is going to get done and action is going to be undertaken."

## MOVING FORWARD

Members of the Council leadership agree that the group must continually evolve, as state policy priorities evolve, in order to maintain relevance and impact. As the Council looks ahead, it is developing a strategy to build momentum in advance of the next legislative session, ensuring that community colleges have the chance to communicate their opportunities and needs, rather than have the issues framed externally. This requires a careful assessment of each institution's priorities and consistent communication of the opportunities and barriers. The Council is actively considering how it will grow and in what areas.

New organizations and individuals may need to be brought to the table based on the Council's policy agenda. In planning for the next legislative session, which begins in 2015, the Council is being deliberate in making strategic decisions to accelerate the evolution of the group by cultivating new members that expand the Council's perspective and sphere of influence. This will require an analysis of the organizations and individuals that need to be engaged to further the Council's policy agenda.

There is general agreement that the Council must deepen its engagement of four-year institutions, particularly regional universities, to further its transfer policy goals. Council members also identified the importance of engaging faculty, trustees, and workforce representatives. Continuing to develop relationships and build consensus for a course of action on a small number of focused goals is essential to the Council's future strategy. Council leadership is optimistic that they will repeat their success in the next legislative session by engaging and building relationships with the multiple stakeholder groups that influence decisions on community college related policies.

# RECOMMENDATIONS

The Council acknowledges that the political and cultural climate in each state may differ dramatically from that of Texas, but members believe that other states can find success with a similar approach. Council members offered the following advice for other states that are considering a similar path:

## **ENGAGE EACH OF THE STAKEHOLDER GROUPS THAT INFLUENCE POSTSECONDARY EDUCATION**

The economy demands accelerated postsecondary pathways that span K-12 education, community colleges, and the workforce. Cross-sector collaboration is essential to the creation, scale, and sustainability of innovative pathways, particularly career and technical education pathways that involve K-12, community colleges, and regional employers. Engaging these groups and facilitating a common vision for student completion is key to enacting a successful student completion agenda.

## **EMBRACE A “BIG TENT” PHILOSOPHY**

Invite individuals and organizations that have traditionally not participated in postsecondary policy conversations. Ensure that members include people with different points of view so that differences can be worked out in advance of the legislative public hearings where stakes are appreciably higher.

## **INCLUDE STUDENT VOICES**

It is critical to ground the group’s advocacy efforts in student experiences. Student voices are typically absent from policy deliberations. The Council invited student representatives to early

Council meetings and questioned them directly about their experiences and opinions, eliciting candid and helpful answers that informed decision making.

### **BUILD ON EXISTING MOMENTUM FOR POLICY CHANGE**

It is important to analyze the policy landscape and focus on issues where some agreement and momentum for change already exist. Collective action on common priorities can dramatically increase the likelihood of success.

### **FOCUS ON SMALL NUMBER OF ACTIONABLE GOALS**

Reject the urge to take on all of the important issues a group might tackle together. It is far more effective instead to focus on three or four actionable goals and build strong consensus on recommendations to propose to the appropriate policy decision makers in the near term, while creating a longer-term roadmap for continuing development and policy change.

### **SYNC PRACTICE AND POLICY**

Do the difficult work to ensure that policy is informed by exemplary college practice. This requires efficient mechanisms for regular communication between institutional innovators and state policymakers on accelerants and obstacles to innovation. Effective communication about what it takes to institutionalize and sustain innovative reforms can increase understanding of where policy creates barriers and where additional policy supports can make the most difference.

### **ANTICIPATE AND MANAGE INHERENT TENSIONS ASSOCIATED WITH DIVERSE MEMBERSHIP**

Develop clear and transparent protocols for communication to manage the inherent tensions associated with diverse stakeholders, each with their own agendas and pressure points. The regular and effective presentation of data and other evidence can hedge against reliance on anecdote and opinion.

### **ANTICIPATE THE WAYS IN WHICH THE GROUP MIGHT EVOLVE**

Assess trends and anticipate the ways the composition and priorities of the group might evolve given policy developments. Improving the K-12 transition into community college might necessitate stronger engagement of stakeholders in K-12, while improving transfer success might include increased engagement of four-year institutions.

# APPENDIX

## TEXAS STUDENT SUCCESS COUNCIL MEMBERS (AS OF JANUARY 2014)

- > **Richard Rhodes**—Council Chair, Austin Community College District \*
- > **Armando Aguirre**, University of Texas at El Paso
- > **David Anthony**, Raise Your Hand Texas
- > **Katie Brock**, The University of Texas at Austin
- > **Richard Carpenter**, Lone Star College System \*\*
- > **David Crouch**, Toyota
- > **Martha Ellis**, Roueche Graduate Center
- > **Bruce Esterline**, Meadows Foundation
- > **Jacob Fraire**, TG (Texas Guaranteed Student Loan Association)
- > **Rey Garcia**, Texas Association of Community Colleges
- > **Bill Hammond**, Texas Association of Business
- > **Bob Harvey**, Greater Houston Partnership
- > **Bill Holda**, Kilgore College \*
- > **Danny King**, Pharr-San Juan-Alamo Independent School District
- > **Sandy Kress**, Akin Gump
- > **Renard Johnson**, METI, Inc. (Management & Engineering Technologies International, Inc.)
- > **Wright Lassiter**, Dallas County Community College District \*\*
- > **Bruce Leslie**, Alamo Colleges \*\*

- > **Ray Martinez**, WGU Texas (online university)
- > **Byron McClenney**, Community College Leadership Program
- > **Kay McClenney**, Center for Community College Student Engagement
- > **Mark David Milliron**, Civitas Learning
- > **Richard Moore**, Texas Community College Teachers Association
- > **Shirley Reed**, South Texas College \*\*
- > **Wynn Rosser**, Greater Texas Foundation
- > **Jeanne Russell**, SA 2020 (San Antonio 2020)
- > **Lydia Santibanez**, Trustee, Temple College
- > **William Serrata**, El Paso Community College \*\*

- > **Greg Williams**, Odessa College \*
- > **Justin Yancy**, Texas Business Leadership Council

## EX OFFICIO MEMBERS

- > **Commissioner Andres Alcantar**, Texas Workforce Commission
- > **Rep. Dan Branch**, Texas House of Representatives Higher Education Committee
- > **Commissioner Raymund Paredes**, Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board
- > **Sen. Kel Seliger**, Texas Senate Higher Education Committee
- > **Sen. Judith Zaffirini**

\* These community college systems have participated in Texas Completes since 2012.

\*\* These community college systems participate in Texas Completes and also were part of the Texas Completion by Design cadre starting in 2011.





## **JOBS FOR THE FUTURE**

TEL 617.728.4446 FAX 617.728.4857 [info@jff.org](mailto:info@jff.org)

88 Broad Street, 8th Floor, Boston, MA 02110

122 C Street, NW, Suite 650, Washington, DC 20001

[WWW.JFF.ORG](http://WWW.JFF.ORG)

