



**Achieving the Dream Colleges
in Pennsylvania and Washington State
Early Progress Toward Building a Culture of Evidence**

Executive Summary

**Davis Jenkins
Todd Ellwein
John Wachen
Monica Reid Kerrigan
Sung-Woo Cho**



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Overview

In 2003, Lumina Foundation for Education launched a bold, multiyear, national initiative called *Achieving the Dream: Community Colleges Count*, to help students stay in school and succeed. The initiative is focused particularly on students who have faced the most barriers to success, including low-income students and students of color. Initially, 27 colleges in five states joined the initiative; there are now over 80 institutions in 15 states.

Participating colleges commit to using data to improve programs and services in ways that lead to increased student success — a process known as “building a culture of evidence.” Specifically, colleges mine transcripts and gather other information to understand how students are faring over time and which groups need the most assistance. Based on a diagnosis of the problems in student achievement, they design and implement strategies to improve academic outcomes. Participating colleges receive a \$50,000 planning grant followed by a four-year \$400,000 implementation grant, along with assistance from coaches hired by the initiative. This report describes the progress made by the 13 Pennsylvania and Washington State community colleges that comprise Round 3 of the Achieving the Dream initiative after planning and one year of implementation. The key findings are:

- **The average institutional rates for Pennsylvania and Washington colleges on most of the baseline performance measures were low**, and there was greater variation among colleges within the two states than between them.
- **There was widespread support among college leaders and other personnel for the Achieving the Dream goals and principles**, which were seen as consistent with college goals and accreditation and state accountability requirements.
- **All 13 colleges used an analysis of their college’s data as the primary means of identifying gaps in student achievement**, and all used both qualitative and quantitative data to identify and prioritize problems areas.
- **The strategies developed by the colleges focused on four areas:** developmental education, supplemental instruction, a first-year student success course, and better organized and more intensive advising.
- **Four colleges were beginning to institutionalize a culture of evidence, and another four had made promising progress after the first year of implementation.** Five had made little or only limited progress.
- **Achieving the Dream had positive effects on all of the 13 Pennsylvania and Washington State colleges**, which as a group were further along a year and a half into

the process than were the colleges that joined the initiative two years earlier in the first round.

The findings from this study will be compared with follow-up research that CCRC and MDRC will conduct in two years to evaluate the progress of the colleges at the end of the five-year project period.

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The Authors

Executive Summary

Introduction

Traditionally, community colleges have played a vital role in American society by expanding access to a college education for millions of Americans. In recent years, community college educators, under pressure from government agencies, accreditation agencies, and students themselves, have begun to pay more attention to what happens to students once they enter college and to take steps to increase the rates at which community college students earn college credentials and transfer to baccalaureate institutions.

The Achieving the Dream Initiative

One of the most important initiatives in this shift in community college attention from access to access *and* success is Achieving the Dream, a national initiative involving more than 80 colleges in 15 states. The initiative seeks to help more community college students succeed and is particularly concerned about students of color and low-income students, who traditionally have faced significant barriers to success. Whereas most efforts to improve community college student success involve specific programmatic interventions, Achieving the Dream is based on the premise that to improve outcomes for students on a substantial scale, colleges need to change how they do business in fundamental ways. Specifically, colleges should create a “culture of inquiry and evidence” in which decisions about the design, delivery, and funding of programs and services are made based on evidence of what works to improve student outcomes. Colleges that operate in this way adhere to four principles: (1) Committed leadership; (2) Use of evidence, specifically data on student progression and outcomes, to improve programs and services; (3) Broad engagement of administrators, faculty, staff, and students in efforts to promote student success; and (4) Systemic institutional improvement.

Achieving the Dream recommends that colleges transform themselves according to these principles and thereby build a culture of evidence through a five-step process: (1) Commit to improving student outcomes; (2) Use longitudinal student cohort data and other evidence to identify and prioritize problems in student achievement; (3) Engage faculty, staff, and other internal and external stakeholders in developing strategies for addressing priority problems; (4) Implement, evaluate, and improve strategies; and (5) Institutionalize continuous improvement of programs and services through program review, planning, and budgeting processes driven by evidence of what works best for students.

Achieving the Dream expects that by following this institutional transformation process, colleges will be able continuously improve rates of student success, including increased course pass rates, persistence, and, ultimately, credential attainment.

Achieving the Dream provides both financial and technical support to help colleges undertake this process. The financial support includes a one-year planning grant and implementation funding over four years that colleges can use to support data collection and analysis, engagement of faculty and staff, and implementation of improvement strategies. The technical support includes two outside consultants — a coach (usually a former community college president) and a data facilitator (usually a community college institutional researcher) — who advise the college on how to analyze its data on student success, interpret and communicate the findings to faculty and staff, and use the information to make improvements in college programs and services.

The Round 3 Colleges

Thirteen colleges, seven in Pennsylvania (PA) and six in Washington (WA) State, joined Achieving the Dream in 2006 in the third round of entering colleges (Table ES.1). All of them participated in a planning year that included a Kickoff Institute in July 2006 and produced proposals that were accepted for four years of implementation funding.

Achieving the Dream: Community Colleges Count

Table ES.1

Achieving the Dream Colleges in Pennsylvania and Washington State Selected Characteristics, Academic Year 2005-06

College	Enrollment (FTE)	Minority Enrollment (%)	Pell Recipients (%)
<u>Pennsylvania</u>			
Allegheny County	12,443	28	34
Beaver County	1,886	20	37
Delaware County	3,664	29	21
Montgomery	5,684	31	18
Northampton	4,525	22	23
Philadelphia	13,542	68	54
Westmoreland	4,116	11	40
<u>Washington State</u>			
Big Bend	1,464	29	44
Highline	4,635	48	18
Renton Technical	2,782	51	27
Seattle Central	4,912	47	21
Tacoma	5,064	39	30
Yakima	3,592	38	40

SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS).

The Evaluation

The Community College Research Center (CCRC) and MDRC conducted baseline evaluation research to examine efforts by the 13 Achieving the Dream colleges in Pennsylvania and Washington to begin implementing the initiative's institutional improvement process during the planning and first implementation year. Specifically, the researchers sought to determine the following: what was the performance of the colleges at baseline; how closely the colleges followed the improvement process recommended by Achieving the Dream; what student success strategies the colleges were implementing and what were the results to date; how much progress the colleges made in building a culture of evidence; what effects Achieving the Dream had on the colleges early on in the initiative; and, finally, how the colleges and the initiative more generally can improve the impact of their efforts moving forward.

Findings based on extensive on-site interviews with personnel at all 13 colleges, a survey of data use by faculty and administrators at these colleges, and an analysis of data on the performance of the colleges in the period before they joined the initiative are presented below. Findings for the PA and WA colleges are compared with each other and with findings from a baseline evaluation of the 27 colleges that joined the initiative in the first round, which was also conducted by CCRC and MDRC. The findings from this study will be compared with follow-on research that CCRC and MDRC plan to conduct in two years to see what progress the PA and WA colleges have made by the end of their five-year project period.

The Baseline Performance of the Pennsylvania and Washington Colleges

At the beginning of the initiative, Achieving the Dream established five main performance indicators, with specific student achievement measures for each, for participating colleges. To establish the baseline performance of the PA and WA colleges on the Achieving the Dream measures, we calculated the average performance of the PA and WA colleges on each measure for the three-year period before each college joined Achieving the Dream using data on cohorts of first-time, degree-seeking students that the colleges participating in Achieving the Dream are required to report to a national database maintained by the initiative.

The average institutional rates for PA and WA colleges on most of the baseline performance measures were low, as they were for the Round 1 colleges. Interestingly, while there was variation in the average performance rates for WA, PA, and Round 1 colleges on all of the Achieving the Dream measures, there was often more substantial variation within these three groups than among them.

Course Completion

- ***Developmental courses.*** PA colleges had a higher average rate of successful completion for developmental instruction in all three subjects (math, English, and reading) than WA colleges. PA college rates did not vary as widely as in WA, however. Both PA and WA colleges had higher average rates of completion for developmental English than did Round 1 colleges, but Round 1 colleges had a higher completion rate than both PA and WA in developmental reading.
- ***Gatekeeper courses.*** Rates of completion of the first college-level “gatekeeper” courses in math and English are important because passing these courses is associated with a higher likelihood of earning college degrees and transferring. PA and WA colleges had higher average rates of completion in gatekeeper English courses than they did in college-level math courses, and the average rates at which students completed gatekeeper English were higher for students who were referred to developmental instruction than for students who were not. Both PA and WA colleges had higher average rates of completion in both math and English gatekeeper courses than did Round 1 colleges.
- ***Overall course completion.*** The average course completion rates for PA, WA, and Round 1 colleges were very similar, slightly more 75 percent, but PA colleges had a much larger range in variation than WA colleges.

Persistence and Credential Completion

- ***Persistence over three years.*** As would be expected, the average rates of persistence decreased as the period of time from initial enrollment increased. WA colleges had the highest percentage of students persisting across the three measured periods of time; moreover, as time passed, the gap between WA colleges’ rates of persistence and both PA and Round 1 colleges’ rates of persistence increased.
- ***Credential completion.*** PA colleges’ average rate of credential completion closely matched the Round 1 colleges, while WA’s average rate was higher. WA also had higher rates of obtaining an associate degree within three years than did either the PA or Round 1 colleges.

Pell Status

WA exhibited higher average rates of completion within three years for both Pell recipients — low-income students who receive federal needs-based grants — and non-recipients than did PA and Round 1 colleges. Consistent with Round 1 colleges, rates of persistence for PA and WA colleges were higher for Pell recipients than non-recipients. This may stem in part from the fact that Pell Grant recipients are encouraged to attend college full-time and full-time students are not surprisingly more likely to graduate than part-time ones. Pell recipient rates of credential completion were low for all three groups, however.

Race and Ethnicity

The average institutional rates for successful completion of developmental and gatekeeper courses were lower for African-Americans, Hispanics, and Native Americans than for whites, with PA colleges having more gaps on these measures than WA colleges. In PA, all of the minority groups had lower average rates than whites for completion of gatekeeper math and English courses. In WA, Asians, African-Americans, Hispanics, and Native Americans all had higher rates of completion in gatekeeper English, though not in math, than whites. Across both PA and WA colleges, the rates at which students completed courses generally were lower for African-Americans, Hispanics, and Native Americans than for whites — a gap also present among the Round 1 colleges.

Patterns of Data Use by Faculty

In late 2008, CCRC and MDRC conducted a survey to identify patterns of data use by faculty and administrators at the Achieving the Dream colleges. The main findings are summarized below.

Extent of Data Use

Overall, a surprisingly high proportion of faculty in the PA, WA, and Round 1 colleges regularly used data on student outcomes, although there were variations across and within colleges on the types of data used most often.

- ***Frequency.*** At least once a year, about half of the faculty across all the Achieving the Dream colleges used data on placement test scores, retention rates, or graduation rates, and used measures of student learning other than grades, although over a third never used such measures.
- ***Teaching-related decisions.*** The majority of faculty surveyed used data and research at least to some extent in decisions related to teaching. Around one

in five indicated that they were a heavy user of data and research for teaching decisions.

- ***Consideration of student achievement gaps.*** Nearly one in three faculty respondents never reviewed data on student achievement gaps among different student groups, although WA college faculty reviewed such data more frequently than their PA counterparts, possibly because their students included a higher proportion of minorities. Faculty at the PA and WA colleges were significantly more likely than those at Round 1 colleges to indicate that they participated frequently in organized discussions about improving the academic performance of students of color.
- ***Academic department decisions.*** Most faculty indicated that their departments used data and research for programmatic decisions at least to some extent, and the departments of approximately one fourth were heavy users of data. However, the frequency with which faculty in the PA, WA, and Round 1 colleges used data for decision making varied by department, with those in general education on average less likely to use data on student outcomes in their work, while faculty in developmental and for-credit occupational programs were more frequent users of data and research.
- ***Effect of departmental vs. college-wide practices.*** Interestingly, we found a much stronger relationship between data use by individual faculty and the extent to which their department used data on students for decision making than between faculty data use and the extent to which the college overall used data on student outcomes to evaluate programs and make decisions at the leadership level. Hence, commitment by top college leaders to data-based decision making and a data-oriented approach to institutional management may not be sufficient to encourage faculty to become more data oriented in practice. Additional efforts at the department level are probably needed to change faculty behavior.

Accessibility of Data and Training in Its Use

A majority of faculty at the PA, WA, and Round 1 colleges indicated that they were able to access information they needed in a timely manner and that the information they received was accurate, although faculty from the WA colleges were less satisfied with their access to data, possibly because of the problems that the WA community and technical colleges had retrieving data from the legacy information system they shared.

- **Methods of data retrieval.** Faculty indicated that they used a variety of sources or methods to get information on groups of students. WA college faculty were significantly less likely than PA and Round 1 faculty to do searches themselves using their college's student information system or their college's website or fact book because of retrieval problems.
- **Support from the institutional research staff.** Faculty at about half of the PA and Round 1 colleges indicated that their college's institutional research (IR) function was adequately staffed to meet the demand for information, compared with a third of WA college faculty. PA college faculty were significantly more likely than those in WA and Round 1 colleges to indicate that their college's institutional research staff was responsive to requests for information. At least some colleges had trouble recruiting qualified IR staff.
- **Perceived barriers to use.** Around a third of the faculty at the PA, WA, and Round 1 colleges indicated that one reason that they did not use data and research was that they were too busy with their teaching responsibilities. Most faculty, however, indicated that using data and research on students was part of their responsibility and that they had the skills needed to analyze data. About a fourth of faculty said that the data available were not relevant to their jobs.
- **Training for data use.** The percentage of faculty who indicated that they had been involved in training or professional development on institutional research or data analysis in the past year ranged from 28 percent for the WA college faculty to 39 percent for the Round 1 college faculty. Over half of the faculty at the PA, WA, and Round 1 colleges said that they participated in training or professional development on program evaluation or assessment. While faculty who had recently participated in training or professional development in either of these topics were more likely to use data in their work, this finding does not necessarily mean that colleges could increase data use by increasing the amount of training provided, since it is possible that faculty and administrators who were heavier users of data were more likely to seek out training in data use.

Possible Effect of Achieving the Dream on Data Use

Not surprisingly, faculty and administrators who participated in Achieving the Dream activities were significantly more likely to use data on student outcomes than were those not involved in the initiative. Moreover, faculty at the Round 1 colleges were significantly more

likely than those in the PA and WA colleges to indicate that they use data on retention and graduation rates frequently. This is consistent with the hypothesis that colleges that have been involved in Achieving the Dream longer should be more advanced in their use of data for improving student success. However, neither finding can be seen as definitive evidence of a causal relationship between Achieving the Dream and more extensive use of data for improvement. CCRC and MDRC will have better evidence with which to examine the effect of Achieving the Dream on data use when we conduct a follow-up survey of faculty and administrators in the WA and PA colleges in two years, near the end of their participation in the initiative.

College Progress on Institutional Improvement in the Planning Year

During the planning year, Achieving the Dream colleges are expected to begin carrying out the first three steps of the initiative's five-step institutional improvement process, which are designed to engage college personnel in identifying areas where students are experiencing barriers to success and designing strategies to break down those barriers.

Commit to Improving Student Outcomes (Step 1)

This first step calls for the college's leadership to make a clear commitment to improve student outcomes, not just to increase enrollments.

- ***Senior leadership commitment.*** Across all 13 PA and WA colleges, college leaders demonstrated a willingness to reallocate resources to improve student outcomes, including the hiring of additional institutional researchers. Eleven of the 13 college presidents were actively engaged in Achieving the Dream activities and were visible advocates for the initiative on their campuses, including regular participation in core team planning. (The core team was to include the college's president, vice presidents or deans for academic affairs and student services, a faculty representative, and a person responsible for institutional research or effectiveness.) Most presidents — a larger percentage than Round 1 college presidents — tapped members of their cabinets or executive teams to lead the implementation of the initiative, and they all kept their board of directors regularly updated on initiative activities throughout both the planning year and the first implementation year.
- ***Incentives for leadership commitment.*** None of the colleges considered grant money as an incentive for participation in Achieving the Dream. Rather, they identified the following as incentives: (1) consistency with

previously-identified college goals; (2) involvement with a high-profile national student success initiative, which lent prestige to the college and allowed conversations with faculty and staff about student outcomes without creating the perception that the administration was blaming the faculty for poor student outcomes; (3) provision of a roadmap to achieve the goals of improving outcomes and closing the achievement gap; (4), synergy with accreditation standards, which would help their college prepare for compliance through the development of the culture-of-evidence approach to institutional improvement; and (5) alignment with state higher education goals and performance accountability requirements.

- ***Internal college communication about Achieving the Dream.*** The PA and WA presidents and senior administrators used a variety of methods to inform the college community about the initiative, including college-wide forums such as fall convocations, faculty in-services and other professional development days, email alerts, data briefs, and featured presentations by Achieving the Dream coaches and data facilitators. In over half of the colleges in both PA and WA, faculty and staff interviewed by the research team suggested that a substantial number of their colleagues understood both the goals and the details of the initiative.
- ***Organization and management of the initiative.*** All of the colleges began their Achieving the Dream work with a core team, which generally involved representatives of a broad cross-section of college personnel, including faculty leaders, mid-level administrators, and student services staff. All but two colleges also began the planning year with separate data teams, and, with one exception, they included non-IR personnel. One of them started its planning year with a combined core and data team and the other created not just one data team, but a team for each of the five main Achieving the Dream performance indicators. Other strategies used by the colleges to promote support for the initiative were the engagement of faculty and faculty union leaders in core team activities and the rotation of the core team membership to facilitate understanding of the initiative and participation among a broad segment of the college.

Use Data to Identify and Prioritize Problems (Step 2)

Step 2 of the Achieving the Dream process of building a culture of evidence calls for the colleges to use longitudinal student cohort data and other evidence to identify gaps in achievement among different student groups as well as “leakage points” where students struggle

or drop out. A key assumption of this approach is that once faculty and staff see that certain groups of students are not doing as well as others, they will be motivated to address barriers to student success.

- ***Process for identifying achievement gaps.*** All 13 colleges relied on an analysis of their own college's data as the primary means of identifying gaps in student achievement, though the majority had not done so before joining the initiative. Twelve used longitudinal cohort analysis to identify problems, and all the colleges disaggregated their data analyses by student race and ethnicity to identify achievement gaps. The colleges collected qualitative data to identify problem areas through both student and faculty focus groups and student surveys. In contrast, only about half of the Round 1 colleges used longitudinal cohort tracking as part of their analysis of student performance.
- ***Institutional research capacity.*** Just over half of the colleges hired new staff for their institutional research offices. Two of the three colleges that did not have an IR department prior to joining the initiative established institutional research (or institutional effectiveness) offices. IR personnel turnover delayed the data collection and work of the data teams to various extents across the colleges, and several colleges had difficulty hiring IR staff.
- ***Presentation of data analysis to faculty and staff.*** All 13 colleges presented the results of their analysis of achievement gaps to faculty and staff across their institutions using a variety of communication methods. While evidence of poor student performance caused some faculty to deny it was their responsibility (though fewer PA and WA college faculty did so than Round 1 faculty), or to blame the students, in general such data was met with genuine interest and reflection by faculty and staff. Indeed, at every PA and WA college, faculty and staff indicated that the identified achievement gaps and problems areas in student outcomes provided motivation to improve and prioritize student success strategies. Round 1 college faculty were less motivated by such findings, and some were concerned that data on student performance would be used to penalize them.

Engage Stakeholders in Developing Strategies for Addressing Priority Problems (Step 3)

In Step 3 of building a culture of evidence, Achieving the Dream encourages the colleges to involve as many voices as possible in the process even though doing so could prove challenging for colleges already stretched thin serving disadvantaged students. The buy-in of

faculty and staff on the front lines of working with students is critical for effective and sustainable student success interventions.

- ***Receptiveness to the initiative.*** Faculty at the PA, WA, and Round 1 colleges generally had a favorable view of the initiative, particularly when adherence to its goals and principles supported efforts they were already making. Colleges where there is healthy collaboration between administrators and faculty and student services staff were more receptive to the initiative.
- ***Concerns about Achieving the Dream.*** At almost half of the colleges, some faculty members were concerned about the time requirements of the initiative, particularly if it would be short lived. At several colleges, some faculty expressed concern that improving student success would mean lowering standards.
- ***Process for designing strategies to address achievement gaps.*** Colleges largely followed the Achieving the Dream planning process in the design of new strategies and most did not develop improvement strategies until after analyzing their data. Teams from all 13 colleges participated in the Achieving the Dream Strategy Institute, which was also well attended by teams from previous rounds. Several colleges took note of mistakes and successes of these earlier round colleges, and many of the strategies adopted in WA and PA were informed by presentations at the Strategy Institute. In addition, college personnel at several institutions reported using the Achieving the Dream website as an additional resource to support strategy development.
- ***Staff involvement in the planning process.*** Seven of the 13 colleges engaged faculty and staff on a fairly wide scale in the process of using data to develop student success strategies, a proportion comparable to that for the Round 1 colleges. Yet, at the other 6 colleges a relatively small number of faculty and staff were actively involved in analyzing the data on student success and identifying strategies for improvement. Only 2 colleges gave faculty release time from instruction to facilitate their participation in initiative planning. For adjunct faculty in particular, scheduling and college expectations regarding their participation on campus committees or at meetings were barriers to their involvement with the initiative.
- ***Board, student, and community engagement.*** College presidents kept their boards of trustees regularly informed of initiative activities and a few colleges included board members on their core teams, but most board

members were not routinely engaged in the initiative. Similarly, while student focus groups contributed insights into problem areas at most colleges, no college chose to engage students directly in designing strategies. Community members or groups were rarely informed about the initiative or engaged in its activities.

First-Year Implementation of Strategies for Improving Success (Step 4)

In the fourth step toward building a culture of evidence, colleges begin implementing the strategies that they described in their implementation plans to evaluate the outcomes of their strategies and to use the results to make further improvements and scale up those that are successful.

Prevalent Strategies

The 13 PA and WA colleges, which had nearly completed their first year of a four-year institutional improvement process when the research team reviewed their progress, had developed strategies in seven broad categories that were similar to those developed by the Round 1 colleges: advising, developmental education, financial support, first year experience, high school and community outreach, professional development, and supplemental instruction/tutoring/study groups. The following four strategy types were most prevalent.

- ***Developmental education.*** Twelve of the 13 colleges, like many of the Round 1 colleges, implemented at least one strategy that targeted students in developmental education courses. They involved the modification of academic policies, including the way that students were placed into developmental education; cohort-based learning and learning communities; curriculum restructuring; and course revision and expansion. Defining learning outcomes for developmental courses and putting in place mechanisms for assessing outcomes was a more common strategy among the PA and WA colleges than those in Round 1. Since student success in developmental math was a particular concern, 11 of the 13 colleges pursued strategies that targeted students who placed into developmental math.
- ***Supplemental instruction, tutoring, and study groups.*** Eight of the 13 PA and WA colleges, like a majority of the Round 1 colleges, developed strategies for providing students — most often developmental education students or students in gatekeeper courses — with additional learning support resources. Four of them implemented supplemental instruction in which peer

leaders attended classes and held review sessions for students. One college was expanding its online tutoring capacity to reach students who lived considerable distances from the campus; another was experimenting with “embedded tutoring,” in which a peer tutor shadowed struggling students in their courses each day then helped them during after-class hours.

- ***First-year experience.*** One strategy designed to provide students with a positive initial college experience, which research shows is critical to persistence and success, is to develop student success courses. These courses, prevalent among the PA, WA, and Round 1 colleges, are designed to help first-year students build the knowledge and skills needed to succeed at college, such as study skills, and time and financial management, to develop plans for college and careers, and connect with support services.
- ***Advising strategies.*** Eight of the PA and WA colleges implemented at least one new advising strategy. Several colleges were targeting underrepresented students for enhanced student advising, including first-time college students, Hispanic students, ESL students, academically underprepared students, and low-income students. Several colleges also began considering mandatory, though short-term, advisement for some students.

Colleges’ Progress in Strategy Implementation

By the end of the first implementation year, all the PA and WA colleges had begun preliminary implementation of at least one strategy as part of Achieving the Dream, as the Round 1 colleges had at the same point in the process.

- ***Strategies under development.*** Four of the 13 colleges were still in the early implementation phase; the colleges had staff working on the strategies and were in the process of making preliminary steps toward implementation, but the majority of their strategies were still under development. Colleges at this level often expressed a need for additional research and planning time. Other colleges were reviewing potential changes in institutional policies. Several college strategies required additional training for staff involved.
- ***Partial implementation.*** At 9 of the 13 colleges the majority of initiative strategies were partially implemented: they were still piloting strategies or were in the process of revising or modifying them.
- ***Full implementation.*** Three PA and two WA colleges had at least one strategy that was fully implemented in that it had reached the college’s

proposed scale and target population. No college had a majority of its strategies fully implemented. Further, the few strategies that had been fully implemented were generally those with which the college had some experience in the past, those that represented a change in college policy or procedures, or were professional development activities for faculty and staff.

- ***Scope of target population for strategies.*** Eight of the colleges had at least one or two strategies that were currently reaching large numbers of students: most concerned placement testing; alignment of developmental education, gatekeeper math, and English curricula; and ending late registration. Strategy implementation at the other colleges tended to still be in the early pilot stages, affecting a relatively small group of students thus far.

Factors Affecting Strategy Implementation

Several of the factors that influenced college progress in identifying student achievement gaps and developing strategies for addressing priority problems were also key to college progress in the implementation of initiative strategies.

- ***Faculty engagement.*** Slightly more than half of the PA and WA colleges had successfully engaged faculty and staff in implementing initiative strategies, but most had difficulty initially in recruiting faculty, and, at one college, few faculty and staff were showing up for professional development activities, one of the college's strategies. Some college faculty were hesitant to commit time and energy to what might be a temporary undertaking.
- ***Student service staff engagement.*** At 6 of the 13 colleges, Achieving the Dream substantially increased student services involvement in student success efforts and at another group of 6 colleges the initiative strengthened collaboration between faculty and student services. At a few colleges, inadequate collaboration between faculty and student services staff hampered implementation.
- ***Personnel turnover.*** Considerable turnover in key personnel, a factor that delayed the collection and data analysis for some colleges, also delayed strategy implementation at three of them.
- ***Recruitment of students into strategies.*** At least three colleges reported difficulty recruiting students for their strategies, and a PA college delayed implementation of three learning communities because of insufficient student enrollment.

Evaluation of Strategies

- *Status of college evaluations.* Four of the colleges had formal plans for evaluating their strategies, but only two had developed what the research team considered to be sound evaluation designs. Because many of the colleges had faced delays in implementing strategies, they had few evaluation results by the time of the research team visits in spring 2008.
- *Factors affecting the evaluation process.* Several colleges had little prior experience in evaluating program outcomes, and they lacked the institutional research capacity to conduct high-quality evaluations of the strategies. At just over half of the colleges, overburdened IR staff and turnover among IR personnel hindered evaluation. Weak collaboration between IR and faculty/staff was also an issue, with several colleges piloting interventions without much thought about proper research design.

Plans for Scaling Up Strategies

With a handful of exceptions, few of the PA and WA colleges, like their Round 1 counterparts at a similar stage in the initiative, had given much thought to bringing successful strategies to scale. Only two colleges appeared to have a plan for reaching more students. Most were still experimenting with small-scale strategies to see what worked.

- *Impediments to scaling up.* Most colleges were not ready to scale up strategies because they did not yet know what worked. Several, which were under financial pressures or lacked discretionary funds, raised the question about the sustainability of their Achieving the Dream-supported strategies once the grant funding ran out.

Progress Toward Institutionalizing a Culture of Evidence (Step 5)

As of the time of our visits in spring 2008, the research team found that 4 of the 13 PA and WA colleges were beginning to institutionalize a culture of evidence on their campuses. Another 4 had made promising progress. The team found that 3 had made limited progress toward institutionalizing a culture of evidence, although major obstacles remained, and rated 2 as making little or no progress. In comparison, fewer than half of the Round 1 colleges were making progress toward institutionalizing a culture of evidence at a similar stage of the project. The research team identified several factors that distinguished the leaders from the laggards:

- ***Leadership commitment.*** The president and other top administrators at leader colleges not only said that they were committed to improving student outcomes, they acted on their convictions, showing a willingness to make substantive changes in institutional policy and practice and to invest in resources necessary to support such changes.
- ***Faculty and staff engagement.*** Leader colleges were more effective in involving faculty and student services staff in efforts to improve student success.
- ***Staff collaboration.*** Collaboration between faculty and student services staff on student success efforts was stronger at leader colleges. Laggard colleges, conversely, often struggled to overcome the “silos” between academic and student affairs that often characterize community colleges generally.
- ***Cross-division communication.*** Leader colleges were more likely to have in place committees for bringing together personnel from across the institution to work on student success.
- ***A strong institutional research department.*** Leader colleges generally not only had the capacity to get the information they needed but IR staff was part of the management team. Some of the laggard colleges had strong IR departments, but they were not used strategically for improvement as they were in the leader colleges.
- ***Evidence-based program review and planning.*** Leader colleges were more likely to have implemented evidence-based program review and strategic planning systems than were laggards, although having a strategic planning process was not sufficient to bring about changes in programs and services.

The Impact of Achieving the Dream

Some of the PA and WA colleges made more progress than others in moving toward a culture of evidence, and, indeed, the research team identified substantial progress at 8. Nevertheless, Achieving the Dream had positive effects on nearly all 13 of the PA and WA colleges involved. For some, Achieving the Dream provided a framework for analyzing data on student progression and outcomes that helped to focus college personnel on student achievement gaps and motivated them to find ways to address them. At several of the colleges, participating in Achieving the Dream helped to increase discussions about student success across the campus.

Effects at the Colleges

- ***Progress toward implementing a culture of evidence.*** The initiative helped the two PA and two WA colleges that made the most progress toward implementing a culture of evidence speed the transformation that they had begun even before joining the initiative. The three PA colleges and one WA college that made promising progress expanded their IR capacity: Three had no IR staff when they joined the initiative, but two created IR offices and the third organized faculty and staff into teams to examine the effect of college policies on student success and to recommend changes; the existing IR office at the fourth college assumed a much more prominent role in efforts to improve student success.
- ***Additional effects for all colleges.*** Even the five colleges with limited progress realized benefits from the participation in Achieving the Dream. Among all 13 colleges: (a) most saw the initiative as an “umbrella” for other student success initiatives; (b) more than half either added IR staff, purchased data analysis software, or upgraded their information systems; (c) half changed their committee structure to allow for a greater focus on student success; (d) 10 reported that the initiative helped them prepare for or comply with accreditation requirements; and (e) 10 colleges reported that the initiative helped them meet statewide performance accountability requirements.
- ***Emphasis on equity.*** About half the colleges in both states developed student success strategies designed expressly to address gaps in achievement by race/ethnicity or income, with most basing them on analyses of student outcomes data that indicated gaps in achievement among minority or low-income students. Most of the colleges, however, did not attempt to make inequities in achievement a college-wide focus and priority, and personnel at some colleges expressed concern that targeting particular groups of students for special support was unfair to other students.

The Value of the Achieving the Dream Supports

- ***Coaches and data facilitators.*** These advisors were seen by most colleges as a particular strength of the Achieving the Dream initiative design. Many colleges saw their coach and data facilitator as a team and considered them to be mentors in the institutional change process.

- ***The Achieving the Dream database.*** Less than half of the colleges relied on this database in the initial analyses they conducted as part of the planning phase, instead using their own data. A few colleges planned to use the national database to compare their performance to other colleges, but the one or two colleges that tried to use the database in this way had difficulty doing so.
- ***Strategy Institutes.*** In general, interview respondents who attended any of the annual Achieving the Dream Strategy Institutes found them useful. Several said that the opportunity to meet with colleagues from earlier-round colleges was particularly useful, and some indicated that they valued having time with colleagues from their own institutions.

Suggestions for Improvement

Increasing opportunities to learn what other colleges are doing was a common suggestion from the colleges, but interviewees also had other recommendations for the initiative:

- ***Increase opportunities to share information with other colleges,*** so that they can learn about each other's strategies and progress.
- ***Increase the use of personnel from Achieving the Dream colleges as coaches for new colleges,*** to ensure that they have relevant knowledge and to enable colleges to benefit from earlier participants in the initiative.
- ***Improve the availability of comparative performance data,*** so that the colleges can know how they are faring in terms of student outcomes.
- ***Expand opportunities and support for faculty involvement,*** since engaging faculty is a challenge for most colleges.
- ***Rethink Achieving the Dream plans for national expansion,*** which include a fee-for-service model that might not attract participation from colleges that do not believe that they have an achievement gap.