

Increasing Student Success at Community Colleges

Institutional Change in
Achieving the Dream: Community Colleges Count

July 2004

Achieving the Dream: Community Colleges Count is a multi-year initiative that addresses a national imperative: increasing the success of underserved students at community colleges.

The initiative is funded by Lumina Foundation for Education and managed by MDC Inc. Other national partners include:

- American Association of Community Colleges
- Community College Leadership Program, University of Texas-Austin
- Community College Research Center, Teachers College, Columbia University
- Futures Project, Brown University
- Jobs for the Future
- MDRC
- Public Agenda

Additional national and regional organizations, including other funders, will join the effort in the future.

The first group of colleges and states are joining the initiative in 2004. The states are Florida, New Mexico, North Carolina, Texas, and Virginia. Additional states and colleges may be invited to participate in future years.

For more information about Achieving the Dream: Community Colleges Count, see our temporary website: www.aacc.nche.edu/atd. Our permanent website will be online soon at www.achievingthedream.org.

This paper was written as a framework for Achieving the Dream's institutional change work. As the initiative evolves, the paper will be revised to incorporate new insights and concepts. We welcome your comments on the paper. Please contact:

MDC Inc.
P.O. Box 17268
Chapel Hill, NC 27516-7268
919-968-4531
srubin@mdcinc.org
www.mdcinc.org

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Introduction

In today's economy, education and economic opportunity are inseparable. Education beyond high school is increasingly essential to people who want to earn a middle class income, and community colleges play a crucial role in preparing individuals for careers and baccalaureate programs.

Students at community colleges have diverse goals. Many seek a technical certificate or associate degree that will lead to a good job and/or transfer to a four-year college. Others take a few courses to enhance or retool their workforce skills. Some simply seek personal enrichment.

Community colleges are the point of entry into higher education for many Americans, and they serve particularly high proportions of first-generation college-goers and students of color. They enroll 44 percent of all undergraduate students, including 46 percent of all African American students, 55 percent of all Hispanics and 55 percent of all Native Americans.¹ They serve large numbers of low-income students and working adults.

While community colleges do an excellent job of providing postsecondary opportunity to a broad population, access does not always lead to success for community college students. One study found that among students seeking an associate degree or higher, only 53 percent earned a degree or transferred to a four-year institution within eight years of initial enrollment.² Another study found that of all students who enrolled in community college in 1995-96, only 35 percent attained a certificate or degree within six years. Completion rates also varied widely by race and ethnicity: only 26 percent of black students and 29 percent of Hispanics attained a degree or certificate within six years, compared with 38 percent of whites and 39 percent of Asians.³

Regardless of whether students seek certificates, degrees, college transfer or specific career skills, many encounter substantial hurdles along their college path. Certain characteristics reduce a student's chance of completing a college program:⁴

- delayed enrollment after high school graduation;
- lack of a high school diploma;
- part-time enrollment;
- full-time work (at least 30 hours a week);
- financial independence from one's parents;
- dependents other than a spouse; and
- single parenthood.

More than 70 percent of community college students have at least one of these impeding factors, and half have two or more of these characteristics.⁵ Low-income students and students of color are especially likely to have these characteristics.

The fact that community colleges enroll substantial numbers of at-risk students is a strength – it indicates these institutions are providing opportunity to many students who might not otherwise have access to college. But there is a clear need for colleges to create experiences and environments that yield improved outcomes for students, especially for populations with low rates of success.

Some community colleges have demonstrated promising approaches to improve student outcomes. Supportive public policies and community engagement can further bolster students' chance for success by making college more affordable, smoothing transitions from high school to college and from two- to four-year programs, and ensuring that community colleges have the capacity and resources to provide the services their students need. Achieving the Dream: Community Colleges Count will help more colleges adopt promising practices, while also working for changes in policy, public engagement and other realms to bolster student success.

Goals of Achieving the Dream

Achieving the Dream is a long-term effort to increase success rates for underserved students at community colleges. Participating colleges will maintain high enrollment levels for these students while working to increase the percentage who complete coursework, advance through programs and earn certificates and degrees.

Each college will identify student populations that currently experience low rates of success, develop interventions to improve student outcomes and measure changes in student success. To gauge the impact of the initiative as a whole, all colleges will document over time the percentage of low-income students and students of color who accomplish the following:

- successfully complete developmental courses and progress to credit-bearing courses;
- enroll in and successfully complete gatekeeper courses;
- complete the courses they take, with a grade of C or higher;
- re-enroll from one semester to the next; and
- earn certificates and degrees.

Ultimately, the initiative seeks to help more students achieve their individual goals, which may include obtaining a better job, earning a community college certificate or degree and/or attaining a bachelor's degree.

To help raise success rates for underserved students, Achieving the Dream will work for change at five levels. The initiative will (1) promote and support institutional change at community colleges; (2) develop supportive state and national policies; (3) engage the public to support community college access and success; (4) build knowledge about strengthening student outcomes at community colleges; and (5) enhance the capacity of national organizations to work long term for improved student success.⁶

The institutional change work of Achieving the Dream is based on the belief that certain institutional policies, practices and commitments can improve the odds of success for

underserved students. Institutions, however, are not creatures that think and act of their own accord. Institutions are created and maintained by people, whose beliefs, attitudes, behaviors and values determine the policies and practices of the institution.

Accordingly, Achieving the Dream will help the faculty, staff and administrators of community colleges strengthen their institution's capacity to:

- Pursue student success with commitment and zeal. Success for all students will be central to the college's mission and to the work of administrators, faculty and staff. The college will create avenues to understand students' educational experiences, their perceptions regarding their experiences, and their ideas and opinions about how the college might better serve them.
- Function as "learning organizations." The college will regularly involve administrators, faculty and staff in reflection and honest self-assessment about barriers and strategies for student success. It will seek out and adapt promising strategies from around the country and the world. And it will encourage innovation in meeting students' needs and helping students succeed.
- Develop a culture of evidence and accountability. The college will set clear goals for student outcomes and use data to document successes, identify weaknesses and problems and measure progress toward goals.
- Make systematic and lasting changes in policies, structures, programs and services to improve student outcomes.

Principles and Values

Effective leadership is driven by values. Institutional change succeeds when leaders frame inspirational values, engage others to bring the college's actions into alignment with those values, and institutionalize new policies and practices that bring about positive results.

Achieving the Dream's institutional change work is grounded in the following principles and values about how to promote student success and effective institutional change.

Promoting Student Success

To achieve high rates of success for all students – and especially historically underserved groups – colleges must have a student-centered vision, a culture of evidence and accountability and a commitment to equity and excellence.

- ***Student-centered vision.*** Helping all students achieve their educational and career goals is the "north star" that should guide institutional decisions. Student involvement is essential to ensure the college develops strategies that match students' needs.

- ***Culture of evidence and accountability.*** Colleges should make decisions and allocate resources based on evidence of what is working and what is not. A data-driven decision-making process is most effective when administrators, faculty and staff across the institution examine evidence and engage in frank discussions about outcomes for different student populations. The college then sets measurable goals for improvement and uses data to assess its progress.
- ***Equity and excellence.*** More students succeed when colleges demonstrate commitment to excellent education for all – especially when that commitment emanates from top leadership and pervades the entire institution, encompassing faculty, staff and students in all departments. "Equity" does not mean treating all students the same; it means creating policies and practices that – to the extent possible – offer each student the support he or she needs to succeed.

Promoting Institutional Change

Achieving the Dream helps colleges pursue a process of institutional change that is based on the following principles.

- ***Long-term impact requires change in systems.*** Systems change is more powerful and lasting than add-on programs or projects. When small pilot innovations prove effective, colleges should take them to scale and integrate them into institutional strategic plans and budgets to ensure sustainability and long-term impact.
- ***Strategies must be appropriate to the college's circumstances and students' needs.*** After assessing their own strengths and weaknesses, colleges need to develop responses that fit their circumstances. That means taking models that have proven effective elsewhere and tailoring them to address local needs, as well as inventing new approaches. New strategies must be tested and assessed to gauge their effectiveness in improving student outcomes.
- ***Broad-based participation is essential.*** New policies and practices are most effective when they are developed with participation and support from all levels of the institution. Administrative leadership is essential for changing college policies, plans and budgets. Faculty and staff across the institution must be involved in designing new approaches, and they must be committed to carrying them out. Student involvement is essential to ensure that college policies and practices match students' needs.
- ***Inside and outside voices must be heard.*** Institutional change is best designed, carried out and sustained when it involves stakeholders from outside the institution as well as college administrators, faculty and staff. Community involvement is essential for political and financial support and long-term sustainability of college programs. Equally important are college-community partnerships that augment the college's programs and services.
- ***Institutional change is both technical and adaptive.*** To achieve substantial improvements in student success rates, colleges must pursue institutional change that is both "technical" and "adaptive."⁷ Technical change involves applying known strategies to routine problems – for example, improving the delivery of student services or

instruction. Adaptive change goes deeper. It involves building institutional commitments and conviction in support of the college's espoused values – for instance, cultivating a systemic commitment to the success of all students. An institution reflects the priorities, culture and values of its leadership and all its people. Adaptive change uses the creation of shared values among all college personnel as a driving force for institutional change and systems reform.

Strategic Challenges for Colleges

Achieving the Dream will help colleges make changes in institutional policies, practices, structures and commitments that can yield significant improvements in student success.

To improve outcomes for underserved students, colleges must help students overcome personal hurdles and eliminate institutional barriers that impede their success. In effect, colleges need to create a better "fit" between their services and environment and their students' needs, paying particular attention to groups of students who currently are not succeeding.

The Student Context

Many community college students are adults with *work and family responsibilities* that can create challenges to their success in college. Nationwide, more than 60 percent of community college students are enrolled part-time, and the average student age is 29.⁸ A study by the National Center for Education Statistics found that among students who began their postsecondary study at community college, 47 percent were enrolled part-time and 35 percent worked full-time. One in five had dependent children, and one in ten was a single parent.⁹ All these characteristics are associated with low rates of degree completion.

To create a more supportive environment for students with work and family responsibilities, colleges need to know what conditions can contribute to students' progress – including factors within the college and issues in the wider community. MDRC's *Opening Doors* study has identified several factors that affect persistence for community college students who are low-wage workers, a group that includes many single parents. Personal factors include stable child care, flexibility on the part of employers and support from family, peers, faculty and staff. Institutional factors that students perceive as important for their success include academic and personal counseling, access to public "safety net" resources and college affordability.¹⁰

Besides accommodating students' work and family responsibilities, community colleges must provide appropriate support to students who are *academically underprepared*. Nationally, only 20 percent of low-income high school graduates (with family income below \$25,000) are considered "highly qualified" for college, based on their high school course of study.¹¹ Because of weak preparation in high school – and because many community college students are adults several years removed from high school – the need for remediation is high. Approximately 40 percent of community college students need to take at least one developmental course.¹² Many of those who place into developmental courses never advance to higher levels, and only a small proportion attain college degrees.

Until the nation makes substantial improvements in K-12 education – especially in schools with concentrations of high-poverty students – we will have large numbers of students who enter college needing remediation. Community colleges must provide more effective academic support to boost students' success in college programs.

To raise student success rates, colleges also must help *low-income students* surmount the cost barrier that forces many to reduce their course load, increase their work hours and ultimately leave college. Community college students who receive financial aid are more likely to complete degrees than those who do not.¹³ But it is not just a question of providing financial aid to all who qualify. Low-income students are sensitive to the type of financial aid available because they are reluctant to go into debt. And their financial needs include not only tuition, fees and books, but also help with emergencies (for example, car repairs or medical bills) and compensating for reduced wages when they cut back their work hours to attend school.

Finally, colleges must create an environment where *first generation college-goers, English language learners, and students from all racial and ethnic groups* feel welcome. The institutional climate – exhibited in attitudes and behaviors of faculty, admissions and financial aid staff and others – affects a student's comfort level and self-confidence, which in turn affect the odds for retention and success.

The College Response

Achieving the Dream is not about adopting a particular set of strategies to improve student outcomes. Rather, the initiative will help colleges use data to understand where their students are experiencing problems. It will then help colleges devise appropriate responses – changes in policies, practices, structures and institutional culture – to improve retention and success.

Drawing on data. Before considering particular strategies, it is essential for each college to have a solid diagnosis of its unique situation. Colleges must analyze data to identify key stumbling blocks for students (e.g., developmental courses, transition from developmental to curriculum courses, particular gatekeeper courses) and to determine whether particular groups of students (by race, income or other characteristics) experience problems in certain areas. At the same time, colleges must rigorously review their current programs and services for academically underprepared students and low-income students to determine how well existing approaches are working and why. And they must honestly assess how college policies and the culture of the institution affect students' prospects for success.

Achieving the Dream will offer colleges guidance on strategic directions based on each institution's diagnosis of its strengths and problems. Colleges will take models that have shown promise elsewhere and modify them to fit local circumstances. In some cases, they may invent new approaches to fit their unique conditions. By cultivating a culture of evidence, the initiative will help ensure that colleges assess the results of new policies and practices and modify them over time to increase their effectiveness.

Strategic directions. Many colleges have developed promising strategies to improve outcomes for low-income students, students of color and others who face barriers to college success. While few models have been rigorously evaluated, certain approaches seem to have value, based on the experience of community college practitioners and the observations of community college scholars.

Examples of the strategic directions colleges may pursue, depending on the results of their data analysis, include the following:

- Redesign of learning experiences to incorporate what is known about good educational practice (for example, first-year experiences, learning communities, college orientation and success seminars, etc.).
- Improvements in developmental studies and academic support systems.
- Promoting connections among students and their peers, instructors and the institution as a whole, through changes in teaching and student services.
- Strategies to address students' financial needs, as well as needs for child care and other support services.
- Professional development for faculty, staff and administrators to promote an institutional culture that enhances student success.

A Process for Institutional Change

Achieving the Dream will help community colleges build a culture of evidence and an unwavering commitment to improving success rates for underserved students. Colleges will strengthen their capacity to assess student outcomes, set goals for improvement and track changes. They will use a team-led process to analyze data, develop effective strategies for improving student success, cultivate support for the strategies, and institutionalize new policies and practices that prove effective.

(See *Figure 1, Process for Institutional Change.*)

Data-Driven Change

Data analysis is fundamental to effective institutional decision-making. Although colleges collect a wide range of data for reports to state and federal government and accreditation agencies, the information is seldom fully tapped for its potential to guide decision-making within the college.

In *Achieving the Dream*, colleges will examine data on student outcomes for these purposes:

- to diagnose the institution's strengths and areas that need improvement;
- to generate the institutional will for change;
- to guide the college in setting priorities and choosing strategies; and
- to assess the impact of new policies and practices.

Diagnosis. Colleges will begin their analysis by looking at outcomes for all students, Pell Grant recipients and students of different racial and ethnic groups. (If desired, they can further disaggregate students by sex, age and other demographic characteristics.) Colleges will examine how many and which students achieve the following:

- successfully complete developmental courses;
- enroll in and successfully complete gatekeeper courses, such as English 101 and Math 101;
- complete the credit hours they enroll in;
- re-enroll from one semester to the next; and
- earn certificates and degrees.

The initial analysis will point to strengths and problem areas for particular populations of students. It will likely generate questions that will be explored through more detailed data analysis and qualitative exploration – interviewing and/or surveying students, faculty and staff to understand, for example, why low-income students have a consistently low pass rate in Math 101, or why Latino men have a low retention rate from one semester to the next.

Generating the will for change. When presented effectively, data analysis is a powerful tool for institutional change. It can bring to light problems that previously went

unrecognized. Discussions about data can produce dissonance for college faculty, staff and administrators who care deeply about their students and did not realize how many were slipping through the cracks. Data analysis can create a potent force for change by underscoring gaps between personal/institutional values and actual institutional performance. It can motivate people to examine their own behavior to see if they are part of the problem, and it can spur them to work for institutional change.

Guiding priorities and strategies. A focused analysis of student outcomes is invaluable in designing effective responses. When the college knows which students are not succeeding and where in the system they are faltering, it can tailor policies and programs to solve those problems.

Assessing impact. When a college has baseline data on student outcomes for different groups, it can more readily assess the effect of new policies and practices. This completes the cycle begun with the initial diagnosis. Over time, the college can see which innovations are making a difference and expand their scope; when an intervention proves ineffective, the college can try something else. As student outcomes improve, the data can provide reinforcement and motivation for faculty and staff. In addition, straightforward communication about outcomes – and efforts to improve them – can strengthen the college's relationship with the community.

Broad-Based Involvement

To tackle an issue as important and complex as improving student success, a college must engage faculty, staff and administrators throughout the institution. It must also seek input from students and the larger community.

A college cannot work intensively to raise student outcomes without buy-in from faculty and staff. Institutional change means changing behavior of people across the institution, and their support will come most readily when they share responsibility for diagnosing the problems and crafting solutions. An inclusive process also yields better strategies, as faculty and staff who are closest to the students – and who know first-hand where the system fails – help redesign programs, services and structures.

Student voices too often go unheard. Colleges need to understand the obstacles their students face (for example, lack of child care, an atmosphere perceived as unwelcoming or difficulty dealing with on-line courses) in order to design appropriate solutions. Inclusion of students on an institutional planning team has value. It is also essential to amplify the voices of students who typically do not have time for extracurricular commitments, especially those who are struggling with academic, work and family issues. Options include conducting surveys or focus groups that target at-risk students; holding open forums (live events or Web-based discussions) where students are invited to offer candid perspectives on college programs and services; devoting a class period in selected courses to structured discussions about what students need to succeed; and training students to lead focus groups or interviews with their peers.

Community involvement can be invaluable in raising success rates for underserved students. Alliances with K-12 schools can boost students' preparation for college. Partnerships with local four-year institutions can increase successful transfer to baccalaureate programs. Collaboration with social service agencies and nonprofit organizations can improve students' access to safety-net services. Relationships with employers can yield internships, job placements, flexible work schedules and scholarships for working students. Relationships with local government, civic organizations and citizens can provide support for the college and its student success goals. Also, local organizations that advocate for poor people can help the college identify practices that would make a difference for low-income students, and they can join with the college to create new programs and services.

Leadership and Teams

Achieving the Dream uses a team approach to institutional change for several reasons. A team can generate energy for change, as team members reinforce one another's commitment and work together to infuse their shared vision throughout the institution. Teams bring sustainability, increasing the likelihood that the college will carry on the work even if the institution's top leadership changes. Also, several heads are better than one. When a group of people share responsibility for leading a change process, their multiple perspectives enrich the mix of ideas, and better solutions emerge. That richness occurs especially when the team gives voice to people outside the college's traditional leadership circle.

Colleges participating in Achieving the Dream will create two teams to lead the process of analyzing data and guiding institutional change. A **core team** (including the president, chief academic officer, chief student services officer, institutional research/institutional effectiveness [IR/IE] director, faculty leaders and others) will identify existing values, assumptions, structures and systems at the college that nurture and impede student success. The team will consider leverage points to improve student outcomes. It will lead a process for setting institutional priorities, goals and strategies.

Aided by the data team (see below), the core team will engage students, faculty, community members and others in dialogue about the analysis and proposed goals and strategies. To promote sustainability, the team will ensure that strategies are aligned with the college budget and strategic plan. It will provide leadership to spread a culture of inquiry, reflection and commitment to student success throughout the college.

A **data team** (including the IR/IE director, faculty, staff and others) will develop a candid analysis of the college's performance with respect to student outcomes, with a special focus on low-income students, students of color and others who face barriers to success. It will examine quantitative data and present findings in a clear and compelling way that shows where the college is doing well and where it needs to improve.

Qualitative data is also an essential part of the diagnosis. The data team and/or core team will seek input from students and faculty to identify strengths and weaknesses of current college policies, structures and services. In effect, the college will conduct an audit of

existing programs to determine how well they serve low-income students, students of color and others who face barriers to success.

In addition to the core team and data team, the college may appoint specialized ***strategy task forces*** to explore and develop strategies in particular areas, such as math or English instruction, financial aid, counseling, cultural competency for faculty or any number of other areas.

A ***coach*** (an external resource person provided to the college through the Achieving the Dream initiative) will work with the core team and the CEO's leadership group to help maximize their effectiveness in leading institutional change. Coaches will help build candor and interpersonal trust within the team. They will cultivate constructive power dynamics among team members, ensuring that everyone's voice is heard and no one dominates. They will help the team name, engage and resolve the tough issues and adopt a "facts are friendly" perspective. They will ensure that the team engages faculty and staff throughout the institution in the change process, and that it seeks the perspectives of people in the community as well as those inside the college.

A ***data facilitator*** (also an external person provided as a resource to the college) will work with data team members to guide their analysis of both quantitative and qualitative data. Facilitators will help set a tone of candor and trust among members of the data team. They will raise questions and facilitate discussion of tough issues to identify areas where the college is succeeding and where it needs to improve. They will help the data team craft effective presentations to the core team and others in the college and community.

As important as effective teams are, ***presidential leadership*** also is essential to bring about institutional change that will improve student outcomes. The president or chancellor must have a vision for student success and equity and must be able to mobilize broad support for that vision throughout the college and community. He or she must be committed to inclusive decision-making that involves voices from all levels of the institution as well as student and community perspectives. The president/chancellor must be committed to data-driven decision-making and must create the expectation throughout the college that decisions will be based on evidence. He or she must lead the college in a process for planning and allocating resources that regularly measures the college's progress against its goals.

Finally, the ***college's governing board*** must be committed to student success and equity. It should be kept informed of the teams' data analyses. Ideally, the board will create policy conditions that both call for and support improvements in student success. And it can play an invaluable role in building community support for the goals that emerge from the college's self-assessment process.

Sustainability

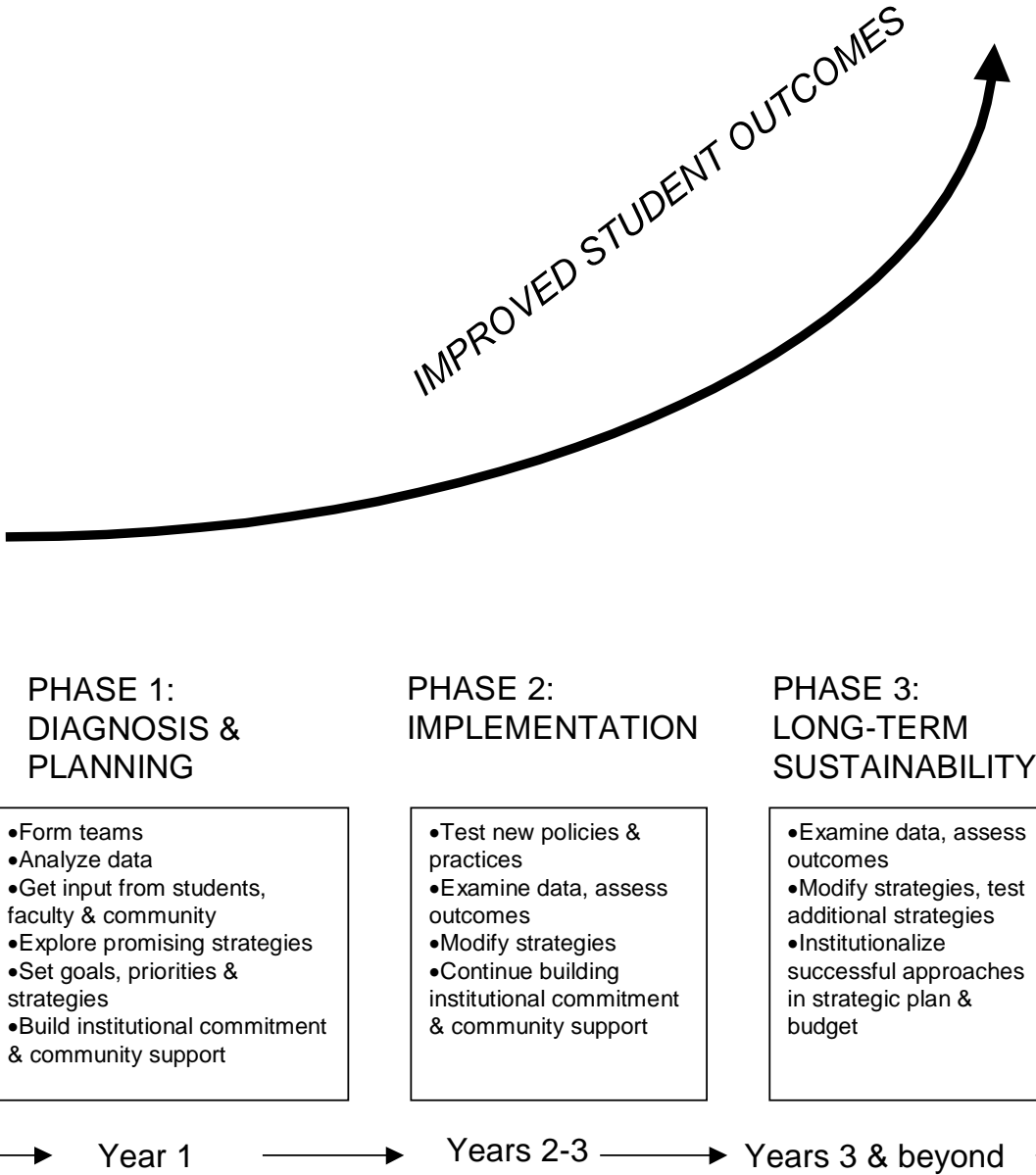
Sustainability means several things in Achieving the Dream. On a ***programmatic level***, it means that when grant-funded pilot projects prove effective, colleges will expand and sustain them by including them in annual institutional budgets, plans and staffing. It means colleges

will change institutional policies and structures as necessary to promote new practices that are shown to improve student success.

On a ***process level***, Achieving the Dream aims to help colleges adopt an evidence-based process for decision-making and resource allocation. We believe that colleges can best sustain that mode of operating through an annual institutional planning cycle – a process of evaluating progress each year, setting new goals for the coming year, and allocating resources based on evidence about how well various policies and programs are moving the college toward its goals. The implementation of an annual planning cycle is cited as the single most important factor in the Community College of Denver's long-term, highly successful efforts to improve student outcomes and close gaps among racial and ethnic groups.¹⁴

On the level of ***institutional values and culture***, Achieving the Dream is about relentless focus on student success, especially for low-income students, students of color and others who face barriers to success. Being part of a national demonstration program often helps institutions maintain a particular focus as they interact with peers who are tackling the same challenges. Colleges will need to build in ways to sustain their commitment long term. Broad-based buy-in from faculty, staff and administration is essential, as is support from trustees, students and community members. A strong focus on student success can be reinforced by supportive policies at the institutional and state level. And it can be nurtured through continued interaction with other colleges that are engaged in this important work.

Figure 1: Process for Institutional Change



Notes

¹ From www.aacc.nche.edu.

² Tom Bailey, "Community College Students: Characteristics, Outcomes, and Recommendations for Success," *CCRC Currents*, April 2004 (analysis of data from then National Education Longitudinal Survey – a sample of students who were in eighth grade in 1988).

³ National Center for Education Statistics, *Community College Students: Goals, Academic Preparation, and Outcomes*, 2003.

⁴ NCES, 2003.

⁵ NCES, 2003.

⁶ For more information, see Achieving the Dream's Integrated Action Plan.

⁷ Ronald Heifetz and Donald L. Laurie, "The Work of Leadership," *Harvard Business Review*, January/February 1997, pp. 124-34.

⁸ www.aacc.nche.edu.

⁹ NCES, 2003.

¹⁰ Lisa Matus-Grossman and Susan Gooden, "Students' Perspective on Juggling Work, Family and College," League for Innovation Leadership Abstracts, December 2002, Vol 4, Number 12 (www.league.org).

¹¹ NCES, *The Condition of Education 2000*.

¹² NCES, "Remedial Education at Degree-Granting Postsecondary Institutions in Fall 2000," 2004.

¹³ Tom Bailey et al., "Findings from Research on Community Colleges and Student Attainment," paper written for Lumina Foundation, DRAFT May 2004.

¹⁴ John E. Roueche, Eileen E. Ely and Suanne D. Roueche, *In Pursuit of Excellence: The Community College of Denver*, AACC, 2001.