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Several of the CLASS members volunteered to document key aspects of leadership for student success, providing honest reflections on the challenges, progress, and leadership lessons learned in undertaking in their own institutions some of the most important work in America. These are their stories.

**Byron McClennen and Kay McClennen**  
Co-Directors, California Leadership Alliance for Student Success  
Community College Leadership Program  
The University of Texas at Austin

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Foreword

Byron McClenny and Kay McClenny
Co-Directors, California Leadership Alliance for Student Success (CLASS)

Community colleges are experiencing an escalating demand for improved student success that is approaching tsunami strength. The attention and energy focused on these institutions is unprecedented, bringing both enormous opportunity and potential threat. The context for this sweeping development is a set of exceedingly challenging conditions: spiraling enrollment, extreme fiscal constraint, and a long-held and treasured mission focused primarily on providing open access to higher education.

“Student success” appropriately has multiple definitions, but there is growing agreement that it includes higher levels of learning and improved rates of successful course completion (both basic skills/developmental and college level), persistence from term to term, and completion of certificates and/or associate degrees, as well as transfer to baccalaureate institutions. As community colleges have moved to embrace this agenda, a new body of knowledge has begun to emerge, illuminating the path toward necessary transformation in community colleges as institutions and in the educational experiences designed to ensure greater success for a remarkably diverse student population. A central lesson from the work is simply stated: Leadership matters.

There are many important aspects of an effective student success agenda, including broad faculty and staff engagement, a clear and shared vision for student success, effective institutional planning, commitment to a culture of evidence and inquiry, strategically targeted professional development, and willingness to reallocate resources and bring effective practice to scale. But significant change will not occur—and stick—without visible, persistent leadership from the college president or chancellor.
Furthermore, the necessary leadership also must come from the institution’s governing board. Boards of trustees have critical roles in strengthening student success, beginning with their selection and support of a president/chancellor who is committed to the work. The board’s influence extends through the priorities it establishes for the institution and the ways it communicates those priorities, monitors progress, asks questions about student success data, evaluates CEO performance, and creates institutional policy conditions specifically intended to promote student success. Not to be underestimated is the role the board can play in ensuring that student success remains at or near the top of the CEO’s agenda, reinforcing the necessary focus and mitigating distractions that inevitably arise.

Leadership for student success is a particular kind of leadership; it involves values, dispositions, and skill sets that are not necessarily prominent in traditional versions of the higher education leadership profile. Critically important is the commitment to data-informed, evidence-based decision-making; and a central discipline for that work is longitudinal student cohort tracking, without which discussions about student success cannot be fully rooted in reality. Other key elements in this leadership are the courage and skill to use the data on student success and institutional performance as the basis for honest—and often courageous—conversations about students’ experiences in the college; the expertise to lead strategic planning and help the college arrive at a limited set of clear priorities, with student success at the center; the discipline to link those priorities explicitly to resource allocation; the ability to integrate multiple fragmented efforts into a coherent student success agenda; and the commitment to ensure broad engagement of—and distributed leadership from—the campus community. Highly significant too is the challenge of bringing an institution to genuine and effective focus on student success and equity while continuing to protect educational quality and the access mission of community colleges.

This collection of essays, contributed by seasoned and committed community college chancellors and presidents, provides insight into the challenges and possibilities encountered as they lead their institutions, at a time of enormous pressure, through the transformations that will—with collaboration, courage, and diligence—produce improved outcomes and equity for students.
The Board and the President:
Partnership for Student Success

One of the biggest challenges for a president focusing on advancing student success at his or her college is to frame the issue as a necessary response to current realities and not as an indictment of the work faculty and staff are already doing. No matter how dynamic or articulate the president may be (or at least perceive herself or himself to be!), the president must involve and partner with the governing board to achieve lasting results in implementing such an agenda. With straightforward, public support, the board can provide the president with a mandate to lead a challenging effort that at times can be disruptive and difficult.

“What do you think we’ve been doing for all the past fifty years?” is a common refrain from committed, passionate faculty and staff when the president begins a dialogue about focusing on student success. Understandably, many leaders at our colleges have seen the flavor of the month come and go, whether the initiative was Total Quality Management or another. By contrast, the reality is that the student success movement is not a fad or passing fancy for community colleges. The national government, led by President Obama, is focusing on successful student outcomes in higher education, particularly increasing the number of graduates. Large private funders, including the Bill and Melinda Gates and Lumina Foundations, are funding significant efforts to explore the factors influencing student success and how to “move the needle” for our students. In California, the state legislature, the California Community College Chancellor’s Office, and the California League for Community Colleges are all focused on data-informed processes and systems to measure and improve student success.

The Cabrillo College Experience

Cabrillo College is a comprehensive community college located within sight of the beautiful Monterey Bay along California’s central coast in Santa Cruz County. Cabrillo enrolls more than 16,000 students in a typical semester. As would be the case at many successful colleges with a proud history, a president presenting a new agenda at Cabrillo College to focus on and improve student success was met with a healthy dose of skepticism.

During its fiftieth anniversary celebration in summer 2009, Cabrillo began participation in the California Leadership Alliance for Student Success (CLASS) initiative. The CLASS initiative focuses on the key partnership between presidents and chancellors and their governing boards in addressing student success; and the initiative has included multi-day institutes where CEOs and board members from twelve colleges around the state have had an opportunity to exchange experiences and ideas. Since the CLASS initiative included board members from the start, it presented a wonderful opportunity to involve the Cabrillo governing board in a dialogue and agenda focused on student success. Facilitated by Byron McClenney and Kay McClenney of The University of Texas at Austin, the CLASS dialogue has been catalytic for Cabrillo College.

The timing and format of the CLASS Initiative could not have been better for Cabrillo. As the college embarked on a second fifty years of excellence, the CLASS discussion provided a framework for addressing the challenges of improving student success. The Cabrillo board chair, Gary Reece, and I returned with a vocabulary for student success and with an understanding of the hard questions we needed to be asking our colleagues.
The Role of the President. Without a consistent, unwavering commitment from the president, the focus on student success will not go very far. The president sets the tone for the college by asking thoughtful, sometimes uncomfortable, questions and by supporting and nurturing a culture of inquiry surrounding student success. Even the most outstanding community college has areas for significant improvement in graduation and transfer rates as well as in course completion and persistence. For too long, we have been hesitant to closely examine the data for fear that our colleges would be unfairly criticized or because of concern that our faculties and staffs would believe they would somehow be punished for unacceptable results.

The president at every college has specific opportunities to articulate the focus on student success. The president cannot be the only voice preaching and teaching about student success, but the agenda will not move forward without active advocacy by the president. Examples of opportunities for advocacy at Cabrillo include the following:

- Student success was the main topic for the President’s college-wide address for the 2009 fall convocation, known as All College Day at Cabrillo.
- At the beginning of each semester, Cabrillo holds an informal discussion session involving the college president and faculty and staff called “Breakfast with Brian.” Student success has become a staple of these dialogues, with frequently provocative discussion questions, including: “How do we define student success?” “Students don’t do optional!—do you agree?” “How is Cabrillo measuring student success, and how are we doing?”
- To emphasize the importance of student success at every meeting facilitated by the president, the question, “What can we do today that will help our students be more successful?” is at the top of every college meeting agenda.

- In establishing annual goals for the president, the board set the following as the number one goal:
  
  Foster, encourage and develop a data-informed, college-wide commitment to increasing student success, including implementation of strategies discussed as part of the California Leadership Alliance for Student Success. Develop a list of measurable goals for 2010 relating to increasing student success.

- The College Master Plan includes specific, data-informed goals related to the student success agenda.

- During a continuing difficult period of severe budget cuts, the question of what impact proposed cuts would have on student success has become a primary question in all budget deliberations.

- For each of the direct reports to the president, student success is a topic for discussion and review as a part of developing annual goals and as part of annual performance evaluations.

- For the All College Day Convocation in August 2010, the president’s theme was, “It Takes A Village: Transforming Lives at Cabrillo College,” a concentrated focus on the next steps in the student success agenda at Cabrillo.

The Cabrillo faculty and staff now expect the president to bring every discussion at the college back to a focus on improving student success. As Cabrillo begins its second year focusing on the student success agenda, a robust dialogue is underway. Following “Breakfast with Brian” sessions, All College Day, and other presentations by the president, the water cooler conversation has taken hold, exploring the next steps at Cabrillo.

At Cabrillo, the first Summer Institute of the CLASS Initiative provided the president and the board with a clear idea of how to begin the dialogue at our college about increasing student success. The leadership of the president and the board in framing the discussion is vitally important. The message the president delivers about student success is important, and equally critical are the visible support and encouragement of the governing board.
The Role of the Governing Board. Cabrillo is fortunate to have a stable, thoughtful seven-person elected governing board. Six of the seven board members have served on the board for more than ten years. But even with that strength and long-term stability, the board can at times underestimate the impact of a board speaking in a clear, unified voice about the importance of student success. The governing board has great influence, and the impact of clear, concise direction from the board is immense.

The Cabrillo governing board has incorporated student success into all of its activities and responsibilities. The message from the president about student success is consistent with and supported by the goals and direction of the board. Examples of board activities in support of student success include the following:

★ The board chair reported to the full board about the CLASS Initiative review of student success data after the initial CLASS institute in summer 2009, and the board had an open discussion of its role in improving student success in September 2009.

★ At the board’s annual retreat in September 2009, the board listed increasing student success as number one of five board goals for 2009-2010. At the September 2010 annual retreat, the board reaffirmed increasing student success as its primary goal.

★ At Cabrillo’s convocation events in 2009 and 2010, the board chair noted in opening remarks to faculty and staff that the board has made student success the number one priority for the president and the college.

★ In addition to establishing increasing student success as the number one goal for the president, the Cabrillo governing board also has included an assessment of progress toward the goal as part of the president’s annual performance evaluation.

★ The board has instructed the president and college administration to schedule regular board study sessions to address specific aspects of the student success agenda; for example, the board held a study session on learning communities at Cabrillo in spring 2010. In pivotal discussions—for example, regarding the need for a review of how best to provide counseling services to students to improve student success—the board has been firm and direct in supporting college efforts to develop and pilot innovative approaches.

As is the case with any significant innovation or direction on campus, nothing the board does is more important than supporting the efforts of the president consistently and openly. If any constituent groups on campus sense that the president and board are not on the same page, the momentum toward positive change can rapidly dissipate. Far too frequently, changes in CEO leadership provide an opportunity for skeptics to simply outwait a president or chancellor and delay implementation of necessary changes to advance student success. Because boards frequently have a longer tenure than presidents and chancellors, the members of the board can ensure the continuation of efforts to improve student success even in the midst of a leadership transition.

It is important to note that the vital role of the board is always to set policy and provide support to the president and his or her leadership team. Even the most well-intentioned board must be aware of the temptation of becoming too involved in the day-to-day operations of the college. The Cabrillo governing board has consistently recognized its role in setting policy and supporting the president while leaving the operation of the college to the president and his staff.
Lessons Learned & Next Steps

For Cabrillo College, the journey toward improved student success is well underway but, in many ways, also still in its early stages. In an environment where collaborative decision-making is a core value and significant change must happen in manageable increments, patience and consistency on the part of the president and the board are essential. As Cabrillo nears the midway point of our second year of developing and advancing an agenda focused on improving student success, significant lessons have been learned as the president and the board have partnered together:

★ The president has many opportunities to present the student success agenda to faculty and staff in the course of the year and should consciously and strategically take advantage of every opportunity.

★ The board greatly strengthens the impact of the president’s message by supporting that message in its goals as well as in public statements at college events and at regular board meetings.

★ Patience is essential, as every organization has its own rhythm and pace. In most organizations, that pace is slower than passionate leaders might choose.

★ Initial skepticism regarding data that reveal challenges to the college (such as a candid discussion of transfer success rates over a six-year period) is almost inevitable.

★ By creating and nurturing a culture of inquiry, not blame, the president and the board can overcome the initial skepticism and create an environment where data constructively inform the decision-making process.

★ To make an impact, the focus on student success must be relentless, even in the face of ongoing challenges like budget cuts that can easily dominate the attention and focus of the college.

Because many of the proposed changes will involve fundamental changes, the collaborative nature of Cabrillo and most community colleges in California will require ongoing patience from the president and the board to support the initiatives that come forward and encourage the individuals who are committed to making hard, but essential, changes.

The second year of the student success efforts at Cabrillo is picking up steam in spite of the cloud of a $19 billion deficit in the California state budget. In fact, our question for the year, posed in many presentations to begin the fall 2010 semester, is straightforward: “How can Cabrillo improve student success and preserve people (faculty, staff, and administrators) with fewer dollars from the state?” Framing the budget crisis in the broader, more visionary concept of student success is an important acknowledgement of the paramount importance of increasing student success at Cabrillo College. Even in the toughest of budget years, improving student success is at the core of our mission and purpose.

Ultimately, Cabrillo will be successful because we must. Our community, our state, and our nation need our best efforts to be even better than we historically have been. Because of our successful partnership, beginning with the president and the governing board, Cabrillo College will continue to improve the success of our students ★

The next steps for Cabrillo College will be exciting but also challenging. Now that the dialogue about how to improve student success is taking place, the next step will be to harness the many good ideas that result from that discussion and then to focus on the interventions and initiatives that will have the greatest impact on increasing student success.
Pursuing Systemic Change in Support of Student Success

You Knew the Job Would be Dangerous When You Took It

Long Beach City College (LBCC) has been proudly serving students for over 82 years. The college enjoys a national reputation, has an impressive cadre of successful alumni, and earns deep regard from the local community. After serving as the Vice President of Administrative Services, I was blessed with the opportunity to become LBCC’s Superintendent-President in January 2007. With my intimate knowledge of the college culture and college performance data—and further armed with results of the recently completed USC Center for Urban Education Equity for All report, which disaggregated student success data by ethnicity—I was well aware that the outcomes LBCC was producing no longer matched the reputation that the college community openly celebrated. Further, the entire California community college system appeared to be blissfully ignorant that our core mission—the successful completion of career certificates, associate degrees, and university transfer—was in a dismal state of neglect.

In this context, I quickly realized that my primary focus as president would have to be getting LBCC to look at its data, own its data, and act on its data. The college culture needed a paradigm shift, and the board of trustees would need to make this their top priority for the foreseeable future. I knew that the change would need to begin with me, as president, and that I needed to live and breathe the student success agenda, both at the college and statewide. On one hand, this was going to be a dangerous path for a brand new college president. On the other hand, I couldn’t sleep well at night knowing that thousands of our students had no real chance to complete their educational goals. I had to do something.

First Steps Toward a Student Success Agenda

First, I needed to know what my assets were and to identify both the areas that could be changed in the short term and those that would require a longer-term approach. I was fortunate to have a seasoned chief instructional officer, Don Berz, working for me. Fresh from major student success achievements at Chaffey College, Don immediately went to work building a student success agenda. I also had five dedicated, supportive, and involved board members who were willing to believe in the student success agenda, even if it meant exposing some very embarrassing data. Additionally, I began searching our faculty ranks and other colleges for the best, most passionate administrators I could find. I knew that LBCC had tremendously talented faculty who, if empowered with the understanding that we could improve student success, would become the most effective champions for change at the college. Finally, the California Leadership Alliance for Student Success (CLASS) initiative provided a support structure and resource reservoir to assist LBCC board member Douglas Otto and me in understanding what was working in other community colleges across the country.

Eloy Oakley
President
Long Beach City College
Changing the institutional culture of LBCC—or of any college, for that matter—is a daunting task. It requires a relentless drive to focus every dialogue and every decision-making process on student outcomes. California community colleges are especially complicated beasts. The system has evolved policies and practices that promote outcomes which, directly or indirectly, the legislature has rewarded. Thus, colleges have become places organized to resist change, maintain the status quo, and reward behavior that leads to increased revenue. This cultural dynamic is especially notable at colleges that have long histories and a mature faculty with a strong identity.

**Campus Engagement and Leadership Commitment**

The faculty at LBCC have a strong tradition of involvement and influence in the college decision-reaching process. Introducing a solely administration-driven agenda was not going to have any chance of leading to meaningful and systemic change. It was therefore critical to find ways to create an environment of trust, gather and openly share data on student success, foster dialogues that raised questions about the data, identify and support faculty champions for a change agenda (water the green grass), and develop and demonstrate a clear and focused board and administration agenda. Most importantly, I, as leader of the college, needed to communicate clearly to the faculty, staff, and community that the student success agenda would be a long-term, systemic, measureable, and comprehensive initiative—one that would be genuine and worth investing in. All too often, college leaders introduce initiatives that respond to short-term interests with no embedded evaluation criteria to measure the impact of the initiative on the college over a sustained period of time. As many faculty and staff have learned, if you wait out the college president, he or she may move on to the next agenda item or simply exit the college without leaving meaningful infrastructure to carry forward initiatives. In the case of LBCC, the student success agenda could be successful only if it became part of the college culture, sewn into the fabric of the institution.

In significant ways, the implementation of a meaningful student success agenda will challenge the culture and institutional practices of any college. Such a challenge will undoubtedly lead to pushback, if not direct challenges to the validity and wisdom of the college president’s agenda. A college president must be cognizant of and motivated by this challenge. He or she must prepare for the slings and arrows that will target a change agenda by laying a solid foundation with the governing board, community, and faculty. The college president must also be prepared to lose his job in order to be free to do what is necessary to implement the change agenda. This may not sound appealing. However, the key factor in the community, board, and faculty truly believing the college president is invested in the change agenda is the conviction that the president is willing to lay his job on the line for it. Only then will the college community believe that the president is in it for the long term and build motivation from the passion that such personal investment demonstrates.

At LBCC, I have taken many risks and have been rewarded by the community, board, faculty, and staff with enough credibility that they take the change agenda seriously. Though my actions may not always be the most effective means to improve student success, the college community embraces the opportunity to question my actions and responds to my desire to improve student success with recommendations and actions that will be more effective. While LBCC still may have a long way to go to improve student success and close persistent achievement gaps, the college leadership has developed the confidence to take on these challenges and has created a paradigm that puts student success at the center of the dialogue and work. The faculty and staff of LBCC now own the student success agenda. I am confident that if I left the college tomorrow, the push to improve outcomes for all students would continue ★
The combination of declining funding, increasing enrollments, pressure for accountability, and the tremendous number of baby boomer faculty and staff moving toward retirement is creating perhaps the greatest set of challenges and opportunities faced by American community colleges in decades. Responding to those challenges is requiring our leaders to consider the very foundation on which community colleges were established. The comprehensive, open-access institutions where any adult, regardless of educational preparation, could come to prepare for transfer or to earn a degree or certificate are threatened by anemic funding and potential for limited access in the name of student success. Enhancing student success must be a top priority for America’s community colleges, but success without open access will not serve our citizens or our country.

Across the vast system of American community colleges, a generational shift is underway. The faculty, staff, and administrators who developed a small number of junior colleges into a system that now serves the majority of lower-division college students in the country are retiring in droves. With their departure goes not only a great deal of knowledge and experience but also much of the passion for open access that fueled the expansion and growth of the colleges across the country in the 1960s, 70s, and 80s.

Nowhere is this transition more evident than in the country’s largest community college state—California. In the Los Rios community college system alone, there are nearly 1,000 full-time faculty, more than 800 hired within the last decade. Similar levels of transition are evident in the administration and classified staff. In a system where the average faculty tenure is over 27 years, this transition is simultaneously frightening and stimulating. New leaders must face increasingly complex organizations and conflicting messages. Federal and state governments and regional accrediting bodies are rightfully screaming for colleges to help students succeed in greater numbers. However, with

Enhancing Student Success
While Maintaining Access

Pamela Haynes
Trustee
Los Rios Community College District

Brice Harris
Chancellor
Los Rios Community College District
declining budgets and unemployed workers beating at the door for admission, the colleges are faced with a classic conflict of core values—is it possible to get bigger and better with less funding? The answer is yes—but vigilance on the side of access is critical to avoid shutting out, in the name of student success, the very students who need us most.

A Focus on Student Success

In the midst of the 2003-2004 California fiscal crisis, the Los Rios system of four colleges in the Capital region of California considered the challenges of declining funding. Board, faculty, and administrative leaders took a bold step to begin a system-wide student success initiative. Even though money was tight, the faculty was encouraged to work on finding ways to improve success indicators, including course completion, retention, degree and certificate completion, and transfer. No financial limits were set and no top-down directions were provided. The idea was for educational leaders at the college level to identify promising practices. If those practices proved to be successful, the task would be to scale them up to other colleges in the district and to discontinue the practices that proved unsuccessful. The only parameter established was to focus on a cohort of younger students who were first-time and full-time enrollees, because district research showed these students to be the most academically at-risk.

As is the case in most colleges across the country, Los Rios found gaps in student performance when the student success indicators were disaggregated by gender, ethnicity and age. College leaders were encouraged to keep these gaps in mind and work to close the gaps while improving success for all students. The work was hard and very slow. The indicators improved modestly—for example, the all-student fall to spring retention rate improved from 61% to 67% from 2004-05 to 2009-10; but the gaps across groups persisted, as retention rates remained substantially lower for African-Americans, Latinos, and Native Americans than for Whites and Asians. Although individual programs showed promise, scaling them up to the entire college and ultimately to all four colleges remains a challenge.

A Long-Standing Commitment to Access

Adding to the challenge of improving success is tremendous pressure for access. The Los Rios District experienced not only a decade-long increase in enrollment—growth from 61,800 students in Spring 2000 to over 92,000 in Spring 2010—but an especially dramatic increase of nearly 31% in the last four years alone. Access to community colleges in California is historically high due to a master plan developed four decades ago that directs 67% of high school graduates to enter higher education through a community college. State policy has also purposefully kept community college student fees extremely low—today at only $26 per unit.

In 2008, 62 of every 1,000 adults living in California attended one of the state’s 110 community colleges. Adult participation is especially high in Los Rios, where in the same year nearly 92 of every 1,000 adults—one in 11—living within the system’s 2,400 square mile boundaries attended one of the District’s four colleges. Regional leaders value this level of participation and they use it to benchmark the Sacramento region against other similar regions across the country. A high college-going rate is a competitive edge when it comes to workforce preparation and is the necessary first step in raising the education level of the area citizenry.

Values in Conflict

The dual community college core values of open access and student success are currently colliding in California. National, state, and local policy makers, prompted by increased reporting and research on the failure of colleges to increase students’ completion rates, are rightfully calling for improvement. These appropriate pressures are coming at a time when the state is in the worst financial crisis in recent memory, a situation that forces colleges to cut classes, limit enrollment, and, in some instances, reduce faculty and staff.
Vigilance on the side of access is critical to avoid shutting out, in the name of student success, the very students who need us most.

The leaders of some colleges find it increasingly difficult to meet even the most basic measures of quality found in the regional accrediting standards, much less make significant improvements. Boards, faculty, and college staff want to see student performance improve; at the same time, they also want to admit the growing number of unemployed and underemployed Californians who desperately need access to college. Unfortunately, the timing for dealing with both increasing accountability and dramatic growth is not optimal, considering California’s financial challenges. The Governor and the Legislature have done their best to hold the funding level of community colleges stable, but with rising costs, the colleges have had no choice but to limit enrollment and therefore turn students away at a time of extremely high student demand.

Although this is not the first time in the past two decades that enrollment has been limited due to funding constraints, it is certainly the worst and most prolonged instance of such challenges. In stark contrast to the dramatic enrollment growth experienced over the past decade or more, access currently is being limited. There have been those who have recommended targeted limitation of course offerings as a means of controlling costs; in fact, some state-level policy staff have suggested that the colleges should reduce offerings in what they consider to be less important areas, like physical education and the arts. College leaders have fought state-level intervention into curriculum decisions, but have quietly tried to stay ahead of this pressure by prioritizing at the local level. This has resulted in difficult local college decisions related to course reductions and limitations. In Los Ríos, we have had to reduce 2010-2011 offerings by 850 sections or 5.5%, resulting in a decline of enrollment of approximately 5,000 students in Fall 2010. Considering the growth trend the system had sustained for the past several years, Fall 2010 enrollment would probably have reached 95,000, suggesting that nearly 10,000 more students would be in the colleges had state funding been available. Even with the current reductions, the colleges are likely to be nearly 10% over their state-funded enrollment limit, meaning that every class of 30 students includes three for whom the colleges receive no funding. At a time when our community needs us the most, we are unable to provide the education its citizens require.

In this environment, improving student success is extremely difficult, and many fear that if the pressures for increased success are too great, the colleges will be forced to limit access for students who are the least educationally prepared, resulting in a false improvement in indicators like course completion, retention, transfer, and degree and certificate completion. Still, in spite of a difficult climate for improving student success, several recent developments and activities suggest reason for optimism.

**Hopeful Signs in a Time of Crisis**

In the past year, a number of student success and legislative initiatives have begun to bear fruit. Supported by funding from the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation and the James Irvine Foundation, the California Leadership Alliance for Student Success (CLASS) initiative was launched in 2009 and included twelve colleges or systems chosen because of their record of innovation and focus on student success. Over the past two years, these colleges—led by Dr. Kay McClennen and Dr. Byron McClennen, well-known student success leaders from The University of Texas at Austin’s Community College Leadership Program—have come together to consider the challenge of improved student success. Teams made up of representatives from the Board of Trustees and the CEO of each college or district have worked, with input from faculty, to refine the cohort tracking of student success. The participating institutions have had a robust dialogue on data-driven decision making as a means of validating what interventions actually work and how to scale them up to serve greater numbers of students. The participants have learned that, while in many instances large funding increases are not needed, existing funding must be redirected. The college leaders have begun to have reason to believe that improving student success without limiting access is possible and that the gaps in performance by age, ethnicity, and gender can be closed.

The California legislature and the state administration also made significant policy-level progress in 2010 that should help improve degree completion and transfer. The Governor has signed legislation making student transitions from California community colleges into the
California State University system much easier. If this pathway works as envisioned, the average number of college units earned by students attaining a Bachelor’s degree (65% of whom currently begin at a California community college) in the CSU system should drop over time from more than 160 units to somewhere closer to 130. This would result in resources freed up to serve more students at both the community college and state university levels. Other state policy discussions are underway that could also lead to making movement of students from high school, through the community colleges, and into the state’s two university systems more seamless and efficient.

The community college regional accrediting body, known as the Accrediting Commission for Community and Junior Colleges (part of the Western Association of Schools and Colleges), is also emphasizing student success through its revision of standards in recent years. The standards require robust measurement of student performance and institutional planning to improve that performance. Although implementation of the standards has not been without controversy, an increasing number of colleges have improved program evaluation and planning and are implementing assessment of student learning outcomes at every level.

The Community College League of California recently presented the work of its Commission on the Future with a call for increasing the number of community college completers by one million by 2020. The ambitious agenda suggests that community colleges must improve the success rates of all students if California is to produce its share toward attainment of educational goals set at the federal level.

Ensuring Access While Improving Success

California community colleges may be in the best possible position to protect access while improving student success. With a decade-long history of measuring adult participation rates, it will be possible to monitor access while improving success. A decade from now, if success indicators have improved, performance gaps have closed, and adult participation has been maintained, then the state’s colleges will have succeeded in getting bigger and better at the same time. However, vigilance will be required from community college leaders and policy makers to ensure that improved success is not the result of simply shutting out the most educationally challenged students.

College leaders will respond to increased calls for accountability, but policy makers will need to be careful not to dramatically change the structure of funding in a way that would disenfranchise needy students. Some who recommend a shift to outcomes-based funding are reluctant to admit that the result could be a slow creep toward selective admissions at the very institutions that are supposed to provide access to the masses who will need to be educated if we are to remain globally competitive. Champions of both access and success must be successful if America is to continue as the world leader and if all of our citizens are to have access to education’s pathway to a better life ★
As a community college president, I have found that opportunities to effect change that can lead to institutional transformation are rare. Community colleges are complex organizations, with competing interests and voices inside and outside the campus. Although all stakeholders may be committed to the goal of student success, their disparate priorities and approaches to achieving that goal function more often in organizational silos than in integrated unison.

A common example of organizational silos is the separation of instructional and student services units at community colleges, a separation that fragments faculty and staff, as well as students’ academic and social integration into higher education. Too often, faculty counselors and discipline faculty either are at odds over policies and procedures affecting student achievement or they simply do not communicate or coordinate. A primary challenge for community college presidents is recognizing and seizing the occasional catalyst that they can parlay into institutional transformation, grounded in an agenda for student success.

That occasional catalyst can bring together the disparate voices, which, though they often tend to speak past one another, may share a common focus on student success. Such an opportunity came to light several years ago through a California program known as the Basic Skills Initiative.

When the State Academic Senate for the California Community Colleges proposed higher levels of math and English requirements for the AA degree, community college stakeholders, including the Senate, began discussing strategies for assisting students who may be unprepared to meet the new degree requirements. With 80% of students entering California community colleges placing below college level in English and math courses, the challenges facing colleges in meeting the basic skills needs of so many students are daunting. Ultimately, the discussions among the stakeholders on basic skills and student success led to a significant and transformational state program aimed at improving teaching and learning in basic skills: the California Community Colleges Basic Skills Initiative (BSI).

My own engagement with the BSI began over dinner with the leader of the Research and Planning Group (RP Group) for California Community Colleges. Mt. San Antonio College (Mt. SAC) had been selected to coordinate the initial activity of the BSI, developing a comprehensive review of the literature on effective practices in basic skills education. The RP Group took on the assignment and produced a text that has had the most significant and productive impact on teaching and learning at California community colleges that I have experienced during my 35 years in the profession. That text, Basic Skills as a Foundation for Student Success in California Community Colleges, has served as a foundation for substantial and significant innovation in basic skills teaching and learning.¹

Faculty and administrators on the Mt. SAC campus have engaged and embraced the review of the literature and attendant recommendations, not only to find rationale and research to support and question their own assumptions and practices, but to stimulate collaboration and exploration of new approaches and paths leading to student success in all disciplines. Campus-wide dialogue, initiated through the shared experience of engaging in the review of the literature, has brought down many of the silos that have inhibited past efforts to lead students to success. An excellent and successful example of collaboration and innovation achieved through the catalyst of research, data, and a shared commitment to student success is the ASPIRE Program.² Based on analysis

¹ Basic Skills as a Foundation for Student Success in California Community Colleges, Chancellor’s Office, California Community Colleges, 2007.
² The ASPIRE Program is a student support program aimed at addressing retention/persistence among African-American and other students at Mt. San Antonio College. The program assists students in achieving academic success through mentoring, progress monitoring, counseling, and cohort learning. The program began in fall 2009, in response to evaluation of student performance data that revealed African-American males lagging in course completion and persistence, relative to other ethnic groups and to females.
of student performance that demonstrated low rates of course completion and persistence among African-American males, faculty, staff, and administrators developed a cohort learning program targeting that population of students. Combining a learning community with extensive counseling, tutoring, and mentoring, the ASPIRE Program has resulted over its first three years in significant gains in course completion and persistence through basic skills courses and into college-level courses.

The BSI has been transformational for Mt. SAC. When faculty and administrators respond to challenges with quality research and data, the resulting modifications of policy and practice can change students’ lives. The success of the ASPIRE Program is but one example of how a shared vision can result in a shared agenda for change and action. The sound research presented in Basic Skills as a Foundation for Student Success in California Community Colleges, combined with serious, campus-wide dialogue on disaggregated assessment data on student performance, has led not only to collaborative innovations such as ASPIRE but also to systemic, transformational changes in the ways the college structures programs and services, including tutoring and supplemental instruction.

Meeting the challenges of basic skills development offers college leaders a strategy, combining and directing effective practices, which can result in
When a shared vision of student success is informed by college-wide dialogue on student performance, the stage is set for systemic transformation of the institution.

Identifying catalysts and motives that can trigger the epiphany of a shared vision of student success is a fundamental challenge facing community college leaders.

Implicit in the effective practices presented in the BSI literature review and in the innovations developed at Mt. SAC is this fundamental notion: that unprepared students must be able, in a simple psychological sense, to identify with a college and its mission, with faculty and staff, and with other students, as prerequisite to their discovery of motivation and purpose that will drive them to success in college and beyond. The application of effective practices in basic skills teaching and learning in bringing success to unprepared students carries with it the implication that many of the same practices can act as a foundation or catalyst for a comprehensive strategy for institutional transformation. That is to say, the mostly affective underlying factors that inform effective practices in teaching and learning translate to effective change processes for institutional transformation. The conditions and actions attendant to effective practices in basic skills development that lead to a state of identification between students and learning very likely correlate with the conditions and actions necessary for trustees, faculty, and staff to find common motivations for institutional transformation.

I would argue that our success in assisting students to discover their unique motivations is dependent on our capacity to assist them in identifying with the culture of higher education, with learning itself, and with faculty, staff, and other students. Through such a process of identification, students can discover motivations that lead them to use learning to achieve present and future purposes and goals. The challenge of achieving identification is most effectively met at a college where programs and services are integrated across disciplines, as evidenced through practices such as learning communities. Identification—achieved through integrated programs and services as opposed to fragmented silos, with all faculty and staff focused on the goal of student success—leads to discovery of motivation, which leads, in turn, to success in basic skills and to achievement in college and beyond. The success students achieve though identification is iterative of the role of identification among all college stakeholders in the pursuit of institutional transformation.

As a community college president, I have the challenge and opportunity to create a campus environment that promotes the process of identification for students, which can lead to purposeful learning. My own discovery (but certainly not new knowledge to the profession) is that the path to student success described above is the same path faculty, staff, trustees, and college presidents must follow in order to create the learning environment necessary for student success, which, in turn, can become a path to institutional transformation.

A successful example at Mt. SAC of applying a catalyst that leads stakeholders to a shared sense of identification with a college focus on student success is a cohort tracking activity adopted by the board of trustees. Through a process derived and adapted from the California Leadership Alliance for Student Success (CLASS) Initiative, the board is tracking a cohort of students who enrolled for the first time in Fall 2010 and who are participating in one of the basic skills learning community programs offered at the college. The college research department, working with the program coordinators, identified a set of data elements, including initial placement scores in basic skills, as well as course completion, persistence, and time to goal, which the board will use to track performance and success. The college disaggregates the data by various demographic factors, giving the board the perspective of equity, along with performance. The board will track the cohort for four years, receiving assessment data following each academic term. The research
staff and program coordinators develop questions that the board might ask about the data, and the board also develops its own questions about the performance of the cohort.

Through the cohort tracking activity, the trustees can identify with the student success agenda and develop a sense of engagement that aligns them in a real way with the evolving focus and work of faculty and staff. For faculty and staff, the board’s activity aligns with and reinforces the organic relationship between evidence (research and data) and effective practices of teaching and learning, focused on basic skills.

Many of the effective practices implemented at Mt. SAC, combined and applied as a coherent set of tactics, have formed a strategy for institutional transformation. The desired transformation integrates mission, assessment and research, resources, professional development, and programs and services into a focused, organic whole, as opposed to silos. Integrated organization can be achieved when all college stakeholders embrace and apply the same principles and practices derived from research on basic skills ★
The North Orange County Community College District (NOCCCD), located just 30 miles south of Los Angeles in Orange County, California, is a diverse community college district serving more than 70,000 credit and non-credit students. Encompassing about 155 square miles and a population of about one million people, the District has provided educational services to its community for more than 97 years.

The people of NOCCCD share a number of characteristics with their sister community colleges in California and beyond. For example, because we are a California community college district, we believe in certain truths without question or evidence. Among our beliefs is that we are the best at everything we do; that our faculty and staff are all above average; and that our best students succeed at high levels, often transferring to high-quality, four-year colleges because of the education we provide. What we feel or believe, rather than what we can document, becomes our generally accepted truth. Mind you, we are not above engaging in endless dialogue about problems. Californians tend to think dialogue is a solution.

The NOCCCD recognized the need to engage the subject of student success more than a decade ago. In October 2000, the district held a Strategic Conversation entitled “Student Success: What’s Our Consumer Report?” More than 100 faculty, staff, and students participated in the discussions. Again, like many of our sister colleges, NOCCCD at that time saw student success as an academic topic to be discussed rather than an issue to be seriously addressed. Further, the NOCCCD of 2000 understood student success primarily as a problem for students who came to its colleges with poor study skills, limited motivation, and deficient high school preparation. Indeed, the problem of student success was placed outside of the NOCCCD’s scope of responsibility and squarely within the student’s responsibility. The summary report from the October 2000 Strategic Conversation stated that students often were unsuccessful because they had unrealistic expectations regarding time required to achieve goals, poor study skills (which didn’t seem to bother them), and habitually improper use of time. Also tallied in the report was a long list of academic and administrative shortcomings that were proffered as explanations of the lack of success among NOCCCD students.

Ned Doffoney
Chancellor
North Orange County Community College District
The Strategic Conversation of 2000 suggested potential solutions to a number of identified problems. Ideas included a required orientation class for first-semester students, creation of student mentor programs for first-generation college students, and a mandatory career assessment and follow-up program. Unfortunately, none of these ideas benefited from a follow-up implementation strategy. Lacking such a plan, these suggestions, unsurprisingly, were not implemented throughout the District.

In general, planning has not been a strength of California community colleges, nor was it a particular strength of the NOCCCD. The Accrediting Commission of the Western Association of Schools and Colleges often cites shortcomings in institutional planning as a deficiency when sanctioning colleges in the West. Upon my arrival in 2008, I noticed that the NOCCCD had been pursuing a student success agenda with limited results. It was immediately clear that the District needed strategies to implement operationally the primary components of the student success agenda identified through district-wide discussions. The District also needed to update its educational master plan, as this plan had not been revised in ten years.

Seeking Synergy

Planning and synergy are important constructs in my thought process. Thus, I thought it was possible to integrate the work of master planning and the focused work necessary for student success into a single work product. Fortunately, the NOCCCD board of trustees agreed that this direction was both appropriate and necessary.

Simultaneously, and with the support of the entire governing board, a member of the board (Barbara Dunsheath) agreed to co-chair the statewide Commission on the Future of community college education in California. The Commission on the Future was charged with studying policy and practice changes that would enable the California Community College system to increase the number of students who have access to, and are able to complete, high-quality degrees, certificates, and transfer pathways in California community colleges. Through this Commission and through her frequent reports to the NOCCCD board, Dr. Dunsheath and the full board played an active role in setting the course of the District on the path of student success.

Supporting Trustee Miller’s work, Trustee Dunsheath said in part:

“Your board is committed to student success. The board articulates the vision, but we need to work collegially together to achieve it. We expect to do things differently…to build a culture of evidence where the current status is unacceptable. It is a primary goal of NOCCCD that says every student counts and deserves not only access to college, but attainment of their educational goal. It is not enough to merely get into a class. Students need to successfully complete the classes they enroll in with a passing grade.”

Old habits are hard to change, and colleges especially are strongly accustomed to sustaining old habits. The idea of a renewed focus on educational master planning met with resistance in the NOCCCD. After all, some said, “We planned ten years ago and much of that work sat on the shelf.” Another often-heard observation was, “The current economic circumstance of California is sure to make most plans both a waste of time and a waste of what little money we have available.” There was even the refrain that, “Some of our students are not college material and will not succeed no matter what we do.”

It was clear that many thought educational master planning and a student success agenda were separate activities and that, furthermore, no good could come from investing in either of them. The educational master plan was seen as focusing on facilities and the Strategic Conversations never seemed to lead to outcomes that were implemented or evaluated. There appeared to be little to tie the two ideas together.
Crisis and Opportunity

Then all hell broke loose. In early summer 2010, the lead administrator on the educational master planning project retired suddenly. This abrupt change resulted in the consulting firm, whose strength was facilities planning, losing focus and momentum on the educational master planning project. Concurrently, employee groups in the District voiced strong resistance to the idea of even interim replacement of the retired administrator. This resistance was expressed through orchestrated demonstrations at governing board meetings, letter-writing campaigns to local media outlets, and a barrage of emails and telephone calls to the governing board and me. And all of this was occurring during a board election season. The tensions related to demonstrations and negative communications created a crisis in the District.

It has been said that crisis brings opportunity. The chaos of the moment provided a perfect opportunity for a renewed focus on student success.

The NOCCCD is a proud district. It is generally well-regarded in the service area, and the negative attention brought by the demonstrations was not customary. The display of public discord did not resonate well within the governing board and me. And all of this was occurring during a board election season. The tensions related to demonstrations and negative communications created a crisis in the District.

Toward a Shared Vision

Jim Collins, author of Good to Great: Why Some Companies Make the Leap...and Others Don’t, understood, as the District does, that performance matters. The District employs more than 3,000 people, an eclectic mix of ideas and talent that, when properly focused, is a powerful force for improved student success. The challenge of leadership is less to “get the right people on the bus and then see where it goes” than it is to “figure out where to go and get the right people on the bus that can get you there.” This challenge was met directly in August 2010 at the summer meeting of the District Planning Council (DPC), which is the district-wide participatory governance group. I stated to the DPC in part, “The data clearly show that colleges which are intentional about improving success invent strategies to achieve student success…It is important to develop our educational plans to address the deficits that are known to us. That, in my view, should be our educational master plan. The plans we create and implement will establish an environment for student success in our district.” This clear, concise, unmistakable challenge was the focus the District needed for everyone to “take the right seat on the bus.”

Unity and clarity from the governing board and the CEO are powerful assets in setting policy and direction for a community college district. That unity and clarity, in turn, greatly facilitate the effective engagement of the college community. Eager faculty, staff, students, administrators, and consultants then are able to go about the task of creating the educational master plan with a clear focus on a data-driven student success agenda.

Although we like to argue the facts in community colleges, we all agree that facts are necessary. The NOCCCD is fortunate to have talented research and technology staff. The members of the research team gathered and presented three years of longitudinal data on student persistence and success to the governing board during a board workshop. The governing board and I worked with the research staff to make these data public to the entire District. Given clear, convincing evidence of dismal performance, the motivation to change the status quo seemed pervasive. Almost every unit of the District joined in the effort to improve student success. The educational master plan project leader surveyed every academic department and full-time faculty member in the District, asking questions such as, “What methods

Non-faculty units also wanted to be part of the student success agenda.
might be used to reach students with differing preparation, abilities, and motivation?” Another sample question from the all-faculty survey was, “What techniques or strategies would the faculty like to learn or what resources could the faculty use to help underprepared students in the department?”

There were numerous unsolicited responses from non-faculty units that also wanted to be part of the student success agenda of the District. For example, the staff of the Student Health Services Department, including physicians, nurse practitioners, psychologists, registered nurses, administrative assistants, and a health educator, also agreed that students are less prepared for college than ever before. However, because they bring a different perspective when considering the challenges of improving student academic success, their issues included behaviors that affect academic performance—for example, smoking, drug use, nutritional habits, exercise, and alcohol consumption, as well as the consequences of these behaviors (DUI’s, fights, unprotected sex resulting in sexually transmitted infections or unplanned pregnancies, etc.) that clearly impact student success.

Strategic Conversation #12 is now scheduled. The theme is “Maintaining Excellence in Challenging Times.” This theme will serve as a reference for the board as it addresses future policy matters. Student success is now defined primarily in the NOCCCD as completing a course with a grade of “C” or better. The conversation will most certainly address how the California budget crisis has challenged the District’s ability to provide the tools necessary to support student success. Significantly, at the end of the conversation, participants will vote for the top two solutions arising from the discussions, which then will be vetted for possible implementation throughout the District and consideration for inclusion in the master plan. Finally, there will be an implementation strategy resulting from strategic conversations.

Opportunities to engage the campus community in the student success agenda now appear routinely on meeting agendas throughout the District. Importantly, the student success agenda now informs the self-studies conducted in preparation for accreditation team visits, focusing the work on a fundamental question: “How will this division or department document and positively impact student success?”

Campus leaders, including campus presidents, faculty senate presidents, and planning councils, include student success as the core message when communicating the vision of the colleges. For the first time in ten years, District administrators are meeting at one location for staff development that is centered on academic success for students throughout the District.

Progress for the NOCCCD has not come easily. The District has learned much about itself through the process of building a student success agenda. An important lesson is the realization of the need to focus discussions throughout the District on evidence rather than on the opinion of the presenter. Just as importantly, the District is now aware that discussions by themselves are not solutions to problems but should lead toward solutions to problems. While the District always understood the need for planning as an intellectual exercise, the current refocus on student success has made planning a vital function. Perhaps the most important lesson the District learned is that it responds well under stress. Self-inflicted wounds need not lead inevitably to self-destruction, but, instead, may provide an opportunity for reflection. Given the opportunity for reflection and examination of its practices and performance, the District relies on the core values of civility, integrity, and communication as it charts new directions.

An important lesson is the realization of the need to focus discussions on evidence rather than on opinion.
To improve student success, go to the source: students. We all have seen discouraging outcomes when we review our student performance statistics. Why is it so difficult to improve these numbers? In finding the cause of low student success, the ‘Why?’ question can best be answered by students:

- On passing math: “MAKE us turn in homework every day—and get it graded and back to us quickly!”
- On being ready for college: “MAKE us do orientation—I wish I had known this before!”
- On prerequisites: “TELL ME how I need to be prepared—and tell me BEFORE I enroll!”
- On counseling: “Don’t just give me courses to take; HELP ME make a plan—AND STICK TO IT!”

In other words, “Make us do it! We don’t do optional!” But how do we get there from here?

These responses and many more evolved out of the College of the Sequoias (COS) planning process for student success initiatives. Our challenge: we know the need, but what interventions would be most effective in improving students’ course completion, year-to-year persistence, and attainment of educational goals? The COS approach was first, to examine data on “gatekeeper” behaviors, using our experience as a guide to data mining; second, to investigate why these barriers exist by using qualitative research techniques including interviews and focus groups; and, finally, to use this research to formulate possible interventions and prioritize them based on potential impact, cost effectiveness, and “fit” with the culture of our college.

Several core values held passionately by our college leaders—and by me, the college president, as well—provided the foundation for this approach. A heightened sense of significance and urgency has been built up at the college through the ongoing review of and reflection on student performance data—to the point that the collective academic body was ready to dig in. Concurrently, over a period approaching three years, the structural capacity of the college to act on student success initiatives has been enhanced. Faculty development was reinstated and funded, additional flex-time was made available to faculty, research capacity was added, data integrity was improved, a data mining and reporting system was constructed, and institutional practices in curriculum development, student learning outcomes, and program review were strengthened. The college achieved this progress in a collegial manner that set the tone for addressing the challenging issues of student success. Further, this progress was made within a climate of inquiry and planning—but one that resulted in visible action.

The Value of Teamwork

COS leaders believe in teamwork—coming together to understand the challenge, define the goal, collect and review information, brainstorm possible solutions, and evaluate them from our many different perspectives. For the student success initiative, we formed teams of three overlapping circles of involvement: a core team of six, a planning team of twenty, and a review team of those on three related college standing committees. At the same time, the college was developing its next five-year strategic plan. At key points in the process, the entire college,
including external partners, participated in developing the plan. The core team participated in training through the college’s involvement with the national Achieving the Dream initiative. To guide the work of the planning team, we used facilitators from California Tomorrow, individuals who had worked with us on three previous projects over five years—and thus knew our college and our culture well.

**The Value of Data-Driven Decision Making**

Our leaders also believe in data-driven decision making. In the run-up to the student success initiative, institutional practices had been revised to depend on data—particularly the program review process, which leads to allocation of growth resources. Looking at data, reflecting on their meaning, and basing proposals on information—these steps have become so engrained in the college culture that everyone expects background information to be made available leading into the discussions of all major issues.

None of this is of value, of course, unless the result is improved student success. Would this planning process result in just another report to sit on the shelf? Will the agreed-upon interventions be so innocuous that only improvements on the fringe result? Will the whole process collapse for lack of buy-in by key stakeholders? Avoiding these common pitfalls takes leadership—and this was the primary mission of our core team.

**The Leadership Role**

When I came to the college, I had a vision of what a student-centered learning college would look like, of the nature of the team that would need to come together both to create the climate for change and to manage that change once underway, and of the steps required to get everyone on board with the change. My vision for the eventual outcome has been forged from the base metal of being a teacher for many years, from the fiery crucible of being burned by many well-intentioned mistakes, and from hot passion inspired by those dogmatic and influential leaders from whom I learned the craft of the CEO.

The challenge to reach this vision was literally one of institutional transformation. It was essential that the administrative team share the core values. In addition to a great team already in place, new hires and promotions have further strengthened the group. Fortunately, the resources from SB 361 arrived at just the right moment to fund the support structure described above. The major challenge in the “readiness pre-steps” to the student success initiative was to control the pace of change at a manageable level. (Well, manageable for me at least—my level of expectation here was admittedly aggressive.) My mantra during all of this has been, “Be patient but persistent.” Getting the administrative team to readiness for change was not done passively: involved were lots of mentoring, many opportunities for individual training, and annual retreats with the full management team (yes, M&O personnel. Achieving the Dream consists of two faculty, the CIO and CSSO, the college’s institutional researcher, and me. We also attend the Achieving the Dream Strategy Institute each February. We wrote an HSI Title V grant proposal that spring using student success as the focus—and received the full grant that fall. Having the resources of the Title V grant proved a blessing both in terms of funding and in terms of personnel. Achieving the Dream was great training for the core team; it has opened our eyes to possibilities that work outside California and has proven to be a great planning model.

The challenge was—and somewhat continues to be—explaining to folks on campus exactly what constitutes our involvement in Achieving the Dream. The college is so used to grant- or categorically-funded boutique programs that they expected ATD to be just that. To say that ATD is a process and a set of resources for institutional transformation has been a tough message to get across. Looking back, I could have been much better at communicating this. That we integrated the planning outcomes of the ATD student success initiative into our new five-year strategic
plan made the world come into focus again for people on campus. It is a little odd how things work out. Here I am all excited about Achieving the Dream and all the wonderful things I see around the nation. And then I struggle to get that message across, until it is all put into the context of strategic planning. I guess the message is that change needs to come dressed in clothing that looks as familiar as possible. (You have to know the secret handshake to tell which of the objectives in the new strategic plan came from the ATD process used by the student success planning team.) Oh, well, it is the result that counts. As will be evident as the success initiatives are described, We Can Do Mandatory!, and students WILL succeed.

The work of the planning team was outstanding. We looked at student outcome data. Then we brainstormed barriers to student success—and then actually ASKED students what THEY thought the barriers were. We grouped our ideas into manageable categories, formulated five “inquiry questions” to drill down to specific information leading to potential interventions, and then reviewed existing data and collected additional data—both quantitative and qualitative—to measure the worthiness of these potential areas for intervention. For example, thinking that counseling might be an area that could improve student success, we asked the fearless Inquiry Question, “What impact does academic counseling and development of a Student Education Plan (SEP) have on student success?” Thumbnail sketch of research results: The number of counseling contacts does not correlate with student success [measured number of contacts against course completion and persistence]. Students highly value counseling but what they value is educational goal clarification not course schedule building [interviews with over a thousand students], having an SEP somewhat improves success but FOLLOWING the SEP makes a BIG improvement in course completion and persistence [degree of following an SEP was measured by reviewing transcripts].

It is hard to describe the unity of purpose that developed among those on the planning team. As the California Tomorrow facilitators led us through this process (designed by the facilitators working with the core team), the administrators, faculty, staff, students, and community members lost their role identity. Each person’s contribution was evaluated on its merits. And the group morphed as we went along. We found that we needed others who had roles on campus that added value. It turned out that these 20+ planning team members were “ambassadors” for the process and for the outcomes as we moved forward. I have to say that the planning team work was NOT particularly a leadership challenge. Once we had the right people in the room with the right facilitators and the right process, things just clicked.

**Current Implementation and Next Steps**

College of the Sequoias serves most of Tulare and Kings Counties in California’s Central Valley. The enrollment of 13,400 students each semester has a 51% majority of Hispanic students, 37% White, and single-digit enrollment of Black, Asian, and Native American students. The college has grown by more than a third in the last four years. Those in our service area are disadvantaged compared to the rest of the state, having twice the unemployment rate, half again more below the poverty level, half the state achievement rate of baccalaureate degrees, low literacy, and more than 40% of families speaking Spanish at home as their primary language. The challenge has been tremendous, and COS has actually been working on student success initiatives for some time. A previous Title V grant had broadly created learning communities, and the grant evolved to include First Year Experience learning communities—pairing our student success course with a basic skills course. Both the state-funded Basic Skills Initiative and a second Title V grant continued and expanded this work. The Title V grant has added Faculty Inquiry Groups and a Second Year Experience, while the Basic Skills Initiative focused on prerequisites and augmented instruction. Prerequisites were reviewed and improved in both the math and English sequences, and social science faculty members are implementing eligibility for English 1 as a prerequisite to transfer courses in their division. Augmented instruction is used in some math and English courses to add hours to class time for the purpose of increasing time-on-task. All of these interventions are moving into their second year of implementation, with the exception of First Year Experience (FYE)—now a robust three years old. FYE has resulted in measured improvement in both student satisfaction and term-to-term persistence.
The student success planning in 2009-2010 prioritized five interventions: 1) Mandatory orientation for all new students, 2) Mandatory student success course for probationary students and those in value added programs, 3) Mandatory first day attendance, 4) Mandatory student education plan adherence for students in value-added programs, and 5) Exploration of options for educational planning (course schedule selection). Note that the term “value-added program” refers to those programs in which the student receives additional services or benefits. Examples include EOPS, TRiO, MESA, and Puente. The first three priorities are on track for Fall 2011 implementation, mandatory SEPs are slated for Fall 2012, and the exploration of educational planning options is being discussed by the academic senate. Here are some specifics:

**Mandatory orientation** will be a half-unit, eight-hour experience completed either in person or online. Pilots of both modes received good reviews from students. An end-of-experience exercise measures retention of key information, and pilot scores averaged 85%. New students can enroll for courses their first semester without orientation, but the college blocks registration for a second term until orientation is completed. Analysis of both facility availability and staffing shows adequate capacity within current resources. A task force with significant student involvement shepherds the process and advises on content. We expect the second term block to have two effects: enabling students who just need one class to enroll with few barriers and discouraging students who do not have an educational goal from enrolling term after term for recreational or avocational purposes. The details currently are being captured in board policy and administrative procedures, with an information campaign to follow.

**Mandatory completion of a student success course** is a new requirement targeted at probationary students and those in value-added programs. The college has adopted the *On Course* system as the new student success course curriculum; and 50 faculty members have participated in a three-day workshop to prepare for course delivery. An additional 50 are scheduled for training as well. The management team completed a one-day training session, and the faculty took over the fall Convocation and featured the use of *On Course* principles. The new course, General Studies 120 (GS 120), has passed through the curriculum process, and all faculty members on campus, regardless of discipline, will be able to teach the course once they are trained. Faculty chairs will coordinate the assignment of faculty to sections offered. Our history is that a good mix of counselors and instructors teach the course. In a time of high demand, when course sections are being cut because of budget constraints, we are only modestly increasing the number of sections; but our analysis shows that the college will have sufficient capacity.

Students on probation will be blocked from reenrollment until they see a counselor. The counselor may require GS 120 as a condition of reenrollment. This is the Chaffey College model, used effectively through the Opening Doors program. (We learned of this system at a CLASS institute just as we were designing our intervention. What timing!) Those in value-added programs also take GS 120 or its equivalent in seminar format as COUN 110: EOPS, Puente, FYE. Faculty in some instructional programs are also using *On Course* as an orientation to their program (Agriculture, etc.), as GS 119.

**Mandatory first day attendance** has been so universally accepted as a college policy that very little discussion has been needed. In the past, COS has allowed students to enroll online in open courses during the add-drop period. Filled classes have students on waiting lists for which faculty issue add codes in priority order. Beginning in Fall 2011, we will close online enrollment the evening before the first meeting of each class, and it will be COS policy that students must be present at the first day of class to receive an add code. Faculty have discretion to make exceptions but must still follow wait-list priority in adding students. Implementation consists of a minor programming change and an information campaign targeting both students and faculty.

**Mandatory student education plan adherence** is a new practice targeted at students in value-added programs. COS does not currently have the capability to require students to follow an education plan. Last spring we acquired the Degree Works software system. The system has many capa-
bilities, among them the production and enforcement of a student education plan, and it interfaces with COS’ Banner ERP system. During 2010-11, the college will install and test the software and train users, particularly counseling staff. By the end of Fall 2011, we should have a good idea of the policies and procedures needed to implement the system. A task force in the Counseling Division is working on the policy and practice issues. Degree Works also has a degree audit system, and the task force will address use of that component as well. Current board policy requires that students on financial aid and those receiving services through the Disability Resource Center have an education plan and that students follow that plan.

**Options for educational planning** are being explored by a task force of the academic senate. “Educational planning” in this context consists of assisting students with course schedule building for a particular semester once they already have an education plan. The task will be to define the role of paraprofessionals—the COS job title is Counseling Technical—and to explore voluntary instructor advising for students with an education plan specifying a major in the discipline the faculty member teaches. There has been no timeline set for this process.

Leadership for the implementation of these five interventions has been proceeding since the Achieving the Dream planning team finalized these priorities. The President’s Cabinet made assignments to guide each of them, and regular follow up occurs as recorded in the Cabinet Plan of Action. (Cabinet consists of six senior administrators and the presidents of the classified and academic senate.) Each of these interventions has been discussed with College Council (four representatives each from classified, faculty senate, faculty union, management, and students, plus the chairs of the six standing college committees.)

The interventions have had their own singular challenges. For mandatory orientation, buy-in has been high and the framework agreed upon, but the devil is in the details. Modifications include having orientation be a half-unit course to allow the ERP system (Banner) to have a hook to block second semester enrollment. The content of orientation is still evolving—and probably will continue to evolve as we learn more from future focus groups and from continuing review of performance data. The online version of orientation was not in the original vision but has proven to be a winner based on student assessment and satisfaction.

The COS faculty handled the changeover of the curriculum for the student success course, with leadership from the academic senate. There were some minor dramas as this evolved, but the faculty worked through the issues, with my role being encouragement and guidance rather than direct involvement. The aspect of mandating the student success course for probationary students was up in the air a bit until we came across the Chaffey College Opening Doors system. The process and outcomes were convincing. Ricardo Diaz, the counselor at Chaffey who spearheads the project, is working with us. The Dean of Counseling has guided this process, including assessment of facility and personnel needs to meet the expected student demand. We expect to implement the student success course with no new resources—strictly through reallocation.

The last two projects both involved counseling: mandating student educational plan adherence and options for assisting students with course schedules. Both involve quite a change for the way counseling operates at the college, so we have gone slowly. Our Vice President of Student Services and Dean of Counseling have gone through the principles and we have groups identified to move forward. Apprehension has been high. After things percolated a bit, I met with the counselors to answer questions and share directly the vision for these interventions. That discussion diffused a lot of anxiety. We will keep moving ahead (patient and persistent, patient and persistent, patient and persistent...).
Critical Lessons

There are lessons here both for the college and for me. The importance of listening to students has been greatly magnified by this experience. We often invite students to participate and say “Oh, well!” when they don’t show up. In this model, we sought out students and understood their responses as key to designing each intervention. The value of qualitative research has stood out during this process. Finding out why a barrier exists requires more than looking at numbers. Done right, asking faculty and students can develop incredible insight into causes and potential solutions.

When the process deemphasized roles, the contributions from team members were amazing. We had a first-year faculty member who was great at thinking out of the box. Students, staff and community members spoke up regularly; the open process, externally facilitated, had a lot to do with this.

The importance of connecting new initiatives with existing processes was starkly reinforced. The planning team spent a lot of time talking about institutional/structural barriers to implementation and then specifically strategizing how to influence those most important in making the interventions work.

My advice to others? Be brave. Be bold. Use data. Ask why. Communicate every step. Be prepared: your team, your research capacity, your processes, and your resources. Mandate, mandate, mandate—even in California. Be patient and persistent, be patient and persistent. *
California Leadership Alliance for Student Success (CLASS)

Participant Colleges

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Chaffey College
Rancho Cucamonga, California
President: Henry Shannon

College of the Sequoias
Visalia, California
President: Bill Scroggins

Gavilan College
Gilroy, California
President: Steven Kinsella

Grossmont-Cuyamaca Community College District
El Cajon, California
Chancellor: Cindy Miles

Hartnell College
Salinas, California
President: Phoebe Helm

Kern Community College District
Bakersfield, California
Chancellor: Sandra Serrano

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