Achieving Success

Sept 2011 · Issue 16

Achieving the Dream
Community Colleges Count

DEVELOPMENTAL EDUCATION INITIATIVE
Accelerating Achievement

Contents

FEATURE

Developing Continuous Improvement Networks: A Strategy to Accelerate Innovations for Student Completion

Many states across the country are looking for institutional homes for student success initiatives across their community colleges. Several Achieving the Dream (ATD) states, with support from private foundations, have recently launched student success centers. Representatives from Arkansas, Michigan, and several other states convened in June at Jobs for the Future in Boston to discuss approaches to promoting continuous improvement in progress and completion by community college students.

Participating states celebrated how far they have come in gathering student success data since joining ATD. States are now seeking to delve more deeply into new, richer data and leverage it strategically. There are at least three "usage points" that participants noted: state level; college level; and faculty level. Each level has different data needs. For example, the majority of student success milestones used by states and national accountability standards groups are too general and out-of-date for faculty to act upon.

"One of the great benefits of ATD has been taking institutional research out of the shadows of a college," said Jim Jacobs, president of Macomb Community College. "It's not about compliance anymore."

Participants said the goal is to make data a friend to educators—a tool for raising the bar for teaching and learning, not assigning blame for undesired results. They also discussed how data should identify practices that colleges should discontinue, especially given tight state budgets.

Another focus for states is developmental curriculum redesign, a central element of many student success initiatives. "Curriculum design is harder to do than student services," said Mike Leach, director of the Center for Student Success at the Arkansas Association of Two-Year Colleges. "It's the last frontier of student success."

Arkansas' model shares evidence-based redesign approaches with colleges and lets each decide which to pursue. Texas and North Carolina created frameworks for state-level action but asked college faculty to formulate and implement the specifics at their respective colleges.

In Texas, for example, colleges submitted applications for redesign grants, and the state provided capacity building and professional development to help them effectively implement new designs. North Carolina established design principles for redesigning dev ed at the state level and is using teams of faculty from across colleges to develop new curriculum competencies that will be adopted statewide.

Rose Asera, a JFF consultant, shared her experiences working with California institutions and their faculty, indicating that effective change often comes from "leadership from the middle." These are the known and respected faculty on campus who, when properly engaged, can propel and spread innovation. Faculty, she said, want to collaborate without being handed a solution.

"Give them the wheels and ask them to build a scooter," Asera suggested.

Participants also discussed how to sustain student success initiatives. Michigan and Arkansas described two primary missions for their states' student success centers: connecting colleges and faculty, and leveraging their states' existing research and data capacity. Creating communities of practice across colleges—rather than building and maintaining larger-scale, heavily-staffed centers—is the path they see for sustainable student success initiatives.

New Publications from Jobs for the Future

HIGH FLYERS:
Policies and Strategies that Boost Developmental Education Success in Florida's Community Colleges
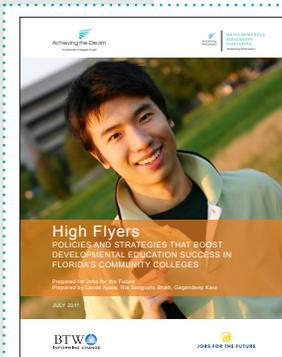
In 2010, Jobs for the Future contracted BTW to conduct a study on developmental education practices and policies in the state of Florida. This study was undertaken with two purposes: to identify common threads among community colleges that outperform their peers in advancing dev ed math students into college-level courses; and to identify how state agencies and community college system leaders support institutions in adopting continuous improvement strategies based on student performance data.

Using Florida data, JFF identified three community colleges that exhibited high performance in dev ed compared to other Florida institutions between 2002 and 2008, particularly among math students. The colleges selected for the case studies are Chipola College, the College of Central Florida, and Daytona State College. The research found that:

1. **Committed leadership** is consistently present across all three colleges.

2. Each college engages in **innovative instruction** that moves beyond standard classroom practices.

3. **Proactive student support** is a less developed function at the three colleges.

4. The colleges vary in the degree of **regular use of data** to promote student success.

5. Faculty and staff acknowledge the availability of **professional development** to improve instruction and services. However, evidence suggests that it has not been a key factor in improving success for dev ed students.

Based on the findings, BTW developed a questionnaire for other states to use when considering their own policymaking environment as related to dev ed. It covers how state policy supports the five areas of the research framework, as well as questions about finance and assessment/placement.

High Flyers is available at www.jff.org.

Hawai'i's Performance-based Funding System
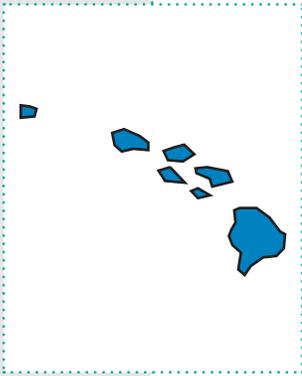
When the University of Hawai'i System (UH) joined Achieving the Dream in 2006, it promised to establish a funding source for colleges based on the achievement of student performance goals. Since then, Hawai'i has taken strategic steps toward designing a performance funding mechanism that rewards student success. With implementation beginning in fall 2011, the latest performance funding formula in Hawai'i will encourage colleges to excel in three key areas: graduation rates; increased STEM degrees; and increased completion rates by Native Hawaiians.

According to Peter Quigley, Associate Vice President for Academic Affairs, establishing bonus funding to incentivize colleges during turbulent fiscal times has proven difficult. UH's initial plan asked for funding above the base amount to reward institutions that improved student outcomes. Although this plan was rejected by the legislature, a portion of the higher education budget cuts made in the previous fiscal year were restored as compensation. Using the restored money for the performance incentive funds, Hawai'i settled on a funding formula where 3.5 percent of the general fund was set aside. Colleges could earn this money back if they met their strategic goals in the areas of graduation and transfer. Along with performance funding allocations, UH has set aside $1 million for innovation funding. Quigley asserts that the innovation fund will encourage colleges to "think outside of the box. . . . This money addresses action in what other university systems call momentum point funding areas."

The new budget ties funding over the next two years (2011-2013) to five progress and completion goals. Colleges that meet all of the goals and show continuous improvement in student achievement will receive more money than institutions that do not. Hawai'i will use data from a variety of performance indicators to determine the gains and losses within each institution's annual budget.

Due to its established evidence-based culture, UH was able to implement its new performance funding guidelines—such as colleges having to earn back money originally included in their budgets—with minimal resistance from faculty and staff.

Quigley suggests that Hawai'i's centralized higher education system contributed to the wide support of the new funding formula. The UH System shares common definitions, curricula, operational guidelines, and credit/enrollment policies across all of its institutions. The rigorous coordination of system-wide policies is beneficial for systemic consistency and implementation. For systems that do not share common policies, according to Quigley, inconsistent cutoff scores, lack of common definitions (e.g., remediation, success), and the inability to transfer credits to other state institutions can pose significant challenges.

For more information, please contact Peter Quigley at quiqleyp@hawaii.edu.

Massachusetts' Vision Project and the Working Group on Graduation and Student Success Rates
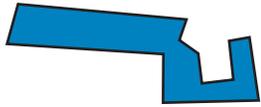
In 2010, the Massachusetts Achieving the Dream and Complete College America (CCA) state policy teams combined to form the Working Group on Graduation and Student Success Rates to oversee Massachusetts' public higher education agenda—the Vision Project—in the area of college completion. The Massachusetts Board of Higher Education (BHE) charged the Working Group with developing a set of recommendations to ensure that the state's public higher education system leads the nation with the highest graduation and student success rates and the lowest educational attainment gaps compared to other states. In June 2011, the Working Group's final report was unanimously accepted and the group will now focus its efforts on implementing the report's recommendations during the 2011-12 academic year.

Francesca Purcell, chair of the Working Group and Associate Commissioner for Academic and P-16 Policy at the Department of Higher Education (DHE), acknowledges that the Vision Project has been a "north star" for higher education state policy in Massachusetts, guiding the BHE, DHE and the 29 public campuses toward a set of common goals. In addition, Purcell feels that combining the knowledge of two national initiatives, ATD and CCA, has elevated the work of the Vision Project.

"We are drawing on the expertise and resources of our national initiatives to strengthen and infuse our work in a really valuable way," Purcell says. She asserts that ATD brings depth to the work both in terms of its focus on—and deep knowledge of—community colleges and because of its long history in tackling community college student success. CCA, a newer initiative, brings breadth because of its focus on both the 2- and 4-year sectors. By capitalizing on the strengths and resources of these two partner initiatives, the Working Group was able to develop a set of strong recommendations and ambitious priorities moving forward.

With the generous support of The Boston Foundation, the Vision Project will develop and issue an annual report that will compare Massachusetts' work to that of peer institutions in other states in the areas of college participation and completion rates, student learning outcomes, and workforce alignment. According to Purcell, the annual report will both celebrate the state's achievements and identify areas for improvement.

There is widespread agreement among the Working Group members that finding new and innovative ways to transform developmental education will also be a critical aspect of the state's and institutions' focus. As such, the Working Group has advised the DHE to create a statewide dev ed task force to collect and analyze dev ed student progression data.

The Working Group will give an update on all its goals and recommendations put forth in the Vision Project report at the Board of Higher Education's June 2012 meeting. For more information about the Vision Project and the Working Group's recommendations, please visit: http://www.mass.edu/currentinit/visionproject.asp.

Texas: The Developmental Education Initiative's Impact on Recent Legislation

Texas' Achieving the Dream/Developmental Education Initiative's State Policy Team recently advocated for state-level policy change by providing research-based testimony to the Higher Education Committee during the 82nd Legislative session. As a result of this coordinated effort to share institutional developmental education needs with legislators, three new evidence-driven statutes were adopted. This effort undergirds the state policy team's goal to "inform and influence state-level policy in developmental education and advocate for innovation funding to support colleges' efforts to increase student success through data-driven innovations."

SB 162, authored by Senator Florence Shapiro and supported by Representative Dan Branch, requires that the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board (THECB) develop a statewide plan for delivering dev ed in a cost-effective and outcome-driven manner. Some of the plan's priorities are: implementation of a diagnostic assessment and modular dev ed course materials; ongoing professional development for faculty and staff; and ongoing research of dev ed programs. Cynthia Ferrell, state policy lead for the ATD/DEI state policy team, suggests that the statewide plan represents a long-term investment, not only in improving dev ed delivery, but also in making it more cost-effective.

HB 1244, authored by Representative Joaquin Castro and sponsored by Senator Royce West, passed following the testimony by members of the ATD/DEI state policy team. The bill requires that all institutions base dev ed coursework on research-based best practices, including diagnostic assessments and non-course-based developmental education interventions. HB 1244 was strongly influenced by the work of the Community College Research Center—specifically, their research on the ineffectiveness of online dev ed offerings. The original bill specified that all colleges must offer online dev ed. However, following DEI team advocacy and testimony by Ferrell in which she cited a recent CCRC brief, "Online Learning: Does It Help Low-Income and Underprepared Students?" the bill was modified to include a variety of instructional delivery methods such as the integration of technology.

The final bill, HB 3468, coauthored by Representatives Diane Patrick and Branch and sponsored by Senator Shapiro, promotes continued research in developing evidence-based assessments and placements. The bill includes recommendations from the CCRC brief, "Assessing Developmental Assessment in Community Colleges" for rigorous evaluation of college-readiness assessments and a placement model that targets alternative treatments. It also requires the Texas Education Agency and THECB to evaluate the current Adult Basic Education assessment mechanism and make recommendations for how to effectively align the ABE and dev ed college-readiness testing.

Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board

Although the legislative session was constrained by a tight budget, the bills were well received and Governor Rick Perry signed all three on June 17. The DEI State Policy team is now developing implementation plans for the proposed changes.

For more information, please contact Cynthia Ferrell at cynthiaferrell@gmail.com.

Data-Driven Improvement

Debt to Degree: A New Way of Measuring College Success
Education Sector

This report discusses a new, comprehensive measure called the "borrowing-to-credential ratio." For each college, authors Kevin Carey and Erin Dillon have taken newly available U.S. Department of Education data showing the total amount of money borrowed by undergraduates and divided that sum by the total number of degrees awarded. The results are revealing.

http://www.educationsector.org/publications/debt-degree-new-way-measuring-college-success

Investments in Innovation

Online Jam: Ending the Failure of Severely Under-Prepared Adults in Higher Education in a Time of Fiscal Restraint
Jobs for the Future, Education Commission of the States, and Knowledge in the Public Interest

On August 4, 2011, JFF, ECS, and KPI co-sponsored an expert-moderated JAM (an online, text-based discussion) about developmental education. The JAM was organized into a series of discussion threads, with topics like Understanding the Challenge: Who is the Low-Level Learner?; State and Federal Policies: Removing Disincentives and Creating Incentives for Improving the Success of Low-Level Learners; and Getting It Done: 180-Day Action Plan.

More than 160 practitioners and policymakers engaged in substantive conversations ranging from whether there should be a cut score floor to how best to place dev ed and ABE students. The JAM discussions are now under analysis, and the three co-sponsoring organizations will produce a publication.

If you would like to visit the JAM site and peruse the postings, email Lara Couturier at lcouturier@jff.org.

Policy Supports

Critical Choices: How Colleges Can Help Students and Families Make Better Decisions about Private Loans
The Institute for College Access & Success

This brief documents promising practices that a variety of financial aid offices are using to help prospective borrowers avoid unnecessarily risky and costly debt. It also identifies some problematic practices that bypass key opportunities to inform students' and parents' borrowing decisions.

http://ticas.org/pub_view.php?idx=766