

Continuous Improvement FOR College Completion:



Arkansas Builds a System-Level Strategy
for Community College Student Success



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Introduction

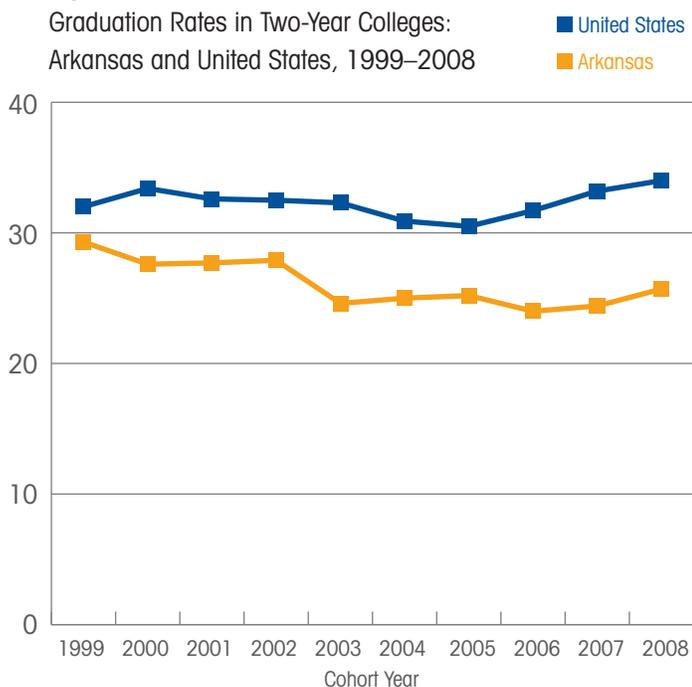
If the United States is to remain a competitive and innovative leader in the global marketplace, American employers must be able to tap a productive pipeline of employees with robust workforce skills. A college education is of course a vital part of that pipeline. President Obama has called for higher education to graduate more students to meet workforce needs. Many stakeholders, including prominent foundations, governors, university presidents, educational advocacy groups, and other thought leaders, advocate similar goals.

The challenges of student success and degree completion are very much in evidence in the state of Arkansas. Just 30 percent of Arkansan adults have a postsecondary degree, the second lowest rate in the nation. In that poverty correlates closely with educational attainment, that statistic is further complicated by the reality that the average household income in Arkansas is 25 percent below the national average.

Arkansas's community colleges serve a unique and powerful role in educating the state's students and future employees. But for many years student success in completing degrees and credentials at two-year colleges in Arkansas has lagged behind the US average (see Figure 1).

Figure 1

Graduation Rates in Two-Year Colleges:
Arkansas and United States, 1999–2008



*Trended graduation rate within 150 percent of normal time at two-year colleges.
Source: National Center for Education Statistics.*

Recently, however, a broad effort has taken root statewide in Arkansas to improve student success in community colleges. Partners in the effort include the Arkansas Association of Two-Year Colleges (AATYC), the Winthrop Rockefeller Foundation, the Arkansas Department of Higher Education (ADHE), and Arkansas's 22 community colleges. Their work is deeply informed by Achieving the Dream, a national nonprofit organization committed to helping more community college students succeed. The Achieving the Dream National Reform Network includes over 200 colleges, 15 state policy teams, more than 20 investors, and more than 100 coaches and advisors working throughout 34 states and the District of Columbia that help 3.8 million community college students have a better chance of realizing greater economic opportunity and achieving their dreams. Other organizations also have played important supporting roles in the Arkansas effort, including the Kresge Foundation and Complete College America (CCA).

Achieving the Dream helped the partners to develop and implement the "Arkansas System-Level Strategy for Student Success," a new framework for building a state-wide culture of student success by testing, proving, and spreading innovative student success strategies across Arkansas's community colleges. Intensive, creative, and

methodologically rigorous, the System-Level Strategy is proving itself to be an effective model for continuous improvement across community colleges statewide.

This broad collaboration has energized ongoing innovation in Arkansas's community colleges. As a result, improvements in the state's two-year colleges have resulted in significant progress in student success: Between 2004 and 2011, for instance, Arkansas's two-year institutions increased their degree and certificate production by 84 percent, compared to an increase of 32 percent for the United States as a whole during the same time period.¹

This report details the development, implementation, and preliminary impact of the Arkansas System-Level Strategy for Student Success. Notably, for example, Arkansas's community colleges improved their six-year graduation and transfer rates by five percentage points between 2006 and 2012.² Additional reform efforts currently underway are helping to bolster college success and completion in Arkansas as well. Further, the System-Level Strategy constitutes a model of collaboration and continuous improvement that can be adopted in other states.

The report concludes with a series of recommendations for funders, policymakers, and institutions of higher learning. Among other specific suggestions, the report recommends that funders support

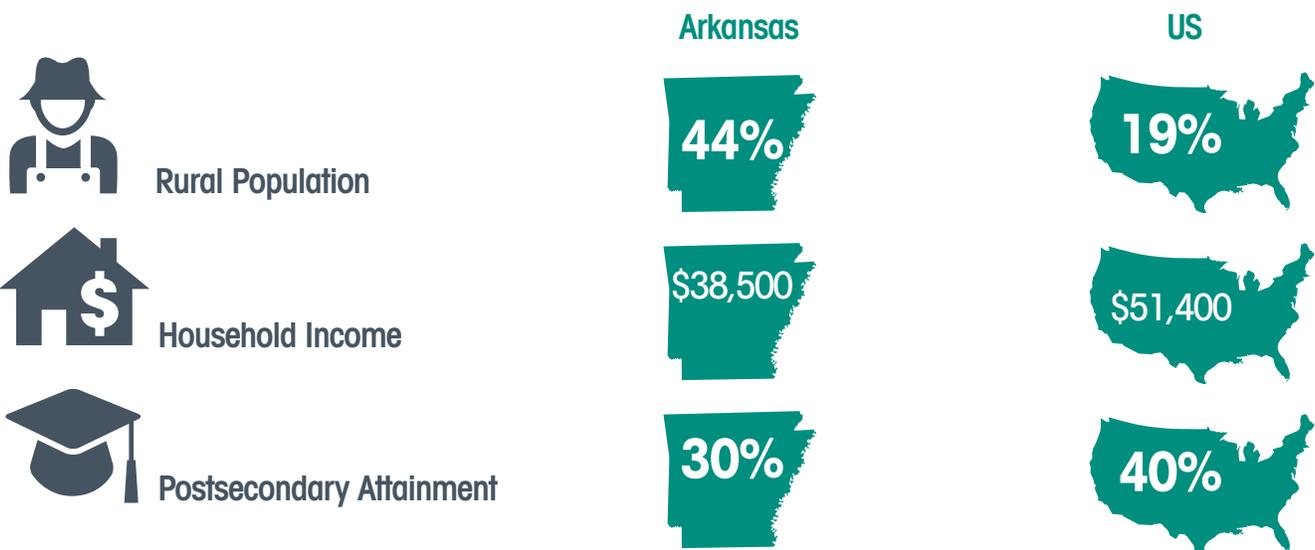
a process that strengthens the capacity for change and brings it to scale rather than focuses too narrowly on a specific intervention or model. It suggests that state policymakers build their own intentional frameworks for student success instead of relying on off-the-shelf solutions. The report further recommends that, if necessary, institutions of higher learning build statewide coordinating entities to support student success.

Improving Educational Achievement in Arkansas

As calls from national leaders for improved college completion suggest, the United States as a whole faces significant challenges in helping students succeed in higher education. Those challenges are particularly acute in low-income rural states.

Arkansas typifies these trends. The majority of the state's residents live in or near a rural area. On average, Arkansans earn less than \$40,000 annually, more than \$10,000 below the national average. Moreover, most lack college degrees and, compared to other states, are less likely to have friends and family members with college degrees. Figure 2 offers further perspective on how educational attainment in Arkansas lags behind the United States as a whole.

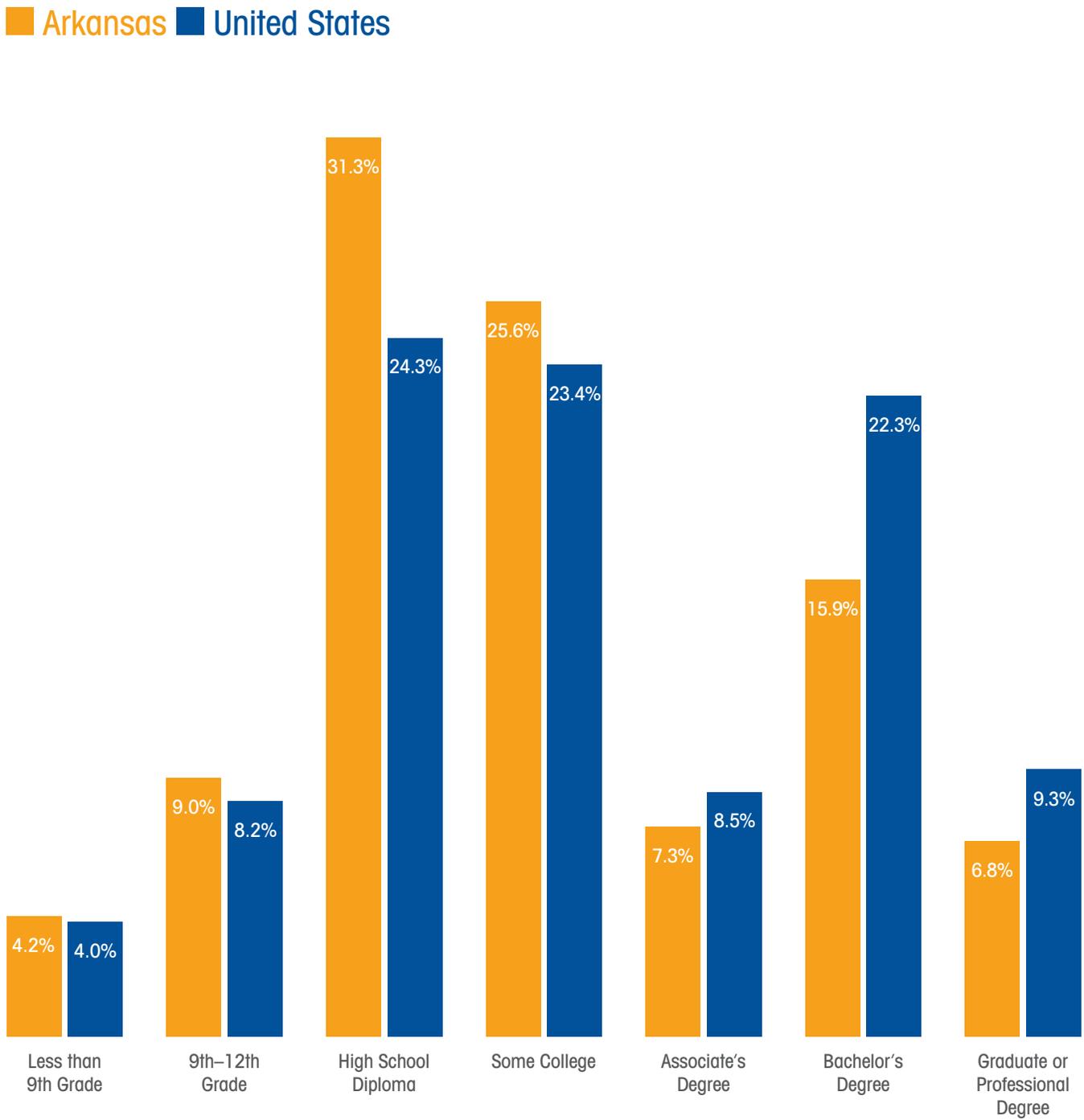
Table 1 – Select Demographic Factors: Arkansas and United States



Source: 2010 Census, 2011 American Community Survey.

Figure 2

Educational Attainment: Arkansas and United States, 2011



Source: 2011 American Community Survey, US Census Bureau.

Education analysts Anthony Carnevale and Nicole Smith make the case that Arkansas and most other southern states are caught in a “low-wage/low-skill equilibrium,” which they describe as “a vicious cycle in which low demand for skill in the real economy discourages individuals and employers from developing skill from education, training and on-the-job skill enhancement.”³ The only way to break this pattern, they argue, is to produce more postsecondary talent and build the job base to employ that talent.

In large part, the future wellbeing of Arkansas hinges on its ability to increase earning capacity among its workforce. This means investing in helping residents develop the workforce skills that will help them find substantive jobs in the near term and retain wage-earning capacity over the course of their careers. Higher education is a linchpin for developing workforce skills.

As in many other states, Arkansas’s community colleges provide a vital gateway to college. Important contributors to the knowledge economy, community colleges are the main providers of education and training to the middle-skill segment of the US economy. They excel at training in technical skills and workforce development as well as provide invaluable service through developmental (or remedial) education. In addition, they prepare students for baccalaureate education and advanced degrees.

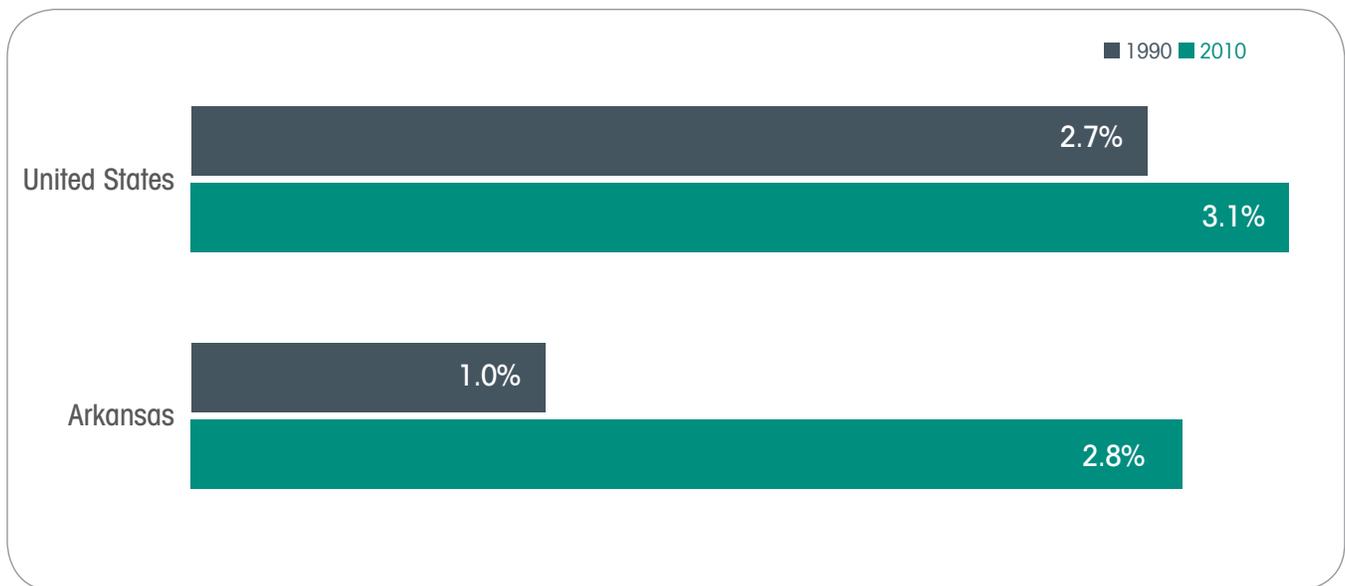
Arkansas’s 22 two-year colleges serve students at 60 locations throughout the state and serve more than 115,000 state residents each year, including more than 62,000 students who enroll in

programs for credit and some 53,000 students who work to upgrade their workforce skills via noncredit courses. Tuition and fees at Arkansas’s two-year colleges average just over \$2,800 per year.

Too often, though, community college students are unable to successfully complete their academic programs. Nationally, fewer than half of all students who enter community college seeking to earn a certificate or degree meet that goal within six years. This trend is more pronounced for low-income students and students of color. More than just the hopes and dreams of students are at stake; the very foundation of our economy depends on increasing student success.

In Arkansas, however, recent student success accomplishments in community colleges seem to belie the national trends. Over the past two decades, community college enrollment has nearly tripled as a share of the working-age population in Arkansas (see Figure 3). Associate degree production in Arkansas increased by 57 percent between 2008 and 2010, almost triple the national rate of increase.⁴ And, enrollment in Arkansas community colleges increased by more than 27 percent between 2004 and 2011. During that time period, the number of students earning degrees or certificates in Arkansas two-year colleges increased by 84 percent.⁵ For Hispanic and African American students, completion rates at two-year colleges in Arkansas exceed national averages—in the case of Hispanic students, by some 10 percent. These improvements were realized while state support for community colleges declined by 17 percent per full-time-equivalent student.⁶

Figure 3
Community College Students as Share of 18+ Population, Arkansas and United States, 1990 and 2010



Source: *Digest of Education Statistics, 1991 and 2011 editions, National Center for Education Statistics, US Department of Education. US Census, 1990 and 2010 editions, US Census Bureau.*

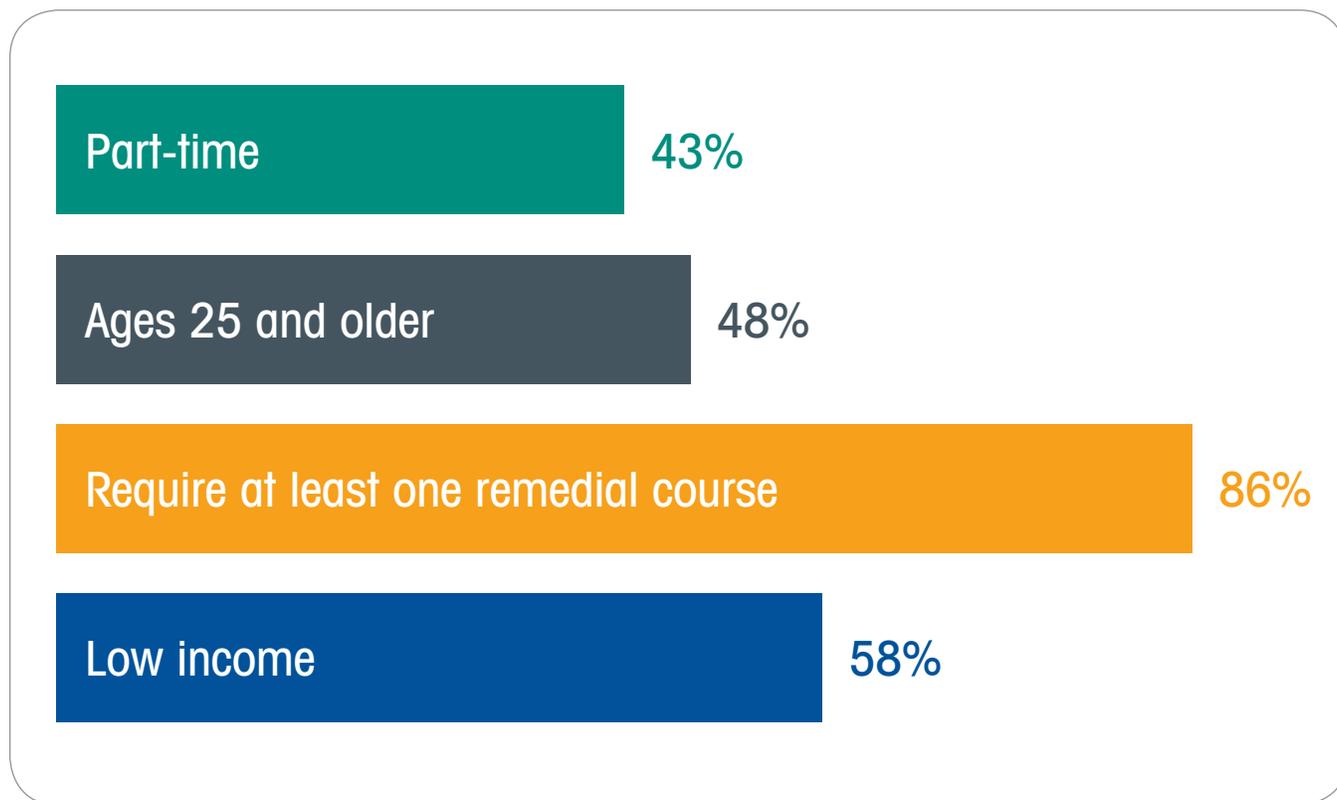
Many factors played a role in Arkansas's achievements. A cornerstone in that success, however, has been the development and implementation of a broad, intentional strategy, focused on student success, to build and scale the capacity of the state's community colleges to drive change on their own campuses. That effort, the Arkansas System-Level Strategy for Student Success, was heavily informed by Achieving the Dream. (The System-Level Strategy and Achieving the Dream's role in helping to shape it in Arkansas are detailed in the next section of this report). A cornerstone in the success of the Arkansas System-Level Strategy has been a unit that AATYC created, the Center for Student Success, which coordinates and supports implementation of the strategy.

Arkansas's achievements are significant in and of themselves. They are even more impressive, though, when considered from a broader perspective. Moving the needle in improving community college completion is a complicated task. Nationwide, a variety of intervention strategies have been shown to work, but scaling is a particular challenge. An intervention that works in one department is often

hard to expand to other departments or to the college as a whole. Moreover, community college leaders and faculty are often averse to adopting interventions that were not created at their home institution, even if that intervention has proven effective at another institution.

A handful of states—notably North Carolina, Virginia, and Washington—have found success in bringing interventions to scale in their community colleges. But these states have relatively high median incomes and levels of educational attainment. Interventions that have proven successful in wealthy states do not constitute ideal models for states, like Arkansas, that have less money to spend on education and where the population is predominantly low income and not educated beyond high school. Moreover, many of the states where reform has taken hold benefit from centralized community college systems that can lead and coordinate the development and implementation of interventions statewide. States like Arkansas have no central infrastructure that might serve this coordination role.

Figure 4
Demographics of Arkansas Community College Students



Source: Arkansas Department of Higher Education, *Arkansas 2025: Leading in the Global Economy by Investing in Education and Enhancing Accountability and associated tables compiled by ADHE*. N = 68,000. Low income: ADHE, Academic Year 2011. Low income is defined as receiving federal need-based Pell Grants.

Toward a State-wide Culture of Student Success and Continuous Improvement: The Role of the Arkansas Association of Two-Year Colleges

Originally created to support the state's relatively new community college system, the Arkansas Association of Two-Year Colleges has evolved to focus on student success as a key component of its mission. The association created the Center for Student Success to coordinate and help lead its student success work at a statewide level and has secured numerous grants to help member colleges implement innovations in such areas as student advising, developmental education, career and technical education, and institutional research. Innovations like these help to build institutional capacity, advance student success, and orient colleges to continuous improvement.

AATYC developed an alliance with the Winthrop Rockefeller Foundation, which was established in 1974 by former Arkansas governor Winthrop Rockefeller and is dedicated to improving education and other aspects of civic life in the state. In 2005, the foundation provided funding to underwrite the participation fees for four Arkansas colleges to participate in Achieving the Dream. Through this partnership, administrators and faculty from Arkansas community colleges attended DREAM, Achieving the Dream's annual institute on student success, where they learned about promising practices in student success reform around the country.

Achieving the Dream has since become a guiding inspiration for the student success movement in Arkansas, helping establish a culture of student success and providing a model for testing, refining, and scaling interventions for student success across the community college sector. Achieving the Dream also supported AATYC and the Winthrop Rockefeller Foundation in creating AATYC's Center for Student Success.

Arkansas's affiliation with Achieving the Dream also helped advance the shaping of state policies designed to strengthen student success. The Postsecondary State Policy Network is an initiative led by Jobs for the Future in conjunction with Achieving the Dream that connects policy teams to maximize peer learning and works to develop and implement state policies that support students. Through the Postsecondary State Policy Network, AATYC and the four member colleges that initially participated in Achieving the Dream in Arkansas learned strategies for statewide policy change from policymakers in some of the most innovative states, such as Virginia, North Carolina, and Michigan. Several major policy changes were informed by this peer-learning process, including a statewide transfer and articulation policy, legislation to authorize concurrent enrollment in college-level credit and remedial courses, and performance-funding models relevant to Arkansas's own emerging performance-funding system.

The Winthrop Rockefeller Foundation, supported by Achieving the Dream, helped AATYC and its in-state partners, including the Arkansas Department of Higher Education, to secure additional revenue for student success reform from national funders that include the Annie E. Casey Foundation, Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, CCA, the Kresge Foundation, and Lumina Foundation. The Kresge Foundation in particular has been an influential supporter of AATYC Center for Student Success and numerous specific projects and activities to advance the student success agenda across the state.

Ultimately, the largest and most influential funder of student success in Arkansas has been the federal government. When the US Department of Labor issued a request for proposals to implement Trade Adjustment Assistance Community College and Career Training (TAACCCT) grants, the association saw a major opportunity. An individual community college qualified for only \$2 million in funding under the program, but a network of community colleges would qualify for up to \$15 million. Funding on that scale could boost the student success agenda statewide. Through the Center for Student Success, and with significant support from CCA and the ADHE, AATYC coordinated preparation of a grant proposal representing the entire community college sector, leading to approval of a \$14.7 million TAACCCT grant awarded to Northwest Arkansas Community College. The grant, called Pathways to Accelerated Completion and Employment (PACE), supports innovative developmental education strategies at every Arkansas community college as well as supports other evidence-based reforms. Over the past decade, AATYC has raised over \$3 million in additional grants to support student success.

The ADHE has worked closely with AATYC in developing statewide support for student success. After being tasked by the state legislature with developing performance-based measures for funding the state's community colleges, the ADHE asked AATYC to help shape those measures, using a task force of institutional leaders and faculty. To inform the task force, AATYC drew on the experience of its fellow members in the Postsecondary State Policy Network. The framework proposed by the task force was incorporated into the state's performance-funding system.

The Arkansas System-Level Strategy for Student Success

The collaboration for student success among AATYC, the Winthrop Rockefeller Foundation, ADHE, Achieving the Dream, the state's community colleges, and many other partners came into full relief in the design and execution of a new model for continuous improvement across community colleges statewide. This model, the Arkansas System-Level Strategy for Student Success, provides a robust framework for developing, testing, refining, and scaling innovative student success strategies across the entire Arkansas community college sector. The Arkansas System-Level Strategy is modeled on the Achieving the Dream Student-Centered Model of Institutional Improvement, a five-step process for building a culture of student success at individual community colleges (see Figure 6).

Inside the Strategy's Framework

As summarized in Figure 5, the Arkansas System-Level Strategy for Student Success builds on a series of steps. First, partners convene to assess the current environment and identify opportunities for improving student success. In a second phase, funders provide seed money to launch the initiative and leverage outside funding to scale the work and to bring in content specialists who provide expertise in areas like coaching, developing evidence-based models, and using cutting-edge technology. In the third phase, one or more colleges volunteer to implement the intervention, which is then evaluated internally and, if possible, through an external evaluator. In the fourth phase, innovative interventions that have proven successful are scaled system-wide, and state policy makers are engaged in the effort to help ensure that policies and budgets prioritize student success. In the fifth phase, reforms that are implemented achieve meaningful outcomes.

The strategy is continuous. While one intervention is being disseminated to institutions, another is in the evaluation phase, pilot sites may be testing new ideas, and the conveners may be exploring additional opportunities to fund and implement other promising interventions.

In Arkansas, Phase 1 started when AATYC convened a group of partners to design a student success initiative. The Winthrop Rockefeller Foundation and the Arkansas Department of Higher Education were both central to the effort, not just in regard to funding or policy but also in regard to adding experience and credibility in supporting student success. In previous experiences, Arkansas had participated in similar initiatives designed around multi-state projects, but the point of the project built around the Arkansas System-Level Strategy was to design an initiative that would respond specifically to the state's unique educational needs. The intent was to build an Arkansas-focused strategy and coalition from the ground up and to gradually engage more college leaders and their institu-

tions across Arkansas as well as engage other stakeholders where appropriate. Today, partners convene regularly to identify common priorities related to improving student success and plan collaborative activities to address those needs.

In Phase 2, the Winthrop Rockefeller Foundation provided critical funding to launch the Arkansas System-Level Strategy for Student Success and to create the coordinating entity, the Center for Student Success, based at AATYC. The foundation and other funding partners it has helped cultivate engage on an ongoing basis in supporting student success initiatives in the state.

In Phase 3, community colleges volunteered to become test sites, agreeing to plan and implement interventions, track student outcomes, and identify opportunities to share and improve the effectiveness of the interventions. The colleges, which follow the Achieving the Dream Student-Centered Model of Institutional Improvement, have initiated numerous specific student success interventions, many of which are described later in this report.

In Phase 4, the Center for Student Success shared proven interventions across Arkansas's two-year colleges through peer learning and supported scaling and continuous improvement through professional development, technical assistance, and commitment of public resources. The Center also collaborated with state policymakers to shape policy and budget decisions to align with the state's goals for improving student success.

In Phase 5, interventions were implemented that resulted in the improved student outcomes reported elsewhere in this report. The results for Arkansas included more students staying in school, more students completing their degrees, and the shrinking of achievement gaps between demographic groups. A database of best practices was developed to help inform and scale interventions. At the policy level, stakeholders worked to shape policy and legislation to support student success.

The outcomes from this kind of effort can be significant. Institutions become deeply engaged in improving student success, generating better outcomes for their own students and contributing data and knowledge that inform improvements system-wide. Legislators become better informed about the challenges and opportunities around student success, and state policy and budget decisions become better aligned with the goals of improving student outcomes. Students benefit from programmatic enhancements that help them stay engaged in their education through to completion of degrees and other credentials. Ultimately, of course, the state benefits from an educational system that is producing citizens who are well qualified to succeed in the workplace and contribute to the fabric of society.

Figure 5 The Arkansas System-Level Strategy for Student Success

Phase 1: Communicate and Convene

Step	Entity	Function	Example
1	Convener	Collectively identifies opportunity to strengthen student success and convenes partners to buy in	Arkansas Association of Two-Year Colleges, Center for Student Success, Arkansas Department of Higher Education

Phase 2: Support

Step	Entity	Function	Example
1	State-level funder	Provides seed funding, leverages outside funding	Winthrop Rockefeller Foundation
2	National funders	Provide financial support to explore and test intervention	The Kresge Foundation, Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, Annie E. Casey Foundation, Lumina, US Department of Labor
3	National resources	Provide specialized expertise, coaching and professional development	Achieving the Dream, Complete College America, Center for Applied Research, National Center for Developmental Education, Jobs for the Future.

Phase 3: Test and Evaluate

Step	Entity	Function	Example
1	Testing sites	Pilot intervention in the field, internally evaluate effectiveness	Achieving the Dream colleges
2	Outside evaluators	Conduct external evaluation of tested intervention	New Growth Group

Phase 4: Spread

Step	Entity	Function	Example
1	Disseminator and steward	Spreads promising practices sector-wide and acts as steward of lessons learned by pilot colleges	Arkansas Association of Two-Year Colleges, Arkansas Department of Higher Education and other state government
2	Sector	Adapts model or intervention to local conditions and culture	22 Arkansas community colleges
3	State Government	Funds tested interventions or supports through policy or regulatory amendments	Arkansas state government

Phase 5: Achieve Goals and Continuous Improvement

Step	Entity	Function	Example
1	Institutions	Commitment to improving student outcomes and continuous feedback to Center for Student Success and system on opportunities to strengthen student success	Administrators, faculty and staff
2	State Policy	State policy environment that reinforces student success	Governor, legislators, agency staff
3	Students	Enhanced retention and completion	Community college students

As mentioned previously, the Arkansas System-Level Strategy for Student Success is modeled on the Achieving the Dream Student-Centered Model of Institutional Improvement, a five-step process for building a culture of student success at individual community colleges (see Figure 6). The Achieving the Dream model provides practical guidelines for helping colleges help more students, particularly low-income students and students of color, to stay in school and earn a college certificate or degree. Recognizing that too many efforts to improve student outcomes at community colleges involve relatively small innovations or changes at the margins, the Achieving the Dream model is based on the premise that improving student success on a substantial scale requires colleges to fundamentally change the way they operate.

The model embodies these five principles:

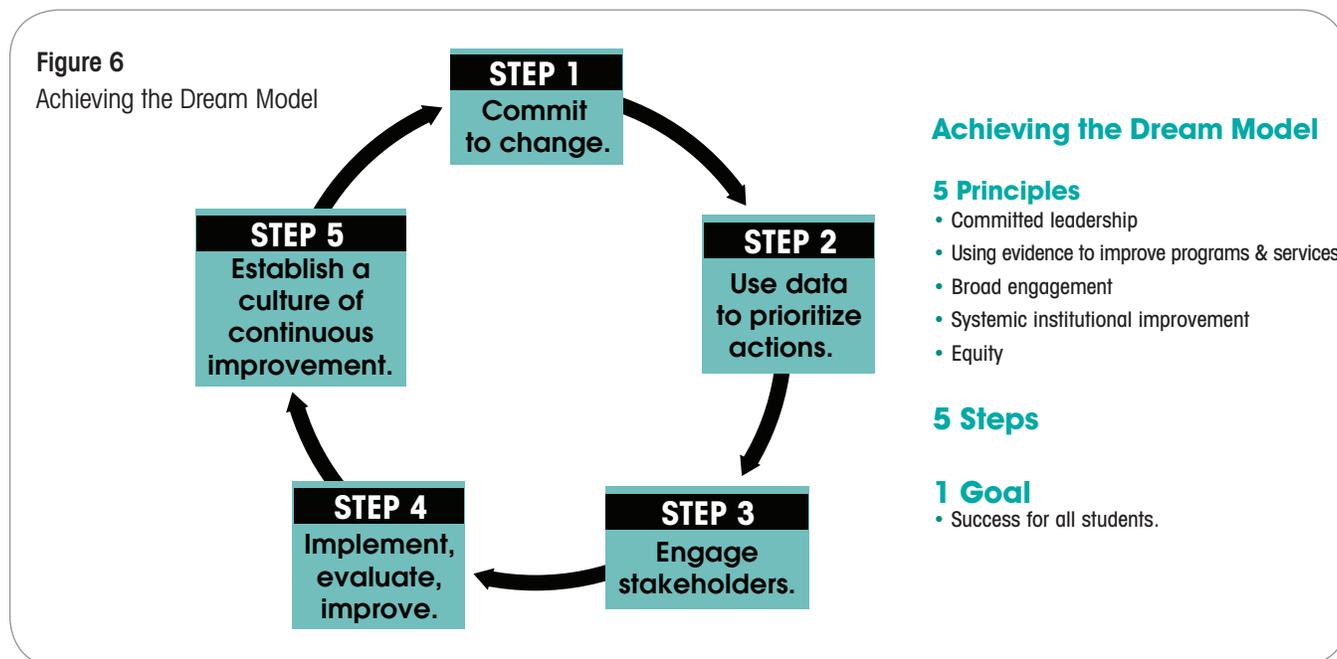
- **Committed Leadership.** Senior college leaders actively support efforts to improve student success. Administrators, board members, and faculty and staff leaders demonstrate a willingness to make changes in policies, programs, and resource allocation to improve student success.
- **Use of Evidence to Improve Programs and Services.** Participating colleges establish processes for using data about student progression and outcomes to identify achievement gaps among student groups, formulate strategies for addressing the gaps identified and for improving student success overall, and evaluate the effectiveness of those strategies.
- **Broad Engagement.** Faculty, student services staff, and administrators share responsibility for student success and collaborate on assessing the effectiveness of programs and services and on implementing appropriate improvements. Other stakeholders with influence on student success (such as K-12

systems, community groups, employers, and students themselves) are included in discussions about student performance, desired outcomes, and potential improvement strategies.

- **Systemic Institutional Improvement.** Participating colleges establish planning processes that rely on data to set goals for student success and then use the data to measure goal attainment. Colleges regularly evaluate their academic programs and services to determine how they can be improved and to find out how well they promote student success. Decisions about budget allocations are based on evidence of program effectiveness and are linked to plans to increase student success. Faculty and staff are afforded professional development opportunities that reinforce efforts to help close achievement gaps and improve overall student success.
- **Equity.** Achieving the Dream colleges commit to eliminating achievement gaps among student groups, including students of color and low-income students, while improving outcomes for all students.

Colleges following the Achieving the Dream model execute a five-step action process:

1. The college's leaders make a clear commitment to improving student outcomes.
2. The college commits to using data to prioritize actions.
3. The institution engages a wide variety of stakeholders in the development of strategies for addressing priority problems and improving student achievement.
4. Colleges implement, evaluate, and refine their strategies.
5. The college intentionally establishes a culture and practice of continuous improvement.



Source: *Achieving the Dream*.

The System-Level Strategy in Practice in Arkansas

Applying and executing the Arkansas System-Level Strategy for Student Success extends an institution-based approach across a heterogeneous cluster of institutions, an appropriate strategy for a decentralized state. In addition, the partners in Arkansas have leveraged a multi-state network to inspire changes in state policy that remove barriers to higher student achievement. By working on multiple fronts, Arkansas's community colleges are reshaping their state's higher education culture. Individually and collectively, these initiatives have contributed significantly to building institutional capacity for improving student success across Arkansas's community colleges.

Achieving the Dream in Arkansas

As mentioned earlier, the Winthrop Rockefeller Foundation agreed to underwrite the fees of four member colleges of the AATYC that would be participating in Achieving the Dream. The foundation also agreed to sponsor AATYC's membership in the previously described Postsecondary Policy Network, a multistate collaboration committed to advancing state policies that accelerate community college student success and completion. Additional support came from the Lumina Foundation.

Twenty-one of the state's twenty-two community colleges applied to participate in Achieving the Dream. The selection process was highly competitive. Ultimately, four colleges were selected to participate: College of the Ouachitas in Malvern; National Park Community College in Hot Springs; Pulaski Technical College in Little Rock; and Phillips Community College of the University of Arkansas, which has campuses in DeWitt, Helena-West, Helena, and Stuttgart.

The four institutions applied the Achieving the Dream model to develop and implement interventions to improve student success. The process began with a rigorous process of self-improvement. Each college met with Leadership and Data Coaches, began an in-depth analysis of its own data, and selected interventions to implement and evaluate. Participating colleges also sent administrators, faculty, and staff to Achieving the Dream's annual national institute on student success. The colleges found Achieving the Dream's focus on data to be an especially powerful tool for informing key decisions and driving change.

These experiences informed new strategies for improving student outcomes. At Pulaski Technical College, for example, interventions focused primarily on developmental math and academic advising. As another example, Phillips Community College of the University of Arkansas established an early warning system for students, enhanced its freshman seminar first-year experience course, and created a student success center. The next section of this report takes a closer look at each college's work in Achieving the Dream.

Arkansas/Achieving the Dream in Action:

Phillips Community College of the University of Arkansas

Phillips Community College of the University of Arkansas (PCCUA) is a mid-sized college located in eastern Arkansas, not far from Memphis. The college has a large African American population that historically graduates at far lower rates than white students.

When Steven Murray became chancellor in 2003, he inherited a reasonably successful college that had grown its enrollment and physical plant over time. But, when PCCUA participated in a Winthrop Rockefeller Foundation-funded program called Foundations of Excellence, the college's leadership found themselves struggling with difficult questions. They perceived that PCCUA was a "good" college, but they knew that if they were to reach their goal of being "excellent" they would have to make some substantive changes. Murray led a drive to review the college's policies and practices in light of the data generated through Foundations of Excellence.

When PCCUA was selected as one of Arkansas's Achieving the Dream colleges in 2007, the college intensified its efforts to create a culture of inquiry and evidence. More staff and faculty were brought into the reform discussions, and the team set out to gain a deeper understanding of the data they collected. After a frank discussion with its Achieving the Dream coach, the college identified areas of strength and areas where it wanted to improve. Despite the fact that historically more than 80 percent of PCCUA's students needed to take at least one developmental education class, the college had never focused on the student experience in developmental courses. Joining Achieving the Dream brought this need to the forefront of PCCUA's reform process, which the college made a priority in its 2008 strategic planning.

In 2007, based on work with the Winthrop Rockefeller Foundation, PCCUA introduced mandatory supplemental labs linked to seven developmental education courses designed to increase the number of students completing developmental courses. Initial implementation of the labs, which took place with no uniform curriculum and inadequate training for instructors, resulted in poor results. Achieving the Dream encouraged PCCUA to spend more time planning and evaluating the labs, which led to important improvements in lab delivery, such as having the same instructor lead the lab and the developmental education class. By 2012, PCCUA's evaluations showed the supplemental labs had been its most effective reform effort; between 2006 and 2011, six of the seven courses showed improved completion rates.

One of the college's main achievements has been its focus on engaging a broad range of stakeholders. The college involved all faculty (full-time and part-time instructors), staff, and students in its reform efforts. Through student surveys and focus groups that included students who had not persisted in their studies, the college identified

lack of preparation and the need for more support as some of the main barriers to student success. Students said they needed reliable tutoring not only in their academic courses but also in universally useful skills such as time management, study skills, and life management. Building on those initial conversations, the college began testing and implementing an array of strategies to boost student success. They included the following:

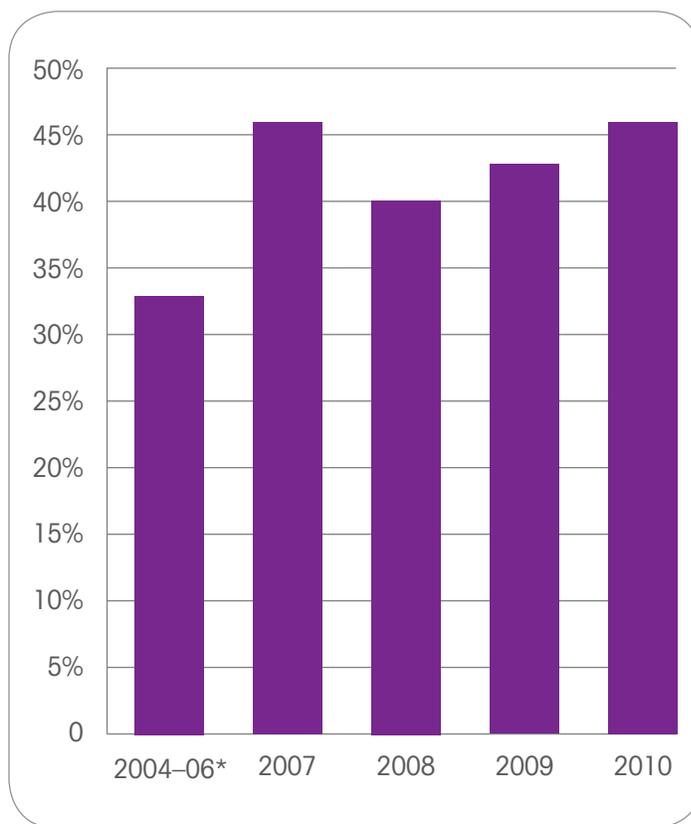
- **Student success courses.** All students who place into developmental education had to take a student success course to prepare them for credit-bearing coursework. The college also developed a module on financial literacy after student surveys found poor financial practices to be a chronic problem.
- **Intrusive advising.** PCCUA required students to see a student advisor three times a semester, far more than most colleges. To ensure student compliance, the college made disbursement of a student's Pell Grant conditional on regular visits to student advisors.
- **Build on career pathways.** PCCUA operates a thriving Career Pathways office. Because many students are not eligible to participate in Career Pathways, the college, with support from the Annie E. Casey Foundation, began using the Center for Working Families approach, which focuses on bundling the supports low-income students need to stay in school.⁷
- **Spotlight on race and poverty.** PCCUA began to engage the faculty and staff in getting to know their students in a more personal way than the data alone could reveal. The college introduced the practice of having everyone on campus read and discuss the same book on race and poverty issues. The college also hosted breakfast meetings to discuss the book and posted the discussions online, followed by discussion groups that further probed relevant issues and related them to the student and faculty experience at the college.

PCCUA has been generating impressive outcomes. Between 2004 and 2011, the share of freshmen who continued studies as sophomores rose from 33 percent to 41 percent. College data also detail results from specific interventions—the supplemental learning labs, for example, raised course-completion rates in six out of seven courses, in one case by 19 percentage points.⁸

Insights gained from these reforms inform revised practices on campus. Now, the college's administrators, faculty and staff focus on supplementing student success throughout a student's first year, starting in the first week. They also scale up student supports that prove successful as soon as possible, often making them mandatory.

Perhaps most notably, the administrators and faculty rethought the core values of their institution. Murray observes that, while the first generation of the college's story was about growth—manifested in growing enrollment and building the campus physical structure—the college is now in a new phase that is focused on student success. The fact that the college's six-year graduation rate increased nearly 10 percent between the cohort entering in 2001 and the cohort entering in 2007,⁹ for example, reflects the institution's dedication to a mission of student success.

Figure 7
Fall-to-Fall Retention at Phillips Community College of the University of Arkansas, 2004–2010



Source: D. King, et al. *Achieving the Dream Annual Report* (unpublished report, Phillips Community College of the University of Arkansas, 2012). *Baseline, average of three years.

A Student's Reality: James

A student at Pulaski Technical College, James works full-time during the day. At nights and on weekends, he studies part-time for an associate's degree in heating, ventilation, and air conditioning.

As a freshman, James enrolled in College Seminar, a course developed in consultation with Achieving the Dream to teach students college skills, expose them to career opportunities, and help them better understand their own learning styles and aptitudes. The freshman year is the most confusing and dangerous; half of all community college dropouts happen during or after the freshman year. But College Seminar helped James get off to the right start and make it to his sophomore year.

James visits his advisor four times a semester to get updates on scholarships, academic programs and changes in course offerings. "The key to the whole school," he says, "is to see your advisor regularly." Fortunately for James and his fellow students, Pulaski was able to greatly enhance its student advising capacity through its work in Achieving the Dream, establishing an advising center, adding staff, and developing a clear processes for advising and training of advisors themselves.

James has found the support he gets from his advisors and faculty at Pulaski decisive in smoothing the bumpy road to graduation: "Once you ask for help from staff and instructors, it becomes a whole community," he says.

Arkansas/Achieving the Dream in Action:

Pulaski Technical College

Pulaski Technical College is Arkansas's largest community college. In 2012-13, Pulaski served almost 12,000 students, approximately one out of every five students enrolled in an Arkansas community college. The college is the primary community college for the city of Little Rock, Arkansas's capital and major population center.

Despite the college's key role in the Arkansas economy, the institution wrestles with a dilemma that is something of a paradox: From its founding in 1991 until recently, enrollment in the school had risen significantly every year. Most colleges would welcome such growth. But Pulaski Technical College receives no local property tax revenue, meaning that new students do not bring sufficient funding to cover the cost of their education. College officials must therefore economize and structure services creatively to meet their students' needs. The Achieving the Dream model helps them to do that.

As one of Arkansas's Achieving the Dream colleges, Pulaski Technical College dove into its data analysis work with enthusiasm, supplementing quantitative data it collected with insights drawn from focus groups with staff, faculty, and students. Staff had personal access to the data, and the findings were also shared in a two-day data-sharing event for various campus stakeholders. A bi-weekly newsletter discussed the planning process.

The data showed that students of color were significantly over-represented in developmental education at the college and were complet-

ing developmental courses at much lower rates than white students, particularly in developmental math. After extensive research into effective developmental math reforms, Pulaski began offering supplemental instruction in 2008. In 2010, the college introduced learning communities. These efforts are starting to pay off. The rate of completion of developmental math courses for African Americans rose by 6.4 percentage points between 2008 and 2010.¹⁰ This success has prompted a wave of enthusiasm for new techniques. The college also offers summer bridge courses to help students improve their placement test scores and move more quickly through their developmental courses.

Over the past several years, Pulaski Technical College staff has worked hard to create a new academic advising model. Before participating in the Achieving the Dream program, the college did not have any structured advising model after the first semester. In the past, students had complained that advisors were not fully informed. As part of its work with Achieving the Dream, the college established an advising center, added advising staff, and developed clear processes for advising. The college is implementing a plan to include faculty in the advising process and to move toward mandatory advising for all students. The college also established a training system to help advisors develop their advising skills and keep up to date on advising practices, skills, policies, and procedures. Pulaski supplements the advisory system with an orientation program and seminar to ensure that entering freshmen get the best possible start.

Arkansas/Achieving the Dream in Action: National Park Community College

The fourth largest community college in Arkansas, National Park Community College, blends liberal arts with occupational education to prepare students to enter the workforce or to transfer to a four-year institution.

When it joined Achieving the Dream, one of National Park's main goals was to identify and strengthen effective practices while discarding outdated ideas. One of its first steps was to thoroughly analyze student demographic data. The college community was surprised when data showed that students were primarily low-income, first-generation, first-time students between the ages of 15 and 23. As the demographics had changed over time, this stood in contrast to a previously held idea that the student body was older with a much lower proportion of Pell grant recipients. Based on the data, college leaders concluded they were not targeting the right interventions to help students succeed. This finding, coupled with the college's low retention rate (36 percent, fall to fall in 2007) and graduation rate (13 percent in 2007), sparked the campus into action.

After researching what was working in other Achieving the Dream colleges, National Park's first steps were to implement a mentor program with ambitious scaling plans, redesign its first-year experience courses, and refocus on faculty development. The Achieving the Dream Core Team—the administrators, faculty, and staff selected to lead the process of analyzing data and guiding institutional reform—also zeroed in on barriers that hurt student retention and progression. One such barrier was registration. The team identified 164 different start times for classes, and students found that scheduling classes was overly complex. When the college standardized start times, class registration became much easier. The college also stopped late registration for classes after data showed extremely poor retention for late-entering students.

National Park has encountered multiple obstacles along its reform journey. Many of these are common to other colleges attempting reform, such as a lack of institutional research staff to analyze data, apprehensive faculty and staff members, and external distractions. However, the college has found that effective faculty training is key to getting buy-in for reforms, particularly when entrenched processes and systems are targeted for change. With assistance from Achieving the Dream, the college offers two-day workshops for both part-time and full-time staff and faculty, and all faculty members have attended workshops designed to improve their understanding of such topics as the millennial student and cooperative learning. The college attributes its strong successes in fall-to-fall retention—which increased from 41 percent in 2004 to 53 percent in 2010—directly to its faculty training initiatives.

Arkansas/Achieving the Dream in Action: College of the Ouachitas

The College of the Ouachitas, the second smallest college in Arkansas, is located in a rural region of west central Arkansas. Once challenged with a low graduation rate and a less-than-exemplary reputation, the college drew national attention in 2011 when it beat many larger and better-known two-year institutions to qualify as a finalist for one of the nation's most prestigious community college award, the Aspen Award for Excellence.

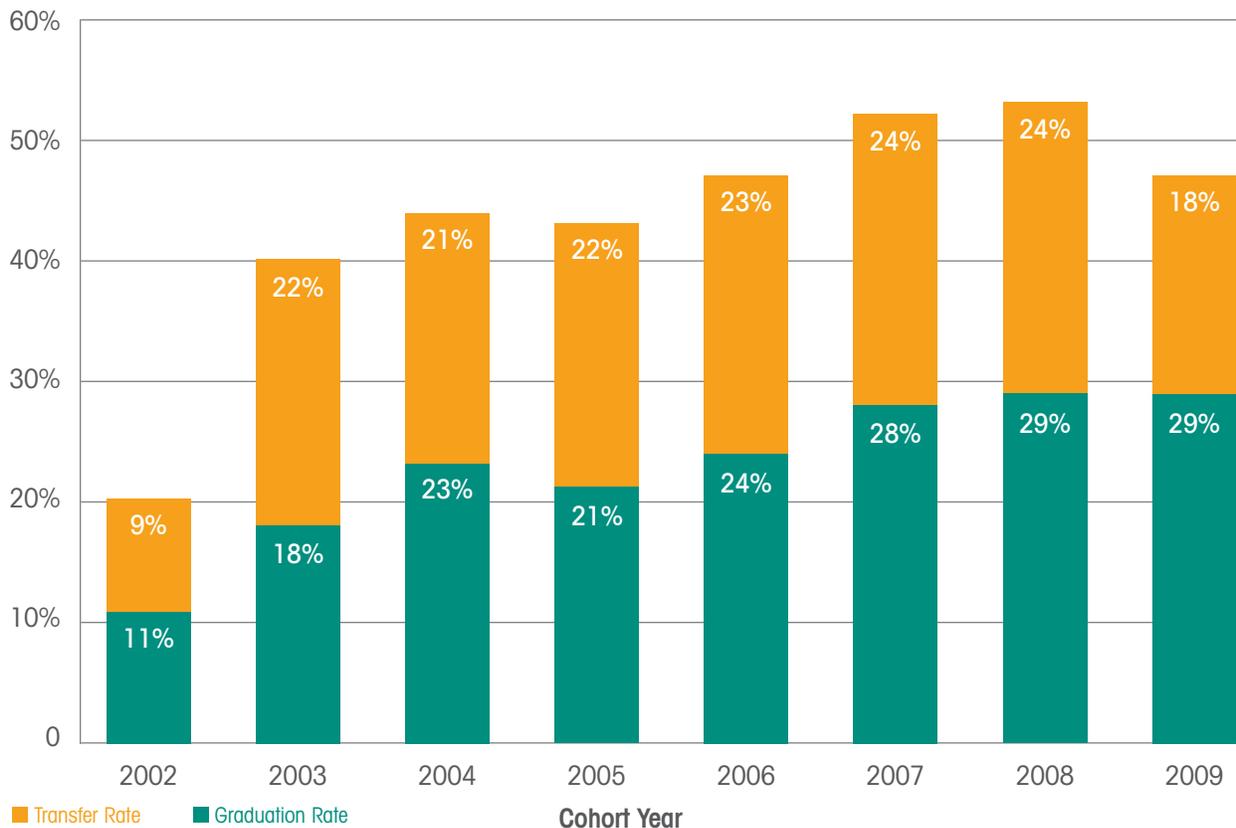
The college has focused on student success and employer engagement to develop appropriate interventions. That work was greatly bolstered when the college was selected to participate in Achieving the Dream. Determined to develop lasting, measureable change, the college embedded the Achieving the Dream values and principles into its mission documents and enhanced its institutional research capacity. Applying Achieving the Dream's methodological rigor, the college dug deep into its data to identify promising points of leverage.

The college's Core Team was disheartened to discover that only 44 percent of students who had entered the college in fall 2004 had graduated, transferred, or re-enrolled within three years. To develop strategies to reverse that trend, the team infused a focus on completion in all of their discussions and decisions. For example, recognizing that the majority of the college's new students came from families without any college experience, the college developed strategies to make a student's first week and first year less confusing. Aiming to improve persistence and completion, the college added a mandatory new student orientation and a student opportunities seminar that shared important basic "college knowledge."

Having identified a large achievement gap between white and African American students, the college also dedicated itself to serving African American students more effectively. The college's team established a peer support group for African American males called Men on a Mission. The group uses intrusive guidance and support methods to help students successfully navigate the college environment and build networking skills. As a result, between 2004 and 2010 the share of African American students continuing to a second year grew from 34 percent to 44 percent, a rate higher than for all students at the college overall.

Other results were also dramatic. The college's three-year graduation rate rose from 11 percent in 2002 to 29 percent in 2009. During the same time period, the transfer rate rose from 9 percent to 24 percent. Those measures are substantially better than the national average for peer institutions—and an even more impressive achievement considering that the median family income of the college's students is at least 25 percent lower than the national average.

Figure 8 Graduation and Transfer Rates, College of the Ouachitas, 2002–2009



Source: C. Crutchfield, *College of the Ouachitas Aspen Institute Prize Application* (unpublished, 2013).

Arkansas/Achieving the Dream in Action:

In Sum

The four Arkansas colleges that took part in Achieving the Dream dug deep into the evidence they had about student outcomes and looked closely at the personal experience of their students to learn how students could best stay on track academically. They essentially became laboratories that applied the Achieving the Dream Student-Centered Model of Institutional Improvement to support student success in Arkansas. Their respective staffs developed cultures of evidence that informed decisions about changes in policy and practice that would improve student outcomes. The results of these efforts showed that, with concerted effort and intention, institutions that were once perhaps only average in performance could build an inspiring culture and record of student success.

Notably, too, the four Arkansas colleges earned Leader College status in Achieving the Dream. Leader Colleges demonstrate commitment to and progress on the five principles of Achieving the Dream and show at least three years of improvement on at least one of the Achieving the Dream measures of student success.

By definition, Leader Colleges set an example for other community colleges through their committed leadership, use of evidence, broad engagement, and systemic institutional improvement. A decade ago, PCCUA and the College of the Ouachitas were focused on enroll-

ment, expanding campus size, and accreditation, according to harsh assessments by their respective leaders. Today, however, the focus has expanded and both institutions are known nationally for their effective work in building student success. Engaging definitively in Achieving the Dream, both colleges achieved measurable gains in student success that their peers would envy. The College of the Ouachitas was a top ten national finalist in the 2013 Aspen Prize for Community College Excellence. Arkansas State University at Beebe and National Park Community College were in the top 120 colleges cited by Aspen for their strong student success outcomes,¹¹ further evidence of how the culture of student success is spreading across the community college sector in Arkansas. In essence, therefore, the four colleges are pioneers creating new models for interventions that other colleges can adopt.

Credit is also certainly due to the individuals who led the reform efforts at their respective institutions, including presidents and the members of the Achieving the Dream Core Team at each college. The leaders of these pioneer colleges played an especially important role in helping to keep their institutions focused on pursuing data-based strategies and interventions that could best impact student success. Moreover, those leaders exhibited leadership across Arkansas, collaborating to help drive the state-wide effort to develop, refine, and scale a culture of educational reform and innovation focused on student success.

A Student's Reality: Yolanda

Yolanda, a mom with two children, works at the checkout counter of a big box store. A high-school graduate, she enrolled in college—National Park Community College—for the first time when she was in her late 30s. A seasoned college counselor would likely have categorized her as a dropout risk. She works full-time, cares for a disabled family member, and looks after two school-age children. And given that she was two decades out of high school, her academic skills were rusty.

"A lot of stuff I forgot that they expected me to know," she recalled. "It's different being 40 years old going to college than being 17 or 18 going to college."

Yolanda had the good fortune to enroll at National Park after it had embraced Achieving the Dream's culture of change. She placed into developmental education in both math and English. For freshmen at many colleges, that would spell the end of their college dreams. But on the first day, her teacher gave everyone in the class her phone number and told them to call if they needed help. The college also established a special tutoring lab for developmental students. Yolanda passed all of her developmental courses and began taking credit bearing courses to complete her major.

Still, Yolanda came close more than once to giving up. "It gets to where your home life, your job, and school are a lot of pressure," she said. One crisis marked a crucial turning point. Although she was nearly unable to walk, she had decided to put off needed knee surgery so that she could stay in class. But her counselor intervened, advising her to get the surgery and making

arrangements with her instructors to help her keep up with her homework. Again, Yolanda passed her courses for the semester.

Later, one of Yolanda's family members went through a medical crisis, right before final exams. After a grueling day at the hospital, Yolanda had to rush home, make dinner for her children, and study for her finals. She was poised to quit. But her math teacher persuaded her to persist. "My teacher explained that I was really OK," Yolanda said. "I was far enough ahead that I could stay at the hospital and still pass my finals." The teacher's understanding and flexibility allowed Yolanda to pass finals and stay in school.

The support Yolanda encountered was more than just a lucky choice of teachers and advisors. According to Gordon Watts, executive vice president for instruction at the college, Yolanda's math teacher is becoming the norm, not the exception. Watts describes a purposeful set of strategies that emerged from NPCC's work with Achieving the Dream to ensure that every teacher is prepared to help students in need. Moreover, Watts says, that support extends beyond just teachers: "We try to shape the experiences that students have in the classroom, outside of the classroom, and with the institution in general," he says.

Yolanda is scheduled to graduate in May 2014 with an associate's degree in education. Next stop: a bachelor's degree and teacher certification. "I push education at home," Yolanda says. "And I'll be really excited when I graduate, because I can tell my kids that if I can do it, they can do it too."

Scaling a Culture of Student Success and Continuous Improvement

To capitalize on the success of reform at the four lead colleges in Arkansas—and build a culture of student success and innovation across the state—stakeholders are deeply interested in leveraging Achieving the Dream’s approach to continuous improvement into a sector-wide strategy for innovation in community colleges focused on student success. Several entities play pivotal roles in this work. AATYC’s Center for Student Success has served a leadership role in developing and coordinating these efforts and can be viewed as a critical intervention itself within the Arkansas System-Level Strategy for Student Success. Other important student success interventions underway in Arkansas include the Path to Accelerated Completion and Employment (PACE) grant, Accelerating Opportunity, the Arkansas Career Pathways Initiative, the Centers for Working Families, Credit When It’s Due, the Completion Innovation Challenge grant, and the Institutional Research Solution.

Arkansas Center for Student Success

AATYC created the Arkansas Center for Student Success in 2010 with backing from the Winthrop Rockefeller Foundation and the Kresge Foundation. Established to provide consistent, coordinated support for student success over time across the community college sector, the center plays a vital role in managing and building support for college completion around the state.

The center convenes community colleges and other stakeholders to identify common student success needs and collaboratively seeks opportunities to meet those needs and to build student success statewide. The center also plays a lead role in developing the financial and technical assistance resources to support broad student success innovation. For example, the center coordinated the application process that resulted in nearly \$15 million in support through the federal Trade Adjustment Assistance Community College and Career Training grants program.

In addition, the center coordinates and creates synergy and coherence around Arkansas’s numerous national and in-state student success initiatives involving its community colleges. To meet this goal, for instance, the center captures and disseminates best practices from Achieving the Dream and other initiatives, organizes workshops to support system-wide adoption of promising models for reform, provides professional development, and delivers technical assistance.

The center influences Arkansas state policy related to strengthening student success at community colleges by representing Arkansas in the Postsecondary State Policy Network. Working with policy teams from other states, the center can identify policy opportunities that respond to critical needs inside Arkansas.

Advances in state policy shaped by the Center for Student Success, the Arkansas Association of Two-Year Colleges, and key partners such as the Arkansas Department of Higher Education over the past three years include:

- Strengthening the Arkansas Course Transfer System, which enacted a state minimum core curriculum across the state and authorized a transfer agreement to all state-supported higher education institutions
- Proposing to allow students enrolled in combined GED and postsecondary programs to be eligible for state financial aid, later enacted into law
- Proposing to allow simultaneous enrollment in college-level credit and remedial courses, later enacted into law
- Organizing committees of community college leaders to develop a framework for statewide performance funding, which was then adopted by the Arkansas Department of Higher Education

In summary, the center provides consistent support for student success over time, spreads the lessons learned from Achieving the Dream and cutting-edge institutions throughout the community college sector, and works closely with policymakers to design policies that support student success. In many ways, the center fills the role that might be played by a central system in some other states, but in a coordinating role rather than a top-down executive role.

Four other states have adapted the Arkansas model (Michigan, Texas, New Jersey, and Ohio), and the Kresge Foundation is supporting an initiative to disseminate it further.¹²

Path to Accelerated Completion and Employment Initiative

In 2011, the US Department of Labor approved a \$14.7 million grant to the entire community college sector in Arkansas.¹³ This grant, the Path to Accelerated Completion and Employment (PACE) Initiative, funds each college to redesign developmental education instruction, streamline pathways to credentials, and enhance student advisement and job placement technology.

The key strategies supported by PACE include the following:

1. **Transform developmental education to accelerate student advancement.** Colleges are redesigning assessment and placement processes so that students are not unnecessarily placed into developmental education courses that slow or disrupt their advancement into credit-bearing courses. They are also employing strategies developed in Washington state that integrate basic skills instruction with education in technical and vocational programs.

2. **Streamline certificate and degree pathways, restructuring programs to reduce the time and credits needed to complete.** Colleges are engaging employers to find out their credential needs, and streamlining targeted programs by adopting block scheduling, compressing courses into shorter lengths of time, and blending technology with regular classroom instruction.
3. **Enhance student support technology and systems.** Colleges are implementing technologies that help students commit to a program map and completion plan during their first semester.

The initiative engages with promising practices tested elsewhere in the country, and drives the potential implementation of those practices beyond the handful of colleges frequently tapped by public and philanthropic funders to test cutting-edge strategies. All of Arkansas's community colleges are implementing PACE. An external evaluation will assess their progress over time.

As a sector-wide grant, the PACE initiative may appear to leapfrog the “test and evaluate” phase of the Arkansas student success framework and go directly to statewide implementation. But in fact, PACE makes every community college in Arkansas a pilot site by providing them with funding and a short list of evidence-based interventions to implement. Funding is included to perform external evaluations of each college's interventions, so that the most effective ones can be replicated and brought to scale.

A Completion Innovation Challenge Grant from Complete College America is enabling several two-year and four-year colleges to pilot institution-level reforms very similar to the PACE grant in areas such as developmental education redesign and prior learning assessment. CCA has played an important supporting role around the student success agenda in Arkansas.

Accelerating Opportunity

Arkansas is one of seven states nationally participating in Accelerating Opportunity (AO), which supports community colleges to develop new instructional programs that combine adult basic education and postsecondary technical training to accelerate college completion for more underprepared students. Arkansas is using its AO participation to build postsecondary vocational programs that incorporate the GED credential so that students can complete the GED and a college credential in a single program. AO is an exciting complement to the Arkansas Career Pathways Initiative (ACPI), which deserves mention as Arkansas' seminal student success effort. ACPI, which is described in detail in the Appendix, was instrumental in beginning to establish a focus on student success across the community college sector in Arkansas, and building the organizational partnerships that developed and now sustain the Arkansas System Level Strategy for Student Success. In short, ACPI provides intensive counseling and support services for low-income students to complete postsecondary training at an Arkansas community

college. Many ACPI students are underprepared, including lacking a high school diploma, so AO will provide much-needed instructional programming to support these students' success.

Center for Working Families

Through the national initiative known as Centers for Working Families, four community colleges in Arkansas have been working to provide students with access to three core services: education and employment services; financial education instruction and coaching; and income and works supports, including basic public benefits such as food stamps and healthcare. This unique approach to serving low-income students has been adopted and implemented by community colleges from many other states and has significant private foundation support secured for an expansion in 2014.¹⁴

Credit When It's Due

Credit When It's Due is a national, multi-state initiative that supports partnerships of community colleges to scale approaches to awarding associate degrees to the many students who have earned that credential but who transfer to universities before receiving them. The initiative is supported by the Lumina Foundation, the Kresge Foundation, Helios Education Foundation, USA Funds, and Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. Credit When It's Due is working in partnership with the ADHE and the Arkansas Research Center to build this capacity in Arkansas.

Completion Innovation Challenge Grant

A Completion Innovation Challenge Grant from CCA is enabling several two-year and four-year colleges to pilot institution-level reforms very similar to the PACE grant in areas such as developmental education redesign and prior learning assessment.

Institutional Research Solution

One of the key insights from the Achieving the Dream colleges in Arkansas was the need to develop institutional research capabilities, which sparked the development of the Institutional Research Solution project to address this need sector wide. Supported by a grant from the Kresge Foundation, all the community colleges in Arkansas will receive a new tool to mine and report data on student outcomes. The data will help the colleges develop and test interventions to improve student success. Consultants from the Center for Applied Research at Central Piedmont Community College in North Carolina developed the tool and are advising the colleges in Arkansas. This project will especially benefit small community colleges, which typically cannot afford dedicated institutional research staff.

Recommendations

The experiences in applying the Arkansas System-Level Strategy for Student Success suggest many ideas for moving forward. In that spirit, *Achieving the Dream* offers the following recommendations:

Recommendations for Funders

The impact of philanthropic support has been pivotal in the development and execution of the Arkansas System-Level Strategy for Student Success. If the gains realized so far are to be fully inculcated and scaled, ongoing financial support is vital.

- **Support a process that strengthens the capacity for change and brings it to scale, not just a favored intervention or model.** Most funders ask hard questions about sustainability or about bringing an initiative to scale, but support for institutional capacity can also be critical. As part of the Arkansas System-Level Strategy, funders in Arkansas and outside the state invested in institutions and supports in ways that could sustain and scale evidence-based innovation. Notably, they supported the development of the AATYC into a coordinating body for student success activities. Indeed, grant-funded projects made it possible for AATYC to create the Arkansas System-Level Strategy for Student Success. Grant funding also enabled the creation of the Center for Student Success to coordinate reform strategies and help each community college develop the commitment and skills needed to execute student success interventions. The Kresge Foundation is supporting a sustainable capacity for change and scale within community colleges by investing in the creation of centers for student success in other states. While other funders are also working to achieve sustainable capacity for change, sector-wide capacity-building needs to be a greater priority.
- **Expand their view of regions that benefit from philanthropic investment.** Many national foundations have traditions and missions that focus on funding in urban areas. But the need for foundation support that can affect meaningful change is vital in rural, low-income states with weak educational attainment and few public or private resources. Reform in such areas is sometimes more difficult to realize than in, for example, more affluent urban areas. But, as the example in Arkansas demonstrates, rural low-income states can generate strong leadership and effect meaningful change if they can avail themselves of the right resources. It is critically important for national funders to partner with regional funders who understand local needs, have strategic relationships with key local stakeholders, and can help sustain an effort over time.

Recommendations for Policymakers

The state can support excellence in various ways, including structuring articulation and transfer systems to meet the needs of students, rewriting financial aid rules to legitimize integrated basic and postsecondary education strategies, and finding the resources to support effective practices. It can demand excellence by setting goals, tracking progress toward those goals, and linking funding to performance standards based on the goals.

- **State policymakers should build their own intentional frameworks for student success.** In Arkansas, a public-private partnership between AATYC, the Winthrop Rockefeller Foundation, and the ADHE, with guidance from *Achieving the Dream*, drove the state's unique student success initiative. Other states have their own trade associations, funders, and state agencies. Policymakers who want to spark change should carefully weigh the roles that need to be filled and consider which entities could fill those roles. Who will convene? Who will provide seed funding or leverage outside funding? Who will support? Who will pilot? How will successful interventions and models be spread sector wide? Having specific policy priorities will increase the likelihood of getting legislative and administrative buy-in, especially if the priorities are based on experience and evidence collected at institutions that will be implementing the policies.
- **State policymakers should partner with conveners and state-level funders.** The success of the reform in Arkansas relied in part on contributions from a broad coalition of stakeholders, including AATYC, the Winthrop Rockefeller Foundation, the ADHE, and *Achieving the Dream*. Other states should consider engaging similar coalitions of partners, which can prove invaluable in coordinating the scaling of innovations, providing seed funding, and disseminating promising practices. This is especially advisable in the absence of a centralized system.
- **State and federal policymakers should continue to support pilot programs.** When a need for improvement is identified, such as when student outcomes are not what they should be, stakeholders often rush to immediate statewide implementation of reform. That rush sometimes overlooks the critical step of developing and testing which responses are appropriate. Generally speaking, stakeholders often view pilot programs with impatience, and pilot efforts sometimes serve only to provide boutique services for select populations at isolated institutions. The Arkansas student success framework shows that initiatives piloted at a local level can be brought to scale and that going through the laborious process of continuous quality improvement at a community college can yield far more effective results when brought to scale.

- **The federal government should seek opportunities to support innovation that builds the skilled workforce.** The federal government provided a powerful boost to community college innovation through the TAACCCT initiative. That program helped Arkansas launch its promising PACE initiative. Other federal policy decisions, however, have hindered Arkansas's educational progress, including the reduction of funding under the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families program, which supports the successful Career Pathways Initiative, and the decision to end the ability of students without high school diplomas to receive Pell Grants while studying in special courses that combine GED preparation with college-level coursework. On the other hand, the Obama Administration's support for competency-based models of education offers great opportunity for adult students in a state like Arkansas.
- **Supplement academic interventions with non-academic supports.** Facing a population largely composed of first-generation students, Achieving the Dream colleges have focused on structuring supports to acclimate those students to college life. First-generation students need education in all aspects of how to navigate a college education. Accordingly, colleges need to ensure that their approaches to admissions, advising, and career planning align with the needs of students who have little or no frame of reference for higher education.
- **Engage internal and external stakeholders fully.** Colleges and universities should be proactive in seeking and using expertise among internal and external stakeholders that can help the institution make effective use of data, identify appropriate interventions, develop and implement interventions, and address obstacles encountered during the process of reform. On campus, key faculty and staff often prove to be the most dedicated supporters of reform and continued innovation. Engagement of these key staff and support for their work through professional development is essential. In-depth engagement with external stakeholders can open channels through which the institution can share its experience with other institutions, a process that can raise the institution's profile among important constituents and help other institutions and organizations improve student success.

Recommendations for Institutions

The four Achieving the Dream colleges in Arkansas derived several insights into strategies that can help inform further work.

- **Use data to drive positive change, without assuming that data by itself will drive change.** The four colleges found that the road to change began with reform teams understanding data at their own institutions. Institutional research staff dug intensively into the data on placement, developmental education, course progression, retention after the first semester and the first year, and completion and transfer rates. They also examined the experience of select groups of students, such as African Americans, Career Pathways participants, and older students. Campus leaders recognized that simply gathering data is not enough. Rather, institutions need to take action based on evidence to ensure that the data drive change.
- **Work with students as individuals.** As a complement to the Achieving the Dream colleges' emphasis on evidence-based decision-making, the colleges also made a point to improve their knowledge of their students as individuals. The factors that led specific students to stay in school or leave were diverse, as were the supports they needed. Achieving the Dream colleges put immense energy into meeting the needs of students with poor literacy, difficult work schedules, and little experience with college culture.

Looking Forward

The cumulative impact of the emerging culture of student success in Arkansas is tangible and significant. Between 2006 and 2012, for example, the state's graduation and transfer rate rose by five percentage points.¹⁵ In the longer term, student success in college will increase earning power among citizens and help to ameliorate the state's rates of poverty and traditionally low tax base.

A culture of reform based on evidence has also taken root. Arkansas's colleges rely more regularly on data to identify barriers to student achievement. Moreover, Arkansas's colleges are engaging both internal and external stakeholders in the use of data to develop, implement, evaluate, and hone strategies for improving student performance. By continuing to refine effective approaches to reform, the colleges are creating cultures and practices of continuous improvement. The concentration of high-quality student success interventions and professional development activities among Arkansas's two-year colleges indicate a flowering institutional culture that increasingly values student success and seeks evidence-based opportunities to improve student outcomes.

The success of the Arkansas System-Level Strategy for Student Success means that Arkansas is one of only a handful of states to have ever scaled a community college success strategy statewide. Arkansas is home to the first student success center for community colleges, a model that has since been adapted in several other states. Those achievements are even more notable given that Arkansas has no statewide system of community colleges and in effect invented that structure through the application of the System-Level Strategy.

The Arkansas System-Level Strategy for Student Success continues to gain momentum, with almost a dozen separate initiatives currently active. Looking forward, reformers in the state's community colleges seek to further scale their gains by pursuing this set of inter-related next steps:

- Embed specific proven interventions within a start-to-finish institutional model of student success.
- Expand capacity to track and measure student success at all community colleges.
- Build faculty and staff capacity to use data to improve student outcomes.
- Refine frameworks to measure institutional performance.
- Seek higher levels of state and other financial support for interventions and models with evidence of effectiveness.

- Establish more structured pathways for students to enter and complete credentials, building on the work of the PACE grant.
- Expand the definition of student success to encompass employment and career outcomes, building on the Career Pathways Initiative and relevant economic development partnerships.

Persistent impediments will continue to challenge the ability of the Arkansas System-Level Strategy for Student Success program to be expanded and scaled. On the whole, the state's appetite for supporting further change through policy decisions is an unanswered question. Meanwhile, the Arkansas state government continues to struggle with difficult budgetary choices overall. Funding for two-year colleges has eroded over the past several years. Continued foundation support is never a given. County and local governments have declined to provide property tax support for several Arkansas community colleges. In addition, federal restrictions imposed on Pell Grants have blocked crucial financial aid to students engaged in pre-GED study combined with college-level coursework.

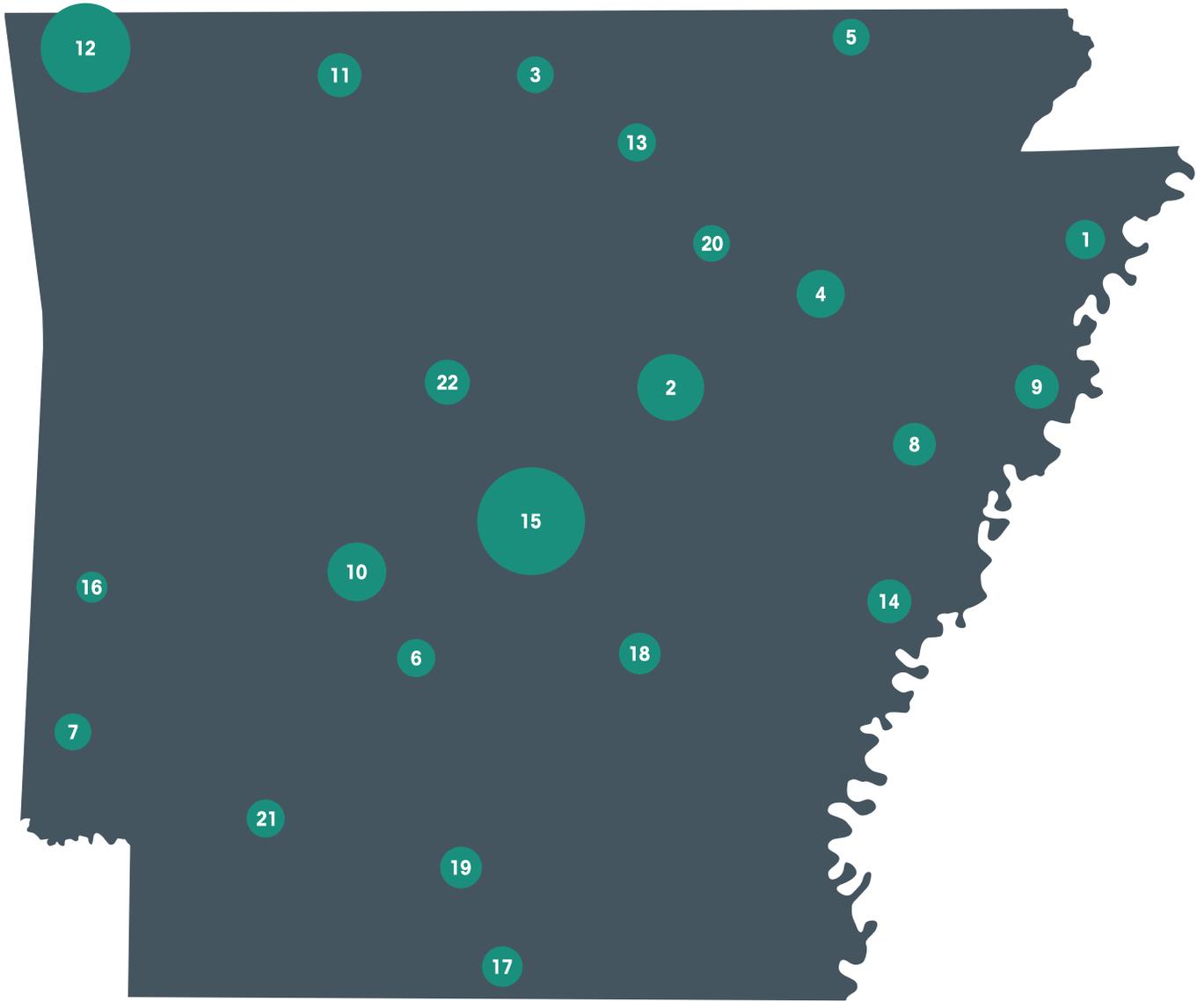
These challenges notwithstanding, the Arkansas System-Level Strategy for Student Success has established durable roots. The key stakeholders in the effort, including AATYC, the Winthrop Rockefeller Foundation, the ADHE, and Achieving the Dream, have established rich and deep collaborations that provide a basis of both trust and expertise on which further reforms can be developed. The System-Level Strategy has helped institutions inculcate evidence-based practices that use data to drive important reform to improve student success. Moreover, participation in the effort has established better relationships between institutions, which have freely shared their knowledge, and an overarching infrastructure that will help them collaborate effectively. And perhaps most important of all, students in Arkansas's community colleges are succeeding with significantly more consistency.

In many respects, however, all of the colleges that have reaped improvements in student success via the Arkansas System-Level Strategy for Student Success are leaders. They model an approach to reform that achieves results and can instruct other institutions. By their example, these colleges have shown Arkansas that meaningful reform and improvement of student success is indeed possible, even in states where resources are significantly challenged and student populations may not be fully oriented to the value of college. The colleges' collective success stands as a testament to their fortitude and commitment to the citizens of Arkansas and serves also as a lasting legacy that reflects the efficacy of the System-Level Strategy.

Appendix A: Community College Enrollment in Arkansas, Fall 2012

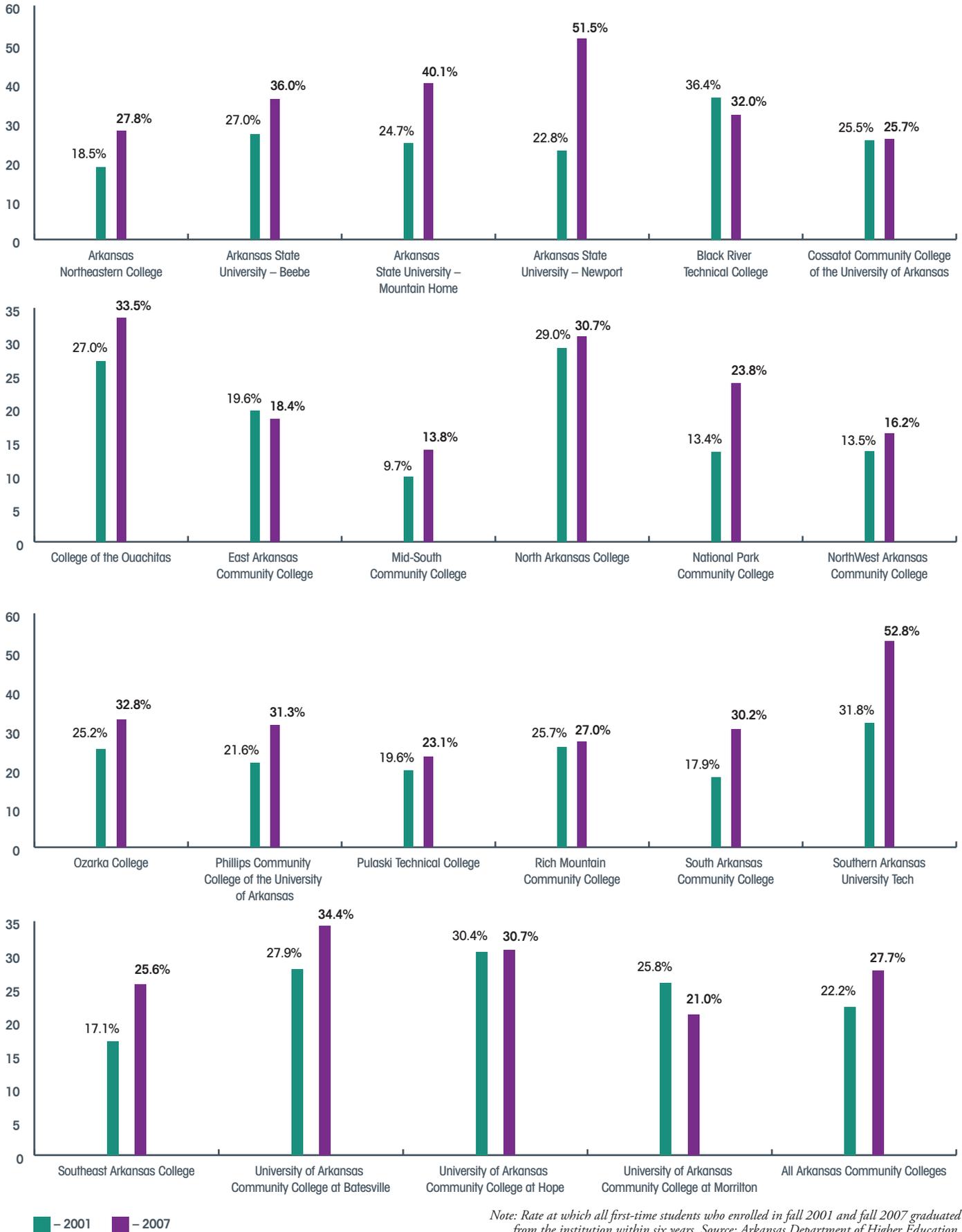
College	Established	Full-Time Enrollment	Part-Time Enrollment	Total Enrollment
1. Arkansas Northeastern College	1975	799	873	1,672
2. Arkansas State University – Beebe	1927	2,385	2,258	4,643
3. Arkansas State University - Mountain Home	1995	922	491	1,413
4. Arkansas State University – Newport	2000	827	1,216	2,043
5. Black River Technical College	1992	1,556	848	2,404
6. College of the Ouachitas	1969	553	859	1,412
7. Cossatot Community College of the University of Arkansas	1992	623	912	1,535
8. East Arkansas Community College	1999	710	753	1,463
9. Mid-South Community College	1992	718	1,262	1,980
10. National Park Community College	1973	1,588	1,955	3,543
11. North Arkansas College	1992	1,165	1,150	2,315
12. NorthWest Arkansas Community College	1990	3,095	5,246	8,341
13. Ozarka College	1992	975	582	1,557
14. Phillips Community College of the University of Arkansas	1965	812	1,247	2,059
15. Pulaski Technical College	1992	5,792	6,146	11,938
16. Rich Mountain Community College	1983	443	608	1,051
17. South Arkansas Community College	1992	774	966	1,740
18. Southeast Arkansas College	1992	912	930	1,842
19. Southern Arkansas University Tech	1968	625	1,192	1,817
20. University of Arkansas Community College at Batesville	1992	877	568	1,445
21. University of Arkansas Community College at Hope	1992	803	693	1,496
22. University of Arkansas Community College at Morrilton	1992	1,267	872	2,139

Arkansas Department of Higher Education. College enrollment and establishment data. Little Rock, AR: State of Arkansas, 2013.



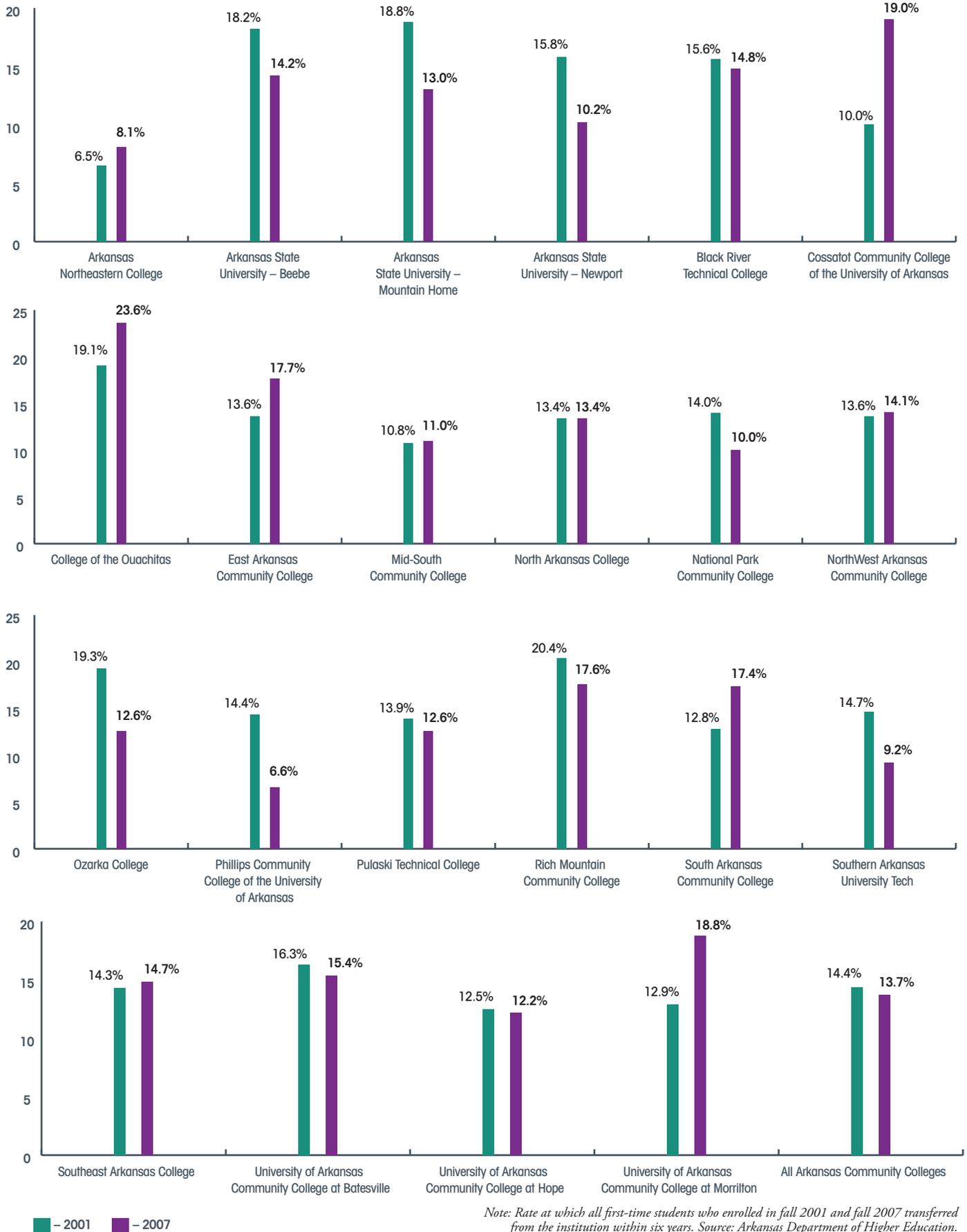
Appendix B: Six-Year Graduation Rate and Six-Year Transfer Rate, Community College Cohorts beginning 2001 and 2007

Figure 1: Graduation Rates within 6 Years by College



Note: Rate at which all first-time students who enrolled in fall 2001 and fall 2007 graduated from the institution within six years. Source: Arkansas Department of Higher Education.

Figure 2: Transfer Rates within 6 Years by College



Note: Rate at which all first-time students who enrolled in fall 2001 and fall 2007 transferred from the institution within six years. Source: Arkansas Department of Higher Education.

Glossary of Participating Organizations

Achieving the Dream (ATD)

A national nonprofit that is dedicated to helping more community college students, particularly low-income students and students of color, stay in school and earn a college certificate or degree.

Arkansas Association of Two-Year Colleges (AATYC)

The association represents the state's 22 community colleges and was started in the early 1990s. The Association facilitates the sharing of ideas, resources, and opportunities among its members, and advocates on behalf of members' students.

Arkansas Career Pathways Initiative (ACPI)

Arkansas Career Pathways Initiative (CPI) is a partnership between community colleges, workforce development agencies, employers, and social service providers, that is driven by two-state agencies, the Arkansas Department of Higher Education and Department of Workforce Services. The Career Pathways Initiative seeks to provide marketable educational credentials to low-income individuals for immediate entry into a high demand occupation or higher education.

Arkansas Department of Higher Education (ADHE)

The mission of the Arkansas Department of Higher Education is to advocate for higher education; to promote a coordinated system of higher education in the State; and to provide for the orderly and effective development of each of the publicly and locally supported institutions of higher education in the state—all geared toward improving the delivery of higher education services to the citizens of Arkansas.

Annie E. Casey Foundation

The Annie E. Casey Foundation is one of the largest private foundations in the nation. Its primary mission is to foster public policies, human-service reforms, and community supports that more effectively meet the needs of today's vulnerable children and families. In pursuit of this goal, the foundation makes grants that help states, cities and neighborhoods fashion more innovative, cost-effective responses to these needs.

The Center for Applied Research (CFAR)

The Center for Applied Research is an applied research and evaluation team based in Charlotte, North Carolina. CFAR provides affordable research, assessment, and evaluation services to community-based organizations in the region and around the nation. Housed at Central Piedmont Community College, CFAR is the first self-sustaining research center in the nation to be affiliated with a community college and is thus uniquely situated to offer insight into community-college-based issues. The Arkansas Center for Student Success in partnership with the CFAR is providing centralized institutional research capacity to create a data warehouse incorporating data from all community colleges in Arkansas.

Center for Student Success

Created by the Arkansas Association of Two-Year Colleges to coordinate and help lead student success work at a statewide level. The center has secured numerous grants to help member colleges implement innovations that help to build institutional capacity, advance student success, and orient colleges to continuous improvement.

Complete College America (CCA)

Complete College America is a national nonprofit with a single mission: to work with states to significantly increase the number of Americans with quality career certificates or college degrees and to close attainment gaps for traditionally underrepresented populations. A grant from Complete College America is enabling several two-year and four-year colleges to pilot institution-level reforms very similar to the PACE grant in such areas as developmental education redesign and prior learning assessment.

Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation

Guided by the belief that every life has equal value, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation works to help all people lead healthy, productive lives. In the United States, it seeks to ensure that all people—especially those with the fewest resources—have access to the opportunities they need to succeed in school and life. This foundation is one of the national funders of the Arkansas initiative.

Jobs for the Future (JFF)

JFF works with partners to design and drive the adoption of education and career pathways leading from college readiness to career advancement for those struggling to succeed in today's economy. Committed to doubling the number of low-income youth and adults who attain postsecondary credentials, Jobs for the Future is committed to advancing state policies that accelerate community college student success and completion.

The Kresge Foundation

The Kresge Foundation is a private, national foundation headquartered in Detroit that works to expand opportunities in America's cities through grant making and investing in arts and culture, education, environment, health, human services, community development, and place-based efforts in Detroit. The Kresge Foundation is supporting a sustainable capacity for change and scale within state community college sectors by investing in the creation of centers for student success.

Lumina Foundation

Lumina Foundation is an independent, private foundation committed to increasing the proportion of Americans with high-quality degrees, certificates and other credentials to 60 percent by 2025. Lumina's outcomes-based approach focuses on helping to design and build an accessible, responsive, and accountable higher education system while fostering a national sense of urgency for action to achieve Goal 2025.

National Center for Developmental Education (NCDE)

The National Center for Developmental Education provides instruction, training programs, research, and other services consistent with the purpose of developmental education and the missions of Appalachian State University and the Reich College of Education. These services are provided to a national audience of professionals dedicated to serving underprepared and disadvantaged college students. With the support of the Arkansas Association of Two-Year Colleges, NCDE is being recruited to host a workshop for community colleges in Arkansas.

New Growth Group

The New Growth Group works to improve regional competitiveness and connect individuals to careers. This group provides an array of services including improving system and program effectiveness using data driven evaluation and impact analysis. The New Growth Group is serving as a third party evaluator for the PACE grant.

Postsecondary State Policy Network

The network is an initiative led by Jobs for the Future in conjunction with the Achieving the Dream National Reform Network to connect policy teams from 11 states to maximize peer learning and to develop and implement state policies that support students.

Trade Adjustment Assistance Community College and Career Training (TAACCCT) Grant Program

TAACCCT provides community colleges and other eligible institutions of higher education with funds to expand and improve their ability to deliver education and career training programs that can be completed in two years or less, are suited for workers who are eligible for training under the TAA for Workers program, and prepare program participants for employment in high-wage, high-skill occupations. Through these multi-year grants, the US Department of Labor is helping to ensure that our nation's institutions of higher education are helping adults succeed in acquiring the skills, degrees, and credentials needed for high-wage, high-skill employment while also meeting the needs of employers for skilled workers.

US Department of Labor (USDOL)

The USDOL seeks to foster, promote, and develop the welfare of the wage earners, job seekers, and retirees of the United States; improve working conditions; advance opportunities for profitable employment; and assure work-related benefits and rights. In 2011, the DOL approved a \$14.7 million grant to the entire community college sector in Arkansas.

Winthrop Rockefeller Foundation

The mission of Winthrop Rockefeller Foundation is to improve the lives of Arkansans in three inter-related areas: education, economic development, and economic, and racial and social justice.

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