

**New Strategies for  
Developmental Education:  
Building on an Achieving the Dream  
Foundation**

This paper was written as a framework for the Developmental Education Initiative. As the initiative evolves, the paper will be revised to incorporate new insights and concepts. We welcome your comments on the paper. Please contact:

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## **THE CHALLENGE**

In today's economy, education and economic opportunity are inseparable. Education beyond high school is increasingly essential to earn a middle-class income, and community colleges play a crucial role in preparing individuals for careers and baccalaureate programs. Community colleges are the point of entry into higher education for many Americans, and they serve particularly high proportions of low-income students and students of color. They enroll 45 percent of all undergraduate students, including 47 percent of all African-American students, 55 percent of all Hispanics and 57 percent of all Native Americans.<sup>1</sup> They serve large numbers of low-income students and working adults.

While community colleges do an excellent job of providing postsecondary educational opportunity to a broad population, access does not always lead to success. Among community college students seeking an associate degree or higher, only 45 percent earn a degree or transfer to a four-year institution within six years of enrollment.<sup>2</sup> Five years ago, the Lumina Foundation for Education launched a comprehensive, multi-year, national community college student success initiative called *Achieving the Dream: Community Colleges Count*. The initiative was co-designed by Lumina and several national organizations that shared a commitment to improving student success, particularly for low-income students and students of color. *Achieving the Dream's* student-centered vision is focused on creating a culture of evidence on community college campuses in which data and evidence drive broad-based institutional efforts to improve student outcomes. The initiative promotes change at the institutional level as well as in state and national policy.

Since many community college students arrive on campus underprepared for college-level study, much of the institutional change work at *Achieving the Dream* colleges has centered on developmental education, with policies and practices implemented at classroom, administrative, and state levels. Developmental courses are meant to prepare enrollees with insufficient skills for college-level work. Generally, a student's preparation level is determined by an assessment test; based on test results, students may be placed in developmental courses in three disciplines: mathematics, reading, and composition. Developmental students span a broad age range and multiple skill levels—from recent high school graduates to adults over the age of 35 and from those needing a brief refresher to those who may be learning basic skills for the first time. These programs also represent a significant portion of community college budgets; a recent study from Strong American Schools calculated the annual cost of community college developmental education at \$1.9 to \$2.3 billion<sup>3</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> American Association of Community Colleges, 2006.

<sup>2</sup> U.S. Department of Education, NCEs (2001). *Beginning Postsecondary Students Longitudinal Study 1996-2001 (BPS:96/01)*. Analysis by Community College Research Center.

<sup>3</sup> Strong American Schools. *Diploma to Nowhere*. 2008. Retrieved January 20, 2009 from <http://www.strongamericanschools.org>.

According to a 2003 National Center for Education Statistics report, 42 percent of first-year students at community colleges enroll in at least one developmental course and fewer than half of developmental students earn a certificate, degree, or transfer to a four-year institution eight years after entering community college.<sup>4</sup> Helping students progress through developmental education more quickly—or bypass it altogether—increases the likelihood of their persistence and higher-level course completion, not to mention reducing students' financial burden, since the sooner they are able to take credit-bearing courses, the more quickly they will be able to move toward degree completion.

## **THE RESPONSE**

Improving successful outcomes for developmental education students at community colleges fits squarely into long-term poverty-reduction and higher education attainment goals for both the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation and Lumina Foundation For Education. Building on the Lumina-supported work of Achieving the Dream colleges, these two foundations have joined forces in a new endeavor to bring to scale the promising developmental education policies and practices piloted at Achieving the Dream colleges.

The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation has set a goal to double the number of young people who earn a postsecondary degree or certificate with value in the marketplace by the time they reach age 26. They aim to achieve this goal by 2025. By investing in the improvement of developmental education student outcomes at community colleges, the Foundation seeks to transform the postsecondary system in ways that move students “further, faster—and at far less cost in terms of time and money.”<sup>5</sup> This postsecondary focus is integral to the Foundation’s broader poverty reduction efforts.

With a goal to increase the proportion of the US adult population who earn college degrees to 60 percent by the year 2025, Lumina Foundation For Education also recognizes that assisting underprepared students is essential to increasing higher education attainment. They have made significant investments to this end, including Achieving the Dream. Supporting an intensified focus on developmental education students will inform their efforts to increase college degree attainment across the higher education spectrum, not just at community colleges.

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<sup>4</sup> Parsad, B. & Lewis, L. *Remedial Education at Degree-Granting Postsecondary Institutions in Fall 2000*, NCES 2004-010. Washington, DC: US Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics (2003). <http://nces.ed.gov/pubs2004/2004010.pdf>. Quoted in “Developmental Education: Completion Status and Outcomes.” *Data Notes: Keeping Informed about Achieving the Dream Data*. Vol. 3, No. 4. July/August 2008.

<sup>5</sup> Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. *Postsecondary Success: Focusing on Completion*. November 2008.

Many Achieving the Dream colleges and states are well-positioned to accelerate their developmental education work. Through the collaborative support of Achieving the Dream partner organizations, these colleges have received extensive support over the last four to five years in collecting and analyzing student data; in designing, implementing, and evaluating intervention strategies; and in broadening knowledge among stakeholders about policies and programs that contribute to student success. State policy teams have benefitted from strategic guidance and support in high-leverage policy areas. With continued support from the Achieving the Dream partnership and backing from Gates and Lumina, a number of these colleges and states will have the opportunity to investigate how large-scale efforts can increase the reach and impact of tested developmental education interventions.

Gates Foundation funds will support the institutional work at up to fifteen colleges and state-level policy efforts in up to five states; Lumina's investment will support an MDRC-led evaluation of the entire project, as well as communications and advocacy work. All participating colleges and states will come from the colleges and states that joined the Achieving the Dream initiative in 2004 and 2005 (Rounds One and Two). This subset of schools and states will remain a part of the extensive Achieving the Dream learning community, open to lessons and insights from across the initiative. In addition to anticipated improvements and innovations within selected colleges and states, this three-year initiative will guide long-term investments at both supporting foundations to increase postsecondary-credential attainment and reduce poverty in the United States.

## **THE APPROACH**

Both Gates and Lumina Foundations have set ambitious targets for their work and expect to see significant returns on their investments. This is one reason they have chosen to work with Achieving the Dream colleges and states. Achieving the Dream institutions have been engaged in data-driven institutional change work for several years. They have increased their capacity to examine student success data and to use that data to identify problem areas, inform policy and programmatic changes, and evaluate the impact of resultant interventions. State policy leads have been engaged in similar data-driven efforts to examine and advance state-level policies that support student success. In addition to the nascent culture of inquiry and evidence, Achieving the Dream institutions and states have the support of seven national partnership organizations and an extensive learning community. This experience and support provides a fertile testing ground for innovations and a strong foundation for efforts aimed at scaling up promising practices. Community colleges that are seeing success through modifications of external supports and environment are well positioned to look at the harder issues of how to improve teaching and learning. Such curriculum and pedagogy reform coupled with policies and practices that support student learning, taken to large sectors of student populations, across disciplines and across campuses, may open the door to significant increases in student success rates. Enabling states to expand benchmarking efforts statewide could uncover the high-level policies that will

support student success at every campus. By supporting the implementation and evaluation of large-scale projects at institutions and within states that are accustomed to basing decisions on student outcome data, the Gates and Lumina Foundations will acquire data and insight to guide their long-term, national investments in postsecondary efforts.

### **College Rationale**

Colleges participating in this initiative will be risk-takers. These institutions will be expected to take on the institutional challenge of educating underprepared students with creativity and enthusiasm, relying on their Achieving the Dream experience to help them make good decisions about how to advance developmental education at their colleges. Infusions of resources—both financial and intellectual—will enable these schools to significantly increase the breadth of their services to students needing developmental education. With such expansion, there is an assumption that colleges also will see a significant increase in the academic impact of these services, especially when paired with modifications of curriculum and pedagogy. While each institution will design its own approach, each is to include the following components:

*Build on Experience—and Evidence—of Achieving the Dream.* Colleges will build on Achieving the Dream interventions and lessons learned from participation in the initiative. Efforts associated with this new developmental education funding must be supported by institutional and student data that show early results or justify proposed targets. Colleges will continue to contribute to the national knowledge base about community college student outcomes for analysis and comparison by regular submissions of student data to the Achieving the Dream database.

*Strategic Design.* The aim of this project is to determine the mix of policy and practices—and the level of resources required—to generate large improvements in outcomes in a significant portion of the student body. Thus, colleges will tailor their individual approaches according to the following four strategic directions:

**Strategic Direction 1:** Demonstrate leadership and institution-wide commitment to the success of underprepared students by developing and implementing institution-wide policies and practices that support better outcomes for those students.

**Strategic Direction 2:** Increase the number of underprepared students who quickly become ready for credit-bearing courses, as students who spend less time in developmental education courses are more likely to move further and faster in college-level coursework. Strategies include those that allow students to avoid traditional developmental education courses as well as those that accelerate their progress through such courses.

**Strategic Direction 3:** Provide intensive and comprehensive academic and student support services for underprepared students that are implemented in an intentional and prescriptive manner.

**Strategic Direction 4:** Revise existing developmental education curricula and/or adopt new teaching methods to address the learning styles of developmental education students. Different teaching methods and materials fit different students. Providing a variety of learning pathways will maximize opportunities for success.

These strategic directions are meant to guide colleges to those interventions and practices that will have the most significant influence on student outcomes during the relatively short grant period. In order to build on the important institutional change work of Achieving the Dream, all colleges will be required to implement at least one strategy within Strategic Direction 1, as well as one or more strategies within Strategic Directions 2-4.

*Commit to Professional Development.* Colleges will include intentional and well-structured professional development for staff, faculty, and administrators in the design of their developmental education work.

*Seek Expert Support.* As colleges take bold steps to improve outcomes for their students who need developmental education, they will be encouraged to take advantage of the knowledge and experience of content experts as they design and implement their strategies. To ease the identification and procurement of such technical assistance, the partnership will recruit and train a pool of experts who will be available to participating schools on a contract basis

*Participate in a Learning Community.* Achieving the Dream colleges are enriched by participation in a national learning community. This initiative will build on and strengthen that community as colleges remain affiliated with Achieving the Dream, participating in both Achieving the Dream and developmental education-specific learning events, building relationships with colleagues throughout both initiatives.

*Measure Progress.* In order to gauge progress, we will consider the amount of improvement in student outcomes, the overall number of students served, and the increase in the proportion of students served. While colleges will be expected to create or refine intervention-specific measures, the influence and reach of the colleges' individual efforts and the initiative as a whole will be tracked, in part, by the following outcomes:

Colleges will significantly increase the success of students who need developmental education, as measured by these six indicators:

- Developmental education course completion rates
- Completion of first-year college, credit-bearing courses
- Persistence from fall to spring and fall to fall
- Improved grade point averages
- Increases in cumulative credits earned
- Rates of recommended developmental sequence completion



Colleges that choose to implement strategies aimed at reducing the number of students placed in developmental education (Strategic Direction 2) will be expected to track the following additional indicators:

- Reduction in the percentage of first-time students assessed as needing developmental education
- Increase in the percentage of first-time, first semester students who take and successfully complete one or more credit-bearing courses

### **State Rationale**

In addition to the college-level work, this initiative will enable up to five Round One and Two states to draw on the work they have done to date in addressing developmental education policies through the Achieving the Dream initiative—and to move more deliberately to support institutional and state efforts to improve outcomes for the large number of students who enter community college in need of developmental courses. The states have built a strong community of practice and have made significant progress in putting student success at the core of their policy agendas. They have embraced an approach that combines a heavy emphasis on data and research with learning from the experience and innovations of other states, both within and outside the initiative. The state policy component of the developmental education initiative is a natural extension of these efforts and will focus on the following goals:

*Adopt a Data-driven Approach.* Participating states will demonstrate the effectiveness of a state-level, data-driven approach to improving outcomes for students who place into developmental education. States will adopt and implement Achieving the Dream cross-state data group intermediate and final outcome measures to track system and institutional performance within their states. They will use this process to identify and learn from institutions having the greatest success in improving outcomes on key measures for students who place into developmental education.

*Identify High-leverage Policies.* States will identify high-leverage policies that can improve student success and institutional outcomes—and develop a plan for implementing a limited number of these within a three-year period.

*Engage Stakeholders.* States will engage and mobilize key stakeholder groups and influential state-level spokespeople to support data-driven efforts to identify promising institutional practices and state policies and to minimize the political risk from aggressive and public efforts to develop the will and commitment to address poor results for students who place into developmental instruction.

Each state will develop a strategic plan that specifies clear and concrete actions it will take to focus its institutions on improving outcomes for students who place into developmental education, as well as provide technical assistance to help the institutions serve these students so that they are successful. States will also collaborate through meetings; sharing of promising practices, policies, and data; and other strategies to

disseminate knowledge and build a vibrant community of practice. Primary strategies for state policy action will include:

- Leveraging the identification and analysis of performance benchmarks, including intermediate and final indicators, to help drive and support institutional improvements that raise student success outcomes for students in need of developmental education.
- Documenting promising practices of high-performing community colleges and sharing that information to help promote adoption of these practices by other institutions and to improve overall state performance for students who place into developmental education.
- Building stakeholder support for needed policy changes that can support and incent improvement across the state's institutions.
- Identifying and implementing policies that are likely to support institutional innovation and reward improved outcomes for target populations.
- Identifying and implementing policies that provide incentives for students to move more quickly and successfully to credit-level courses.

### **Role of the Partnership**

Seven organizations comprise the Achieving the Dream national partnership: the Association of American Community Colleges, Community College Leadership Program at the University of Texas at Austin, Community College Research Center of Teachers College at Columbia University, Jobs for the Future, MDRC, Public Agenda, and MDC, Inc. (managing partner). These organizations will provide leadership, infrastructure, and support for colleges and states, calling national and state attention to the high priority of improving the low success rates of students who begin postsecondary study underprepared. They will work to persuade postsecondary education leaders that substantively increasing student success—and especially improving the outcomes for students who need developmental education—is necessary and achievable.

### **Evaluation**

Because both supporting foundations recognize the importance of a thorough and objective evaluation, Lumina Foundation For Education has committed resources to support an evaluation of the entire initiative, led by MDRC. While the evaluation plans are still in progress, several ideas are being considered. These include:

- An *impact analysis* that would measure the effectiveness of the specific developmental education strategies that the states and colleges put into place.
- An in-depth *implementation analysis* that would describe select interventions and how they contrast from standard developmental education practices.
- The *cost analysis* that would investigate the context of funding at each site in order to provide estimates on what it will take to bring effective developmental education programs to scale.

## **CONCLUSION**

Our nation's community colleges can lead the way in educating the 21<sup>st</sup> century workforce. While they have opened doors for individuals previously unable to access higher education, particularly low-income and minority students, they must now find ways to help these same students attain postsecondary credentials and careers—even those who arrive underprepared for college-level work. Through this developmental education endeavor, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, Lumina Foundation For Education, and the Achieving the Dream initiative have formed a powerful alliance. The experience, creativity, and resources shared among these organizations, colleges, and states will guide the next decade of effort and investment in increasing postsecondary attainment and poverty reduction in the United States.