

Lessons Learned from Achieving the Dream: Community Colleges Count An Issue Brief on Institutional Change

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A cohort of 10 Washington community and technical colleges participated in *Achieving the Dream: Community Colleges Count (AtD)* from 2011 through 2015, with the goal of increasing student success and closing equity gaps. Funding was provided by College Spark Washington. As part of the initiative, we conducted an independent, third party evaluation, also funded by College Spark Washington, to document and evaluate the impact of AtD on participating colleges, provide timely feedback to the colleges to help inform their efforts, and document lessons learned and their implications for policy, practice, and systems. This included conducting regular college site visits and structured interviews, analyzing Student Achievement Initiative (SAI) data provided by the State Board for Community and Technical Colleges, participating in statewide meetings of the colleges, and reviewing AtD reports and other documents.

This issue brief is part of a post-AtD study funded by College Spark Washington that takes a deeper look at the impact of AtD on the participating colleges and the implications for efforts to increase student success and close equity gaps moving forward. It focuses on institutional change and assesses the overall progress made by colleges in achieving broad institutional changes, the factors affecting this, positive and negative; and the lessons learned about institutional change at community and technical colleges. It draws on evaluation work done over the four years of the initiative, additional interviews with those involved in AtD at the colleges, and a review of the literature in the field of institutional change and community colleges.

About this series:

This is the first in a series of issue briefs analyzing the impact of *Achieving the Dream: Community Colleges Count* on a cohort of 10 Washington community and technical colleges that participated in AtD from 2011 through 2015, with funding support from College Spark Washington; and the implications for efforts to increase student success and close equity gaps moving forward. Future issue briefs will focus on advising, precollege reforms; broad, strategic professional development; and equity. Additional years of college level student outcome data will also be analyzed.

How much progress did the Achieving the Dream colleges make on institutional change?

First, we assess whether broad institutional changes were achieved during the four years of AtD participation, based on the initiative's core principles of committed leadership, use of evidence to improve programs and services, broad engagement, systemic institutional improvement, and equity. We discuss progress on the first four principles in the following section, and discuss equity, the fifth principle that was added mid-initiative, separately below.

About one third of the 10 colleges showed significant progress on institutional change. The colleges in this group had active, engaged, and ongoing leadership support, especially at the presidential level. This kind of support was critical to success. For example, those leading AtD interventions at one college reported that they knew their work was a priority and they had the support of top leadership. This enabled them to drive change forward beyond the intervention team to a broader level at the college.

They either had or acquired solid institutional research (IR) capacity at the start of AtD, and strategically positioned IR as part of strategic planning, accreditation, and grants. These colleges also strengthened IR capacity during AtD, adding staff, developing data systems and tools, and increasing their use of Student Achievement Initiative (SAI) data to examine student success. They often used their data to improve their AtD interventions and in some instances to change college practices and policies (for example, making College 101 mandatory for all students).

The colleges in this group also engaged faculty and staff in the AtD interventions with some of this engagement being both broad and deep, especially for classroom based interventions such as Reading Apprenticeship. This was often supported by release time and stipends. Ongoing challenges for all colleges included maintaining engagement over time, finding workable ways to involve adjunct faculty, and continuing to broaden engagement beyond specific interventions.

Each of these colleges scaled up and sustained one or more of their AtD interventions, covering areas such as advising, college success courses, precollege reform, and Reading Apprenticeship. This required leadership support, changes in policy (for example, making student participation truly mandatory), and resource allocation, including strategic use of grants to support the work. And they provided large numbers of faculty with broad strategic professional development opportunities aimed at improving student success (for example, active teaching and learning strategies and Reading Apprenticeship).

About one third of the colleges made some progress on institutional change. We define this as including progress on some but not all of the principles of the AtD institutional improvement framework, and/or limited progress on these principles.

These colleges did have support from leadership, but it was less focused and more sporadic than at the colleges we describe above. At a couple of the colleges in this group, mid-level

people took the lead in moving the work forward. As a result, AtD helped empower and support these emerging leaders. However, they were not able to take the work as far as it might have gone had leadership, in turn, been more consistently engaged and active. One of these mid-level leaders noted that if a college takes on institutional change, it has to be the first and foremost priority for leadership all the time in order for it to work.

The colleges in this group also built their IR capacity with additional staff and with development and use of data tools, and provided valuable data and data analyses during their AtD participation. The use of this capacity to document and evaluate AtD interventions, as a way to improve programs and services, did occur in some places and for some interventions, but it was not made routine.

These colleges also engaged faculty and staff in the AtD interventions and in student success-focused professional development, but the breadth and depth of this was more variable. These engagement efforts were sometimes supported by release time and stipends, as was the case with colleges that made significant progress on institutional change.

The record of the colleges in this group in scaling up and sustaining their AtD interventions was more mixed. Some interventions, covering areas such as advising and precollege reform, were sustained and scaled up or in the process of being scaled up. Barriers to achieving greater success in scaling up and sustaining interventions included a lack of leadership support at key levels; resistance to change; and difficulty making needed policy changes and resource allocations.

About one third of colleges made very limited progress on institutional change.

Challenges for these colleges included lack of active, engaged, and ongoing support from leadership; turnover in key positions; limited IR capacity; and discrete, small scale interventions that engaged a small number of faculty and staff and were disconnected from broader policy and system changes.



Progress on the equity principle

At the start of their AtD work, most of the 10 colleges took a “rising tide lifts all boats” or “leveling the playing field” approach to closing equity gaps. This included targeting issues that disproportionately affect students of color and low income students (for example, presence in precollege math and English), and strengthening orientation and advising to help surface and address barriers and issues early on.

However, over the course of AtD participation, many of these colleges came to the conclusion that this alone was not enough to close equity gaps. In response, some began to develop and implement more targeted, direct strategies. These included outreach

and recruitment targeting specific underserved communities of color; academic and student services and supports for students of color once they are at the college, and curricular and instructional changes.

Colleges that pursued these changes had strong leadership support for this work, had a sense of direction and clear priorities, made structural and organizational changes to help elevate and advance this work (for example, several colleges added chief diversity and equity officers), and had dedicated staff and resources.

What are the key lessons that have been learned about institutional change?



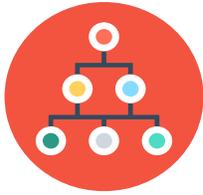
INSTITUTIONAL CHANGE REQUIRES VISIONARY, ACTIVE, ENGAGED, AND ONGOING LEADERSHIP.

Leadership from the top needs to be active and unrelenting. While it is important for the president to lead the way early in setting and publicizing a vision, presidential leadership cannot stop there - this is only the first step in a continuous change process. For systemic change to occur throughout a college, the president needs to be present and intensely focused on transformation work as a main priority.



Successful leadership styles can vary according to personalities and college cultures. One president may work quietly and strategically behind the scenes while another is more visibly public in leadership style. One may emphasize vertical structure, another horizontal. The **common** behavior that makes broad change more likely is actively following through over time on the commitment to moving a student success agenda forward at multiple levels throughout the college.

This also means moving beyond communicating the vision to a relatively small circle at the top. Where presidents promote a strong student success vision to boards and executive teams but not beyond, the vision is less likely to be realized throughout the college.



SHARED OR DISTRIBUTED LEADERSHIP IS ESSENTIAL TO INSTITUTIONAL CHANGE, AND THIS REQUIRES ENGAGING LEADERS AT ALL LEVELS OF THE COLLEGE.

We have concluded from our AtD work that a crucial component of spreading institutional change is using the organization's structure in a strategic, intentional way from top to bottom and across functions and departments. This includes champions of innovation and people who are in both formal and informal leadership roles, and it needs to go beyond small committees into the entire structure of the college. The initial locus of change leadership may vary depending on college culture, but the need to then build buy in and engagement at all levels remains an essential element of change.

The organizational structure of colleges provides a framework that can be used both vertically and horizontally to disseminate change. This can carry both the vision and its implementation work from the president and board through the vice presidents, out to deans and divisions, and to faculty and staff formal and informal structures where innovation and implementation occur. Leading only from the top tends to stop the message at that level, however powerful the vision may be. Deans and others in the middle of the organization can only move change so far without explicit support from top leadership. And faculty and staff engaged in the work cannot carry their innovations and adaptations outwards without active help and expectation-setting from deans and leaders. If these connections are not made, the sparks of innovation and reform tend to stay small and may in time go out.

TIPS FOR IMPLEMENTATION:

- From the start, systematically engage vice presidents, deans, faculty, and staff across departments and functions.
- Expand this engagement intentionally and strategically throughout the college.
- Find and reward champions of change at all levels.
- Provide incentives, release time, and other supports, such as backfilling other responsibilities where necessary.

TOOLS AND RESOURCES (HYPERLINKS BELOW OR URLS LISTED IN THE RESOURCE SECTION) :

- Transformative, shared leadership: Transformative Change Initiative (Resource 6)
- Promoting shared leadership and collaboration: Adrianna Kezar (Resource 14)

These observations are well supported by research that calls attention to the importance of shared or distributed leadership in moving community college change forward. Bragg and her associates discuss the importance of distributed leadership in engaging multiple stakeholders, promoting innovation and adaptation, and disseminating change throughout an organization. Kezar describes shared leadership as intentionally bringing together people in positions of authority with leaders who work from the bottom up and sees it as the most likely leadership approach to bring long term changes. And Karp and her co-authors emphasize the need for intentional use of cross-hierarchical leadership in transformation change work at community colleges. (See Kezar, 2014; Bragg, Kirby, Witt, Richie, Mix, Feldbaum, Liu, & Mason, 2014; Karp, Kalamkarian, Klempin, & Fletcher, 2016).



MAKING THE CASE FOR WHY CHANGE NEEDS TO OCCUR IS THE KEY DRIVING FORCE FOR GENUINE CHANGE.

Making the case for *why* change needs to occur—helping faculty and staff shift their values, beliefs, and attitudes about how they can best help students—is the key driving force for genuine change. The “why” needs to be compelling and inspiring, and must bring people together to form a collective belief that their contributions to the work will change student lives for the better.

And it cannot happen just once, at the beginning of a change initiative; it needs to be a deliberate, active, and ongoing process that engages people through the college.

Kezar and others who work in the field of community college change talk extensively about the critical role of “sensemaking”—making new sense, new meaning in how people see themselves and their institutions—in second order/deep transformational change. They emphasize the need for collaborative sensemaking processes that help faculty and staff understand how their roles and daily activities contribute to a changing organization. These often involve ongoing conversations and social interactions that build relationships and promote learning and information-sharing. For example, Bragg et.al. discuss the value of storytelling as an organizational learning tool that reflects diverse voices, creates new meaning, and brings to life lessons learned so that others can use them in scaling innovation.

Kezar also points out the likelihood of failure in change efforts when colleges identify and pursue appealing solutions without also taking the time to explicitly address underlying values, assumptions, and culture. (Kezar, 2014; Bragg et.al., 2014; Brown & Kurzweil, 2016).

Some pockets of changed beliefs did occur during AtD—for example, there were faculty at various colleges who came to reject the old “students have a right to fail” attitude in favor of one that focuses more on how they can help students succeed. Success was added to access as a college goal, and seeing disaggregated data on student outcomes helped motivate

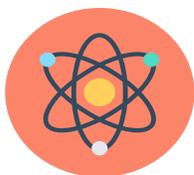
people to work on improvements. But this more closely resembled organizational learning, which emphasizes providing people with data and inquiry methods and the means to engage in problem solving and process improvement. Organizational learning is seen in the field as more likely to produce first order change, where improvements are on the margins. In colleges where we saw this predominate, we also heard frustration about the lack of a continuing, strong “why” message from top leadership, and we often saw promising change efforts eventually peter out.

TIPS FOR IMPLEMENTATION:

- Build in activities that help participants understand why change needs to occur such as organized, ongoing conversations about the work of transformational change, and how participants can help change students’ lives. This needs to be done intentionally and not just at the beginning, but throughout as the work evolves and new participants join in.
- Be explicit about the critical importance of faculty and staff responsibility for student success in recruitment, in advancement, and in strategic professional development.

TOOLS AND RESOURCES (HYPERLINKS BELOW OR URLS LISTED IN THE RESOURCE SECTION):

- Using storytelling to promote learning about innovation and change: Transformative Change Initiative (Resource 15)
- Eight factors that foster changes in roles, attitudes, and beliefs: MDRC/Completion by Design (Resource 18)



TRANSFORMATIONAL CHANGE REQUIRES MEANINGFUL ENGAGEMENT.

In addition to disseminating improvements through full use of the organizational structure, this kind of deliberate, systemic involvement can be used to build and sustain change through continued engagement and the building of broad institutional memory. It is also an opportunity to find and support emerging leaders, and we have seen this used effectively at some colleges.

Among the 10 AtD colleges, engagement tended to be broad or deep, but not always both (an example of the former is a college-wide presentation of student success and equity data; of the latter, a couple of faculty or staff working intensively on a specific intervention). For the colleges where meaningful institutional change occurred, engagement was both broad AND deep. These colleges had champions that were empowered to lead the work, often supported with some combination of stipends, release time, and extra assistance, and leaders who rewarded innovation and course corrections.



Engagement that is both broad and deep also helps to minimize loss of momentum from the normally occurring turnover in leaders, faculty, and staff, including key players that helped start the change. Without an explicit plan for this, good initial efforts may just sink back under the waves of daily work.

And it provides an existing structure to bring new participants into the vision and the work— spreading the changes further and reducing the chances of having a small core team that is carrying the load eventually burn out.

Broad, strategically focused professional development provided to large numbers of faculty and staff is also important, along with follow-up support for implementing what's been learned over time. Large-scale professional development has great potential for creating institutional change if it is done with strategic intent and as part of a long term continuous improvement effort.

One key issue here is how best to bring adjunct instructors into systemic change work, given their significant numbers at community and technical colleges. While efforts are being made at the colleges to find ways and incentives to promote this, we note also that Achieving the Dream has made this a priority initiative in its current work, and we look forward to hearing more from them as the work progresses.

TIPS FOR IMPLEMENTATION:

- Implement a structure for change work that includes both horizontal and vertical spread.
- Find and reward champions of change at all levels.
- Have succession plans to keep engaging people as turnover occurs.
- Provide incentives, release time, and other supports.
- Use professional development as a tool for large-scale, ongoing engagement.
- Develop an engagement plan specifically for adjuncts.

TOOLS AND RESOURCES (HYPERLINKS BELOW OR URLS LISTED IN THE RESOURCE SECTION):

- Effective strategies for engaging faculty and staff: Achieving the Dream (Resource 1)
- Strengthening the role of part-time faculty: Center for Community College Student Engagement (Resource 9)
- Principles and practices of constructive faculty engagement: Achieving the Dream and Public Agenda (Resource 3)



EXTERNAL PARTNERS MAKE A DIFFERENCE IN MOVING INSTITUTIONAL CHANGE FORWARD, PROVIDING LEARNING NETWORKS, AND SUPPORTING PUBLIC, MUTUAL ACCOUNTABILITY.

External partners - national organizations, grantmakers, collaborating colleges, and partners outside of the community and technical college system - can play a key role in helping colleges move institutional change forward.

National organizations and grantmakers provide explicit guidelines and expectations that help colleges stay focused on their tasks and goals. They can also be helpful in moderating internal conflict; it can serve a constructive purpose to be able to say that a grant requires the college to wrestle with certain key issues or practices. They can also provide frameworks or structures that colleges find valuable in helping them to conceptualize and organize their change work. And they can provide information on promising practices and connections to peers across the country.

In addition, engaging in collaborative partnerships—whether vertical (K-12, community college, and four year school), horizontal (a network of fellow colleges), or multi-sector (community based, business, and workforce organizations)—builds a support structure that promotes motivation, knowledge generation, dissemination of improvements in policies and practices, staying on track and moving forward.

Vertical networks can also provide a way to build a “structural equity” pipeline. These are described by the Aspen Institute as coordinated, collaborative efforts that include community colleges in a larger ecosystem of institutions to build partnerships intended to change the structural inequities that constrain educational and career success (Aspen Institute, June 2016). One promising local example of this is Diversifying Pathways, a structural equity project that partners two local school districts with Everett Community College and the University of Washington-Bothell.

The use of learning networks is seen in the community college change field as an important

source of organizational innovation, transformation, and dissemination. It is a key component of continuous improvement in education, discussed below in the Evaluation section. Gehrke and Kezar identify faculty “communities of transformation” in the STEM reform area whose in-depth rethinking of science pedagogy is seen as having real potential to address the underrepresentation of women and people of color. They describe these networks as going beyond faculty development and best practice dissemination to working on shifting departmental cultures and institutional norms (Gehrke and Kezar, 2016).

Washington has systems-level infrastructure for supporting external partner change work that many other states do not. The State Board for Community and Technical Colleges provides a variety of resources and supports for institutional change work, including research, policy and practice innovations, technical assistance, and strategic engagement of the state system’s structure - the presidents’ organization, commissions, councils, etc. - to generate and spread innovation and change and to promote learning networks.

TIPS FOR IMPLEMENTATION:

- Expand the role of external partners by engaging them as critical participants in broad institutional change efforts—beyond discrete, isolated efforts such as advisory committees or individual projects.
- Consider forming structured learning networks to advance change.

TOOLS AND RESOURCES (HYPERLINKS BELOW OR URLS LISTED IN THE RESOURCE SECTION):

- Using cross-sector partnerships to advance structural equity: The Aspen Institute (Resource 5)
- Community engagement and strategic partnerships: Public Agenda (Resource 20)
- Networked Improvement Communities: Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching (Resource 17)



INSTITUTIONAL CHANGE IS A COMPLEX, NON-LINEAR PROCESS.

Transformational change is continuous and iterative—and it is essential to build in mechanisms that ensure this happens. While most would readily agree with the first part of that sentence, it is in the implementation where the continuous component can break down, under the pressures of daily work demands. When change ends up being treated by default as a series of elements that can be checked off a list, the process of transformation is likely to slow and eventually stop. Below we describe several key elements we see as critical for this approach to change.

Evaluation, learning, and continuous improvement. Even with AtD’s emphasis on culture of evidence and its data and reporting requirements, evaluation practices at some of the colleges were sporadic and at times treated more as an add-on than an integral part of the work. We see incorporating internal evaluation practices through a learning and continuous improvement lens as a critical component of institutional change. It allows colleges to capture lessons learned, make course corrections, and develop, test, and improve new approaches.

The role of evaluation, learning, and continuous improvement in fostering successful change is strongly supported by national work on developmental evaluation and improvement science. Developmental evaluation emphasizes the role of evaluation in fostering innovation, learning and change, including awareness of and responsiveness to local contexts and systems dynamics. Evaluators engage change participants in reflective practice, and provide rapid, user-friendly feedback to support learning, adaptation, and continued innovation. This also helps colleges adapt their change work to fit their own starting points and cultures (Bragg et.al., 2014).

Continuous improvement, also called improvement science, focuses on using near and midterm progress measures to quickly assess how implementation is working and to allow for rapid adaptation and adjustment of the work in response to what is learned about both successes and problems that arise. Local context, organization structures and processes, work roles and relationships, and systems reform are also core elements of continuous improvement (Park, Hironaka, Carver & Nordstrum, 2013).

The central role of the integrator in making institutional change happen.

At those colleges where some real institutional change took place, we found that there were key people who served as integrators, or “orchestra conductors” - strategic thinkers who stayed on top of what was happening and helped tie bits and pieces together into coherent packages that helped move transformational change. These were not people in positions of high authority, but were relatively neutral, trusted actors who were seen as helpers and supporters of change.

At one AtD college, it was the institutional research head; at another, a grants and special projects director and the institutional research team; at a third, a dean; and at a fourth, a faculty member. Part of this role, too, includes a deliberate effort to help the college to build on prior successful work and to use what is being learned to inform future efforts.

These different people had in common a strategic vision for AtD; broad knowledge of the college and its systems and people; the willingness to put in the time to check in on the different moving parts of AtD; the skills to provide support and help solve problems, to evaluate progress, showcase successes, and help teams make course corrections when needed. Without this active weaving together of the parts, the individual initiatives tend to stay in fragmented form and do not serve as a strong base for institutional change.

TIPS FOR IMPLEMENTATION:

- Build continuous improvement and evaluation processes into transformation work as required components.
- Identify and support leads/integrators who have the strategic vision, institutional knowledge, relationships, and technical skills to advance the work of transformative change and weave all parts of the initiative together.

TOOLS AND RESOURCES (HYPERLINKS BELOW OR URLS LISTED IN THE RESOURCE SECTION):

- Using evaluation as a tool to scale transformative change: Transformative Change Initiative (Resource 10)
- Framing questions for evaluation and continuous improvement: Achieving the Dream and Public Agenda (Resource 4)
- A five-step evaluation process: Achieving the Dream (Resource 2)

Conclusion

Based on our assessment of the progress made by the 10 Washington community and technical colleges participating in Achieving the Dream during 2011-2015 in achieving institutional change, the lessons learned from these colleges, and a review of national research, we have identified the following as critical success factors for colleges:

- Active, engaged, and ongoing leadership support, especially at the president level. However, leadership must be shared, fully using the organizational structure of the college.
- Institutional change grounded in core values and vision (for example, improving the lives of students, social justice, and equity). This can help keep institutional change efforts focused on the bigger picture and on track.
- Broad and deep engagement of faculty and staff in institutional change efforts at both the intervention and institutional level. This requires structures, processes, and supports (for example, release time, stipends, and reassignment of some existing responsibilities).
- Solid institutional research capacity and its strategic use as part of institutional change. This includes the regular, routine use of data and information (for example, quantitative data on student outcomes and qualitative information from faculty and student focus groups) to evaluate and improve programs and services.
- Willingness to make needed changes in policy, practice, systems, and allocation of resources (for example, making things mandatory and strategically leveraging grants to support reform efforts).

External partners such as national organizations, grantmakers, and agencies such as the State Board for Community and Technical Colleges can play a key role in helping colleges move forward on institutional change. Their positive contributions include providing a framework or model for change, providing coaching and/or training (for example, change management), sharing information on related research and promising practices, making connections to peers elsewhere in the country that are further along in the work, convening cohort colleges to facilitate learning across colleges, and promoting accountability through mechanisms such as reporting requirements.

External partners can apply these lessons learned from AtD—both in terms of the critical success factors for colleges in making progress on institutional change and their own positive contributions to help move that work forward—in future initiatives. For example, overall design of reform efforts, grant application guidelines, targeted funding to support key change elements, self-evaluation requirements, and technical support can all be targeted to promote specific approaches that appear to have a meaningful impact on transformative change.

Resources

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