

Achieving the Dream: Community Colleges Count

**Advancing a Public Policy Agenda in Washington
State:
Report on SBCTC College & Policy Sessions**

**February 1, 2010
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Public Policy Agenda**

Introduction

Achieving the Dream: Community Colleges Count is a national initiative to help more community college students succeed, with particular attention to student groups that have traditionally faced significant barriers to success, including students of color and low income students. More specifically, AtD focuses on:

- Creating a culture of evidence for decisionmaking and student intervention strategies
- Increasing student success for low income and academically under-prepared students
- Aligning K-12 and postsecondary education to ease student transitions
- Increasing need based financial aid

As part of the initiative, Achieving the Dream (AtD) provides institution-level support to participating colleges. With funding from College Spark Washington and management support from the State Board for Community and Technical Colleges (SBCTC), participating Washington colleges are: Big Bend Community College, Highline Community College, Renton Technical College, Seattle Central Community College, Tacoma Community College, and Yakima Valley Community College.

Since 2006, these colleges have developed and implemented a wide range of intervention strategies to help more students succeed, including efforts to improve advising and developmental education; engage students in the classroom through new instructional techniques such as team teaching and integrated learning; and use student or college success courses to teach skills such as time management and effective study skills. Colleges have tracked student cohorts to evaluate and improve the effectiveness of their interventions.

AtD also supports research, public engagement, and public policy. As part of the initiative, states have made a commitment to pursue the following policy priorities:

- Develop visible public policy commitment to student access and success
- Strengthen state data systems to measure student outcomes and encourage higher performance
- Better align community colleges and other levels of education
- Provide incentives for improved services for academically under- prepared students
- Expand access to financial aid and other financial incentives that increase persistence

- Build strong public support for policies that promote access and success

As one way to help advance a public policy agenda for AtD, the State Board for Community and Technical Colleges convened two sessions in the fall of 2009. The first session brought together teams from each of the colleges participating in AtD to share promising practices and lessons learned and identify the policy implications of their work. The second session brought together representatives from the legislature, foundations, the SBCTC, partner agencies (state, local and nonprofit), AtD colleges, and AtD partners including College Spark Washington and Jobs for the Future to engage them in the work, identify major policy issues needing to be addressed to improve success rates among low income and academically underprepared students, and build momentum for policy change.

This report summarizes the results of the two sessions and identifies possible next steps.

(More information on AtD can be found at www.achievingthedream.org. More information on Washington state's AtD efforts, including a state policy report, can be found at www.collegespark.org.)

Promising Practices, Lessons Learned & Policy Implications

Promising Practices

The six Washington community and technical colleges participating in Achieving the Dream have developed and implemented a variety of intervention strategies to improve success rates among low income students and academically under-prepared students. Specific efforts highlighted at the AtD college session included:

- Tacoma Community College – Tacoma Community College's advisor dashboard was created in response to the need for a comprehensive advising tool and a way to track and report advising data. Advisors and administrators worked with colleagues in information systems to create the dashboard, which allows advisors to access transcripts, courses transferred in from other colleges, test scores and electronic education plans created by students. Advisors can upload documents into a student's file, input comments from each advising contact, and keep a list of activities completed and referrals made. The dashboard also tracks academic progress, giving advisors information relevant to momentum points, GPA, early alerts, and completion of the college's student success seminar.

The advisor dashboard supports the student-advisor relationship and has become a necessary tool in the advising process at Tacoma Community College.

- Renton Technical College – Renton Technical College's flexible data reporting system aids faculty, staff and administrators in asking research questions and disaggregating

retention data by student demographics and other characteristics such as program and department. The system uses Microsoft Excel. As a result, it is easy to use, on most PCs, and requires minimal training. About 40 percent of all full time employees have access to the system. Vocational-technical faculty have access to retention data by cohorts, job placement estimates, economic forecast data, and student evaluations specific to their programs.

- Highline Community College – Highline Community College’s formulation of critical questions for research engages faculty, staff, and administrators in analyzing and using data to develop intervention strategies for improving student success rates.

College data suggested that students with multiple developmental-level placements stood out as high risk. Nearly half of all English 91 classes are made up of students with this profile. English 91 instructors met with academic advising staff and developed an intervention strategy that includes academic advisors visiting all English 91 class to provide advising, students investigating and then writing an essay about their career and academic goals, and students meeting with other students having similar career and academic goals. After providing this intervention for two years, the percent of students who persist has increased as has the percent who earned a 2.0 or higher in English 91.

College data also showed that very few non-credit ESL students transition into college level courses, even though the vast majority say they want to continue into college level studies. The college’s response was to focus on advising and intrusive student information to help students navigate the transition. Results show an increase in the percent of ESL students transitioning to college level study.

- Seattle Central Community College – Seattle Central Community College’s pre-college math initiative features:
 - A cohort approach that enables students to continue as a group with the same instructor throughout the three quarter developmental math sequence
 - Supplemental instruction, including tutors
 - A study skills course
 - A success coach to foster student retention and persistence

As a result of these interventions, student success rates have improved.

- Yakima Valley Community College – Yakima Valley Community College’s fall student survey was created to help the college identify areas in which to focus its efforts at improving student success and developing intervention strategies. The survey is organized around several areas of investigation, including:

- Academic challenge
- Use of and satisfaction with services
- Relationships with the college and its personnel
- Barriers to attendance

Early survey results pointed to a need to better understand barriers to persistence and perceptions that the college wasn't supportive. The college conducted follow up focus groups with students and then developed intervention strategies such as new student orientation, an academic early warning system, and advisor training. Follow up surveys showed increases in the percent of students reporting participation in new student orientation, use of support services, and help coping with nonacademic responsibilities.

- Big Bend Community College – Big Bend Community College's dashboard provides automated "snapshots" of data to faculty, staff, administrators, and students, and fosters data driven decisionmaking. Key features of the dashboards include:
 - Timely, accurate, and consistent data
 - Easy to read and use reporting tools
 - Wide availability, with dashboards accessible to any administrator, faculty, staff or student with a college email account
 - Drill down capabilities

Currently, one "live" dashboard reports FTE counts (annualized and quarterly). Another dashboard will report retention trends among student cohorts and types of awards earned among completers. Additional dash-boards to be designed include course success rates/grade distributions, annual student characteristics, graduates/certificates/completions, and budget information.

Lessons Learned

Lessons learned from the AtD work, as identified at the AtD college session, include:

Culture of Evidence

AtD has generated growing demand for and interest in data among faculty, staff, and administrators in identifying barriers to student success, developing intervention strategies to improve success rates, and then evaluating their effectiveness.

Data use has evolved over time, from initial efforts to raise awareness about the importance of using data to developing ways to make data more accessible and user-friendly. One college participant called this “the democratization of data”: increasing access to and understanding of data as well as data use by a much broader set of people than research staff alone. Colleges are also much more conscious of the need to tailor data presentations for specific audiences. By making data more accessible and easy to understand, they are better able to communicate big picture issues to a wide variety of people.

This broader use of data has begun to cross both functions and levels, with the involvement of some combination of high level administrators, faculty, student services staff, institutional researchers, and information technology staff. Where this happens, it is creating some major structural and functional changes. In some places, this has been promoted by the creation of a single central information/data source—an Office of Institutional Effectiveness that brings together strategic planning with institutional research and information technology. This has allowed the whole campus to speak the same data language, to reduce data silos, meet a variety of data needs more quickly, and make the database process clearer so they are able to publish more user-friendly data. Other campuses have found ways to create such cross-functional partnerships using interested faculty and staff without the creation of a new office. All report much more use of data on campus.

Colleges find themselves moving well beyond simply using data to show trends, and are using data findings to guide broader strategic thinking and decisionmaking. Faculty are being taught to conduct inquiry-based research with student data so they can make the best decisions about how to teach and advise. There is more awareness of the importance of combining high quality quantitative and qualitative data in order to get a full understanding of student experiences and needs. AtD teams and their institutional researchers say they are becoming not just research producers but research educators and analysts. They find themselves asking deeper, more reflective questions of the data, and would like to have statewide conversations about how they can find or build better analytic tools to move forward with more useful data analysis. And, as the demand for data analysis and education is growing—a desired outcome of Achieving the Dream—the resources available to answer this increase in demand are not keeping pace. Coupled with a very difficult economic climate, this presents real stresses and strains on AtD teams.

These advancements in the use of data and creation of a broader culture of evidence are in turn leading to the desire to learn how to take the lessons and stories the data are telling into the policy arena, whether it is at the institutional or state level, so the colleges can start moving forward on some of the needed changes that data analyses have identified. As one participant in the AtD college session said, “Now what can we do to start making the changes we’ve shown we need? How do we make real change happen?”

Student Success

AtD has helped bring student success to the forefront for community and technical colleges, providing a strategic direction and framework. As part of AtD, colleges have developed and implemented a wide variety of intervention strategies to help more students succeed, including efforts to improve advising and developmental education; engage students in the classroom through new instructional techniques such as team teaching and integrated learning; and use student or college success courses to teach skills such as time management and effective study skills.

In the area of advising, colleges participating in AtD are very committed to using early warning system databases to catch at-risk students early on, and to provide advising when they see those warning signs, without waiting for students to come to them. This reflects several changes based on what they have learned from AtD and other student success-related efforts:

- “Intrusive advising”—advising that is actively undertaken by college personnel—is often necessary, since students who are at-risk do not necessarily seek it out on their own.
- An early warning system that monitors student achievement and related behaviors such as attendance is an essential part of providing such advising.
- “High touch” advising—advising that includes regular interaction between advisors and students, especially as student systems become increasingly organized online—is an essential component of supporting students. A continuum of advising services to fit varying student needs is most effective in helping students succeed.

There is also growing awareness of the need for contextualized, integrated learning and instruction such as that provided by Integrated Basic Education and Skills Training (I-BEST). Here, there are three issues. I-BEST reaches only a small portion of all ABE/ESL students. I-BEST, while providing ABE/ESL students technical training, does not necessarily provide the related instruction required to move directly into college level study. And there is the need to apply the I-BEST approach to developmental education.

Alignment

There continues to be a significant disconnect between K-12 and the colleges with respect to both student data and curriculum. This is, as in other states across the country, a particular concern in the area of math. While the colleges say that the state’s Transition Math Project has been helpful in reducing some of the gap between K-12 and college expectations, there is still a very high level of frustration with the structural and territorial barriers between high school and

the community and technical college system in all areas and a strong belief that there is a need for a statewide policy platform to address this.

There is still much disagreement even within the colleges about math requirements: Do all students need calculus? Are colleges losing students because of college level math requirements that may not be necessary for all degrees? This continues to be what one college participant called “an all-out academic war.” The lack of resolution on this issue continues to limit alignment efforts.

Financial Aid

Flexible, timely financial aid—such as that provided by Opportunity Grants—is critical to student success. However, there is not enough to meet student need. Traditional forms of financial aid present a number of challenges for low income students. Applying for financial aid is a complicated, time consuming process. It can take up to six months to actually get financial aid, which can be a barrier to momentum. And assistance with nonacademic needs is limited.

Policy Implications

What needs to change to expand and strengthen intervention strategies begun as part of Achieving the Dream? Participants in the AtD college meeting identified the following policy implications of their work:

Culture of Evidence

- Increase resources (support and funding) for institutional researchers at the college level, as they move from being data reporters to taking on broader roles as research educators and analysts.
- Promote the “democratization of data” and improve transparency (for example, provide data access to all college personnel along with training, ensure data are meaningful to users, have clearly defined processes regarding data use and decisionmaking, etc.).
- Ensure college institutional researchers are supported by SBCTC, including more communication and provision of information such as data queries, professional development/training, and how to build analytical tools to deepen data analysis and pursue change.
- Purchase a new data information system that is universal and vendor controlled.
- Increase data sharing among agencies (e.g., K-12 and Employment Security) so that student outcomes can be better understood and tracked in order to improve them.

Student Success

- Expand high touch advising and support services for students, including early warning and support to overcome obstacles for at-risk students. Supports should be provided on a continuum and based on varying student needs, with fewer “silo” restrictions.
- Be more “directive” with students (e.g., mandatory placement, advising, and taking developmental math courses).
- Train faculty in advising.
- Make explicit efforts to identify and apply successful features of I-BEST and other innovative, effective programs across the system and to other students, in addition to expanding the coverage of such programs.
- Rethink how developmental education works and create concrete strategies to bridge the divide to college level courses. Use college-specific information about developmental education students in tailoring these strategies to match their needs.
- Establish a funding model that recognizes low income and academically underprepared students and incorporates more flexibility for them.
- Make the academic calendar more flexible to accommodate those who work or who periodically need to take time away from college.

Alignment

- Continue to work on bridging the gap between K-12 and the community and technical colleges in data use, curriculum, and goals.
- Create and promote statewide awareness of and a policy platform for improving connections between K-12 and the community and technical colleges.
- Continue looking at how to make dual enrollment programs such as Running Start more genuinely accessible to low income students.

Financial Aid

- Make sure student financial aid and support is adequate and accessible, even for those not eligible for traditional aid. Targeted financial aid needs to be more flexible and apply to more students.

Other

- Create a structure for AtD colleges to learn from each other and to communicate lessons to the other community and technical colleges.
- Create ways for K-12, the community and technical colleges, and the universities to share ideas and data on student outcomes.
- Start working on realistic, practical strategies to move from data use to making real changes happen based on the lessons from the data. Start discussing the shifting of resources based on the findings of student outcomes data.

Four Major Policy Actions to Increase the Success of Low Income and Academically Underprepared Students

Participants in the AtD policy session—representatives from the state legislature, foundations, SBCTC, partner agencies (state, local and nonprofit), AtD colleges, and AtD partners, including College Spark Washington and Jobs for the Future—identified four major policy actions that could significantly increase the success of low income and academically underprepared students:

- *Expand high touch advising and support services.* High touch advising and support services for low income and academically underprepared students need to be expanded. It is critical to help students navigate the system. Colleges also need to engage students wherever they are in terms of needs. Ideas that work include:
 - Mentoring.
 - Helping students with goal setting.
 - Building schedules around student needs.
 - Easy ways to refer students from one service to the next.
 - Anyone on campus being able to answer the first five questions a student may ask.
 - Linking services with community based organizations.

First steps toward change include gathering and analyzing data on the specific traits and needs of students at the different colleges; developing specific intervention strategies, based on analysis of the data; engaging campus stakeholders in the work; and building relationships and strengthening partnerships among them.

- *Increase student success in pre-college math.* Among changes that need to occur are providing incentives for math faculty to engage in retention strategies and curriculum

reform; helping students believe they have the ability to complete math – help them blossom; maintaining multiple pathways for students – move away from the assumption that all students need calculus; designing better recognized pathways between systems; increasing resources and supports for these efforts; and creating time for faculty in the different sectors to get together and work through these issues.

Strategies and partnerships needed for change include:

- Teaching study skills and college skills in math classes.
- Expanding efforts to align the K-12 curriculum with college math.

A first step toward change is for AtD colleges to create incentives for math faculty to engage in one or both of these strategies.

- *Redefine implementation policies of WorkFirst in the state.* The goal of WorkFirst needs to change from getting employment—any job will do—to providing long term economic self-sufficiency to help people get off and stay off TANF.

Strategies and partnerships needed for change include:

- Focusing on updating people’s skills to reach the “tipping point” and beyond.
- Bringing partners together—including the Department of Social and Health Services, SBCTC, Employment Security, the Workforce Training and Education Coordinating Board, labor, business, and community based organizations—and agreeing on the overarching goal and ways to accomplish that goal.

First steps toward change include gathering data to show the current policy is not effective; talking to the Governor about changing the policy and goals; and calling a summit of stakeholders to discuss the problem and the need for a unified goal and outcomes.

- *Restructure state financial aid, making it more flexible to better meet the needs of low income students – much like the original Opportunity Grants.* Among the changes that need to occur are increasing the amount of grants that go to students to cover the actual costs of college attendance; increasing the flexibility of grants so that colleges can help cover emergency costs associated with low income students attending college (e.g., transportation, electricity bills, equipment costs, and other unanticipated expenses); and helping decisionmakers understand the changing nature of today’s student population and their needs – too many have had a traditional college-going experience.

Strategies and partnerships needed for change include:

- Hiring coordinators/case managers to help support Adult Education, WorkFirst and Worker Retraining students navigate and acquire adequate financial aid from a variety of sources, with a focus on unmet needs.
- Changing state policies to minimize gaps in unmet need and provide colleges flexibility to meet students' emergency needs.
- Partnering effectively with foundations, workforce development councils, and community based organizations to meet students' financial needs.

A first step toward change is to communicate the incompatibility of financial aid policies and the needs of low income community and technical college students.

Next Steps

Next steps in moving an Achieving the Dream public policy agenda forward include:

- Gather and analyze data and information to make the case for the four policy actions stakeholders identified as key to increasing the success of low income and academically underprepared students. For example:
 - High touch advising and support services – Document the colleges' strategic interventions around advising, including what led to them, and their impact on student success. This includes gathering and analyzing data on the outcomes of such interventions as well as conducting interviews and/or focus groups with college faculty, staff, administrators, and students.
 - WorkFirst – Document the shortcomings of current WorkFirst policies through analysis of WorkFirst outcomes (e.g., education, employment and earnings) and interviews and/or focus groups with college faculty, staff, and administrators, and current and former WorkFirst participants.
 - Financial aid – Document the difficulties with traditional financial aid and the benefits of flexible, timely financial aid such as that provided by Opportunity Grants, including their impact on student success. This includes gathering and analyzing data on outcomes associated with financial aid programs and conducting interviews and/or focus groups with college staff and students receiving aid, not receiving but eligible for aid, and those who had to drop out because of lack of financial aid or problems with financial aid.
- Engage stakeholders—including college faculty, staff, administrators, and students; SBCTC board and staff; other state agencies; and allies—in this effort. This includes sharing promising practices developed through AtD, their outcomes, the lessons

learned, and their policy implications. It also includes engaging these stakeholders in gathering and analyzing data and information to make the case for policy change. And it includes involving them in developing specific policy proposals.

- Develop concrete policy proposals that are data driven and evidence based.
- Build coalitions in support of the policy proposals.