



Achieving the Dream™

Community Colleges Count

COMMUNITY AND FACULTY ENGAGEMENT

Engaging Faculty in Data Collection and Analysis and in Redesigning Courses at Sinclair Community College

From "Engaging Faculty in the Achieving the Dream Initiative" by Lara Birnback and Will Friedman from the series Principles and Practices of Student Success

Even before joining Achieving the Dream, Sinclair Community College had an active institutional research (IR) department. However, faculty rarely saw the data that the IR office collected and even more rarely discussed or thought about how to use the information. One of the first things the college did after joining the initiative was to bring faculty and staff together at a "data retreat" to examine and discuss student success data.

Participants in the retreat found that their most at-risk students were especially struggling with math and English and decided to involve faculty from developmental studies, along with the math and English departments, in a problem-solving group to address the challenge.

Ultimately, they merged the work of faculty in these priority areas into two AQIP (Academic Quality Improvement Program) projects the college developed for reaccreditation: math and writing success. The work teams for these two AQIP projects were led by faculty and were composed of faculty and staff from across the college.

While most of the attention at the initial data retreat and other planning meetings was on quantitative data, it became clear that there was also a need to collect qualitative data from students to help design appropriate strategies. Sinclair's Achieving the Dream project director asked permission to interview students in ten developmental math and English classes to find out about their experiences in these courses. The faculty were assured that all information collected would remain confidential. Students were asked about various aspects of their experience in the given class, such as where their needs were being met, where they were struggling, and how the course could be improved. After the notes were compiled, the Achieving the Dream project director met individually with each faculty member to discuss what was heard, and finally, the entire group met together to look for patterns in the data and discuss possible solutions to the problems identified.

The developmental course faculty who had been involved in these interviews greatly valued hearing what students were saying about their classes, and for their part, students appreciated the opportunity to talk about their experiences. Despite some early fears that students would focus on personal problems and gripes, responses focused on practical ways in which students thought things could be improved, such as the suggestion that students be allowed to work in the computer lab and that faculty post notes and worksheets online.

The faculty concluded that these class interviews should be held during the middle of the term, so that instructors would still have time to make changes before the end of the course. They also believed that other faculty members would enjoy learning about their students' experiences. They became the first faculty to become interview facilitators and note-takers for Sinclair's mid-quarter student interviews, a process that had a faculty grassroots beginning. Each quarter, all full- and part-time faculty are invited to participate in a mid-quarter class interview. The interviews are facilitated by two faculty volunteers who ask the class ten questions and share the responses with the faculty member.

At the request of the writing success AQIP team, faculty interviewed the students in all sections of developmental English as well as those enrolled in the first credit-bearing English course — more than thirty classes in all. The English and developmental writing faculty created a “best practices” Web site where they could share what they had learned with the larger college teaching community. In addition, they worked together to write a successful “learning challenge grant” that enabled them to hire an outside expert on the teaching of grammar for professional development sessions.

Next, the Achieving the Dream project director suggested to the math AQIP team that it use mid-quarter interviews to gather student information to guide a revision of “MAT 101— Introduction to College Algebra,” a course with a high failure rate. A team of four math faculty developed a questionnaire to ask students about computer-based instruction. Faculty also visited twenty-five sections of MAT 101 to interview students and to complete the questionnaire. The Achieving the Dream project director met with four math faculty to review the raw data, ensuring that there would be no misinterpretation and empowering the faculty to perform the analysis themselves. Based on the data, the course was substantially reworked, and faculty designed a pilot course to improve student success by using computer software, class tutors, lab time, and other student engagement activities. Ultimately, as part of the math AQIP work, the curriculum was revised into a new, slower-paced three-course series — MAT 191, 192, and 193 — which produced a measurable, if modest, increase in student success.

Following the pilot year, full-time math faculty members formed a learning community where they discussed changes in how the course sequence was taught. These faculty met with the Achieving the Dream project director to standardize the MAT 191–193 course sequence so that every faculty member who taught the courses was covering the same units, administering the same tests and quizzes, and using standardized grading procedures.

This faculty collaboration has produced positive changes in success rates in these courses. The process of regular meetings to discuss what was working and what was not, and to constantly make improvements, has been well received by faculty who participated. These same faculty are now training other full- and part-time math faculty on this new math series.

Sinclair reports that the process of working together on student success has been valuable for the math faculty who have been involved to date, improving working relationships and collegiality within the department and producing concrete results for students. The next step is for the college to find ways to engage faculty through its new Center for Teaching and Learning, which will provide support for faculty to learn more about effective teaching methods.

Breaking down the Silos: South Texas College, McAllen, Texas

From ATD's Field Guide for Improving Student Success

Serving counties along the U.S.-Mexico border in southeastern Texas, South Texas College (STC) has a predominantly Hispanic student population. About 50 percent of students are considered low-income, nearly 40 percent are first-generation college students, and 71 percent receive financial aid.

STC joined Achieving the Dream in 2004 to learn how to better serve the educational needs of its students. At that point, STC made a strategic decision to institutionalize Achieving the Dream work into the college's existing processes. All Achieving the Dream initiatives are included in STC's strategic plan, and the college is using a template model — in which decisions are driven by data and analysis — for institutionalizing interventions.

Achieving the Dream provided STC with the framework to systematically and objectively review college policies and practices for their impact on student success. STC began to leverage qualitative research methods to gain a deeper understanding of the barriers that students were facing. This understanding led to several changes:

- STC reorganized its Office of Institutional Research and Effectiveness into three distinct operations focused on data management, research and analysis, and evaluation.
- STC established the Office of Student Learning Outcomes and Assessment and formed an administrative-level research, reporting, assessment, and planning team led by the director of research and analytical services.
- STC has invested heavily in faculty professional development with a focus on improving student success.
- STC also sought to break down operational silos and improve communication and collaboration at the college. Now, college personnel routinely identify issues in need of attention and then propose interventions to address the problem identified. Each intervention is regularly assessed and has a “refine or abandon” point.

Through this collaborative, campus-wide effort, STC has learned many valuable lessons, including:

- The quantity and quality of questions will increase rapidly and in relationship to the implementation of Achieving the Dream principles.
- Automation of basic data reporting tasks is essential to keep up with demand. Data collection and tracking must become routine at every level.
- Rather than simply reporting data and expecting recipients to use it, researchers must bridge the gap by supplying interpretation and recommending strategies suggested by the data.
- Capacity must be built throughout the organization for effective assessment, evaluation, and use of data for decision-making.
- A culture of excellence based on evidence requires institutional systems and processes, as well as projects and interventions.
- Changes in organizational structure and processes must be evaluated.

Community Conversations Spur Student Success Initiatives: University of New Mexico at Gallup

From ATD's Field Guide for Improving Student Success

The University of New Mexico–Gallup (UNM–Gallup) has the largest Native American student population of any public two-year college in the United States. It is located in the poorest county in New Mexico (and one of the poorest in the nation) and its large Native American population has been subject to significant historical trauma that has resulted in a legacy of distrust of educational institutions.

Upon joining Achieving the Dream, UNM–Gallup set out to build community involvement. In thinking about all those whose support could help students succeed, UNM–Gallup committed to widening the circle beyond the usual suspects. Engaging in community conversations was a key strategy.



With assistance from Achieving the Dream, UNM–Gallup established a college and community leadership team composed of members from the Zuni Adult Basic Education Center, the New Mexico Department of Health, the Navajo Nation Program for Self Reliance, the Coalition for Healthy and Resilient Youth, school board members, and the New Mexico Workforce Connection, Northern Area, among others.

This broadly inclusive team then:

- Analyzed the community’s assets and barriers with respect to student success Assessed the strengths and weaknesses of the college–community relationship Constructed a historical timeline illustrating the trends in educational access and equity in the region. This timeline has become a community asset that has been widely disseminated to generate awareness and discussion.
- Organized a broad-based community conversation (called a “Talking Circle”) to engage even more community members in a moderated discussion of how to help students achieve their goals, and to agree upon solutions and strategies. The college saw this as an opportunity to reach out to the Navajo and Zuni communities in a substantive way. For some of the more than 150 participants, the event was their first time on campus, and that alone was an important step toward building a stronger relationship between the college and the community.

Several tangible benefits have resulted, including the following:

- A permanent student success campus committee has been formed with members of the college and external community.
- The college held a Campus Conversation to engage faculty and staff in a dialogue about student success and reestablished the K–20 Task Force, which will identify further strategies focused on college readiness.
- The Student Senate is co-sponsoring events and focusing their activities on building student success.