

# The Achieving the Dream Initiative

Achieving the Dream is a multiyear national initiative to help more community college students succeed. The initiative is particularly concerned about student groups that traditionally have faced the most significant barriers to success, including low-income students and students of color. Achieving the Dream emphasizes the use of data to drive change and focuses on measurable outcomes, especially closing achievement gaps.

Achieving the Dream works on multiple fronts, including broad-based change at participating colleges; research into effective practices at community colleges; public policy work; and outreach to communities, businesses and the public. Improving student outcomes, particularly for students of color and low-income students, is at the core of every part of this multilayered initiative.

The initiative includes 10 national partner organizations, 27 community colleges that joined the initiative in 2004, eight community colleges that joined the initiative in 2005 and many dedicated individuals. Lumina Foundation for Education provided funding for the initiative's startup and is providing ongoing funding for many of the participating colleges as well as other elements of the work. KnowledgeWorks Foundation and Nellie Mae Education Foundation are providing additional funding to help support colleges that joined the initiative in 2005.

### Instituting change at the participating colleges

- Through Achieving the Dream, participating colleges assess what is happening on their campuses in an open, straightforward and rigorous way — and then make lasting changes in their own practices and cultures. Colleges adopt strategies to improve students' achievement, closely monitor students' and the college's progress, and share their findings broadly.
- The 27 colleges that started their work in 2004 are located in five states: Florida, New Mexico, North Carolina, Texas and Virginia. These states were chosen because they have community colleges that enroll large numbers of low-income students and students of color. These states also have demonstrated interest in implementing state policies that promote access to and success in community colleges.
- In 2005, five colleges in Ohio and three in Connecticut joined the initiative.
- Each participating college has the support of a coach and a data facilitator. Achieving the Dream coaches, many of whom are former college presidents, have strong track records as organizational leaders. They help the colleges develop strategies, set priorities and implement institutional improvements. The data facilitators, generally trained as institutional researchers, help the colleges analyze data about their students and use data to develop strategies for improvement, monitor progress and evaluate results.
- Colleges evaluate their own student data — overall data as well as data broken down by various student groups. They gather input from their students, faculty, staff and communities. They then adopt strategies for improvement based on these findings.

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Colleges' plans include concrete changes in specific practices, such as a sharper focus on effective developmental education, and less tangible shifts in attitudes and approaches, such as improving institutional research capacity so decisions are based on actual outcomes.

- Achieving the Dream colleges do not work in isolation to improve student outcomes. Rather, they work in partnership with their communities — K–12 education leaders, businesses, social service and civic organizations, and other higher education institutions — as well as with the initiative's national partner organizations, state policy organizations and other participating community colleges.
- Through a Lumina Foundation for Education grant to Scholarship America, 11 Achieving the Dream colleges are providing emergency aid for students. A community college student may be forced to drop out of school because he or she can't afford to buy books, pay a car-repair bill or pay for temporary child care. Scholarship America helps colleges address needs such as these, which typically arise after other forms of financial aid already have been assigned.

#### Research, public policy and public support

- Achieving the Dream participants are conducting research and advancing knowledge on issues related to improving student outcomes at community colleges.

- Achieving the Dream participants are working to build public support for community college access and success.
- Achieving the Dream participants are advocating public policies that may lead to higher student achievement. Examples of such policies include policies to improve state capacity for collecting and analyzing student data and policies related to making financial aid more accessible to part-time students.
- The organizations leading the state policy efforts are the Florida Department of Education, KnowledgeWorks Foundation (OH), New Mexico Association of Community Colleges, North Carolina Community College System, Texas Association of Community Colleges and Virginia Community College System.

#### National partners

- Achieving the Dream has 10 national partner organizations strategically selected to bring their diverse strengths and expertise to the common goal of helping community colleges better serve their students.
- The national partner organizations are: the American Association of Community Colleges; Community College Leadership Program, University of Texas at Austin; Community College Research Center, Teachers College, Columbia University; Jobs for the Future; KnowledgeWorks Foundation; Lumina Foundation for Education; MDC; MDRC; Nellie Mae Education Foundation; and Public Agenda.

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