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Building a Culture of Evidence for Community College Student Success

Early Progress in the Achieving the Dream Initiative

Overview

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In 2003, Lumina Foundation for Education launched a bold, multiyear, national initiative called *Achieving the Dream: Community Colleges Count*, to help students stay in school and succeed. The initiative is focused particularly on students who have faced the most barriers to success, including low-income students and students of color. Initially, 27 community colleges in five states joined the initiative; there are now 82 institutions in 15 states.

Participating colleges commit to collecting and analyzing data to improve student outcomes — a process known as “building a culture of evidence.” Specifically, colleges mine transcripts and gather other information to understand how students are faring over time and which groups need the most assistance. From this work, colleges implement strategies to improve academic outcomes. Colleges evaluate their strategies, expand effective ones, and use data to guide budgeting and other institutional decisions. Participating colleges receive a \$50,000 planning grant followed by a four-year, \$400,000 implementation grant, along with assistance from expert advisers hired by the initiative. This report describes the progress that the first 27 colleges have made after planning and one year of implementation. The key findings are:

- **As expected, institutional measures reveal low rates of success at baseline.** Before the initiative was launched, colleges reported that, on average, only about 30 percent of students who were referred to introductory college English completed the course within three years. For introductory math, the rate was about 20 percent.
- **The colleges embraced the goal of building a culture of evidence.** The presidents at the colleges generally showed strong leadership, and every college created at least a small team to plan and implement Achieving the Dream.
- **About half the colleges used data analysis to identify problems to address on their campuses.** Colleges were not always sure about how to respond to what they had learned from the data, however. Some colleges struggled because their research offices were understaffed or their computer systems were weak.

- **Colleges implemented a wide array of strategies to improve student success**, including strengthening academic advising and orientation programs, revamping developmental education, and offering professional development for faculty and staff.
- **Six colleges showed signs of institutionalizing a culture of evidence after only one year.** Most other colleges showed signs of progress.

The evaluation team will return to the colleges over the next few years to determine what further progress they — and their students — have made. A final report is planned for 2010.