



# BUILDING STUDENT SUCCESS FROM THE GROUND UP

A Case Study of an  
*Achieving the Dream* College

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## Executive Summary

Crowding the lawns and parking lots of their expansive campus in Jamestown, North Carolina, the students at Guilford Technical Community College are as diverse as they are numerous. Over 10,000 undergraduates enrolled in fall 2008 to become civil engineers, auto technicians, paralegals, hotel managers, and nurses, to name a few of the dozens of programs offered at the college. These students range from recent high school graduates with plans to transfer to four-year institutions, to middle-aged workers pursuing career advancement. They hail from over 30 countries, representing multiple racial and ethnic groups. Fifty-five percent receive some form of financial aid, while 47 percent attend college part time, often because of full-time jobs and family commitments. As at many community colleges, the majority of these students place into developmental, or remedial, education, and far fewer graduate than they or Guilford would like.

In 2004, Guilford applied to Achieving the Dream: Community Colleges Count, a national initiative launched the year before by Lumina Foundation for Education. The initiative was designed to mentor colleges through an institution-wide improvement process focused on helping students succeed, particularly low-income students and students of color, by building a “culture of evidence” — that is, using data on student outcomes to make better-informed institutional and programming decisions. More specifically, colleges are asked to follow Achieving the Dream’s five-step improvement process, in which they (1) commit to institutional reform aimed at improving student success rates; (2) analyze data on student outcomes in order to identify barriers to student achievement and prioritize areas for reform; (3) engage a broad base of stakeholders in developing strategies to address priority problems; (4) implement, evaluate, and improve student success strategies; and (5) institutionalize and “scale up” effective policies and practices.

As colleges undertake this process, they are expected to improve their overall student success rates as measured by five key indicators: (1) completion of developmental education courses; (2) completion of introductory-level, or “gatekeeper,” college courses; (3) completion of courses with a C or higher; (4) persistence from term to term and year to year; and (5) attainment of a degree or certificate. The initiative provides a number of supports to assist colleges in these endeavors, including professional coaching, annual initiative-wide conferences, and grants totaling up to \$450,000 over five years.

Since joining Achieving the Dream, Guilford has transformed into a data-driven, success-oriented institution focused on systemic efforts to improve student achievement. Most of its numerous strategic interventions — ranging from a supplemental instruction program for developmental education students to a revamped orientation and streamlined intake process for

first-year students — have each been implemented and evaluated over time. Furthermore, several strategies have been scaled up based on promising student outcomes to reach increasing numbers of students.

Unlike many MDRC studies that use a random assignment methodology — in which members of a study sample are randomly assigned to either a program group, which receives the intervention being evaluated, or a control group, which does not, in order to measure the program’s impact — this analysis is based on qualitative interview data and trend data from Guilford. Trends in student outcomes are discussed in this report to illuminate the information that was available to the college as it made programming decisions and to highlight promising reforms. However, they are not experimentally derived program impacts, and thus should be interpreted as suggestive rather than causal proof of program effectiveness.

## Key Findings

Achieving the Dream has defined a rigorous set of steps for helping colleges build a culture of evidence and develop strategies for increasing student success. First, colleges are asked to develop tools to track student outcomes with sufficient accuracy and specificity to inform decision making. This step often requires colleges to build up both their technological and human research capacities, and generally results in a stronger focus on colleges’ institutional research (IR) departments. Colleges are then expected to use data to identify priority areas for reform and develop interventions for institutional improvement. Initiative leaders hope that colleges will engage a broad spectrum of faculty, staff, and administrators in this planning stage. Additionally, colleges are expected to implement, evaluate, and refine their intervention strategies as part of a continuous process that guides the institution’s decisions about strategic planning and resource allocation.

- **Despite initial setbacks with data collection and analysis, Guilford committed to three priorities for improving student success rates: (1) establishing a culture of evidence; (2) improving the experience of first-year students; and (3) improving developmental courses through the creation of learning communities.**

Like many Achieving the Dream colleges, Guilford joined the initiative with a limited IR capacity and unreliable data systems. The college was making the transition to a new data system and searching for a new IR director, both of which hindered its efforts to collect and analyze data. Furthermore, Guilford’s faculty and staff remained largely detached from the college’s IR department, viewing its main function as providing compliance reports for state and federal funding. These early difficulties hampered Guilford’s ability to use its own institutional data to identify target student groups, develop interventions, and engage the campus

community in data analysis during its first two years in the initiative. In response, Guilford first turned to available national and state data to support its efforts. After data analysis revealed challenges with students' retention, persistence, course success rates, and graduation rates, the college's leaders identified improving these success measures as their primary goal.

Guilford's numerous Achieving the Dream interventions were designed strategically around its three priority areas, leading to an array of new programs and supports for students in developmental and gatekeeper courses, as well as for first-year students generally. The college ultimately piloted 15 different strategies seeking to improve students' success rates and achievement. Several of these strategies were part of a menu of academic options targeting different types of developmental education students. For example, low-level developmental education students might benefit from an intensive reading, writing, and math program or from a slower-paced developmental math course spread over two semesters. Other developmental education students could also choose from an array of strategies, such as "student success" courses that teach skills to help students navigate through college; "learning communities," which strengthen classroom engagement by fostering peer relationships and building thematic connections across subject areas; self-paced math courses; courses paired with supplemental instruction; and a tutoring lab. Additional strategies focused on gatekeeper courses and enhanced supports for first-year students and other student subgroups.

- **Guilford's substantial investment in professional development for faculty and staff helped foster their commitment to and involvement in the college's student success strategies.**

Guilford used a significant portion of its grant money to send its faculty and staff to conferences and on trips to other community colleges that had achieved success in a particular area of interest. This and other professional developmental activities generally built faculty and staff skills in connection with the development of particular interventions and helped foster faculty and staff engagement with these intervention strategies.

- **Guilford has made substantial progress in building its institutional research capacity to support a robust culture of evidence. The simultaneous development of technological systems and staff knowledge has allowed Guilford to make decisions about whether to continue, modify, eliminate, or scale up its student success strategies based on evidence of program effectiveness.**

One of Guilford's central goals was to build a stronger, more capable IR department. This capacity building began by hiring an adept IR director, who led the creation of a "data warehouse" that could track both institutional and individual student performance. Guilford has conducted ongoing, detailed evaluations of the majority of its strategies, even as the number of

strategies implemented has grown over time. In many cases, its IR department has identified an appropriate comparison group to document differences in student success for a particular intervention, and then used the results of those evaluations to inform programming decisions. The college has also scaled up a number of its interventions and modified others based on its findings. For instance, the college experimented with a three-credit success course after its previous one-credit version proved promising.

Furthermore, the college established a committee of faculty and staff to advise the IR department and administrators on critical issues, such as the expansion of intervention strategies and the selection of institutional performance indicators. A strengthened IR department has also encouraged faculty and staff to use data more regularly to assess their own programs and practices as part of a broader student success agenda.

- **Several of Guilford’s evaluations of its intervention programs have revealed promising trends in student persistence, successful course completion, and graduation rates among targeted student groups; one intervention also showed promise for reducing the achievement gap among African-American males.**

While based on nonexperimental research, this case study reveals increased persistence among students who participated in Guilford’s success courses, learning communities, revised student orientation, and special classes for low-level developmental education students. Learning communities, supplemental instruction, and the two-semester developmental math course also were associated with promising trends in course completion, while the student success course was associated with promising increases in graduation rates. Furthermore, and of particular relevance to Achieving the Dream’s objective of closing racial achievement gaps, Guilford found that increases in persistence and graduation among participants in the success course were especially evident among African-American males. However, while encouraging, these findings should be interpreted as promising trends rather than causal program impacts.

## **Institutionalizing Achieving the Dream**

When they join Achieving the Dream, college leaders are expected to commit to lasting institutional change on their campuses by adopting a new model of decision making in order to sustain and integrate successful reforms institution-wide. Colleges are encouraged to develop overarching committees to monitor their progress in improving student success rates. Moreover, the leaders of the initiative hope that colleges will see measurable improvement in their students’ persistence, achievement, and, ultimately, graduation as a result of their efforts. The final goal is that colleges will institutionalize their progress under Achieving the Dream such that their learning and commitment to student success will survive long after their initiative funding ends.

- **Spurred by high-level commitment from the president, senior leaders, and the board of trustees, as well as support from an Achieving the Dream coach and data facilitator, Guilford has successfully institutionalized its student success agenda across the college during its participation in the initiative.**

Guilford has taken meaningful action to integrate its student success agenda into its leadership structure, including presenting reports to its board of trustees and revising its strategic planning and budgeting processes. Its overall approach to management of the initiative has been to overlay the committees prescribed by Achieving the Dream with its pre-existing leadership committees so that Achieving the Dream planning occurred alongside other high-level institutional decision making. These committees also engaged faculty and staff on a rotating basis, thus encouraging wider institutional involvement in initiative activities.

The strong, committed leadership at Guilford has been crucial to these institutional reform efforts. The president has remained connected with Achieving the Dream throughout the college's participation in the initiative and has committed skilled senior administrators to leading its activities. Inputs from Achieving the Dream, including guidance from an expert coach and technical assistance from a data facilitator, reinforced this leadership commitment.

- **As a result of Achieving the Dream, Guilford's leaders have established specific benchmarks for institutional performance, and they continuously monitor the college's progress against those goals in an institutional "scorecard."**

With guidance from its data facilitator, Guilford began to track its progress more systematically against specific benchmarks for institutional performance, using indicators such as college graduation rates, student persistence, student engagement, and achievement of developmental education students. The college has now created an institutional "scorecard" that allows it to track its performance relative to specific targets and to identify successes and areas for improvement.

- **Guilford observed promising increases in student success rates across some of its institutional performance measures during the course of its participation in Achieving the Dream.**

Since Guilford began to track its performance in 2003, it has seen nearly a 6 percentage point increase in its student persistence rates and a 3 percentage point increase in its graduation rates. While encouraging, these trends are not definitive evidence that improvements in student outcomes are attributable to Guilford's Achieving the Dream interventions. Because the initiative is institution-wide, it is not possible to create a "control college" to assess what would

have happened in its absence. Nonetheless, upward movement in Guilford's student success indicators is promising.

## **Continuing Challenges**

- **Guilford is still working to engage segments of its faculty and staff in data analysis.**

Guilford has found effective ways to engage parts of the campus community in monitoring student success, but it has yet to reach all faculty and staff. While most are aware of the college's growing focus on student retention, some reported being too busy to spend time tracking their students' performance and implementing reforms. Still others thought that some students faced too many personal challenges to achieve academic success, and they doubted their ability to influence students' performance by improving their own practices. Thus, while Guilford has successfully garnered support from some faculty and staff in its efforts to improve student achievement, others remain unaware of or uninterested in this agenda.

- **Guilford faces a challenge in synthesizing its institutional student outcome measures with those from the Achieving the Dream database.**

All Achieving the Dream colleges are required to submit student outcomes information to the initiative's data system. Guilford struggled with some aspects of that system, primarily because of differences among measures of student success. While the college regularly submitted data to the Achieving the Dream database, the IR department generally relied on its own institutional database and internally defined measures of student achievement to track its institutional progress and the success of its intervention strategies.

- **Guilford has struggled to scale up some of its high-intensity, high-cost programs.**

By the fall of 2008, Guilford had expanded most of its 15 intervention strategies. Three of these — a new student orientation, a streamlined intake process for new students, and a College Transfer Advising Center — had been scaled up to reach 25 percent or more of their target populations. While one other strategy — the student success course — was reaching 10 to 25 percent of its target population, many of the college's strategies were still reaching less than 10 percent of their target populations, despite promising trends in the academic outcomes of those students who were reached. These smaller-scale strategies tended to be higher intensity and were often more costly to implement. The high cost of these more intensive interventions posed a challenge for Guilford as it strove to sustain and expand its most effective strategies.



## Key Lessons for Colleges

- **In building a culture of evidence, focus first on building strong data systems, which can then be leveraged to engage broader segments of faculty and staff.**

Colleges with less mature IR departments may need to seek alternate sources of data as they work to build their internal systems and research capacity. Leaning on a strong data facilitator, mining state and national data systems, and gathering qualitative data from faculty, staff, and students are a few ways colleges may build their knowledge while data systems are still in flux. These colleges may also want to hire staff who have both the quantitative skills to conduct sound data inquiries and the interpersonal skills to communicate their findings effectively to faculty and staff. Finally, colleges may want to carefully consider the types of data and measures that are most useful for their own institutional needs and build systems that allow these indicators to be tracked.

- **Investing resources in training faculty and staff can help to cultivate a sense of responsibility and commitment to individual programs.**

Strategic professional development proved to be an important way for Guilford to learn about new ideas and develop its interventions. Additionally, the college allowed for a significant amount of faculty and staff ownership in the creation and management of new interventions, thus fostering more interest and engagement in this work within the larger campus community. Involving faculty and staff in higher-level data analysis and decision making helped bring the modification and expansion of these strategies full-circle.

- **Align the leadership and management of Achieving the Dream with existing institutional committees.**

Overlaying Achieving the Dream decision making with larger college planning may make it easier to integrate the initiative within the larger institution. Additionally, colleges may wish to consider ways to move toward increasingly embedding data analysis into divisions and departments as a way of fostering faculty and staff leadership.

## Key Lessons for Achieving the Dream

- **Achieving the Dream leaders may wish to consider how colleges might balance the competing demands of program scale and intensity.**

Those programs that are most likely to significantly increase students' achievement might also be the most time-intensive and costly. These issues are particularly pressing for

institutions nearing the end of their implementation grants, as some may have relied upon initiative funding to sustain and expand strategies.

- **Achieving the Dream leaders may wish to consider how colleges analyze their student success data.**

Guilford tracked its performance using its institutional data rather than data from the Achieving the Dream database. The initiative partners may wish to consider how they will weigh colleges' own internal measures of institutional performance against results from the Achieving the Dream database.

- **The leadership of Achieving the Dream may wish to provide some guidance to colleges about how to communicate with their external stakeholders about the initiative.**

Promoting open discussion about student outcomes can be risky, particularly when colleges must compete for enrollment. Additionally, some Achieving the Dream colleges may not yet see evidence of overall improvements in student achievement, which can be disheartening after having worked intensively to improve their programs. When sharing student success data with the community, it may help to acknowledge that the initiative is ambitious, that difficult state or economic environments can complicate student outcomes data, and that colleges might need more time to see improvements in student success. Furthermore, because Achieving the Dream is an institution-wide effort, it is difficult to establish a good comparison to know what would have happened in its absence.

Regardless of the improvements they have made with student achievement, colleges like Guilford that have rigorously applied the tenets of the initiative should be commended for their work. There is no magic bullet for student success. However, Guilford's experience suggests that with strong commitment and strategic, data-based decision making, community colleges can make important strides as they push all students to achieve.