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## Technical Assistance: Coach and Data Facilitator Support Among Texas Colleges

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# Technical Assistance:

## Coach and Data Facilitator Support Among Texas Colleges

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April 5, 2011



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**Technical Assistance: Coach and Data Facilitator Support Among Texas Colleges**

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## Introduction

Achieving the Dream: Community Colleges Count is a multi-year initiative designed to help community colleges make better use of data to improve instruction and services that will lead to greater student success. This research brief examines the 2009 national expansion colleges that joined the Achieving the Dream initiative through funding from the Greater Texas Foundation as well as the Round Three Houston colleges. Support of the Round Three Houston Colleges was made possible by the Houston Endowment. Specifically, this report reviews the experiences of two sets of colleges, the 2009 Greater Texas colleges and the Round Three Houston, colleges and the relationships established between the coach and data facilitator assigned to each participating institution.

The goal of this brief is to provide an assessment of the relationship among Achieving the Dream colleges, coaches and data facilitators. This research brief places emphasis on the coach and data facilitator relationship to the college and how it affects the work being done related to Achieving the Dream. In addition, this brief offers a comparison of the support provided to Round Three Houston colleges which operate under the 5-year model, to the 2009 Greater Texas colleges which operate under a shorter, 2-year model.

This brief provides an understanding of:

- The coach/data facilitator role
- How the coach/data facilitator is typically used at the college
- Campus visit logistics
- Assessment of coach and data facilitator
- Fit between college, coach, and data facilitator
- Assessment of 5-year vs. 2-year model
- Advice to other colleges and to Achieving the Dream

### *Summary of Key Findings*

Based on telephone interviews with administrators, coaches, and data facilitators at 12 community colleges in Texas, this research brief concludes that coaches and data facilitators are a widely valued component of Achieving the Dream. As external consultants designed to motivate and support a culture of evidence, coaches and data facilitators spend a significant amount of time both on and off campus offering colleges advice, feedback, and overall direction as they progress within the Initiative. Coaches and data facilitators report that while each college is simultaneously similar and unique, their work with colleges is largely guided by common rules of thumb. Embedded in a context of trust and mutual respect, coaches and data facilitators operate as constant communicators of the goals of Achieving the Dream, while also supporting the colleges by advancing buy-in of the initiative, analysis of data, and by offering insights from other colleges to effectively overcome challenges. An important consideration for Achieving the Dream planners and funders is determining the number of years to offer colleges technical support from coaches and data facilitators. This research suggests the two year model may be too short to solidify the culture of change advanced by the Initiative. Recognizing the

significant time and costs associated with support provided by coaches and data facilitators, a 3-year model may offer a more effective approach.

### *Profile of Colleges*

The 2009 Greater Texas colleges included in this evaluation are: Austin Community College District, Blinn College, Odessa College, Richland College, and Temple College. These colleges joined the Initiative in 2009 and are funded by the Greater Texas Foundation. The Round Three Houston colleges used to compare support services and initiative implementation are: Alvin Community College, Brazosport College, College of the Mainland, Lee College, Lone Star College System, San Jacinto Community College, and Wharton County Junior College. The Round Three Houston colleges joined Achieving the Dream in 2006 and are funded by the Houston Endowment. Tables 1 and 2 provide an overview of these colleges. This study includes a variety of institutions ranging from a small, rural institution with about 3,000 students to a large multi-campus colleges with over 40,000 students.

**Table 1: 2009 Greater Texas Colleges Student Demographics**

Characteristic	Austin Community College District	Blinn College	Odessa College	Richland College	Temple College
<b>Total Undergraduate Enrollment (N)</b>	40,248	17,173	5,132	18,201	5,659
<b>Undergraduate Attendance Status (%)</b>					
Full-time	27	89	29	27	40
Part-time	73	11	71	71	60
<b>Undergraduate Enrollment by Race/Ethnicity (%)</b>					
American Indian or Alaska Native	1	1	0	0	1
Asian/Native Hawaiian/ Pacific Islander	6	2	1	16	2
Black or African American	9	9	4	20	19
Hispanic/Latino	25	14	50	22	19
White	57	73	45	36	58
Non-resident Alien	1	1	0	1	0
Race or Ethnicity Unknown	2	0	0	4	1
<b>Undergraduate Enrollment by Gender (%)</b>					
Female	56	50	60	55	66
Male	44	50	40	45	34
<b>Undergraduate Enrollment by Age (%)</b>					
24 and under	59	87	67	62	62
25 and over	41	13	33	38	38
<b>Undergraduate Retention Rate<sup>a</sup> (%)</b>					
Full-time students	57	53	78	68	49
Part-time students	46	53	71	55	40
<b>Undergraduate Graduation Rate<sup>b</sup> (%)</b>	4	7	9	9	10

SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, Institute of Education Sciences (2009). *IPEDS College data 2009-2010*. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Education.

NOTES: <sup>a</sup>Retention Rate – the percentage of first-time students who began their studies in Fall 2008 and returned in Fall 2009.

<sup>b</sup>Graduation Rate - the percentage of first-time students who started their studies in Fall 2006.

**Table 2: Round Three Houston Colleges Student Demographics**

Characteristic	Alvin Community College	Brazosport College	College of the Mainland	Lee College	Lone Star College System	San Jacinto Community College	Wharton County Junior College
<b>Total Undergraduate Enrollment (N)</b>	5,240	3,908	3,916	6,658	46,504	27,011	6,622
<b>Undergraduate Attendance Status (%)</b>							
Full-time	27	32	31	28	35	36	45
Part-time	73	68	69	72	65	64	55
<b>Undergraduate Enrollment by Race/Ethnicity (%)</b>							
American Indian or Alaska Native	1	0	1	0	0	1	0
Asian/Native Hawaiian/ Pacific Islander	4	2	3	1	7	6	6
Black or African American	10	8	18	19	12	11	10
Hispanic/Latino	25	27	19	27	25	38	27
White	59	63	54	49	47	41	53
Non-resident Alien	0	0	0	1	1	3	3
Race or Ethnicity Unknown	1	0	4	1	7	0	1
<b>Undergraduate Enrollment by Gender (%)</b>							
Female	55	51	61	49	59	56	57
Male	45	49	39	51	41	44	43
<b>Undergraduate Enrollment by Age (%)</b>							
24 and under	68	71	63	53	68	70	78
25 and over	32	29	37	47	32	30	22
<b>Undergraduate Retention Rate<sup>a</sup> (%)</b>							
Full-time students	71	83	59	67	69	65	63
Part-time students	54	75	52	55	53	50	48
<b>Undergraduate Graduation Rate<sup>b</sup> (%)</b>	11	20	7	18	9	10	16

SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, Institute of Education Sciences (2009). *IPEDS College data 2009-2010*. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Education.

NOTES: <sup>a</sup>Retention Rate – the percentage of first-time students who began their studies in Fall 2008 and returned in Fall 2009.

<sup>b</sup>Graduation Rate - the percentage of first-time students who started their studies in Fall 2006.



*Data Collection:*

Data for this report were collected from October through December 2010. Eighty-six semi-structured telephone interviews were conducted with individuals who had a role in implementing Achieving the Dream on their campus or those involved in efforts to improve student success and create a culture of evidence at participating colleges. At each college, interview participants generally included the college's president or chancellor, coaches, data facilitators, Achieving the Dream coordinator or core team leader, institutional research director, vice president or dean of instruction, vice president or dean of student services, and faculty, staff, and administrators most directly involved in Achieving the Dream. The interviews averaged about an hour in length and were tape recorded. The response rate was 96 percent. Interviews were coded for key themes using NVIVO8, a qualitative analysis software program.

## Formal Role of Coach and Data Facilitator

In addition to the financial support, participating institutions in the Achieving the Dream initiative also receive external technical support in an effort to stimulate and support a culture of evidence. Each college is individually paired with both a coach and a data facilitator to help guide them through their implementation strategies in an advisory role. These coaches and data facilitators serve as external consultants and are expected to “interact with their assigned colleges through a combination of campus visits, email correspondence, telephone conversations and web-mediated communication.”<sup>1</sup>

The coach is typically a former community college president who works with the core team and the college’s senior administration to help maximize their effectiveness in leading institutional change. As further explained, “The coach’s role is to help the leadership teams at the participating colleges draw lessons from their data analyses, determine how best to communicate the results to faculty and the public (particularly when the results are unflattering), and develop and implement plans for improving student performance.”<sup>2</sup>

The data facilitator provides technical support and works with the data team members to help guide their data analysis. The data facilitator is “a research expert who helps the college fulfill the technical requirements of Achieving the Dream — in particular, the longitudinal and subgroup analyses” (Building a Culture of Evidence for Community College Student Success Early Progress in the Achieving the Dream Initiative, May 2007). The data facilitator serves as an advisor to the college, providing guidance on how to conduct data analysis, the interpretation and dissemination of findings, and the integration of the data into select strategies that can be implemented throughout the college. Data facilitators “raise questions and facilitate discussion of tough issues to identify areas where the college is succeeding and where it needs to improve” (Institutional Change Framing Paper, 2006)<sup>3</sup>

### *Training the trainers*

Achieving the Dream provides several opportunities for ongoing training to coaches and data facilitators throughout the Initiative. Achieving the Dream provides a fall workshop training to coaches and data facilitators each year. The National Director for Coaching explains that this training evolves every year: “Each year we adjust what we train on based on what we see from the year that is ending. We build on the experiences. It is all about how you bring transformational change and the practice and philosophy of doing that.” At this annual retreat, the coaches and data facilitators discuss tools and templates to advance the issues of their

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<sup>1</sup> Achieving the Dream: Community Colleges Count. April 2009. “Context, Background, and Expectations.” Website [www.achievingthedream.org](http://www.achievingthedream.org).

<sup>2</sup> Brock, Thomas, Davis Jenkins, Todd Ellwein, Jennifer Miller, Susan Gooden, Kasey Martin, Casey MacGregor, and Michael Pih. *Building a culture of evidence for community college students: Early progress in achieving the dream initiative*. New York: MDRC.

<sup>3</sup> MDC, Inc. 2006. *Increasing student success at community colleges: Institutional change in achieving the dream: Community colleges count*. Chapel Hill, NC: MDC, Inc.

practice; how to help colleges build their IR and IT capacity; provide information on the future direction of Achieving the Dream; discuss struggles and strengths in their role; and provide direction and feedback on the Initiative. As the National Director of Data Facilitation notes about the retreat, “It’s very collegial, very relaxed, but at the same time [we have] intense and rich conversations.”

Additionally, when a new cohort of colleges enters the Initiative, a Kickoff Institute is held prior to beginning these new partnerships. At the institute, which typically lasts four days, colleges within the cohort meet each other and their assigned coach and data facilitator and participate in trainings led by the National Director for Coaching and the National Director of Data Facilitation. Topics covered at the kickoff include: roles of coaches and data facilitators; building a culture of evidence; data collection and analysis; national resources; building partnerships; and communicating the goals of the Initiative. Also, each year the Achieving the Dream Strategy Institute provides updated information and training to both the coach and data facilitator, and the participating colleges. The National Director for Coaching for Achieving the Dream explained that the coaches have a collaborative relationship with each other. He stated, “We have ongoing sharing of information from coaches.” Coaches and data facilitators also play a large role in assisting each other as mentors. As the National Director of Data Facilitation explained, “Now there is a strong mentorship for current data facilitators with those who are new. There is a much closer mentorship between new data facilitators and older data facilitators.”

## **Overview of Models**

The funding provided by Achieving the Dream is designed to assist the colleges in “data collection and analysis as well as the implementation of their selected program strategies” (Building a Culture of Evidence for Community College Student Success Early Progress in the Achieving the Dream Initiative, May 2007). In the original 5-year model, each college attends a Kickoff Institute and is provided \$50,000 for their planning year and an additional \$400,000 for the four implementation years. Additionally, each college receives technical support from an external coach and data facilitator, complimentary registrations to attend the annual Achieving the Dream Strategy Institute for five years, communications support and access to Achieving the Dream tools, guidebooks, and equity resources. In the 2009 Greater Texas Foundation 2-year model, the colleges do not receive any direct funding. Instead, the Greater Texas Foundation dedicates \$140,000 per college to support technical assistance from an external coach and data facilitator, and to provide support for college representatives to attend the annual Achieving the Dream Strategy Institute for two years. Colleges following the two year model also receive communications support, as well as access to Achieving the Dream tools, guidebooks, and equity resources. This funding does not include support for specific student success initiatives. Colleges must use internal funding or different grant funding to implement the Achieving the Dream model of systemic change.

Both the 5-year and the 2-year model include a planning year for colleges to create a four year implementation plan to guide their work. Colleges under the 5-year model receive funding and

technical support for 4 years of implementation; whereas colleges under the 2009 Greater Texas Foundation 2-year model only receive technical support from Achieving the Dream for their first year of implementation and have the option to pay for continued support within the initiative. The chart below provides an overview of each model. This research brief offers a specific focus on the coach and data facilitator support.

	<b>5-year Model (Original)</b>	<b>2-year Model (GTF)</b>
<b>College Planning</b>	Planning year to create implementation proposal	Planning year to create implementation proposal
<b>Implementation Time Frame</b>	4 years of implementation	1 year of implementation
<b>Total Funding</b>	\$450,000 (direct)	\$140,000 (indirect)
<b>Coach &amp; Data Facilitator External Support</b>	12 days of support from each in the planning year and first year of implementation(4 sites visits per year); afterward, support is gradually reduced	8 days of support from each per year (2 site visits per year)
<b>Learning Events</b>	Kickoff Institute and Strategy Institute for five years	Kickoff Institute and Strategy Institute for two years
<b>Tools, Guides, Resources</b>	Access for five years	Access for two years, including a self administered readiness assessment

## Coaches and Data Facilitators in Practice

Across Achieving the Dream, coaches and data facilitators are seasoned professionals with valuable experience and expertise. In many cases, coaches are retirees who have more than 30 years of experience in community college settings serving as former presidents, provosts and/or deans. Most have served in multiple administrative roles in a variety of community college settings including, for example, multi-campus community colleges, large urban community colleges, and smaller rural community colleges. Data facilitators have an extensive background in higher education research, including evaluation research, institutional research and data analysis, statistical analysis, and policy evaluation. Many data facilitators are working full-time in a related position while serving as a consultant to community colleges in Achieving the Dream. Depending upon their availability and the needs of the Initiative, coaches and data facilitators may serve as consultants to more than one community college in Achieving the Dream.

### *Typical Campus Visit*

All of the coaches and data facilitators we interviewed indicated that they visit each community college as a team in order to maximize their impact and to work efficiently. Each on-campus visit is typically scheduled months in advance and averages two to three days in length. In advance of each visit, coaches and data facilitators work with community college administrators, especially the core team leader, to collaboratively develop the itinerary for the site visit. Typically, they report spending the majority (60 percent) of their on-campus time with

faculty and staff, including the core team, data team, and individuals who are leading specific initiatives such as the community college's student success course. During each visit they report spending about 20 percent of their time with the president and other senior level administrators and the remaining 20 percent of their time with other groups such as board members, students, and/or community leaders. Additionally, during their visit, several data facilitators meet individually with the data team leader and/or community college's primary institutional researcher to discuss specific items relating to data analysis, presentation of data, or improving accessibility of data. A few coaches indicated that they spend additional one-on-one time with the president as well. Most coaches and data facilitators underscored the importance of meeting with the president during every visit. Often scheduled near the end of the visit, this period provides an opportunity for the coach and data facilitator to have a candid discussion with the president and offer their frank perspective on how the community college is progressing within the initiative.

Coaches and data facilitators also discussed commonly extending their support to colleges beyond their specific visits. The coaches, data facilitators, and colleges all agree that the coaches and data facilitators are easily accessible via phone and email. Many report that they are regularly in contact with their coaches and data facilitators to receive feedback, obtain clarification, or to double check that they are on the right track.

### *Types of Support Provided*

In general, coaches and data facilitators provide three core areas of support to their colleges. These areas include: communicating goals of Achieving the Dream within the college; fostering data-driven decision making; and providing support as a critical, professional friend. In many ways, coaches and data facilitators operate as the on-site communicators of Achieving the Dream. In some cases, this means having direct or difficult conversations with the community college president about the college's progress, capacity, or strategies. The on-campus visits by the coach and data facilitators also convey that the expectations of the Initiative are real. As one coach commented, "Well, the first year, I think they [community college administrators] considered it an award – they did not think they had to do any work." In other cases, coaches and data facilitators help community colleges in setting a pace and making sure their strategies are well founded. As one coach commented, "Sometimes colleges want to jump to solutions before they are ready." Other coaches discussed assisting the president in reaching specific subgroups of faculty or communities within Achieving the Dream. For example, one coach noted, "I helped the President do outreach to communities, particularly communities of color. I have been a resource working with the Faculty Senate and helped them resolve issues with Achieving the Dream."

Coaches and data facilitators also support colleges with data-driven decision making. This includes helping colleges analyze and understand their data, design potential intervention strategies, evaluate strategies and make data accessible to a non-technical audience. As one data facilitator commented, "We help colleges in crossing the bridge from 'here's the data' to

'let's use it' . . . getting it out so that normal people know what it means." Another data facilitator offered a specific example of assisting a college with analyzing their data:

At the beginning, we did a data session and it came out that there was an issue with developmental math. It looked like a personnel issue. Once we did the data summit and brought in all full-time and part-time faculty for a bold, open and honest discussion about student success. People began to say that it wasn't just developmental math, that it was reading and English and that it had to do with the placement method that they were using. They interviewed faculty and staff and found out that it was the placement scores. They were not able to accurately place developmental students. I helped them look at the data, transform the data into valuable information and use the information to impact policy. I helped them move from the very narrow data observation to the very large and open systematic change to a culture of inquiry.

In particular, colleges, coaches and data facilitators commented on the value of data facilitators in helping colleges make their data more accessible. In referring to one college, a data facilitator remarked, "They used to have a 50 page report with data, now they provide a snapshot." Making data accessible is important to communicating student performance to a wide audience of faculty, fostering faculty buy-in of Achieving the Dream and communicating outcomes of specific strategies.

Finally, coaches and data facilitators offer support to colleges as a critical, professional friend. This includes offering their candid assessment and feedback, pushing colleges beyond their comfort zone, but earning the trust from colleges that they want to see the school do well. A coach remarked, "The role is to be an organizational coach, to be a critical friend particularly for the college's chief executive and the leadership team. To cause an institution to look at itself and realize opportunities to change the way they do business to improve student success." Another remarked, "A critical friend. You have the best interest of the institution at heart, but you have to be objective. It involves navigating the political waters of the institutions and sometimes being the voice that can tell certain groups within the institutions what to look at. An outsider can sometimes be the best person to do that."

In a few cases, coaches and data facilitators also serve as a source of stability in a time of organizational change and flux when there has been considerable administrative turnover. As one college vice president remarked, "I would doubt that the other schools they interact with have had the leadership changes we had. They have had to start over [Achieving the Dream] with each president. They had to start from scratch with the second and third president. They have had the most influence [on Achieving the Dream] on our succession of presidents."

We also asked coaches and data facilitators to share any "rules of thumb" they had developed to enable them to work more productively with colleges. Although the specific description varied somewhat, the common rules of thumb are the following:

***Relationship building and respecting boundaries is important*** – Several coaches and data facilitators stressed the importance of building a positive relationship with the colleges that is based on trust and mutual respect. "You always recognize that you are visitor, and that you are

there at their invitation. So you don't get into personnel issues," one coach advised. Another remarked, "One of the primary first steps is to try to figure out the culture of the college and establish as many relationships as possible to help me do the best job I can." Similarly, a data facilitator noted, "I always try to establish a feeling of trust, work with sharing ideas with IR folks, and share tools that they or I have developed."

***Examining the data first-hand and helping colleges move forward with using their data*** – Data facilitators in particular noted the importance of carefully reviewing a college's data and to assist the college in overcoming data challenges. A data facilitator remarked, "I try to emphasize taking a skeptical perspective. . . They may not be lying, they just may not know their situations. I try to emphasize taking a skeptical perspective. They are convinced everyone knows this is the problem. Conventional wisdom is not always supported by the data. I quote Ronald Reagan 'trust but verify.' Data facilitators also noted their role in assisting colleges in continuing to move forward despite the common challenge of imperfect data or evaluation designs. This data facilitator continued, "I [emphasize] a lot more that everything does not have to be perfect. You do not have to adhere to strict experimental control. You do your best and move on. You do not let your imperfections keep you from moving forward."

***Both coaches and data facilitators emphasize the importance of listening*** – Each community college has different organizational cultures, norms, strengths and challenges. As a coach indicated, "One [rule of thumb] is that I listen hard. It is very hard work to listen to people and to get the feel for the dynamics on a campus or in a room. It is amazing what you can pick up if you are paying attention." A data facilitator offered this assessment: "Probably the most basic [rules of thumb] are to listen well and to be non-threatening. I think initially the data facilitator can be seen as an auditor. That is not what we want. We are not there to audit them. We are there to see what they do well and what they do not do well and to help them with the latter."

***Sharing lots of examples with colleges is very helpful*** – Because many coaches and data facilitators have worked with other colleges in Achieving the Dream, they can serve as an important resource in sharing the experiences other colleges have had with various aspects of the initiative including, for example, getting faculty buy-in; developing a culture of evidence; implementing a specific strategy; or developing an evaluation design. A data facilitator noted, "It is helpful to have some hands-on examples. Having examples from [another Achieving the Dream] college is helpful. I think that has proven to be useful."

***Recognizing that colleges are simultaneously similar and different in important ways*** – Several coaches and data facilitators remarked that although there are often similarities in the struggles colleges face within the Initiative, they also vary considerably in terms of presidential commitment and leadership style, institutional research capacity, receptivity to cultural change and transformation, and overall institutional buy-in. A coach commented, "There are standards and procedures that you have to follow and I think that is the framework that you move through. Each institution is different. For example, [one college] has a very fluent use of data. For this college, using data to inform and drive decision making was already part of the established operations of the college. That is very different focus than my [other] community

college. They have no infrastructure of data collection. It is a totally different situation. You have to be flexible. You have to know the situation and who you are working with. There is no one way to do things. If you think that way, it would be inappropriate.”

### *How Coaches and Data Facilitators define success in their roles*

We asked the coaches and data facilitators to provide us with a sense of how they personally evaluate their success in their respective roles. Most typically, they linked their definition of success to the college’s overall success. As one coach noted, “You are only successful as a coach, if your colleges are successful in making changes with student success.” A data facilitator agreed, “That the college changes significantly. That is the bottom line. Are they changing? Are they improving student success? Are the changes actually taking place? If the answer to that question is yes, then progress is being made.”

### **Having their say: Colleges’ perspectives on Coaches and Data Facilitators**

This section explores the coach and data facilitator relationship from the perspective of the colleges. Coaches and data facilitators are considered a vital part of the initiative providing a wealth of knowledge and expertise that is critical to deciphering the Achieving the Dream process. We asked the colleges to assess the support provided by their coach and data facilitator and the fit between their institution and their assigned coach and data facilitator. Both Round Three Houston colleges and Greater Texas colleges reported that the expertise and support provided by their coach and data facilitator was invaluable to keeping them focused and moving forward. The colleges saw their coaches and data facilitators as their personal navigation systems for the Achieving the Dream process, as well as keeping them in tune with what is going on nationally related to student success. The colleges valued the insight, suggestions, examples, templates, and connections with other colleges or consultants that their coach and data facilitator provided. A core team member reflected, “They are a wealth of knowledge whether it be sharing information on other colleges implementing similar strategies or connecting us with a consultant to rework our developmental education program.”

*Value added of coach and data facilitator*—Colleges report coaches and data facilitators are critical in keeping Achieving the Dream focused and on-track. The coaches and data facilitators help keep the work of Achieving the Dream on the forefront by providing needed assistance in data analysis, interpretation, as well as strategy development and implementation. They serve as important focusing and accountability agents. As one president shared, “They [coach and data facilitator] keep us very focused on the initiatives, how we are moving forward, how we are integrating them into the institution, and how we are looking at student success as a goal. They are very helpful. Otherwise, it would be hard to keep the focus.” Colleges also expressed that the visits and periodic check-ins via phone or email kept them on track. A senior administrator reflected, “Without our coach and data facilitator I think it would have been a much slower process.”



Additionally, they provide blunt, trusted support. Colleges view coaches and data facilitators as providing support and cheerleading the college's efforts while simultaneously holding them accountable when they are not making progress or if there is lack of follow-through. A college president stated, "I appreciate their candor. . .they are outspoken in a collegial way." A senior administrator from another college indicated, "They [coach and data facilitator] do not sugar coat anything with us. They advocate for what is good for our institution." An Achieving the Dream director further commented, "They have to be willing to push and demand more from the college's own people. If the coaches were not willing to push, the colleges would probably drop some of their initiatives. In a way, you have to rub people the wrong way to get things done."

Consistently the colleges mentioned valuing the time their coaches and data facilitators took to get to know their institution – their strengths, their challenges and their culture. Colleges appreciated that coaches and data facilitators did not take a "one size fits all" approach to their Achieving the Dream guidance. As a senior administrator commented, "They adapt to us. Once they got to know us, they know where we are, they know our people. . .we are not just another school on their circuit. They are definitely invested."

The external nature of the coach and data facilitator relationship was considered a strength by most colleges. The colleges discussed that their coach and data facilitator serve as an outside source of encouragement and support. As one core team member summed it up : "They ask the questions that only outsiders can ask." The colleges viewed coaches and data facilitators as an advocate whether it meant, for example, having difficult conversations with leadership on the continued investment needed in institutional research or helping launch and share the tenets of Achieving the Dream college-wide. Most colleges felt that their coach and data facilitator were accessible. The colleges benefited from having access to their coach and data facilitator for input, advice, suggestions and models during campus visits as well as informally. An Achieving the Dream coordinator shared, "We are lucky to have them. They are really insightful about some of the challenges we have faced. All the way, up to the board of trustees. I have found them to be solution driven, and they have said some things that needed to be said at the time. They have said some difficult things."

Colleges especially appreciated their coaches and data facilitators tailoring their advice to the needs of their college and "not just suggesting some best practice or community college trend." For example, a few colleges discussed undergoing presidential and/or senior level administrator changes during their participation within Achieving the Dream. These colleges noted their coach and data facilitator provided a sense of continuity and stability during the change period and served as an important communicator with new leaders about the importance of Achieving the Dream. A new president joining an Achieving the Dream college shared, "The information they were able to provide me at the first meeting was a valuable backdrop of what the college was supposed to have accomplished by this time. That was invaluable to know that there was still so much progress to make on such a worthy project. Without them I would not have had. . . the information needed for me to get up to speed."

## Lessons Colleges Learned from their Coach and Data Facilitator

Some of the key lessons colleges consistently mentioned learning from working with their coach and data facilitator include:

**Achieving the Dream is designed to create change at an institutional level** – For many of the colleges, making Achieving the Dream an institution-wide initiative, rather than a unit level (i.e., developmental education, student services) initiative continues to be a difficult. As one senior administrator stated, “Achieving the Dream cannot be implemented as a set of boutique programs. We need to work on a broad institutional level.” Coaches and data facilitators continually prompt their colleges to think through how they are going to institutionalize their efforts – how they were going to change their institution. One president shared that his/her coach and data facilitator helped them realize, “We need to communicate that promoting student success is part of everyone’s job description.”

**The Initiative provides a safe environment to take innovative risks and discontinue strategies that are not successful**—Colleges report that Achieving the Dream promotes a comfortable environment to try new student success initiatives. As a core team leader reflected, “[we learned] it’s ok to fail. . .we learn from failure as much as success.” Colleges were willing to be bolder in their efforts related to student success because having the technical assistance of a coach and data facilitator alleviated the apprehension surrounding failure and served as a trusted source of advice to discontinue a particular efforts. Colleges found the freedom to not stick with an initiative that was not working just because it was a part of their implementation proposal. An IR director shared, they learned “to recognize when it’s time to go back to the drawing board and try something new.”

**Data presentation is important; less is often best** – Nearly all colleges mentioned learning that creating a culture of evidence required them to distill the “takeaway messages.” Data team leaders and institutional research directors discussed that they learned posting the data to their website or handing out lengthy reports did not encourage people to use data. As one IR director commented, “Having too much data is as bad as having no data at all.” The colleges found tools provided by their data facilitators invaluable and saw an increased discussion of data on their campuses when they used dashboard indicators or logic models to summarize the key messages or data changes.

**Mandating programs can be more effective than optional** – The concept of mandating programs initially was viewed with resistance among some colleges. As the initiative has progressed; however, more colleges are realizing that mandatory programs may be the best strategy to reach the intended population. Several colleges discussed learning this lesson when implementing their student success courses: In order for students to enroll in the course within their first 15 credit hours, they had to not only make it mandatory but further define the mandatory period. Students were not benefiting from taking a class that helped them navigate college at the end of their program.

Making an initiative mandatory or enforcing policy changes are not only techniques for promoting student success but also ensuring faculty buy-in. A core team leader laughingly shared they had to learn that “students *and faculty* [original emphasis] do not do optional.” For example, a few colleges discussed having to make faculty participation in their Early Alert System program mandatory. These colleges found some faculty were not referring students who were performing poorly or not attending class unless they were required to do so.

### *Suggestions for Future Colleges*

We asked the colleges to offer suggestions to future colleges in terms of how to maximize the assistance provided by a coach and data facilitator. An Achieving the Dream director suggested for new colleges to “Really develop a relationship with your coach and data facilitator. . . they will be your biggest asset.” Colleges overwhelmingly stressed that in order to make progress within Achieving the Dream, “you need come to the realization that they are your friends and not your foes. One senior administrator suggested that colleges have to “be open and honest and willing to share your strengths and weaknesses.” Finally, colleges discussed the importance of utilizing the coaches and data facilitators in helping launch and obtain institutional buy-in and ultimately broad based engagement for their student success efforts. A president shared the following strategy for new colleges: “Expose your coach and data facilitator to as many people as you can on campus.” Across the board, colleges viewed their relationship with their coach and data facilitator as very positive and beneficial.

## **Ratings**

We asked the coaches and data facilitators to numerically rate their colleges across multiple dimensions and for colleges to rate their coach and data facilitator as well. In both cases, ratings were provided across these dimensions using a scale of 1 to 5, with 1 as poor and 5 as excellent. Tables 3 and 4 provide a summary of these ratings.

The ratings for the Round Three Houston colleges and the Greater Texas colleges are very similar. As Table 3 reports, most colleges rate their coaches as “good” or “excellent” across the board. The colleges gave the highest ratings to the qualifications of their coaches and data facilitators. Several of the participants indicated that they appreciated the care that Achieving the Dream took in matching the colleges with their coaches and data facilitators.

As Table 4 reports, the ratings provided by the coaches and data facilitators on their colleges are also generally positive with ratings of “average to good” across all areas. The coaches and data facilitators were more critical in their ratings of the colleges demonstrating the high standards that they have for their colleges, their commitment to this work, and their view of a specific college relative to other colleges in the initiative.

**Table 3: College Ratings of Coach and Data Facilitator**

		Round Three Houston	Greater Texas	Summary (Average)
<b>Coach: Q1</b>	Matching/pairing of coach with college	4.37	4.65	4.51
<b>Coach: Q2</b>	Qualification of coach	4.73	4.79	4.76
<b>Coach: Q3</b>	On-site assistance and presence of coach	4.36	4.41	4.38
<b>Coach: Q4</b>	Off-site assistance and presence of coach	4.29	4.20	4.24
<b>Coach: Q5</b>	Overall responsiveness and timeliness of coach	4.59	4.60	4.59
<b>Coach: Q6</b>	Overall assessment of coach	4.42	4.65	4.54
<b>DF: Q1</b>	Matching/pairing of data facilitator with college	4.33	4.52	4.43
<b>DF: Q2</b>	Qualification of data facilitator	4.85	4.92	4.88
<b>DF: Q3</b>	On-site assistance and presence of data facilitator	4.59	4.62	4.60
<b>DF: Q4</b>	Off-site assistance and presence of data facilitator	4.44	4.25	4.34
<b>DF: Q5</b>	Overall responsiveness and timeliness of data facilitator	4.52	4.46	4.49
<b>DF: Q6</b>	Overall assessment of data facilitator	4.56	4.58	4.57
				<b>N = 62</b>

**Table 4: Coach and Data Facilitator Ratings of Colleges**

		Coaches (n=9)	DFs (n=8)
<b>Q1:</b>	Matching/pairing of coach/data facilitator with college	4.25	4.45
<b>Q2:</b>	Receptiveness by senior administration of coach and df	3.85	3.98
<b>Q3:</b>	Timely responsiveness of requests from college	3.65	4.15
<b>Q4:</b>	Faculty buy-in of Achieving the Dream	3.60	3.64
<b>Q5:</b>	Faculty buy-in of data-driven approach and analysis	3.53	3.71
<b>Q6:</b>	What percentage of faculty were engaged in ATD at the beginning of the initiative?	10%	0%
<b>Q7:</b>	What percentage of faculty are engaged in ATD now?	32.9%	24.5%
Note: Includes all 12 colleges (some coaches/dfs are assigned to more than one college)			

### Model Assessment: 5-Year vs. 2-Year

The overwhelming consensus among colleges, coaches and data facilitators is that two years of technical support does not provide adequate support for colleges to design and implement data-driven student success strategies. The individuals we interviewed understood the need for colleges to work as efficiently as possible, recognizing the significant costs related to providing 5 years of funding to multiple colleges within Achieving the Dream. Reflecting on this, one data facilitator remarked, “Two years is too short. . . 5 years may be too long. . . 3 years might be the happy medium.” Adopting a three-year model may equip colleges with the resources they need to realize on-going and sustained progress within the Initiative. It also allows colleges to take advantage of ‘best practices’ based on earlier Achieving the Dream colleges that had to learn through the ‘trial and error’ process. The challenge is to provide colleges with enough support to promote sustained institutional change, broad adoption of a culture of evidence, and a

serious commitment to student success, while simultaneously balancing the realities of limited resources.

In current practice, despite the differences in time allocated for technical assistance, the levels of support provided by coaches and data facilitators is quite similar across the 5-year and 2-year colleges. Some colleges reporting independently purchasing additional consulting time from their coach and/or data facilitator; while some coaches and/or data facilitators report providing similar levels of technical support across colleges without additional compensation. In many cases, a college's relationship with the coach and data facilitator is on-going independent of the initially provided level of support. This suggests colleges view the technical assistance provided by coaches and data facilitators as valuable. It also suggests coaches and data facilitators are equally committed to assisting their colleges toward achieving a culture of student success.

Additionally, technical support is typically provided based on allocating a fixed number of days to colleges. It may be beneficial to customize the number of coach/data facilitator technical support days based on the needs of that particular college. For example, one college may have limited institutional research capacity, minimal experience with data-driven decision making, and an overall culture that is resistant to promoting student success. Another college may have a strong institutional research capacity and a culture that is supportive of student success. Although they enter the initiative at the same time, the former college may need more technical assistance days than the latter.

## **Conclusion**

The coach and data facilitator support provided to the 2009 Greater Texas colleges and the Round Three Houston colleges is decidedly valued among colleges. Nearly all colleges report their coaches and data facilitators are highly qualified, a vital component to their school's ability to maximize their success within the Initiative, and a trusted external resource who can provide a frank and direct assessment of their college's overall performance. For their part, coaches and data facilitators take the time to get to know their colleges, build a relationship based on trust, and provide assistance that is institution specific, while also offering a comparative analysis and larger context. Over time, coaches and data facilitators have developed rules of thumb to guide their interactions with colleges and foster success, while recognizing their role as an outsider and remaining respectful of the leadership within the college. Colleges, coaches and data facilitators concur that providing this technical support is essential but can also be time consuming and costly. Providing a 3-year model of technical support, that offers some flexibility by customizing the intensity of support that is most appropriate for the particular college, may be an effective approach for future Achieving the Dream colleges.

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