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Achieving the Dream and Four-Year Institutions: Perspectives from Three Houston Colleges

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**Achieving the Dream and Four-Year Institutions: Perspectives from Three
Houston Colleges**

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Government and Public Affairs**

Overview of the Report

This report examines the experiences of three Houston area four-year universities that are participating in Achieving the Dream, a national initiative designed to use data-driven decision making to promote student success, especially among low-income students and students of color. Each of these universities is a minority-serving institution, two are Historically Black Colleges or Universities and one is a Hispanic Serving Institution. With over 100 institutions participating in Achieving the Dream -- nearly all of which are community colleges -- these three universities offer a unique perspective on the initiative. This report focuses on how the institutions are implementing the initiative, early successes and challenges, leadership commitment from senior administration, students' perspectives of factors influencing student success, and core components of the institutions' overall approaches to promote student success. Section I provides an overview of Achieving the Dream, minority-serving institutions, a profile of each of the three colleges specifically examined in this report, and the methodological approach. Section II discusses these four-year colleges' approach to Achieving the Dream and how it compares in general to that of community colleges. This section also includes a discussion of developing a culture of evidence, where Achieving the Dream resides structurally at each institution, how the initiative is being implemented, and potential challenges to institutionalization. Section III presents the perspectives of faculty, administrators and students regarding the key elements of student success. Section IV, the conclusion, summarizes key themes from the four-year colleges and offers practical informative considerations for the initiative at large.

I. Achieving the Dream and the Four-Year Colleges in This Report

Achieving the Dream: Community Colleges Count is a multi-year national initiative launched by the Lumina Foundation for Education in 2003 to improve student success at community colleges. The initiative is particularly concerned about student groups that have traditionally faced significant barriers to success, including students of color and low-income students. Achieving the Dream works across multiple fronts, including changes in the institutional practices and policies at participating colleges; research into effective practices at community colleges; public policy work; and outreach to communities, businesses, and the public. It emphasizes the use of data to drive change. The initiative promotes ground-level strategies to accomplish big-picture outcomes.¹

This report focuses on Achieving the Dream in a different context by analyzing the experiences of three four-year colleges. These colleges, Prairie View A&M University, Texas Southern University, and the University of Houston-Downtown, are all minority-serving institutions located in Houston, Texas. Based on interviews with college administrators, faculty, and staff, as well as focus groups with students, this report examines how these institutions are implementing Achieving the Dream, using the following questions as a structural guide:

- What are the Achieving the Dream experiences of three Minority Serving Institutions?
- What are the early success and challenges of these colleges?
- What are the core components of the institutions' overall approach to promoting student success?
- According to administrators, faculty, and students, what are the factors influencing student success on their campus?
- How do the experiences of these four-year institutions compare in general to the experiences of community colleges within the initiative?

Following a brief description of Achieving the Dream and the institutions profiled in this report, section II examines the colleges approach to developing a culture of evidence, how Achieving the Dream is organized structurally within these institutions, implementation accomplishments and struggles, and potential challenges for institutionalization. Section III examines key factors in promoting student success from the perspectives of faculty, administrators, and students (first-year students, as well as seniors). The final section summarizes key findings and offers informative conclusions for the overall initiative.

¹ Achieving the Dream (2009).

Achieving the Dream

Achieving the Dream's student-centered vision is focused on creating a culture of evidence on community college campuses in which data and evidence drive broad-based institutional efforts to improve student outcomes. This multi-faceted initiative seeks change at the institutional level as well as in state and national policy. Through the collaborative work of its partner organizations, Achieving the Dream provides extensive supports to participating colleges in collecting and analyzing student data; in designing, implementing, and evaluating intervention strategies; and in broadening knowledge among stakeholders about policies and programs that contribute to student success.²

Achieving the Dream is changing the conversation about student outcomes. The initiative has helped drive student success to the top of the community college change agenda.³ The imperative to transform community colleges into learning organizations dedicated to student success requires systematic cultural change at most institutions. With concentrations of low-income students and students of color, the participating college's undergraduates are also largely underprepared for college-level work.⁴ Ultimately, the initiative seeks to help more students reach their individual goals.

The framework of Achieving the Dream has four guiding principles for institutional improvement:

- committed leadership,
- using evidence to improve programs and services,
- promoting broad engagement, and
- creating systemic institutional change.

Each college participating in Achieving the Dream identifies student populations that currently experience low rates of success, develops interventions to improve student outcomes, and measures changes in student success. Institutions are also required to submit longitudinal student record data on cohorts of students to document student progression and success.⁵

Consistent with earlier rounds of Achieving the Dream, the Round Three Houston Colleges receive financial and technical support to participate in the initiative. Including significant funding from the Houston Endowment, each college receives a planning grant of \$50,000 and implementation grants of \$400,000 (over a four-year period) to support data collection and analysis, as well as implementation of program strategies. Each college also receives technical support from a coach and data facilitator assigned to provide routine guidance, as well as general support from the initiative through participation in the annual Achieving the Dream Strategy Institute.

The Houston Endowment is the only Achieving the Dream funder to include four-year institutions in the initiative. Prairie View A&M University, Texas Southern University, and the

² Jenkins (2006).

³ McClenney (2008).

⁴ Bailey, Calcagno, Jenkins, Kienzl, and Leinbach (2005).

⁵ Morest and Jenkins (2007).

University of Houston-Downtown, three minority-serving institutions joined an educational initiative geared toward community colleges primarily as part of the Houston Endowment's broader focus on higher education.

What are Minority-Serving Institutions?

Post-secondary educational institutions that serve large numbers of minority students are called minority-serving institutions (MSIs). Since their inception, they have played a significant role in providing higher education access for minority students. There are two criteria that classify institutions as a minority-serving institution—they must either qualify by the percentage of minority students enrolled, or they are classified by specific legislation.⁶ Within the minority-serving institution classification, there are three primary types of institutions: (1) Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs), (2) Hispanic Serving Institutions (HSIs), and (3) Tribal Colleges and Universities (TCUs). Table 1 provides an overview of various types of minority-serving institutions within the United States.

Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) began in the late nineteenth century and were specifically established to address the educational needs of African-Americans. The first of these schools, which was later designated as an HBCU, was established in Pennsylvania in 1837 to provide education for former slaves after the abolition of slavery. Today, there are over 100 HBCUs within the postsecondary educational system of the United States. Two of the colleges in this report, Prairie View A&M University and Texas Southern University, are HBCUs.

Hispanic Serving Institutions (HSIs) are defined by the U.S. Department of Education as any accredited, degree-granting institution whose full-time equivalent undergraduate enrollment is at least 25 percent Hispanic. The professional organization that represents these institutions, the Hispanic Association of Colleges and Universities, indicates that there are more than 200 of these schools within the United States and Puerto Rico.⁷ One of the colleges in this report, the University of Houston-Downtown, is a Hispanic Serving Institution.

Tribal Colleges and Universities have been chartered by one or more of the American tribal nations recognized by the federal government. These schools are located in 12 states on American Indian reservations or in communities with large populations of Native Americans.⁸ None of the colleges in this report are Tribal Colleges or Universities.

⁶ Li and Carroll (2007).

⁷ Lumina Foundation (2008).

⁸ U.S. Department of Education (2009).

		Type of College	Number of Colleges and Universities	
Table	Two- year colleges			1
		Public	1,032	
		Private	645	
U.S.	Four-year colleges and universities			Degree
		Public	653	
		Private	2,022	
	Total number of degree granting institutions		4,352	
	Hispanic Serving Institutions			
		Two-year public	128	
		Two-year private	10	
		Four-year public	57	
		Four-year private	71	

Granting Institutions

Total Hispanic Serving Institutions	266
Historically Black Colleges and Universities	
Two-year public	11
Two-year private	5
Four-year public	40
Four-year private	49
Total Historically Black Colleges and Universities	105
Tribal Colleges and Universities	
Two-year public	24
Two-year private	4
Four-year public	5
Four-year private	3
Total Tribal Colleges and Universities	36

SOURCES:

- Hispanic Association of Colleges and Universities. 2008. "Fact Sheet: Hispanic Higher Education and HSIs."
Web site: http://www.hacu.net/hacu/HSI_Fact_Sheet_EN.asp?SnID=2.
- U.S. Department of Education, The Office for Civil Rights. 2009. "Lists of Postsecondary Minority Institutions."
Web site: <http://www.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ocr/edlite-minorityinst.html>.
- U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics. 2008. *Digest of Education Statistics*. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Education.

Today, minority-serving institutions educate one-third of all American students of color, or 2.3 million students overall, including much of the growing Latino undergraduate population. Almost half of the teacher-education degrees awarded to students of color are conferred by minority-serving institutions. From 1984 to 2004, the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) found that minority undergraduate enrollment grew much faster than Caucasian enrollments overall. NCES also found that the "proportion of degree-granting institutions identified as minority-serving more than doubled during the two decades, increasing from 14 percent in 1984 to 32 percent in 2004." Additionally, during this time period minority-serving institutions enrolled almost 60 percent of all minority undergraduates. HBCUs are still

considered the “top producers of professional African American talent and remain extremely important in meeting the education needs of the black community.”⁹

Minority-serving institutions continue to offer access to students who have typically faced the greatest barriers to success. Jamie Merisotis, President of the Lumina Foundation for Education, explains that, “MSIs offer unique educational experiences that foster cultural values and traditions, promote civic and community responsibility and produce citizens who are attuned to the increasingly diverse country in which we live.”¹⁰ Minority-serving institutions are able to provide students with a culturally relevant experience and personal attention to help them succeed academically. A faculty member at Texas Southern University agreed: “As an [MSI], by our nature we operate as an extended family. We are more intrusive. . . . We provide a holistic student environment.” Simply put, minority-serving institutions remain a significant provider of higher education credentials for students, particularly for students of color in the United States.

Minority-Serving Institutions and Achieving the Dream

An examination of these four-year, minority serving institutions provides an opportunity to better understand how the initiative is operating outside of a community college context. Since these institutions are open admission or nearly open admission, it offers a useful comparison of Achieving the Dream that is based on a student population similar to that of community colleges, but within a four-year university structure. Of equal importance, an examination of Achieving the Dream allows the Initiative to learn about and incorporate approaches and strategies from minority-serving institutions who have a long history of successfully educating students of color, low-income students, and first-generation college students. In sum, this analysis is intended to facilitate mutual learning between Achieving the Dream and four-year minority-serving institutions.

Report Focus: Prairie View A&M University, Texas Southern University, and the University of Houston-Downtown

*Prairie View A&M University*¹¹

Prairie View A&M University is a public, four-year institution located in Prairie View, Texas. It is considered the second oldest institution of higher education in Texas. Established by the Texas Constitution of 1876, the University has undergone several name changes since its inception. In 1947 the institution became Prairie View A&M, making it an independent branch of the Texas A&M University system. Prairie View is known for its programs in Juvenile Justice,

⁹ HBCU Connect (2008).

¹⁰ Lumina Foundation (2008).

¹¹ Prairie View A&M University website (2009); Achieving the Dream website (2005).

Architecture, Teacher Education, Social Work, and Natural Resources Sciences. It has a reputation for producing engineers, nurses, and educators. The University also houses the only Crime Prevention Center in the state of Texas. Of the three universities profiled in this study, Prairie View is the smallest, enrolls the highest percentage of full-time students, and has the highest graduation and retention rates. Compared to Texas Southern University and the University of Houston-Downtown, Prairie View has the highest Achieving the Dream cohort retention rates and developmental math pass rates.

*Texas Southern University*¹²

Texas Southern University (TSU) was founded by the 50th Texas Legislature in 1947 in Houston, Texas, becoming the first state supported university in Houston. It also became the first Historically Black College and University to acquire a law school, the Thurgood Marshall School of Law. The University has various academic programs that are unique to Houston. It boasts the only Urban Planning degree in the area and has one of only two flight simulators in the nation that helps to maintain the Airway Sciences Program. The University is also known for its renowned Debate Team. The student profile of Texas Southern University is similar to Prairie View, with a large percentage of full-time students, and a large percentage of African-American students (90 percent). However, Texas Southern University has a low retention and graduation rate (50 percent and 13 percent respectively).

*University of Houston-Downtown*¹³

The University of Houston-Downtown was founded in 1974 following the acquisition of South Texas Junior College. During the 1990s, the University of Houston-Downtown was recognized as the third fastest growing university in the state of Texas. The University of Houston-Downtown is one of the most ethnically diverse institutions of higher education in the southwest. The University is also known for its academic programs in technology and has received national recognition for its wireless campus.

Among the three universities profiled in this report, the University of Houston-Downtown is the largest. With over 12,000 students, it is almost twice as large as Prairie View. It also has a fairly even split between full-time and part-time students. The university prides itself in having no majority student in terms of race or ethnicity, with a student population of 28 percent African American students, 35 percent Hispanic students and 22 percent white students. Similar to Texas Southern University, the University of Houston-Downtown also has a low retention and graduation rate (58 percent and 14 percent respectively). Table 2 provides basic student demographic information for each university.

¹² Texas Southern University website (2009); Achieving the Dream website (2005).

¹³ University of Houston-Downtown website (2009); Achieving the Dream website (2005).

Characteristic	Prairie View A&M University	Texas Southern University	University of Houston- Downtown
Total Undergraduate Enrollment (N)	6,728	7,131	12,134

Table 2
Student Demographics

Undergraduate Attendance Status (%)			
Full-time	90	81	48
Part-time	10	19	52
Pell Grant Recipients^a	37	74	54
Undergraduate Enrollment by Race/Ethnicity (%)			
Asian/Native Hawaiian/ Pacific Islander	2	2	10
Black or African American	88	90	28
Hispanic/Latino	4	3	35
White	3	1	22
Non-resident Alien	1	3	5
Race or Ethnicity Unknown	1	0	0
Undergraduate Enrollment by Gender (%)			
Female	57	58	61
Male	43	42	39
Undergraduate Enrollment by age (%)			
24 and under	87	73	51
25 and over	13	27	49
Undergraduate Retention Rates^b (%)	79	59	58
Undergraduate Graduation Rates^c (%)	37	13	14
Achieving the Dream Cohort^d			
Semester to Semester Retention	8,081	13,382	14,162
Fall to Spring (Avg %)	86	77	79
Fall to Fall (Avg %)	55	48	48
Fall to Year 2 (Avg %) ^e	58	50	51
Developmental Math Pass Rate on First Attempt (%)^f	76	59	61

SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, Institute of Education Sciences (2009). *IPEDS College data 2008-2009*. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Education. Achieving the Dream Database.

NOTES: ^aPell Grant Recipients - percentage of full-time, first-time degree/certificate seeking students.

^bRetention Rate - first-time, full-time students who began their studies in Fall 2007 and returned in Fall 2008.

^cGraduation rate - the percentage of full-time, first-time, students who started their studies in Fall 2002.

^dThe Achieving the Dream Cohort is longitudinal and includes the “first time in college” students tracked from 2003-2007.

^eFall to Year 2 – the measure of student retention from Fall of origin to Fall of 2nd year (5th semester).

Methods

Data for this study were collected primarily through semi-structured interviews with college administrators, faculty and staff, as well as focus groups with first-year students and senior students at each university. The data were collected from March to May 2009. The data for this report are based on our observations during the data collection period. Given the continually changing work of all Achieving the Dream colleges, the data referenced in this report are not intended to provide a longitudinal view of the colleges’ efforts, nor are they intended to reflect how Achieving the Dream may be currently operating at any of the institutions. Rather, this report offers a snapshot of the three universities during the time of our visits.

Although the specific titles vary somewhat by institution, at each college we typically interviewed the college President, Chief Academic Officer, Director of Student Services, Director of Institutional Research, counselors/advisors, members of the faculty, and others who were directly involved in the initiative. We conducted individual and small group interviews for a total of 60 persons interviewed. Specific topics included the university’s approach to Achieving the Dream, concerns and challenges within the initiative, the university’s commitment to student success, university supports enabled through Achieving the Dream, specific instructional student success supports, administrative and governance structures of the university that affect their participation in the initiative, and their advice to community colleges who are interested in promoting student success at their institutions.

Student focus groups were typically comprised of students who were enrolled in a specific course. We asked students questions across multiple topics including: how they selected the university they are attending, students perceptions of their university (in particular, how the university promotes student success), overall campus climate, and their perceptions of other factors influencing student success. We conducted a total of five focus groups ranging in size from 6 to 25 students; a total of 57 students participated. Table 3 provides an overview of the employee interviews and student focus groups at each college. Most interviews lasted about an hour (focus groups about 90 minutes) and were digitally recorded. We coded the interviews by key themes using NVIVO7, a qualitative data analysis software program.

The qualitative approach of this report means the findings are not applicable to four-year colleges or minority-serving institutions more broadly. It would be difficult, if not impossible, to differentiate which aspects of these four-year colleges’ experiences are related to their status as a four-year college versus those aspects that correlated with their status as a minority-serving institution. However, the goal of this report is not to extrapolate its findings but to capture the important perspectives of these three colleges to better inform the Achieving the Dream initiative about the experiences of a particular subset of its participating institutions. It discusses how these experiences were similar to or different from those of community colleges within the initiative.

Importantly, during our fieldwork, we discovered that these colleges’ Achieving the Dream efforts were generally a component of their larger institutional emphasis on student success. Often, it was difficult to isolate the direct impact of Achieving the Dream. Throughout our interviews and focus groups, administrators, faculty, and students largely discussed the initiative within a broader framework of student success.

Table 3

Student Focus Groups and Employee Interviews

Characteristic	Prairie View A&M University	Texas Southern University	University of Houston-Downtown
Focus Groups (N)			

Number of students in First Year/Freshman Level Focus Group	11	15	15
Number of students in Senior Level Focus Group	6	0	10
Total number of students participating in Focus Groups	17	15	25
Administrator/Faculty Interviews (N)			
Number of University employees interviewed	28	15	17

II. Achieving the Dream: Examining the Model's Fit

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.¹⁴ Colleges are then expected to use data to identify priority areas for

¹⁴ Brock, Jenkins, Ellwein, Miller, Gooden et al. (2007).

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.¹⁵ As represented in Figure 1, Achieving the Dream's improvement process includes the following:

- (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.¹⁶

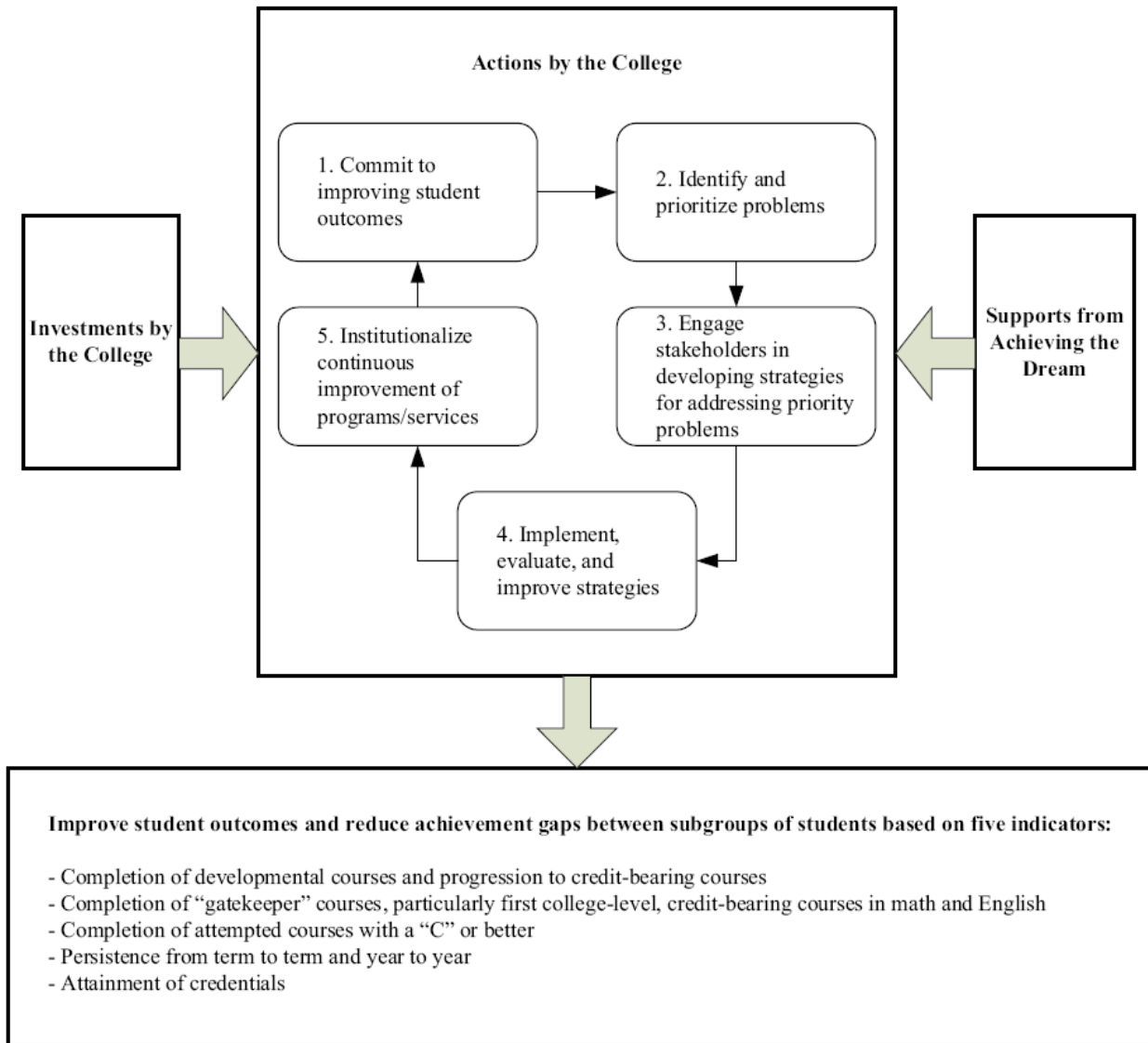
This section examines the application of Achieving the Dream within the context of these four-year colleges and the ways in which their experiences compare with those of community colleges in the initiative. In order to determine the impact of Achieving the Dream at these institutions we had the universities share their experiences related to creating a culture of evidence, strategy development and institutional change.

¹⁵ MDC (2008).

¹⁶ Achieving the Dream (2009).

Figure 1

Five-Step Institutional Improvement Process for the Achieving the Dream Initiative



SOURCE: Zachry, E. (2008). *Promising Instructional reforms in developmental education: A case study of three achieving the dream colleges*. New York: MDRC.

- **Achieving the Dream as an initiative did not loom as large at the four-year colleges when compared to community colleges. Instead, student success is their main driving message. Achieving the Dream is viewed as one component within their broader emphasis on student success. Additionally, the four-year colleges find some of the Achieving the Dream language more tailored toward community colleges.**

The “Achieving the Dream” brand did not weigh as heavily at the four-year colleges primarily because of the initiative’s tag line, website, as well as the written resources and materials associated with the initiative that all focus on community colleges. Put simply, senior administrators at four-year colleges experienced difficulty selling the appeal of an initiative so directly focused on community colleges to their faculty. For example, specific language used within the initiative is “Achieving the Dream: Community Colleges Count.” This was problematic language for four-year institutions to incorporate. To overcome this challenge, these institutions de-emphasized the specific language of Achieving the Dream and focused on the initiative as one component of their larger student success agenda. Throughout this report Achieving the Dream is most appropriately viewed as one aspect of these colleges’ broader and more dominant emphasis on “student success.”

- **For many participating community colleges, Achieving the Dream permeates the entire campus. Conversely, at these four-year colleges, the initiative is used to promote existing student success approaches that are typically concentrated within a specific unit of the college.**

The initiative encourages colleges to involve a wide variety of faculty and staff at each stage of the process, from strategy design to implementation, assessment, and refinement. This broad engagement ensures that all aspects of the initiative will become more prominent across the campus as students and employees from each area contribute their diverse insights and perspectives. The four-year universities have tied Achieving the Dream to a larger student success umbrella. As one administrator at the University of Houston-Downtown put it:

We have changed the way we do business with our general focus being on how we can help students succeed. We want to understand what causes students to not come back to school, or drop their classes. We have become more intrusive in trying to understand what stumbling blocks exist for our students. We are trying to be more proactive.

Achieving the Dream has found a home at each of these institutions based upon the organization of their student success efforts. Overall, at the four-year institutions, involvement in Achieving the Dream is not widespread but concentrated in one area; for example, the University College or Student Success Center. The four-year institutions did not adhere to the top-down approach that many community colleges used to help the initiative permeate the institution. Boxes 1, 2, and 3 offer a more detailed description of each institution’s approach, and the following section highlights unique ways in which they have incorporated Achieving the Dream into an existing effort.

Prairie View A&M University's Achieving the Dream implementation efforts are concentrated in the University College. Achieving the Dream enhances both the focus and goals of University College around student success. Many of the students served through University College are students who are in need of developmental education, are low income, or are from high schools that did not fully prepare them for success at the college level. As described more fully in Box 1, linking the ACCESS program with University College ensured that these students have the skills necessary to attain academic success before entering college and to maintain a level of academic achievement during their first year of college. Locating the initiative in the institution's University College links Achieving the Dream efforts to first year experience, developmental coursework, and other student success efforts.

At Texas Southern University, Achieving the Dream is housed within the Student Success Center which integrates programs and services that support student achievement and needs. The services provided by the student success center are aimed at increasing student retention and graduation rates, which are goals of Achieving the Dream. Texas Southern University has used Achieving the Dream funds to expand its supplemental instruction program, which helps students successfully complete courses. Box 2 highlights in more detail the Student Success Center and supplemental instruction program at Texas Southern University.

At the University of Houston-Downtown, Achieving the Dream efforts are aligned with the university's Quality Enhancement Plan which began about same time as the initiative. Many of the efforts and staff involvement for Achieving the Dream come from the University College. Achieving the Dream has had a very organic process at the University of Houston-Downtown gaining involvement and buy-in from hosting Friday morning information sessions and involving the faculty senate. The University of Houston-Downtown has been able to create unique opportunities for collaboration under the umbrella of student success and utilizing Achieving the Dream funds. An example of such collaboration is the work the University did in relation to enhancing its mission and connecting students, faculty, staff, alumni, and community members through Dialogue to Action Circles. Box 3 describes these efforts more fully. Achieving the Dream and the University of Houston-Downtown Center for Public Deliberation came together to ensure that the principles of Achieving the Dream were implemented at the University of Houston-Downtown. By bringing together students, faculty, administrators, and staff of the University of Houston-Downtown with community members, a united front was created to ensure that students at the university overcome barriers to their academic success.

Box 1

Prairie View A&M University's University College and Summer Bridge Program

University College (UC) is a residential and learning community designed to enhance the academic success of students enrolled at Prairie View A&M University, especially freshmen students. Participation in University College is mandatory for freshman students. Over 6,500 students have participated in UC designed to provide a student-centered atmosphere, aimed at improving the academic performance of students, increasing retention rates of freshman students into their sophomore year, increasing graduation rates, and providing students with opportunities to engage in learning, build leadership skills, and experience personal growth. The retention rate of students who participate in the residential program at UC is 71 percent. To foster academic development students within UC are assigned to a University College Academic Team. This team is composed of 100 to 125 students, an advisor, a learning community manager, two community assistants, and a faculty fellow. Additionally, there are several services provided to students within University College such as advising, the ability to form UC study groups, attend academic workshops, and recommendations for academic assistance. University College seeks to establish a community for students that helps them thrive throughout their college experiences.

Summer Bridge Program

The Academy for Collegiate Excellence and Student Success (ACCESS) program at Prairie View A&M University is a bridge to college program aimed at aiding in the transition to college. The program helps to improve the academic success high school students in Texas who are making the transition to college. The ACCESS program is composed of two parts. The first part of the program is a seven-week residential program that takes place the summer before the prospective student will enroll at the University. This period is referred to as an academic boot camp. Each day the students are exposed to lessons in reading comprehension, math, writing, problem solving, and critical thinking. In addition to daily instruction, the students also have the opportunity to participate in study halls and workshops. As well as daily instruction and participation in study halls and workshops, students are exposed to field experiences to complement the teachings that occur in the classroom. These field experiences lead to the growth of leadership, personal, and social skills intended to benefit the students both in college and in their careers. More than 1,200 students have participated in the ACCESS program. Of the students who graduate from the summer component of the ACCESS program, 90 percent go on to attend college. The second component of the ACCESS program is University College. All students who enroll at Prairie View A&M will participate in UC in the subsequent fall.

SOURCE: Information provided by University College at Prairie View A&M University.

Box 2

Texas Southern University Student Success Center and Supplemental Instruction

The Student Success Center, formerly the General University Academic Center, at Texas Southern University serves to provide support services to all students, focusing specifically on first-year and transfer students. The Student Success Center provides several services to ensure academic success among students such as academic advisement, orientation seminars, early warning systems, placement testing, and career advisement. There are several programs and services organized by the Student Success Center that are aimed at increasing student success and retention.

Supplemental Instruction

Supplemental Instruction at Texas Southern University is a student success program offered through the Student Success Center. The goals of Supplemental Instruction are to improve grades in targeted courses, reduce the attrition rate of those courses, and to increase graduation rates. The idea behind Supplemental Instruction at Texas Southern University is to enhance the instruction of professors at Texas Southern University by supporting dialogue among students and providing students with interactive learning. At Texas Southern University Supplemental Instruction was piloted across various sections of four courses. Supplemental Instruction is based on peer learning and instruction. Master students facilitate Supplemental Instruction sessions. The facilitators do not lecture or re-teach any course material; rather they teach participants how to learn and what material they should learn. At Texas Southern University Supplemental Instruction was held three times per week, with some sessions being held in the classroom. Students who participated in Supplemental Instruction sessions scored on average 12 points higher compared to students who did not participate.

SOURCE: Information provided by Texas Southern University.

Box 3

University of Houston-Downtown's Mission and Dialogue to Action Program

The University of Houston-Downtown provides academic programs to the Houston community and surrounding communities. The University of Houston-Downtown seeks to grant educational opportunities to individuals who would not otherwise have access to an education. The University focuses on facilitating success among all of its students. To achieve student success, the University of Houston-Downtown provides numerous support services for its students and has faculty and staff members who are devoted to helping students attain academic success.

Dialogue-to-Action Initiative

The Achieving the Dream Dialogue-to-Action Circles Initiative was an initiative that was started by the University of Houston-Downtown Center for Public Deliberation and Achieving the Dream. Launched in 2009, the Dialogue-to-Action Circles Initiative was based on a model established by Everyday Democracy that focuses on education and involvement. At the University of Houston-Downtown, the initiative brought together various individuals: faculty, administrators, staff, and students of the University of Houston-Downtown, and community members in Houston to take part in meetings, called "dialogue-to-action circles," to discuss success among college students. Eighty participants took part in the initiative. Participants in the dialogue-to-action circles also discussed achievement gaps that exist among students and how they can affect the level of success obtained by students. In addition, participants discussed the ways that members of the University of Houston-Downtown community and community members in Houston can help to address the impediments to student success and help college students succeed. The goal of the Achieving the Dream Dialogue-to-Action Initiative is to build the capabilities of students, faculty, and staff at the University of Houston-Downtown and Houston community members to take on reform at the University of Houston-Downtown. The initiative also seeks to create academic support for students at the University of Houston-Downtown and to create a community that will advocate for learning practices and policies that focus on supporting students.

SOURCE: Information provided by the University of Houston-Downtown Center for Public Deliberation.

- **The four-year colleges report experiences similar to those of community colleges in the initiative in terms of developing a culture of evidence. The culture of evidence is being embraced and data are being shared in meaningful ways.**

Developing a “culture of inquiry, evidence, and accountability” is meant to be at the core of an Achieving the Dream college’s experience. As stated in the Achieving the Dream framing paper:

Institutions should make decisions and allocate resources based on evidence of what is working and what is not. A data-driven decision-making process is most effective when administrators, faculty and staff across the institution examine evidence and engage in frank discussions about outcomes for different student populations. The college then sets measurable goals for improvement and uses data to assess its progress.¹⁷

The expectation is that colleges will be motivated by student outcomes data to commit to improving student performance. Not only will evidence of disappointing student achievement serve as an impetus for action, but it will also empower colleges to address their challenges through targeted changes in institutional planning and programming.¹⁸

Creating a culture of evidence requires the colleges to look to the data for answers to their questions and to move away from relying solely upon anecdotal information. As with many of the community colleges the four-year institutions faced difficulties accessing data due to antiquated systems, state data definitions, and other challenges. Although these colleges generally had the institutional research expertise on staff to relatively quickly handle the data analysis, technical challenges, and reporting requirements, these colleges faced other important challenges including overall institutional research staff reductions due to the economy and the lack of capacity to handle the increased demand for data requests. In addition, the increase reliance on data creates exponential demand for data as one data team leader describes:

Every time we furnish the answer, it furnishes a new question. It is a never ending process of more and more refined information as we serve the larger community. Once we show we can answer one thing, then we can answer this. I’m in heaven because I like data, but now people actually want the data. This has led to infusion in the culture (University of Houston-Downtown).

A data member at Prairie View A&M University had a similar recollection:

We are more focused now on our data collection. We know very specific things. This is more useful to us then it has been in the past. Sometimes you collect data just to collect data. Now we are being forced to use the data. Now we see the benefit of making data driven decisions. That is changing the culture of evidence around here.

The culture of evidence has permeated other areas of these four-year institutions and it is not remaining just an Achieving the Dream activity. Data driven decision making is being embraced by administrators, faculty and staff alike. The data removes some of the tension about discussing

¹⁷ MDC (2006).

¹⁸ Achieving the Dream (2009).

what is working and not working. It also helps minimize the perception of individual blaming in the conversation. One University of Houston-Downtown faculty member described what is happening at their campus:

I think that the AtD focus has sort of legitimized this for people we need to work with on campus, and that has been helpful. If we want to make a decision we turn to the data, and we are able to get more people on the same page to make the appropriate decisions. The AtD focus has established a good model, in making the data the basis for making decisions for our entire institution in a way that was not prevalent before.

Using data has helped bridge relationships between faculty and administrators. Faculty feel empowered to try new things to experiment to find what works.

- **An important challenge for four-year colleges is modifying data definitions that were designed for community colleges.¹⁹**

As a requirement of participating in Achieving the Dream all participating institutions are required to submit data on the student cohorts being tracked. The initiative is using this data to create a national longitudinal database that tracks cohorts of first-time students (full-time and part-time) who seek degrees or certificates.²⁰ All of the Achieving the Dream data definitions are based upon a community college model and some are not very useful for four-year colleges.

Some of these definitions require modification to align with the needs of four-year colleges. In order to overcome this challenge, the four-year colleges worked with their coaches and/or data facilitators to determine how to best translate the model to a four-year institution. For example, the Achieving the Dream database focuses on two-year graduation rates for community colleges, while the four-year colleges typically assess six-year graduation rates. This difference in time periods also makes it unlikely that the four-year colleges will realize a similar level of success at the completion of their Achieving the Dream funding as community colleges. Also, these institutions expressed a need to assess progression patterns of transfer students in addition to first time in college (FTIC) students. A member of the data team explained:

I think particularly with us, being able to use that information to also access transfer students would also be helpful, not just following FTIC. I believe AtD began with community colleges—most students would receive a degree within two years for community colleges; for many four year colleges six years is the minimum graduation rate. I believe the option is open to add data elements to our cohort, if there are programs that are being offered. . . It would be helpful to follow our transfer students, like they follow FTIC students.

¹⁹ It is important to note that the Achieving the Dream has focused primarily on interim outcomes. For example asking colleges to track their cohorts semester to semester persistence, passing developmental education courses, and passing gateway courses. The improvement of interim outcomes will in the long-term impact graduation rates.

²⁰ Achieving the Dream website (2005).

The four-year colleges did not find the Achieving the Dream database very useful to track their data. They are tracking their cohorts including measures beyond the initiative's database, such as FTICs, conditionally admitted students, or transfer students.

These modified data definition and cohort considerations ultimately results in additional time and resource demands on the Institutional Research unit. Each of these four-year institutions met that time requirement differently by expanding their institutional research capacity, cross department collaborations, or implementing a model of broad engagement with data. The Institutional Research Directors at each of the four-year colleges expressed similar frustrations with trying to submit data from a four-year institution to a database designed for two-year institutions. Changing the format of their data to meet the requirements of the initiative is both timely and costly. Additionally, The IT functions for two of the universities is centralized and handled by the college system.

- **Addressing achievement gaps of students of color is a central concern of the initiative. In comparison to community colleges, the four-year minority-serving institutions are finding the Achieving the Dream initiative more useful in examining different subgroups of students, such as developmental versus non-developmental students.**

Colleges participating in the Achieving the Dream initiative are expected to advance educational equity by identifying and addressing any achievement gaps that exist among their students, particularly for low-income students and students of color. As a minority-serving institution, these four-year institutions already had a historical, long-term priority of providing educational access and success for students of color. These colleges are finding the Achieving the Dream initiative more useful in examining achievement differences within racial/ethnic groups, rather than across racial/ethnic groups. As a core team member stated:

Ninty percent of our students are African American--that's almost everybody. . . We have a 60/40 breakdown in gender [60 percent women], but the state isn't that concerned about gender. . .Our biggest drop was among African American males. Most of our other groups rose except for that one group. Achieving the Dream has been pushing some of that forward. We're really looking at that more carefully. We want to know why that is happening. Let's look at other factors.

Achieving the Dream has helped these institutions use data in new and meaningful ways. These institutions have even implemented changes, programs, and policies in reaction to what they learned from the data. For example, the college quoted above is planning to develop a center on supporting male academic achievement that offers male students increased opportunities for engagement and mentorship. Additionally, the colleges are identifying achievement gaps by disaggregating their student data to compare conditional admission students to regular admission students, developmental students to college ready students, and by gender. Another core team leader commented:

The [racial/ethnic group] categories do not really apply to us. The main categories for us are developmental and non-developmental. In the analysis of retention and graduation rates, but what was new is discovering the very high failure rates in freshman level courses. Failure rates hover around 50 percent for developmental or non-developmental. There was an expectation that the highest failure rates would be in English and math. However, that was not the case. The highest failure rate was in reading intensive courses, such as history and science. There was a great deal of resistance in facing that by the administration. But, now we have a new administration and that has not been an issue for them.

In essence, data is a driving force across the four-year colleges included in this report. However, their focus is somewhat different than that of community colleges in general. The four-year colleges have modified Achieving the Dream data definitions, cohort composition, and their examination of student success among students of color to better align with the overall characteristics of their student population.

- **The four-year colleges' experiences with data dissemination parallel that of community colleges within Achieving the Dream.**

The colleges are sharing what they are learning about student success. They report sharing the findings about semester-to-semester retention, graduation rates by cohort, teasing out factors that keep a student from graduating whether it be a course, changing majors, lack of preparation, or other personal or institutional barriers. Similar to community colleges in the initiative, the data are being shared across the college community through newsletters, committee meetings, faculty senate, brown bag presentations, and posted on the college's intranet. Data dissemination has helped create buy-in and support for building a culture of evidence. At one college after sharing some information about classes that are creating bottlenecks, it led to further analysis and consideration. For example, the college found that statistics was required by many of their majors and created a bottleneck for students who did not pass the course. This finding led someone else at the college to ask what happens to the students who successfully complete the statistics course. They found that the students who successfully completed statistics were graduating within four semesters or less after completing the course.

At one university, the director of an advising department was inspired by the work being done to promote student success as a result of Achieving the Dream. They decided if data can be helpful in identifying courses that are barriers to students reaching their academic goals, this data can also track the outcomes of specific interventions. The department requested data about students on probation and tracked which interventions helped these students move from probation to success. The advising director described the department's efforts:

There are monthly reports that advisors submit outlining the activities they are doing, workshops they have conducted, and caseload of suspended/probation students. We are having [name omitted] pull reports for the students on probation. We want to get a better understanding if the interventions that students are participating in are helping them. We are also trying to understand who is using the resources on campus. We want to

understand what really impacts student success... We try to replicate and share best practices. We have successful advisors share what they do...how they reach their students. Perhaps their ideas can help us.

The data provided a means for fellow advisors to collaborate and work toward implementing what truly helps their students become successful.

Achieving the Dream Implementation: Where does Achieving the Dream Live at These Four-Year Colleges?

Achieving the Dream implementation began at each of these institutions after a planning year (2006-2007). During the time of our visits, each institution was in its second year of implementation and making varying degrees of progress. In order for students to benefit from Achieving the Dream the universities have to translate their focus on student success into strategic action. The primary vehicle for enacting this change is the development of new programs and policies that help students to remain in school, improve their performance, and ultimately graduate with degrees. The strategies being implemented at the four-year universities are similar to the ones being implemented at community colleges participating in the initiative and range from revising administrative procedures to changing instructional practices in specific subject areas. Each of the universities is trying new approaches or new programs but mainly revamping services that were in place prior to their participation in Achieving the Dream. During our interviews with administrators, faculty and staff at the three Houston four-year colleges, we learned that they are using Achieving the Dream to enhance their commitment to student success and are focusing on ways to engage students inside and outside the classroom and investing in the retooling of their employees.

- **All three four-year colleges we examined are focusing on delivering key student support systems during the first year. Achieving the Dream funding has increased their ability to provide these support systems. These broad focus areas, increasing students' overall "college knowledge," promoting student ownership of their academic journey, and getting students connected to the institution, are similar to the broad focus areas of community colleges.**

Across the Achieving the Dream initiative, many colleges are focusing on strategies that promote student success during their first year. College success courses, intensive advisement, and mentoring are just a few ways some colleges have directly targeted first year students. A student's first year in college is extremely important. In many ways, it is the foundation upon which a student's undergraduate success (or lack thereof) is built and is central to student persistence. As Alexander and Gardner (2009) explain, "Investigating an institution's achievement of excellence in the first year requires institutions to go beyond a focus on programs to consider all components of the first year and the way those components interact, for better or worse, to affect the learning and retention of beginning college students."²¹

²¹ Alexander and Gardner (2009), p.20.

Additionally, college attrition rates are much higher during the first year, with a majority of all leaving taking place during the first year.²² According to Tinto, student departure from college is a longitudinal process based largely on both their social and academic interactions. In essence, “the more academically integrated a student is in college, the greater the degree of social integration, the more committed one is to his/her goals, and the more likely s/he is to complete college.”²³ In response to these trends, many colleges invest in significant first year student support services, including for example, summer bridge programs, academic, study skill courses, and first-year seminars.²⁴

Interviews with key administrators and faculty suggest the three Houston four-year colleges are using Achieving the Dream to enhance their commitment to the first year college experience in three core ways: 1) to increase students’ overall “college knowledge”; 2) to promote student ownership of their academic journey; and 3) to get students connected to the institution. The culture of evidence approach of Achieving the Dream, combined with the actual funding, allowed the colleges to expand and fine tune their already existing focus on these areas of student success.

Increasing students’ “college knowledge”

Pursuing higher education at any college involves understanding a broad array of basic college terminology, culture, and expectations. Some of these include, for example, the concept of course credit hours, course scheduling, sufficient outside of class preparation; course pre-requisites, developmental courses vs. credit bearing courses; lab sections; and balancing college and life. For students who come from middle and upper income families, much of this “college knowledge” is passed along informally by parents and older siblings. Lower-income students and minority students, particularly first generation college students, may not be privy to such knowledge, thus entering college with a significant disadvantage compared with their peers. Additionally, many lower income, minority and first-generation college students find themselves having significantly more non-college responsibilities, such as working extended hours and having more family responsibilities. As one student at the University of Houston-Downtown commented: “My family does not know anything about college. I am the first person to go to college in my family. They get mad at me and say I never have time for them.” A counselor at Prairie View A&M University summed up the issue:

It’s so overwhelming for them. When they come in they face an orientation plan, syllabi and a financial stack. It’s so overwhelming. We’re already dealing with an underserved group who are not used to this level of responsibility. . . They have to get used to being away from home, sharing a room, in a class with 100 people rather than 50 like in high school. Also, we’re having to retrain their minds on how to learn.

Faculty and administrators at Prairie View A&M University, Texas Southern University and the University of Houston-Downtown discussed the importance of providing college knowledge

²² Tinto (1993).

²³ Strayhorn (2009), p.10.

²⁴ Strayhorn (2009).

through campus resources, life skills courses, advisement, mentoring, and counseling. At Prairie View A&M University and Texas Southern University, many of the first year support systems are linked to a residential setting. This has the added advantage of facilitating a shared experience in a natural, home-like setting. For example, at Prairie View A&M University, much of this college knowledge is provided through University College. As a senior administrator explained:

At University College, we are always looking for ways to improve the front door experience for our students. We were the first to do the advising and registration of our students (all incoming freshmen). Now, college wide this process is departmentalized . . . All of the freshman dorms are co-located each housing only 100 students. We limit the number of residents to create a sense of community. It is our freshman neighborhood. We have about 26-40 helpers working and living with the freshmen. We have faculty fellows who are paired with a dorm and offer two or more programs for the residents per academic year. This allows the students to make a connection with a faculty person who is not teaching them or who is not giving them a grade.

Similarly, administrators and faculty at Texas Southern University convey college knowledge through their Urban Academic Village, a community concept that is geared at first year students, focused on life skills, student success services, and presentations from advisors, instructors and guest presenters. An advisor at Texas Southern University cited a particular focus on male students:

We have TSU man seminars geared toward our male students. We have a mentoring program for freshman male students. We pair them with professors, staff, or seniors . . . Females have the tendency to discuss and share their problems . . . Females will seek assistance sooner than male students. Male students have a tendency to hold in their issues.

Like the vast majority of the community colleges in the Achieving the Dream, the University of Houston-Downtown is non-residential. However, they still provide targeted first-year support services. One such support service is Connections, a mentoring program that focuses on first-year students. A counselor noted:

We established a mentoring program. . . We had a 92.6 percent retention rate for our mentored students. . . During the summer we send out letters inviting FTIC [first time in college] students to participate in success programs on campus. We contact them and pair them with mentors. We send them weekly emails and call them. We try to bring a personal touch with the students. What I have realized is that when students feel you care they are more inclined to go the extra mile.

Promoting students' ownership of their academic journey

An important theme among administrators, faculty and students was the importance of promoting student ownership in their academic journey during the first year. From assuming academic responsibility, encouraging students to select a major, to conveying to students the

importance of taking advantage of opportunities, there is a strong sentiment that students must become invested in their academic endeavor. Such investment leads to motivation, dedication and commitment to achieving academic success.

For example, the University of Houston-Downtown works with students to help them declare a major. A Dean commented, “We are working with the other colleges to increase the number of students who declare a major, so they can enter that college. Many of the students have not declared a major because they have not decided on one, or they have not fulfilled all of the requirements to be able to declare a major.” Faculty and administrators at the University of Houston-Downtown link the identification of a major to an important step in the student identifying a career. As the Vice President of Student Services described:

Many of the students are first generation students. They have been told, “If you want to get a good job, then you need to go to college.” Then they get in college and they ask, “now what?” We are working with the departments to get the students ready for the major courses by designing pre-major classes when the college identifies a student that is interested in that track. These pre-major courses then have speakers come in and talk to the students about career options in that track.

Getting students connected to the college

Faculty and administrators also cited the importance of student engagement, particularly in getting students connected to college during their first year. Although these colleges were focused on engagement of students prior to Achieving the Dream, their participation in the initiative allows them to enhance their efforts. Promoting student engagement within the first year underscored the importance of student involvement in campus life, organizations and activities. As a counselor at Prairie View A&M University shared: “We offer our students the opportunity to participate in professional development. We prepare you for life beyond the flag poles [campus border]. What helps is for them to be involved outside of the university and network with other people doing the same things.”

A student services advisor at Texas Southern University linked student engagement to persistence and overall student success. “The students who get connected tend to stay or persist. We try to get students involved in spirit days, campus organizations like clubs related to their interests or majors. The students that connect with someone tend to feel like they are a part of the university family. They will do well and graduate.”

Although faculty and administrators recognize the importance of first-year student engagement, they have also experienced its difficulty. They are hopeful that their participation in Achieving the Dream can assist in overcoming this challenge. As a faculty member at the University of Houston-Downtown remarked: “Our clubs and organizations have diminished. That’s a challenge for us. How do you form a core? I have not seen something successful about how to keep people here during the day. This [Achieving the Dream] philosophy of student success may attract some buy-in and do something about these challenges.”

Institutionalizing Achieving the Dream: Potential Challenges and Approaches

Achieving the Dream colleges are encouraged to institutionalize their student success agendas by establishing standing committees to guide various aspects of their institutional reform processes. The leaders of the initiative hope that colleges will integrate the work of their data teams to engage a broad spectrum of the campus community in analyzing student outcomes data. Meanwhile, Achieving the Dream expects colleges to embed the work of the core team into larger institutional decision making as the college's senior leadership guides the institution toward a greater focus on student success. Initiative leaders hope that the initiative will permeate the institution, affecting everything from hiring practices to professional development for faculty and staff.

- **Although commitment from senior administrators remains important, the bottom-up approach seems more critical for four-year colleges due to differences in governance structures.**

During the initial site visits conducted during 2007, the four-year institutions shared the need for a bottom-up approach to Achieving the Dream that is more aligned with the democratic governance approach of their institutions. The utilization of a bottom-up approach was again reiterated during the site visits conducted in the spring of 2009. The core team leader at University of Houston-Downtown described it as:

This four-year [college] is a democracy. Our strategies and buy in-have come from the bottom up. We have competent interested faculty and staff, coming forward with different strategies. . . As these things work, others have become interested. . .The culture of change has been the good work of faculty and staff in our culture, not so much the leadership. You find your motivated faculty and bring them in. (University of Houston-Downtown)

The Faculty Senate President indicated that her role in Achieving the Dream is based upon getting widespread buy-in and involvement for the initiative through faculty senate:

...What I would like to help facilitate, is getting broader based faculty engaged in some of the initiatives. And work with AtD and other initiatives, with the same kind of purposes, to create a bigger campus presence for them. I see myself as sort of a ...liaison to help coordinate these efforts and work other groups here on campus. (University of Houston-Downtown)

Another college described how looking at data related to student success has been shared through a series of Friday informal information sessions allowing the sharing of the issues to happen organically. The informal information sessions allow faculty, administrators, and staff to engage the data without finger-pointing. The informal sessions have also been used to increase buy-in and support for Achieving the Dream and more broadly student success efforts and directions at the institution.

- **Four-year colleges have both a teaching and research mission. A particular challenge for Achieving the Dream is to more directly link the student success agenda to the colleges' research agenda.**

As an administrator at the University of Houston-Downtown explained:

We are a teaching institution, but not a teaching institution in the same way as a community college, because our faculty are research faculty. We pride ourselves on our research expectations and endeavors. But the teaching part and the research part creates a tension sometimes within the university. We try to maintain the proper balance between the two. It creates tension because the faculty value teaching and we have research expectations, and it's sometimes difficult to balance.

A particular challenge for four-year institutions in the initiative is to more directly link the student success agenda to the college's research agenda. Although not specifically discussed in the interviews we conducted, some options might include providing seed money for faculty to conduct Achieving the Dream and/or student success related research, making data from the initiative more accessible for faculty research, and/or supporting faculty to present student success related research at their discipline specific professional conferences.

This fieldwork suggests four-year colleges engaging in Achieving the Dream may experience a particular set of challenges and opportunities that may differ from community colleges. These challenges include recognizing the importance of the bottom-up approach to initiative sustainability at four-year colleges and addressing both the teaching and research mission of four-year institutions in working toward student success.

III. Faculty/Administrators and Students Perspectives on Student Success

*. . .Life for me ain't been no crystal stair.
It's had tacks in it,
And splinters,
And boards torn up,
And places with no carpets on the floor—
Bare. . .
. . .But all the time,
I'se been a –climbin' on,
And reachin' landin's,
And turnin' corners And sometimes goin' in the dark
Where there ain't been no light.
So boy, don't you turn back.
Don't you set down on the steps
'Cause you finds it's kinder hard
Don't you fall now—
For I'se still goin', honey,
I'se still climbin',
And life for me ain't been no crystal stair.*

“Mother to Son” by Langston Hughes

Written in 1922, Langston Hughes’ classic poem, “Mother to Son” provides poignant advice: Life is hard, and full of stumbling blocks, but in order to succeed, one must persevere and keep going. As students navigate college, outside of the classroom is where much of the student investment, esteem building and support occurs. The interviews conducted with faculty and administrators, as well as our focus groups with students suggest the three colleges in our study employ a holistic approach toward students, which is a core part of the colleges’ mission and their student success agendas.

- **Creating a caring, supportive environment is a priority of administrators and recognized by students**

One of the fundamental tenants of Achieving the Dream is a focus on promoting student success. Achieving the Dream encourages colleges to have a student-centered vision, “helping all students achieve their educational and career goals is the ‘north star’ that should guide institutional decisions.”²⁵ The metaphoric North Star is often realized through the creation of a supportive environment for students both inside and outside of the classroom. This environment is largely shaped by the actions of faculty and administrators, specifically their interactions with students. Capturing students’ perspectives offers useful insight to those involved in the Achieving the Dream initiative. In particular, it highlights the importance of non-academic factors in the promotion of student success. Such factors include helping students make the

²⁵ MDC (2006), p.3.

adjustment to college, individual student responsibility, engagement beyond the classroom, and having a supportive environment.

Several of the faculty and administrators interviewed adopted an intrusive approach toward students, intentionally learning more about the lives of their students, their sources of support, hardships and responsibilities that affect their ability to achieve success in school and offering suggestions for how they might overcome or at least manage these obstacles. A senior at Prairie View A&M University commented: “I have had faculty come and have conversation with me for no reason. They just wanted to see how I was doing.” The Vice President of Student Services Staff at Prairie View A&M University agreed:

We have a holistic perspective, a family perspective, and here, you never meet a stranger. . . Here you have access to administration and faculty. There is a genuine, real family atmosphere here.

- **Faculty and administrators at these institutions clearly linked their commitment to student success to their educational mission to create an environment where every student matters and is potentially successful.**

As the President of Prairie View A&M University noted, providing leadership opportunities for a wide range of students, not just exceptional students is important.

One thing that we do that is different...Prairie View A&M University takes students who are not in the top 10 percent and produces good students out of them. We are much more intrusive. It is part of the cultural underpinning of the university. . .it is much more time consuming to be intrusive. Faculty are much more committed to meet the students where they are and get them where they need to be.

Senior administrators at these colleges voiced a strong commitment to providing opportunities for students. As an example, the president compared leadership opportunities for students of color at Prairie View A&M University versus typical opportunity structures for students of color at highly selective predominately white universities. For example, he notes that at the latter type of institutions it is only the “exceptional minority student” who can become student body president. Comparatively, minority-serving institutions try to enhance the leadership opportunities and skills for a broader group of students, sending an important message to students about the university’s commitment to their overall success.

Additionally, faculty and administrators across these colleges expressed a commitment to conveying important social norms and expectations to students. With a clear focus toward job attainment and career building, faculty at these institutions conveyed to students important information about the getting a job in the real world, where earning educational credentials is a necessary but not a sufficient condition for achieving success. It must be accompanied by an awareness of social norms and behaviors that can impact a student’s ability to be successful in the workplace. As a senior administrator at Prairie View A&M University stated:

I really do believe in freedom of expression, but you cannot show your breasts and get a job. You can have a tattoo but do not put it in a place that is going to keep you from getting hired.

Faculty and administrators conveyed how they will instruct men to remove their hats when they are inside a building, or talk with them about wearing a belt to keep their pants up. All of these examples are manifestations of faculty intrusiveness and a “beyond the classroom” approach to holistic investments in the success of their students.

- **Ties to sports, residential living, social connections, and/or familial alumni connections, suggest strong alumni commitment to four-year institutions. Faculty and administrators can creatively engage alumni in the student success agenda by drawing upon greater financial and programmatic support from their alums.**

Alumni engagement is important financially and from a student success perspective. In general, support from alumni at four-year institutions may be much stronger than for community colleges. In general, public HBCUs and minority-serving institutions received far less economic support from the state than their predominately white college counterparts. More recently, through political and legal means, some important economic progress has occurred to address such state-caused inequities. The Texas state legislature did an assessment of all public HBCUs that existed by law in Texas. This led to a recommendation that Prairie View A&M University and Texas Southern University receive additional infrastructure support. A number of appropriation measures were passed by the Texas General Assembly including \$25 million each to Texas Southern and Prairie View in 2001.²⁶

Beyond state support, these four-year universities are more actively soliciting alumni support to assist in the student success agenda. As the President of Prairie View A&M University stated:

When I came here as president, I made sure to reach to alumni to let them know their affiliation to the University was not over. We made the commitment to name all new buildings after alumni donors...I challenge every dean to raise \$15,000 so when a student comes with a need you have money to address it...This money is used to help students with small expenses like child care or transportation. This money helps students reach their goals.

An administrator at Texas Southern University articulated the link between alumni and student success:

Alumni play a particularly important role in the success of our students. They have adopted classes. They come in and support them and share their experiences with our students.

This raises an important consideration. Compared to community colleges, four-year colleges within the initiative may be able to draw upon more alumni support in advancing their student success agenda. As a senior administrator at Prairie View A&M University noted:

²⁶ Texas Legislature Senate Bill 1.

You end up with graduates who love this institution. My first year I marveled about the number of alumni that came back and still talk about what a difference this institution made in our lives. We just came off a capital campaign. We set a goal to raise \$30 million and we raised \$32 million.”

- **Faculty and administrators at these four-year colleges grapple with open admissions versus competitive admissions.²⁷ This raises important considerations in terms of student success: Should colleges invest in all students or only students who meet particular entrance level criteria?**

Many of the faculty and administrators we interviewed, particularly at Texas Southern University, expressed mixed opinions about senior administration’s approach to moving away from their open admission tradition. One of the primary goals of the new administration is to increase student retention and graduation rates. This has led to the implementation of performance-based admissions. As an administrator explained:

The single most core tradition is open admission for underprepared African-American students from the inner city. That has always been TSU’s primary mission since its inception. The only thing that has changed over the years is the kinds of students that we get. . . Students have become less and less prepared over the years to the point that a college has difficulty dealing with them. Their basic skills are so poor—we have to spend too much time on remediation.

All three institutions we visited take great pride in their ability to effectively educate students who would not have been given an educational opportunity at colleges with more competitive admissions. A senior administrator at Prairie View A&M University noted:

We have students who were earning a 2.0 in engineering at [another university] and are earning a 3.0 in engineering here. We asked the students what was different and they indicated the programs teach the same concept. The students indicated they were more comfortable asking questions here. They shared that they could engage with the faculty more.

There is significant concern that moving away from open admissions results in an important loss of opportunity for students to potentially earn a college degree. A faculty member at Texas Southern University conveyed with emotion:

²⁷ According to each institution’s website, the University of Houston-Downtown has an open admissions policy; Texas Southern University requires a 2.00 minimum GPA and a minimum SAT score of 820 (Critical Reading and Mathematics combined) or ACT score of 17 (composite); and Prairie View A&M University requires a 2.50 GPA and a minimum SAT score of 820 or ACT score of 17 (websites accessed June 8, 2010). During the time of our site visits, Texas Southern University had recently adopted this new minimum admissions policy, having formerly operated as an open admissions institution.

They [senior administration] think that students who have a record of performing better will be more successful when they get here. Personally, I would rather error on the other side than not ever give them the possibility.

Additionally, some individuals we interviewed expressed concern about the growing gender gap. Nationwide, women are outpacing men in terms of college enrollment and, in many cases, academic performance. This is particularly true among African Americans. One administrator suggested some colleges are accepting this trend and are focusing their efforts on recruiting African American females.

Stay at home Johnny. We are going to take Mary. I do not think in the long term that is going to solve the problem. We have a big imbalance between black males and black females. As more black females get degrees, the gulf will continue to grow wider for black males. I am not a proponent of [competitive admissions].

Those in support of the change offered a different perspective, also linked to student success. As a senior administrator explained: “We believe that it is important to student success to bring in students who are more focused. . . We want to bring in students that we can retain and graduate.”

Student Success Factors Identified in Freshmen and Senior Focus Groups

During the site visits, we conducted focus groups with first-year students and seniors in order to learn more about students’ perspectives of their academic journeys, as well as factors influencing their success in college. Data from the student focus groups provide a meaningful comparison of student perceptions of influences on student success. As a group, consistently across all three colleges, seniors provided more analytical, in-depth, and reflective responses than their freshmen counterparts. This section captures freshmen and senior students’ discussion of barriers to student success, their role or the role of students in general in achieving success in college; support systems; whether the minority-serving status of institution impacted their decision to attend the college; and general student success advice they had for their colleges or other students. Students play a critical part in the evaluation, development and enhancement of the quality of their learning experience. Student involvement requires that students act as collaborators in, rather than passive receivers of, teaching and learning. Perspectives from students allow these colleges, as well as Achieving the Dream more broadly, to evaluate how their efforts to promote student success are perceived by and impacting their students.

- **Both groups of students discussed the common obstacle of making the initial adjustment to college life.**

The transition to college can be especially difficult for low-income and first generation students due to their lack of college knowledge and general financial stressors. Many students discussed fundamental differences between how they envisioned college life as a prospective student and the reality of college life once they enrolled. As a University of Houston-Downtown senior reflected:

Coming out of high school, I had a fairly generic view of college—the name of a college, movies and an image of what it was supposed to be. It was definitely an eye-opener. I had to realize that not all schools are the same. They are not all focused on football, sports, and Greek life. Here, the focus is on education—get a degree and get a career—it’s a very goal oriented place... It’s a place where students can learn.

Another senior at the University of Houston-Downtown provided some insights into the financial realities students face,

[There are] a lot of the issues that have to do with stress—the basics of trying to get into school, trying to get this stuff done, how much you will pay for it—how much can I cover with my financial aid—there is so much students have to combat on a regular basis.

The comments offered by these students underscore the importance of the investments colleges make in first-year students. Establishing a foundation of general college knowledge is a critical factor in cultivating student success. As indicated by students, faculty and administrators alike, colleges cannot assume students are familiar with many of the basics of college culture including choosing a major, creating a plan of study, finding the services they need, applying for financial aid, navigating the college campus, and accessing instructional support resources.

- **As a group, seniors were emphatic about the importance of individual student responsibility in achieving or inhibiting academic success.**

When asked what inhibits their college success, students quickly identified the role students play in achieving success in college. They shared the importance of self-motivation and an internal drive to succeed. As senior at Prairie View A&M University described, “Something inside you has to make you want to do better.” Another senior agreed saying, “You cannot motivate someone who is not motivated.” A senior at Texas Southern University summed it up:

Some teachers go above and beyond to help us learn the information providing study guides or bonus points. You have to have personal initiative. Nobody is going to spoon-feed you. Do not blame the instructor, blame yourself.

In comparison, first-year students identified faculty, administrators and the college in general as a primary factor in achieving student success. They routinely discussed what the college was or was not doing to help them to be successful. A first-year student at Texas Southern University expressed: “If I am paying you, it’s on you. If I was not paying you, it should be on me.”

- **Senior level students recognized the importance of being engaged in the campus community outside of the classroom.**

Several senior students commented that being involved in campus life and programs helps contribute to their academic success. These students stressed the importance of becoming involved with student organizations across campus. As one senior student at the University of Houston-Downtown commented:

One of the things that hurt me was that I was not involved—that’s the nature of a commuter school. I’d show up to class and then I’d leave. I wasn’t engaged. I’d rather be engaged at home or with what my friends were doing, rather than school. When I returned to school [after taking some time off] I started getting involved in organizations. I started working with Toastmasters. This helped me with communication and my public speaking, and confidence. By staying after class on campus for one more hour, I was engaging myself and creating my own academic environment and making the school my home. For a student to be successful, they must think of their university as their home.

Similarly, another senior at Prairie View A&M University discussed the importance of finding an outlet on campus:

The transition should not be hard if you are interacting with everybody instead of walking around here being funky. I make sure I have an outlet. It is important to learn that now because you are going to have find your outlet in the real world.

- **Both groups of students discussed the importance of a caring and supportive environment at college to student success.**

Across both groups, students discussed the importance of supportive and engaged faculty and staff. They clearly linked these interactions as a key influence on student success. A first-year student at Prairie View A&M University explained, “You can tell when [the faculty] have their heart into it, and when they don’t.” Another first-year student at Texas Southern University shared how she felt about the faculty: “Most of your teachers are going to give you a chance. They want to see you succeed.”

Many of the seniors offered similar comments.

“I considered dropping out because of financial and other issues. I have been encouraged by professors and administrators that knew I had the potential to finish.” (Senior, Prairie View A&M University)

“Here they don’t have a choice to ignore you—all of the classes are small...I’ve never had any problems approaching a teacher. Sometimes I feel dumb and I need to keep asking, and I keep showing up at his or her office. There’s no eye-rolling or anything—they start helping you out. I feel very comfortable.” (Senior, University of Houston-Downtown)

“I love the faculty, staff and administration. They have been very helpful and understanding. They work with your to help you succeed.” (Senior, Prairie View A&M University)

“All of my professors are helpful. I’ve got a sense that they really care compared to professor at a university with 300 people in a class. They may rip [my papers] up, but they take the time to work with me here. That is why I like this school.” (Senior, University of Houston-Downtown)

- **For both groups of students, the minority-serving institution status of these colleges was an important factor in their decision to attend.**

There are multiple factors that impact a student's college choice. Some of these factors include, for example, academic reputation, cost, familial ties, proximity to home, and reputation of sports teams. Across the focus groups, the most common contributing factor in the students' school choice decision was the minority-serving status of the institution. When asked about their school choice decision, overwhelmingly many students responded like the following Texas Southern University student, "I came here because I wanted to go to an HBCU." When probed about why the school's minority-serving status was important in their decision, the following types of reasons were provided. As a senior at Prairie View A&M University noted: "There is a greater understanding of struggle here that I would not find at UT Austin. It is just how the school handles it...how they talk about it and have conversations." A freshman at Prairie View A&M University discussed the additional opportunities made available to them, "Based on my experience at Prairie View, I will be more prepared for the workforce because they are more hands-on here and they have a better support system." The supportive and nurturing environment provided by these minority-serving institutions was a critical factor in the student focus group participants' decision to attend and remain at these colleges.

- **Students clearly articulated factors influencing their success in college. Their perspectives offer important context for the overall student success initiative.**

The connection between students and their colleges is fundamental. A first-year student at Prairie View A&M University expressed a sentiment shared by several students throughout the focus groups: "Once you get to know your teachers, you don't want to let them down. You want to do your best." Capturing students' perspectives offers useful insight to those involved in the Achieving the Dream initiative. In particular, it highlights the importance of non-academic factors in the promotion of student success. Such factors include helping students make the adjustment to college, individual student responsibility, engagement beyond the classroom, and having a supportive environment.

IV. Key Lessons for the Achieving the Dream Initiative

The three four-year colleges profiled in the report, Prairie View A&M University, Texas Southern University and the University of Houston-Downtown, may provide useful lessons in securing the participation of other four-year institutions in promoting student success. The following are important considerations in extending student success initiatives to more four-year colleges.

- ***Targeting specific four-year colleges is important.*** The three colleges in this study are all minority-serving institutions with a strong, historical commitment to promoting and achieving success among students of color and low-income students. The decided commitment of four-year colleges to students of color and low-income students varies considerably among four-year institutions. Likewise, some four-year colleges operate highly competitive admissions; whereas others, like the colleges in this report, are closer to open admissions. When compared to community colleges, as a group, four-year colleges have much more variation in terms of student population, educational philosophy, and admissions criteria. Although beyond the current scope of Achieving the Dream, future student success efforts will need to consider the types of four-year institutions that are a good fit and target these colleges for participation. Consideration needs to be given to developing criteria for four-year college inclusion.
- ***Given the scope of four-year colleges, the initiative may not permeate the entire campus, but rather serve as a focal point for a particular unit, such as University College.*** Many four-year colleges have considerable size and breadth. Their educational offerings may include graduate or professional degree programs, as well as undergraduate education and developmental courses. The three four-year colleges profiled in this report all housed their Achieving the Dream efforts within a particular focal unit, often within a unit that supports first year students. For many community colleges within the initiative, Achieving the Dream has largely operated as an all-encompassing initiative for the entire college. However, the difference in scope and complexity for four-year colleges may not make this same implementation approach as practical.

However, the difference in scope and complexity for four-year colleges may not make this same implementation approach as practical. Instead, most four year colleges have adopted the language of student success, which overcomes the problematic subtitle and offers a larger umbrella to capture their efforts. This was particularly true given that many four year colleges had trouble with Achieving the Dream's subtitle, "community colleges count" which routinely appears on the Achieving the Dream materials and official logo. Many four-year faculty and administrators note that this type of language makes it difficult to attain buy-in and therefore opted to develop a broader student success agenda.

- ***Overall, the culture of evidence experience for four-year colleges is very similar to that of community colleges. However, the initiative will need to consider modifying data definitions to better fit four-year colleges.*** The four-year colleges in this report had experiences similar to community colleges in promoting a culture of evidence. In examining their data, the four-year colleges had to engage in very candid discussions about student performance and learn more about the progression patterns of their students. They also dealt with data acceptance and institutional research capacity concerns. A key challenge for four-year colleges is modifying data definitions to better fit their institutions. Many of the Achieving the Dream definitions are based on two year student outcomes; whereas most four-year colleges assess student success outcomes based on six years.
- ***Four-year colleges are focused on research and teaching. To promote additional participation of four-year colleges, the initiative will need to consider the colleges' research mission, as well.*** Unlike community colleges, which are primarily focused on teaching, many four-year colleges have specific research expectations for their faculty as well. Annual faculty performance assessments, promotion and tenure guidelines, and opportunities for career advancement for four-year college faculty often considers research and publication activities, in addition to classroom instructional performance. Rather than create tension between the teaching and research mission, it may be useful for the initiative to promote student success research, make data from the initiative more available for faculty research, and/or provide seed money for faculty to evaluate specific student success strategies. This will simultaneously create research incentives for faculty, while producing additional student success research that can be beneficial to the initiative at large.

Additionally, the three four-year colleges profiled in the report, Prairie View A&M University, Texas Southern University and the University of Houston-Downtown, may provide useful lessons for community colleges participating in Achieving the Dream. The following are key lessons for the initiative to consider.

- ***Many of the critical investments in student success occur outside of the classroom.*** Many of the strategies commonly used by community colleges in Achieving the Dream are appropriately focused on improving student outcomes in classes. Strategies targeted at improving student outcomes in developmental courses and gatekeeper courses remain vitally important. However, overall student success is tied to students' experiences outside of the classroom as well. A clear theme from our student focus groups, especially seniors, was the importance of student engagement in clubs, organizations, or other extracurricular activities. These ties promote a greater commitment to college and overall success.

- ***Alumni are an important resource to a college's student success efforts.*** At the four year colleges, particularly Prairie View and Texas Southern, alumni financial engagement is important to their student success agenda. These funds may offer flexible dollars to assist with expenses such as child care or transportation. Alumni can also provide critical moral support: A student can relate to alumni who were able to complete their goals despite having similar struggles such as entering college as a first-generation, low-income, student, completing challenging courses, and navigating the responsibilities of work, school, and family.
- ***Learning from students who are near the completion of their academic journey may be more useful than learning from students who are just starting.*** Although immediate student feedback is important, it is also important to obtain student assessments after more time has passed. It may be unrealistic to expect first-year students to appreciate the array of supports colleges offer until a bit later in their academic career. Routinely collecting the perspectives of students near the completion of their programs, as well as recent alumni, may offer very useful assessments of specific college supports.

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