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Implementing the Dream: Lessons from the Houston Community College

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**Round Three Houston Achieving the Dream Colleges:
Early impressions from the field**

MDRC

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With funding from the Houston Endowment, ten Houston colleges joined Lumina's Achieving the Dream initiative in 2006. The Houston colleges are a unique group in two important ways. This is the first set of colleges that are from the same general geographical area. With the addition of these Round Three colleges, all of the community colleges in the Houston area are now participating in Achieving the Dream¹. Secondly, the Round Three Houston colleges are the first to include 4-year universities in an initiative that previously included only community colleges. The Round Three Houston colleges also include institutions with multiple campuses. While this is not unique within the initiative, this is the first MDRC report to consider the distinctive experiences colleges with multiple campuses may face.

The principal goal of this report is to provide formative feedback on MDRC's field research at all ten Houston colleges during 2007. Similar to the formative feedback evaluation MDRC provided for the Round One colleges and for the Round Two Connecticut colleges, this formative feedback is designed to provide a sense of the progress Houston Round Three colleges are making at an early point in their involvement within the initiative; to understand how the planning and very early implementation phase is going across the ten colleges; to share the colleges' views on the initiative and on the support they are receiving from the partnership; to share their suggestions on improving the initiative; and to provide the colleges and the initiative with useful feedback at an early point in their 5-year funding cycle. Although this report is a part of MDRC's on-going evaluation work with Achieving the Dream, it is separate from MDRC's larger evaluation of Round One Achieving the Dream colleges.

Specifically, our site visits were designed to obtain a better understanding of:

- Initial progress at each Round Three Houston college
- 4-year universities' experiences
- Initial Achieving the Dream team structure and organization of work
- Board and senior administrative commitment and buy-in
- Data engagement and institutional research capacity
- Assessment of initiative support provided by coaches and data facilitators
- Integration with other campus initiatives
- Overall campus engagement with Achieving the Dream

Data for this report were collected during Spring and Fall 2007². MDRC researchers spent a full day at each of the Round Three Houston colleges and conducted semi-structured interviews with key personnel involved with the planning and implementation efforts at each college. 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, members of the faculty, and others who were directly involved in the college's core planning or data team. We conducted individual and small group interviews. On occasion, we conducted phone interviews if we were unable to meet with a specific individual during our time on campus. Additionally, we conducted a phone interview with a key program officer at the Houston Endowment to gain a funder's perspective of the initiative. To better

¹ Two other Houston community colleges, Galveston and the Houston Community College System, were included in Round One colleges which joined the Achieving the Dream initiative in 2004.

² The data for this report are based on our observations during the data collection period. Given the constantly 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 is it intended to reflect how Achieving the Dream may be currently operating at any of the institutions. Rather, this report offers a snapshot of Round Three Houston colleges during the time of our visits.

understand the work of the Trustee Institute, designed to increase board member involvement in Achieving the Dream, we conducted a phone interview with a key planner of the Trustee Institute. Most interviews lasted about an hour and were tape recorded. We coded the interviews by key themes using NVIVO7, a qualitative data analysis software program. Although this report does not identify any institution specifically, given the small number of colleges involved, those closest to the initiative may be able to discern which college is being referenced.

About Achieving the Dream

Achieving the Dream: Community Colleges Count is a bold, multiyear, national initiative designed to help more community college students succeed, either by earning a certificate, associates degree or by transferring to another institution. The initiative is particularly concerned about helping students who have traditionally faced the most barriers to success, including low income students and students of color. Launched in 2003 by the Lumina Foundation for Education, the initiative now includes 83 institutions in fifteen states. The initiative also involves many national organizations or foundations that play key supportive roles. Together, these organizations are working to change *internal* factors, such as the culture and practices within community colleges, as well as *external* factors that shape institutional behavior, such as public policy, research, and public engagement (Brock, Jenkins, Ellwein, et al., 2007).

There are ten Round Three Houston colleges. These colleges include:

- Alvin Community College
- Brazosport College
- College of the Mainland
- Lee College
- Lone Star College System³ (Five colleges: North Harris College, Kingwood College, Tomball College, Montgomery College, and CyFair College)
- Prairie View A & M University (4-year university)
- San Jacinto College (Three campuses: Central, North and South)
- Texas Southern University (4-year university)
- University of Houston-Downtown (4-year university)
- Wharton County Junior College (Three campuses: Main, Sugarland, and Bay City)

The Houston Endowment is a major funder of the Round Three Houston colleges. Established in 1937 by Jesse and Mary Gibbs Jones, the Houston Endowment is a philanthropic organization that provides significant educational funding within its overall portfolio. In 2007, the Houston Endowment awarded over \$69 million in funding, with about a third awarded to support educational initiatives. The Houston Endowment clearly links the funding of Achieving the Dream to the foundation's larger regional strategy to improve both secondary and post-secondary education in the Houston area. The Houston Endowment is concerned with improving educational outcomes across the spectrum—from pre-K through 4-year degree completion. Achieving the Dream offers an important opportunity for the Houston Endowment to devote resources to improving educational outcomes of many Houston area colleges.

³ Formerly North Harris Montgomery Community College District

Consistent with earlier rounds of Achieving the Dream, the Round Three Houston Colleges receive financial and technical support to participate in the initiative. 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 support from the initiative more broadly through participation in the annual Achieving the Dream Strategy Institute.

KEY FINDINGS

I. The Local Houston Context

All of the community colleges in the Houston area are participating in Achieving the Dream. Three Houston area 4-year colleges are participating as well. This level of concentrated participation within a specific geographical area provides an opportunity for Achieving the Dream to operate on a larger scale within an entire community. This broad scope of participation within a single area is unprecedented within the initiative and offers a unique opportunity for these colleges, as well as their primary Houston area funder, to assess the value of this approach. One of the potential benefits of all Houston area colleges participating in Achieving the Dream is the possibility of increased interaction among these colleges. During the course of our interviews, we asked administrators and faculty to compare their interaction with other Houston colleges since Achieving the Dream.

Nearly all of the colleges understood that the selection and funding strategy was designed to promote increased interaction among the Houston colleges. Although colleges expressed a willingness to have increased interaction with their regional neighbors in the future, at this point in the process, they are primarily focused on their own institution.

During the time of our visits, the Houston colleges were actively engaged in understanding the expectations of the initiative, ensuring they have appropriate staffing to complete the work of the initiative, gaining a better understanding of their specific data, and identifying specific strategies for their institution. During the time of our visits, the Houston area colleges were primarily internally focused. A core team leader commented: “We haven’t had too much [interaction with other colleges] yet. We’ve had a couple of joint meetings that certain groups from the college have attended. We participated in the Houston college in service—not a lot of interaction yet.” However, many of the faculty and administrators in Houston area colleges express an interest in increasing their interaction with other area colleges in the future.

In thinking about future opportunities for increased interaction with other Houston colleges, many senior administrators, especially Presidents and Institutional Research directors identified the work of the Texas Gulf Coast Consortium as an important contributor to such an effort. Launched over 20 years ago, the Texas Gulf Coast Consortium of Community Colleges⁴ is a partnership of nine community colleges in the Houston area. Members of the consortium make curricular recommendations, assist in program evaluation and provide essential data about personnel needs.⁵ One of the important accomplishments of the consortium was the creation of a shared course numbering system for member institutions in 1987-89. The shared course

⁴ All of the community colleges within Gulf Consortium are participating in Achieving the Dream.

⁵ See www.collegenow.cc

numbering work of the consortium works to ensure that students are able to transfer their credits to area universities.⁶

Although this consortium was well established prior to Achieving the Dream, it serves as an important vehicle for these college administrators to discuss particular aspects of the initiative. As one Institutional Researcher noted, “There’s the Gulf Coast Association of Institutional Research—we meet every 2 months—there’s generally a discussion about Achieving the Dream. . . We’ve confirmed things we suspected all along. . . now we have proof that this needs attention. Sometimes it’s information we did not know, but now we do know. This gives all of the community colleges, at least in the Gulf Coast, an ability to look at the data more specifically and more attentively.” Institutional researchers provide each other support in accessing and analyzing their student progression and outcome data. For example, one institutional researcher provided templates and a plan for analyzing the data and presenting to their core teams to facilitate data driven decision making.

The established infrastructure of the Gulf Coast Consortium offers promise in facilitating future exchange of ideas, data analysis, and strategy implementation among many of the Houston area community colleges.

- ***Funding from the Houston Endowment facilitates the concentration of Achieving the Dream across multiple colleges throughout the Houston area. Round Three Houston Colleges were selected through a non-competitive process. This differs from the competitive selection process used in Round One college selection. The non-competitive selection process of Round Three Houston colleges may offer an important opportunity for the Initiative to gauge whether competitive selection makes a meaningful difference in buy-in or commitment at the college level.***

We asked college presidents, as well as a senior program officer at the Houston Endowment, to share their perspectives on this funding strategy, both in terms of regional educational improvements as well as the potential implications of their non-competitive funding selection. Although strong financial support from the Houston Endowment facilitated the inclusion of all Houston area community colleges, as well as three 4-year institutions, the college selection process for Round Three Houston colleges was different from earlier rounds, in which institutions were competitively selected. Round Three Houston colleges were required to submit proposals; however, the competitive aspect of the selection process was removed.

Round Three colleges recognized the non-competitive nature of the grant, often commenting on how it differed from other grant processes in which they had participated. As one individual commented,

It was so simple to join. The phone rings and it is [name omitted]. He asks, “Are you familiar with Achieving the Dream initiative. Would you like to be a part of the Achieving the Dream program?” We had just completed our QEP and we needed some resources. He told me \$50,000 for planning, \$100,000 for each of the four years. . . It fits very well with our mission. It provides us an opportunity to address learning outcomes throughout the whole university.

Generally speaking, a competitive selection process assumes that: a) only those with significant interest and commitment will apply for funding; b) given a finite amount of personnel resources

⁶ See www.tccns.org/cnn/history.asp

to devote to grantwriting, institutions will devote their grantwriting resources to funding opportunities that best align with the priorities of the institution, those that offer an attractive level of funding, and/or those that have a high probability of funding (e.g., more bang for the organization's grantwriting buck); and c) ultimately the funder will limit funding to the strongest proposals that meet the award criteria, thereby increasing the overall likelihood of success (in other words, funders strategically invest dollars where a maximum return on investment is likely).

Despite the difference in the competitive nature of the selection process, the Houston Endowment is confident the Round Three Houston colleges will do well within the initiative. The non-competitive selection process of the Houston colleges raises at least two interesting questions for the initiative: 1) Will Round Three non-competitively selected colleges have as strong of a commitment to the expectations and goals of Achieving the Dream and 2) in the end, is competitive vs. non-competitive selection related to overall institutional performance within the initiative? We will discuss these questions further in the concluding section of this report.

II. Early Impressions from Round Three Houston Site Visits

Similar to Rounds One and Two, all of the Round Three Houston colleges are engaged in Achieving the Dream and have made progress to varying degrees in analyzing data and using data to guide their implementation proposal, and early implementation efforts. This section highlights our early impressions from the Round Three Houston site visits.

- ***Nearly all senior administrators at Round Three Houston colleges expressed support of the Achieving the Dream initiative. Similarly, all of the presidents we interviewed viewed Achieving the Dream as important to their institution. Many of them noted that the initiative is a leverage point for the change their institution needed. However, a couple of senior administrators also raised concern about the level of effort the initiative requires.***

A fundamental premise behind Achieving the Dream is that presidential and senior leadership commitment and involvement is an essential component to promoting the goals of the initiative on campus, and changing the overall culture of the institution. We asked Round Three college presidents and senior administrators to discuss their role in helping to communicate the goals of Achieving the Dream. Additionally, we asked them to gauge the overall importance of Achieving the Dream to their campus (vis-à-vis other institutional priorities).

A common point that several presidents and senior administrators articulated was the importance of the Achieving the Dream initiative in helping move the college along a much needed change of direction. As one senior administrator expressed,

We see ATD as a critical catalyst in helping us change into an institution that is far more focused on the success of our students than we have been focused on the past.

The “culture of evidence” is an idea that has been embraced by nearly all senior administrators and presidents. Many mentioned utilizing the “culture of evidence” approach in other decision making areas within the college, including budgeting priorities. The colleges recognize that the “culture of evidence” and data driven decision making approaches advocated by Achieving the Dream are beneficial to their overall institutional planning not just for focusing on student outcomes. For example, one senior administrator described Achieving the Dream as a means of integrating a culture of evidence into the operations of the college,

I’m trying to use Achieving the Dream to embed the culture of evidence into other areas... We build the culture of evidence into many of our day to day activities. We’re trying not to wrap the initiatives with the grant itself, but build a culture of evidence as the umbrella to sustain our work far beyond the grant period.

Although presidents and senior administrators are quite supportive of Achieving the Dream, a couple of senior administrators raised concerns about the amount of time and effort involved. Serious commitment to Achieving the Dream requires a core group of faculty and administrators to communicate the vision of Achieving the Dream, understand an institution’s data, and develop and implement strategies specific to that institution. Given the overall grant award, colleges rely heavily upon existing staff to work on Achieving the Dream, forcing senior administrators to manage the overall workload. Some senior administrators are concerned about the level of effort the initiative requires in relation to the amount of monetary support given. As one senior administrator explained,

We are working our staff to death on a \$100,000 per year grant. I am not belittling a \$100,000 but there should be a time money formula.

Similar concerns were echoed by senior administrators at other colleges who routinely ask faculty and staff to work on multiple assignments, in addition to their normal teaching or administrative responsibilities.

A common workload management strategy is to overlay Achieving the Dream efforts with other student success initiatives on their campus. Alignment of Achieving the Dream with other key efforts of the college, such as the QEP, Title V or Title III, complements the college's goal to become a learner centered institution focused on student success. This allows colleges to focus on integration, institutionalization and maximization of funds. One president noted that Achieving the Dream serves as an umbrella for these types of efforts,

It [Achieving the Dream] has really taken over the campus. We have a lot of things going on. We call it the umbrella for everything we have going on. We have a Title V grant and our QEP. . .it provides the big picture for the work we are doing.

In essence, Achieving the Dream operates as an umbrella by offering a way for colleges to focus on multiple aspects of student success while balancing the workload demands of faculty and staff.

- ***About half of the Round Three Houston colleges expressed concern about their institutional research capacity. Although such data analysis is critical to creating a culture of evidence, it also stretches their staff.***

At each college, we asked the individuals we interviewed to assess the capacity of their college's institutional research department to handle the data analysis demands of Achieving the Dream. All of the Round Three Houston colleges have made progress in examining their data, even in spite of data access and staff capacity issues. However, many administrators within the Round Three Houston colleges expressed concern about the capacity of their institutional research units and recognize the need to strengthen this area. Their concerns primarily cluster around the overall small capacity of their Institutional Research department and the change in focus from a traditional state reporting model to include additional complexity in data analysis. Data-driven decision making requires access to the data, manpower to complete the analysis, and the ability to know how to best drill down into the data and to meaningfully disaggregate it. For most colleges the primary issue is the staffing of their Institutional Research departments. As one core team leader described, "[Our institutional research capacity] is less than adequate—we have a one person IR department. We will need some support beyond what we currently have."

Importantly, as faculty and administrators begin to value data more and engage in data-driven decision making, the request for data increases, thereby stretching the Institutional Research unit even further. As one senior administrator articulated,

In my opinion, we can't spend enough on research activity. We had one full time IR person and brought in another full time person as a result of our involvement with Achieving the Dream. But, what happens is the idea of reviewing data begins to take hold. . .Then the demand for data increases. The increased demand is a very good thing, but it just illustrates the point that we could still use additional resources in this area.

Essentially, as faculty and staff within the institution begin to analyze their institution's data, more questions arise. Nearly all colleges mentioned that seeing some data tends to generate more questions which results in more data requests. Staff may have an interest in learning more from the data in a particular subject area, such as developmental math, or about the performance of a particular subgroup of their college population, such as minority males. This results in a new set of questions that requires additional and perhaps even more complex data analysis from the Institutional Research unit. The result is an increased demand for data from a unit that already faces capacity challenges. Although colleges clearly recognize the benefit of data-driven decision making, there is also a challenge in terms of meeting the increased demands for data, given the other responsibilities of the unit.

This becomes particularly challenging when the data does not seem to point toward a clear finding or when there is not consensus around the interpretation of the data. When analyzing student outcome data, some of the Round Three Houston colleges found that multiple paths often emerged. In some cases, the data point to a clear path. Still, for others, there is distrust and questioning of the data. Some of the questioning of the data is a result of the data definitions used by Achieving the Dream (example: cohorts, pass rates etc.). For the others they think there is a disconnect between what the data is designed to measure and what is actually occurring in the classroom. While institutional researchers and the data team are charged with the task of analyzing and presenting the data, creating a meaningful message that helps promote data-driven decision making can be challenging.

- ***Most colleges noted that the data-driven approach allows them to move beyond anecdotal data, which may or may not have been accurate, to solid data that identifies clear trends. Most colleges also reported utility in examining data disaggregated by student groups to help them better understand student achievement.***

Many of the senior administrators and faculty we interviewed indicated that the data-driven focus of Achieving the Dream allows them to move away from the reliance on anecdotal data to guide decisions and instead to focus on a careful examination of their data. We asked senior administrators and faculty to discuss what they had learned from their data analysis, whether they had experienced any “ah-ha” moments, and how their data is being used to guide their strategy development. One president summed it up well stating, “We had a lot of anecdotal data about student success, now we can back it up. Our researchers and data analyzers have said that this is a positive experience. This is something tangible for them to use to make changes.”

One of the clear benefits reported by most of the Houston colleges is the usefulness in examining data by subgroups. Colleges are able to analyze data on specific subgroups of their population to better understand student outcomes. One senior administrator commented, “We look at the numbers very carefully. [We] break it down by different groups to see what we can improve.”

For example, an “ah ha” moment occurred at one of the Round Three Houston colleges when the data pointed to academic success concerns among young (age 18-24) African-American male students. The students are attending college in smaller numbers but being placed into developmental course work at higher rates than any other student subgroup. Based on this finding, the college is working with many successful black males in the larger community to seek

out their advice and expertise on improving student outcomes. This is an important, previously untapped resource, that is assisting the college in identifying innovative ways to engage students and promote student success among young, African-American males.

Still, another college is focusing on the linkage between developmental education and the poor performance of students in history. They are incorporating reading comprehension techniques utilized in developmental reading through supplemental instruction. The data point to patterns and connections that colleges were unaware of before examining the cohort analysis of their student progression data. Colleges can then design and implement strategies that align with their specific data findings.

A few senior administrators and faculty noted that it can be difficult to understand where the data is leading them. If the data does not lead to a clear path, this can raise more questions and lead to frustration. For example some colleges are trying to understand what is impeding student progression is their data directing them to change their placement system for developmental courses or change course curricula. Many of the questions and much of the confusion arise from the adjustment to using data to drive decision making.

- ***The Board of Trustees Institute is designed to inform board members about the student success and equity agenda. This institute, funded by Houston Endowment Inc., is a pilot that is initially designed to serve Houston/Gulf Coast area colleges and universities. The Institute, a direct result of Achieving the Dream, offers an approach that is overwhelmingly rated as effective by Houston college and university presidents.***

During our interviews, we asked presidents to give us a sense of how they were communicating the goals of Achieving the Dream to their board members, and how they have involved board members in the overall initiative. All of the presidents mentioned the Board of Trustees Institute, a unique institute being piloted with Houston/Gulf Coast colleges and universities. Initially offered in 2007, this annual institute -- developed by the University of Texas at Austin, with funding by the Houston Endowment Inc. -- provides an opportunity for board members to learn more about Achieving the Dream. This two and a half-day, out-of-state institute is designed to foster collaboration among board members and presidents to: share and elevate knowledge of how effective governance and operations contribute to student success and equity; enhance understanding of board member roles and responsibilities in establishing policies, priorities, goals and practices to increase student success; and acquire resources and a common body of knowledge about integrating a student success agenda and performance indicators into policies and operations.

The institute involves advanced submission of student outcomes data, reflections about institutional readiness for the work, and several break out sessions during which board members and presidents discuss case studies and are familiarized with the data, policy and operational implications of fostering an effective student success and equity agenda. Participants in the Board of Trustees Institute have the opportunity to become immersed in their own college's data and carefully examine their institution's student outcomes. As one of the Board of Trustees Institute resident faculty commented, "The premise of the Board of Trustees Institute is to help put student success in the heart of the planning and policies. We help them look beyond building, politics, planning and governance. It was a big "ah-ha" moment for many of the board members." For many of the board members, this was the first time they were

immersed in student outcomes data or considered the role of the board in promoting and implementing a student success agenda for the institution.

One of the developers of the Board of Trustees Institute stressed the importance of involving board members in Achieving the Dream work, “When you’re trying to create system-level reform, if you ignore governing boards, you do that reform work at your own peril.” A college president agreed stating, “What really helped us take another step was the Board of Trustees Institute. I took two trustees and after attending the institute they wanted to be more involved in developing policies to improve student outcomes and in the Achieving the Dream initiative. I definitely think they should put more money into the Board of Trustees Institute and we will rotate our board through.”

During its pilot phase, the Board of Trustees Institute has focused on the Houston/Gulf Coast area colleges and universities. The institute is designed to help fulfill an important challenge of more fully engaging board members in student success / Achieving the Dream work. One president cautioned the initiative to be aware of the time commitments placed on board members by attending the institute, and suggested there may be an opportunity to combine elements of the institute with other meetings involving board members from multiple institutions.

In addition to regarding the Board of Trustees Institute favorably, many presidents also indicated that they are engaging board members at regular board meetings. Across the colleges, senior administrators are communicating their commitment to Achieving the Dream through campus-wide events. Many are sharing updates on Achieving the Dream with their board members to create further buy-in for the initiative at their institution. One president noted,

The Board of Regents are very involved in Achieving the Dream at the policy level. They require that data be shown at every meeting. They are asking questions about how our budget reflects our commitment to student success. Each month there is a presentation to the board with the Achieving the Dream data. It is the good, the bad, and the ugly.

At another college, as a direct result of participation in the Board of Trustees Institute, the board introduced and approved a request from senior administrators to raise tuition by \$1 and to allocate those funds to student success. This board action provided important financial support to institutionalize the college’s student success initiatives.

- ***The assistance provided by both coaches and data facilitators has been an important resource for the Round Three Houston Colleges. Many of the colleges find the guidance and feedback on analyzing their data and strategy development helpful, though a few colleges have mixed reactions.***

A key feature of the support provided by the initiative to each college is external consulting through a coach and a data facilitator. Often the coach is a former community college president who has a track record of institutional leadership and data-driven decision-making. The data facilitator provides guidance on how to interpret and present data, as well as how to evaluate the effectiveness of college programs and services. The coach and data facilitator each spend 12 days working with the colleges during the planning phase and the first year of implementation, and they gradually reduce their time in subsequent years. We asked the colleges we interviewed to assess the support provided by their coach and data facilitator. Many of the of the Round Three Houston Colleges found the coaches’ and data facilitators’ expertise and support was invaluable to keeping them focused and moving forward.

A core team leader reflected, "They've done a great job. I've never seen this much of support for such a small grant. . . I think this is not a group that is hovering over you, they are trying to assure that you do not fail. When people see it that way, they start to get more comfortable. . . We can get stalled out if they weren't coming. Some people may bark a bit, but it does keep the wagon moving."

The coaches and data facilitators help keep the work of Achieving the Dream on the forefront and provide needed assistance in data analysis, interpretation, as well as strategy development and implementation.

While most of the Round Three Houston Colleges found the assistance provided by their coaches and data facilitators helpful, a few colleges did not express the same sentiments. Some faculty and administrators at these colleges had concerns regarding the assistance provided by their coach and/or data facilitator, noting too much intrusiveness, or a sense that their coach and/or data facilitator were assigned to work with too many colleges. Most coaches and data facilitators are working with only two colleges each, although in some cases, they were above the norm. As one core team member commented,

_____ [name omitted] said the biggest problem is that we would get minimum guidance from our coach, and the coach bulldozed our data facilitator. The coach had worked with three schools. We would do something and show it to her and then we would be told it was incorrect. S/he would not even tell us what was wrong. That's my biggest, single complaint about [our coach]. Achieving the Dream should limit the amount of schools a coach could have. S/he would never remember what we were doing. S/he was split by too many colleges.

Another faculty member commented,

One of the things that came out of the meeting yesterday is that coaches need to coach and not just let you turn in the work and say you've done it all wrong.

These comments raise an interesting question regarding the number of colleges each coach or data facilitator is assigned. The initiative employs 34 data facilitators and 30 coaches to provide support and guidance to the institutions participating in Achieving the Dream. On average, each data facilitator is working with two colleges. The same holds true for coaches, who on average work with two colleges. However, there are some instances in which a single coach or data facilitator is working with as many as five or six colleges respectively. Across the Round Three Houston colleges half of the coaches and data facilitators are working with three or more colleges. It is also important to note that the colleges that mentioned having concerns about the assistance provided by their coach and/or data facilitator are working with coaches and data facilitators that are assisting more than the average number of colleges. The initiative may need to consider the appropriate number of colleges for any individual coach or data facilitator.

III. Four Year Colleges: A Part of the Dream?

Round Three Houston colleges includes three 4-year institutions (two of which are historically black colleges and universities): Prairie View A&M University, Texas Southern University, and the University of Houston-Downtown. We asked the individuals we interviewed to assess the fit of the Achieving the Dream initiative for 4-year colleges. The inclusion of 4-year colleges was generally supported by community colleges and the four-year colleges alike. However, faculty and administrators identified some important concerns as well.

- ***Community college and 4-year college administrators were generally positive toward including 4-year colleges in Achieving the Dream, as long as the selected 4-year institutions are open enrollment or nearly open enrollment institutions.***

All of the community college presidents, senior administrators and faculty we interviewed felt the 4-year universities selected for participation in Round Three were a good fit for the initiative. They noted that the three Houston 4-year institutions currently in the initiative are struggling with the same student issues that community colleges face. As one administrator commented, “I do not have any concerns because the [4-year] colleges included [in the initiative] are probably struggling with the same things that we are.” These institutions also offer developmental courses, student success courses, and other student support resources designed to increase the likelihood of student success. Community college administrators and faculty universally agreed that extending Achieving the Dream to highly competitive 4-year colleges would not be a good fit for the initiative, given the focus of such institutions on admitting the “best and the brightest” who generally do not face the same issues regarding college readiness and challenges to student success.

Similarly, many 4-year college faculty and administrators noted the common missions between the 4-year institutions and their community college partners which make Achieving the Dream an excellent fit for their institution. Faculty and administrators across the 4-year colleges also shared a similar view as their community college counterparts, tying the focus on open admissions to their overall mission. A 4-year college administrator articulated this point effectively: “If you look at our mission and you see who we serve, you will see there was no real dissonance from the beginning. We are an 1890s land grant institution. We’ve been formed as part of the Jacksonian notion of democracy—meaning education is for the masses, not just for an elite group like the Jefferson model. We serve those who are well prepared, as well as those who are not as well prepared.”

- ***However, a majority of the 4-year college faculty and administrators we interviewed expressed concern about the language used by the initiative to describe Achieving the Dream.***

Within the initiative, the subtitle of Achieving the Dream is “community colleges count.” This routinely appears on the Achieving the Dream materials and official logo. Many 4-year faculty and administrators note that this type of language is problematic and makes it difficult to attain buy-in. As one individual noted, “The language of Achieving the Dream is a problem and they need to change it to include 4 year institutions. When I look at the mission of the initiative we are not included.”

- ***Four-year college faculty and administrators also identified important factors, such as governance structure and residential living, that receive little consideration within the initiative, but can likely affect overall college buy-in and student success.***

Faculty members and administrators at 4-year institutions note the important role of the faculty senate in university governance and decision making. The level of faculty involvement in university governance is typically less in community college governance structures. Additionally, on-campus residential living is a common aspect of many 4-year colleges. However, residential living is a rare occurrence at community colleges. As one administrator noted,

We are also a heavy residential college. A lot of them, especially freshman live on campus. We have access to them in a way community colleges tend not to. We bring that perspective to see how life on the campus is an enhancement to that academic and social development.

The 4-year institutions can organize student success efforts within their residential student communities. By being aware of their contextual differences they are able to adapt the Achieving the Dream approach to more appropriately fit their institution.

IV. Colleges with Multiple Campuses

Three of the Round Three Houston colleges have multiple campuses. Trying to implement an educational initiative that permeates the entire institution creates unique concerns, challenges, and issues for colleges with multiple campuses. Although operating under one accreditation for the entire system, it is important to note the varying administrative structures of multi-college campuses. In some cases, the administrative structure is centralized within a particular campus; while others have a more decentralized structure involving multiple administrators at the district and individual college levels.

- ***Early evidence suggests Achieving the Dream may serve as a unifier across multiple campuses.***

In some cases, Achieving the Dream offers an important opportunity for multiple campuses of the same institution to unite around a common vision. In a context of competition among campuses for resources and programs, one Chancellor mentioned that Achieving the Dream acts as a catalyst for unifying the district and getting rid of the campus competition. As one senior administrator reflected, “We were approached. . .to go with one of our colleges as a pilot, then adopt [it] for [the] other four colleges. We made the commitment to participate early on and to commit the funds for all colleges to participate.” A senior administrator another college agreed, “It is better or us to be an Achieving the Dream District. The campuses watch what the other colleges get and there can be issues of jealousy.”

The decision to implement Achieving the Dream across all their campuses represents the importance of initiative and the willingness of these community college districts to invest in student success.

- ***As multi-campus colleges develop strategies and analyze data, they face an important question: Should planning, data analysis and strategy implementation occur at individual campuses or college-wide?***

Multi-campus institutions face the challenge of establishing an Achieving the Dream planning process, data analysis, and implementation structure that creates buy-in across all campuses. During the time of our visit, this issue was especially pronounced in the organization of core and data teams. As one faculty member stated,

If they do what we do, with a district data team and district core team, [then] more communication between those two teams to clarify roles would be helpful, even [within] the campus [college] data teams because I don't know what they are doing. They are fairly separate—there's some confusion.

In order to begin the process of data-driven decision-making, colleges with multiple campuses have to determine if they look at their data as one institution or by each individual campus. One administrator described their approach:

District is the official report person. Any official data comes out of district. The colleges have access to their own data... Some of the colleges want to dig up their own data. They are concerned about data integrity.

It's a delicate blend. We collect data centrally. For all federal reporting we report as a district, for state reporting, we report as a college, but we are funded as a district.

Another college mentioned anxiety expressed by the campuses, with the thought of their data being compared across campuses. The district office analyzes all data across the colleges, leaving the individual colleges to perform any additional analysis. One senior administrator cautioned,

Data can never be used punitively. [When looking at] College A and College B, we need to understand the myriad of factors that go into differences. It is not that one college is better or worse.

The data have to be trusted and not seen as a punitive measure in order to promote data driven decision making. One college accomplishes this by having both a district level and college level data teams while another college with multiple campuses only analyzes data from a district level. Finding a delicate balance between the use of district wide data and college data is an important consideration that has an impact on the buy-in of individual campuses to Achieving the Dream.

Additionally, the colleges have to determine how the unique aspects of each campus do or do not impact strategy development and implementation. Is it appropriate to pilot a strategy on one campus before launching it college wide or is it important to pilot on all campuses? As one person noted for their district, "Each college prioritizes different needs and each college serves different demographics." Another disagreed and explained the need for common implementation across the campuses to provide their students, who often take classes at multiple campuses, with consistency. "There are things we need to do that are district wide. Our students swirl from institution to institution. We have to be consistent on certain things. We need commonalities."

One college's solution is to implement some common initiatives across all campuses while allowing each campus to develop additional initiatives. Ultimately, the consensus across senior administrators at multi-campus institutions is that a unified effort is important. The challenge is to manage that unified effort to the benefit of the system at-large, while not inflaming any existing campus divisions or jealousy.

FORMATIVE FEEDBACK QUESTIONS FOR THE INITIATIVE

The Round Three Houston colleges are clearly working hard to successfully participate in the Achieving the Dream initiative. Similar to the experiences of earlier rounds, the Round Three Houston colleges grapple with institutional research capacity, managing and maximizing the interaction with their coach and data facilitator, as well as aligning Achieving the Dream with other student success initiatives. As a group, they face unique opportunities and challenges by virtue of their geographical proximity, inclusion of 4-year universities, and the inclusion of a set of colleges with multiple campuses.

To conclude, our analysis raises some questions for the developers of the initiative to consider:

- *How can the initiative promote increased interaction among the Houston area colleges?*

The Round Three Houston college selection strategy was designed to promote increased contact among the area colleges. Although all of the colleges expressed a willingness to do so, contact to date seems sporadic. Structured, intentional opportunities for interaction may promote increased collaboration among these colleges. The Gulf Coast Consortium is one existing structure that could be further utilized to promote a shared student success agenda.

- *As the initiative expands, is a competitive or non-competitive college selection strategy important?*

Unlike earlier rounds, Round Three Houston colleges were non-competitively selected. Early evidence does not seem to suggest significant differences in the level of commitment or buy-in from these institutions. Rather, there is a common interest and focus on student success and viewing Achieving the Dream as an important initiative that offers an array of resources to support this goal. As the Achieving the Dream partners consider overall initiative expansion, it may be useful to consider the appropriate level of competition in future college selections.

- *How can the initiative best support developing institutional research capacity?*

Institutional research capacity is an enduring challenge within the initiative. Although the support offered by data facilitators, as well as the IR help sessions offered during the Strategy Institute, assist in addressing this challenge, additional work remains. College teams grapple with data interpretation, data “analysis paralysis,” and unclear findings. Assistance provided early on in the planning process, as well as a clear timeline for the data analysis and strategy development process may be useful.

- *How can the initiative expand the Houston Trustee Institute model to other colleges?*

An important contribution of the Round Three Houston colleges to Achieving the Dream more broadly is the introduction of the Trustee Institute. Designed to educate board members about the overall goals of the initiative and to obtain their feedback and buy-in, this offers an important model for other Achieving the Dream states and colleges to consider. Attaining board member understanding and buy-in of the initiative is important in achieving overall success. The Trustee Institute developed for Houston colleges is universally viewed as effective by the Houston college presidents we interviewed.

- *How should the initiative assess the performance of coaches and data facilitators, especially those who work with several colleges?*

This is a sensitive and complex issue. As the initiative expands, so does the need for coaches and data facilitators. One approach is to increase the number of colleges assigned to particular coaches and data facilitators, especially if they have the interest and availability in working with more colleges. Coaches and data facilitators who have worked with more colleges have an increased array of experiences to draw upon and have presumably amassed additional expertise as a result of their continued work. Is there an ideal number of colleges for each coach and data facilitator? If so, how is this determined?

- *Should the Achieving the Dream materials be more inclusive of 4-year colleges?*

The Achieving the Dream materials utilize language which specifically references community colleges. For example, the sub-title of the initiative is “community colleges count.” Since its inception, the initiative has expanded to include 4-year colleges. In order to assist 4-year institutions promotion of Achieving the Dream on their campuses, the initiative may want to consider ways to provide alternative versions of materials to reflect their involvement.

- *What is the role of the initiative in providing guidance to colleges with multiple campuses?*

Community colleges with multiple campuses confront important decisions about the organization, data analysis and strategy implementation across their campuses. The initiative may need to consider how their work can best be supported, in order to maximize buy-in and success across individual campuses. Providing colleges with an opportunity to learn from other colleges with multiple campuses at Strategy Institutes, and assigning coaches and data facilitators who have experience working in multi-campus systems, may be ways of better supporting these institutions.