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An \$88-Million Experiment to Improve Community Colleges

By ELYSE ASHBURN

Four years ago, the Lumina Foundation for Education assembled several dozen of the country's foremost experts on community colleges.

Officials of the Indianapolis-based foundation wanted to discuss raising transfer and graduation rates, particularly those of minority and low-income students, at two-year colleges. Lumina was prepared to put millions of dollars behind the recommendations that emerged.

As the conversation went past the same stale sound bites and well-trod national data points, the participants determined that more was needed than just another isolated position paper. They wanted to build a campus-based movement to increase community colleges' graduation and transfer rates.

"The challenge was, How do you get to movement stage with limited dollars?" says Leah Meyer Austin, Lumina's senior vice president for program development and organizational learning.

The answer, they all decided, was to provide financial support to dozens of institutions across the country, creating a network of colleges that could share information with each other and, Lumina hoped, eventually influence nearby colleges.

To judge the effectiveness of the projects, the foundation would closely track students before and after the interventions. Some ideas would certainly fall short, but the colleges would know what worked and what did not. The project was named Achieving the Dream: Community Colleges Count.

The effort began in 2004 with 27 colleges in five states and has grown to 58 colleges in nine states. Lumina has invested \$56-million in the project and recently promised an additional \$18-million to continue its work until 2012. Foundations including the Heinz Endowments and the Houston Endowment Inc. have also put up money.

Two dozen more colleges, the final group, are expected to join the project this summer. Achieving the Dream has developed such a cachet in community-college circles that those institutions were willing to bring their own money to the project, a requirement for the colleges in the final round.

Still, three years in, it is not clear whether the project will have any lasting impact on participating colleges, much less on the two-year-college sector as a whole. And more than the future of the institutions hinge on that question. The project, after all, is about improving the educational prospects of thousands of disadvantaged students.

"With 80-some-odd institutions in 15 states, Achieving the Dream is really becoming a force, but we really don't know what will happen," says Carol A. Lincoln, a senior associate with MDC Inc., a nonprofit social-action group that was enlisted to manage the project. "There's some beginning signs that show we're on the right path, but we don't have the information yet to know that we have transformed colleges."

Daunting Task

Achieving the Dream released a report on its preliminary findings in early 2006. The document, which focused on students in remedial mathematics, was only two pages long but packed with bad news.

Researchers looked at historical data from the 35 colleges participating in the project by 2006. They found that in the fall of 2002, 61 percent of the students at the those colleges were required to take at least one remedial math course. At some colleges, as many as 89 percent of students needed at least one basic math course, which did not surprise the researchers, given that the project focused on institutions with high numbers of disadvantaged students.

What did surprise the researchers was that two years later, only 17 percent of the students, on average, had completed their remedial work and moved on to college-level math.

"That is kind of a bummer," says Kay M. McClenney, a senior lecturer in the College of Education at the University of Texas at Austin, who works with Achieving the Dream. "But there is a counterpoint."

The project's research also showed that if colleges could get students to complete at least one developmental course in their first semester, they were more likely to stay, and to pass their courses, than any other group of students, including those who did not need remedial work.

"The two of those realities together call for a really strong focus on the need to get developmental math right," says Ms. McClenney, who is also director of the national Community College Survey of Student Engagement.

Improving basic math courses has become a focus of many of the colleges in Achieving the Dream, including the Alamo Community College District, in San Antonio, with which Ms. McClenney works directly. The district has had some initial success at moving students quickly through remedial math to prevent them from getting frustrated and dropping out. Some students take more than one section at a time, so that they can enroll in college-level courses in fewer semesters.

Developing Math

Another participant in the project, Patrick Henry Community College, in Martinsville, Va., has focused on improving not only basic math courses but also basic English and entry-level college courses, by emphasizing cooperative learning. That teaching method requires students to work in small groups for five to 10 minutes in most class periods.

J. Gregory Hodges, an assistant professor of educational assisting at Patrick Henry, breaks his students into groups at the beginning of each semester and grades members of each group in part based on whether all of them came to class with completed homework. Students are likelier to stay on top of their work, he says, when they feel responsible for their classmates' grades.

Cooperative learning also requires professors to solicit regular feedback on what their students are learning. Sharon H. Wayne, an associate professor of developmental mathematics at Patrick Henry, checks her students' progress in almost every class session, asking multiple-choice questions that they answer on hand-held devices. The responses are transmitted to her computer, and she can immediately tell which students are struggling or if she needs to go back over a concept for the entire class.

The college brought in experts from the Cooperative Learning Center, at the University of Minnesota-Twin Cities, to teach the approach to its faculty members. The two-year college has also sent several professors, including Mr. Hodges, to Minnesota to learn how to train others in the method.

All faculty members are encouraged to use cooperative-learning methods in their classes, although they are allowed to make the decision.

Carolyn R. Byrd, dean of instructional-support services at Patrick Henry, says about two-thirds of the college's full-time faculty members and 80 percent of those who teach general-education courses have adopted the teaching method to some degree. All new hires are expected to use it.

"If you don't have commitment and buy-in from faculty, it won't work," she says.

Ms. Wayne, who has taught for 33 years, says that in the past, only about 55 percent of students would pass her math courses, but that in the past two semesters, since she started using cooperative learning, 80 percent have passed. "That's the first time I've tried something - and I have tried a lot of things over the years - and seen that kind of change," she says.

She recently tried using computer software to drill students on math and got middling results. She toyed with the idea of group learning years ago but felt that groups weren't conducive to teaching

math. Back then, she says, the idea was just to put students in groups without any clear goal. Now, with cooperative learning, she gives students a set task, like solving word problems.

Ms. Wayne says incorporating the new teaching style into her lesson plans was not much of a hassle. She does have to program the hand-held devices with the questions before each class, but that takes only a few minutes. "As long as our data is showing it's making a difference, it's worthwhile," she says. "And from my standpoint, it makes teaching even more enjoyable than before because you really get a sense that students are learning something."

As promising as stories like Ms. Wayne's

are, they still represent a small proportion of students at each institution. Patrick Henry, like many colleges, has data from only a few professors' classes. The institution plans to start measuring whether more students in all cooperative-learning classes are passing.

And while about two-thirds of Patrick Henry's professors are participating in the project, many colleges in Achieving the Dream - reluctant to pour money into overhauling curriculum and college practices before they know if the projects really work - have started out with smaller groups. Those colleges are just beginning to expand the programs that have shown potential, so the most telling information is yet to come.

"Colleges have got to expand the class sessions and the number of students," says Texas' Ms. McClenney, "in order to show that it is the interventions that are working and not the heroic effort of one professor."

Universal Change

Byron N. McClenney, a project director in the Community College Leadership Program at Austin (and Ms. McClenney's husband), says a few community colleges are having a hard time scaling up their projects.

Learning communities, in which students take paired courses that focus on a central theme, like a history course and an English course on post-World War II America, have proved especially hard to expand because they require students to enroll in two specified class sections, which can cause scheduling difficulties. Community-college students, who are often balancing their studies with work or raising children, are accustomed to having more flexibility in scheduling their classes, says Mr. McClenney, who heads the group of experts who are coaching the Lumina project's participating institutions.

Cost is another concern for the colleges. Several have scaled back their projects, he says, after they realized that they could not afford to continue them once the funds from Achieving the Dream ran out. The Lumina grants cover a five-year period, and so the foundation's support for the first colleges to join the project will be phased out in 2009.

Administrators at Durham Technical Community College, in North Carolina, have already begun planning for that day. The grant money has supported its mentorship projects, a mandatory student orientation, several dozen courses in college skills, and an early-alert program, in which counselors can step in during the first semester to help struggling students.

Lumina's tab for Durham so far is \$300,000, and the college is expecting \$150,000 more over the next two years, a total grant that is typical for the project. William G. Ingram, senior vice president and chief instructional officer, says Durham has used much of the money to design programs and make structural changes. The coaches and technical support provided by the project have been crucial, he says.

With the programs in place, Mr. Ingram says, the college should be able to shift its budget around to keep paying for the mentors, extra counselors, and faculty time necessary to keep them going. "We know we need to focus on student persistence and success," he says, "and we need to put our money where our mouth is."

Getting college leaders to think like that, says Mr. McClenney, will be the biggest hurdle as Achieving the Dream tries to spread its message beyond its few dozen participants. College leaders must change their institutional culture from one centered on simply getting students in the door rather than through their years of classes. "We've been focused on access, not success, and we've got to change that," he says. "It has to go beyond a project mentality to broad institutional change, and it's surprising to some colleges how difficult that work can be."

Experiences of 2 Colleges in Achieving the Dream

Durham Technical Community College, in Durham, N.C.

Black students account for about 40 percent of the student body at this 8,200-student institution. Like many colleges, Durham Technical struggled with keeping black males enrolled and on the path to degrees. So about three years ago they started the Minority Male Leadership Project, which pairs students with male mentors who are themselves members of minority groups. The college's president, Phail Wynn Jr., who is black, serves as one of the mentors.

The 40 or so students in the program, or "fellows," as the college calls them, must commit to attend weekly meetings on topics that include study skills, time management, and how to properly enroll in and withdraw from classes. The students, who range in age from 18 to 52, are supposed to come to the meetings in business attire, complete with ties.

Rudolph Bailey joined the group after he saw students in the program walking around campus wearing ties. Mr. Bailey, who has a 3.6 grade-point average, has been in the program for three semesters now, and in addition to being advised, helps other students in the group. He says the project has helped him juggle college, working full time at FedEx, and raising two children.

Demetrius O. Thompson, a college mentoring specialist who runs the program, says that at first, the group only met once a month, and their performance at Durham Technical did not improve as much as he hoped it would. So this fall, the group started meeting once a week, and Mr. Thompson says the students' grades are markedly better, fewer have dropped out this year, and they seem more aware of resources, like tutoring and financial aid, available to them.

Paul D. Camp Community College, in Franklin, Va.

Administrators at this rural college in southeastern Virginia decided that if they were going to help students improve their grades and get them to graduate, they had to first improve the skills of the people teaching them. The two-year institution already offered professional development for full-time faculty members but had little available for adjunct faculty members, who teach 55 percent of for-credit courses at the college.

"We had an orientation session for adjuncts at the beginning of each semester that was basically a 'Welcome back, here's your fried chicken' kind of event," says Joe Edenfield, dean of the college's Franklin campus. "So, basically, not much."

In 2006 the college began holding four training sessions a semester for adjuncts, covering topics like students' learning styles, incorporating technology into the classroom, and helping students master core competencies, like public speaking, critical thinking, and writing clearly.

The college gives the faculty members a \$100 stipend for the training, and the sessions have been well attended, Mr. Edenfield says.

In the fall, the college plans to start comparing how each adjunct's students fared before and after their teacher participated in training.