

ACHIEVING THE DREAM

*A Series of Briefs Looking Back on Two Decades of
Impact & Lessons Learned from Key Lumina Initiatives*

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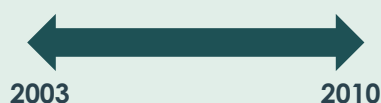


Executive Summary: Achieving the Dream

PURPOSE

ATD was a bold, multiyear, national initiative to support an initial cohort of 26 community colleges to build data capacity and cultures of evidence and to implement strategies to advance student success, particularly among low-income students and students of color.

TIMELINE



TOTAL LUMINA INVESTMENT



KEY PARTNERS



IMPACT ON THE FIELD

Institutional Policy/Practice: Most of the colleges (81%) adopted some or all of the practices associated with building a culture of evidence, such as increased data and research capacity and the implementation of student success strategies informed by data.

Student Outcomes: Student outcome trends and equity gaps remained largely unchanged over the grant period.

Philanthropy: ATD launched long-standing philanthropic investment in initiatives focused on developmental education reform and math pathways, among others. Beyond the initiative, the ATD model and theory of change shaped the overall philanthropic approach to institutional transformation and system reform that persists today. MDRC asserted that "ATD can be thought of as a continuous model for institutional reform" and this seems to be true even now when looking at several other major national initiatives that were most certainly modeled after ATD, such as BMGF's Completion by Design, the Frontier Set, and Intermediaries for Scale.

Community Colleges: A strong set of community colleges emerged from ATD with the capacity, infrastructure, and proof points to be coveted for other national grant initiatives.

Intermediaries: Participation in ATD helped to bolster credibility and build capacity at several key intermediary organizations that are still known as key players in the field today, e.g. JFF, CCRC and MDRC.

ATD: More than a decade after it was established as an independent 501c3, ATD remains a national leader in community college transformation with a network of more than 200 community colleges in more than 40 states.

LUMINA'S LESSONS LEARNED

Set Reasonable Expectations: While meaningful change can occur at the institutional level (e.g. becoming a more data-driven college) in a five-year grant period, substantially improving institution-wide student outcomes is far more challenging and takes more time.

College Context is Critical. ATD colleges were a diverse set with different student contexts, implementation strategies, experiences, and results. The case studies and stories that emerged from this initiative exemplify how different institutions can work toward improvement in a variety of ways with a variety of results.

Initiatives Must Be Integrated: It's not enough for colleges to implement a variety of programs and services if they are not well aligned and integrated. Yet, integrating initiatives is complex and may require a college to redesign practices, policies, and processes over time to realign them with new organizational goals.

Mid-level Managers Matter: Institutional leadership frameworks must include faculty and mid-level managers like deans and department chairs in reform efforts, and these leaders can sometimes spur change more effectively among their peers and within their departments.

Meet Faculty Where They Are: Including a focus on teaching and learning efforts (not just student outcomes), may help with engaging faculty as central actors in future institutional transformation efforts.

Center Students: It is important for institutions to start by knowing their student subgroups and their specific needs and then tailor reforms to meet the specific needs of these groups of students.

Prioritize Evaluation: With colleges undertaking various initiatives at any given time, it is important to prioritize quality evaluations to discern which interventions lead to institutional transformation and which impact outcomes for particular subgroups of students.

Thoughtfully Craft Co-funding Strategies: The inclusive partnership among co-funders which allowed for collaborative design and governance was an asset to this particular initiative.

Introduction to this Series of Briefs

Purpose: This brief is part of a series looking back on two decades of impact and lessons learned from key Lumina-funded initiatives. The purpose of examining this set of key initiatives is to explore Lumina’s impact and reflect lessons learned that might inform how the foundation conceives of and plans for its role(s), impact, and strategies in the future.

Methodology and Limitations: By design, these briefs focus mostly on existing documents and data related to the initiatives, e.g. grant reports, evaluation and research findings, and any other key documents available in Lumina’s grant system and the web. Therefore, the briefs may lack more recent and longer-term perspectives on the broader impact and lessons learned from these initiatives. Thus, they are intended to be used as a jumping off point for conversations at Lumina focused on lessons learned from past work and implications for the next strategic plan.

Achieving the Dream: Overview, Impact, & Lessons Learned

Purpose and Scope

Achieving the Dream (ATD) was Lumina’s first “big bet” on community colleges, and it is, by far, Lumina’s largest investment in institutional reform to-date. Launched in 2003, ATD was a bold, multiyear, national initiative to support community colleges to build cultures of evidence and to implement strategies to advance student success, particularly among low-income students and students of color. Overall, **Lumina has invested a total of \$79M+ in ATD**, including the participating institutions and the vast network of support partners involved in the initiative.

The first cohort of ATD institutions, funded from 2004-2009, included 26 community colleges in 5 states (FL, NM, NC, TX, and VA). ATD colleges and states are listed in Figure 1 below. ATD states were chosen based on their community colleges that enrolled large numbers of low-income students and students of color — student groups that traditionally face the most significant barriers to success. They also demonstrated interest in implementing policies that promote access to and success in community colleges.

Figure 1: ATD Round 1 Colleges Funded from 2004 - 2009

Florida

- Broward College
- Hillsborough Community College

Texas

- Alamo Community College District Central Office
 - Northwest Vista College

- Tallahassee Community College
- Valencia Community College

New Mexico

- Central New Mexico Community College
- New Mexico State University – Dona Ana
- Santa Fe Community College
- Southwestern Indian Polytechnic Institute
- University of New Mexico-Gallup Campus

North Carolina

- Durham Technical Community College
- Guilford Technical Community College
- Martin Community College
- Wayne Community College

- Palo Alto College
- San Antonio College
- St. Philips College

- Brookhaven College
- Coastal Bend College
- El Paso Community College
- Galveston College
- Houston Community College System
- South Texas College
- Southwest Texas Junior College

Virginia

- Danville Community College
- Mountain Empire Community College
- Patrick Henry Community College
- Paul D. Camp Community College
- Tidewater Community College

Participating colleges were expected to commit to collecting and analyzing data to improve student outcomes and “building a culture of evidence.” This included disaggregating and analyzing their own student data to identify achievement gaps and priority areas for reform, and then developing and implementing strategies to improve academic outcomes. Through these institutional reforms, Achieving the Dream expected colleges to see measurable improvements in student outcomes, such as completion of developmental (remedial) courses, semester-to-semester retention, and graduation.

From the start, Lumina’s vision was for ATD to be sustainable independent from Lumina’s and other co-funders’ support. In 2010, ATD transitioned from being managed by a group of partner organizations to achieving status as an independent nonprofit organization, which remains strong today. At that point, Achieving the Dream included nearly 200 colleges in 30 states and the District of Columbia.

Rationale

Achieving the Dream marks a pivotal shift from Lumina’s early years of focusing primarily on access to focusing on persistence and completion. In 2003, when Lumina was beginning to plan for ATD, community colleges were seen as vital to improving outcomes for low-income students and students of color. However, at the time, community colleges were conditioned to focus most on enrollment rather than tracking student data over time to see if they were making steady progress toward a credential. Lumina was concerned about the droves of community college students—who were disproportionately students of color and/or from low-income backgrounds—who were leaving community colleges without a credential or a solid transfer pathway.

According to Samuel Cargile, senior director of grantmaking at Lumina Foundation:

“The data revealed that many of the students we wanted to see succeed were enrolled at community colleges, but they were not succeeding at levels comparable to students from the majority group. In fact, students from all groups were not succeeding at sufficiently high

rates to achieve their academic goals. Therefore, we decided that it was important to emphasize success among all students in the Achieving the Dream initiative, but particularly among low-income students and students of color” (Clayton, 10).

Vision and Approach

In Achieving the Dream, Lumina took a comprehensive, holistic, systems change approach to reforming postsecondary education, which focused not only on institutional change, but also policy change, knowledge development and public engagement. Leah Meyer Austin, Lumina’s Director of Programs at the time, described the vision in the following statement:

“To achieve social change, I believe you need to start at the center of the bull’s-eye, with the individual who is going to benefit from the change—in this case, the community college student. Then you figure out how you are going to work with all those who affect the student’s academic success: families, community organizations, schools, government agencies, etc. Many foundations take a slice or layer or ring of this work; for example, they’ll work on public policy change in an attempt to effect lasting improvements. Our approach with Achieving the Dream was different: we wanted to invest close to the center of the bull’s-eye but also have strategies for working in the other rings and bringing in partners who could help make change in those areas” (Clayton 14).

To support this ambitious approach, Lumina developed a massive network of partners and co-funders with a high degree of intentionality, allowing ample time and \$10M for the careful co-creation of a theory of action and an Integrated Action Plan (IAP) over the course of a year.

The original theory of action assumed that if colleges built a “culture of evidence” whereby they used disaggregated data to diagnose student barriers and implement strategies to help students overcome barriers, there would be an uptick in student progression metrics and ultimately attainment (Rutschow et al. ES3-4). Thus, participating colleges were expected to enact a five-step process of institutional reform, which included (1) securing leadership commitment; (2) using data to prioritize actions; (3) engaging stakeholders; (4) implementing, evaluating, and improving intervention strategies; and (5) establishing a culture of continuous improvement.

In the 5-year period, the ATD colleges were expected to “move the needle” on five measures of student success, including: (1) completion of developmental courses and progression to credit-bearing courses; (2) completion of gateway courses, (3) completion of attempted courses with a grade of “C” or better; (4) persistence from semester to semester and from year to year; and (5) attainment of college credentials. Colleges were expected to track these outcomes for each fall cohort of entering students and to make comparisons with past cohorts to determine whether the outcomes improved over time. They were also expected to break down the results for subgroups of students defined by race, ethnicity, and income.

Funding and Infrastructure

ATD offered participating colleges both monetary and technical support. The 26 Colleges were awarded an initial year-long planning grant of \$50,000 each, followed by annual grants of \$100,000 for four years (\$450,000 total). In addition, the colleges had two consultants: a data facilitator, who helped them perform the data collection and analysis and interpret the results; and a coach, who helped them set priorities, build consensus, and implement strategies for improvement. The initiative also sponsored a Kick-off Institute and annual Strategy Institutes for all the Achieving the Dream colleges, where they learned more about the Achieving the Dream process, made plans for their own campuses, and shared ideas and lessons with other colleges on how to help students be more successful. Colleges also received technical assistance from the initiative's eight founding partner organizations, led by MDC, Inc., the managing partner of Achieving the Dream.

Co-Collaboration and Sustainability Plan

From the start, Lumina built ATD with the intention to be one of *many* partners that could help it become self-sustaining. To that end, the foundation worked to build trust and an inclusive model of shared governance where partners and co-funders had an equal seat at the table. Leah Meyer Austin relayed that: "Initially some [partners] may have been befuddled by the fact that we did not expect them to compete; we expected them to become partners in an enterprise that was bigger than any one organization...It took a while to convince them that Lumina Foundation was just another partner who sat at the table like everyone else" (Clayton, 11-12). ATD evaluations also noted that the shared governance and collaboration was a key strength of the initiative, that it was a "selling point" for other funders to join in and that it facilitated long-term sustainability.

Impact on the Field

"Achieving the Dream was at the vanguard, anticipating — and helping spur — the growing national focus on institutional accountability in community colleges. After five years in the initiative — the first two years of which were spent planning and setting up strategies for reform — a majority of the Round 1 colleges are collecting data on their students' performance and are committed to using those data to design and implement effective reforms. On the other hand, trends in student outcomes — such as course completion, persistence, maintaining good grades, and earning college credentials — have remained relatively unchanged at these colleges, underscoring the depth of the challenge facing all community colleges" (Rutschow, xi).

The ultimate goal of ATD was to increase student success, particularly among low-income students and students of color. Five key outcomes were targeted: (1) progression through developmental education, (2) completion of gatekeeper (introductory college) courses in math and English, (3) completion of courses with a grade of "C" or better, (4) persistence, and (5) attainment of credentials. ATD also emphasized this process as a means to overcoming achievement gaps, particularly among students of color and low-income students.

In addition to student-level outcomes, Lumina expected to see evidence of institutional transformation at participating community colleges that would suggest that improvements in student outcomes could be sustained over time. In particular, they sought increased data capacity and data infrastructure, operations to support a culture of evidence, and the implementation of policies and practices aimed at increasing student success.

The list below highlights some of the key areas of impact on the field that resulted from ATD.

- **ATD colleges' student outcomes:** Many colleges instituted a wide range of strategies to help their students succeed, but average student outcome trends for Round 1 colleges remained largely unchanged over time, with one exception. Gateway English course completion rates increased at some of the colleges. (Mayer et al, 15-16).
- **ATD colleges' cultures of evidence:** Most of the colleges (81%) adopted some or all of the practices associated with building a culture of evidence and most attributed this changed to ATD and other grants received during that time period. In particular, many enhanced their leadership commitment to student success, increased their data and research capacity, used data more frequently to inform policies and practices, and implemented a variety of student success strategies (Mayer, 41).
- **ATD colleges' student success strategy implementation and reach:** While nearly all of the colleges succeeded in expanding at least one student success strategy to reach at least 25% of its intended target population, the majority of strategies implemented reached less than 10% of the intended target populations. Therefore, the benefits of promising interventions were frequently extended to only a fraction of students (Rutschow et al, ES-11).
- **Philanthropic approach to institutional transformation and system reform strategies:** ATD launched long-standing philanthropic investment in initiatives focused on developmental education reform and math pathways, among others. Beyond the initiative, the ATD model and theory of change shaped the overall philanthropic approach to institutional transformation and system reform that persists today. Nearly a decade ago, MDRC asserted that "ATD can be thought of as a continuous model for institutional reform" (Mayer, 41) and this seems to be true even now when looking at several other major national initiatives that were most certainly modeled after ATD, e.g. Completion by Design (CBD) from 2011-2017, the Frontier Set (FS) from 2015-2021, and Intermediaries for Scale from 2022-today, all funded by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation.

In their final report, MDRC summarized the impact of ATD on system reform and pathways focused initiatives:

“The Round 1 colleges’ innovations and their willingness to publicly share their experiences have pushed the field forward and helped advance reform efforts in community colleges. Other system reform initiatives, such as the Developmental Education Initiative and Completion by Design, have been heavily influenced by lessons from the early experiences of Round 1 colleges. Indeed, Achieving the Dream colleges continue to be leaders in new programs now under way in the field, including in initiatives that, like Completion by Design, emphasize focused pathways for students. Among these programs are the Statway™ and Quantway™ Networked Improvement Communities and the New Mathways Project, all focused on rethinking traditional approaches to mathematics” (Mayer, 46).

- **Exemplary Community Colleges:** A strong set of community colleges emerged from Achieving the Dream with the capacity, infrastructure, and proof points to be coveted for other national grant initiatives like those listed above. In fact, there are 8 ATD community colleges, in particular, that went on to participate in CBD and/or FS. These include Central Piedmont CC, Davidson-Davie CC (NC), Guilford Tech CC (NC), Martin CC (NC), Santa Fe CC (FL), San Jacinto CC (TX), Lorain County CC (OH), Sinclair CC (OH).
- **Intermediaries and Support Partners:** Participation in ATD helped to bolster credibility and build capacity at several key intermediary organizations that are still known as key players in the field today, including Jobs for the Future (JFF), MDC, MDRC, Public Agenda, and the Community College Research Center (CCRC), among others.
- **On ATD as an independent organization:** ATD, the organization, continues to be regarded as a national leader in community college transformation. According to the ATD website the organization is “celebrating over 15 years of work...[and] leads the most comprehensive non-governmental reform network for community college student success in higher education history.” Today the ATD network includes over 200 community colleges in more than 40 states.

Challenges and Barriers

- **Timeline:** The long timeline required to scale desired system changes and see improvements in student level outcomes can be a major challenge for funders and for their grantees. Even despite prevalent gains in capacity, infrastructure, and policy/practice change, the ATD colleges were not able to sustain significant improvements in student outcomes over the course of this investment. This is summed up in MDRC’s final report as follows: “In short, translating institutional reform into practices that substantially change the experiences of large groups of students — and observing changes in institution-wide student outcomes — may simply be more difficult, and may take more time, than first anticipated....Increasing the capacity of schools and colleges to gather and analyze data may be a necessary condition for improvement, but it does not appear to be sufficient. More work is needed to understand how such reforms might translate into institution-wide gains in student outcomes” (Mayer, 41-2).

- **Scale:** Colleges struggled to scale interventions and they tended to reach much smaller groups of students than they originally intended. Developing a coherent set of strategies for a targeted group of students also proved difficult when institutions had multiple priorities and sought to carry out numerous initiatives, many of which competed for limited resources (Mayer, 29).
- **Faculty Buy-in and Engagement:** CCs faced obstacles in their attempts to gain wide-scale support and buy-in from faculty and staff to develop and sustain these programs amid limited resources and personnel. A number of colleges also struggled to engage faculty in using and applying data and research, despite their commitment to this key tenet of Achieving the Dream. For instance, surveys of faculty and administrators suggest that faculty tended to use data on student progression and completion much less frequently than did administrators. Similarly, though colleges generally improved their institutional research capacity, they were not expected to — and generally did not — rigorously evaluate new interventions to better understand the effectiveness of reform efforts (Mayer, 41).
- **Institutional Research Capacity:** At the completion of the grant period, five colleges (19%) were still struggling to implement a number of the recommended practices; most were hindered by weak IR departments (Mayer, 41).

Lumina's Lessons Learned

- While meaningful change can occur at the institutional level (e.g. becoming a more data-driven college) in a five-year grant period, substantially **improving institution-wide student outcomes is far more challenging and takes more time** (Mayer, iii).
- **College context is critical.** ATD colleges were a diverse set with different student contexts, implementation strategies, experiences, and results. No one pattern of program reform and implementation emerged from the ATD evaluation. The case studies and stories that emerged from this initiative exemplify how different institutions can work toward improvement in a variety of ways with a variety of results.
- It's not enough for colleges to implement a variety of programs and services if they are not well aligned and integrated. Furthermore, **integrating initiatives is complex and may require a college to redesign practices, policies, and processes over time** to realign them with new organizational goals (Mayer, ES-11).
- **Institutional leadership frameworks must include faculty and mid-level managers** like deans and department chairs in reform efforts, and these leaders can sometimes spur change more effectively among their peers and within their departments. Colleges that cultivate strong leaders throughout their institutions may have a greater chance of long-term success, even when some leaders move on and must be replaced by others (Mayer, ES-12).

- **Including a focus on teaching and learning efforts and outcomes** (in addition to student outcomes), may help with engaging faculty as central actors in future institutional transformation efforts (Mayer, ES-12).
- It is important for institutions to **start by knowing their student subgroups and their specific needs** and then tailor new policy and practice reforms to meet the specific needs of these groups of students (Mayer, ES-12).
- With colleges undertaking various initiatives at any given time, it is difficult to know which reforms are effective. Therefore, it is important to **prioritize ongoing, careful, and rigorous evaluations** to discern which interventions lead to institutional transformation and which impact outcomes for particular subgroups of students (Mayer, ES-12).
- **The inclusive partnership among co-funders which allowed for collaborative design and governance was one of the core strengths of the initiative** and one of the key selling points to other funders (Clayton 20).

Sources

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