

CRISIS AND **OPPORTUNITY**

Aligning the Community College
Presidency with Student Success

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



THE ASPEN INSTITUTE



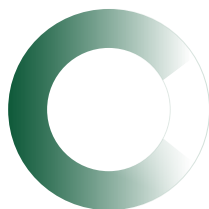
Achieving the Dream™
Community Colleges Count

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Achieving the Dream, Inc. is a national nonprofit leading the nation's most comprehensive non-governmental reform network for student success in higher education history. The Achieving the Dream National Reform Network, including nearly 200 institutions, more than 100 coaches and advisors, and 15 state policy teams—working throughout 32 states and the District of Columbia—helps 3.75 million community college students have a better chance of realizing greater economic opportunity and achieving their dreams. For more information, visit www.achievingthedream.org.

The Aspen Institute mission is twofold: to foster values-based leadership, encouraging individuals to reflect on the ideals and ideas that define a good society, and to provide a neutral and balanced venue for discussing and acting on critical issues. **The Aspen College Excellence Program** aims to identify and replicate practices, policies and leadership that significantly improve college student outcomes. For more information, visit www.aspeninstitute.org/cep.



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



The world around community colleges is changing quickly. States, students, and families face serious resource constraints; demographic shifts are ushering in a more diverse student population; and technology is opening the door to new forms of educational delivery and ever more competitors. Shifting with equal force is the definition of community college success. Driven by stiffening international competition and urgent domestic economic challenges, state and federal policymakers—not to mention parents and students—increasingly expect community colleges not just to provide broad access to higher education, but also to deliver success for students, many of whom enter college underprepared.

In sum, community colleges will for the foreseeable future be expected to produce more degrees of a higher quality at a lower per-student cost to an increasingly diverse population. Gone are the days when expanding access alone will be equated with success. Meeting new expectations will require a new vision for leadership. The skills and qualities that made community college presidents effective when the dominant benchmark of success was access alone are no longer the same now that expectations extend to higher levels of completion, quality, and productivity.



The average age of community college presidents has been steadily pushing upwards, and by the end of this decade over half the current cohort of leaders will likely be retired. Moreover, individuals in positions that typically lead into the presidency, such as chief academic officers, are also approaching retirement age or are not aspiring to the presidency. In ten years, most community colleges are likely to have different, younger leaders than they do today.

The question, then, is where to find and how to develop the next generation of leaders needed to dramatically improve student success? The Aspen Institute and Achieving the Dream (ATD) have worked with many community colleges around the nation that are making significant improvements in their completion rates and ensuring high levels of success for their students. Several of these colleges have been spotlighted as Aspen Prize for Community College Excellence finalists and/or as Achieving the Dream Leader Colleges. They range

from large, urban institutions that serve over 50,000 students in a wide variety of vocational and academic programs to small, rural colleges that offer a limited number of high-value technical credentials. All of these institutions have one important thing in common: leaders with the strong skills needed to create organizational structures, processes, and policies aligned—explicitly and aggressively—with student success goals. The ability of these leaders to align their core responsibilities—in communication, relationship-building, budgeting, fundraising, and advocacy—to achieving high levels of student success makes all the difference.

With this in mind, Aspen and ATD have, over the past year, researched and explored the qualities of presidents who have led community colleges to high and improving levels of student success. After completing a literature review, conducting focus groups, and synthesizing responses to extensive interviews with presidents and search consultants, we have concluded that:

While educational and professional development programs provide some of the skills that make leaders effective, they underemphasize several critical skills and often fail to deliberately and explicitly connect their curricula to student success goals.

When recruiting and hiring new presidents, boards of trustees often do not value—and sometimes completely overlook—many of the critical qualities that presidents have brought to institutions achieving high and improving levels of student success.

For the presidents of today and tomorrow to collectively contribute to the national priority of dramatically improving community college student success, we must question past assumptions about the community college presidency and join with others to overhaul the way presidents are developed, trained, recruited, hired, and evaluated. By doing so, we believe that the looming leadership void can become—must become—a transformative leadership opportunity.

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FINDINGS

At the center of this report lies a description of the qualities of highly effective community college presidents, which we define as those whose institutions have achieved high and/or significantly improving levels of student success. Based on research and reflection, we conclude that there are five qualities, above all others, common among highly effective presidents, regardless of the context within which they lead.



QUALITIES:

Deep Commitment to Student Access and Success

While those who devote their careers to community colleges often care deeply for the populations and missions these unique institutions serve, it is clear that some leaders, more than others, demonstrate a persistent, almost zealous drive to ensure student success, while at the same time maintaining access for the broad range of students community colleges have traditionally served. This commitment drives them to become community college presidents and informs the great majority of their actions.



Willingness to Take Significant Risks to Advance Student Success

Exceptional presidents demonstrate that skillfully taking risks is a vital step toward improvement. For example, they publicly admit and take ownership of low success rates as a tactic to build urgency around an improvement agenda, and they make bold decisions to reallocate resources when needed to advance student outcomes.



The Ability to Create Lasting Change within the College

Community college presidents that have brought about substantial improvement in student success spend substantial time and effort working to create that change internally. These presidents generally lead change through four critical steps:

- **Building urgency** by using data and the bully pulpit to communicate about student success challenges without laying blame.
- **Creating strong plans**, operationalized with sustainable strategies that are proven to improve student success and that involve the whole institution.
- **Collaborating with and listening to faculty and support staff** who have the most direct contact with and impact on students.
- **Implementing and evaluating change strategies**, holding faculty and staff throughout the institution accountable for executing against plans and demonstrating with data that their practices are effective.



Having a Strong, Broad, Strategic Vision for the College and Its Students, Reflected in External Partnerships

Highly effective presidents work to serve students not just while on campus, but also in ways other college leaders might deem beyond their control or responsibility. In particular, they focus on who in their community gets access to a college education, whether students are positioned to succeed when they arrive, what non-educational services they receive on campus, and whether they succeed after they graduate. These leaders build strong relationships with other organizations—including K-12 school districts, universities, employers, community-based non-profit organizations, and policymakers—that are tailored to deliver what students need most to succeed.



Raise and Allocate Resources in Ways Aligned to Student Success

Exceptional community college presidents craft and expertly implement strategies for raising revenue – and deploying resources – that support and align with their goals for improving student success. They are unusually entrepreneurial in raising revenue and consistently strategic when allocating resources.

CREATING A NEW GENERATION OF LEADERS EQUIPPED TO ACHIEVE EXCELLENCE FOR STUDENTS



Most of the exceptional community college presidents we interviewed for this report rose to their positions through traditional leadership pathways: doctoral degrees followed by upward movement through faculty or administrative positions in community colleges. Many have participated in professional leadership development programs designed and implemented by leading national associations and universities. These academic and professional experiences were essential to their success and will continue to be vital to the development of new and future leaders. Similarly, new efforts to train trustees hold promise to impart important learning relevant to achieving higher rates of community college student success.

But our research revealed two major areas in which current efforts are not adequately aligned to ensure that more presidents have the ability to drive reforms that lead to high levels of student success. First, the processes and criteria by which trustees recruit and select presidents must be improved to ensure that more candidates possess a set of essential skills and competencies and have demonstrated the ability to apply those skills to achieve high levels of success for students. Second, training and professional development programs must be better aligned with the qualities demonstrated by presidents who have transformed community colleges into institutions that achieve high and continually improving levels of student success.

CHANGING THE HIRING PERSPECTIVE



Our conversations with search consultants revealed a consistent finding: In the hiring process, trustees tend to neglect whether candidates have three core qualities present in highly effective community college presidents: a deep commitment to student access and success, the ability to purposefully create institutional change aligned with student success goals, and a willingness to take the risks needed to bring about student success reforms.

Each of these characteristics can be evaluated during the search process, if the right questions are asked. Accordingly, it is important that trustees understand these characteristics and can identify a leader who is able to prioritize actions necessary to achieve high levels of student success even if they deviate from common practice in ways that may upset some colleagues and stakeholders. In order to do so, when evaluating presidential candidates, trustees and other hiring authorities should:

- **Look for proof of a deep commitment to students.** Identify individuals who reflect a consistent focus on student success in all of their interviews and other communications and have experience achieving results over the several years it takes to improve outcomes at

community colleges. Ask questions such as how they define institutional success and what broad and specific goals they would set for improving institutional effectiveness.

- **Assess candidates' ability to change culture and practice.** Look for evidence of consistently using simple and powerful data to build urgency; of using planning or other means to build consensus and plans for specific results; of collaborating with and inspiring leadership teams and staff; and of leading organizations that implement effectively, evaluate success regularly, and change course quickly when needed. Ask how they would inspire a sense of urgency, develop a plan for moving forward, ensure strong implementation, benchmark success, and evaluate progress.
- **Ensure willingness to take risks in order to achieve organizational success.** Look for specific examples of leaders who have taken risks that resulted in higher levels of success. Examples include admitting failure as a rallying call to action and reallocating resources (or taking other actions) that are aligned with proven student success strategies but most would avoid as unpopular or countercultural.

- **Consider non-traditional candidates.** There are many exceptional future presidents currently sitting in administrative or faculty positions in community colleges. But there are also many dedicated and talented leaders who come from outside academia, including from industries that depend on community college graduates and understand deeply the value of ensuring students' success in and beyond college.

Those who select and work with community college trustees should take additional steps to focus trustees on student success by creating assessment tools and related materials to use in presidential searches, conducting training on the hiring process for both new trustees and existing boards, developing guidelines and tools for state political leaders and their staffs on the connection between hiring and governance and student completion and success, and producing voter guides to enable communities to better understand the connection between the qualities of exceptional trustees and the recruitment, hiring, and retention of highly effective presidents.

CHANGING THE WAY PRESIDENTS ARE PREPARED AND DEVELOPED

Current community college presidential preparation and continuing education programs target many of the skills and knowledge areas critical to leading institutions to higher levels of student success. However, programs sometimes neglect to ground the teaching of skills in the context of improving student outcomes. Self-assessment tools should be developed to help all programs that prepare and develop community college leaders determine the extent to which their curricula are aligned with, and identify gaps in the teaching of, the skills held by highly effective community college presidents. As well, faculty and administrators of PhD, EdD, and professional development programs with a mission of preparing future community college leaders should do the following to ensure that topics and skills are framed in terms of their utility in ensuring student success:

- **Improve change management skills.** Create new courses and programs that prepare future leaders to lead organizational transformation aligned with student success. Such courses and programs would be built around using data as a communications tool and as the foundation for a shared vision, using planning to define specific institution-wide strategies, collaborating for success, and ensuring strong implementation and evaluation.
- **Better align all courses with student success goals.** Teach core skills such as budgeting, fundraising, and advocacy in ways that enable them to be used to improve student success, not just to keep the college afloat.

- **Develop new teaching strategies for the new environment.** Create and deliver curricular units to address difficult issues all community colleges face in a changing environment, including how to increase productivity, how to succeed with students starting with developmental needs, how to reinvent pathways and systems in decentralized cultures, and how to monitor and close equity gaps.
- **Include more nontraditional candidates.** Recruit for programs broadly from within and beyond academia to find future leaders with both the skill and the personal commitment needed to ensure that community colleges effectively prepare students for further education and careers.

The number of individuals served by current community college leadership programs is not nearly great enough to meet the coming demand. One way to potentially increase the pool of highly effective leaders would be to build open-access curricular units for all community college leadership programs to share in areas of emerging and unresolved concerns, such as reforming developmental education, using technology effectively, and building cultures of inquiry throughout an institution. In addition, nontraditional candidates should be provided new opportunities to acquire the skills needed to pursue community college presidencies, including through hands-on mentorship from those who have succeeded within the sector. The creation of additional national communities of highly effective new leaders is needed to provide more structured opportunities for leaders to learn with and from one another and, over time, could form the backbone of future community college reform efforts.

CONCLUSION

There are community colleges around the United States that are succeeding in securing strong outcomes for students—in learning, persisting, transferring to four-year colleges, graduating with degrees and certificates, and finding good jobs. These colleges have exceptional leaders who align their actions every day with the goal of monitoring and improving these outcomes for all students. We cannot leave to chance whether our nation's community colleges will have such leaders in the future. We must act wisely, proactively, and urgently to adapt the way we recruit, train, and hire new presidents so that even more can meet the challenge of helping our students succeed while on campus and beyond.

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