

# THE ROLE OF PRESIDENTS, TRUSTEES, AND COLLEGE LEADERS IN STUDENT SUCCESS

Josh Wyner

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## EVERY TWO YEARS SINCE 2011,

the Aspen Institute has awarded the Aspen Prize for Community College Excellence. On the surface, this is a \$1 million prize to honor colleges doing an exceptional job of serving students. At Aspen, though, it is much more: an opportunity to deeply research how standout colleges achieve high levels of success for students both while in college and after graduating.<sup>i</sup>



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Aspen defines an excellent college as one that demonstrates strong or rapidly improving outcomes in five areas: degree and credential completion, student learning, transfer toward the baccalaureate, success in the workforce, and equitable access and outcomes across all these domains. To understand how entire colleges—not just individual programs—achieve these goals, Aspen collects extensive data and qualitative information from multiple sources.<sup>ii</sup>

The winners of the Aspen Prize demonstrate what is possible. These winners include:

- **LAKE AREA TECHNICAL COLLEGE** in South Dakota, which every year graduates over two-thirds of the students who began three years before, more than twice the graduation rate for community colleges nationally.<sup>iii</sup> Over an eight-year period, the college eliminated a sizable graduation-rate gap for low-income students.
- **MIAMI DADE COLLEGE** in Florida, where there is virtually no graduation-rate gap for Black and Latinx students. The rate for completion and transfer is 46 percent, 12 points above the national average.
- **VALENCIA COLLEGE** in Florida, which has improved teaching practice at scale, through exceptional faculty development and tenure processes. Completion rates and bachelor's degree attainment after transfer are both more than 10 percentage points above the national average.
- **WALLA WALLA COMMUNITY AND TECHNICAL COLLEGE** in Washington, which graduates students at a rate 15 percentage points above the national average. By closely aligning programs to projected employer needs and developing talent for new regional industries, the college enables recent graduates to earn 79 percent more than other new workers in the college's region.

*What do these institutions have in common?* Not their size—they include the largest community college in the country and one of the smallest. Some are rural and others urban. Some are minority-serving, others mostly white. Some have unionized faculty, and others do not.

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While colleges that win the Aspen Prize differ in major ways, they all share a crucial element: an exceptional president who steered reform for many years.

While colleges that win the Aspen Prize differ in major ways, they all share a crucial element: an exceptional president who steered reform for many years, almost always at least a decade. These leaders are deeply committed to student success and equity, and they have the strategic ability to translate that commitment into culture change at their institutions and opportunity for students.

In the end, it is the culture of a community college that dictates whether it can sustainably improve student outcomes. And presidents are the key to building highly effective student-oriented cultures. Culture does not just mean that everyone at the college cares about and believes in students. Culture is built through a compelling vision for purpose and change; effective communications; the execution of comprehensive strategies; and systems to ensure that all college resources—financial, informational, those accessed through external partnerships—are dedicated to the mission.

Above all else, culture is made up of the people at the college. So highly effective presidents engage boards of trustees as partners in vision and strategy, build exceptional cabinets, and develop systems to ensure that all decisions and processes regarding human capital center around the college's student success goals. While “[l]eading this work is a team sport,” explains Sandy Shugart, president of Valencia College, the inaugural Aspen Prize winner, “the president has a special role in assembling the right talent with the right motivations and keeping them focused on the common goals.”<sup>iv</sup>

The role of the president in building culture inside the college is crucial, but it is often given short shrift in favor of external-facing activities. To be sure, excellent presidents are highly effective at building relationships with outside partners, including employers, K-12 schools, four-year universities, and political players. But students suffer when presidents focus most of their efforts externally.

This chapter, then, focuses on building culture inside the college. First the chapter explains why presidential leadership matters so much in any efforts to increase student success. Then it explains the actions excellent presidents take. The chapter concludes with recommendations for how all relevant parties—states, their higher education systems, university education schools, and nonprofit organizations—can ensure that presidents, along with their boards and senior teams, are equipped to lead the cultural change necessary to advance student success at scale in the decades ahead.

## Why Senior Leadership Matters to Student Success Reform

Among American institutions, community colleges play a unique and indispensable role in developing workforce talent, enabling individual economic mobility, and closing equity gaps. For nearly two decades, national, state, foundation, and nongovernmental reformers have been working to ensure that community colleges deliver against this promise, that they significantly improve student outcomes so that many more individuals and communities can thrive.<sup>v</sup> Much has been learned from these reform efforts about the conditions under which outstanding student outcomes can be sustained—including through the biennial process of awarding the Aspen Prize for Community College Excellence.

Aspen continually researches, through the Prize and other efforts, community colleges that achieve high and improving levels of student success while narrowing and even closing equity gaps. There are many effective practices that contribute to student success that are being widely replicated around the country (many highlighted elsewhere in this book): among them, guided pathways, corequisite developmental education, seamless transfer pathways that guarantee credit applicability, and the provision of deep work-based learning that effectively prepares students for good jobs.

These reforms get lots of attention for good reason: Reformers are tired of pilot projects that never scale and thus do not make a big difference. But institutional excellence cannot be achieved simply by aggregating a series of program reforms, no matter how proven and no matter how widely they are scaled.

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Only with intentional leadership can divisions coordinate their efforts and prioritize those approaches that put student success first.

Without strong senior leadership, reforms cannot add up to what every student needs, because community colleges are traditionally decentralized in too many ways—curriculum, hiring, budgeting, and professional development are frequently driven at the department level, and thus may not easily cohere and serve a change agenda. In the end, reform strategies require visionary senior leadership, for several reasons:

- *Meaningful reform requires significant changes in multiple parts of the college.* Without leaders setting common goals, change within community colleges often happens in disconnected ways within divisions or disciplines, where departmental leaders and faculty enjoy substantial autonomy. If math faculty have found success by adopting corequisite developmental education and training faculty to deliver it effectively at scale, it is far more likely that degree completion will be accelerated if developmental English faculty members do the same. If advisors are working hard to connect students to transportation and child care so they can get to class, it is imperative that faculty understand the reasons students may struggle to attend class and not (as happens at some colleges) automatically withdraw students from courses for absenteeism even if they have good grades. Only with intentional leadership can divisions coordinate their efforts and prioritize those approaches that put student success first.
- *The way employees are hired, developed, and rewarded matters for student success.* The typical college fails to organize its human capital strategies around student success. Each division usually hires its faculty, staff, and mid-level administrators based on substantially different criteria. Moreover, professional development goals and processes routinely favor the development of technical skills unique to each division or discipline over skills that matter across the college. But it need not be that way. Take, for example, a college where the president has led the adoption of bold goals to close equity gaps for students of color and has aligned human capital policies to those goals. In such a climate, every department would use the same questions and decision-making processes to identify whether faculty candidates believe all students can learn and have experience teaching students who might not feel a sense of belonging in the classroom.

Professional development funds would be allocated to train faculty in inclusive practices aimed at increasing student belonging or how to address specific academic and nonacademic obstacles diverse students may face. It takes the vision and commitment of senior leaders to develop a purposeful, college-wide human capital strategy that is aligned to student success goals.

- *Building a culture of inquiry and data requires centralized strategy.* To significantly advance student success, excellent community colleges employ data to assess collegewide challenges, build urgency and common understanding, measure performance, and celebrate success. At many colleges, different divisions pay uneven attention to data, which prevents them from developing a holistic understanding of the student experience or rallying around unified goals.
- *Presidents and their cabinets are essential to changing this dynamic.* They analyze student outcome data at the cabinet level and decide on collegewide priorities so the president and cabinet can then lead a process of engaging everyone in crafting collegewide student success strategies. With those strategies underway, the senior team can set the expectations and conditions for everyone throughout the college to dig into data to define and measure results and to adjust programs and resource allocations accordingly.
- *Reforms often require new or reallocated financial resources.* These resources can be hard to find for community colleges that are underfunded and experiencing enrollment declines.<sup>vi</sup> The need for resources is especially acute as colleges aim to improve student advising, where it is estimated that the average caseload for professional advisors is 1,000 students, and faculty advising is constrained by heavy course-load assignments and the increasing number of adjunct faculty.<sup>vii</sup> Where senior leaders think strategically about how to allocate and raise funds aligned to student success goals, effective reforms are much more likely to be sustained at the scale needed.
- *Deep-rooted structures and cultures perpetuate inequities that require leadership to reverse.* With rare exceptions, the traditional structures and cultures of community colleges lead to deeply inequitable results. Unclear

course sequences and incomplete advising systems result in poor outcomes for students who need structure the most: those who are first in their families to go to college and have nowhere to turn for advice. Low-income students and students of color are often sorted into courses and programs of study that lead them to less reliable transfer pathways and less remunerative careers. Lecture-based teaching methods fail to engage any student but have the worst impact on students whose K-12 schools have failed to impart a sense of belonging in the classroom. Class sections and tutoring are often available when students working full-time are least likely to be able to access them. These systemic inequities can be dismantled when senior leaders enact institution-wide equity strategies.

Simply put, exceptional presidents build the culture that allows effective student success strategies to grow and endure. And while presidents take many actions to drive cultural change, strategic communication is integral to every presidential action.

## What Exceptional Presidents Do

Achieving scaled improvements in community college student success requires leadership at multiple levels. Engaging leaders from the ranks of faculty and advisors is key, given their control over curriculum and direct connections with students. Effective mid-level leadership from deans, department chairs, and division directors is essential to ensuring the effectiveness of those on the front lines. At the top, trustees and cabinet members play a primary role in developing policy and allocating resources in ways that align to a single set of student success goals. But it is the president alone who can unify all of those actors toward a common purpose.

### Communicating a Compelling Reason for Change

For nearly two decades, community colleges, as a sector, have been engaged in devising and implementing student success reforms. Leaders at the Aspen Institute have been privileged to witness, again and again, community college leaders overcoming resistance to change to advance student success.

They do so, first and foremost, by developing and strategically communicating a compelling reason for reform. But this does not happen just by pointing out all that is wrong with community college student outcomes; the reason should be inspiring. “Change,” explains Valencia’s Shugart, “is a cocktail made with one part despair and three parts hope.”<sup>viii</sup>

To invoke despair, some presidents point to poor outcomes for enrolled students. Others cite the large number of local residents—especially people of color—living in poverty or stranded in low-wage work. Still others appeal to the self-interest of those at the college. One year, with enrollments declining and faculty and staff jobs threatened, Bob Templin, then president of Northern Virginia Community College, asked his faculty and staff at convocation, “Is this what you signed up for? Wondering how big our cuts would be every year? Wondering which of your colleagues might lose their jobs?”<sup>ix</sup>

Ken Ender, then president of Harper College outside Chicago, once used despair to motivate administrators, faculty, and staff attending the president’s opening address to the college community. At the beginning of his presentation, Ender asked all the administrators, faculty, and staff in the audience to stand up. He then listed the primary reasons Harper College students failed to graduate or remain enrolled: they did not register for another term, did not survive their first semester, or did not return after their first year. He asked that if there was agreement with the reason, those standing should sit down. Eventually, fewer than 20 percent of the administrators, faculty, and staff remained standing. At this point, Ender noted that 80 percent of the administrators, faculty, and staff believed that students dropped out for the reasons listed and asked: “Is this okay? Can we do better?”<sup>x</sup>

To establish hope, presidents show that the college can, in fact, do better. They cite data about what the college has achieved. Perhaps a set of pilot programs has doubled graduation rates for Black students, or faculty trained in cultivating a sense of belonging for students have achieved 90 percent course completion rates. They point to the positive results that can accompany better performance.



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Former Miami Dade College president Eduardo Padron regularly and powerfully communicated reasons for hope. He would cite the incredible post-graduation success of MDC students. They advance economically (in relation to the income level of their parents) at a rate higher than any institution in the state and among the highest nationally; 83 percent of associate in arts graduates transfer to a four year university. Padron repeatedly reminded people in the college how many of the city’s leading businesspeople, police officers, teachers, mayors, legislators, and other leaders were educated at MDC—including himself. Against the backdrop of hope, Padron asked everyone in the college to do even more on behalf of students, families, and the entire community.

Effective presidents are persistent in communicating multiple messages of hope and despair—both “we must do better” and “we can do better”—to multiple audiences. Faculty may be moved by the imperative to reverse inequitable outcomes or by the fear of losing their jobs. Trustees may be motivated by the need to fill essential jobs for employers or by enrollment and budget projections. Effective presidents understand what motivates each audience and tailor messages accordingly.

## Developing a Comprehensive Strategy that Matches the Reason for Change

Presidential actions may be more important than their words. Meaningful change requires a comprehensive strategy to improve outcomes that touches every student and every part of the institution. Administrators, faculty, and staff must believe not just that the president is committed to a compelling vision but that they will actually be able to enact a comprehensive strategy over time. Most have witnessed the alternative: a president who talks a good game but is unwilling to do the hard work needed to unify the college and resources behind holistic (and often difficult) change.

Exceptional presidents believe that personally owning the reform strategy is essential to fulfilling their responsibility, so they run strategy development, including strategic planning, out of their office. They understand that collegewide reform cannot happen without their visible and energetic leadership.

In recent years, many leaders have adopted collegewide reform strategies built around the concept of guided pathways reforms. To implement an effective guided pathways approach—in which students are presented with, and guided through, clear credential pathways aligned to further education and good jobs—multiple parts of the institution have to work in concert. Rather than allowing each division to decide how it will contribute, presidents at colleges with effective guided pathways strategies begin by communicating a few key principles, rooted in why students so frequently drop out. Among them:

- Clear program maps that define course sequences and other learning expectations by semester are better than the traditional “cafeteria approach,” in which students choose courses from a catalog based on what sounds best and can most easily be scheduled into their busy lives.
- Connecting students to a program of study as early as possible will make it more likely that they take courses applicable to their ultimate major and will foster a sense of purpose that will help them maintain momentum to a degree.
- Advising will be more effective if tied to a program of study, because it is easier to tell if students are making progress and because it benefits students if their advisors have specialized programmatic knowledge.

Guided pathways work kicked off at Miami Dade College in 2011, when Lenore Rodicio, then executive vice president and provost, gave student affairs and academic deans the following charge: look at a set of data about student progression and completion, find gaps for different student populations, and identify the barriers that most stand in the way of improved outcomes. Rodicio recounts five themes emerging as relevant barriers to every student population:

- Unstructured student pathways at all levels
- Too many academic choices and curricular options
- Inconsistent or misaligned academic support
- Unclear or inconsistent communication of information
- Inadequate technological infrastructure to effectively guide and monitor student progress

“It was a game-changing moment, because we finally had something concrete to wrap our arms around—a clear starting point to develop our blueprint,” recalls Rodicio.

Thus began eight years of redesign efforts at Miami Dade. Clear program maps were built for the largest programs, advising was aligned to a clear vision of what supports students needed, and new technology was systematically implemented to guide students and monitor their success. As a result, graduation rates improved nearly 10 percentage points between 2015 and 2018, with no gap for Latinx and Black students.

Since Miami Dade began its work, hundreds of colleges nationwide have been engaged in guided pathways reform work, supported by the American Association of Community Colleges, the Community College Research Center at Columbia University’s Teachers College, and other organizations. Among the leaders most effective at explaining the reasons for guided pathways is Maria Harper-Marinick, former chancellor of Maricopa Colleges, one of the largest community college systems in the country.

“Colleges were doing a very good job recruiting a diverse population of students but had not done as well providing the structures, support, and motivation for students to remain engaged through the completion of degrees or transfer,” Harper-Marinick explains. Backed by data and her understanding of the student experience, she shared a troubling fact with others at the college: “Students were accumulating credit but were not following an effective or efficient path to do so.” Moreover, she shared information showing that the collection of credits being accumulated often did not lead to employment or bachelor’s degrees. The result of repeatedly sharing this information was systemwide change: clear workforce pathways resulting in more associate degrees and industry certificates, and clearer transfer pathways to universities designed to ensure applicability of credits to bachelor’s degrees.

“I have always considered it a moral responsibility for institutions of higher education to not only provide access to all people but to ensure that systems, policies, and practices help more people attain their goals,” explains

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Harper-Marinick. As she repeatedly explains on her campuses, that does not mean just completion, but also success in the workforce or after transfer. Whether or not a guided pathways approach is the chosen collegewide reform strategy, leaders need to understand that a commonly understood collegewide strategy is essential if reforms are to reach all (or even most) students. Why?

Historically, many community college reforms are pilot projects that affect a limited number of students but never scale up. What good is a pilot that dramatically improves outcomes for 1,000 of a college's 30,000 students if the other 29,000 are never going to benefit from it? Understanding this, exceptional leaders set up processes that result in the development of collegewide reforms, crafted for scale and sustainability.

Even reforms scaled to help all of one type of students may not be enough. For example, some community colleges scaling corequisite developmental education have no strategy to raise standards and expectations in subsequent credit-bearing courses. So, students gain confidence and early momentum in thoughtfully designed introductory courses, but then enter classes where faculty are not trained on acceleration techniques and just-in-time supports are not built in. Similarly, when case-management advising is not accompanied by strong program maps with clear course sequences, it can be hard for advisors to prevent students from completing courses that are not aligned with their degree programs.

As was the case at Miami Dade, effective strategies begin with a clear diagnosis of a problem, and presidents must own that diagnosis and communicate it broadly. Such leadership is essential to unifying institutional silos around common purpose. At Valencia, data showed that students who completed their first five courses—no matter what they were—would graduate at the highest rates, those that completed four graduated at the next highest rates, and so on. Presenting this analysis collegewide, Shugart asked what it would take to ensure that every student completed as many of their first five courses as possible.

The process of answering such a big question should be designed to get everyone to own strategies that are relevant to the problem, can be scaled to all students, and are sustainable over the long term. At Valencia, most faculty

and staff attended large meetings at which leaders were given rapid surveys and engaged in table conversations about how to help more students complete their first five classes. With the majority of the college engaged, the plan that emerged affected everyone. Advisors would help every student develop and regularly revisit personalized program maps to ensure that they had a reason to complete their courses. Because students who registered late were less likely to complete, the registrar would end late registration, so enrollment specialists had to ensure that students registered on time and faculty leaders had to create a limited number of shorter courses for late start. Financial aid officers provided developmental education students cash incentives to take steps correlated with early-course success, such as visiting the tutoring center.

Shugart and his senior team came up with a name for this strategy: Start Right. Those two words were repeated at every opportunity, placed on committee meeting agendas, spoken repeatedly in collegewide meetings, and offered as a theme for training in the teaching and learning center. Just as important was what was *not* communicated. Shugart never asked what the impact of those strategies might be on enrollment or paid much attention to questions about whether certain divisions would get more resources than others; instead, Shugart kept everyone singularly focused on what it would take to change the student experience.

Presidents at two Texas community colleges have in recent years developed compelling collegewide strategies revolving around “love” and “belonging.” The strategy adopted by Amarillo College, in the words of President Russell Lowery-Hart, is “loving our students to success.”

That sounds cheesy, until it is understood as a response to the stark reality students were facing. When he arrived at Amarillo in 2010, Lowery-Hart was “embarrassed by our student outcomes,” including a 22 percent graduation rate.

So, Lowery-Hart put himself in the shoes of students, running focus groups and secret shopper programs, which revealed that students in poverty were not getting their basic needs met such as food, housing, and transportation. He knew that the college would have to change radically to support students.

While Amarillo had been engaged in many of today's popular collegewide reforms, such as data analytics, developmental education reform, and accelerated learning, improvements were too slow. What unlocked the success of all of those strategies was Lowery-Hart's vision of "love." When you love someone, you do everything you can to prevent them from falling.

The college built partnerships with local service agencies—food banks, housing agencies, transportation providers—while budgeting hundreds of thousands of dollars annually to fill in what those partners could not provide. This, Lowery-Hart describes, is what his students need most: "Every employee intuitively knows it, feels it, and can share it," he explains. "If love drives our service to our students and each other, the initiatives we implement will work." Indeed, love works. Amarillo's graduation rates have increased from 27 percent to 45 percent since Lowery-Hart became president in 2014.

Faced with the stark reality of very low graduation rates, Odessa College President Greg Williams recognized a decade ago that students needed to feel a deeper sense of belonging if they were to complete their degrees. Since Odessa is located in the Permian Basin, where high-paying jobs are plentiful when the oil economy is booming and scarce when it is not, education has not always been a necessary prerequisite for good jobs, at least in the short term. On top of that, students' classroom struggles have led them to believe college was not for them. So, Williams shepherded reforms centered around the principle of belonging.

Odessa faculty members are all trained to implement four commitments to every student:

- When you speak to students, call them by their name from the very first day.
- When you see students having trouble, intercede immediately and see if you can help.
- Spend a moment, or ten, with each student individually. Say hello, goodbye, how are things, how's the family?
- Set high standards, but when life happens to students, treat them as you would wish to be treated.

Efforts to impart a sense of belonging extend also to Odessa faculty and staff, who are given an opportunity to meet with the president twice a month to discuss anything on their minds and to celebrate student success. Employees are even rewarded with small bonuses for showing up to school plays, sporting events, transfer fairs, and other events, signaling that everyone should be connecting with students beyond the classroom. The results are clear: Course completion rates at Odessa have risen to 95 percent; degree completion increased from 7 to 51 percent over nine years; and graduation gaps for Black and Latinx students have been reduced to 1 percent.

The most compelling strategies often relate to not just what students experience in college but to what happens next. This is especially true in rural communities, where college attainment rates are typically low and good jobs can be hard to find. Such was the case in the rural service area around western Washington State's Walla Walla Community College. Seeing the number of food processing and timber jobs rapidly declining in the wake of NAFTA, then-president Steven VanAusdle realized that his vision for the college had to shift from educating students for existing jobs to "helping reinvent the economy." Over a decade, the college tripled the size of its nursing program, added wind energy and water management programs, and built a new viticulture and enology center. This meant that other programs had to close or shrink.

Unemployed residents "wanted to stay in the region and needed a job that paid a family sustaining wage," explains VanAusdle. Using economic data, he made a compelling case within the college and externally that change was needed, raising funds from the legislature and private donors while reallocating substantial college resources. Resistance came from within the college (including a faculty vote of no confidence) and from outside (opposition from legislators who did not think college students should be producing alcohol). In the end, VanAusdle's persistent leadership won over his critics. More importantly, it benefited students, who graduate into good jobs with strong wages.

Students at rural-serving Lake Area Technical College in South Dakota also benefited when President Deb Shepherd, along with her successor

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“We help them decide on a career and then assist them in selecting a path leading to that career. That’s tangible to them—a career is tangible; a degree is not.”

—Mike Cartney, president,  
Lake Area Technical College

Mike Cartney (then a vice president at the college), led a process that reframed the college’s strategy. Lake Area Tech had long framed its key goal as degree completion. And in fact, the college was very good at this. Its 67 percent three-year graduation rate was one of the highest in the nation. But Shepherd and Cartney came to realize that this definition was not especially motivating to low-income students, who were graduating at rates 8 percentage points below others.

After talking with high school students, Shepherd and Cartney saw that the concept of degree completion is abstract. Rather, as Cartney said, “high school students see inherent value in a career, the value of a good job with benefits. So, we made the conversation about something they want, something they can obtain, something they value and find relevant.”

In 2015, Lake Area Tech’s leaders redefined its primary goal to placement of students in good jobs and made sure that faculty, staff, and industry partners understood and adopted the new framing. “It changed the whole conversation, from recruitment through graduation,” explains Cartney. “We talk about what they want to be and what they want to experience. We help them decide on a career and then assist them in selecting a path leading to that career. That’s tangible to them—a career is tangible; a degree is not.”

At Lake Area Technical College, the vision changed, the focus changed, and so did one other thing: The graduation gap for low-income students closed completely.



## Establishing a Cabinet to Lead Collegewide Reform

Implementing a comprehensive strategy requires that busy presidents have the full engagement and commitment of a highly effective cabinet, capable of communicating the need for change and following through to execute reforms. Perhaps the most important thing presidents do is ensure that the cabinet is composed of the right people and has the structures and incentives in place for them—and by extension their divisions—to collaborate and execute effectively to achieve well-defined student success goals.

### *The right capacities*

Exceptional cabinets are comprised of the right individuals—which means something different for today’s student-success-oriented colleges than it did even a decade ago. Traditional expectations of cabinet members are often misaligned to what is needed to achieve scaled and sustainable reforms. For this reason, excellent presidents at excellent colleges ensure that each cabinet member possesses a few important characteristics.

First, every cabinet member must believe that every student can in fact succeed. Certainly, the vast majority of administrators at community colleges care about students. But at excellent colleges, that has a specific meaning. Leaders consistently strive to understand the student experience and align their efforts—along with the college’s resources and services—to what students most need.

Provosts value high-quality instruction rooted in effective teaching practice as much as they value technical expertise. Vice presidents for student services view themselves not primarily as administrators ensuring the smooth functioning of financial aid, advising, and the like, but as catalyzers of student success, ensuring that all of those services first and foremost advance opportunity for students with varying and often intensive needs. There is nothing more damaging to a cabinet’s capacity to lead change than the pervasive belief among its members (or even just one member) that the

college's job is simply to keep the doors open by maintaining enrollment and balancing the budget.

Second, the most effective cabinet members are strategic and innovative. They are curious about what changes could better ensure that every student receives what is needed to be successful. This means looking for examples of excellence within and outside the academy. It means thinking in ways that challenge the status quo—asking why things are done the way they are rather than accepting them because they have always been done that way. But curiosity is not enough. It must be coupled with the capacity to be bold enough to develop aggressive strategies and smart enough to understand what is likely to overcome the status quo.

Third, highly effective cabinets are results-oriented. As in other industries, this means the capacity to set SMART goals for their work—ones that are specific, measurable, achievable, relevant, and time bound—and develop the systems that ensure that those goals are being achieved. But unlike other industries, colleges are very reluctant to stop doing anything. So, cabinet members at the best community colleges establish a culture where ineffective approaches and programs are discontinued. This means always asking the same questions—how and when precisely will we know if this works?—and then ensuring that action is taken when things do not work and that what does work is funded.

Finally, cabinet members should all be good communicators. In highly effective cabinets, everyone is committed to and capable of communicating within their divisions the why and what of collegewide reform. How they do so is far from routinized. Leaders tailor their communications to the culture of the units they lead, with provosts and vice presidents understanding what motivates faculty, and leaders responsible for operations understanding how best to communicate with staff working in facilities and finances, and so on. They are good listeners, making corrections based on what they hear, so everyone's voice contributes to the college direction. And they understand that their actions speak loudest—that people will assess their dedication to student success based on what they say, how they spend their time, where they allocate resources, and how they choose to spend their political capital.

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“We had to have goals and benchmarks of where we were. Without that, nothing gets scaled.”

—Edwin Massey, former president, Indian River State College

### *Shared vision, collaboration, and productivity*

Highly effective presidents set the conditions for their cabinet members to always focus on continuous improvement and collaborate across the college to achieve student success goals. The first condition is that cabinet members must share the president’s vision and strategy for change. Even the most competent vice president can detract from reform efforts if the vice president does not believe that change is needed to achieve the college’s mission or the vice president is reluctant to contribute to that change. Presidents must repeat the same strategic priorities to their cabinets whenever possible, in meetings with both the whole cabinet and individual members.

For Edwin Massey, who retired as president of Indian River State College in Florida in 2020, these communication strategies have been undergirded by consistent data review. Flip charts of data line the “war room,” where cabinet members regularly examine consistent metrics over time and connect them to the discussion of their work. “We had to have goals and benchmarks of where we were,” explains Massey. “Without that, nothing gets scaled.”

With common goals and benchmarks, Indian River’s cabinet was able to squelch what Massey describes as “renegade data systems,” developed within each division to serve their own goals, regardless of whether they connected to the college’s student success mission. In turn, the collegewide goals enabled the cabinet to begin assessing what interventions had the greatest impact, and better align resources to mission.

Indian River, like other exceptional colleges, prioritizes collaboration across divisions. College departments and disciplines at other institutions typically operate fairly autonomously, with leaders and faculty in each division deciding what courses are offered, when they are scheduled, who is hired to teach, and how professional development dollars are allocated. At these colleges, cabinet members traditionally make division-level decisions that are largely siloed from the decisions made by their counterparts in other divisions. In addition, individual cabinet members have their own discrete goals and are assessed independently on how well they are achieving these goals.

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“I encourage a difference of opinion; but when we leave the room with a direction, everyone needs to pull together.”

—Eduardo Padrón,  
former president,  
Miami Dade College

But collegewide student success strategies cross multiple domains and require a different, highly collaborative approach. At Indian River, the annual evaluation of each cabinet member is based not just on the president’s assessment, but on those of every other cabinet member. Some leading presidents put identical collegewide student outcome aims into every cabinet member’s annual goals, reinforcing the need for all leaders to row in the same direction and setting the stage for leaders to work together to attain mutual goals.

Highly effective presidents reinforce the value of collaboration in their one-on-one interactions with cabinet members. At weekly or biweekly meetings, these presidents ask questions of and coach cabinet members on matters that connect to collegewide goals. They make clear to every cabinet member that their job is to be critically engaged in addressing student outcome challenges. “I tell people, ‘I do not want a ‘yes person’ next to me,’” explains Miami Dade’s Padron. “I encourage a difference of opinion; but when we leave the room with a direction, everyone needs to pull together.”

### *Using finance as a student success strategy*

Even the most compelling vision, comprehensive strategy, and well-developed cabinet cannot succeed without the necessary financial resources aligned to what matters most. For several reasons, the fiscal strategy must be owned, first and foremost, by the college president.

Finance is not just a way to fund a college’s operations, but rather a way to align its culture with student success. Highly effective presidents spend funds in ways that signal that student outcomes matter more than other priorities.

Unfortunately, many presidents cede control of their finances to the chief financial officer. Traditional CFOs—often with the board’s support—take a conservative, compliance-oriented approach and prioritize many other things over student success. Some of these priorities are fundamental, especially in the face of declining state funding and enrollments: a balanced budget, fiscal controls, and adequate reserves in case of crisis. Others are questionable, such as the prioritization of enrollment, the key source of revenue, above all.

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With resources out in the open, presidents can shift their thinking from a tactical, fixed-asset approach to a strategic, mission-based approach.

To ensure that resources flow to student success, presidents must own the budget in partnership with their CFOs (and their boards). And they need CFOs who view themselves first and foremost as agents of student success. The first step presidents often take to assert control over financial resources is insisting on transparency. When Sandy Shugart became president of Valencia, he made it clear to his CFO that he wanted access to every detail of the budget and needed to be kept aware of all of the college's resources. Once he had that access, he asked the CFO to make that information available to everyone on campus—a far cry from colleges where CFOs hide budget details to maintain flexibility or disguise priorities. This transparency about where money was allocated placed Shugart's student success priorities in full view.

With resources out in the open, presidents can shift their thinking from a tactical, fixed-asset approach (How much money do I have this year and how can it be distributed?) to a strategic, mission-based approach. All financial decisions flow from the answers to these questions: What are our college's strategic student success goals? Where can we find the resources to achieve them, both within the institution and through regional partnerships? How can we use resources, and the process by which we allocate them, to communicate what matters most?

When Brenda Hellyer became president of San Jacinto College in the Houston metropolitan area, the budget rolled over from year to year, with little change and lots of complacency. She often could not get an answer to her questions about how expenditures were helping students. Whenever budgets were submitted, she and her CFO began routinely asking how, exactly, each request would advance student success. Soon, she realized she would have to reallocate resources to hire the 30 new faculty members needed to revamp developmental education. That “got everyone's attention and clearly demonstrated our priority to students,” explains Hellyer.

Over time, budget requests grew increasingly aligned to mission, and the college freed up resources to fund other centralized priorities such as assigning and training permanent department chairs, creating a staff and faculty performance funding model, and enhancing student support services.

“I am not going to say it isn’t a painful process at times,” explains Hellyer, “but we are transparent and clear on what is driving our decisions, which is a focus on student success.” The results clearly are not painful for students since graduation rates have increased from 31 percent to 47 percent over the past four years.

To redirect culture through strategic finance, a leader needs to combat the deep-seated habit of valuing enrollment above all, even where there is a short-term zero-sum game between enrollment and student success.<sup>xi</sup> (Improvements in developmental education are an example. Colleges should do all they can to support reforms that cut the time students spend in remedial classes, even if this reduces course enrollment in the short term.) Not only are state funding and tuition revenue linked to tuition, but also the allocation of resources within a community college. Money flows to disciplines and programs based on how many students enroll in courses and programs of study. Excellent presidents communicate that student learning and completion matter as much as or more than getting students in the door.

Such was Sandy Shugart’s goal early in his tenure, when, for example, Valencia ended late course registration even if it meant that some students might not enroll. But mid-level leaders, concerned about enrollment, resisted Shugart’s entreaties to seriously consider ending the practice of adding course sections at the last minute based on student demand—which often resulted in unprepared faculty and unsuccessful students. So Shugart forbade his institutional research leaders from distributing the regular enrollment reports everyone had relied on to indicate whether they had been successful. Shugart explains that everyone had to believe that “we, the institution’s leaders, were willing to put enrollment at risk in order to improve learning.”

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Presidents of advanced colleges define qualities crucial for all employees—a customer service orientation, a belief in all students’ potential—that are named in job descriptions and assessed in interviews.

## Putting Student Success at the Center of Human Capital Strategies

Presidents of excellent colleges understand the vital importance of committed and effective faculty, staff, and administrators. Accordingly, they develop human capital systems that align hiring, professional development, and—to the extent possible—compensation and promotion with the goals of student success and equity.

Traditionally, presidents leave hiring to college divisions. Faculty members are hired within their disciplines, with division deans and hiring committees responsible for selecting faculty with appropriate content knowledge. Some colleges have adopted standard practices such as requiring teaching demonstrations before hiring, but few have tied hiring practices more closely to a clear institution-wide strategy for student success. In nonacademic units as well, department leaders decide independently what skill sets, preparation, and attitudes they seek.

Professional development is often similarly decentralized. Most colleges require certain onboarding procedures for all faculty and staff, aimed at introducing everyone to the systems, technology, and rules needed to navigate the college. Many institutions include an ongoing orientation or mentorship throughout an employee’s first semester or year as well as continuing professional development opportunities. Typically, these offerings include optional courses in technology, leadership, and working styles as well as other interdisciplinary subject matter. Most professional development budgets are meted out within departments that use the money to send faculty members to conferences in their disciplines and administrators and staff to association meetings. Funds are awarded on a first-come, first-served basis. As a result, each division has its own micro-culture, which may or may not be aligned to the strategic priorities set under a president’s leadership.

Presidents of advanced colleges centralize substantial components of hiring and professional development. They define qualities crucial for all employees—a customer service orientation, a belief in all students’

potential—that are named in job descriptions and assessed in interviews. Faculty are onboarded and trained at a teaching and learning center in ways carefully created to advance practice in alignment to the college’s perspective on excellent teaching—improving critical thinking abilities, perhaps, and instilling belonging in the classroom. Department chairs and deans are given responsibilities and development opportunities aligned to a specific vision of teaching and learning.

Such is the case at San Jacinto, where President Hellyer and her cabinet converted department chairs to full-time positions so they could all be trained on the same critical component of student success: coaching faculty to analyze student data and adopt teaching practices that improve outcomes.

The most important human capital systems developed at excellent colleges are those related to faculty. Because teaching and learning is the fundamental function of community colleges, presidents at excellent institutions strategically pursue a collegewide culture that elevates teaching practice. They understand that this requires a shared understanding of excellent instruction, can only be developed through focused professional learning, and needs to be supported by systems aimed at hiring for and incentivizing effective instruction. To accomplish this goal, presidents often do three specific things:

- *Identify the great teachers.* At colleges that value and recognize excellent teaching and learning practices, exceptional faculty members drive the agenda. To ensure that is the case, effective presidents work with the provost, vice presidents, deans, department chairs, and faculty to identify excellent teachers. They work to understand who the strong practitioners are, those who have worked diligently to advance their own teaching practice and who value working collectively. Sometimes the best teachers prefer to be left alone, undistracted by committee participation or processes that feel unrelated to teaching practice. By identifying and elevating the work of great teachers, the president can set the stage for teaching reform.
- *Elevate exceptional faculty into leadership positions.* Having identified potential faculty leaders, presidents need to bring them to the center



of the college's reform efforts. Valencia's Shugart did this by having faculty define the six qualities of excellent instructors, a list that would eventually shape a revamped tenure system, hiring processes, the offerings at its teaching and learning center, and post-tenure review.<sup>xiii</sup>

At West Kentucky Community and Technical College, where reading comprehension had been identified as a common challenge across the institution, former president Barbara Veazey charged exceptional faculty with crafting a plan through the college's accreditation process for improving reading instruction. When the system they piloted showed that training faculty on reading strategies yielded large gains in student reading comprehension, Veazey invested the money to ensure that every faculty member received that training. In these and other cases, presidents issued a charge to a workgroup of excellent faculty who clearly prioritized college-wide improvements in teaching and learning. In doing so, they also signaled the strong likelihood of presidential support—including funding—for whatever faculty recommended.

Institutionalize reforms. Highly effective presidents consider how to build systems that incentivize continuous improvement among faculty. An obvious and important place to start is with a well-resourced teaching and learning center. Another is compensation. Leaders at Pierce College in Washington negotiated a faculty contract that ties pay increases to participation in in-house professional development on effective teaching and to conducting action research projects designed to test out innovative instructional approaches. President Williams at Odessa College in Texas centralized professional development dollars to support faculty training designed to improve students' sense of belonging.

Presidents do not decide how courses are taught or what curricular changes will be made. But their leadership and their unique responsibilities—to communicate collegewide what should be celebrated and what needs to change, to ensure that resources are aligned to mission, to make sure that the cabinet is unified behind strategy—make them indispensable to ensuring that the human capital strategy undergirds a collegewide approach to

strong teaching practice. In the end, if the president elevates teaching and learning through human capital strategy, faculty will be on board with reform. Then, the reason that so many work in community colleges—a genuine caring for student learning and credential completion—can be activated and connected to sustained efforts to ensure that every student succeeds.

## Engaging the Board in Reform

Scaled, collegewide student success takes time. What leaders have found at the Aspen Institute is that while colleges can improve outcomes significantly over three to five years, it can take a decade or more of dedicated effort for colleges to become truly exceptional.

Much has been written in recent years about presidents fired soon in their tenure because boards behaved badly. And there is no doubt that the politicization of higher education increases the chances that the tenure of presidents—and the student success reforms they are leading—will be short-lived. But that need not be the case.

Boards of trustees can be essential partners in the reform process, in several important ways. Effective boards set and monitor student success goals, and they decide on key policies and approve budgets, both of which may need to substantially change if a college is to prioritize student success as heavily as enrollment. Important reform is likely to draw complaints from some corners. For momentum to be sustained, trustees must understand and commit to a president's vision.

Such was the case in the Alamo Colleges District in Texas, where former chancellor Bruce Leslie received a vote of no confidence after pursuing aggressive reforms in his first few years, including consolidating all five colleges into a single unit and changing the way developmental education math was delivered. Whereas many boards would have asked the chancellor to scale things back—or worse—the Alamo Colleges had already adopted policies supporting the changes Leslie was implementing, so the board took the opposite approach. They responded to the vote of no confidence by quickly extending his contract for three years, with a pay increase.

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Highly effective boards aim to hire presidents who can continue student success reforms rather than starting from scratch after each leadership transition.

“The message we sent,” explains Roberto Zárate, former Alamo board chair, “is that we are not going to bend, that the student success policies we adopted were going to be implemented, and that Bruce was going to be the captain of the ship.”

The most important thing boards do is hire the president. The average tenure of a community college president is about four years—far less than the amount of time it has taken for Aspen Prize winners to fully develop their excellence. Highly effective boards aim to hire presidents who can continue student success reforms rather than starting from scratch after each leadership transition. That means spending time considering precisely what leadership characteristics the college needs and communicating them clearly to the search committee and search consultant. With clear direction from the board, those actors are much more likely to focus on candidates who do not just appear presidential but have the dedication to student success, the capacity to devise strategy, and the skills to lead internal change that will advance student success outcomes.

It may be counterintuitive, but from their first year in office, presidents need to ensure that their boards are prepared for presidential transitions. If reforms are to transcend the tenure of a single president, trustees have to understand the college’s goals, current capacity to meet them, and what is needed in the next leader to sustain forward motion. Unfortunately, few board members fully understand the president’s role, which can result in a quick exit for a new president who upsets a key constituency without the board understanding why. So new presidents should build a transition plan in collaboration with their board chair and quickly establish regular touchpoints with the chair and entire board to explain how things are going both internally and externally.

Likewise, the board should align the president’s annual evaluation with the college’s student success goals. Each year, the Alamo board develops a set of goals with the president, almost all of them aimed at student success: reducing the amount of time students are in developmental education, increasing the number of students who transfer to four-year universities, developing clear program pathways for every student. These goals “drove everything,

including the president's evaluation," explains Zárte. With such an orientation, boards can ensure the leadership needed to achieve high and improving levels of student success.

## Conclusion: Building a Movement to Develop Transformational Leaders

This chapter has shown that leading a community college to strong student outcomes requires a broad range of skills—not all of which today's leaders possess. In 2015, Aspen convened a group of 12 national community college leaders and asked them to assess the preparation and capacity of their peers. These leaders estimated that not even 15 percent of community college presidents are capable of the transformational change that students and communities need.

At Aspen, it is known that excellent presidential leadership can be taught. The Aspen Institute has been doing it for four years through fellowship programs for aspiring presidents, many of whom are now leading rapid improvements in student outcomes.<sup>xiii</sup> Fortunately, the Aspen Institute is not alone; a renewed energy has emerged in recent years to develop the leadership needed to advance student success. Each of the actors below could learn from these early efforts to improve leadership development.

- *State associations and systems.* Some of the best leadership development work in the country is being provided at the state level. The Texas Association of Community Colleges, for example, has been training trustees for over a decade on how they can contribute best to student success strategies. The Ohio system provides programs for cabinet members and deans on student success leadership. Similar efforts are emerging in California and Washington, and other state systems are taking notice. Utilizing the state apparatus to train leaders may be the most promising strategy in the decades ahead. Presidents and other senior leaders already convene regularly within states to discuss policy changes and funding opportunities, including legislative requests. More states would do well to invest in training trustees, presidents, and cabinet members, with a focus on student success.

- *Universities.* In the 1970s, the W.K. Kellogg Foundation provided funding to multiple universities to develop community college leadership programs. Widely considered the most successful, The University of Texas, Austin delivered doctorates to hundreds of individuals who became leading community college presidents. While many of these programs have been curtailed or closed over time, there has been a resurgence of interest in preparing presidents in recent years. North Carolina State University has doubled the size of its doctoral programs since 2015 and centered the curriculum on student success goals.<sup>xiv</sup> Every doctoral student is required to address student outcomes in his or her dissertation, and the curriculum has been redesigned to include practice-based education on improving student outcomes. With an \$11 million investment from the John M. Belk Endowment, NC State is also devising training for sitting presidents as well as boards of trustees. Other universities should take note of both the student-success orientation of NC State's programming and the philanthropic dollars it has attracted.
- *Nonprofit organizations.* National nonprofits have accelerated leadership development efforts in recent years. Achieving the Dream has for over a decade included presidential coaching in its services to a network that now exceeds 200 community colleges. And the American Association of Community Colleges (AACC) and the League for Innovation have offered presidential training for many years. More recently, AACC has been running guided pathways institutes for scores of colleges, each of which engages presidents, cabinet members, and trustees in multiple sessions to implement strategies for institution-wide reform. As these entities expand their efforts, other national associations and nonprofits—including the American Association for Community College Trustees—should consider providing leadership development centered on student success.
- *Aspen Institute College Excellence Program.* Aspen has been working for five years to advance community college leadership development. The effort began with a 2015 research report, *Crisis and Opportunity: Aligning the Community College Presidency with Student Success*, developed with Achieving the Dream, that enumerates the qualities of highly

effective community college presidents. Since then, Aspen has developed an open-access leadership curriculum, which is used in leadership programs run by state associations and universities as well as in Aspen's own leadership development programs for sitting and aspiring presidents. Aspen has also published research-based tools for hiring highly effective presidents, which have been used in multiple searches and are openly available to trustees, search firms, and others engaged in hiring presidents.<sup>xv</sup>

While promising, these efforts are not enough. Leadership development does not appear as a line item in federal higher education budgets. Most states and state higher education systems lack a comprehensive leadership development strategy. Nonprofit organizations are much more focused on replicating promising student success interventions than on developing great leaders. With a few notable exceptions, universities have either failed to develop or scaled back their community college leadership programs. Many leadership programs that do exist fail to prioritize student success above all else. In addition, most search firms continue to support the hiring of presidents and cabinet members using traditional methods, often misaligned with student success goals.

If community college student outcomes are to improve more rapidly—as they must—each of these actors will need to ramp up efforts to develop presidents, senior teams, and trustees. More importantly, presidents, senior teams, and boards themselves must invest time to develop skills needed for transformational leadership. Developing, communicating, and executing collegewide reform strategies is hard work, and the tools needed to succeed are increasingly well-understood. Teaching those tools to willing institutional leaders can unleash scaled improvements in student success and enable community colleges to better fulfill their vital national mission of activating talent and advancing economic mobility.

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## Endnotes

- <sup>i</sup> In addition to the Aspen Prize, the Aspen Institute College Excellence Program's ongoing community college projects include the Aspen Presidential Fellowship, partnerships with several states to develop presidents and boards of trustees, multiyear support for 12 community colleges as part of the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation's Frontier Set, and research projects and assessment tools, such as the Transfer Playbook and Workforce Playbook. This chapter draws upon leadership lessons and examples from each of these projects.
- <sup>ii</sup> To assess excellence for the Prize, Aspen collects quantitative data from institutions, the National Student Clearinghouse, and state unemployment insurance records; and qualitative information from written applications, phone interviews with leadership teams, and interviews with students, faculty, advisors, deans and division leaders, cabinets, presidents, and trustees over two-day site visits.
- <sup>iii</sup> For this chapter, graduation rates are drawn from federal data, and refer to a combined metric: three-year graduation plus transfer rates.
- <sup>iv</sup> Unless otherwise noted, quotations attributed to college leaders in this chapter—including current and former presidents, other senior administrators, and board members—are from interviews with the author conducted by phone, email, or in person in January and February 2020.
- <sup>v</sup> For students who enter community college, the chance of graduating hovers around 30 percent, the chance of transferring and getting a bachelor's degree is around 14 percent, and wages for over half of students who complete only an associate degree are too low to support a family. Davis Jenkins and John Fink, *Tracking Transfer: New Measures of Institutional and State Effectiveness in Helping Community College Students Attain Bachelor's Degrees*, Community College Research Center, Teachers College, Columbia University and the Aspen Institute College Excellence Program (January 2016) and Tony Carnevale, *Good Jobs that Pay Without a BA*, Center on Education and the Workforce, Georgetown University (July 2017). And, as many have found, outcome gaps between white students without financial need and their Black, Latinx, and lower-income counterparts is stark.
- <sup>vi</sup> For inadequate funding for community colleges, see *Bridging the Higher Education Divide: Strengthening Community Colleges and Restoring the American Dream*, The Century Foundation (May 2013). On enrollment declines, see Paul Fain, "College Enrollment Declines Continue," *Inside Higher Education* (May 30, 2019).
- <sup>vii</sup> While advising may be more intensive today, in 2012, "Academic counselors at community colleges typically handle 1,000 students each, according to MDRC, a nonprofit research organization. In some cash-strapped California community colleges, the ratio is as high as one to 1,700." Jon Marcus, "Advising Plays Key Role in Student Success—Just as it is Being Cut," *Hechinger Report* (November 13, 2012).
- <sup>viii</sup> Remarks at the Aspen Presidential Fellowship for Community College Excellence, Stanford University, July 28, 2016.
- <sup>ix</sup> Remarks at the Aspen Presidential Fellowship for Community College Excellence, Stanford University, July 25, 2019.
- <sup>x</sup> Remarks at the Aspen Presidential Fellowship for Community College Excellence, Stanford University, July 23, 2018.
- <sup>xi</sup> For a compelling discussion of why changing college culture is important and difficult, see Sanford C. Shugart, "The Challenge to Deep Change: A Brief Cultural History of Higher Education," *Planning for Higher Education* 41, no. 2 (January-March 2013).
- <sup>xii</sup> For a list of the Valencia faculty competencies, see Aspen Institute College Excellence Program, *Building a Faculty Culture of Student Success* (2014) 13.
- <sup>xiii</sup> The Aspen Presidential Fellowship for Community College Excellence first began training aspiring presidents in 2016, through the Aspen Rising Presidents Fellowship; nearly 160 leaders have gone through the program, and 41 are presidents, of colleges that collectively serve more than 500,000 students. The Aspen New Presidents Fellowship, launched in 2020, serves community college leaders in their first five years as president.
- <sup>xiv</sup> The Aspen Institute College Excellence Program has been a partner in updating NC State's community college leadership curriculum.
- <sup>xv</sup> Aspen Institute College Excellence Program, *Hiring Community College Presidents: Tools for Hiring Leaders who Advance Student Access and Success* (2014).