

**STRUCTURAL EQUITY:**  
BIG-PICTURE THINKING &  
PARTNERSHIPS THAT IMPROVE  
COMMUNITY COLLEGE STUDENT  
OUTCOMES



THE ASPEN INSTITUTE  

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COLLEGE EXCELLENCE PROGRAM

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## **THE ASPEN INSTITUTE'S COLLEGE EXCELLENCE PROGRAM**

The Aspen Institute's College Excellence Program aims to advance higher education practices, policies, and leadership that significantly improve student outcomes in four areas:

- **COMPLETION.** Do students earn degrees and other meaningful credentials while in college?
  - **EQUITY.** Do colleges work to ensure equitable outcomes for minority and low-income students, and others often underserved?
  - **LABOR MARKET.** Do graduates get well-paying jobs?
  - **LEARNING.** Do colleges and their faculty set expectations for what students should learn, measure whether they are doing so, and use that information to improve?
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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Community colleges play a vital role in creating a more equitable society through educational opportunity. The most effective community colleges—those that not only enroll but graduate large numbers of students from underserved communities—have worked hard to fundamentally reform internal structures and operations so that the education and supports students receive are aligned with student success goals. Much of the national dialogue and efforts to improve community college performance have focused on critical elements of internal change.

What has recently received less attention is the work excellent community colleges have done to actively position themselves as part of a broader ecosystem of institutions acting in concert to transform students' lives. By thinking big-picture about the needs of their communities and regions and then building partnerships that create seamless pathways from high school to community college and on to a four-year degree and a career, community colleges have the potential to disrupt the structural inequities that constrain educational attainment and economic opportunity in the U.S.—and instead, build *structural equity* through pipelines that lead to greater success among underrepresented students. This report illustrates strategies for doing so.

Among the finalists for and winners of the Aspen Prize for Community College Excellence, we find examples of colleges that have played a central role in building structural equity in their communities. These colleges have taken seriously an imperative to achieve not only high levels of student success but also equity in student outcomes. They have done so through three main strategies and a series of deliberate and sustained practices that we describe in this report:

## **Strategy 1. Think Big Picture to Redefine Student Success and Set Equity Goals**

*Essential practices:*

- ✓ Understand who your students are in their local and regional contexts
- ✓ Rely on data to set big-picture equity goals and define strategies that extend beyond the college
- ✓ Define specific measures against which to benchmark progress

## **Strategy 2. Work Externally to Change the Student Experience**

*Essential practices:*

- ✓ Identify external partners vital to creating a seamless student experience
- ✓ Devise strategies that speak to the needs and goals of both partners
- ✓ Establish common metrics of progress and success
- ✓ Create structures for frequent and meaningful communication between partners about curriculum alignment and skills expectations
- ✓ Establish conditions in which all partners are accountable for success

## **Strategy 3. Work Internally to Build Urgency and Commitment to Equity Goals**

*Essential practices:*

- ✓ Build urgency and leadership commitment throughout partnering institutions
- ✓ Create systems for regularly analyzing and discussing data
- ✓ Celebrate wins and build success on success
- ✓ Evaluate effectiveness and revise goals and strategies

# THE EQUITY IMPERATIVE IN COMMUNITY COLLEGES

There are deep inequities that impact access to higher education in the U.S., leading to wide disparities in the social and economic opportunity conferred by a college degree. In many communities throughout the country, limited access to education, healthcare, and other social and cultural resources begins from a young age to shape children's futures. And disparity begets disparity throughout their lives. As reflected in the notion of *structural inequity*, the possibility of achieving a college degree is circumscribed by lack of opportunity long before many students could even consider enrolling in college.

Fortunately, the U.S. (unlike many countries) has educational institutions designed to give individuals who've experienced a lifetime of unequal opportunity an on-ramp to a postsecondary education—

higher education for millions of students, young and old, who were never given the clear path to college that exists for the more privileged in our society. This is evident based on the composition of students these colleges enroll: Among all undergraduates nationwide, two-thirds of American Indian students and more than half of all African Americans and Latinos enroll in community college,<sup>1</sup> and around 4 in 10 community college students are Pell Grant recipients.<sup>2</sup>

More has to be done to realize the potential community colleges have for ameliorating the effects of structural inequity, however. Though the growth of the sector has dramatically increased access to college, the rates at which students complete or transfer have been too low and too slow to improve. Equity in access has not yet been matched with equity in outcomes.

Over the last decade, a significant wave of reform in the community college sector has focused on improving rates of student success. Many colleges have made efforts to improve remedial education, strengthen advising, and enhance the use of data in decision-making. Many are now creating structured curricular pathways, which—coupled with targeted student advising and supports—hold great promise for institution-wide improvements in student outcomes. These strategies are critical for ensuring that community colleges match the promise of open access with strong completion outcomes.

But even when implemented effectively and at scale, these strategies alone may not have a broad enough reach to impact persistent disparities between racial and socioeconomic groups in college access and post-graduation success. That's why some exceptional community colleges—those that have achieved high and improving levels of student success—also engage in deliberate, sustained efforts beyond the college to achieve those goals. By creating

deep links to the other sectors that interact with students before and after they arrive on campus, the most effective community colleges are fundamentally changing the way students experience higher education.

This report focuses on strategies for strengthening community colleges' role in advancing equity in student success—that is, in expanding educational and career opportunities and success for the huge numbers of students from populations traditionally underrepresented in higher education. Making a commitment to work beyond the campus to improve student outcomes is challenging. It requires sustained, authentic partnerships with K-12 institutions to help align expectations and build college aspirations; robust connections with local industries to ensure students will have the skills and knowledge needed for in-demand careers; and close partnerships with four-year universities to ensure that students can transfer without losing time or credits.

The most effective community colleges understand themselves as just one step in a larger educational trajectory for students. They enact that philosophy by creating connections to other sectors in order make that trajectory seamless. While the approaches featured in this report vary based on student needs and local contexts, they are all cemented in the notion that pathways from high school through higher education and into the workforce require robust, cross-sector partnerships that contribute to more equitable postsecondary education outcomes. To be sure, internal reform strategies like those mentioned above are critical for advancing student outcomes. But external partnerships are equally vital as cornerstones of *structural equity*—policies and practices that eliminate chances for students to fall through the cracks before they arrive and after they graduate.



El Paso Community College

1 American Association of Community Colleges, "2016 Fact Sheet," <http://www.aacc.nche.edu/AboutCC/Documents/AACCFactSheetsR2.pdf>.

2 Association of Community College Trustees, "Pell Grants," <http://www.acct.org/pell-grants> (accessed April 29, 2016).

# STRUCTURAL EQUITY IN PRACTICE

Here, we tell the stories of four colleges that have been finalists for or winners of the Aspen Prize for Community College Excellence. These are colleges that have achieved high and continually improving levels of student success while focusing intentionally on improving equity in student outcomes. They are reversing the trends of educational and economic disparity in their communities through big-picture thinking about student success and strategic partnership across sectors. In essence, they are building *structural equity* in their communities and regions by creating seamless pathways that lead directly into community college and on to a four-year degree and/or a career.

## SANTA BARBARA CITY COLLEGE

By *partnering deeply with local school districts* to build college aspirations and improve curricular alignment between high school and college, SBCC has helped ensure that far more students—especially among the region’s growing population of first-generation Latino students—not only go to college but start college academically prepared to succeed.

Like many community colleges across the country, California’s community colleges have been under pressure to increase student success, including transfer and degree attainment rates. In 2015, less than half of California community college students graduated within six years of entry.<sup>3</sup> And, like many community colleges across the county, those in California enroll many students who are unprepared for college-level work. Between 70 and 90 percent of incoming freshmen entering California’s community colleges are placed in pre-college level English and/or math.<sup>4</sup> Getting more students to the finish line who start out so far behind when they enroll is a daunting task.

Rather than only investing resources in remediating students once they arrive on

campus, Santa Barbara City College (SBCC) has taken a different approach: working with prospective students far before they even enroll in college—and, hopefully, before they fall behind academically. That meant going all the way back to ninth grade.

“It started with: What can we do to increase the academic preparation of high school students coming into community colleges or going to universities?” said Jack Friedlander, executive vice president at SBCC, a 2013 winner of the Aspen Prize for Community College Excellence. “We thought that by students being motivated and having a clear goal—to understand why they’re taking that math and why they need to take English and the other [general education courses]—they’d be more successful and more serious in their



Santa Barbara City College

3 California Community Colleges, “2016 Statewide Student Success Scorecard,” [http://scorecard.cccco.edu/reports/OneYear/000\\_OneYear.pdf](http://scorecard.cccco.edu/reports/OneYear/000_OneYear.pdf).

4 California Community Colleges, *Basic Skills Completion: The Key to Student Success in California Community Colleges*, [http://extranet.cccco.edu/Portals/1/AA/BasicSkills/2013Files/BSI\\_E-Resource\\_10-18-13.pdf](http://extranet.cccco.edu/Portals/1/AA/BasicSkills/2013Files/BSI_E-Resource_10-18-13.pdf).



SB  
CC  
ORIENTATION

Student Ambassador  
International Student Support Program

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studies.” From this big-picture thinking, the Get Focused, Stay Focused program was born.

The Get Focused, Stay Focused program is a partnership between SBCC and two nearby school districts—Goleta and Santa Barbara. It’s anchored in a college-credit course that SBCC provides to all ninth-graders (free of charge), which helps students think about long-term career aspirations and the academic preparation needed to reach them. By the end of their freshman year, students have a digital 10-year plan, which they reference and modify in units incorporated into their English and/or social studies courses in 10th, 11th, and 12th grades. These units require students to apply their research, critical thinking and writing skills to explore potential careers they are interested in pursuing, colleges and universities that offer these types of programs, and steps they could take to prepare themselves to secure positions in their desired career field and to be admitted to the universities they identified that are aligned with their career objectives. (Some teachers utilize these units after state standardized tests are completed in the spring in order to keep students engaged and to keep content relevant in those remaining weeks before summer.) They also talk about financial aid, the types of internships and summer jobs that will support their long-term goals, and the financial consequences of not acquiring the credits and skills they need to in high school. Some students have opportunities to job-shadow in their preferred industries as well.

For students at SBCC, a Hispanic-serving institution with a growing Latino population—many of whom are the first in their family to go to college and more likely than not to come in with an undeclared major—this early planning and career focus can be transformational. “Usually, you ask a high school student, ‘Where do you want to go to college?’ and they say, ‘I want to go to this college ... because it’s got a good reputation’—as opposed to, ‘I want to go there because it’s got a really strong program in actuarial science,’” Friedlander said. “It’s a very different way of thinking about college choice.” In 2015, Get Focused, Stay Focused became a nonprofit and now works with more than 100 high schools to implement these 10-year career plans.

To launch the program, SBCC leaders first focused on identifying K-12 superintendents and principals interested in the idea. Once those school leaders were hooked, they took it back to their districts and schools and led the implementation and execution. “They did all of the selling for us,” Friedlander said. And once teachers started piloting the 10-year plan, other teachers started to see how much it engaged students—and it grew from there. “Teachers sold other teachers—they were the pioneers,” he said.

SBCC continues to facilitate cross-sector collaboration to keep the program fresh and responsive to new demands. Twice annually, SBCC hosts all of the area high school counselors to talk about challenges, experiences, and potential improvements in the way college preparation and advising

are delivered. Additionally, in 2016, SBCC began funding a new counselor position that rotates among its feeder high schools, providing information to students about postsecondary options. SBCC invested in this position, at the request of the school district, in order to create an even stronger link between the two institutions.

It might seem odd for a community college to expend significant resources working with high schools to motivate students to prepare for college—students who might not even ultimately enroll in that institution. But SBCC has fundamentally reconfigured its definition of student success by thinking about students’ aspirations and preparation far before they reach a college campus. “We felt the best way to [motivate students] was not to give them another lecture about why it’s so important for them to go to college,” Friedlander said, “but to think of their self-interests [and involving them] in the discovery of themselves through guidance—in terms of what kind of lifestyle they want and what career choice will get them there.”

This year, among students who participated in the Get Focused, Stay Focused program and enrolled at SBCC, 79 percent are proficient in reading and math.<sup>5</sup> (Among Latinos, who comprise 40 percent of SBCC’s student population, it’s 72 percent.<sup>6</sup>) But the impact is even larger. “A lot of these students [who participate in Get Focused, Stay Focused] don’t go to community college; they’ll go to a [four-year] university,” Friedlander said. “But at least they have a clear idea of what they want to do.”

## EL PASO COMMUNITY COLLEGE

*By understanding the unique challenges in the region and partnering closely with K-12 districts, EPCC has helped to embed a college-going culture in the region’s schools and developed alignment between high schools and the college that dramatically reduce students’ need for remedial education.*

For more than 20 years, leaders from K-12 school districts and local colleges in El Paso, Texas, have come together for one important reason: to strengthen the connection between the two sectors,

creating seamless educational opportunities that are affordable and accessible to the region’s students. The partnership started in the 1990s with dual credit options for teenagers, which allowed

them to earn college credit while still in high school. By 2005, it expanded to early college high schools, which are—in most cases—housed on high school campuses and offer college-level coursework (and

<sup>5</sup> Data provided by Jack Friedlander, executive vice president

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

credits) to students for free. Ideally, graduates of early college high schools earn an associate degree alongside their high school diploma. Thanks to these programs, 73 percent of El Paso's early college high school graduates finish with a diploma and an associate degree.<sup>7</sup> (Nationally, early college high schools confer associate degrees to 31 percent of their students.)<sup>8</sup>

These incredible outcomes require a significant level of ongoing collaboration, intentionality, and investment of time and resources. "From day one ... the intent was: Let's create some high schools ... and put the curriculum and programming in place so they can get their associate degrees," said Steven Smith, vice president for instruction and workforce education at El Paso Community College (EPCC). That has required regular meetings (that continue to this day) where representatives from El Paso's K-12 schools and the colleges align instruction and practice. "It makes sure the appropriate coursework is in place," Smith said. "It's not just a hodgepodge of credits that are offered—they're specific programs."

Additionally, a group of superintendents, principals, student support specialists, educators, and representatives from the University of Texas at El Paso (UTEP)—called the Early College High School Leadership Council—meets once per semester

**For a more detailed profile of cross-sector partnerships in El Paso, see *Addressing the 61st Hour Challenge: Collaborating in El Paso to Create Seamless Pathways from High School to College* by Nancy Hoffman & Valerie Lundy-Wagner (Jobs for the Future, March 2016).**

to talk about any changes in education requirements, including those happening at the state level, that may affect these schools. El Paso plans to open their tenth early college high school this fall.

Sustaining this level of collaboration between the instructors of two separate educational institutions, which operate under separate accountability and governance structures, is hard work. The meetings require a significant investment of time and other resources, as well as the will to act on information that emerges from the meetings. And for children in El Paso, the assumption isn't always that they'll go to college. Twenty-one percent of the county's population, ages 25 and older, have a bachelor's degree; and 23 percent live in poverty (above the national average of

15 percent).<sup>9</sup> "There's no disputing the fact that we're somewhat isolated," said William Serrata, EPCC president. The city is in the geographically isolated western-most tip of Texas, which makes the community college's efforts all the more instrumental in sustaining and building El Paso's livelihood.

Of teens who go on to college, about 85 percent stay local, enrolling at either EPCC or UTEP.<sup>10</sup> Much of the region's population is Latino, and many of the students in the K-12 system come from families with no postsecondary credentials. This is, in part, why EPCC works to begin instilling a college-going mindset as early as elementary school. "Our freshman class of 2025 is in third grade right now," Serrata says, matter-of-factly.

The college "adopted" its third elementary school this year—and by adopting, they contribute \$10,000 to the school to bill it as a "college-bound elementary school." Students receive T-shirts that say "Future College Student" and backpacks; educators and support personnel are asked to display their college degrees in their classrooms and offices; and third grade is referred to as the high school graduating class of 2025 and college graduating class of 2029, for example. The college also buses students to the nearest of its five campuses for tours and other events.



7 Phone interview with President William Serrata

8 Michael Webb with Carol Gerwin, *Early College Expansion: Propelling Students to Postsecondary Success, at a School Near You*, March 2014, [http://www.jff.org/sites/default/files/publications/materials/Early-College-Expansion\\_031714.pdf](http://www.jff.org/sites/default/files/publications/materials/Early-College-Expansion_031714.pdf).

9 United States Census Bureau, "Quick Facts," <http://www.census.gov/quickfacts/table/PST045215/00,48141> (accessed April 29, 2016).

10 Phone interview with President William Serrata

The hope is that, by talking about college from a young age, it won't become a question—but more an affirmation—in middle school. By the time students are in the eighth grade, EPCC tests them to see if they're eligible to begin taking college-credit coursework in high school. Leaders say providing these dual credit opportunities is advantageous for a few reasons: It gets students started on a long-term educational goal, exposes them to the

rigorous coursework they'll encounter in college, and saves them money. Of the students who earn dual credit in high school through EPCC, 80 percent matriculate into college; among graduates without dual credit, 33 percent matriculate.<sup>11</sup> Each year, more than 1,000 early college high school graduates enroll in their first year as juniors at UTEP.

And among students who enroll at EPCC,

Serrata says they see higher caliber students than in previous years. Three years ago, 17 percent of all faculty contact hours at EPCC were in developmental education; last year, it was 12 percent. "We're all in this together to have a collective impact to move the region forward," Serrata said. "If we increase the educational attainment level in our region, that will inherently increase our quality of life."

## LAKE AREA TECHNICAL INSTITUTE

*By intentionally analyzing student outcome data disaggregated by Pell eligibility, redefining measures of success to include students' labor market outcomes, and working intentionally to design programs that link to careers, LATI has not only completely eliminated disparities in graduation rates for Pell recipients but also ensured those students secure good jobs after they graduate.*

For colleges like those among the Aspen Prize finalists and winners—especially those with graduation rates astonishingly higher than the national average—it might be easy for leaders to be complacent. But the commitment to continually improve (that gets those institutions to such high levels of success in the first place) is precisely what prevents complacency. Because community colleges serve so many first-generation and low-income students, achieving high and continually improving levels of student success requires that they have structures in place that keep equity top of mind and in turn, ensure that equitable student outcomes are consistently monitored and gaps are acted upon. In particular, structures to improve equity have to be supported by an ongoing analysis of, and learning from, data disaggregated by race/ethnicity and income.

That's just what leaders at Lake Area Technical Institute (LATI), in Watertown, South Dakota, were doing a few years ago when they were plotting to improve the already-exceptional graduation rate. When they compared those rates by demo-

graphics, they saw something they hadn't before: Pell Grant recipients were graduating at a rate 8 percentage points behind non-Pell students. Pell recipients also were more likely to stop at a certificate, rather than continuing to an associate degree. That finding didn't sit well with leaders, and the data helped build urgency for closing those gaps.

"When you think about it, a college degree is an abstract thing—to most people, but particularly to high school students," said Michael Cartney, president at LATI, a three-time Finalist with Distinction for the Aspen Prize. For low-income students, community college can be a catapult out of poverty, but beyond that, the connection to real life isn't always apparent. "When you talk about a degree, they're probably going to look at you and bounce their head up and down and say, 'Yeah, I'm working toward a degree,'" Cartney said. "But it's a lot more powerful for them to say they're working toward a specific occupation, or 'I'm going to be an energy technician ... and I'm going to make \$50,000 a year six months after graduation.'" And the college's cohort model does just that.



Lake Area Technical Institute

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

At LATI, students don't just apply; they must declare a major in order to enroll. Once admitted, they're assigned a cohort, ranging in size from 20 to 100 students (depending on major), that moves through a prescribed series of courses needed for the occupation students are studying for. The cohorts help students avoid wasting any time or money in coursework they don't need. For the Pell recipients who comprise half of the population at LATI, this efficiency is of particular importance. It forces students to be deliberate about their career choice from day one. Rather than working toward a degree in auto mechanics, for example, they're working toward becoming an auto technician. This gives them purpose in their day-to-day work and a sense of how their education connects to their long-term goals.

Moreover, the cohort model provides a critical support net of peers who can serve as a source of morale and encouragement when—as they often do—life challenges get in the way of education.

Since LATI began intentionally splicing the data and focusing on low-income students, the gap in graduation rates between Pell Grant-eligible students and non-Pell students has closed. Last year, Pell students even outperformed non-Pell students with a graduation rate of 84 percent compared to 79 percent, respectively.<sup>12</sup>

But gathering data is only a tool that helps keep the focus on results. The real catalyst for change is a multi-faceted strategy that LATI leaders have employed to encourage more equitable success—a strategy that is centered on a broad definition of student success.

In 2014, leaders decided that graduation rates didn't fully capture whether students had succeeded, so they drew a stronger line to careers—by including job placement rates in their definition of success. “By doing so, you change the entire conversation ... from the time you sit down with a potential applicant,” Cartney said. “The question isn't, ‘What classes do you want?’

‘It's, ‘What do you want to be after you graduate?’ It really pushes the concept that college is a pathway, not a destination.”

Leaders rely on six-month, post-graduation data from the South Dakota Department of Labor and Regulation, as well as longer-term data from the National Student Clearinghouse. They also track graduates' salaries and whether they stayed in South Dakota. College leaders follow up with local employers to see that graduates are meeting workplace expectations—and if not, LATI faculty work to adapt instruction accordingly. Cartney says, “We have to recruit and get [students] in the door, retain them, keep high marks in student satisfaction, and graduate them. So success now includes all of those things, plus placement.”

To codify this change in the definition of success, Cartney also revised the college's mission statement to include “changing lives and launching careers,” which recognized the importance of embedding a big-picture student success vision in the culture of the college. “The mission statement ripples through your whole organization,” he said. “This made sure that everybody knew this wasn't just something we were giving lip service to, and this was something very important and something that needed to happen if we were going to raise our graduation rates.”

The shift in paradigm reflected in the new mission statement sends an important message to parents, as well, Cartney added. “If you can get a parent thinking less about ... a particular degree from a particular place, and rather, more focused on what their child's future is going to be, that changes the conversation for them too.” What could be more powerful for a student from a family that has never been to college?



Lake Area Technical Institute

<sup>12</sup> Data provided by President Michael Cartney

## VALENCIA COLLEGE

*By partnering deeply with a four-year institution, establishing structures that fundamentally change students' transfer experience, and embedding commitment to equity throughout the college and its partners, Valencia has more than doubled the number of students earning associate degrees since 2005, increased by more than 10 percentage points the completion rates of Latino students, and dramatically improved the rates at which low-income and underrepresented minority students go on to earn bachelor's degrees after transfer.*

More than a decade ago, Florida's community colleges had begun to create bachelor's degree programs of their own to meet the demand that remained as four-year universities became increasingly more selective. More often than not, those most negatively impacted by increasing selectivity and competition were first-generation and low-income students, which exacerbated inequities in a region home to a rapidly growing Latino community.

Rather than competing, the presidents at Valencia College and the University of Central Florida (UCF) collaborated to establish a transfer program that would not only avoid competition, but also bring a four-year degree within reach for many in their shared community who might otherwise have not had access to one.

Called DirectConnect, the transfer program is much more than an articulation agreement between two-year and four-year institutions. More than aligning transfer credits, leaders and faculty at Valencia and UCF collaborate to ensure courses feed into one another; that rigor and expectations are consistent from one campus to the other; and that students who graduate from Valencia succeed at UCF. The partnership is built on information-sharing and a deep curricular collaboration for which having adequate data is critical. For example, if a student takes a general education science course at Valencia, are they more or less likely to pass a higher-level science course at UCF? Or once a student enrolls at UCF, how likely is he to change his major, which might elongate

time to degree? And among students of color, what percentage are transferring? What's their average GPA, and how many are graduating within three years? The commitment to finding answers to these kinds of questions—and addressing the weaknesses and disparities in student outcomes that emerge—help make DirectConnect the success that it is, but these questions couldn't be addressed if Valencia or UCF didn't share the outcomes of each of those courses and the trajectories of the students in them.

"This requires a level of data-sharing—sometimes at a student-record level—that many institutions are not prepared to exchange," said Kurt Ewen, presidential fellow and former assistant vice president of institutional effectiveness and planning at Valencia. This ensures that courses on either side of the transfer fit together seamlessly. Ewen said Valencia leaders largely have relied on—and shared—student outcome data, disaggregated by race/ethnicity and income, to be able to identify trends at a granular level. This means not only tracking transfer, retention, and bachelor's degree attainment, but also breaking down that data by race/ethnicity and gender and comparing it over time in order to spot trends and any gaping holes in students' progression toward graduation.

UCF sends regular feedback reports to Valencia and the other community colleges that feed into the university. The report includes data on transfer students, including enrollment by each community



ages than those of the general graduating population at UCF.<sup>13</sup>

Ewen says much of this data-sharing is possible, thanks to the strong relationships between—and the longevity among—leaders on both campuses. Sandy Shugart joined Valencia as president in 2000; at UCF, John Hitt has been in office since 1992. Both remain today, 10 years into DirectConnect, and that consistency has contributed to the program's vitality and success, leaders say. "Everything stems from high-level presidential and executive-level leadership on both sides of the transfer," Ewen said. "These have to be in place for the nature of relationships to not only be meaningful, but impactful, to students."

13 UCF Office of Institutional Research, *UCF Florida College System Consortium Partners' Student Success Feedback Report, Valencia College 2014-2015*, <http://valenciacollege.edu/governance/11c/documents/IR30815UCFStudentSuccessFeedbackReports-VC.PDF>.

Data-sharing has also had an additional (positive) side effect: encouraging more buy-in among faculty, some of whom initially remained a bit skeptical. “One of the hurdles we had to overcome early on was getting university professors at UCF to believe that the guarantee of admission to UCF once you’ve completed an associate degree at Valencia wasn’t a lowering of standards,” Ewen said. Much of that initial doubt dissipated as faculty from both institutions worked together to ensure courses from Valencia appropriately fed into courses at UCF. And the data that came later confirmed what they all had been working toward—successful transfers for students. “Certainly, the data-sharing and curricular alignment activities continue to reinforce the fact that we’re serious about rigor, they’re serious about rigor, and by working together, we can make sure it all happens well,” Ewen said.

Currently, the two institutions are working on a multi-institutional predictive analytic pathway, which would allow a deeper level of data-sharing. “We’d be able to give students a whole lot better advice about their optimal path from Valencia to UCF by looking at comparable students in Valencia’s history and UCF’s history,” Ewen said—advice like which courses to avoid taking at the same time, which could increase the

**For an in-depth description of Valencia College’s partnership with University of Central Florida, see *Collaborating for Student Success at Valencia College* by Jessie Brown and Martin Kurzweil (Ithaka S+R, October 2015).**

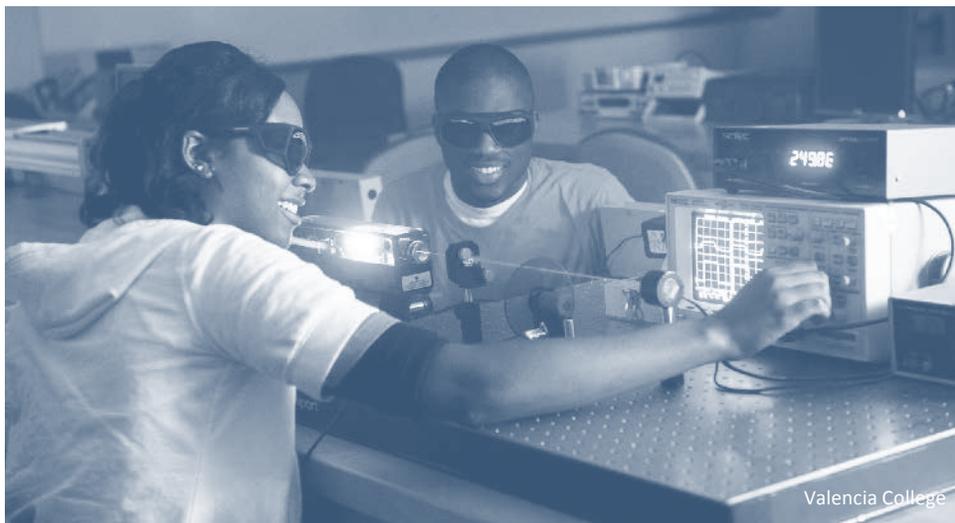
efficiency of a pipeline already delivering far more graduates than what used to be.

The depth and robustness of the partnership between Valencia and UCF reflects perfectly the notion of building structural equity. Through extensive sharing of data and maintaining a continual process of communication and knowledge-sharing, the two institutions are achieving greater equity in student access and success despite the fact that DirectConnect does not explicitly target any particular group. Rather, DirectConnect creates more equitable outcomes by fundamentally redesigning the student transfer experience to eliminate barriers that disproportionately impact disadvantaged students.

It’s a systemic strategy that works. Of all of the students who graduated from UCF in 2015, 41 percent came via DirectCon-

nect transfer at one of the six community colleges. Of those DirectConnect graduates, Valencia contributed the largest share (60 percent)—nearly half of whom are students of color. In all, 64 percent of Valencia’s DirectConnect students earned a degree within four years of transferring to UCF.<sup>14</sup>

The program has been pivotal for underrepresented students, who were impacted most as UCF became more selective. From 2005 to 2014, the number of students graduating from Valencia with an associate degree more than doubled—from 926 to 2,007.<sup>15</sup> Among Latinos, 46 percent earn an associate degree, an increase of 12 percentage points from a decade ago.<sup>16</sup> Through DirectConnect, Valencia bridges the gap to a four-year degree by delivering the rigor and the required coursework—at half the cost, on campuses accessible to local communities—that make enrollment attainable at one of the largest four-year universities in the country. It’s that sense of purpose and certainty that can make the difference for underrepresented populations historically shut out of high-quality educational opportunities.



<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Aspen Institute College Excellence Program, *Promoting Equity & Student Success in Transfer Through Partnership: A Case Study of Two At-Scale Approaches*.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

# STRATEGIES AND ESSENTIAL PRACTICES FOR BUILDING STRUCTURAL EQUITY

In the end, exceptional community colleges achieve structural equity by redefining student success to extend beyond college walls and taking strategic actions in line with that vision. In particular, we identify in these colleges' experiences three major strategies and a series of essential practices for achieving them.

## Strategy 1. Think Big Picture to Redefine Student Success and Set Equity Goals

### Essential practices:

- ✓ Understand who your students are in their local and regional contexts
- ✓ Rely on data to set big-picture equity goals and identify strategies that extend beyond the college
- ✓ Define specific measures against which to benchmark progress

As a starting point for achieving equity in outcomes, colleges have to understand—in a deep and meaningful way, relying on data rather than anecdote or assumption—who their students are, where they're coming from, and what the opportunities are that exist for them in the region.

Santa Barbara City College, for example, decided to extend its reach into K-12 based on the recognition that too many students from the region's low-income and largely Latino communities were given neither the hope of attending college nor the academic preparation to do so. In El Paso, leaders saw the vast majority of students staying in the area, so in order to create a stronger local economy, they knew they would have to create a college-going culture that encouraged high school graduates to pursue the training they would need for the jobs that existed in the region.

But understanding students' experiences and the contexts of their lives is only the first step. Colleges have to set explicit, equity-focused goals that make clear for whom and on what measures student success needs to be improved. Colleges have to define what success means for students

*beyond the walls of the campus*, whether it's transfer and completion of a bachelor's degree, placement in a job that pays a family-sustaining wage, or both.

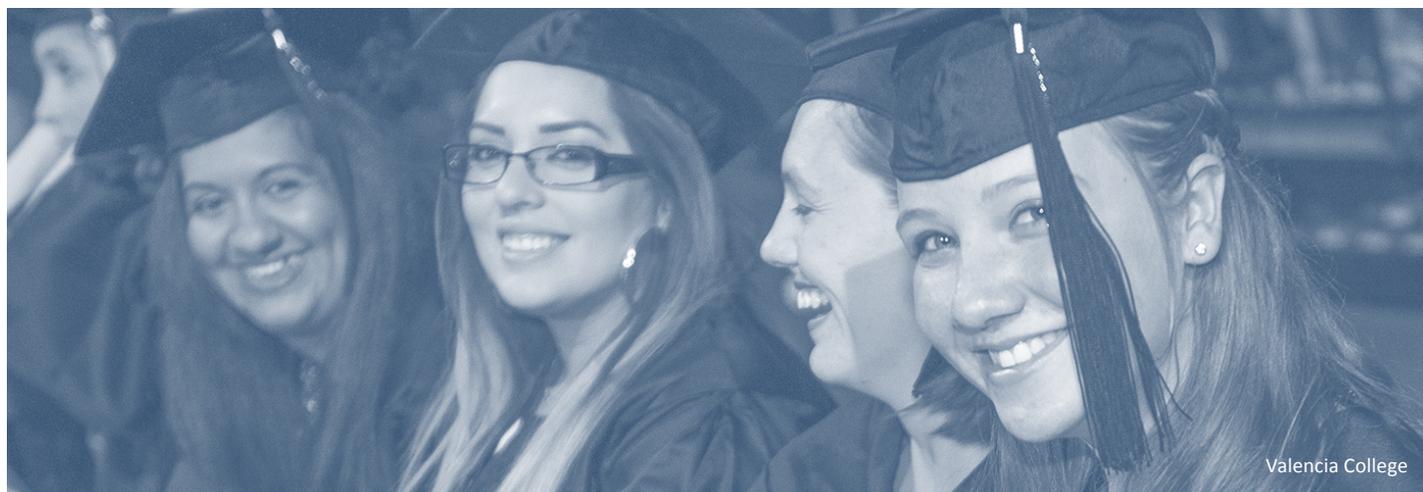
Leaders at Lake Area Technical Institute redefined success to include not only graduation rates, but also job placement rates. That change in thinking spurred intentionality about designing programs that link directly to careers and provide students both the structure and the motivation and support they need to succeed. And at Valencia, leaders measure the college's success not just by the rates at which students transfer to a four-year institution but the rates at which they successfully complete a bachelor's degree after transfer, which is provided in regular feedback reports from the University of Central Florida.

Having set goals and established measures against which to benchmark progress, colleges have to also be committed to evaluating progress regularly and revising strategies as needed to ensure that the impact of all student success reforms are, indeed, equitable. Leaders should not assume that reforms will impact all students equally and



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should be vigilant and disciplined about examining outcome data disaggregated by race/ethnicity, income, gender, age, and other factors that characterize the diversity of their student enrollment.



## Strategy 2. Work Externally to Change the Student Experience

### *Essential practices:*

- ✓ Identify external partners vital to creating a seamless student experience
- ✓ Devise strategies that speak to the needs and goals of both partners
- ✓ Establish common metrics of progress and success
- ✓ Create structures for frequent and meaningful communication between partners about curriculum alignment and skills expectations
- ✓ Establish conditions through which all partners are accountable for success

Many effective community colleges have developed strong partnerships with key institutions in other sectors in order to help students succeed. Equity-focused institutions do so intentionally as a way of creating a fundamentally more equitable educational pathway for the most vulnerable populations in their communities.

This type of collaboration with the K-12 sector, four-year universities, and industry can be challenging—particularly as organizations in different sectors work under different sets of incentives, operate within different accountability and governance structures, and have different missions. Leaders at colleges that are spearheading such efforts must identify partners who are committed to improving student success, a precursor to implementing a seamless student experience, and then work to build a collective framework for action and evaluation. The Collective Impact framework offers important principles for developing practices that contribute to shared goals,

measures, and accountability across a set of partners.<sup>17</sup>

Frequent, structured communication is vital. Santa Barbara City College created (and continues to maintain) a strong foundation for sharing the kinds of vital information needed to make the partnership with K-12 districts work: Instructors from the college and the high schools meet regularly to discuss curriculum; SBCC has embedded an adviser that rotates among feeder high schools and serves as a critical liaison; and the partners conduct annual training sessions for instructors in both sectors.

Partnerships also have to serve the interests of all the organizations involved. Business leaders, for example, may not be motivated purely by the goal of helping students succeed—but they are motivated by the need to hire qualified employees. At Lake Area Tech, leaders looked for opportunities to make local employers partners in their student success initiatives, as those employers stand to gain the most benefit

from well-trained graduates. To do so, they asked employers to split the cost of funding full-ride scholarships for low-income students. In exchange, students commit to work for the employer for three years. So industry invests, the community college provides, and students succeed.

And though the community college can be the driving force behind these types of deep partnership, others have to be equally accountable for their success. The terms of the partnership need to make clear what the contributions and expectations are of each partner and what resources will be dedicated, in an ongoing way, to ensuring shared success. The DirectConnect partnership between Valencia and UCF epitomizes this notion of shared accountability: Both institutions measure their own success based on the outcomes of students who transfer between them, meaning both institutions have a stake in the students' total four-year experience, not just their two-year segment of it.

<sup>17</sup> For more information about the Collective Impact Framework developed by FSG, go to <http://www.fsg.org/approach-areas/collective-impact>.



### Strategy 3. Work Internally to Build Urgency and Commitment to Equity Goals

#### Essential practices:

- ✓ Build urgency and leadership commitment throughout partnering institutions
- ✓ Create systems for regularly analyzing and discussing data
- ✓ Celebrate wins and build success on success
- ✓ Evaluate effectiveness and revise goals and strategies

While specific goals and strategies differ from one institution to the next, one common component at successful community colleges is strong leadership that not only embodies a student-centric mission, but also creates the expectation that others will follow suit. Sustaining the structures that fundamentally change the student experience requires a wide net of leaders beyond the president who are dedicated to the partnership and can continue the work required for it even after the initial champion of the effort is gone.

Much of the success seen at Valencia can be traced back to its president, Sandy Shugart, who has been in the position since 2000. He's forged and maintained a close relationship with the president at UCF, and both presidents have been deliberate about diffusing the commitment to that relationship among other leaders at both colleges. Seeing the enduring commitment of leaders to spend their own time and their institutions' resources in advancing partnership goals, administrators and faculty at both institutions now work closely together to align curricula and share data on students'

progression between the two institutions.

But asking individuals throughout the college to commit to an equity goal isn't enough; some may nod their heads in agreement when the president expresses a new vision and then continue business as usual. True distributed leadership around equity requires that top leaders *manage the change culturally*: They have to build urgency around an equity imperative, use successes to incrementally build buy-in, and create incentives and accountability mechanisms that hold individuals throughout the organization accountable for implementing and measuring success in their part of the bigger strategy.

In El Paso, leaders from the K-12 and higher education sectors have worked together for more than 20 years, creating various dual credit opportunities for teenagers in the region. And although leaders changed in that time, the work did not—because no one person from K-12 schools, El Paso Community College, or the University of Texas at El Paso is solely responsible for driving these initiatives. Rather, commitment to the partnership has been *insti-*

*tutionalized* in processes and practices, including regular meetings to discuss curricula, analyze student success data and evaluate progress, and identify shared opportunities for development and improvement.

As a president, the decision to invest resources (financial or otherwise) beyond the campus perimeter is a risky one. There will always be great needs on campus: improvements in facilities, investments in professional development, raises in acknowledgement of faculty and staff's hard work, and so on. When the campus community sees leaders investing time and money in K-12 schools or in partnerships with other institutions or industry, it's natural for them to regard these as neglecting more important and immediate needs.

Leaders have to be prepared for this resistance and be dedicated to building buy-in incrementally through such intentional, disciplined tactics as setting a clear student success vision, finding champions for the vision among faculty and staff, scoring and celebrating early wins, and then using success to beget more success.



# CONCLUSION: LEADING FOR EQUITY

The exemplary colleges profiled here showcase various approaches to creating the structures and policies that foster more equitable educational pathways for students. In every case, their efforts extend beyond campus—into the K-12 sector to better prepare and bridge the transition to collegiate-level work, into four-year universities to boost students' likelihood for success, and into the workforce to ensure training matches demands. While these institutions have distinct approaches, one thing is common: Each operates as one rung in an education and career ladder, linking with the rungs before and after it. No excellent community college operates in isolation.

Leaders at El Paso Community College and Santa Barbara City College concentrate their efforts on instilling a college mindset in students long before they begin thinking about their postsecondary plans. Through high expectations, structured guidance, and early exposure to collegiate-level work, they aim to help students shape those plans into pathways that lead students toward family-sustaining careers.

At Lake Area Technical Institute and Valencia College, leaders focus on creating seamless and accessible connections to life after community college, whether that be a career or four-year university. By enlisting a shared commitment from industry and a four-year university, these institutions have created pathways that not only strengthen purpose and direction for students, but also—and most importantly—bring more opportunities within reach for the students who, too often, don't have them.

Leaders at these institutions acknowledge that it's not enough to craft programming and supports, in hopes that they will reach the underrepresented students who most need them. Nor do they assume that reforms on campus, though important, will serve automatically as "rising tides that lift all boats." Instead, they identify the groups of students they are not serving well, learn about the obstacles those students face, and tailor their strategies accordingly. That's how they move graduation rates higher year after year; it's how they lift more low-income students out of poverty and into self-sustaining careers; and it's how they've created pipelines that benefit all students—and especially those who most need it.

These practices require hard, sustained work and the willingness to take risks with the confidence that students' successes outside of college perimeters will contribute, if indirectly, to the long-term success of the college itself. They require leaders to think big and to redefine not only the college's definition of student success but also their own measures of their impact.

*Structural equity*, as we've described it through these examples, requires an intentionality about making the community college the agent of change for a whole community. And accomplishing that goal means working across an ecosystem—not just during the two or three years while a student is enrolled, but in true partnership—to secure a better future for the young people and adults who may one day pass through campus.





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