ACHIEVING THE DREAM™
COMMUNITY COLLEGES COUNT

Power Tools:
Designing State Community College Data and Performance Measurement Systems to Improve Student Success

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Across higher education, there is growing interest in strengthening state data and performance measurement systems that track student progress and success. The common goal is to improve outcomes, particularly at community colleges and non-selective four-year institutions, by identifying at-risk students early and providing them with supports that can help them stay in school and graduate.

Achieving the Dream: Community Colleges Count, a national initiative to help more community college students succeed, has been working with more than 80 institutions in 15 states to address this challenge. This policy brief grew out of the work of Achieving the Dream's Cross-State Data Work Group, which is developing a set of indicators that states can use to more effectively track student performance over time, evaluate the effectiveness of interventions, and learn from the strengths of other community college systems. It is intended to help states answer questions at the heart of the design and implementation of performance measurement and data systems—how to structure these systems to maximize improvement, particularly for students who traditionally have not fared well in college.

Essential Features of a State Performance Measurement System

A performance measurement system must define the community college system's goals clearly, identify precise indicators of progress toward those goals, and focus institutional efforts on boosting the success rate of students who face significant barriers to graduation. It is essential to include the following features:

• A limited number of intermediate and long-term performance indicators, tied to a clearly defined set of strategic priorities, appropriate to each mission area (e.g., degree and transfer programs, workforce training, and adult basic education);

• Goals and benchmarks that provide clear incentives—and reasonable time frames—for institutions to focus on raising the success rates of underprepared and historically underserved students;

• Performance measures disaggregated by high-priority subgroups (e.g., students entering college with significant remedial academic needs, low-income students) so states can track the progress that community colleges make in increasing the success rate of these target populations; and

• A public reporting system that allows students, policymakers, and practitioners to identify institutions achieving strong results with high-priority subgroups.

Essential Features of a State Data System

A state data system must serve the state's performance measurement system, providing quantitative answers to critical questions about student success, such as "How many students who entered community college for the first time left without completing a degree or transferring to a four-year institution?" and "What interventions are helping to improve outcomes for various subgroups?" It is essential to include the following features:

• Student-level unit records that track performance across years and institutions;

• Detailed data on demographics, enrollment status, program enrollment, academic readiness (as measured by high school coursework, high school exit exams, and college placement exams), and college course enrollment, completion, and grades;

• Supplemental information, such as the Community College Survey of Student Engagement, to help identify institutional practices associated with student success; and

• The ability to share student-level information among K-12 and higher education data systems—and to link to other state databases (e.g., unemployment insurance)—to track student transitions and assess improvements in employment and earnings.

Essential Features of State Research Capacity to Support Data-Driven Improvement Strategies

States can play a critical role in driving improvement by mining longitudinal data to help identify effective strategies for increasing success rates of at-risk students—and providing research support and training to institutional staff. States also should participate in projects that enable them to benchmark the performance of their community college system against those of other states and to learn from their improvement efforts.

Tool to Track State Progress Implementing the Key Features of *Power Tools*

JFF has developed a short self-assessment tool to help states gauge the status of their efforts to implement community college data and performance measurement systems that incorporate the key features described in this report. This tool is included with this executive summary and is an appendix to the full report.

Framework for State Policies to Support Student Success: Data and Performance Measurement Systems

	No/Under Consideration/ In Process/Yes	Elaboration/Comments
Features of a strong state performance measurement system		
Does the state have an economical set of student performance measures tied to a clearly defined, limited set of strategic priorities?		
Is the system based on longitudinal measures that track student progress relative to benchmarks?		
Do the system's performance measures distinguish among students based on initial level of college readiness? If yes, is this based on placement test data?		
Does the performance measurement system include controls for other student-level characteristics associated with different likelihoods of success, such as part-time versus full-time enrollment status or age at entry?		
Does the system include controls for institutional characteristics (e.g., size, resources for student) that allow for appropriate peer group comparisons of performance?		
Do the system's goals and benchmarks provide clear incentives for institutions to focus on raising the success rates of under-prepared and underserved students?		
Does the system include reasonable time frames for achieving benchmarks, given high percentage of part-time students and students needing remediation?		
Does the performance measurement system include intermediate benchmarks that identify key first- and second-year "academic momentum" builders or predictors of long-term success?		
Do the system's reports allow students, policymakers, and practitioners to examine college and system performance and identify institutions that are achieving strong results with high-priority subgroups?		
Is there a process for revising goals and measures in light of latest research evidence about key predictors of student success?		

	No/Under Consideration/ In Process/Yes	Elaboration/Comments
Features of a robust state data system		
Does the state have a centralized data system to track the performance of community college students?		
Is the state data system built upon student-level unit records that track student performance across years and institutions?		
Does the system include demographic and program enrollment data?		
Does it include college placement test scores and other secondary school academic information?		
Does the state collect supplemental student information such as the Community College Survey of Student Engagement to help identify and track institutional practices associated with improved student outcomes?		
Does it include information on community college courses enrolled in and completed and grades earned?		
Does the state have the ability to share student-level information among K-12, community college, and other higher education data systems?		
Does the state have the ability to link to other state databases (e.g., state UI and adult education)?		
Features of state research capacity to support data-driven improvement		
Does the state have the ability to produce research on key student performance issues and possible improvement strategies?		
Does the state have the ability to conduct analysis to inform the design of state policies and monitor their effectiveness?		
Does the state have the ability to provide colleges with user-friendly access to longitudinal data, data programming and research support, and training for institutional research staff?		
Does the state participate in cross-state projects that enable a state to benchmark community college system performance against, and to learn from, other states?		