



Achieving
the Dream™

Community Colleges Count

PROGRESS, CAMPUS PROFILES, AND PRELIMINARY LESSONS

**FROM THE WORKING STUDENTS
SUCCESS NETWORK**





INTRODUCTION

Millions of Americans are working to gain college credentials and skills to secure a foothold in today's economy. Achieving the Dream's (ATD) Working Students Success Network (WSSN) is helping community college students not only complete certificates and degrees but also develop financial skills and connect their credentials to jobs that pay family-sustaining wages.

Achieving the Dream took on this work to encourage community colleges to see students' needs holistically and help institutions design integrated supports to prepare struggling students for academic and career success, access complementary services, and learn how to build savings to create a solid financial base for themselves and their families.

WSSN advances ATD's understanding that helping more students achieve their goals takes building a student-focused culture. To be successful, colleges often must undertake foundational changes across the institution. Achieving the Dream and participating WSSN colleges are finding that strengthening capacities within ATD's institutional capacity framework in directly related areas, such as faculty and community engagement, data and technology, strategy and planning, and equity facilitate those changes. As the initiative matures, we will continue to share information about what we are learning and the capacities that institutions need to be successful in this work.

Nineteen community colleges in four states are implementing WSSN using an integrated service delivery approach launched in experiments by non-profits Local Initiatives Support Corporation, United Way, MDC and individual community colleges focused intensively on helping low-income students find employment. Funded by the Annie E. Casey, Lumina, W.K. Kellogg, Kresge, and MetLife Foundations, the initiative addresses three key areas of work:

- **Education and employment advancement.** WSSN helps students develop and follow an achievable career plan. It works with institutions to bolster career counseling, develop training on specific skills for targeted industries or occupations, and strengthen other career services.
- **Income and work supports.** WSSN not only helps students with tasks like filing their taxes or filling out FAFSA forms, it ensures that students can tap into all the available resources that will improve financial stability for themselves and their families while they are working and pursuing further education. WSSN helps students to pull together the pieces—such as childcare,

transportation, food, and housing—that make or break working students' ability to attain the credentials they seek.

- **Financial services and asset building.** WSSN offers training, information, and tools for students to make informed choices about budgeting and use of financial products such as loans and credit cards. It helps colleges partner with local financial institutions and provides intensive financial coaching. It even helps students save for the future through special savings accounts often enhanced with matching funds with support from the financial institutions.

By connecting students to career pathways and jobs, providing courses and coaching on financial planning, and helping students gain access to available public services, WSSN colleges are helping working students achieve their academic, career, and personal goals.

WSSN colleges provide both high-touch services—intensive one-on-one advising, counseling, or coaching—and low-touch services—standardized services that reach a broad range of students, typically through large-scale orientations or first-year student success courses. A centerpiece of the WSSN initiative is the concept of “bundling” services—bringing academic services, such as advising and tutoring, and the many nonacademic services offered by a range of on-campus offices and public and private, social service, and community-based agencies together in carefully planned sequencing and in one access point. The colleges that have been the most successful at integrating services have done so by creating a single location or campus “hub” for services. This integrated services approach organizes delivery of complementary resources in ways that lead students toward financial stability and success in earning needed credentials.

WSSN PROGRESS

Two years into the WSSN initiative, reports from the colleges involved and evaluations from our partners reveal that for campuses that have implemented the approach with the greatest fidelity, WSSN is a catalyst for culture change, an integrated hub of service delivery, and a data-driven approach leading to better monitoring and increased success for low-income students.

KEY CHANGES AS A RESULT OF WSSN

While the WSSN initiative has led to essential services being provided to tens of thousands of low-income students, more important is its role as a catalyst for long-term institutional change and capacity building. Specifically, the WSSN initiative has led to three major changes:

1. CHANGING INSTITUTIONAL CULTURE

The initiative has helped WSSN colleges to make a significant investment in changing institutional culture and developing campus-wide buy-in to promoting and integrating the program as central to the mission of the college.

The WSSN initiative was conceived to be more than just another short-term funding source for community colleges. The intent was to serve as a catalyst for helping colleges become more student-focused, engaging faculty and the community, and making WSSN staff roles and services sustainable in the long run. The majority of WSSN partner colleges have, in fact, made significant progress in this area. The WSSN initiative has encouraged broad changes in institutional culture, including:

- Reengineering programmatic offerings and student service models to better address equity goals and serve low-income students seeking to gain a stronger financial foothold for themselves and their families.
- Redefining faculty and staff roles to focus more holistically on students and getting buy-in from faculty and staff to take on these roles.
- Focusing on high-touch intake processes to ensure that students see WSSN services as a normal part of their college-going experience and central to their success.

Deeply committing to these organizational and cultural changes is crucial to building sustainability for the WSSN model.

The following profile of North Arkansas College shows how the introduction of a food bank led to many bigger and more profound changes on the campus. The college reengineered its student service model, redefined faculty and staff roles to focus more holistically on students, and focused on high-touch intake processes. These and other changes led to a palpable culture change on the campus.

ALL-HANDS-ON-DECK: North Arkansas College

To help meet the needs of its low-income students, North Arkansas College opened an on-campus food pantry in fall 2015. Stocked in part by a fundraising competition among different college departments, Pete's Pantry was an immediate success—so much so that the shelves nearly became bare soon after it opened.

After arranging an emergency shipment, the college's truck-driving program instructor volunteered to haul the supplies early in the morning on his day off, and volunteers from across campus then helped stock Pete's Pantry, which is named after the community college's mascot. "With an all-hands-on-deck approach, the shipment was broken, inventoried, and stocked just in time for the pantry to open," college officials say.

All told, more than \$10,500 in food was distributed to 265 North Arkansas College students and their family members during the 2015-16 school year. When paper goods ran low later in the year, faculty and staff brought more than 400 rolls of toilet paper and paper towels from home to keep the shelves stocked. College officials also helped students who stepped inside the pantry and requested additional services apply for Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits and referred them to other services. The coordinated effort paid off: students who accessed the pantry in the fall were 12 percent more likely to persist than their counterparts who did not, according to college officials.

"Pete's Pantry was a dream that WSSN made a reality, and we feel it has had, by far, the greatest impact on our students," officials say. "It has also been a tangible motivator to encourage students to remain in college to pursue their goals."

North Arkansas—better known locally as "Northark"—adopted the slogan "Northark Cares" for its WSSN efforts. Fearful of "grant overload," college leaders focused on integrating services into existing programs, training larger numbers of staff members to provide coaching, and deepening faculty and staff understanding of the challenges high-poverty students face.

Financial and career literacy programs were incorporated in Northark's freshman orientation success course, and students in that course are also required to attend one-on-one

financial and career coaching sessions. The college's advisers and financial aid officers, admissions and registrar staff as well as others have been trained to provide financial and career coaching, as well as help students apply for benefits and coordinate referrals to other services. Starting this fall, faculty also will provide coaching services during assigned faculty advisor sessions.

"Instead of creating a WSSN Center and only serving students in that center/program, Northark chose to implement the strategies into multiple college functions and processes to ensure multiple student exposure, strategic longevity, and ultimately, culture change," college officials say.

Northark leaders also quickly recognized the limitations of existing data systems and upgraded technology to better meet the needs of advising center personnel and coaches. Doing so will help the transition to a case-management advising and mentoring approach for all students.

"Students seem to thrive and light up when they realize their coach will not judge or make decisions for them, but facilitate them in talking through all sides of the issue, coming to their own conclusions," college officials say. "Once students find the excitement of knowing what they are working for, they seem to be more engaged and invested in being successful, one step at a time."

Northark officials share stories about how growing numbers of faculty and staff have focused on helping individual students—finding a work-study job in the college library for one student who was living in a campground near campus; helping another appeal denial of SNAP benefits; and giving one student with aspirations of earning a PhD in mathematics his first suit as part of a program that provides students with professional attire for job interviews.

"He looked at the staff member and said, 'I could get married in this suit,'" college officials say.

Northark points to the cumulative impact of individual successes like these over time. "We find that our students would much rather break their direction down in small steps, celebrating little victories along the way," college officials say.

2. EFFECTIVELY BUNDLING BOTH LOW- AND HIGH-TOUCH SERVICES

The initiative has helped WSSN colleges increase focus on effectively bundling both low- and high-touch services and sequencing those services to efficiently match the needs, location, and schedules of students.

Colleges have placed significant emphasis on developing the best strategies and approaches to bundling WSSN services for students. Some colleges have gone the low-touch route, while others have been able to respond more directly to individual student needs. The WSSN initiative has encouraged breaking down “service silos” often through the use of a college “hub” to provide students with integrated academic and non-academic services, including:

> Bundling low-touch services for students primarily through orientations, in-take processes, and student success courses. Many of these “initial bundles” have been made mandatory for the student population colleges are targeting to ensure students see services as a normal part of their college-going experience and serve as a foundation for ongoing high-touch services.

- Bundling services with better sequencing to provide services in a logical manner that best meets the needs of students. This includes both sequencing of low-touch services within courses and efficiently moving students from low-touch to higher-touch services.
- Successfully analyzing students’ biggest and most immediate needs and initiating bundling around them. By meeting students where they are and not assuming a “build it and they will come” model, campuses have been able to address students’ short-term needs and then build on that for longer-term stability.

At the heart of bundling is centralizing services and being “intentional” about service delivery. Colleges reported that frequently students who qualify for WSSN-related services qualify for a wide range of other services as well. But since those services are housed in different places or divisions of the college, the institution has to be more intentional in directing students to all other services from which they may benefit, especially when delivery of those services happens elsewhere on campus.

The following profile indicates how Big Bend Community College (WA) began by coordinating a broad range of outreach activities into a single event. A commitment to being strategic in integrating services, and continuous efforts and use of technology to learn from their work to improve bundling, sequencing, and student engagement helped college officials fine-tune services and meet students’ needs in a timely manner and in sensible sequences. Working in part by trial and error, the college has slowly built and bundled services to better support students and become sustainable for the long haul.

SUSTAINABLE, STUDENT-CENTERED SERVICES: Big Bend Community College

When the staff at Big Bend Community College (BBCC), in Washington state, started to plan an Opportunity Fair in the fall of 2015 to promote community and campus resources, they realized they were going to be competing with several other college events, including a career-oriented event, a university transfer fair, and a professional/technical open house. This scheduling challenge quickly became an opportunity to bundle a variety of services for a significant number of Big Bend students.

The College created a single event called Get HERE, with “HERE” standing for Higher Education Resources and Employment. This first time event—which brought together academic, community, and employment resources—reached over 250 Big Bend students. Feedback from university partners, community resources, and employers indicated that the Get HERE event was the most successful event the college’s partners had ever attended on campus.

Get HERE is just one example of how the WSSN initiative has become an integral part of Big Bend’s efforts to improve student success. “WSSN has shifted our paradigm to focus on integrated service delivery, helping us to expand and strategically bundle our services for low-income students,” officials noted.

Over the first two years of the grant, Big Bend has worked to ramp up its financial and career coaching through a first-year College Survival Skills course, a strong partnership with a local credit union, which provides financial coaching, and various online tools and resources for students. Big Bend utilized Career Coach, an online search tool where students can explore hundreds of potential careers in the region and match their career goals with the degrees and certificates offered at BBCC. Promotion of Career Coach in the second year of the WSSN grant resulted in 1,249 visits to the site, with 227 resumes created and 264 Strong Interest Inventory assessments completed.

To track the WSSN services that were created or expanded as a result of the initiative, BBCC has been using a campus-wide card swipe system. The card swipe system—developed as part of a Title V grant—allows students to swipe their BBCC ID cards whenever they receive services. This has allowed for more accurate tracking of student progress and use of services across campus.

College officials quickly recognized that information about WSSN services would need to be integrated into existing points

of contact with students. “We didn’t believe that most of our students would seek out financial coaching, but that these kinds of conversations and needs would come up authentically in our work with students,” officials said. BBCC determined that the best option to reach students in a way that that was sustainable and would provide a bundle of services was to train their existing student services staff to be financial coaches. As a result, several student services staff went through financial training with the Prosperity Center, a local community-based organization offering financial classes and coaching. BBCC partnered with the other WSSN colleges in Washington State—Highline College, Walla Walla Community College, and Clark College—to train staff using the Central New Mexico Community College Financial Coaching Training model. BBCC now has eight certified, trained financial coaches working in Financial Aid and Workforce Education Services.

Strong faculty and staff education and buy-in has been a cornerstone of BBCC’s efforts to integrate the WSSN model into the college’s organizational culture. The college purchased a copy of *Blindspot: Hidden Biases of Good People* for every full-time employee and used this common reading as the basis for workshops and campus discussions on different issues related to better serving students, including understanding bias and the power of words; diversity in the hiring process; poverty, and disabilities. While these discussions helped improve awareness, BBCC leaders note that “we still have some work to do to reach everyone. Many of the WSSN services are still seen as available for certain student populations rather than all students.”

More recently, BBCC introduced the Viking Food Pantry. The college had initially intended to create workshops around information about the Affordable Care Act, but soon recognized that food insecurity was a more pressing issue for its students. The college pivoted to address this issue, developing a relationship with the Moses Lake Food Bank that resulted in a sustainable food source to serve students in need.

BBCC leaders note that while some of their efforts can be best described as “trial and error,” adapting to student needs and implementing programs and services that will serve students over the long-run has been a guiding principle. “One practice that we are proud of is the sustainability of what we have built through the WSSN initiative,” college officials said. “We slowly built our services and bundled services with sustainability in mind.”

3. IMPROVED DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS SYSTEMS

The initiative has helped colleges improve data collection and analysis systems to ensure better tracking of students receiving services and better communication with staff and faculty so they receive timely information and feedback to monitor student progress.

High-performing colleges have all made significant progress in the demanding task of strengthening data collection and analysis systems. At the same time colleges that have not made as much progress recognize the need to improve in these areas to strengthen their programs.

Collecting and managing student data is simultaneously critical to the success of the WSSN initiative and the most idiosyncratic challenge, as most colleges already have multiple data tracking systems that they have to adapt and integrate to track WSSN services. Nevertheless, WSSN colleges report progress in this area across most campuses. Most notably, colleges reported increased investment—both time and resources—to create more robust data systems and trained staff in the use of that data to better serve students. In most cases, campuses have worked to better integrate and centralize data so staff are able to enter and retrieve data on students in a comprehensive and user-friendly system.

The following profile of Patrick Henry Community College (VA) shows that the college has taken practical steps to address some of their students' biggest challenges. But their efforts have been far reaching, and the establishment of an internal student monitoring system that combines extensive non-academic and academic intervention data has been crucial in helping better identify student needs, determine what's working and not working, and help the college monitor the success of WSSN as a whole.

TRANSPORTING STUDENTS TO SUCCESS: Patrick Henry Community College

Located in rural southern Virginia, Patrick Henry Community College (PHCC) students face a major challenge before they even get to campus: transportation. Many students do not have a car they can use (or money for gas), and the public bus service in the area is limited and often difficult for students to navigate.

Recognizing this fundamental issue, PHCC officials sought to provide students with emergency transportation assistance as part of the WSSN Education and Employment service pillar. PHCC provided bus tokens, gas vouchers, and minor car repairs to 160 students in year two of the grant—a significant increase from the 13 students served in year one.

PHCC also started a program called Skills to Wheels. A local car dealer donates vehicles and students can either earn a vehicle through a payment plan or scholarship. Three students have been awarded vehicles and are no longer dependent on public transportation. One student is now at Virginia Commonwealth University, and two others will graduate from PHCC by year's end.

Since transportation is students' biggest barrier, PHCC has attempted to bundle career services, employment services, and access to benefits with transportation services. However, not every student is prepared for additional services when they initially seek assistance. "Some are just beginning and although they have needed emergency transportation assistance, they have not been ready for some of the other items within this bundle," officials say. "Our challenge now is to retain those students and ensure they come back for assistance in those categories."

Bundling and sequencing services has been a key strategy for PHCC, with particularly notable effects in its Middle College program, which works with cohorts of 18- to 26-year-old students to help them earn GEDs and career readiness certification so that they can transition into college and work. Middle College students receive a comprehensive and carefully timed bundle of services on their way to earning their GED, including college credit for the first-year College Survival Skills course, a financial education course and financial coaching through United Way/WSSN staff, access to benefits through the Department of Social Services and the West Piedmont Workforce Investment Board, tutoring services, and assistance with transportation.

"Middle College has students who need four different subjects and are at different academic levels," PHCC staff notes. "It is easy to see why a timeline would be important."

PHCC also bundles low-touch services through its first year College Survival Course and through services such as free tax preparation integrated with FAFSA completion in partnership with United Way and the Educational Opportunity Center (EOC) on campus.

Another critical component for implementing the WSSN initiative at PHCC successfully has been the development of a robust data tracking system. PHCC had long collected data for ATD, but information was kept on spreadsheets that required significant time spent on data input and verification. To better track services, PHCC developed MyCompass, an internal tracking system, to help capture data on all three WSSN pillars. This database is able to pull in information from the SIS system when needed to combine with academic information for data and reporting purposes. MyCompass provides extensive details on the types of service provided, including whether it is high- or low-touch, who received the service, associated costs, and which pillar services fall under.

PHCC leaders believe that the changes they have been able to make through WSSN have been extremely valuable. "The importance is proven in the retention and completion rates of these students," officials note, "but more importantly we see it in their faces each and every day and hear it as they tell their stories to others as they go along their educational journey."

Kelsey Crossman is just one student who's experienced that journey. She moved to Virginia with her mother from a small farm in Kansas and enrolled in the Middle College program at PHCC. During her time at PHCC, Crossman received a variety of WSSN services that helped her earn her GED and a gold level National Career Readiness Certificate. She received transportation assistance in the form of bus tokens and a gas voucher and ultimately received a vehicle through the Skills to Wheels program in recognition of her hard work. She qualified for public benefits, but she decided not to take them, moving into an apartment on her own and learning to budget her money wisely. Crossman soon became deeply involved in PHCC as a member of the Student Government Association and the President's Student Leadership Cabinet.

Crossman graduated with an associate degree in general studies with a 4.0 GPA and transferred to VCU, where she is currently studying medical research. The increased confidence, self-sufficiency, determination, and a love for learning that she now possesses are a direct result of the services provided through WSSN.

INITIAL LESSONS LEARNED

Just as important as WSSN's progress in serving low-income students are the lessons learned through the process. These lessons inform not only the current WSSN college partners, but expand the knowledge base from which ATD and our member colleges draw as we work to build institutional capacity and help more students succeed. Key lessons learned from the WSSN initiative include:

- **WSSN is a catalyst for cultural change on campus.**

WSSN holds significant promise for driving institutional change and reorganizing services—both academic and non-academic—to better serve the whole student and help students to overcome a wide variety of challenges that we know often interfere with their ability to persist and attain their goals. In the first two years of WSSN, a diverse set of colleges attacked key issues on their campuses, learned more about how to serve and reach students, and, over time, introduced effective ways to reach large numbers of students with what they needed when they needed it.

- **ATD colleges are well positioned to use the model.**

The greater the capacity colleges have to integrate services, address individual student needs, use and analyze data, change policy and practice, bolster teaching and learning, and advance equity on campus, the more impact they have when introducing WSSN. Institutions that have already invested in capacity building through ATD are more likely to be in a position to implement large solutions like the WSSN model and are most successful when they are able to use the WSSN framework as a catalyst for integrating the various student success initiatives.

- **Managing data capacity is demanding.** Building data collection capacity and data integrity continues to be a significant challenge for community colleges and is an area in which ATD will be looking to provide increased support for partner colleges. Some colleges are still collecting data manually and pulling that data from multiple data-entry points resulting in data that are either not very useable or a process that is cumbersome. Most of the colleges have invested time and resources to create data systems so that staff are able to enter and retrieve data on students in a comprehensive and user-friendly system. Nonetheless, even the more sophisticated data-oriented colleges have more work to do in this area.

- **WSSN requires strong relationships with external partners.**

Community colleges are particularly effective in introducing non-academic services, accessing public services, building careers, and helping students gain the skills they need to manage finances when they reach out to the community to involve business and public-sector partners. The colleges that have done the most for their students had some of the most vigorous partnerships—with financial-service and transportation companies, food-service providers, community service organizations, and others. Colleges also must develop data-sharing agreements with the local community and state agencies. For the college, this warrants developing stronger internal and external connections and shaping policies to support implementation.

PARTICIPATING COLLEGES AND STATE PARTNER ORGANIZATIONS

Arkansas Consortium	California Consortium	Virginia Consortium	Washington Consortium
Arkansas Association of Two-Year Colleges	California Community Colleges Chancellor's Office	Virginia Community College System	The Washington State Board for Community and Technical Colleges
College of the Ouachitas (Malvern, AR)	Cabrillo College (Aptos, CA)	Danville Community College (Danville, VA)	Big Bend Community College (Moses Lake, WA)
East Arkansas Community College (Forrest City, AR)	Cañada College (Redwood City, CA)	Eastern Shore Community College (Melfa, VA)	Clark College (Vancouver, WA)
North Arkansas College (Harrison, AR)	East Los Angeles Colleges (Monterey Park, CA)	Northern Virginia Community College (Annandale, VA)	Highline College (Des Moines, WA)
Phillips Community College of the University of Arkansas (Helena-West Helena, AR)	Los Angeles Harbor College (Wilmington, CA)	Patrick Henry Community College (Martinsville, VA)	Walla Walla Community College (Walla Walla, WA)
	Los Angeles Southwest College (Los Angeles, CA)		
	Porterville College (Porterville, CA)		
	Skyline College (San Bruno, CA)		



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ABOUT ACHIEVING THE DREAM

Achieving the Dream leads a national network of more than 200 community colleges dedicated to helping their students, particularly low-income students and students of color, achieve their goals for academic success, personal growth, and economic opportunity. Achieving the Dream is working toward closing achievement gaps and accelerating student success through a change process that builds colleges' institutional capacities in seven critical areas. More than 100 coaches and advisors and 15 state policy teams are working throughout 35 states and the District of Columbia to help Achieving the Dream reach more than 4 million community college students.

FOR MORE INFORMATION ABOUT ACHIEVING THE DREAM:

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