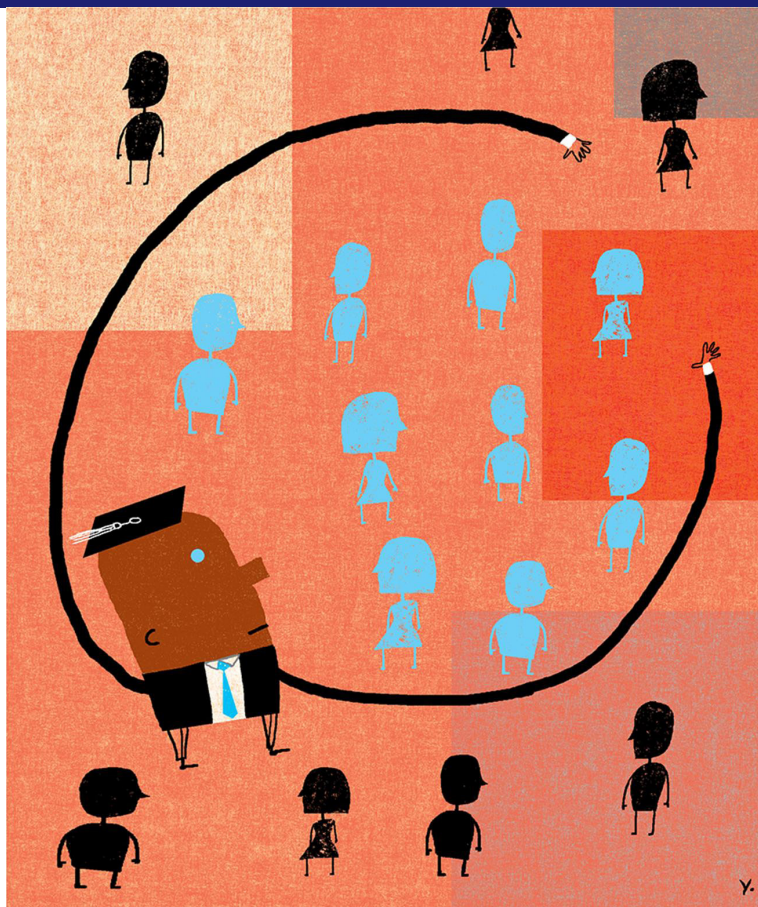




Achieving the Community College Dream

William E. Trueheart



This article has been adapted from the text of the keynote address given by Bill Trueheart, President and Chief Executive Officer of Achieving the Dream, at the NTL member's meeting on August 26th 2011, the theme of which was: Diversity, Inclusion and Social Justice: The Dream, The Research, The Practice

Nearly ten years ago, a small group of visionaries assembled to discuss a *dream* - a dream that every American community college student would finish what he or she started, whether a single parent, a student from a broken home, or an immigrant who spoke English as a second language. The group had a dream that those students and millions of others like them would earn important, life-changing education credentials that would lead to better jobs and higher quality lives. The dreamers knew that, on average, as the President of Wake Technical Community College has said, most of these students could, at best, enter community college making about \$8 an hour but that, if they could persist through school and earn a college credential, they could leave making about \$18 an hour, and they would have also changed their lives and the lives of future generations.

Persistence and completion of college credentials was the fundamental challenge. Fewer than half of students who entered community college with the goal of earning a certificate or degree were able to meet their completion goals six years later. And those numbers were worse for low-income students and students of color and, worse yet, no one was talking about it.

Back then, the conversation among community college leaders turned centrally on enrollment. Leaders spent a lot of time discussing how many students filled the college's seats each term, in large part because enrollment determined the amount of money each college would receive from the state each year. But they had never discussed what happened to these men and women after the first day of classes - whether they went on to complete even a single course, never mind persist through with sufficient grades to earn a certificate or an associate's degree or to transfer to a four-year institution.

The dreamers believed that community colleges should be as successful at retaining and graduating students, particularly students of color and low-income students, as they were at enrolling them. Thus began an institutional change and academic reform movement, *Achieving the Dream*, that encouraged key leaders on each campus and key leaders in the community college sector to begin to have 'Courageous Conversations' about students success and completion.

A handful of community college presidents and trustees joined the dreamers and began a series of 'Courageous Conversations'. These determined leaders acknowledged



their unspectacular student retention and completion rates, and vowed that things were going to change. At San Jacinto College, for example, the Chairman confronted his Board with the college's low success rate, pushed for an immediate and profound decision to shift to a student success and completion agenda, and then proposed a one dollar per credit hour annual tuition hike for all students, with 100 percent of the proceeds directed toward student success initiatives on campus – and the Board room broke into applause!

San Jacinto was not alone. After decades spent concentrating on open access, many community colleges across the US began acknowledging the hard truth that the vast majority of students were not meeting their educational goals. More and more colleges began making student success both an immediate and long-term priority.

And so it began - a national reform movement focused on fundamental institutional and state policy changes. It started as a dream, and is now the nation's largest and most bold non-governmental reform movement for student success in higher education history! With nearly 200 institutions, more than 100 coaches and advisors, and 16 state policy teams working throughout 32 states and the District of Columbia, Achieving the Dream now helps 3.75 million community college students have a better chance of realizing greater economic opportunity and achieving their dreams.

As you can imagine, the task of improving student success is very difficult but it is extremely important. For that reason the dreamers grounded the mission firmly upon three pillars, that continue to fortify us at every turn.

- 1) The first and foremost pillar is a 'Student-Centered Vision'. Helping *all* students - particularly those with the toughest barriers – achieve their educational and career goals is of paramount importance. When we are engaging students directly, listening to them, and tailoring our responses to their needs, we are attuned to the 'true north' of the Achieving the Dream internal compass.
- 2) The second pillar is 'Equity and Excellence'. Achieving the Dream is dedicated to *excellent* education for *all* students. When an achievement gap exists between one subset of students and another, this represents an opportunity to make changes that bring about a more equitable educational environment.
- 3) And the third pillar is 'A Culture of Inquiry, Evidence, and Accountability'. A hallmark of Achieving the Dream is our commitment to *evidence-based* decision-making. The Achieving the Dream Network uses quantitative and qualitative data to stimulate reflection and discussion, and to inform decisions designed to revolutionize curricula and student support to achieve better and enduring student outcomes.

These three pillars lend strength, discipline, and focus to our work. Our work is based on four approaches, which together with our three pillars, make up our Theory of Change, and work as mutually-reinforcing levers to accelerate and sustain student success.

- 1) The first lever is 'Institutional Change'. With Achieving the Dream support that includes direct coaching and technical assistance, we have an ever-growing set of institutions that have committed to our Student-Centered Model of Institutional Improvement. The institutional change model is based on four principles and five-steps, which I will outline shortly. This institutional change model helps frame the work for the colleges, helps keep the focus where it belongs, and builds momentum over time.
- 2) The second lever is 'Policy Change'. We are influencing public policy, particularly legislative agendas, by advocating for the development and implementation of student-centered reforms and policies. And, of course, state policy changes and institutional improvements mutually reinforce one another.
- 3) The third lever is 'Developing New Knowledge'. Achieving the Dream engages partners to conduct research on success strategies and meaningful metrics for educators and the community college sector at large.
- 4) And finally, the fourth lever is 'Engaging the Public'. Through our network which is the nation's largest network of community college reformers, we have established a common understanding of the barriers to student success and forged commitments to a shared success agenda.

To understand how Achieving the Dream works on college campuses, I will tell you a little about an extraordinary institution - El Paso Community College, the 2011 winner of our most prestigious award: the Leah Meyer Austin Institutional Student Leadership Award - affectionately known as "The Leah". In 2003-2004, 98% of students entering El Paso Community College needed at least one developmental course. Let me say that again in a different way: only 2% of students entering El Paso Community College were fully ready for college whereas the other 98% needed at least one remedial class.

El Paso began working with Achieving the Dream and implementing our Student-Centered Model of Institutional Improvement, which includes the four guiding principles:

- 1) Committed leadership
- 2) Use of evidence to improve programs and services
- 3) Broad engagement
- 4) Systemic institutional improvement



and the five-steps:

- Step 1: Commit to Improving Student Outcomes
- Step 2: Use Data to Prioritize Actions
- Step 3: Engage Stakeholders to Help Develop a Plan
- Step 4: Implement, Evaluate, Improve Strategies
- Step 5: Establish a Culture of Continuous Improvement

Together with their Achieving the Dream Leadership Coach and Data Coach, El Paso's leaders used their data to design and prioritize institutional change strategies, which led to the development of a College Readiness Initiative to ensure that more high school graduates would secure a place at college level. El Paso faculty and staff worked closely with local school districts on curricula and student preparation, and hosted orientation meetings explaining the importance of placement tests to students and parents. Throughout it all, El Paso had an open approach and engendered broad engagement, particularly among local school superintendents and community advisory groups.

The results? While overall enrollment at El Paso grew (from Fall 2003 to Fall 2009), fewer students required developmental education, and those who did required fewer developmental courses.

- Developmental reading enrollments for first-time-in-college students **dropped** 24% (from Spring 2006 to Spring 2008).
- Developmental writing enrollments for first-time-in-college students **dropped** 37% (from Spring 2006 to Spring 2008).

Indeed, together with Achieving the Dream, El Paso has realized:

- a reduction in the number of students who need developmental courses
- an improvement in the performance of students who are placed in developmental courses
- an increase in completion rates in gateway courses
- and an increase in graduation rates

Based on the evidence, El Paso is scaling their College Readiness Initiative. And with their newfound emphasis on degree completion, they have modified their longtime motto: "El Paso Community College: A Great Place to Start," by adding "El Paso Community College: The Best Place to Finish."

El Paso's progress is promising and must be accelerated across the country, because the very foundation of our

economy depends on increasing student success. For the first time in US history, the current generation of college-age Americans will be less educated than their parents' generation, and yet our workplaces require a higher level of skills than ever before. A recent report by our Board member, Tony Carnevale, and his colleague, Stephen Rose from Georgetown University, found that "The United States has been *under-producing* college-going workers since 1980." Carnevale and Rose assert that the US needs to add an additional *20 million* post-secondary educated workers over the course of the next 15 years to make our level of educational attainment *comparable* with other developed nations..." The report also revealed that the "supply [of post-secondary educated workers] has failed to keep pace with growing demand, and as a result, income inequality has grown precipitously."

For me, helping meet this national challenge is very important, very urgent, and very personal. I ask you to bear with me as I share reflections about some of the challenges I faced and the caring people who made such an enormous difference in my life. I grew up in Stamford, Connecticut, a city with plenty of wealthy residents; however, my family was not among them. Until I was fourteen years old, we lived in a racially segregated housing project in Stamford called Southfield Village. That is hard to believe, but it is true. Later we lived in a renovated garage that, for several years, did not have indoor plumbing. My parents were both domestics, and I worked with them all through elementary, middle, and high school, tending to wealthy folks' yards and cleaning their houses. My father never finished third grade and it was not until I was in college that I realized he could not read or write well. My mother completed high school, but she did not go on to college. Actually, I never knew anyone in the projects who had a college degree. My parents were hugely supportive of my learning and always stressed the importance of getting a good education, but they never discussed my going to college, not even after my junior high school guidance counselor placed me in the college preparatory track in seventh grade. That counselor became a life-long mentor and friend and, while I took all the college preparatory courses through high school, I was never sure I would attend college even after being admitted to the University of Connecticut (UCONN). Several teachers and another valued friend, my high school guidance counselor, urged me to apply to college. So thank God for them, I did.

When I got to UCONN, I made friends with lots of students including upper-class student leaders who urged me to run for freshman class president. So I did and won. Shortly after my election, the head of Plant Maintenance, a Caucasian, congratulated me and offered to help in any way he could. He connected me to good paying jobs in the area, and he and his family have been life-long friends. I was inspired by faculty and staff and several of them remain life-long friends. My experiences at UCONN were so rich that I returned there to work for several years. The president of the University, Homer Babbidge, became a life-long friend and mentor and he urged me to apply to graduate school. So I did and was admitted to Harvard.



By now the message I am trying to convey should be clear. I had lots of very strong support - from my family and from teachers, faculty, administrators and fellow students: all people who really cared and wanted me to succeed, and helped me to see and seize opportunities that I did not know were there or even possible. The fact that so many gave so much to help me inspired my life's work.

I write this article during these daunting economic times, fully aware that *millions* of students' hopes and dreams are at stake. A recent interim evaluation of Achieving the Dream Round 1 colleges affirmed that the colleges have enhanced their leadership commitment to student success and completion, increased their research capacity, and developed strategic interventions to enhance student achievement – all of which are essential to the creation and nurturing of cultures of evidence on their campuses. Also, according to the report, several Round 1 colleges made significant progress against Achieving the Dream's five outcome indicators. The colleges that had not made significant progress were facing very common community college reform challenges, including difficulty with engaging adjunct and full-time faculty, scaling promising initiatives to reach more students, and strengthening institutional research and data analysis capacity.

Recently, I have asked several NTL representatives to serve on an Achieving the Dream Advisory Council (Ted Tschudy, Fred Nader, Lucia Edmonds, Mila Baker, and Robert Marshak) and Achieving the Dream hired Beverly Fletcher to serve as Senior Director of Organizational Development. Together, Dr. Fletcher and the Council will intensively examine and monitor our Institutional Change work and reform challenges. The NTL perspective will be invaluable for Achieving the Dream to meet the nation's education challenge. It must be done. We will not rest. This partnership between Achieving the Dream and NTL and the work that is ahead of us reminds me of a line from a wonderful poem by Langston Hughes called *Dreams*:

“Hold fast to dreams
For if dreams die
Life is a broken-winged bird
That cannot fly.”

Let us hold fast to this important mission that all community college students can achieve their dream.

BIOGRAPHY

Dr. William E. Trueheart is President and Chief Executive Officer of Achieving the Dream, a national nonprofit organization that helps more community college students succeed, particularly low-income students and students of color. He earned his BA degree in political science and economics at the University of Connecticut, his MPA at the Harvard University John F. Kennedy School of Government, and EdD at the Graduate School of Education at Harvard University. His honorary degrees include a PhD in Humane Letters from Bryant University, a PhD in Education from Bridgewater State College and a DBA from Johnson and Wales University.

Dr. Trueheart is the former President and Chief Executive Officer of The Pittsburgh Foundation, one of the oldest and largest community foundations in the country, and former President and Chief Executive Officer of Reading Is Fundamental, Inc., America's oldest and largest children's and family literacy organization. Additionally, Trueheart is the former President of Bryant University (formerly Bryant College) in Rhode Island, and the first African American to head a four-year private college in New England.

He currently serves on the Boards of the Commonfund, Inc., Johnson and Wales University. He also serves on the Visiting Committees for the School of Public Health at the University of Pittsburgh and the College of Arts and Sciences at the University of Connecticut.