

## With Great Challenges Come Great Opportunities:

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### *Promising Practices of Texas Community Colleges*

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# Executive Summary

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Enrollment at Texas community colleges has increased substantially in recent years. New White House initiatives focusing on community colleges have brought renewed interest to this integral sector of the higher education system. Texas community colleges have a multitude of diverse missions, from academic degrees to technical certifications, remedial education, recreational self-fulfillment courses, and more. This diversity of student and community needs poses significant challenges to a community college's ability to produce successful outcomes for its students and community.

TG's Center for Financial Aid Policy in Community Colleges commissioned a report to examine how high-performing Texas community colleges were meeting those challenges. The mission of the center is to inform community colleges of policies, best practices, and strategies that assist community college practitioners and stakeholders to maximize effective student service, enrollment, retention, default prevention, and graduation rates.

In this report, a qualitative approach was used to gather descriptive information from three top-performing Texas community colleges: Northwest Vista College, Temple College, and Wharton County Junior College. These schools were chosen for their higher than average persistence, workforce placement, and Pell recipient rates and for their lower than average cohort default rates. Across the three colleges visited, four common themes were discovered. These themes highlight new and existing strategies that are successful in improving student outcomes, and they may serve to encourage other community colleges to examine their current initiatives.



# Key Findings

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***Culture of improvement*** — The institutions described in this report are open to change and constantly seeking improvement in order to help students succeed. The administrations that welcomes new ideas, and that message is communicated and embraced by all levels of the institution. These schools look for innovative ways to minimize barriers and maximize the return on limited resources. As a group, the schools:

- Gather and utilize data
- Seek grant funds
- Promote process improvement

***Significant faculty and staff involvement*** — Faculty members at these institutions serve dual roles as educators and liaisons to the community workforce. As a result, the faculty has significant input into the development of programs and curriculum as well as accountability for students' success. Faculty members are active participants in providing guidance to the college in their current and future initiatives. At these institutions, faculty members:

- Take attendance and interact with students one on one
- Must participate in professional development
- Have significant input on curriculum

***Student-focused*** — Students are perceived as valued partners in the educational experience, rather than as products. Students receive individual attention to assess their personal issues and goals. These community colleges constantly seek new ways to keep students engaged in an effort to improve retention and completion rates. These schools:

- Provide a one-stop shop of student services
- Employ multiple communication tactics that keep students informed
- Develop individualized academic and career plans for students

***Community outreach*** — By serving the community, these colleges bridge the gap between the needs of employers and the student population. The economy thrives due to a robust workforce, and the community as a whole is better served by an educated constituency. These schools never lose sight of their purpose — to support the communities that support them. These institutions:

- Promote early college awareness programs
- Provide community access to college resources such as the career center
- Build strong relationships between the faculty and local business leaders

# Introduction

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The community college has been an increasingly integral component of the Texas higher education system since the first such institution in the state opened its doors in 1921 in Weatherford. As a primary path to higher education for many Texas students, community colleges serve multiple objectives. These include maintaining an open access pathway to higher education, offering diverse educational curricula, and providing resources for job training. The community college must manage its many objectives in order to fulfill the wide-ranging needs of its students and the community it serves. Community colleges that secure resources and implement solutions to meet this challenge show promising outcomes for their students. In this report, three Texas community colleges with proven success in student and community outcomes shared their perspectives on their institutional philosophies, programs, and services. This report provides a summary of recurring themes discovered among these institutions to help guide community colleges as they formulate future initiatives.

## Role of Community Colleges

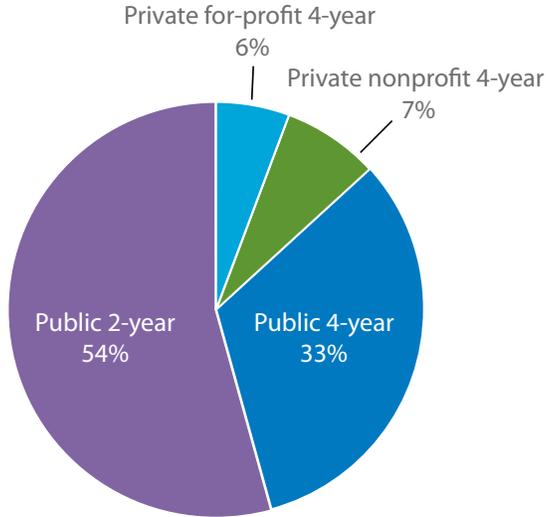
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The spotlight on the community college's role in higher education has never been brighter with the current administration's initiative to graduate an additional five million community college students by 2020. President Barack Obama has signaled his administration's belief in the vital role of community colleges by allocating \$2 billion to fund the Community College and Career Training initiative through the 2010 Health Care and Education Reconciliation Act (White House, 2010). These federal funds will provide community colleges with more resources to innovate and provide support services for their students.

Enrollment at Texas community colleges is increasing substantially. According to recent enrollment data, a little over half of all undergraduates in Texas are enrolled in community colleges. Eighty-two percent of all freshmen at Texas public higher education institutions were enrolled in 2-year colleges in the fall of 2009 (Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board [THECB], 2009). Nearly 700,000 students were enrolled at 2-year public schools in Texas in the fall of 2009, a 22 percent increase in just five years (THECB, 2011). In comparison, Texas 4-year public school enrollment increased just 10 percent during the same period. The relatively greater proportional increase in enrollment at community colleges in Texas may be partly attributed to differences in enrollment policies across higher educational sectors.

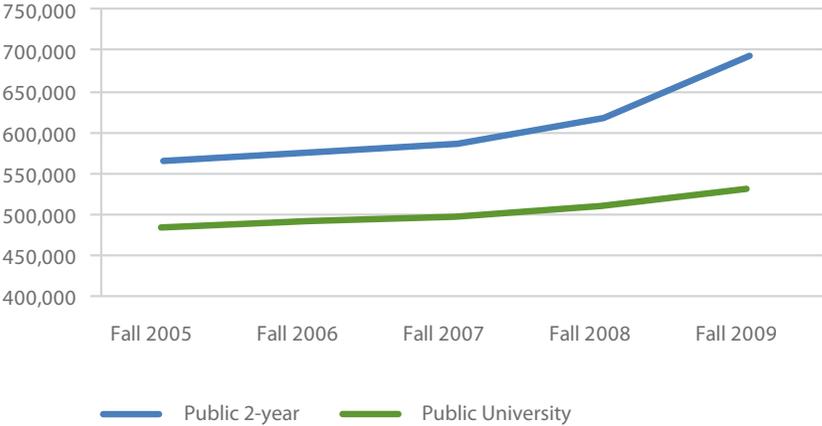


**Chart 1: Enrollment by Sector, Texas Schools**



Source: NPSAS, 2008

**Chart 2: Enrollment Changes Over Time, Texas Public Schools**

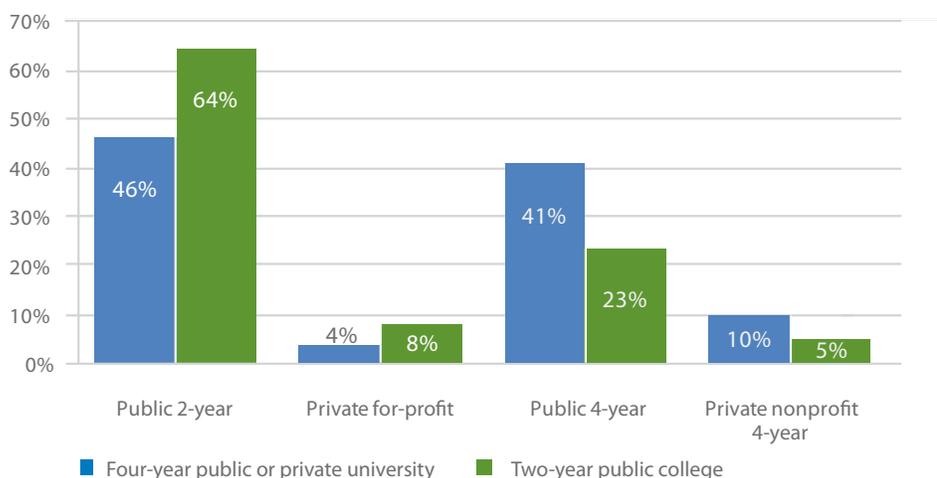


Source: THECB, 2011

All Texas community colleges are open admissions institutions, which admit students regardless of academic qualifications. In contrast, only two 4-year colleges in Texas are classified as open admissions colleges. As open admissions institutions, Texas community colleges are able to provide services to a diverse population of students, some of whom are unable to enroll in a 4-year college for a variety of reasons, including economics, geography, or academic preparedness. Without community colleges, many students in Texas would be unable to pursue opportunities for higher education. With 50 public community college districts, nearly every person in Texas has proximal access to a local community college.

Texas community colleges serve a diverse student population. Sixty-four percent of community college students are classified as independent students, and 46 percent are considered first-generation college students. Community colleges also serve a greater percentage of lower income students, with roughly 65 percent of community college students coming from families that earn less than \$40,000 per year, compared to just 35 percent of students enrolled in 4-year schools.

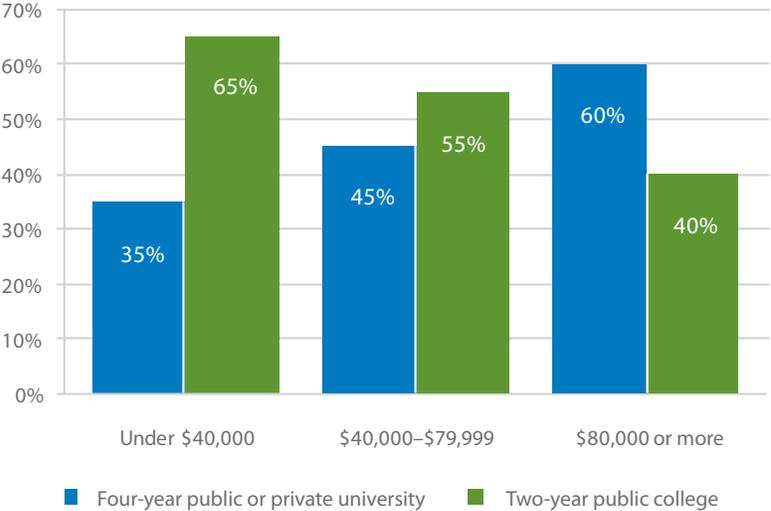
**Chart 3: Dependency Status, Texas Schools**



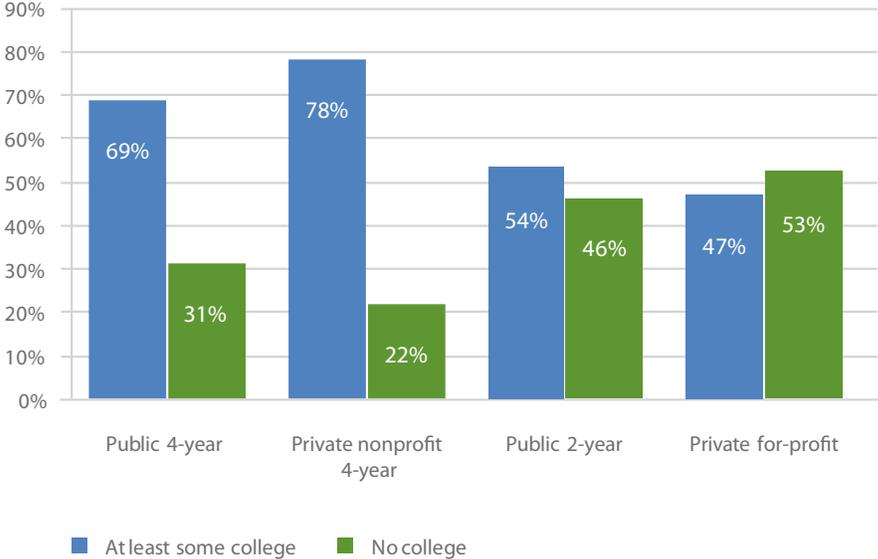
Source: NPSAS, 2008



**Chart 4:** Type of Institution Attended by Dependent Undergraduates, by Parents' Income (AY 2007–2008)



**Chart 5:** Parent's Highest Education Level, Texas Schools



Source: NPSAS, 2008

Many students from lower income families choose to enroll in community colleges because tuition and fees are lower compared to 4-year colleges. As TG has previously reported, students with financial barriers are less likely to enroll in postsecondary education and graduate with a baccalaureate degree (TG, 2009). Among Texas high school students who graduated with a college preparatory diploma, students considered economically disadvantaged are 18 percent less likely to enroll in postsecondary education than those not considered economically disadvantaged. Those who do enroll in higher education are 13 percent more likely to enroll at a community college than at a 4-year school (TG, 2009). Low-income students are especially sensitive to price, making the lower tuition and fee costs at community colleges very attractive to many students.

**Chart 6:** Tuition and Fees, Texas Schools (2009–2010)

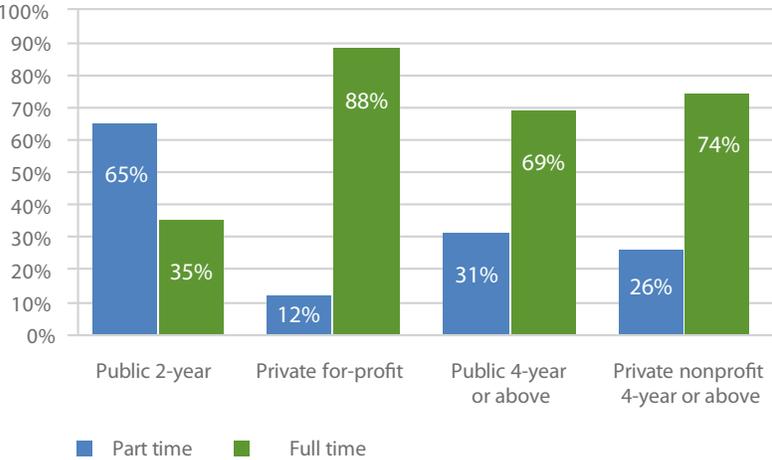


A fundamental role of community colleges is to provide students with the skills needed to meet local workforce requirements. According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, by 2018 nearly half of all new jobs and one-third of total jobs will require a postsecondary degree. Occupations that necessitate an associate degree will be among the fastest growing (U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2009). Community colleges offer educational options that span the gamut. Basic skills courses, such as English as a second language and remedial classes, are available for those not academically prepared for college-level coursework. Students who intend to transfer to a 4-year school are able to begin their college journey with freshman- and sophomore-level core coursework. Students may also earn licensure or certification in their vocation of interest. Community colleges offer educational opportunities that fit an array of higher educational goals.

# Community College Challenges

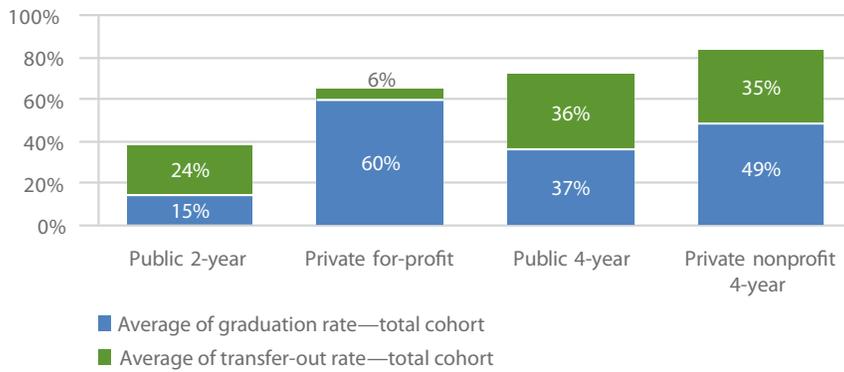
Providing students with multiple educational products is not without its challenges. As enrollment continues to climb, community colleges must react to exploding growth while continuing to provide each student with the services, support, and education needed to succeed. Historically, community colleges have struggled with student success as measured by performance accountability systems. The latest data from the Department of Education’s Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS) indicated that on average 15 percent of community college students graduate with a degree or certificate (Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System, 2009). Aspirations are high among students at first enrollment, as 45 percent report that they hope to transfer to a 4-year college in the future; only 24 percent of students do so, however. The IPEDS postsecondary graduation and transfer rates operationally include only first-time, full-time undergraduate students. With 65 percent of community college students attending school part time and many returning students, the rates derived from IPEDS may not be telling the whole story of community college student success. Even so, the low graduation and transfer rates at community colleges are a cause for concern.

**Chart 7: Attendance Pattern by Sector, Texas Schools**



Source: IPEDS, 2008

**Chart8:** Graduation and Transfer Rates by Sector in Texas



Source: IPEDS, 2009

There are many reasons for low success outcomes. Many community college students exhibit risk factors for dropping out. The National Center for Education Statistics identifies seven characteristics that signify a greater than average risk of attrition (Horn, 1996): delayed enrollment, lack of a high school diploma, part-time enrollment, financial independence, having dependents, single-parent status, and working full time while enrolled. The population of community colleges comprises greater numbers of students with one or more of these characteristics (U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2008). A student who exhibits multiple risk factors may experience overwhelming challenges to completing higher educational goals. Many community colleges understand these barriers, embrace the need to address student challenges, and work toward strategies to enable students to reach their individual higher educational goals.



# Methodology

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A qualitative approach was employed to gather descriptive information from top-performing Texas community colleges. The case study methodology is most in line with the research aim of gaining insights rather than hypothesis testing (Noor, 2008). To identify top-performing institutions, we used a combination of persistence and workforce placement rates derived from available Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board data (THECB, 2006–2007) and data provided by the Department of Education on Pell recipients and cohort default rates. An objective criterion based on these data points was used to operationally categorize institutions as high-or low-performing schools.

The three high-performing schools selected comprised one rural (Wharton County Junior College), one urban (Northwest Vista College), and one midsized (Temple College) school. Although not representative of all Texas community colleges, the selected schools gave us a varied picture of the current community college landscape. Interviews conducted at each campus included multiple levels of personnel, from the college president and faculty to staff and current and former students. An effort was made to gain perspectives from staff members working in key student support departments, such as the advising, registrars, and financial aid offices. In sum, nearly 30 individuals provided perceptions of their colleges.

# Results

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A qualitative analysis of the information collected from these interviews was conducted by multiple researchers. Across the three colleges visited, four common themes were discovered. Schools exhibited (1) a culture of improvement, (2) high faculty and staff involvement, (3) student focus, and (4) valued community outreach.

## Culture of Improvement

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Higher education systems have seen an increasing emphasis on performance accountability (Dougherty, 2005). The three campuses we visited actively participate in initiatives to promote change and improve success at their institution. They demonstrate dedication to improvements in multiple ways: by seeking grant funds to expand and create new initiatives, gathering data to monitor performance, implementing improvements informed by data, and relying on evaluations from faculty and community members. The overall intent of these initiatives is to improve efficiency and effectiveness across programs and services offered to promote student success.

One key to success is having the necessary funding available to make needed improvements. It has been suggested that funding at the federal and state levels for community colleges has historically been inequitable compared to other public degree-granting institutions (Mullin, 2010). The institutions we visited seek out grant funds from available sources to supplement their budgets. As evidence of this, all three schools were selected to be a part of Achieving the Dream, a multiyear national initiative directed at helping community college students succeed.

Achieving the Dream stresses gathering, analyzing, and using data to make informed decisions about future institutional initiatives. The institutions we visited already had a culture of improvement instilled in faculty and staff and were able to welcome and implement the needed improvements suggested by the Achieving the Dream program. The presidents of these schools stated that their institutions are able to gather and analyze more data than ever before because of participating in this initiative. For example, one college indicated they were able to use data analysis strategies to tackle a long-standing problem in a new way. Historically, this school had not been successful in increasing minority enrollment. However, with the new staff and tools afforded them through grant funds, they were able to identify a need for financial aid packaging changes and implement strategic initiatives to make an impact on enrollment among minority students.

Grant funds enable these institutions to expand and create programs that serve the changing needs of its students. Limited fiscal resources are often a barrier for new programs and services to get off the ground. Community colleges spend a greater percentage of their budgets on instruction when compared to public and private research institutions (Mullin, 2010). In order to test pilot programs, expand current services, and serve more students, these schools turn to external sources of funding whenever they are available. One school was able to furnish one of their health services programs with state of the art equipment through grants. The new equipment led not only to increased enrollment in the program, but also to nearly 100 percent placement rates following degree completion because of the cutting edge training.



Acquiring external funding allows school administrators more flexibility in where to target limited resources to make the most impact. To make informed decisions about which improvements would make the most impact, institutions rely on both structured assessment processes and informal feedback gathering. This includes program assessments at multiple intervals and formation of advisory committees. The administrators at these institutions place a high priority on using the results of evaluative processes to make decisions in the best interests of the institution and its students.

One of the ways that community colleges stay well informed on areas in need of improvement is through the use of annual assessments. The results identify opportunities for improvement and gaps in performance. Administrators collaborate with faculty and staff in incorporating assessment results in strategic planning. Faculty and staff recognize that the annual assessment process is an important contributor to the decisions that impact the future direction of the institution. Throughout the many interviews, all faculty and staff were able to communicate their institution's strategic plan and their department's most recent annual assessment results. That a range of campus personnel conveyed these messages consistently demonstrates that administrators at these schools were effective in communicating the value of periodic performance monitoring.

Program improvements are often driven by evaluative feedback. Specifically, vocational programs are evaluated at least twice per year because timely feedback is crucial in maintaining competitiveness and relevance to the local business community. Identification of weaknesses in these vocational programs is largely the responsibility of advisory committee members, comprised of faculty and local business leaders. Committee members have strong ties to the local business community, which is crucial in keeping abreast of cutting edge developments in the industry. The vocational programs we visited are objectively successful, with completion and placement rates higher than peer institutions. The success of these programs may be partly attributed to the advisory committee members' strong connections to local industries and their dedication to scrutinizing program coursework. The advisory committee's candidness in recommending program changes provides an example of the internalization of the culture of improvement philosophy.

Constant improvement requires continuous oversight of performance indicators. This oversight allows schools to increase efficiency where it is most effective. The presidents at these campuses have a clear understanding of areas that need improvement, and they prioritize those improvements according to the colleges' strategic plans. The schools we visited are aware of their shortcomings and are using multiple approaches in order to be responsive to changing student needs.

Process improvement is a major focus of one of the campuses we visited. At this institution, the staff was struggling to meet student needs during peak registration times. The school implemented a regular evaluation process at the end of each registration cycle to devise strategies to address needed process improvements prior to the next registration period. From this evaluation process the school discovered that staff were stretched too thin and were not able to accommodate the high volume of students during the contracted registration period. Increasing staff size would be ideal; however, limited funding has made that option prohibitory. The staff instead made process improvements directed at ease and efficiency of course registration, which in turn resulted in fewer students needing individualized attention. Improving the ease and efficiency of the registration process provided students with the tools to help themselves, and also enabled the staff to spend time giving quality one-on-one attention to students who needed a bit more of a helping hand.

Helping students along throughout their college journey is the fundamental goal of all the campuses we visited. With that aim in mind, schools are proactive in formulating and implementing the steps necessary to make the outcome of that college journey successful. Institutions recognize that a student's success requires many helping hands, a principle illustrated in their focus on interdepartmental cooperation. For example, one campus prioritizes cross-training among various student support departments so that staff can help students immediately when they pose questions. This cross-training produces highly knowledgeable staff, and solidifies the mindset that helping students with their needs is everyone's job. This cross-training also produced the added benefit of allowing support staff to step in when needed in multiple departments.

This flexibility among staff member roles enables institutions to effectively serve students, even during peak levels, without having to hire more staff. In cases where the staff cannot directly assist students, students can be escorted to the staff member who can provide assistance. Staff members feel rewarded when they are able to provide personal attention to students and are proud when the students they help succeed.

The culture of improvement is a philosophy created at the top, but it needs all levels of campus personnel to promote it effectively. At the institutions we visited, administrators are effective in communicating this philosophy, and faculty and staff members work tirelessly to support it. The administrators, faculty, and staff recognize that they cannot become complacent. In order to maintain their institution's reputation of producing successful outcomes for students, they have to remain proactive in developing and implementing improvements at their institutions.

## Faculty and Staff Involvement

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Higher student engagement with faculty and staff is empirically associated with higher rates of student retention (Pascarella, 1991). The institutions we visited recognize this relationship and instill these values in the faculty and staff, so that an engaged faculty and staff is a hallmark of these campuses. Faculty and staff are active in supporting and mentoring students, and the schools place a high priority on offering and sometimes mandating professional development activities.

One essential tool that may facilitate active engagement between faculty and students is classroom size. At the institutions we visited, administrators create environments conducive to high student engagement with faculty by offering courses with small student-to-faculty ratios. Small classrooms allow faculty members to form personalized relationships with students. Small classroom sizes also enable faculty to be well informed of student attendance and, in turn, to initiate contact with students in need of support services. It was evident throughout the interviews with campus personnel that the faculty and staff had internalized the value of active roles in supporting and mentoring students.

Academic support delivered intrusively rather than passively leads to positive academic outcomes (Cuseo, 2007). The faculty and staff at the community colleges we selected for site visits are highly engaged with students. Faculty members commonly reach out to students who have missed classes. Two of the campuses we visited incorporate early attendance warning systems, whereby both faculty and staff contact struggling students via telephone and email to offer timely support services. This early alert system is an important tool for advising staff to initiate contact with students and insist that students utilize available campus support



services, such as tutoring, student accommodations, or computer labs. Staff will also counsel students one on one about any other challenges to attending classes. The campus personnel we spoke with were adamant in their belief that this system was crucial to producing successful outcomes and getting students back on track to reaching their higher educational goals.

Active engagement by faculty and staff is one predictor of higher retention and persistence rates. Another important predictor is the level of student satisfaction (Bean, 1983; Noel & Levitz, 1995; Noel, Levitz, & Saluri, 1985). Satisfied students stay at the institution and are more likely to complete their programs. They are also highly engaged with faculty and staff (Astin, 1977). The community colleges we visited do not discount the value of interpersonal relationships between campus personnel and students. Many of the students we spoke with were impressed by the level of personal support they receive at their schools. Student support staff made it a point to ask questions about a student's personal life as well as academic life. This approach enables staff to offer more comprehensive advising assistance to students and to help students make realistic decisions about time management, school work load, and career goals.

Student satisfaction at these institutions also derives from the overwhelmingly positive perceptions of faculty members. Students repeatedly mentioned that the faculty they engage with are enthusiastic and accessible. The atmosphere is one where faculty members are approachable and students are not intimidated to ask for help. In our conversations with current students and alumni, the majority described at least one faculty member as the driving force in their academic and career decisions.

Providing knowledgeable assistance to students requires continuous professional development (Cuseo, 2007; National Institute of Education, 1984). Administrators at the campuses we visited understand that an emphasis on professional development is needed to strengthen the student–faculty relationship. Professional development is not only available but often required. One of the colleges we visited requires new faculty to participate in a yearlong professional development class that meets weekly. The school believes that mandatory training provides faculty members the necessary tools to offer superior support to students and helps solidify the school's culture and values.

Administrators also recognize the value of faculty input in the future direction of the institution. The schools promote an atmosphere of openness to faculty input on a continuum of institutional issues, from specific issues such as curriculum development and change to more global issues impacting the institution. The institution demonstrates high esteem for the faculty by enabling them to dictate the curriculum of academic and workforce programs. The schools we visited allow faculty to drive the curriculum on varying levels. Curriculum change is a transparent process at these institutions and often comes directly from the suggestions of the faculty. The faculty is encouraged to contribute input on curriculum changes and bring forward suggestions to create a curriculum that best meets the needs of the students, institution, and business community.

Input from faculty on specific issues also influences the institutional direction on other more global dimensions relating to campus operations. Administrators signify the value of faculty and staff feedback on a variety of issues by maintaining a sincere open door policy. The college presidents at each of the institutions

we visited create informal arenas for open dialogue with faculty, staff, and students. One school takes the focus group a step further by creating a monthly gathering of faculty and administrators dedicated to soliciting feedback on the institution's successes and needs for improvement. These proactive tactics help administrators better understand their school's needs by absorbing perspectives from those most actively engaged with campus life on a daily basis.

Incorporating viewpoints from a wide variety of valued contributors within the institution provides important avenues for maintaining future growth of and demand for the institution's programs and services. This emphasis on continuous feedback in conjunction with highly engaged faculty and staff helps the institution guide students toward successful outcomes. In turn, the perception among students that their institution, their faculty, and their staff are committed to their individual success spurs them to achieve their higher education goals.

## Student Focused

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Students are the priority at the community colleges we visited. These schools help each student with their individual goals. People from all walks of life come to community colleges to achieve a wide range of goals. These colleges also realize the importance of getting students involved in the institution and in their own learning, so they empower students to engage in the process. They also encourage involvement and share knowledge through a variety of communication methods.

Treating students as individuals matters greatly in a community college setting. Their diverse student body has a wide assortment of needs. There isn't a "typical" student at the schools we visited. The staff and faculty see each student as an individual with unique goals and challenges. Students are encouraged to formalize their future plans early so that staff and faculty can help them develop their personal degree plan — one that gets them to their goal while also fitting into their lives. There are general guidelines to follow, but the staff also tries to address each student's personal situation to help them create the ideal plan. Each student has a different definition of success and may need a different path to get there.

One tactic that these schools use to provide individualized attention is a rigorously monitored and enforced attendance policy. Small class sizes at these community colleges enable professors to get to know their students by name, helping them to effectively enforce attendance policies. Faculty and staff have systems in place to monitor absences and try to help students get back on track. At one school, students can be dropped from a class if they miss a certain number of classes. The faculty keep up-to-date attendance records so that students can be contacted if they get close to the threshold. The advising department at this school acknowledges that enforcing the attendance guidelines has been their most effective tactic at keeping students enrolled.

Schools must balance the need for strong attendance and other policies with respect and support for their students through student empowerment. A key feature of the student empowerment that we saw was the development of and involvement in social groups. One school we visited went so far as to hire a staff member responsible for community building on campus. Faculty members are encouraged to sponsor student groups, and work-study students are encouraged to get the word out to their peers. These schools are aware of the



difficulty of getting community college students involved in campus life. By and large, these are commuter campuses, many of these students don't attend full time, and many of them work off campus. Providing and encouraging opportunities for social interaction, though challenging, helps to reduce attrition, because students who are more engaged with the institution are more likely to persist (Tinto, 1987).

Students are also empowered by being given opportunities to provide input. Student input is highly valued as a way to evaluate staff and faculty, improve processes, and improve the institution as a whole. At one school, the president and vice president conduct a focus group with students each semester to learn about policies, practices, and issues from the student perspective. At another school, the college's president schedules a recurring monthly coffee break in which any faculty, staff, or students can chat in an informal setting. All three schools we visited utilize course evaluations and student satisfaction surveys to obtain student input.

Another aspect of student empowerment involves making institutional processes as easy as possible for students. When students can navigate their school's bureaucracy without needing help, they feel capable and empowered. The schools we talked to worked hard at making institutional processes as simple as possible. All three schools have some degree of cross-training between student services departments and physically place the departments as close together as possible. Each department works to simplify their processes so that staff time can be freed to focus on tougher issues. Students at one school said the institution makes it straightforward for people to get an education. At another school, the mission is to be student-centered and make processes easy for students to navigate. Bureaucracies such as community colleges are not inherently easy to navigate, but the schools we talked to endeavor to make it as simple as possible.

Of course, in order to utilize available resources, students must know those services exist. Communicating with a very diverse group of students can be challenging. Students have varying degrees of comfort with technology. One student may not feel comfortable with email, while another student responds best to text messages. The community colleges we talked to sought to overcome this barrier by repeating their messages frequently and using a wide variety of methods to connect with students. Campus website updates, posted signs, newsletters, text messages, and social networking sites such as Facebook might all be used in the hopes that at least one method would reach each student. The Lumina Foundation's Emerging Pathways research has found that adult learner success is tied to how the institution communicates with students and recommends giving students easy access to information about student services (Pusser, et al., 2007). One school we talked to takes that message to heart. In addition to the regular student orientation at the beginning of the semester, they have a one-minute orientation in certain classes on different topics each week. These one-minute orientations effectively inform and remind students of the resources available to them. They also tape a newsletter to the inside of bathroom stalls with information timed to coincide with the weekly orientations, as yet another way to remind students of available services. This school even designed a "one-stop shop" setting to make it truly simple to access these student services.

The "one-stop shop" philosophy for student services means that students can talk to anyone in student services and still find the help they need. One campus put all their student services departments, such as financial aid, advising, and placement, in one building to make it as easy as possible for students to find the help they need. The staff within these departments are cross-trained, so no matter where a student might end up, they would find someone who could help them or could direct them to the right person. According to the students we spoke with, the one-stop shop made it simple to get the help and information they needed to move forward.

A wide range of services and programs are offered to community college students to give them the tools, information, support, and skills they need to succeed. From online tutorials, study buddies, and tutoring centers to career advising, 4-year college liaisons, and bridge programs, students have a multitude of resources to utilize.

## Community Outreach

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Facilitating collaboration among the institution, students, and the community lies at the heart of a community college's role. Raising awareness of the college and its resources among local residents and business members provides one avenue for building such collaborations. The community colleges we visited focus on building collaborations in three ways: immersing campus personnel in the community, inviting local residents to explore the campus, and providing forums for business members to actively participate in making decisions about the college's future workforce curriculum. These initiatives help build and maintain the college's standing as a valued contributor to the local community.

The colleges we visited recognize that in order to increase awareness of the college's resources, they need to raise educational aspirations and knowledge about college within the community. One campus promotes higher educational attainment with an early college awareness program in local primary and secondary schools. This program includes campus personnel as well as current community college students in outreach activities. For the primary school audience, current college students captivate the minds of younger students with engaging puppet shows about college. The animated puppets share with the youngsters the rewards of higher education in a fun, appealing format. For the secondary school audience, the college personnel and campus leaders present college information in a question and answer format. This format enables current college students to motivate high school students and increase educational aspirations from the peer perspective. The colleges we visited use early college awareness programs to spread the word in the community that access to college is in their own backyards and that others like them are taking advantage of this higher education opportunity.

Another approach to raising awareness of a college's many resources is to invite local residents to the campus. All three campuses we visited share their valuable resources in informal events such as letting community members stop in to explore the campus or visit various resources as well as through organized events such as spring flings and job fairs. The colleges invite local high school students to visit the campus to explore the college and see what a day in college is like. Visiting students are encouraged to experience the life of a college student by sitting in on classes, eating in the dining halls, and browsing the campus bookstore. Visiting the campus further instills in students' minds that the college experience can be a reality in the near future.

Enthusiasm about sharing the college's resources with local residents was pronounced across all three campuses. One college invests significant resources in its career center as a result of increasing demand. An online tool to assist in the identification of career choices, a fully equipped career development center with computer workstations for career searches, and advising staff who counsel patrons on career options and resume writing are all free to anyone with interest. The college emphasizes planned social activities at multiple intervals throughout the year to promote fun and community on campus. Campus events are clearly a high priority for the colleges we visited.



A community college is not just a place for students to learn, but also for local employers to actively participate in shaping the future workforce in their community. Local businesses understand the importance of having an active role in college job fairs, career days, and internship opportunities. The emphasis on participation in these events allows the college to facilitate networking between students and local employers.

Participation at events is not the only way business members are involved in campus activities. Key community members serve actively on campus committees that determine changes needed to current workforce programs. The college relies on committee members' expertise and background in the business community to guide the campus in the future directions of various workforce programs. Campus administrators often solicit the committee members' feedback on which programs should be expanded or reduced, what curriculum improvements are needed, and how prepared the college's alumni are in the workforce. The colleges we visited understand that the inclusion of community members on such goals relating to academic programs and noncredit college and community-based training programs can strengthen the pipeline of students entering the college in the future (Jenkins, 2011).

There was a feeling of excitement and energy among the campus personnel we talked to, as well as a belief that expanding the resources to the residents that need it is an institutional mission. All three colleges have expanded their campus locations to meet the steady growth in higher education needs. One campus not only expanded the number its affiliated campuses, but also made an effort to immerse itself physically in the community. A stand-alone office in the heart of the city was established to make access to information about the college convenient for nonstudents. This initiative sent the message that the college is ready, willing, and able to provide rewarding opportunities to the community's residents.

# Discussion

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The three community colleges we visited shared their insights into the promising practices that are helping students reach their higher education goals. Attitudes that emphasize an openness to implementing change in the spirit of helping students succeed are communicated from the top and embraced by all levels of the institution. Faculty members who serve dual roles as educators and liaisons to the community workforce are integral to student success. Students are perceived as valued partners in the educational experience rather than as products. The promising practices of these institutions guide students toward the pathway to achieving their individual higher educational goals.

The visits also shed light on areas that necessitated additional improvements. Administrators and staff alike were candid about sharing their current deficiencies. Across the three campuses, administrators and staff struggle with systematic methods to implement metric-driven improvements, services heavily dependent on staffing, and a lack of focus on alumni. These institutions recognize future and current challenges, and many had processes in place to evaluate and implement changes.

While the three schools visited were among the best in the state, they emphasized the continual need for improvement. Many of the promising practices described here require some amount of individualized focus. This level of personal attention takes an enormous amount of staff and faculty time. With enrollments at community colleges on the rise, administrations may need to be proactive about managing resources to address potential staffing capacity issues in the future.

All three schools also recognized room for improvement in the collection, analysis, and use of data. As Achieving the Dream schools, they were already on the pathway to becoming more data informed, but they are all still learning how to use the data gathered efficiently and effectively to positively impact student success. To become more successful at using data, these schools must continue to invest the time and resources on this endeavor.

Targeted areas also in need of improvement include increasing commuter students' involvement in campus life and reaching out to alumni students. Students described their obstacles to participating in student organizations and other events that take place outside of class time. They suggested that the schools create programs and events specifically designed with the commuter student in mind. More convenient times and child care are two ideas that students believe will make a difference in participation. Secondly, we found an absence of any programs specific to providing resources to alumni. Alumni students are an untapped resource who may have the potential to serve as mentors to current students and to act as ambassadors to prospective students and the community. Addressing the needs of commuter and alumni students may improve students' satisfaction with the institution, which may in turn lead to successful student outcomes.



The qualitative methodology utilized in this report is not without its limitations. Specifically, we do not purport that the findings we discovered are representative of all Texas community colleges. We limited our research to just three Texas community colleges that demonstrated objectively positive student outcomes for their students and were in line with institutional characteristics of interest. In addition, the practices we describe are certainly not exhaustive of all the promising practices the schools are implementing. We selectively highlighted the initiatives that are implemented across all three institutions because it was more likely that the outcomes achieved were not unique to the institution itself and could be applied at other institutions in Texas. Lastly, many of the initiatives mentioned are in their infancy. Although their success is unknown, it is important to emphasize that these schools are open to trying different programs and services to see what works best for their students.

These successful schools promote a culture of improvement, conveying an attitude that is amenable to change and improvement from the top down. The college presidents are highly visible on campus and encourage out-of-the-box thinking. This attitude set the mindset for staff and faculty in their service to students. These community colleges seek to be responsive to both students and the communities they serve. A recurring theme involved finding ways to make the processes more efficient and effective for students and staff. These schools look for innovative ways to minimize barriers and maximize the return on limited resources.

At these institutions, students are valued as partners in the educational experience rather than as a product. The emphasis on individualized attention from staff and faculty conveys a message to students that their success is of value to the community. Faculty and staff understand that the majority of community college students balance many responsibilities in their lives, including school, work, and family responsibilities, and they work to provide avenues to success. Timely and effective communication are recognized as key contributors to success, and the schools seek a variety of ways to track, monitor, and reach out to their student populations. These community colleges constantly seek new ways to keep students engaged in an effort to improve retention and completion rates.

Retention and completion rates are also influenced by the quality of the faculty and their dedication to student success. Faculty are recruited and retained for their expertise in the field and for their reputation in the community as a resource. As a result, the faculty has significant input into the development of programs and curriculum as well as accountability for the success of students. Faculty members are not just educators, but active participants in providing guidance to the college in their current and future initiatives.

The focus on students is bolstered by the colleges' promotion of community awareness and participation. By serving the community, the colleges bridge the gap between the needs of the employers and the population. The economy thrives due to a robust workforce, and the community as a whole is better served by an educated constituency. Community colleges function as social and cultural anchors for the public, providing services like libraries, career centers, and counseling. The schools cultivate a college-going culture within the communities they serve, promoting access and success. These schools never lose sight of their purpose — to support the communities that support them.

There has been increasing focus on the community college's role in meeting the changing needs of the American economy. During the first ever White House Summit on Community Colleges, two new multimillion dollar competitive grants were announced to help drive continuing efforts to reshape community colleges. Timely responsiveness to seeking new strategies to move the needle on student success has never had the potential to be more rewarding. The promising practices highlighted in this report shine a light on the strategies that are successful in improving student outcomes, and they may serve to encourage other community colleges to examine their current initiatives.



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## About TG

TG promotes educational access and success so that students can realize their college and career dreams. As a public, nonprofit corporation, TG offers resources to help students and families plan and prepare for college, learn the basics of money management, and repay their federal student loans.

## About the Center for Financial Aid Policy in Community Colleges

The Center for Financial Aid Policy in Community Colleges works to inform community colleges of policy and practices with an emphasis on student financial aid. The Center researches and recommends best practices, professional development, training, information, strategies, and policies which would assist community college practitioners and stakeholders to maximize effective student service, enrollment, retention, default prevention, and graduation rates.

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