

right *from the*

START

AN INSTITUTIONAL PERSPECTIVE ON
DEVELOPMENTAL EDUCATION REFORM

Practitioner Briefs



Acknowledgements

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Series Authors

Right from the Start: Series Overview, Leslie Lass, Achieving the Dream

Adopting and Adapting Compression Strategies, David S. Powell for Achieving the Dream

Adopting and Adapting Computer-Assisted Strategies, Abby Parcell, MDC

Adopting and Adapting Contextualization Strategies, Alyson Zandt, MDC

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Achieving the Dream™

Community Colleges Count

About Achieving the Dream

Achieving the Dream, Inc. is a national nonprofit that is dedicated to helping more community college students, particularly low-income students and students of color, stay in school and earn a college certificate or degree. Evidence-based, student-centered, and built on the values of equity and excellence, Achieving the Dream is closing achievement gaps and accelerating student success nationwide by 1) guiding evidence-based institutional improvement, 2) leading policy change, 3) generating knowledge, and 4) engaging the public. Conceived as an initiative in 2004 by Lumina Foundation and seven founding partner organizations, today Achieving the Dream is leading the most comprehensive non-governmental reform network for student success in higher education history. With over 200 colleges, more than 100 coaches and advisors, and 15 state policy teams—working throughout 34 states and the District of Columbia—the Achieving the Dream National Reform Network helps 3.8 million community college students have a better chance of realizing greater economic opportunity and achieving their dreams.



About MDC

MDC, a nonprofit with an extensive history working to improve the effectiveness of community colleges around the nation, was established in 1967 and manages programs across the U.S. that connect education, employment, and economic security to help people “learn, earn, and save” their way to a place in the middle class. MDC’s strategies, aimed at removing the barriers that separate people from opportunity, include: using data to define gaps and mobilize leaders to create a will for change; demonstrating sustainable solutions and developing them into effective models; and then incubating them so they can be replicated at scale for maximum impact.





Right from the Start: ATD and MDC's Approach

Broad access to quality education and training is essential to a robust economy and an engaged society. With affordable tuition and campuses in big cities and small towns, community colleges make that education and training accessible to thousands of citizens every year. We developed the *Right from the Start* series of practitioner-focused, evidence-based briefs to highlight strategies that support the significant number of students who arrive on campus underprepared for credit-bearing coursework. Serving these students, who often undertake adult basic education and developmental education courses, is an important part of the community college dual mission of access and success.

Series Overview

This overview introduces *Right from the Start: An Institutional Perspective on Developmental Education Reform*, a series of three practitioner briefs on developmental education. Created by Achieving the Dream and MDC, the briefs spotlight successful reform efforts in developmental education at seven Achieving the Dream colleges. —————▶

Designed to help practitioners enhance their work in developmental education—including addressing complex challenges prompted by changes in state and federal policy—the briefs illustrate a variety of approaches for applying current research in developmental education to help colleges

-  Analyze students' needs and create programs to meet those needs.
-  Evaluate students' level of preparation for college work.
-  Assess and refine programs after implementing them.
-  Scale programs that had a successful launch or implement them at scale.

Our hope is that college faculty, leaders, and staff will draw insights from these briefs to inform wide-ranging, creative conversations—focused broadly on new approaches to teaching and learning—that can lead to whole-college solutions for reforming developmental education and for improving equitable access and student success. Ideally, such conversations will engage colleagues across disciplines and comprise department heads, deans, and senior administrators, including presidents and chancellors.

Principles for Ensuring Student Completion in Community Colleges

The campus work reflected in the *Right from the Start* series is predicated on several important principles for how community colleges can ensure their students' success.

Develop an Accurate Profile of Developmental Education Students

According to a report published by the Community College Research Center (CCRC), nearly 60 percent of students who take skills assessment tests when they enter community college are underprepared for college work and therefore need some degree of remediation in writing, reading, or mathematics.¹ Historically, such students have been placed in developmental education classes and routinely have been referred to multiple levels of often not-for-credit instruction. Frequently, students in developmental education become discouraged by the length of time it can take to advance to credit-bearing coursework, and consequently many fail to progress through their studies.

Addressing the complex needs of underprepared students is an urgent challenge for community colleges, especially in light of President Obama's 2020 goal of increasing the number of community college graduates by five million, thereby ensuring a more competitive and equitable workforce.²

¹ See Bailey, Thomas, Dong Wook Jeong, and Sung-Woo Cho, "Referral, Enrollment, and Completion in Developmental Education Sequences in Community Colleges." Community College Research Center Working Paper 15, Columbia University, 2009.

² For more information about President Obama's higher education initiatives, go to <http://www.whitehouse.gov/issues/education/higher-education>

Part of the challenge in meeting this goal is that community colleges attract an increasingly diverse group of students with widely varying backgrounds and goals who come to campus with differing degrees of academic ability and preparation. A typical developmental English course, for example, might enroll students young and older from all walks of life with vastly different levels of English language proficiency and significantly different levels of ability in writing, reading, and critical thinking.

Given this rich complexity, it is vital that community colleges take the time to understand the particular students they serve by conducting a thorough, data-based analysis of student needs before they determine which intervention strategies would best serve their unique student population.

It is critical, too, for colleges to proceed with particular care when analyzing the needs of students who are assessed at two or more levels below college-ready (typically a third of those assessed). Many factors may affect those students' readiness, including poor alignment of curriculum between high school and college, lack of preparation for assessment tests, need for additional services that address basic needs such as financial aid or childcare, and lack of fundamental skills like English language acquisition and arithmetic. Colleges may need to craft different solutions for populations that need support for various facets of college readiness.

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Another factor that colleges need to address is that low-income students and students of color are more likely to place at the lowest levels below college-ready. Failing to support the needs of these students when they first enter college exacerbates the equity gap in student graduation rates and erodes the ability of minority students to pursue academic training options. Because people of color make up a growing share of America's youth, the ability to close equity gaps is an increasingly important component of efforts to improve the rate of college completion for all.

Moreover, given that a majority of community college students may test into at least one developmental education course, a college's capacity to meet its

goals for student completion hinges on a commitment to student success that engages the entire institution and all of its resources in a concerted effort to help students succeed.

Recognize That Equitable Access is a Key to Success for Both Students and Institutions

The term “student success” evokes different meanings. In the context of the three *Right from the Start* practitioner briefs, though, “student success” signifies a successful and concrete result, where students finish educational programs they have started and obtain market-valued credentials for their labors—whether that means earning a workforce training certificate, receiving an associate’s degree, or going on to complete a four-year program of study. To help students succeed in these ways, community colleges have the responsibility to ensure that all students have access to a full range of educational choices and are given equitable opportunities to succeed at whatever it is they may choose to do. Such educational choices can vary widely depending on the student.

For example, students who test one level below college-ready may arrive at school already prepared to persist, and they may be best served by redesigned first-year (or gateway) classes that offer “just-in-time” support such as tutoring. For students who test two or more levels below college readiness, however, this kind of low-touch acceleration might be inadequate. Those students might benefit most from alternative pathways, such as those leading to quality career certificates, and from embedding basic-skills instruction in courses. Others may benefit from intensive developmental education opportunities that help them advance on a transfer-directed pathway.

Understand How to Define and Fairly Assess College Readiness

Being college-ready does not only mean being academically prepared for credit-bearing courses. In groundbreaking research on “productive persistence,” the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching has shown that students who succeed in college do so because they have also acquired the tactical and affective skills they need to negotiate the college environment with self-assuredness and because they have shown the tenacity, or “grit,” needed to persevere in the face of challenges.³ Through similarly pioneering work, the Charles A. Dana Center at the University of Texas, in partnership with the Texas Association of Community Colleges, has demonstrated through its New Mathways Project the importance of helping students acquire a broad range of skills they will need to become successful learners.⁴ We can conclude, therefore, that reform efforts in developmental education are more likely to succeed if they include student success courses and services that offer in-depth information about the college; give students an enduring connection to faculty, staff, and peers; and provide basic skills instruction.





³ For more information about this research, go to <http://www.carnegiefoundation.org/productive-persistence>.

⁴ For more information about the New Mathways Project in Texas, go to <http://www.utdanacenter.org/higher-education/new-mathways-project>

Successful reform efforts in developmental education also include taking a hard look at the way students are assessed and analyzing cutting-edge research in the field, such as that undertaken by CCRC⁵ and the RP Group in California.⁶ Though efficient for the purposes of determining the level of college readiness for thousands of students, standard placement tests do not always place students accurately. This can result in students who languish in courses they do not need or who struggle to keep up in courses for which they are not prepared. Recognizing this, some states and systems are moving toward a common assessment with more diagnostic tools. Others are taking a careful look at metrics that have proven more accurate as predictive measures of student readiness, such as high school GPA. Additionally, efforts to align community college and K-12 curricular standards help ensure a more accurate and fair way of assessing entering college students who have just graduated from high school.

Emphasize Innovations in Student-Centered Teaching and Learning

In focus groups and surveys, students in developmental education often report that they do not feel engaged in their classes because instructors resort too often to uninspiring “skill and drill” approaches. To bolster their reform efforts, therefore, colleges should look toward implementing pedagogical strategies that engage students and support their persistence. Such strategies might include the following:

-  Redesigning curriculum, with an emphasis on student-centered teaching and learning that incorporates students’ prior knowledge and integrates meaningful, real-world instruction and activities.
-  Reducing class size to enable closer student-faculty interaction.
-  Providing ongoing professional development for full- and part-time faculty, with a particular focus on innovations in pedagogy and on sharing teaching strategies that work.
-  Asking students to participate actively in their own learning by helping to develop curricula that respond to their specific needs and by providing ongoing feedback about the instruction they receive.

⁵ See Hughes, Katherine L. and Judith Scott-Clayton, “Assessing Developmental Assessment in Community Colleges.” Community College Research Center Working Paper 19, Columbia University, 2011.

⁶ For information about the RP Group’s Student Transcript-Enhanced Placement Project, go to <http://www.rpgroup.org/projects/STEPS>

Build Whole-College Solutions

Lasting, scaled change is most likely to occur when reform efforts engage a broad range of college practitioners in examining evidence on student outcomes, designing a change process, mastering the skills required to implement new approaches, and refining those efforts over a period of time.

Successful developmental education reform, in particular, requires a broad institutional commitment to widespread change. The effort should start with an in-depth analysis of the role of the faculty, including workloads, equitable remuneration, and leadership opportunities. Also essential is a deep analysis of college culture, existing infrastructure, resources, and capacity for data collection and management as well as a thorough review of all academic programs, related processes, and services in such areas as records and registration, financial aid, advising and counseling, and student health/wellness.

Effective reform efforts are typically framed by an implementation plan that, among other requisites, anticipates the institution- and community-wide impact of a given reform. Such efforts allow for risk taking and experimentation. They also foster collegiality and encourage campus-wide collaboration, intentionally embracing strategies designed to bridge the typical campus divides—such as those between full- and part-time instructors as well as those between academic and non-academic departments and among students, faculty, and staff.

Look Beyond the Borders

Community colleges that have successfully raised their completion rates by undergoing rigorous self-study and by making significant reforms frequently participate in external programs, initiatives, and partnerships that help them define, clarify, and amplify their paths to success. Achieving the Dream colleges highlighted in the *Right from the Start* series, for example, saw improvement in completion rates in part because their committed participation in the Achieving the Dream Reform Network led to wholesale change across their campuses. Similarly, colleges participating in Completion by Design, another reform effort funded by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, also have seen a spike in completion rates—a result of the initiative’s focus on systemic changes in college policies, programs, and practices as well as its emphasis on peer learning and sharing across institutions. In addition, higher education systems in the Access to Success Initiative, a project of The Education Trust and the National Association of System Heads, are working to reduce equity gaps for low-income and minority students and are beginning to see results.

Developmental Education as a Starting Point for Whole-College Reform: Experiences at Seven Community Colleges

If students are going to reach their academic goals and experience equitable access to a range of academic and other programs, it is essential that community colleges support multiple pathways to success and accelerate those pathways through developmental education; however, developmental education should not be the only focus of educational reform but instead should be a starting point that offers an instructive window into broader issues of access and success. Such principles inform the practitioner briefs that constitute the *Right from the Start* series.

The briefs report on successful developmental education reform at the following seven Achieving the Dream colleges:

- ✍ Zane State College, Ohio
- ✍ The Community College of Baltimore County, Maryland
- ✍ El Paso Community College, Texas
- ✍ Patrick Henry Community College, Virginia
- ✍ Bunker Hill Community College, Massachusetts
- ✍ Tacoma Community College, Washington
- ✍ South Texas College, Texas

Engaged in building whole-college solutions to reform, all of these colleges developed strategies for accelerating students through developmental education courses without sacrificing quality of education—both in terms of teaching the academic and critical thinking skills necessary for students to succeed in transfer-level courses as well as teaching them the skills necessary to negotiate a college environment with confidence.

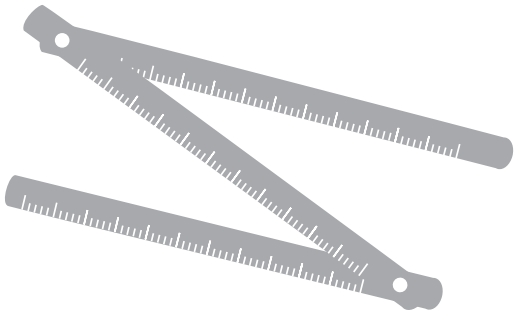
Framing the Reform Efforts

The strategies described in each brief in the *Right from the Start* series are viewed through a common “adoption and adaptation” framework, which emphasizes research and planning and values ongoing attention to the implementation process. Developed by CCRC, this framework grew out of the Center’s extensive scan of developmental education instructional reforms and through field work at 11 colleges engaged in reform.⁷ Importantly, the results of this scan suggest that identifying the right “best practice” is only part of the equation; equally important considerations are “how, where, and with whom” the reforms can work. Designed to generate the strategies, actions, and relationships necessary for building an organizational capacity that sustains true reform, the framework consists of six components:

⁷ See Bickerstaff, Sue and Mary Monroe-Ellis, “Adoption and Adaptation: A Framework for Instructional Reform.” *Inside Out: A Publication of the Scaling Innovation Project* 1, no. 2 (2012).



Adoption



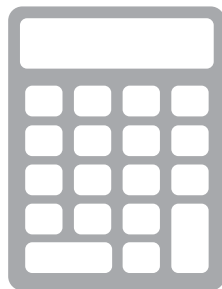
Diagnosis

the process of determining the particular challenge students are facing, identifying institutional barriers, and gathering evidence to demonstrate the need for reform



Selection

choosing a reform model that responds to the challenge identified during the “diagnosis” phase



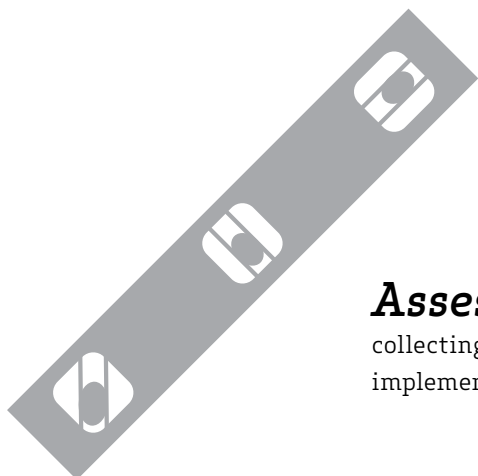
Preparation

conducting activities necessary for a successful reform launch—from curriculum development to space allocation to recruitment



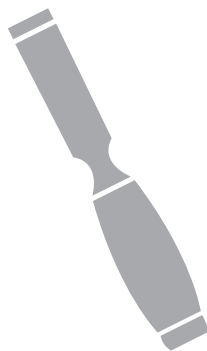


Adaptation



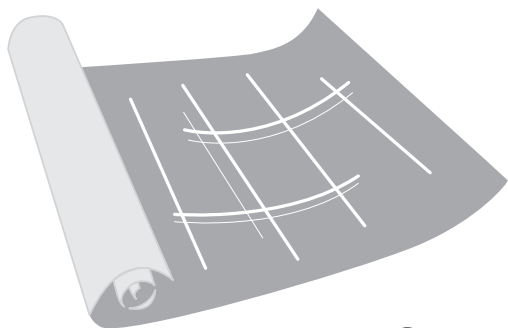
Assessment

collecting and analyzing data about reform implementation and outcomes



Refinement

turning the data gathered from quantitative and qualitative assessment into action, improving instruction, streamlining processes, and addressing unexpected obstacles



Scaling

institutionalizing the reform with the resources needed to sustain it so that it serves all of the students who can benefit

At some point in the process, of course, the reform is launched. CCRC researchers found that, when colleges conducted an assessment early on in implementation, they were able to involve more people in refinements, which led to more successful growth and development of the reform. The graphic on pages 12–13 details these steps and suggests how the components of adoption and adaptation overlap as colleges conduct the complex, non-linear, and sometimes messy business of reform.

The adoption and adaptation structure provides a powerful framework for describing the experience of the colleges featured in this series, even though each of these colleges took unique paths to reform. To further help the reader understand how individual colleges sought to best serve their unique student populations, the three *Right from the Start* practitioner briefs are organized by type of developmental education reforms. Broadly speaking, that work can be categorized as pursuing acceleration of student success via three distinct approaches: compression, technology-assisted learning, and contextualization.

The reform work of the seven colleges is summarized below. More detailed information—including how programs were implemented, data on outcomes, lessons learned, key challenges, and ongoing adaptations—can be found in the briefs themselves.

Acceleration through Compression

Zane State College (Zane) and the Community College of Baltimore County (CCBC) used *compression* strategies to accelerate their students through developmental education. Compression is a complex concept, but in this context it can mean shortening the overall duration of a course but maintaining the same number of instructional hours. It can also mean pairing two courses with complementary content that students take simultaneously.

At Zane, where poverty is pervasive, academic readiness is poor, and as many as 80 percent of students are deemed at risk of dropping out of school, a strong developmental education program serves as an essential lifeline to a growing population of adults—many of them displaced workers who are returning to school to improve their skills and secure a better future.

For these students, who are as much in need of orientation to college and confidence building as they are in need of basic skills instruction, Zane's *QuickStart to College* program combines the more traditional aspects of a math and writing developmental education curriculum with “college survival” information and social and cultural connections. Over time, this program has evolved, largely in response to student feedback. What had initially been a self-paced, asynchronous, online format was abandoned for a slightly longer in-class format, where students meet in a computer lab with an on-site instructor. In addition, the college tweaked its registration and placement process to accommodate the compression option. The effort has resulted in more students completing the developmental sequence. It has also resulted in increased revenue for the college due to increased enrollments.

Like their colleagues at Zane, faculty and administrators at CCBC also studied the needs of their students and determined that different strategies for student success were required. After analyzing discouraging data about the relatively low number of

students who completed a developmental education English class and then passed an English gateway course, CCBC developed the now widely acclaimed *Accelerated Learning Program (ALP)*. Students in the ALP co-enroll in both a developmental and gateway course and move through remediation while they simultaneously complete college-level coursework.

Acceleration through Technology-Assisted Learning

El Paso Community College (EPCC), Patrick Henry Community College (PHCC), and Bunker Hill Community College (BHCC) all use *technology-assisted learning approaches* to acceleration, which enable students to spend varying and individualized lengths of time to master certain core competencies.

In 2004, when EPCC joined the Achieving the Dream Reform Network, nearly 98 percent of students at the Hispanic-serving institution were deemed not college-ready in mathematics, based on the school's placement test. More than 50 percent of all first-time students, both part-time and full-time, tested three levels below college-ready in mathematics.

Determined to find a way to accelerate students through its protracted developmental math sequence to credit-bearing courses, part-time and full-time instructors at the college analyzed what students should know both when they enter and when they finish developmental math. What they learned led them to shorten the sequence from four to three courses and to begin offering courses in

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an emporium model. Emporium courses at EPCC are computer based. Students work in computer labs at their own pace to develop required competencies. As needed, they also receive individual or small-group support from instructors and tutors. During the emporium course, which is 16 weeks long, students can finish all three courses in the shortened sequence if they can demonstrate mastery of the material. If they do not finish during that period, they can pick up where they left off when they enroll in the course again in the following semester. (Students at EPCC also have the option of enrolling in a traditional 16-week lecture course if they prefer.) The college invested significantly in its computer and professional development infrastructure to support these new ways of teaching, which has also led it to reassess how it documents and analyzes success. Today, a quarter of

developmental education students participate in the emporium offerings.

As a result of a statewide developmental math redesign in Virginia, PHCC also implemented a technology-assisted learning program, in this case offered in three different formats. The first format is not unlike EPCC's math emporium. The second pairs a traditional lecture course with modules grouped into eight-week segments. The third, based on the ALP model, allows students who need to complete only a few modules to co-enroll in a credit-bearing course while they enroll in a lab section that focuses on their remedial needs.

In 2007, BHCC administrators, faculty, and staff found alarming trends in longitudinal data that showed particularly low persistence rates among developmental math students. Those data helped the college recognize the need for comprehensive reform and sparked it to rethink pedagogy and redesign curriculum for its math students. The result was a shortened, two-course sequence or, for students who desired to learn at a more accelerated pace, a more intensive approach with the same material compressed into one course; these courses are integrated with tutoring and computer-assisted skill building.

To build consensus among math faculty over time and to address resistance to change, college and department administrators at BHCC also formed faculty work groups that included full- and part-time instructors as well as a mix of those who were new to the college and those who had been there for a long time. In addition, faculty members teaching the new curriculum were given stipends for professional development. Once the new model was in place, the college also addressed other challenges, such as ensuring that these offerings align with financial aid eligibility requirements and integrating shortened courses with traditional schedules.

Acceleration through Contextualization

Tacoma Community College (TCC) and South Texas College (STC) both sought to improve the success of students in developmental education by implementing *contextualization* strategies focused on providing relevant content.

As at Zane State College, which sought to serve students who were at greatest risk of dropping out, TCC redesigned its developmental reading and English courses to improve students' course completion rates and to ensure their successful progression to transfer-level English.

Looking closely at their data for Achieving the Dream, TCC administrators and faculty discovered that students were struggling to navigate and complete the long and complex developmental English and reading sequence. Students who placed in the lowest-level developmental courses in both disciplines were faring the worst. TCC adopted promising practices from Washington State's renowned adult education program, known as Integrated Basic Education and Skills Training (I-BEST), CCBC's ALP program, and the Acceleration in Context project at Chabot College.

TCC's effort focused on curricular and pedagogical changes, supported by significant professional development and space to experiment with the new approach. In particular, faculty inquiry groups have helped instructors better

understand the concept of contextualization and share knowledge about what has and has not been working well in the redesign. The college also recognized the importance of listening actively to and incorporating student feedback in the ongoing process of refinement. As a result, TCC has seen a significant increase in course completion rates in both developmental education and gateway English classes. This, in turn, has led other departments to express interest in adapting the model for their own students.

As part of the Developmental Education Initiative, an MDC initiative to scale up effective developmental education practices, which was funded by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, STC also created contextualized developmental English and reading curriculum. In this case, the college incorporated material and assignments from across the disciplines, thereby offering students—93 percent of whom are Latino or Hispanic—course content that would be relevant to their experiences and that would serve them well in their higher-level courses. Using course completion data from developmental English and reading courses, faculty members have continued to redesign the curriculum and strengthen collaboration across departments.

Final Thoughts

Based on important principles for how community colleges can ensure student success, the three briefs that constitute the *Right from the Start* series document practical strategies for reform of developmental education. We hope they will prove informative for other institutions and perhaps illuminate new pathways for supporting the success of underprepared students.

The adoption and adaptation framework is designed to generate the strategies, actions, and relationships necessary for building an organizational capacity that sustains true reform.

Common Threads

Although the colleges featured in the *Right from the Start* briefs used different acceleration strategies and served students with divergent needs and levels of skill, they drew similar lessons from the programs they implemented:

It's not all academic. As a complement to academic support, colleges must provide developmental students with tactical and affective training that helps them negotiate campus processes, understand college culture, and gain the confidence needed to seek help from faculty and staff.

The personal touch is essential. Relationships developed with faculty, staff, and other students are a key to student persistence and completion.

A thorough, whole-campus plan for reform is imperative. A sound implementation plan that anticipates the impact a reform will have on the entire college community is critical to the success of any program.

Improvement should be data-driven. Interventions are successful, and successfully scaled, only to the extent that they are continually improved and refined through careful and ongoing analysis of data.

Students are not the only ones who need support. If they are to successfully implement reform, developmental education faculty, whether full- or part-time, must have significant professional development opportunities and must be genuinely valued and rewarded for their efforts.

Leadership comes from many quarters. Although the success of reform efforts in developmental education depends on a strong and ongoing commitment from the institution's top administrators, champions of such initiatives can come from elsewhere on campus. Often, passionate, dedicated faculty members spark innovative reforms and keep them going. Institutions that are serious about reform need to recognize and reward those forms of leadership.

Worthwhile reforms need time to flourish. Reforms in developmental education prove their true value only through a process of continuous assessment and improvement.



8403 Colesville Road, Suite 450
Silver Spring, Maryland 20910
(240) 450-0075
www.achievingthedream.org



307 West Main Street
Durham, NC 27701-3125
(919) 381-5802
www.mdcinc.org

