

Achieving the Dream

Annual Narrative – April 2008

Name of Institution: North Central State College

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Achieving the Dream Funder: Self-funding

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I. Culture of Evidence and Inquiry

a. Has the institution upgraded its institutional research capacity this year?

Yes, the Institutional Advancement Division filled an open senior administrative assistant position with a highly talented individual largely dedicated to institutional research. This individual has extensive experience in database management and has proved a tremendous asset in not only generating queries, but also assisting the Institutional Research and Grants Director in analysis. She is a Core Team member and a request is pending with the Interim President to reclassify her as an IR associate.

b. Has there been any change in the institution's use of data in institutional decision-making this year?

Yes, in two major ways. First, the 07-08 academic year was the scale up for gatekeeper course strategies (developmental strategies being the 06-07 year). There had been a gatekeeper analysis in the original proposal which included a selection of high enrollment/high failure rate courses, but the course list was revised in fall 2006. The new list included Basic Composition (ENG 101) and program-level courses in accounting (ACC 111), anatomy/physiology (BIO 121), business management, (BUS 121) computer information systems (CIS 110) and criminal justice CRG 145). The Data Team analyzed trends in: failure rates (WDF and DF), correlation of course failure to stop outs, first quarter attempts, correlation of course success to COMPASS placement, correlation of course success to concurrent developmental coursework, and correlation of course success to credit hours attempted. In addition, focus groups were conducted of students in these courses to identify barriers to success, frequency of barriers, knowledge/actions to

overcome, and recommended changes. The quantitative and qualitative data was presented to program staff, resulting in several changes related to advising, curriculum and instruction (see online interventions). The second major change involved refining the process for faculty and staff teams to propose strategies through a proposal template requiring evidence/data to support the proposal, as well as outcome indicators for tracking success. This is part of the college's new strategic planning model (see online intervention).

c. What institutional research challenges has the college faced this year?

One challenge has concerned IR staff resources, as the Director spends significant amounts of time on grants and implementation projects. While the IR assistant has been a godsend in assisting the Director in management data retrieval and manipulation, she likewise has been assigned projects and tasks not related to IR. Further, the college is currently reliant on a legacy administrative system with somewhat incoherent coding systems, which increases the efforts involved with retrieval. Finally, the college has struggled with presenting a uniform cohort view of gatekeeper math because students may take a variety of first college-level math courses depending on their program, and a few programs don't even require math.

d. Has the institution made use of longitudinal/student cohort data this year?

Yes, and much of this data use came after joining AtD. During the 07-08 year there was significant discussion amongst the Data and Core teams that the original approach was flawed because it entailed comparing cohorts across differing time periods (e.g., three years of data for the 2004 cohort vs. a few quarters for 2007). So the college has attempted to adapt the indicators from the *Achieving the Dream Framework for Institutional Improvement*, and even consulted with the paper's author Davis Jenkins. The largest impacts from adopting this framework entail looking at six quarter outcomes (uniform time frame) for each cohort year. The methodology appears to be working well for developmental courses (tracking percent of students referred) and gatekeeper English (tracking entire cohort because required of all students). Finding a base group becomes more complicated with gatekeeper math because there are so

many “gatekeeper” pathways (including no math at all) as well as with program-level gatekeeper courses.
e. Have you looked at any new data this year to diagnose achievement gaps among groups of students?

Yes, data was disaggregated while researching gatekeeper courses, during a preliminary follow-up report to the college in fall 2007 and during this analysis. In all three instances, cohort students were broken out by age, race and sex. These have been submitted within uploads.

II. Stakeholder Involvement

a. In what ways have faculty and staff been actively engaged in your AtD efforts this year?

Faculty and staff have been tremendously involved through coordination with AtD initiatives, designing new student success initiatives, related Data/Core Team discussions and professional development (first-year experience and tutoring). For example, gatekeeper course faculty were kept apprised during the 2007 data collection phase, and essentially drove several changes based on that involvement. The college’s First Year Experience (success course) program and English department (developmental and gatekeeper) have been exceptionally involved and excited, as have college advising staff. Certain strategies, such as enhanced academic early alerts, have strengthened the relations amongst faculty and staff advisors. However, involvement from the college’s math department remains a concern. The department has experienced significant turnover, including the recent passing of its divisional dean, and is now down to three full-time instructors who try to be engaged in AtD but are stretched thin. Once new positions are filled, fully re-engaging this department is a high priority.

b. How have you involved students in your work this year?

The college sponsored 12 focus groups of 98 total students (two for each gatekeeper course) during Spring 2007 to help explain quantitative data. In addition, more than 600 students took the Community College Survey of Student Success in Spring 2008, which NC State intends to use as an AtD indicator.

c. How have you involved the larger community this year?

Though not formally launched as an Achieving the Dream initiative, NC State drove the establishment of a regional preschool-16 council that syncs strongly with the AtD concepts. The strongest link between P-16 and AtD is the common goal to mitigate the impact of remediation past high school. To this end, the Council is supporting an expansion of the ACT EXPLORE and PLAN assessments for middle and high school students. These assessments provide early indicators of college readiness, and help students explore rigorous high school course plans. The college has also sponsored community updates, most recently one on April 28 involving both the mayor of Mansfield and Mansfield schools superintendent.

d. Has the president participated in your AtD work this year?

Yes, NC State appointed an Interim President in January 2008 who has made clear his commitment to keep AtD elevated as one of the core initiatives of NC State. He attended the Strategy Instituted the day after being appointed, attends every Core team meeting and requested updates for the Trustee Board.

III. Strategic Interventions

Strategy	Most Recent Update Online
Advising, Curriculum and Instruction Strategies in Technical Gatekeeper Courses	4/30/07
Advising, Curriculum and Instruction in Gatekeeper English	4/30/07
Advising, Curriculum and Instruction in Developmental Reading and Writing	4/30/07
Curriculum and Instruction Changes in Developmental Math	4/30/07
Strengthen the College Advising System -- Developmental Math	4/30/07
Establishment of Regional P-16 Council	4/30/07
Professional Development for First Year Experience Teachers	4/30/07
Strategic Planning Process	4/30/07
Community College Survey of Student Engagement	4/30/07

b. Progress in implementing planned initiatives

(1-2): All these initiatives have been implemented or refined as a whole and detailed in the online tool. However, some individual planned actions within these initiatives have been delayed, modified or cancelled as discussed below:

-Developmental math advising. The college initially proposed study guides for each math course to be used with COMPASS assessment, but this was delayed due to turnover in the math department. It implemented recommendation to have students assessing into developmental math take the COMPASS diagnostic, but there has been no aggregate analysis of diagnostic data to assist in curriculum or policy. While protocols were drafted to trigger a math early alert and alerts have increased, the number of alerts is less than other developmental courses. Finally, the new cut-off scores implemented in math has created challenges within the college's large high school dual credit program.

-Curriculum/instruction developmental math. The math department is ceasing a computer-enhanced tutorial incorporated with each class after concerns over effectiveness. The math department is reverting back to a straight lecture format (from proposed lecture/lab) due to difficulty in finding tutors/supplemental instructors. While PLATO lab hours have been extended into evenings (4-7:30) and intermittent Saturdays, there is still an access challenge for some working students.

-Advising/Curriculum/Instruction Developmental Reading and Writing. Due to the introduction of the PLATO lab, lower-level reading was eliminated altogether instead of the proposed conversion to a lab concurrent with higher-level reading. Also, use of the PLATO lab software for developmental writing is inconsistent among instructors, as is the proposal to create an additional week of instructional time by changing the assessment methodology/schedule. PLATO access is also an issue for some students, especially evening. Finally, a writing instructor reports that mandatory tutoring has not been uniformly applied across sections.

-Strategies related to persistence. The original AtD proposal suggested several strategies to help improve student persistence above and beyond those at the developmental and gatekeeper course level. The two

most prevalent strategies included analysis of data related to financial aid, and examining the current advising structure toward development of a new advising model as an AQIP Action Project. Neither of these strategies has progressed far for several reasons as discussed below.

(3): Several obstacles have impacted strategy implementation, including:

-Multiple concurrent initiatives taxing staff/faculty time such as: conversion to a new administrative system, development of the AQIP Systems Portfolio, development of state-mandated core and program-learning outcomes, numerous economic development and community-based partnerships.

-Significant turnover and vacancies in key faculty and administrative positions.

-Difficulty for the Core Team moving from developmental/gateway to persistence issues.

(4): The most important changes next year will entail a more in-depth review of math strategies at the developmental level, as well as creation of strategies to ensure successful completion of the two most common gatekeeper math courses (Business Math and Introduction to Algebra). The college should have in place a new dean, department chair and additional math faculty to help address these concerns. In addition, KnowledgeWorks and the Ohio AtD colleges have agreed on highlighting issues surrounding financial aid, which is also high on NC State's priority list. Further, it intends to dedicate a large share of its upcoming capital campaign in 2009 to scholarship development.

(5): Some interventions were "scaled" from the start, especially related to mandatory placement for math.

The College would like to expand other elements, such as PLATO coverage, but lacks current funding.

IV. Institutionalization

a-b. How have you aligned and integrated AtD work with core activities, processes and policies? Have additional resources been committed?

Even though NC State is self-funding this initiative, in many ways it still faces the same challenges as if this internal annual allocation of \$50,000 were an outside grant. For example, the Core Team struggled this year with balancing how to treat budget requests for FY 2008-09 to roll over funding from strategies in

2007-08. Other pilot strategies didn't even reapply to the Core Team for funding, creating additional questions as to whether renewal or institutionalization was somehow assumed. In addition to institutional dollars, NC State was able to fund certain request out of federal Perkins grant funding (\$13,000) such as additional tutoring, advising and faculty professional development. The college realizes that in the next budget cycle it must develop a more defined transition for institutionalizing strategies.

V. Evaluation

a. What is the current status of your evaluation?

As previously mentioned, NC State have largely adopted indicators proposed from the *Achieving the Dream Framework for Institutional Improvement* (Davis Jenkins, Nov. 2007). Upon consultation with Mr. Jenkins, NC State have grouped cohort data according to "six quarter outcomes". Consequently, the first six-quarter performance of the Fall 2006 cohort can be uniformly tracked against the first six-quarter performance of the Fall 2005 cohort, and so on. The college is prioritizing evaluation on developmental and gateway course completion as these were the first two general strategy areas adopted. The college does intend to fully complete this evaluation template over summer 2008 on all these indicators, including an update for the Fall 2007 cohort with a uniform comparison of "four quarter outcomes" across all the cohorts.

b. What obstacles have you faced in designing or conducting the evaluation?

The design of evaluation has been an evolving process since submission of the original proposal in 2006. When the IR department first attempted a preliminary evaluation of 06-07 results, it struggled with the lack of uniformity in comparing cohort groups, such as the skewness factor from course repeats for older cohorts. Another major obstacle involves the wide variety of action steps grouped underneath general AtD strategy areas, and the difficulty in determining whether these specific action steps had a positive or negative impact on the AtD performance indicators. Also, it can be difficult to grasp the context of major policy changes such as changing the math COMPASS cut-off scores and implementing mandatory placement when making conclusions on longitudinal data. The populations of students in these courses are

now entirely different. The IR department is also struggling with correlating success in gatekeeper math (for which there is no one course) and program-level gatekeeper courses with the high-level “institution-wide” perspective on which the initiative appears to focus. There are numerous other context questions that qualitative research could help answer. While some interviews took place for this narrative, this has also been deficient. In summary, the biggest obstacle and challenge appears to one of setting aside the time to go through all the requisite steps required for an optimal formative evaluation.

How are you addressing these obstacles?

Despite these challenges, the college is making progress in evaluation. The IR/Grants Director attended several evaluation sessions at the 2008 Strategy Institute, and the Core Team is consulting AtD materials and even experts in trying to build a better evaluation methodology. As the college converts to a new student information system (Colleague from Datatel), the IR department is meeting with the IT department to ensure that retrieval of AtD data will become more efficient and effective. They are even viewing presentations from data vendors (e.g., Zogotech) that have provided solutions for AtD colleges. The Core Team has tasked the Data Team with compiling an annual update of AtD activities by the college’s Fall convocation of staff and faculty in September. The Data Team intends to work over the summer refining the evaluation process and following methodology as proposed by AtD (*Evaluation Guidelines*), though a summative evaluation appears premature. It will especially focus on the many steps involved with formative evaluation, incorporating 2008 CCSSE results where appropriate and performing qualitative analysis such as expanded interviews of stakeholders. Ideally the Data team would like to present a four-quarter longitudinal cohort outcome by Fall convocation, but there is a very short window of time between the conclusion of Summer Quarter and start of Fall Quarter. Most likely it will post a three-quarter preliminary report, followed by a final update later in Fall.

c-d. Have you uploaded any evaluative data using the Interventions to Improve Student Outcomes Online Tool? Do you have other evaluative data you would like to share?

Yes, the college has uploaded certain developmental and gatekeeper longitudinal outcome data, including demographic breakouts. It has also attached the assessment plan and results of the College's developmental reading and writing program, a summary of CCSSE observations and documentation from its strategic planning process (including FY 07-08 budget). Finally, the College is attaching to this report the adaptation of *Indicators for Institutional Improvement* that will guide the full evaluation this summer.

VI. Communications

a. How have you shared information/lessons learned from your AtD work within the institution this year?

As noted before, the Data Team does make an annual update report at Fall faculty/staff convocation. Further, more general updates on AtD activities are presented at Spring professional development. In addition, the Interim President has made improving internal communication of college initiatives a priority, and has tasked the Core Team to present on AtD initiatives to various internal college committees such as the faculty caucus, staff caucus, and mid-management caucus. He has also requested that the Core Team leader make a special update to the College Board of Trustees in Spring 2008 in AtD efforts and outcomes to date. This being said, the college has issued few written updates in newsletter or web form in the past year. These communication elements were derailed largely due to a vacancy within the college's public relations position, but this position has since been filled as well as a new webmaster. The college realizes the need to improve in this area, and intends to use data gleaned during this evaluation as a new starting point for updating the website and hopefully restarting the monthly newsletter.

b. How have you shared information and lessons with external audiences?

The college has shared information with community groups, such as the monthly meeting of the Richland County Family and Children's First Council. In addition, the Interim President has set a goal of having the college expand such community presentations as part of an outreach strategy. The only conference the college is aware of which referenced AtD is the national Noel-Levitz conference in which college advising staff discussed its strategies for having 95% of developmental students take the Noel-Levitz College

Student Inventory and attend an advising debrief on the assessment. The Interim President has requested that the Core Team present at the 2009 AtD Strategy Institute. AtD initiatives occasionally appear in the college's quarterly newsletter.

c. Was your institution's AtD work mentioned or featured in a print or electronic media story?

At best, in bits and parts in articles and opinion-editorial pieces submitted to local newspapers. As the college updates its internal initiatives, it only makes sense to transfer some of these efforts externally.

VII. Summary of Accomplishments and Disappointments

a. Briefly describe your one or two greatest accomplishments this year.

AtD continues to bring a needed focus on developmental education that historically hasn't always existed at NC State, despite the fact that most students take developmental courses. It has created new synergy amongst faculty and advising staff to get students to that college-level goal, and continues to spark a variety of new ideas to meet this goal. Nelson-Denny post-levels for developmental reading have tremendously increased as have longitudinal success rates. Even with the math department challenges, longitudinal (6-quarter) success in the highest developmental math is the highest in five cohort years.

Another very noticeable change is the energy and focus it has created amongst gatekeeper English (ENG 101) faculty. ENG 101 is the only course that every NC State student must take to graduate. Consequently, it plugs right into the AtD philosophy of institution-wide change. The English department was extremely engaged during the gatekeeper data collection phase in Spring 2007, and based on this data crafted major strategies such as mandatory tutoring (for both students and faculty) and reduced class sizes. When looking at 6-quarter outcomes, it appears still too early to detect the impact of these strategies but in one short-term view, pass rates for cohort students taking the course in Fall 2007 were 71%, significantly higher than prior Fall quarters.

b. What disappointments or setbacks have you faced this year?

A major short-term need entails refining math strategies at both the developmental and gatekeeper levels. Since increasing the math cut-scores and implementing mandatory placement, the number of developmental sections has mushroomed and the math faculty has done its best to keep up. However, numerous math strategies have stalled as discussed earlier in this narrative, and the college is further raising the stakes next year when it will require all students, regardless of major, to test out of or pass at minimum the highest developmental math level.

Another major disappointment has been the lagging performance of African American students despite being selected as a demographic group in need of strategic intervention. Generally the age (23-29) and sex (male) groups have improved in developmental and gatekeeper English according to the six-quarter outcomes. While outcomes in developmental reading and writing did slightly improve for African Americans, they significantly dropped in developmental math and gatekeeper English. Only one of 23 cohort students from the 2006 had completed the highest developmental math, and only three of 30 cohort students from 2006 had completed gatekeeper English within six quarters.

c. Is there anything else you would like MDC to know about your work this year?

Despite all the challenges making the decision to self-fund into AtD was a very worthwhile. It has forced the institution to move toward a more data-informed culture, brought focus into the core areas of developmental and gatekeeper education and is truly energizing many faculty and staff at NC State. This is an evolving, iterative process that NC State believes will continue to improve over time.