

The Challenges of Scaling

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Scaling up innovations and promising practices in education is a lot more challenging than scaling up successful outcomes in business. If a creative worker at a McDonald's franchise figures out a faster and more cost effective way to add pickles to a hamburger, the infrastructure, the reward system, and the culture at McDonald's are all in place to test the innovation and scale it up rapidly across thousands of other outlets. Community colleges are often challenged to scale up a proven practice in a single department; scaling up a proven practice across an entire institution or across community colleges in a state can be particularly formidable. As reported in the first major evaluation of Achieving the Dream "While colleges instituted a wide range of strategies to improve student achievement under the auspices of Achieving the Dream, a majority of these reforms reached less than 10 percent of their intended target populations — likely too few to make demonstrable progress on improving student achievement overall."

In a 2005 interview, Chris Dede, a thought leader and endowed professor at Harvard, summarized the challenge of scaling up innovations in education. "Scaling up involves closing gaps that exist between the innovation's demands and an organization's capacity." Successful scaling occurs when innovations or promising practices can be applied to large numbers of students and faculty and if the proven innovations are not too costly. Case management, for example, is an effective practice but it is too costly to apply to large numbers of students and should be reserved for students who require more special attention. Other programs require extensive collaboration; scaling up learning communities, for example, requires a change in curriculum structures, interest and involvement of faculty leaders, support from the registrar's office, and revisions in the college catalog and other documents, among many other changes. Colleges need to analyze what will be required to scale up a specific program or practice and whether or not the college has the capacity to do so—and that analysis needs to occur well before colleges decide which programs or practices they are going to implement.

Community colleges that have been successful in scaling up innovations and promising practices have, first, piloted the practice and gathered data supporting its effectiveness. Second, champions of the practice have helped herd it through institutional pastures and have gained support from key leaders. Third, strategies for implementation and evaluation have been designed to scale up the new approaches. Fourth, barriers, resources, and scope have been determined to support the scaling up. Too often, scaling up is something that receives attention after an innovation has been proven effective; guidelines for scaling up need to be applied from the beginning of any initiative to improve and expand student success and completion.

Scaling up practices and programs that work is a key element of the Completion by Design initiative funded by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. Initial funding supports cadres of colleges in four states to create student success pathways that will lead

to completion and attainment of the initiative's goals to double the number of students who complete degrees and certificates with market place value. Each of the projects in the four states will analyze current student success pathways to determine where students are being lost; promising or high impact practices based on evidence will be introduced into the pathways; the projects will be monitored and evaluated to determine effectiveness; the effective models will be scaled up to all other community colleges in each state.

This is an ambitious project, and scaling up effective models to other community colleges in a state presents some special challenges for the Completion by Design initiative. Five of these challenges are noted below:

1. The four college cadres include the leading community colleges in each state. These leading colleges have earned statewide and national reputations for their leadership, innovations, and general quality. Some, if not many, of the other colleges in each state are jealous of the leading colleges and resent their reputations and the attention they receive. This resentment, built up over many years, does not encourage these colleges to adapt a model created by the leading colleges in a state.
2. The Completion by Design colleges will receive significant funding to create and implement a model student success pathway. It will be natural for other colleges in a state to reject participation in scaling up the model because they will receive no special funding as did the pilot colleges.
3. Some colleges will also reject scaling up based on the rationale that their colleges are very different from the leading colleges. Miami is not Lake City, Florida. Houston serves a different population than Texarkana. These excuses not to participate are, in part, relevant.
4. There is a very strong culture in educational institutions, perhaps more pronounced in community colleges because of the emphasis on local control, that what works at a college must be based on the idiosyncratic culture of that college. Colleges demand the right to reinvent their own wheels although many lack the vision and resources to do so.
5. There are three different categories of policy leads in the four states that will play a leading role in the statewide scaling up process. Two (Florida and North Carolina) policy leads represent state departments of community colleges; one (Ohio) represents a state association; and one (Texas) represents a foundation. While it is valuable for the initiative to reflect such diversity among these policy leads, the scaling up process is likely to be quite different for each policy lead. For example, the state departments of community colleges will have the legal authority to implement changes in policy, funding, and evaluation—benefits lacking in the other two agencies. The Communities Foundation of Texas will have access to foundation funds to support the scaling up effort—benefits lacking in the other three agencies. The diversity among the policy leads does allow the initiative to assess the impact on scaling of these different arrangements.

For these and other reasons each of the four state projects should be required to create a strategic plan for statewide scaling from the beginning of the overall initiative. The plan should:

- Frame the project as a major reform effort leading to transformation
- Incorporate the values and benefits the other colleges in the state will gain by participation
- Outline clear strategies the colleges can use to adapt and implement the model student success pathway
- Identify barriers and opportunities in scaling up embedded in state policies
- Design a strategy for involving key stakeholders from the other colleges in the state from the beginning of the initiative to ensure buy-in
- Not depend solely on statewide publications and state organizations to disseminate information and connect the other colleges in the state to the initiative

The ultimate value of the Completion by Design initiative will, in great part, be reflected in the extent other colleges in a state not part of the original cadre adopt the student success pathway as a model and incorporate the programs and practices deemed successful in the pilot. Scaling up is too important to the success of Completion by Design to leave it to whim or chance.