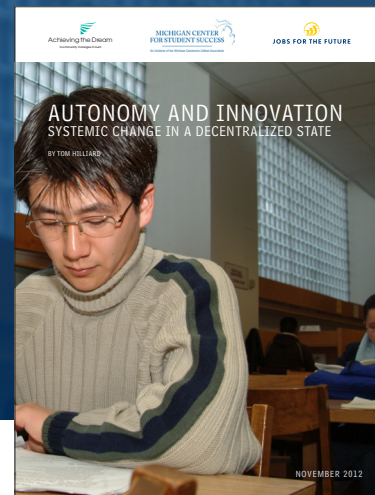


# AUTONOMY AND INNOVATION: SYSTEMIC CHANGE IN A DECENTRALIZED STATE

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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As the student success movement has come of age at America's community colleges, much effort has gone into state-level reforms coupled with college-level efforts, on the theory that relying on individual institutions alone to bring change at scale across states and the nation will take too long and cost too much. But if centralized authority is essential, the student success agenda is in peril. Most states exercise little direct control over their community colleges, instead delegating authority to local and county government. That is why Michigan—the quintessential “non-system” state—is of such great interest. Its 28 community colleges enjoy complete administrative independence, lacking even a state higher education executive officer to whom reports would be formally submitted.

Yet Michigan is far from a straggler in the student success movement. Many of its community colleges are implementing aggressive and creative strategies to strengthen student success at their institutions. Indeed, an outside observer would find few differences in the scale and effectiveness of student success innovation in Michigan and a typical state with centralized authority. Governance structures matter, but they do not destine some states to succeed and others to fall short.

Perhaps the most important driver of Michigan's commitment to student success has been Achieving the Dream, a national nonprofit leading the nation's most comprehensive nongovernmental reform network for student success in higher education history. This is the story of how seven Michigan colleges that joined Achieving the Dream in its early years sought to realize the promise of student success in their classrooms, and how their hard-won lessons influenced peers and gelled into strategic statewide actions with support from the Michigan Community College Association.

## PUTTING STUDENT SUCCESS INTO PRACTICE

Each first-round Michigan college implemented three to five student success interventions under the auspices of Achieving the Dream. Though no particular approach or single intervention was favored consistently by all seven institutions, key groupings of interventions included reform of developmental education; support for the first-year experience, such as student success courses, learning communities, and supplemental instruction; and capacity building to support change, such as professional development of faculty and institutional research and effectiveness.

In focus groups and interviews with administrators and faculty, three key themes echoed across all of the first-round Achieving the Dream Colleges in Michigan:

- > **The centrality of building a culture of evidence:** The planning stage for an Achieving the Dream College begins with a deep dive into its outcomes data, so each college can tailor interventions to the needs of its particular populations.
- > **The importance of faculty participation:** First-round Achieving the Dream Colleges in Michigan solicited faculty input, gave faculty leadership roles in crafting the initiatives, and addressed concerns about the potential for punitive use of data and concessions that might affect collective bargaining.
- > **The importance of learning and refining as you go:** Respondents consistently noted that strengthening student success requires an institutional commitment to a process of learning from reform efforts and refining interventions over time.

## AUTONOMY AND INNOVATION

The lack of a system leader to drive common interventions has not prevented the colleges from forging ahead and making gains. The respondents see value in their autonomy—not only because they can adapt interventions to their institutional context and regional labor market needs, but because they can count on a degree of buy-in that would take much longer to develop were interventions imposed from above.

However, the interviews revealed shortcomings of the non-system approach. Michigan has lacked mechanisms for student success functions that require collaboration or collective action, such as spreading innovation through peer learning, building consensus around the most effective interventions, consistently collecting and reporting outcomes data, and holding institutions accountable for student success outcomes.

Participation in Achieving the Dream compensated for these shortcomings by providing an impetus and structure for campus-specific and cross-college experimentation and learning. Community college leaders, private funders, and state policymakers are now collaborating on long-term strategies to build capacity for collective action at the state level. While other promising opportunities appear to be on the horizon, two stand out:

- > **The establishment of the Michigan Center for Student Success:** With several grant-funded, time-limited initiatives underway, the Michigan Community College Association wanted to play a more proactive, strategic role in helping colleges weave their initiatives into a cohesive whole, sustaining gains and spreading the lessons learned to other institutions. The solution was to establish an organization, the Michigan Center for Student Success, that would support colleges by connecting practice, research, and policy development around student success.
- > **The development of the Michigan Statewide Longitudinal Data System:** Michigan is using federal funding to extend its PK-12 database to include the public higher education sector. The fully operational system will enable higher education institutions to track their own performance on key indicators relative to their peers, as well as the movement of high school graduates and GED attainers into college. These data hold the potential to drive student success to the top of the priority list across the state.

## THE FUTURE OF STUDENT SUCCESS IN MICHIGAN

Respondents were uniformly confident that they will maintain momentum after concluding their formal participation in the five-year demonstration phase of Achieving the Dream. A number of steps could support their efforts:

- > **Utilize the Michigan Center for Student Success to build capacity for collaborative action:** the MCSS should play a pivotal role in supporting peer learning, delivering professional development, and shaping data use.
- > **Support K-12 partnerships:** support partnering efforts and make a greater investment in proven college readiness models.
- > **Review pathways to degree completion framework:** carry out a systematic review of opportunities to better support student success, such as improved advising.
- > **Create clear articulation and transfer policy:** improve articulation of credits, structure a transfer core and support reverse transfer.
- > **Connect P-20 databases:** encourage system linkages and better data use.
- > **Inform and engage key stakeholders:** push against natural inward-facing tendencies.

Seven very different community colleges integrated Achieving the Dream principles into their institutional cultures, and the lessons learned are now spreading to other colleges. Michigan's experience demonstrates that non-system states can build a culture of student success by leveraging the advantages of autonomy, while at the same time acknowledging its disadvantages and developing concrete strategies to overcome them.

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