

Prepared for
Michigan Community College Association

Michigan Center for Student Success: Achievements and Challenges in the Early Years



An Interim Evaluation of the Center

Prepared by
Public Policy Associates, Incorporated

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Public Policy Associates, Incorporated is a public policy research, development, and evaluation firm headquartered in Lansing, Michigan. The firm serves clients nationally in the public, private, and nonprofit sectors at the national, state, and local levels by conducting research, analysis, and evaluation that supports informed strategic decision making.

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The Center's Goals

Background

The Michigan Center for Student Success was established in 2011 to build the capacity around student achievement at the community college level statewide. Driven by economic needs, research, policy, and foundation interests were converging in the years leading up to the Center's formation; the community colleges were operating in an environment with a virtual "alphabet soup of student success initiatives," as noted by Mike Hansen, president of the Michigan Community College Association (MCCA). This situation presented a two-fold problem: (1) in Michigan's decentralized higher education system, coordination on this issue across the 28 community colleges was lacking and (2) the MCCA staff could not take on such a robust agenda.

Thus, the MCCA applied for a grant from the Kresge Foundation to create the Center. The application included a thorough set of priorities based on what work was needed to support the community colleges as they attempted to improve data, curricula, programming, professional development, and other aspects of fostering student success. This three-year plan was formalized after an executive director was hired.

Strategic Plan

The strategic plan for the Center was created in cooperation with an advisory board made up of community college presidents, institutional research staff, academic officers, and others. The plan includes five goals and multiple strategies and actions.

- *Goal 1:* Enhance existing and establish new student success communities of practice
- *Goal 2:* Promote innovation and continuous improvement through the appropriate use of institutional data and metrics
- *Goal 3:* Develop a sustained student success research agenda based on the needs of the 28 community colleges and key questions related to improved student outcomes
- *Goal 4:* Identify areas where common, cross-college innovations and/or improvement strategies warrant concerted state-level action in the form of formal state policy or consensus-driven collective action
- *Goal 5:* Provide strong, effective management of the Center and grant resources

These goals have guided the work of the Center, with each having been given substantial attention during the short time the Center has operated. The plan, with status updates, is provided as Appendix A.

Student Success Framework

In addition to the strategic plan, the Center created a framework to explain its work in the context of student success needs. This framework is used to organize the Student Success Summit the Center hosts annually, as well as other activities.



Early national efforts, like Achieving the Dream—which a number of Michigan community college participate in—help to give the framework depth and focus. The Center has since overlaid all the active or pending programs in the state with the framework, matching each with one or more of the framework’s priority areas. See Appendix D for this matrix.

Findings

Organization

The Michigan Center for Student Success sits in a special position, closely aligned with the MCCA but operating largely independently with regard to daily work, and serving as a hub of student success information and learning for the community colleges across the state. The Center also works with its advisory group and various task groups, which pull in more campus-focused staff and faculty. This interconnection and degree of autonomy seems to be respected by the stakeholders. In this structure, the Center can draw together the community colleges in a flexible manner while also having a strong focus. The connection with the MCCA offers a separate direct line to the college presidents and the board members, layering communications through multiple channels. For example, the Center provides weekly updates to the MCCA board and Center staff participate in MCCA staff meetings. The broader focus of the MCCA is complemented nicely by the Center’s campus-level reach, and vice versa. In particular, the Center has provided the beginnings of a deeper linkage to the staff and faculty of the community colleges.



Figure 1: The Center’s Linkages

As shown in Figure 1, above, the Center has established ties with a variety of partners, from task groups organized to address key issues to policymakers who are the audiences for metrics and research. As the Center has conducted its work, these networks have grown, primarily through the different student success initiatives it has helped to facilitate and through outreach to the community colleges and university researchers. At this stage, the outreach to the K-12 and university partners is still minimal, with focus being on intensive work with the community colleges.

The Center has three staff: a full-time executive director and associate director and a part-time administrative support person. In addition, the Center has contracted with several professionals to provide necessary support to some of its efforts. Overall, the structure is lean, with the two directors taking primary

“The Center is the hub. We need an organization to work to keep us all connected. . . . If left to do it ourselves, I don’t know that it would get done.”

responsibility for communications, meeting attendance and support, spurring and following up on grant and research opportunities, event planning, and other outreach.

The staff, according to stakeholders, are professional and proactive. In the interviews, the Center staff were praised as being good at communicating, and called “very thoughtful,” “really responsive,” and open to input. The survey corroborated these findings. Over 80% (133) of the respondents found the Center staff to be easily accessible. Similarly, about eight in ten respondents (127) said that staff adequately seek out input from the field about colleges’ needs.¹ In the relatively small world of Michigan community colleges, this respect for the staff of the Center is no doubt helpful in gaining cooperation and accessing the campuses at a deeper level. The Center staff have been able to show that they are capable “servant” leaders.

Value-Added Activities

The Center has undertaken an array of activities aligned with its five goals. While not every task described in the strategic plan has been completed, the vast majority has progressed well, and the Center has achieved a remarkable amount in its short

¹ Survey respondents were asked to indicate their level of agreement with these two statements on a scale of 1 (low) to 5 (high), or they could select “don’t know.” “Don’t know” selections to these questions were excluded from the denominator in these calculations. However, approximately one-third of respondents did not know if staff were easily accessible and if staff adequately seek out input from the field about colleges’ needs.

existence. The following sections describe the results of the evaluation for each goal area.

Communities of Practice

Student Success Initiatives

A key area of work for the Center is bringing together community college staff and faculty around student success initiatives and discussion topics to share ideas, practices, questions, and learning. One major way the Center does this is by convening Michigan community colleges participating in the same programs, such as Breaking Through and Project Win-Win. While there is some national-level networking under these programs, the community colleges appreciate being able to talk more substantially with their fellow Michigan participants. Over half of all of the survey respondents (55%) reported that they had been connected to the Center through a student success-focused program in the past year, meaning at least 135 people have benefitted from these connections.

In this capacity, the Center has brought to the community colleges several opportunities to participate in student success programs. In 2012, these programs included Pathways to Credentials, Degree Qualifications Profile national community college consortium, the Accelerated Learning Program, and Credit When It's Due. In addition, the Center brought a contract with Burning Glass to the state in order to help 14 community colleges access real-time labor market data to inform their programming. In total, these efforts have brought upwards of \$1.5 million to the state, most of which will go directly to the colleges.² In the words of one interviewee, the Center provided a central point of organization for accessing the funding: "Securing other resources, as 28 separate colleges, would be more difficult to do."

Student Success Summit



The Center also convenes staff and faculty for an exchange of ideas and learning through its annual Student Success Summit. The Summit has occurred twice, in 2011 and 2012. This event has seen growing attendance, with more faculty attending in 2012.

Student Success Summit, September 2012

² Please refer to Appendix A to see the community colleges' level of participation in these programs.

Nearly three-quarters of the survey respondents (182) had attended a Student Success Summit; the Summit was by far the most frequently reported way in which respondents had connected to the Center in the past year. For the 2012 Summit, 57% (51) of participants responding to the feedback survey said that they learned “a lot” or “a great deal” at the event, and 82% (73) said the information presented was “extremely” or “very useful” to them.³ The words of one interviewee capture this satisfaction with the Summit: “I like hearing from peers. . . . The Summit is getting better and better.” Another interviewee noted that the Summit is “extremely helpful and valuable in terms of our own work.”

“The Summit is a wonderful opportunity for us to connect to colleagues.”

Other Interactions

The Center has held webinars to explain new programs and share promising practices,⁴ and the webinars—including video-recordings and slides—are stored on its Web site for later access. While Public Policy Associates, Inc. (PPA) did not have access to feedback on these webinars, it seems that these webinars are an adept way to promote learning across the community colleges in an efficient format.

The Center also has developed linkages with community college staff in specialized areas, like the chief academic officers and institutional research (IR) staff, by attending their pre-existing group meetings. While these meetings are not held frequently (e.g., the chief academic officers’ group meets only three times per year), those interviewed reported that such in-person contact with the Center staff has been helpful in understanding how it is seeking to work with them to improve outcomes for students and has laid the groundwork for ongoing efforts, like developing greater IR capacity across the colleges.

On the whole, the survey respondents reported finding the Center helpful in linking them to new opportunities and resources (73% or 208 stakeholders), providing valuable tools and assistance to community colleges (73% or 207 stakeholders), and successfully convening key individuals for discussion and networking (77% or 205 stakeholders).

³ An online feedback survey was issued shortly after the event by Center staff. Results were provided to PPA by the Center.

⁴ The Center’s Web site has an archive of the 2012 webinars:
<http://www.mcca.org/content.cfm?m=82&id=82&startRow=1&mm=0>

Resulting Learning

According to the survey of the Center’s community college stakeholders, the Center has had some impact on stakeholders’ knowledge and behavior. As shown in Figure 2 about six in ten respondents felt that they were more aware of intervention options to support student success (153) and were better able to contribute to student success efforts (149) as a result of the Center. Slightly fewer respondents (56% or 134 stakeholders) agreed that they had made important connections with peers as a result of the Center, although 78% of respondents agreed that the Center successfully convenes key individuals for discussion and networking. It may be that such connections were already in place or that individuals have not seen opportunities to make significant connections.

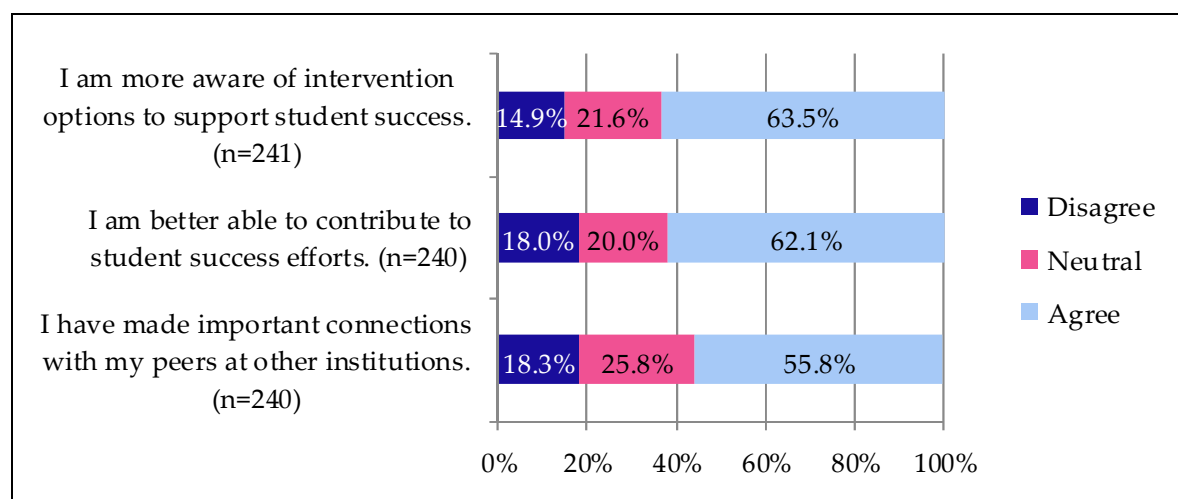


Figure 2: Center’s Impact on Stakeholders’ Knowledge and Behavior

Although few survey respondents “disagreed” or “strongly disagreed” with the three statements in Figure 2, above, the fact that so many offered a noncommittal, or neutral, response (about one-quarter of respondents for each item) indicates that the Center has an opportunity to play a stronger role in engaging stakeholders in student success efforts and fostering connections.

The survey made it clear that the Center’s activities related to fostering connections and identifying and providing student success supports are highly valued, which may also mean that these activities fill a gap. To assess the value of these and other activities by the Center, survey respondents were asked to indicate how valuable they found the activities (which are listed in Table 1, below) on a scale of 1 (low) to 5 (high). The percentages of respondents selecting 4 or 5 are shown.

Table 1: Value of Center Activities

Fostering community college networking (n= 229)	91.2%
Identifying student success supports (n= 230)	87.7%
Trainings and professional development (n= 229)	82.9%
Coordinating grant applications across community colleges (n= 229)	77.0%
Bridging the gap between K-12, two-year, and four-year institutions (n= 229)	71.5%

The overwhelming majority of survey respondents (91% or 187 stakeholders) said that they find value in having the Center foster community college networking. Given that such a large percentage of respondents network through the Center, in its absence, there would likely be fewer opportunities for community college staff and faculty to connect.

One interviewee expressed that the value of the connections was in “the exchange of ideas.” Activities related to student success supports and trainings and professional development were also valued highly by respondents. About three-quarters of the stakeholders found the Center’s role in coordinating grant applications (117 stakeholders) and bridging the gap between K-12, two-year, and four-year institutions (118 stakeholders) to be useful.

Use of Data

Data Tools

The promotion of stronger data systems and accountability for student success has been another goal area for the Center. With the growing need to have more skilled workers with recognized credentials among the nation’s workforce, pressure to have better tools to even understand what is happening to students who enroll in higher education is driving a sense of urgency for this work. The Center has been part of the Michigan P-20 Council’s ongoing effort to establish a longitudinal data system to track individual students from elementary school through college. Among those who were aware of the Center’s efforts to help advance Michigan’s P-20 data system, 70% (104) of survey respondents found this activity valuable. However, it is worth noting that 36% (82) of respondents did not know if this was a valuable activity of the Center. This suggests that not all stakeholders are aware of the Center’s involvement in this activity.

The Center also worked closely with the Governor’s Office to aid in defining metrics for the dashboard on education in 2011. Seventy-nine percent of survey respondents (135)

said that identifying and tracking performance metrics at the state level is a valuable activity of the Center.⁵

In addition, data use is promoted by the Center in some subtle ways. For instance, in a webinar hosted by the Center on adult education, Jenny Schanker shared data from national reports that helped to frame the presentation on the topic.⁶ This framing is typical of the Center’s work, reinforcing the messaging to community colleges about the importance of using data to inform practice. Over three-quarters of respondents (78% or 146 stakeholders) said that there is value in the Center helping colleges to use data to improve student outcomes.

As shown in the strategic plan update (Appendix A), while progress has been made, several of the actions under this goal have not been completed. In conversation with the executive director, PPA learned that as the Center discovers more about the needs in this area, particularly as related to institutional capacity, it is considering a new activity—an asset mapping process—that will better direct next steps.

As new tools and demands arise, it is not enough to address the awareness about the use of data to inform practice, but to build capacity at the campus level for construction and dissemination of new information. The Center is looking into adding institutional research capacity, but that may be only one aspect of the data usage issue; other staff and faculty may require greater exposure to and support for how to inform their work using data. The realities of student preparation, remediation, funding, and outcomes are all relevant to accountability. More information is required to determine the level of need of assistance for staff and faculty.

Gaining Buy-In

Using data is not a new concept for Michigan’s community colleges, as many employ data to make decisions about course offerings, staffing needs, and the like, but the emphasis on taking a hard look at why

“Data-driven accountability is the name of the game. It is how we have to approach our work.”

⁵ Survey respondents were asked to indicate the level of value of these activities on a scale of 1 (low) to 5 (high), or they could select “don’t know.” In order to more accurately determine the value stakeholders placed on these activities, “don’t know” selections to these questions were excluded from the denominator in the calculations. Respondents who selected “don’t know” were most likely not aware of the Center’s involvement in these activities.

⁶ Michigan Center for Student Success, “Serving Low-Skill Adults: Challenges, Opportunities, and Promising Practices in Michigan,” February 24, 2012, Accessed October 24, 2012. <http://www.mcca.org/content.cfm?m=82&id=82&startRow=1&mm=0>

students do or do not succeed in their educational goals is a newer use for many. This requires not only having the right data points at their disposal, but buy-in by staff and leadership to prioritize effort. The Center is leading the push to guide the community colleges in this direction. As one interviewee commented, the Center is recognized as “coordinating a more unified approach so that we can study the results.”

In total, 62% (149) of survey respondents either strongly agreed or agreed that “[The Center] promotes continuous improvement at the colleges through the use of data.” Strategically, this cooperation approach is allowing the community colleges to be part of a movement toward more informed, more successful practice, which makes stepping out of the norm a bit easier.

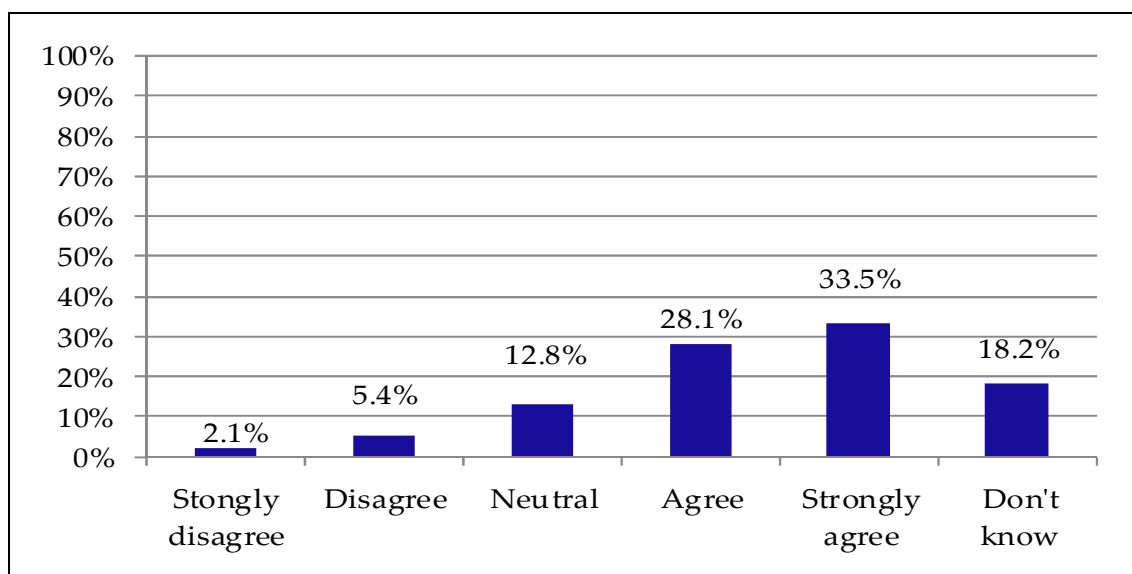


Figure 3: The Center’s Role in Promoting Continuous Improvement (n=242)

The shift to a more data-driven approach to student success is by no means fully achieved yet, but progress seems to be happening. Some of those interviewed hoped to see more emphasis on this area in the future: “The pressure on accountability is extremely valuable. The majority of us just need a little pressure to perform at peak. We have far better documentation today and far more specific criteria than we ever had in the past.” Another interviewee noted that creating a “culture of evidence” was really the underlying need so that the use of data becomes imbedded in their work.

Research Agenda

Research Symposium

In April 2012, the Center hosted a symposium to discuss, across community college staff and faculty, their questions about student success and how to go about answering those key questions. The result of the symposium was a proposal for an initial set of research projects. The proposal was prepared by a professor of postsecondary education from the University of Michigan (who was also involved in the symposium). This agenda was presented on at the most recent Student Success Summit, where a summary was also distributed. The summary focused on three topics: understanding better the milestones along student paths within community colleges (e.g., assessment, remediation, transfer, etc.) and how they contribute to success; more accurate metrics to reflect community college success, which cannot, for example, be measured simply by degree completion; and evaluating new interventions for their effects on student success. While not as far along as some other areas of the Center's work, the input gathering for the research agenda has been deliberate and well-paced, so that when undertaken, it should meet some of the more immediate knowledge needs of the community colleges. It may also provide an opportunity to contribute to a broader understanding of student achievement in a community college setting.

There were differences among stakeholder groups in terms of how valuable they found the Center's activities around facilitating new research opportunities. Figure 4 shows the breakdown of faculty and staff responses.

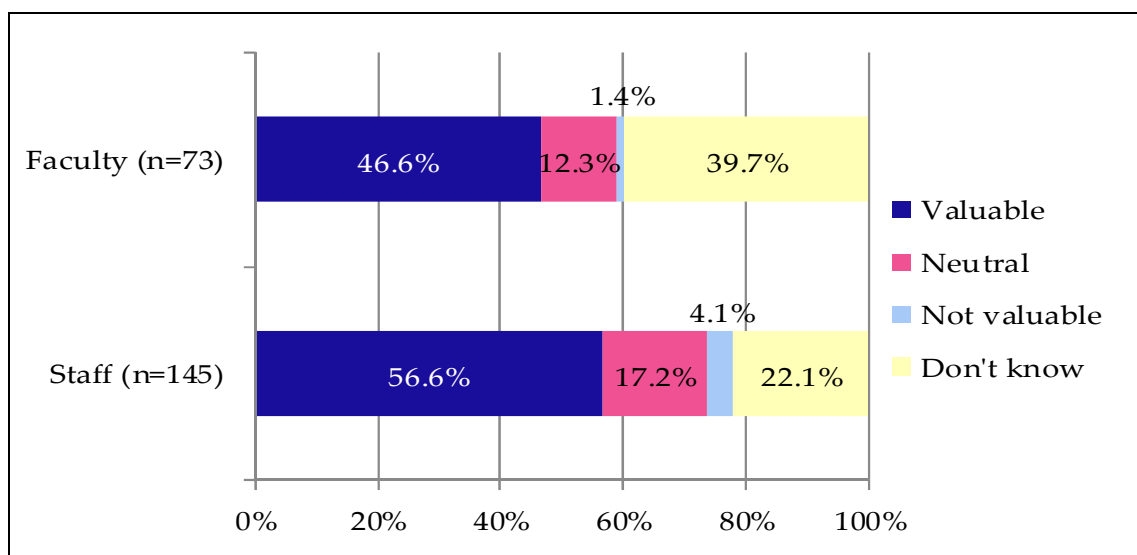


Figure 4: The Center's Role in Facilitating Research Opportunities

More staff (57% or 82 respondents) than faculty (47% or 34 respondents) reported that facilitating research opportunities was a valuable activity of the Center. Only a few disagreed in each case. However, faculty were much more likely to select “don’t know” (40% or 29 respondents) compared to staff (22% or 32 respondents). This is likely due to the fact that many faculty stakeholders noted that they do not receive direct communication from the Center, so they may not be aware of the Center’s role in this area.

One interviewee pointed to the limited resources at the disposal of community colleges for research and the critical nature of making in-roads on the student success issue, stating that the cost-benefit for colleges of certain interventions is important to prioritizing budgets and staffing. What works and how well is a classic question, but one that decision makers are looking to know, as quickly as possible.

Policy Action

Organizing Response

One of the primary roles of the MCCA is to speak on behalf of the state’s community colleges. As an outgrowth of this, the Center has taken on gathering together community college staff to inform policy decisions that relate to student success, with the approval of the presidents. The Center facilitated multiple task groups over the past year and a half as needed.

- One helped to set benchmark metrics for the state, giving input on how higher education in Michigan should be measured, as discussed above.
- Another group worked on the issue of setting a common readiness standard (in the form of a “cut score”) across the community colleges.
- A third addressed concurrent enrollment.
- A fourth focused on the transfer of core courses between the community colleges and universities.

One interviewee, who had participated in one of these groups, noted that the Center’s role “was done very well.” In that case, the staff person created meeting summaries, helped make clarifications, and provided information that helped the group make decisions. Only 11% (27) of survey respondents reported that they had participated in a legislative task force in the past year, which one would expect given the limited nature

of the groups. However, about eight in ten respondents (81% or 136 stakeholders) said that policy advocacy was a valuable activity for the Center.⁷

“Until I got involved with the Center, I didn’t know what was going on with policy and how it affects me.”

For the community colleges, it seems that this sort of opportunity to come together on policy issues has been highly valued. As an interviewee observed about one rising concern, “We’re asked to deliver college instruction in different ways (at high schools,

etc.) and we need to deliver quality; we need to preserve the integrity of the transcript.” In this context, then the Center, as a convener, offers another outlet for community colleges to share their voices. For the colleges, this may be a different type of activity than the other work of the Center, but one that is aligned with programmatic activities and equally worthy.

Communications

Outreach Approaches

The Center has made use of a variety of approaches to reach out to its audiences. The staff produce a monthly e-newsletter, host events and webinars, maintain a Web site, attend meetings, and are readily available for e-mail and phone contacts. In addition, the board of MCCA gets weekly updates about the activities of the Center. The survey conducted by PPA asked respondents about the specific types of contacts that they have had with the Center. As Table 2, below, shows, there are a variety of ways that stakeholders have come into contact with the Center.

⁷ Survey respondents were asked to indicate the level of value of this activity on a scale of 1 (low) to 5 (high), or they could select “don’t know.” In order to more accurately determine the value stakeholders place on these activities, “don’t know” selections to this question was excluded from the denominator in this calculation. It is likely that the respondents who selected “don’t know” (27% or 62 stakeholders) were not aware of the Center’s role in policy advocacy.

Table 2: Stakeholders' Contact with the Center (n=247)⁸

Attended a Center event	77.7%
Visited the Center's page on the MCCA Web site	54.7%
Had a conversation with the Center's staff	49.4%
Received the e-newsletter	45.3%
Read a publication prepared by the Center	35.6%
None	7.3%
Other	3.6%

More than three-quarters of respondents had attended a Center event. In addition, about half of all respondents had visited the Center's web page, had a conversation with the Center's staff, or had received the e-newsletter.

In terms of how stakeholders hear about the offerings of the Center (e.g., events, reports, etc.), respondents reported that they generally hear from colleagues within their institution or directly from the Center.

Table 3: Sources of Information About Center Offerings (n=243)⁹

From colleagues within institution	61.3%
From the Center's e-newsletter	48.1%
From the Center's staff	44.9%
From colleagues outside institution	14.4%
Do not receive information	7.0%
Other	4.9%

Over 60% (149) of survey respondents heard about the Center's offerings from colleagues within their institution. The fact that so many stakeholders do not hear directly from the Center about its offerings has both positive and negative implications. While it is promising that community college staff and faculty are discussing these opportunities with one another, it also suggests that the Center may not be reaching all relevant stakeholders. Some individuals may be relying solely on word of mouth or e-mail forwards from colleagues for information about the Center's offerings, which

⁸ Percentages do not add up to 100% because multiple responses were allowed.

⁹ Percentages do not add up to 100% because multiple responses were allowed.

means there may be some missed opportunities. A smaller percentage of respondents reported hearing about offerings through the e-newsletter or from Center staff. Given that all of the survey respondents are also on the e-newsletter distribution list, this suggests that many stakeholders are receiving, but not actually reading, the e-newsletter.

The e-newsletter itself received mixed reviews among the interviewees. The responses ranged from it is a “nice communication tool” to “newsletters don’t get a lot of my time.” One person also noted that the e-newsletter, despite being sent to over 600 people, was not always reaching the people on campus who needed the information it contained. An example of this is that, among survey respondents, 52% of staff and 33% of faculty members reported receiving the e-newsletter. The Center may consider exploring alternatives, such as sending e-blasts about information that is posted to the Web site or organizing content into topic series based on recipient interests. It would be fruitful to ask stakeholders how, when, and what they prefer to receive.

Another area that the survey explored was whether or not stakeholders were given adequate time to respond to requests from the Center (e.g., grant interest, event notices, etc.). Of those who had received requests from the Center, nearly three-quarters (72% or 149 stakeholders) reported that they had been given adequate time. Of the 13 respondents who provided a specific example when they were not given adequate time to respond to a request, six said that they were not given enough advance notice about the Summit or other events, two said that not enough time was given to respond to the Governor’s dashboard project, and one respondent reported not having enough time to respond to grant solicitations.

For practicality’s sake, continuing the multiple approaches to outreach is necessary, but input from the survey and interviews suggests that face-to-face discussion, like when a Center staff member attends to present on a new program or the Summit, are the preferred means of learning.

Content Value

One of the original goals of the Center had been to establish a clearinghouse of information about community college student success. Although this has not developed as planned, the Center has imbedded information about research, programs, and other news into the newsletters and presentations. One interviewee remarked that such communication has not been “just information in and information out; there is value-added.” This indicates that the staff have been purposeful in their selections about what to pass along.

Overall, the Center seems to be communicating the right information to its stakeholders. Three-quarters of the survey respondents (168) found the information that the Center communicates to be very or somewhat relevant, as shown in Figure 5.

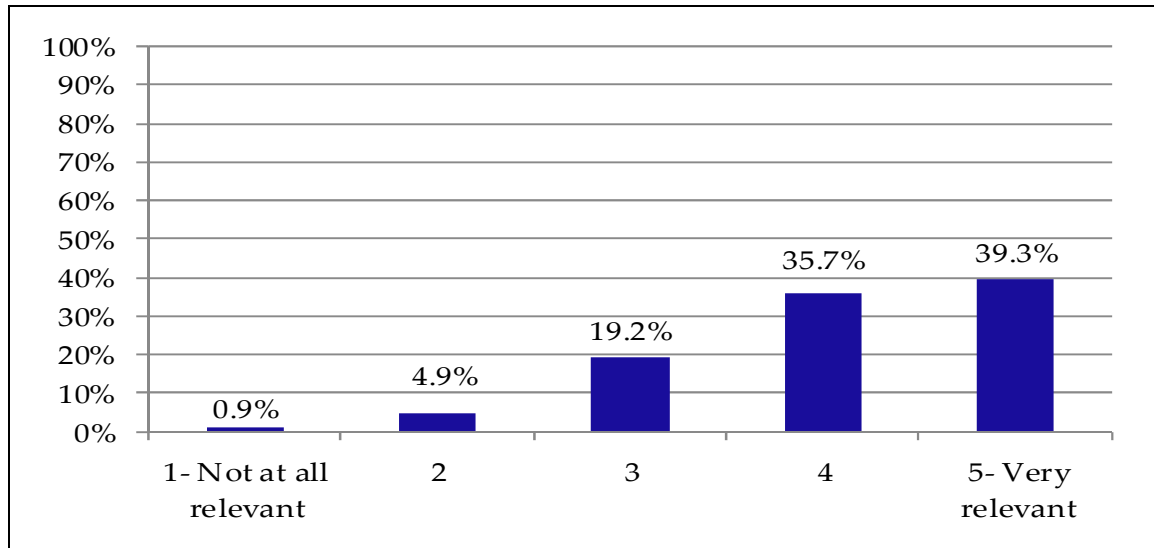


Figure 5: Relevance of Information Communicated by the Center (n=224)

Very few respondents (6% or 12 stakeholders) reported that the information was not at all or not very relevant. In particular, stakeholders found the sharing of research reports and relevant news to be very valuable, with 88% (168) of respondents finding this somewhat or extremely valuable.¹⁰

Suggested Communication Improvements

A few survey respondents provided the following suggestions for improving the Center’s communications: eight respondents said that communications could be more inclusive (i.e., reaching them directly versus through administrators or other staff), five said that it could be more frequent, and three said that the timeliness of communications could be improved.

¹⁰ Survey respondents were asked to indicate the level of value of this activity on a scale of 1 (low) to 5 (high), or they could select “don’t know.” In order to more accurately determine the value stakeholders place on this activity, “don’t know” selections to this question were excluded from the denominator in this calculation. Most likely, the 7% (18) of respondents who selected “don’t know” do not receive communications from the Center.

Stakeholder Satisfaction

Overall, stakeholders were very satisfied with the Center. About 80% of survey respondents were somewhat or very satisfied with the Center, with nearly half of those saying that they were very satisfied.¹¹

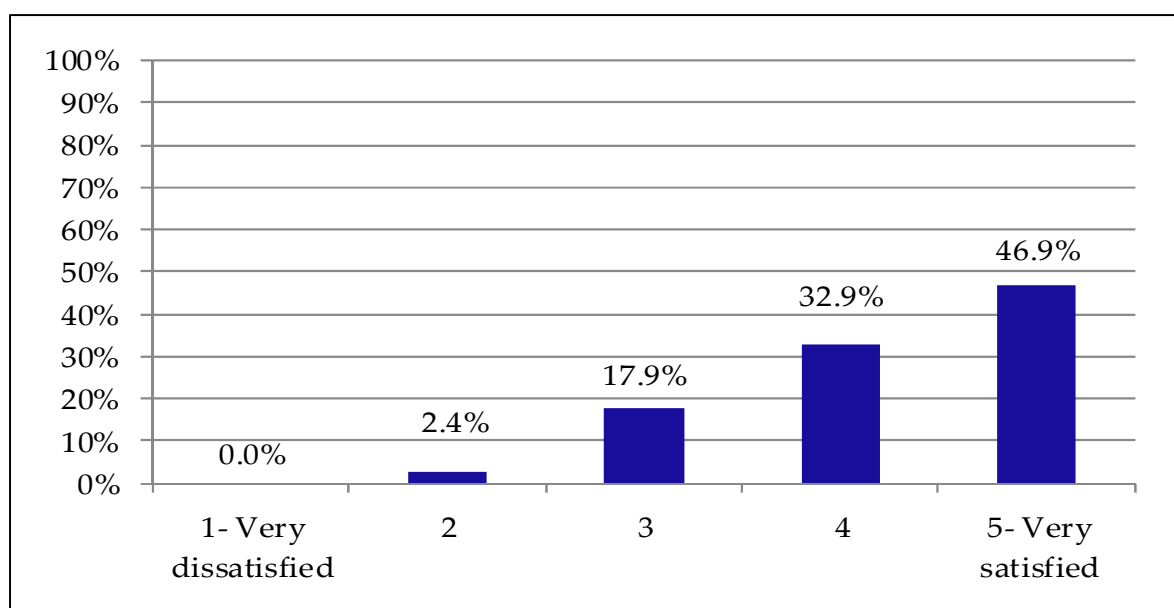


Figure 6: Overall Satisfaction With MCSS (n=207)

Of the 20 respondents who offered a suggestion for improving the Center overall, 11 of them mentioned something related to communications. Suggestions for improving communication included

Improve communication	11
Narrow focus	3
More collaboration	2
Improve workshops	1
Other	3

more frequent contact from the Center and more direct communication, so that some stakeholders are not relying on staff or administrators to pass along information. In

¹¹ Twenty-seven respondents answered “don’t know/not sure” to this question. They were excluded from the analysis in order to get a more accurate view of the overall level of satisfaction among those who were familiar enough with the Center to provide a response.

addition, three respondents wanted to see the Center focus on a particular area, although each of the three recommended a different area of focus.

The survey also asked stakeholders if there was anything that the Center was not currently doing that they would like to see it do. Responses tended to describe improvements to existing activities, rather than new activities or initiatives, and supported many of the findings that have already been reported.

For example, of the 29 respondents who provided an answer, 14 said that the Center could do a better job of promoting its activities and reaching a broader audience, five said it could do more in terms of sharing best practices, and five said it could do a better job of connecting with faculty.

Challenges

Working in a Decentralized Environment

One challenge for the Center that was mentioned often by those interviewed was the fact that Michigan has a decentralized higher education system. In part, this circumstance justifies the need for the Center as a point of conversion; it also means that accomplishing its tasks requires gathering input, building consensus, and an asking-rather-than-telling approach. The community colleges are used to making independent decisions, so the more collaborative activities occurring under the Center are new for some. That being said, a good number of the community colleges seem to welcome the presence of the Center as a way to “systematize discussions as important as student success.” Another interviewee commented that decentralization is not a bad thing, but it takes work to avoid silos.

The work of the Center has recognized that the community colleges have the prerogative to choose their level of participation in the student success agenda. One interviewee summed up the mode of operation that seems to have worked well to date: “Not all 28 colleges are in this particular thing [program]. They join when it fits their goals and objectives. I don’t feel they [the Center staff] are pushy. We can opt out of things.” Thus, the Center has found a balance

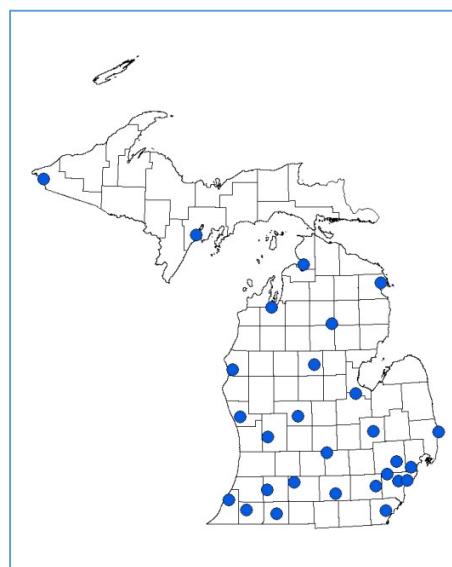


Figure 7: Michigan’s Community College Locations

between encouraging the colleges to work in new ways and leaving room for holding back or taking a different path.

As the Center continues to pull in more research, metrics, and data, it may find that some uncomfortable conversations need to occur around negative findings, such as poor retention or poor success with development education. This information is not unknown now, but how this will be discussed openly statewide, across colleges, is unclear. The focus on the use of data is linked intrinsically to accountability as much as it is to self-improvement.

Scope of the Need

Another point of balance that has been and will likely continue to be a challenge for the Center is that of capacity versus demand. The staff, while clearly capable, are still few. They have launched much of the work planned for at the outset of the Center, as well as some unplanned opportunities that presented themselves (e.g., program grants, policy tasks). As more time passes and additional opportunities to support student success arise, it may become more difficult to carry out multiple tasks well. Using consultants is one means that the Center has already employed to add capacity. Delivering more responsibility to community college staff for convening and facilitating is another option, as is making new hires. Staying focused on the critical roles of the Center seems key in weighing needs and opportunities with capacity.

In addition to the needs of the community colleges for information and coordination, there is the ever-present financial reality of supporting campus-level programs and broader communities of practice. The community colleges in Michigan, as elsewhere in the country, felt the recession acutely and continue to experience funding shortages, leaving little for new programs or staff. Working through the Center has already helped some of the community colleges access new funding. The Center also plans to concentrate on exploring ways to leverage institutional research capacity across the campuses as another means of adding resources where they are lacking. Other efficiencies may also be discovered.

The Center, and the community colleges, will need to be creative and open-minded about how to meet the financial end of achieving student success.

Sustainability

Funding for the Center is currently entirely grant-based, so sustainability presents another challenge. There has not been much discussion of the models of sustainability

for the Center, but leadership is beginning to consider how it will continue to deliver activities and support to the community colleges. Ideally, as is the case for similar organizations, the Center would have a range of funding sources to provide longer-term stability.

“We are now engaged in activities that five years ago I would not have imagined. We still need to be intentional about the student success commitment, but flexible for that future window.”

When asked about sustainability during the interviews, the interviewees commented broadly about the important role the Center has played, but also noted a few specific areas to focus on regarding sustainability. These speak to the strategic direction and value of the Center rather than its financial support:

- Continue to pay attention to what the colleges need and encourage collaboration around these needs (e.g., scans, opportunities for grants, etc.).
- Move the data use and research agenda forward (e.g., benchmarks, common definitions, etc.).
- Build relationships within the community colleges, including with faculty (e.g., liaison to MCCA, “ground-level” resources, etc.).

Survey respondents were also asked how they thought that the Center would be sustained in the future in an open-ended question. The responses were grouped into categories and the number of mentions in each category is reported in Table 5.

Table 5: Sustaining the Center (n=46)

Combination of grants and community college contributions	11
Not sure the Center should be sustained	9
Solely grants	4
Michigan Community College Association	3
State funding	2
Other	5
Don't know	12

Eleven respondents thought that the Center would be sustained through a combination of grants and community college contributions. As one respondent noted, “Providing services and support to colleges through a fee-based model and grants can provide sustainability of the Center... why not have the Center be the go-to organization when expertise is needed?”

However, nine respondents were unsure as to whether or not the Center should be sustained. Six of these respondents identified themselves as staff and three were faculty; only two were dissatisfied with the Center overall. Most of this group felt that the Center would need to demonstrate a greater impact in order to merit additional funding. While this is the perspective of just 20% of those who responded to the question, and a smaller portion of those who answered the survey, it is worth looking at the support longer-term for continuing the Center. The evaluation has found that many value its work, but it may be that expectations differ if services are no longer free to the community colleges.

Summary

The Center has achieved several major successes. It has coordinated and enhanced the scope and depth of the student success conversation in the state, and supported this focus by bringing in programming. The forums for networking and learning, such as the Student Success Summit, have also been popular and, by attendee accounts, useful “venues for exchange of best practices.” The

Center has also implemented a number of activities at a good pace over the course of its first year and a half. The Center has been described as a hub, glue, and a magnet—all terms that recognize its central contribution to connecting a diverse group of community colleges around a common focus. As one interviewee noted, “Not all schools are participating at the same level or intensity, but we are all able to benefit.”

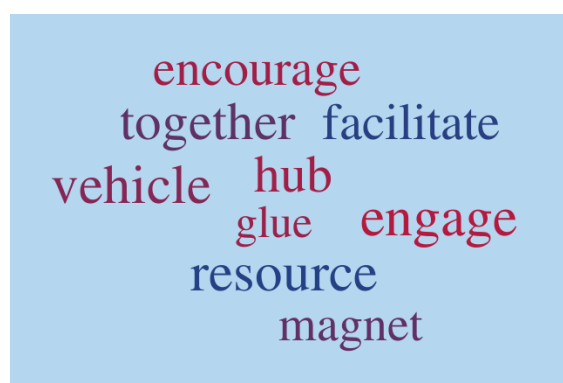


Figure 8: Terms Used by Stakeholders to Describe the Center

Follow-Up Evaluation

As the Center continues in its work, ongoing tracking of progress and satisfaction should be conducted to inform improvements and decision making. This could take the form of event feedback collection (e.g., questionnaires), updating and monitoring of the strategic plan, and periodic discussions with key stakeholders. Another interim evaluation would be valuable in the Center’s third year, as its Kresge Foundation grant comes to a close. This would offer the opportunity to assess how the Center has stayed

relevant to the needs of the community colleges regarding student success, built its sustainability strategy, and contributed to new and lasting efforts to improve student success in Michigan.

Recommendations Summary

Furthering Successes

- The Center's role as a convener is highly valued, particularly in Michigan's decentralized higher education environment. The Center should continue this primary role by providing opportunities to bring together staff and faculty across the community colleges for discussion and learning through the Student Success Summit and other venues. The in-person networking is particularly important to furthering relationships.
- The Center also has been an important contributor toward the understanding of student success resources and best practices among the community colleges. This information brokering should be driven deeper into the colleges to reach more staff and faculty, with an emphasis on applying this information to their practice. Finding the best means of sharing knowledge is an important consideration for the Center going forward; such outreach might include additional webinars, e-blasts, a more interactive Web site, periodic publications, and cross-campus meetings.
- The Center's work on policy, use of data, and research regarding student success could be interlaced more explicitly to reinforce the central message of improvement through evidence-based decisions. For instance, a longitudinal data system supports research, which in turn, informs policy recommendations and outcomes metrics. The ongoing efforts in these goal areas should continue to be driven by the interests of the community colleges.

Making Improvements

- As the Center approaches the end of its Kresge Foundation grant, it is imperative that a method for diversifying its funding be determined. A solely grant-dependent organization is highly vulnerable to financial risk, as well being susceptible to mission capture (i.e., funders could heavily influence its mission and autonomy).
- The Center should consider ways to support a growing body of tasks to determine how best to support its goals; eventually, prioritizing tasks that may become necessary so that the quality of the work is not compromised if the staffing level remains the same.

- Demand for cross-campus and within-campus outreach will require strategies that do not stretch staff too thin. In-person contact by the staff is ideal, but other methods should also be planned. These might include webinars, leadership from community college staff or faculty, or online discussion groups.
- Communications with stakeholders via the newsletter might not be as effective as the Center would like. It may be that the newsletter is simply not reaching enough contacts, but it may be that the format does not work well for potential readers (e.g., they are overwhelmed with e-mails). It would be worthwhile to explore how stakeholders prefer to receive information from the Center, what content they are interested in, and at what frequency.