



**Strengthening Achieving the Dream Planning
through Stakeholder Engagement**

A Guide for Community College Leadership Teams

Prepared by Public Agenda for
Achieving the Dream: Community Colleges Count

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Achieving the Dream: Community Colleges Count is a national initiative to increase the success of community college students, particularly those in groups that have been underserved in higher education.

The initiative is funded by Lumina Foundation for Education and managed by MDC Inc. Other national partners include:

- American Association of Community Colleges
- Community College Leadership Program, University of Texas-Austin
- Community College Research Center, Teachers College, Columbia University
- Jobs for the Future
- MDRC
- Public Agenda
- The Futures Project, Brown University

Additional national and regional organizations, including other funders, are expected to join the effort.

The first group of colleges – 27 institutions in five states – joined the initiative in 2004. These states are Florida, New Mexico, North Carolina, Texas, and Virginia. Additional states have joined the initiative since then, adding the following states to the initiative: Connecticut, Ohio, Pennsylvania, Washington, Arkansas, Massachusetts, Michigan, Hawaii, Oklahoma, and South Carolina. More colleges may be invited to participate in future years.

For more information about Achieving the Dream: Community Colleges Count, see our Web site: www.achievingthedream.org or contact:

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Preface

Achieving the Dream: Community Colleges Count is a national initiative to increase the success of community college students, particularly those in groups that have been underserved in higher education. Achieving the Dream aims to help more students reach their individual goals, which may include obtaining a better job, earning a community college certificate or degree, or attaining a bachelor's degree. To attain high rates of success among all students, especially historically underserved students, Achieving the Dream asserts that colleges must have a student-centered vision, a culture of evidence and accountability, and a commitment to excellence and equity.

Besides examining quantitative data on student outcomes, it is important for Achieving the Dream colleges to identify policies and practices at the college that impede or enhance student success. Stakeholders both inside and outside the college can be instrumental in helping to identify such institutional practices while also raising awareness of the challenges students face.

Key internal stakeholders include faculty, staff, and students. In the community, numerous groups, including employers and potential students and their families, have important perspectives to consider. Reaching out to groups with vested interests but who are not typically consulted is an important aspect of Achieving the Dream. These internal and external groups will have ideas for ways to improve student success and can be critical partners and allies in bringing about change. But how do you do this?

Public Agenda created this guide as a tool to help Achieving the Dream colleges engage important stakeholder groups in conversations about student success. It is a great starting point for community colleges that have not worked much with the public or have had limited success with this work. Some of the techniques described in the guide can also help structure conversations with internal stakeholders.

Suggestions for Using this Manual

The president or chancellor and the leadership team of the college/district should pay particular attention to the sections on engagement (pages 6 and 7), “Engaging Whom?” (Page 9), and “Engaging How?” (Page 11), in order to provide guidance to the core and data teams. A staff meeting devoted to the topic will be time well spent as the early planning work proceeds.

The core team, with guidance from the college leadership, should dig into the details of how to approach this work. The important distinctions between focus groups (page 20), stakeholder dialogues (page 23), and community forums (page 31), should be discussed in light of the performance and attainment gaps colleges are beginning to identify. The recommendations of the data team will also be important at this stage of planning. The “Choicework” example may be helpful in a joint meeting of the core and data teams.

Great care and sensitivity will be required in situations where there are significant gaps in outcomes, but the shared struggle can lead to insights you will find useful in making changes inside the college. This guide offers suggestions for how to lead conversations that focus on solutions, not blame.

The guide is not meant to be an exhaustive compendium of every technique a college could employ to engage stakeholders. Rather it is meant as a framework for planning engagement along with a set of proven guidelines and strategies that you can readily employ should you find them useful. As the Achieving the Dream Initiative evolves, we expect to expand our collective wisdom on how to do this work effectively, learning not only from national experts but also from the experiences of Achieving the Dream colleges.

Our partners at Public Agenda have created a strong, basic document on engagement built on three decades of lessons learned from their laser-like focus on working with the public. It is this solid foundation that you now hold in your hands. For some colleges, this material may help to jumpstart your work; for others, it may enhance what you have already begun to do. Most importantly, we hope it offers you meaningful insights on how your college can work with key stakeholders to increase student success.

Thanks for taking the chance to try something different and stepping outside your comfort zone. We are convinced your college and your students will benefit greatly in the end. Good luck with your work! Please let us know how we can help.

MDC, Inc.

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I. Stakeholder Engagement and the Achieving the Dream Planning Process

Authentic Engagement vs. Business as Usual

Most often, decision-making is viewed as an expert-driven process. Get the best information, bring trained minds to bear, make the best decision, and only then reach out to wider audiences to persuade them to sign on. Those outside the circle of decision-makers and experts tend to be viewed as an audience to be educated or persuaded, sometimes as a problem to manage. Rarely are they seen as a vital resource, especially at the planning stage of a new initiative.

From this perspective, planning and decision-making are confined to a small circle in order to make progress quickly and minimize the static. To be sure, there is sometimes a minor nod toward gaining a degree of “input” from “customers” or “end-users.” An advisory committee, perhaps a questionnaire, or some form of public hearing might be put in play. In the best case, these minor measures add a small degree of useful input and lend some legitimacy to the planning process. At worst, empty, cynical public relations gestures prevail, as in the rigged “town meetings” that seem to be gaining popularity these days, in which participants are carefully screened and questions carefully controlled.

Authentic engagement, by contrast, involves substantive give and take with those who have an interest in the decisions that are made. While broad-based engagement is not appropriate for every decision, it can be the right move for developing many important decisions and plans—particularly those whose success and sustainability will depend on many varied stakeholders. Institutional change efforts to close achievement gaps certainly fall into this category. Skillful engagement with a broad cross-section of stakeholders can improve results by:

- Bringing together multiple points of view in order to inform decisions.
- Creating a sense of legitimacy and shared responsibility by involving stakeholders in the change process early and often, rather than after decisions have been made.
- Creating broad awareness and momentum for change.

A mutual struggle for solutions

Engagement of this kind involves frank, productive dialogue and deliberation to begin with and, ultimately, complementary and cooperative action toward a common goal. In the Achieving the Dream context this means involving many important actors, including students, faculty and community members, in the effort to improve success for all students and close achievement gaps. Top-down, one-way communication is complemented by dialogue and a mutual struggle for solutions.

An authentic public engagement perspective assumes that many stakeholders can and should be involved, not in every technical detail of college policy, but in helping to set

the broad directions and values from which policy proceeds. It assumes, moreover, that faculty, staff, students, and various members of the larger community can play an important, even vital, role in making college policies work.

To be clear, to promote public engagement, as this manual does, is not to argue that all members of the community should have an equal say in every aspect of college policy, and that traditional college leadership and professional expertise no longer count. Nor would we recommend ignoring more traditional communications efforts to get information and messages out to key audiences, which remain absolutely essential. But there can be an important place for well-designed stakeholder engagement as you plan your Achieving the Dream initiative.

Benefits of including public engagement in your Achieving the Dream planning

Engaging stakeholders is as important during the planning phase of an initiative as during implementation. Engaging faculty and staff, the student body, community leaders and the broader public you serve as you plan to improve outcomes for underserved students can help your efforts in critical ways:

- Engaging these groups early on makes it more likely that important actors will view your plan as legitimate and be willing to actively support it later, when you are putting it into effect.
- Well-designed input by critical stakeholders such as students and faculty (and not just a single volunteer on a committee, but truly representative groups) can help you significantly improve your plans. This is because the people closest to the action—students, faculty, and those who can immediately affect their performance—have a hands-on, in-the-trenches knowledge that is invaluable.

Because our goal is to increase student success, particularly for those in groups that have been historically underserved by higher education, bringing these students and their teachers into the planning process is liable to pay off in a more fine-tuned and effective set of initiatives. The insights of parents, employers, community leaders, K-12 educators and community funders can also be useful (although there will be practical limits to what you can do, and diminishing returns will eventually set in. This will be discussed further later in the guide.) Such input minimizes the danger of failing to take some important variable into account as you devise your concrete plans. It will also give you many clues as to the best way to communicate your initiative when the time comes.

- In a related vein, engaging stakeholders early on can help community colleges avoid unexpected backlashes that can result in significant setbacks. How many times have we seen well-meaning initiatives run up against a brick wall of resistance that, later on, we realized could have been avoided through small, acceptable adjustments in substance or communications—had we only realized? Well-designed stakeholder engagement can bring that advance intelligence to the fore.

- Finally, public engagement during the planning stage will help you see more clearly who your allies are in your outreach and communications efforts, what the obstacles are, the kinds of engagement strategies you are most comfortable with, and how best to incorporate them into your future Achieving the Dream work.

Throughout these opening remarks the emphasis has been on *well-designed* public engagement. It is important to note that, if poorly done, these activities will simply squander time, energy and resources without providing a significant return. This manual offers guidance to community colleges on strategies for engaging specific stakeholders or your community overall as you complete your Achieving the Dream planning phase. It is not meant as a recipe so much as a set of guidelines, cautions and strategies to help you enrich your planning process.

II. Engaging Whom?

Before talking about principles and strategies for effective engagement, we'll begin with some discussion aimed at helping you prioritize the groups you might want to talk to. As a general rule, a broader scope of public engagement will bring more varied and greater returns, but it will also entail far more work and resources. As there are points of diminishing returns, you need to consider your options carefully.

Who are the stakeholders that you most need to engage in your planning process?

Thinking about the purpose of your initiative will get you started. For each community college this will be some variant on the core purpose of Achieving the Dream, as captured in the tagline: "Achieving the Dream: Community Colleges Count is a national initiative to increase the success of community college students, particularly those in groups that have been underserved in higher education." What stakeholders (again, defined as those groups that have the most direct stake and impact on the initiative) are suggested by this core purpose?

Faculty are clearly a critical group to engage early and often, for not only do they have important insights to offer any initiative aimed at student success, they can make a huge difference in the traction you gain in implementing institutional change depending on whether they resist or embrace the work. And note that we're not just speaking of full-time faculty here but adjuncts as well.

Students are another obvious group with whom to do some serious listening and engaging as you develop your plans and priorities. Which ones? Certainly, those from groups that your data indicate are doing less well than others should be among them, but what other kinds of students would you do well to talk to, listen to, and involve in your institutional change work?

What about other stakeholders inside and outside the college, such as:

- High School Guidance counselors?
- Recent graduates and other alumnae?
- Family members of students?
- Employers?
- K-12 educators?
- Community leaders in the public, private or nonprofit sectors?
- Local funders, such as community foundations?
- Others?

This list will be adjusted according to your initial thoughts about the directions your initiative might go. For example, if you're already working closely with the K-12 system or want to think about whether you should, you might want them on the list. If, on the other hand, the K-12 system is for some reason better left alone for the time being—

perhaps due to political chaos that is much more likely to sink your initiative than help it—it probably will not be worthwhile to include them at this juncture.

It is also worth thinking creatively about whose perspective might be particularly important or interesting. Might social service agencies, religious leaders or community activists have important perspectives to contribute as you plan your initiative?

What about the media? You will be getting Achieving the Dream support in media relations—things like press release protocols and templates and guidance in press relations. These are critical activities that fall under the heading of traditional communications more than active stakeholder engagement in the sense we are using the term here. But you might also think of the local press as potential public engagement participants or partners, especially if you decide to venture into the arena of general community engagement.

What about the community more generally?

Broad-based public forums can help you engage wider swaths of the community and raise general awareness about the Achieving the Dream initiative in your area. Community Conversations are labor and time intensive and may be a more expansive public engagement strategy than some colleges need, at least at the planning stage. But if broad community support and involvement are key to your thinking, you may want to consider a community forum strategy as well.

Engaging Underserved Students and Community Members

Creating diverse and representative public engagement that goes beyond the “usual suspects” is as important as anything else you can do. Including students and community members who are low-income, people of color, single mothers, first-generation college students, adult workers, etc.—and not just one or two “spokespeople” but a fair sampling of those various communities and groups—is naturally an important component of this. And for Achieving the Dream, whose very purpose is to help underserved students, it is absolutely central.

The next section will, after some preliminary discussion, describe three core strategies for public engagement, each with its own set of strengths and weaknesses. They are: focus groups, stakeholder dialogues and community conversations. Appendices 1-3 provide practical guidelines for applying each of these strategies, and in each case special attention is paid to going beyond the usual suspects.

III. Engaging How? General Principles and Guidelines

First, what not to do...

Well conceived and implemented public engagement can inform your plans, legitimize them via a kind of public vetting process, and gain the active support and involvement of important stakeholder groups as well as the broader community. Unfortunately, there are several wrong ways to go about this, some of which are simply a waste of time while others are decidedly counter-productive.

For example, Dan Yankelovich, who co-founded Public Agenda along with Cyrus Vance almost 30 years ago, talks about “two wrong ways to hold a public meeting.” As it turns out, while these are probably the two most frequently seen approaches to public meetings, they very often end up as colossal wastes of time. To make the point, I’ll describe the extreme versions of each. In the *expert panel*, a mind-numbing data dump ensues (albeit, often with the best of intentions) that glazes the eyes of the average citizen and effectively hands the meeting over to the policy wonks. The audience is there to be educated. Meanwhile, in the classic *public hearing*, officials put on the body armor and take the stage for a vent fest. The audience is there to complain.

In both images, there are officials or experts up on a stage either pontificating or taking one for the team. The audience—composed largely of the interest group representatives, officials, reporters and activists who always attend these things—sits passively or waits their turn on the microphone line, where they meekly ask questions or boldly vent their spleen. In neither case is there much, if any, real communication, exchange of ideas, or fresh thinking. The ritual is not particularly satisfying or productive for anyone concerned, but for some reason it continues to be played out in one or other of its forms.

In describing these wrong turns, we are assuming that good intentions are defeated by poor design and execution. The impulse toward public engagement is sincere but the methodology is flawed. Yet more damaging is the cynical-yet-slick execution of, for instance, a “town meeting” that is purely a dog-and-pony show. It is nothing more than a public relations event dressed up as a civic occasion, with no intention of listening to new voices or encouraging a thought-provoking exchange of ideas. In other words, it is a way of *saying* that people had an opportunity to weigh in without really providing that opportunity. People are increasingly tired of these transparent manipulations, with the outcome being a public that is, in varying degrees, angry, cynical and disengaged. In no case is it a public that will be available to support your work over the long haul.

Fortunately, there are better ways.

Principles of successful public engagement

Bring people into the process early

This has been stressed from the outset of this manual, but it bears repeating. If you are simply bringing people together to announce your intentions, you're likely to turn them into critics. If you bring them together to gain their perspectives *as* you are developing your plans, you're more likely to turn them into allies.

This doesn't mean that employing engagement strategies later in your initiative, after you plans have cohered, will be meaningless—not at all. If you do enough public engagement early on, your plan will have greater legitimacy and buy-in among stakeholders and the community, so you'll be less likely to run into the “why-wasn't-I-asked-about-this-before?” reaction. If you've fine-tuned your plan based on useful feedback, and given a good number of folks a chance to weigh in and contribute, you'll be in a solid position to continue to engage stakeholders to help you figure out the best ways to implement the plan and keep things moving in the right direction.

Go beyond the usual suspects

Also worth repeating is the importance of reaching out. While it's fine to consult with the village elders, and it's inevitable that you'll be dealing with interest groups and activists of various sorts, public engagement should always strive to reach beyond the usual suspects to include individuals and groups who are not typically involved. In short, engagement is more useful, and tends to be considerably more interesting and fun, if you can bring fresh faces, energy and ideas to the table.

Listen more, talk less

While you will surely have some important things to say, public engagement is not well served by a great deal of speechmaking and expert pontificating. The idea is to set the stage for dialogue, and the only way you'll get much out of it is to listen more and talk less than everyone else.

Set a constructive, problem-solving tone

Avoid easy polarization, accusations, and stridency. You need to get beyond “sounding the alarm” to create discussions that have forward momentum.

The vituperative style of talk radio is all many people seem to know these days. But it's amazing how quickly and enthusiastically they take to civil, constructive, problem-solving dialogue. You should look to set the tone and create the conditions that allow this kind of talk to flourish.

This doesn't mean, of course, that there's no place for criticism. You need to be able to hear it and learn from it. At the same time, the point is not just another seemingly endless gripe session but, rather, honest, constructive give and take.

Start where people are

Be alert to what people fear, want, know and feel they need to know. This also means that you should look to engage people using their interests, concerns and language—and avoid jargon completely.

Avoid overly technical discussions

Focus on broad policy directions and the values and tradeoffs they entail rather than the technical details of policy. Avoid data dumps that may be perfectly appropriate in a professional conference, but make it impossible for many stakeholders, such as students or community members, to effectively participate.

Offer choices for deliberation

Let people wrestle with alternatives, and point out the pros and cons. Doing so communicates that there are no easy answers and that many points of view are welcome and essential to the discussion. This technique (that Public Agenda calls “Choicework”) also helps people with very different levels of expertise engage both the issues and each other more effectively than a wide-open discussion with no structure. Based on Public Agenda’s long experience with public engagement, this is one of the most important steps you can take—especially with average citizens as opposed to professionals and experts.

Expect obstacles and resistances

People are used to doing things in a particular way, and it’s hard work to grapple with new possibilities. It may even threaten their identities or interests to do so. It therefore takes time, and repeated opportunities, for people to really work through problems, absorb information about the tradeoffs of different approaches, and build common ground.¹

Follow-up is critical

Once you’ve elicited people’s interest and participation, it’s extremely important to follow up with them. This does not mean you need to address every single point that is raised or do everything everyone tells you to do during a phase of stakeholder engagement. It simply means that you need to take people’s participation very seriously, explain in what ways it has affected your plans, how things are proceeding, and how they can stay involved over time.

¹ See Dan Yankelovich’s *Coming to Public Judgment* for a fuller discussion of the seven stages people go through as they wrestle with issues.

Public Engagement Strategies

Various strategies can be employed to reach out to stakeholders, raise their awareness, gain their insights, and build common ground and active support for your plans. Each has its strengths and weaknesses. Where one is more efficient, another leads to greater public buy-in, while yet another is better at gaining media attention.

Specifically, we will discuss the following public engagement strategies:

- Focus groups and surveys
- Stakeholder dialogues
- Community forums

Each of these basic methodologies will be covered in sufficient detail in this section to orient planning teams to their uses, strengths and weaknesses. More detailed guidelines for actually applying them can be found in Appendices 1, 2 and 3.

1. Focus groups

Focus groups—essentially, small-group research interviews—are a tool that can accomplish some, but not all, of the goals of public engagement. They are an efficient means to inform the planning team of the priorities and concerns of various stakeholders.

Moreover, there is no better way to prepare for the open give and take of, for example, Community Conversations than by exploring issues first via a few focus groups. Doing so can help you understand the public's starting point, frame the issue you wish to talk about, develop background materials, become aware of potential hot-button issues that can derail the dialogue, prepare moderator training materials, etc.

But, while focus groups achieve some public engagement goals, they do not achieve them all. They provide a reading of people's state of mind, but do not, by themselves, help them develop their thinking very much. They can illuminate confusion but do not constitute the communication needed to correct it. They can distinguish those issues people are willing to delegate to leaders from those they want to have a say in, but do not necessarily give them much of a say. They clarify differences in priority among various stakeholders, but do not help communities work through those differences to build the common ground and collaborations that can best serve students and improve colleges.

Nor does focus group research provide the public vetting of a solution that helps legitimize it. You can always argue that you received good input from many stakeholders via focus groups, and that these were incorporated into your thinking and planning. But as focus groups are a controlled process, not a public one, they are also easy to call into question. Who did you talk to? Why didn't *I* have a chance to participate? I wasn't there, so why should I trust the process?

The strengths of focus groups include:

- They are an efficient way to gain input from various important stakeholders or from the community more generally. This can help you refine your plans, communicate about them more effectively, and prepare for more ambitious engagement activities later on.
- They are a relatively controlled process, in that the information is pretty much yours to do with as you wish.

Among their disadvantages are:

- Focus groups do not do as much to legitimize your plans with stakeholders and the community overall as other more “public” strategies do. People are less likely to say that there was some kind of democratic process involved and therefore they should respect the approach you are bringing to bear to achieve your goals.
- They require some resources and expertise to do well.

See Appendix 1 for a more nuts-and-bolts discussion on the use of focus groups.

2. Stakeholder Dialogues

Focus groups, the research methods just discussed, keep control in the hands of the researchers. In focus groups, for example, people are typically paid to attend. It's therefore not hard to steer the conversation directly to the topics you want to discuss, and the information is yours to decide how to use.

By contrast, stakeholder dialogues are by nature a less controlled process. Participants are not research subjects; they are peers, citizens who are voluntarily contributing their time and ideas. They'll tend to be more assertive if they have questions about the agenda. Compared to focus group participants, they'll feel less constrained about commenting to others—including, perhaps, the media, about what it is they've discussed.

These sessions can be with highly homogenous groups—a session with faculty only, for example. Or, depending on your purpose, they can be more diverse, with several different stakeholders, e.g., sessions with faculty and students combined. (Public Agenda has found combined faculty-student dialogues to be a particularly useful process for productive problem-solving.) The idea is to engage people in productive dialogue about your initiative, to elicit their interest and ideas about how to make it work. In either case you have the option of focusing on *leaders*, *constituents*, or, as we generally recommend, *both*.

The strengths of stakeholder dialogues include:

- They allow you, as focus groups do, to target specific groups that are most important to your work.
- They do not tend to cost much.
- Nor do they require much in the way of special expertise. While some designs will work much more effectively than others, stakeholder dialogues are closer than other engagement strategies to things that educators and administrators have done many times before (i.e., lead meetings) and they can usually implement the strategy with little or no outside help.

Drawbacks, limitations and challenges of stakeholder dialogues include:

- They require time and care to do well.
- They do not raise general awareness and engagement across the broader campus or surrounding community as effectively as larger Community Conversations will (see next section).
- They can raise some issues of diplomacy because, as a practical matter, you will have to concentrate on some stakeholders more than others.

A more detailed discussion of stakeholder dialogues may be found in Appendix 2.

3. Community Conversations

These are opportunities to engage a broad cross-section of a community in dialogue, including both specific stakeholders and average citizens. They are the most public of the public engagement strategies we are discussing in this manual in the sense that these are large-scale civic events meant to include all sectors of the community on the issue at hand.

While there are several models that have been widely applied for broad-based community dialogue, most are variations on a basic set of principles, which, in Public Agenda's Community Conversations model, may be summarized as follows:

- Nonpartisan sponsors/organizers
- Diverse cross-section of participants
- Small, diverse dialogue groups

- Nonpartisan discussion materials that help citizens weigh alternatives
- Trained, nonpartisan moderators and recorders
- Forum follow-up

These elements, discussed in detail in Appendix 3, will create participative, productive, inclusive and effective community forums.

The strengths of community forums are:

- They will tend to reach the largest number of people and to gain the broadest (although not usually the most detailed) input.
- They can generate positive press coverage and raise general awareness.
- They can bring new ideas, resources and partners to your initiative that you hadn't even considered.

Disadvantages of a public forum strategy are:

- They are labor intensive and require a significant amount of lead time, especially to recruit diverse participants.
- If you are not already experienced in public forum work, you'll need technical assistance to create useful discussion materials, develop organizing strategies, train moderators and recorders, and form plans for moving from dialogue to action.
- They should not be one-time affairs: You must be prepared to follow up with participants to keep them informed and create actions consistent with your Achieving the Dream goals.

**Summary Table:
Strengths and Weaknesses of Three Public Engagement Strategies**

Type of Public Engagement	Pros	Cons
Focus Groups	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Efficient way to gain input · You maintain maximum control of information 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Less effective than other strategies for legitimizing plans · May require money and expertise to do well
Stakeholder Dialogues	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Targets key groups · Relatively inexpensive · Requires minimal special expertise, technical assistance 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Time consuming · Limited impact on community overall · Can be politically tricky to include some stakeholders and not others
Community Conversations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Engages the most people · Raises general awareness through direct contact, word of mouth and media attention · Generates new ideas and partnerships 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Labor intensive, requires significant lead time · Usually requires technical assistance. · Requires some level of ongoing follow-up

Public Engagement as a Pedagogical Opportunity

One final note: As an exercise in democratic decision-making, public engagement can offer some interesting pedagogical opportunities for your students. Students could, for example, receive class credit for helping to organize Community Conversations. They could be being part of action teams that follow-up on engagement activities. They could act as facilitators or recorders at dialogues as well as participants. They could follow the public policy implications of the questions you are pursuing as they stretch from the community to the state and even the national levels of government.

Your engagement activities could thus provide valuable experiences for students in democratic process, citizenship and community politics, thereby serving your Achieving the Dream initiative in yet another way.

Appendix 1: Focus Groups

Focus groups are simply small-group research interviews that allow you to explore, in some depth, people's perceptions, concerns, confusions, values, ideas for change, the language they use, and so on. As you approach focus group research, there are three main sets of questions you need to work through. What do you want to know? From whom? And how, practically, will your research program be executed?

An experienced researcher's help will be invaluable in helping you figure out how to answer these questions and in actually conducting the groups. But even with a professional helping you, your serious involvement in thinking through the research strategy will pay off in results that will best serve your planning needs.

What do you want to know?

Generally speaking, it's the job of the leadership team or a task force acting on its behalf (such as your data team) to decide which areas of inquiry will be most useful; it is the researcher's job to translate these into the specific research questions that will shed light on them.

The themes will differ somewhat depending on each college's situation and with each group that is being addressed. That said, some themes and questions are likely to be of interest to most Achieving the Dream community colleges at the planning stage, such as:

- What are the key obstacles to student success (generally, or with respect to specific types of students)?
- What needs to happen in order to overcome those obstacles?
- What are the perceptions of the college, including things like its strengths, weaknesses and major challenges?
- How important is the college's success in the eyes of respondents, and in particular how important is it that the college succeeds in improving results for underserved students? Is it a matter of concern, and if so, how urgent is that concern? Do respondents feel they have a stake in the college's success or that of its students?
- What is the language that people use spontaneously to talk about these things?
- Who do people view as primarily responsible for improving these results? Do they see a role for themselves, for others, for the community overall?
- How do people react to the college's participation in Achieving the Dream, as well as specific interventions that are part of the team's initial thinking? Are they enthusiastic? Cynical? Anxious? Do they have specific concerns that might be addressed as you move ahead? Are there roles they are comfortable playing? What would help them get on board?

Insight into these sorts of questions, and others you may think of, can help you plan your initiative with people's values and concerns in mind, anticipate resistance you're likely to run into, and inform how you implement and communicate what you are doing.

Who do you want to talk to?

Focus groups can be conducted with general population groups or with more targeted groups such as full-time faculty, adjunct faculty, younger students, older students, low-performing students, former or prospective students, family members of students, employers of students who are currently in college, employers of graduates, etc.

Focus groups can also be conducted with cross-sections of stakeholders (such as a mix of educators, community leaders, students, and the general public). This last focus group composition is unusual among traditional researchers, but has been extremely valuable at Public Agenda where we've used it to develop issue guides to spark dialogue in public dialogues. These highly diverse groups replicate the small, breakout groups in our Community Conversation method of community engagement (see Appendix 3), thus providing the perfect lab for testing materials before going public with them in a forum.

Deciding on the “who”

Deciding whom you will include in focus groups is always a matter of getting the most bang for the buck. There are costs in both time and money in focus group research, and while you may be interested in exploring your questions with many different subgroups, you will end up deciding which will give you the greatest return on your investment.

Given Achieving the Dream's mission, it is hard to imagine a focus group strategy that did not include the underserved students that are at the heart of the endeavor, as well as the faculty who will be so key to their success. But depending on your initial thinking about who you will be most important to your efforts, as well as the time and resources you can practically devote to this engagement strategy, you may well want to speak to others as well.

Reaching low-income participants and people of color

Focus groups are one reliable way to gain insights from the low-income and communities of color that make up the largest proportion of the underserved students that are the focus of Achieving the Dream. But there are some methodological and funding questions that come into play. For instance, it may be more expensive to recruit a minority group, depending on their numbers in the general population, available databases, etc. And it's sometimes the case that moderators with a background similar to a particular group of participants can go somewhat deeper with them, especially with regard to issues that are racially or ethnically sensitive. But given enough time and resources, an experienced researcher can usually arrange focus groups with any group in a community that might be desired.

Making it happen

So far we've reviewed the critical questions of whom you wish to talk to and what you want to ask them. In this final section we'll turn to the practical issues of making focus groups happen.

The most efficient and reliable way to proceed is to hire a solid professional to set up the groups, develop a moderator guide that reflects your research objectives, and analyze the results for you. But as this usually costs somewhere between \$4,000 and \$8,000 per group, not every college is likely to take up this option.

Focus groups can be done informally, but they tend to become less reliable. For instance, it's somewhat iffy to find participants by asking for volunteers among your own network of contacts, because the sample might be skewed in such a way that you'll lose valuable information. College personnel can moderate, but it takes a special skill to do it well, and people might hold back if they're uncomfortable giving feedback directly to a college representative.

In short, very poor research is *not* better than nothing, for it can steer you in the wrong direction. On the other hand, a little modest research, if done well, *is* better than nothing. A few well-crafted and executed focus groups, while not the last word on public opinion or public engagement, can begin to clue you in to important information that can go a long way toward improving your Achieving the Dream planning and prioritizing.

Appendix 2: Stakeholder Dialogues

Stakeholders are leaders and constituents of important groups and organizations that have a direct stake in the success of your initiative and can directly affect its outcome. Stakeholder dialogues are highly participatory discussions of an issue of mutual concern. When properly designed they are deliberative (encouraging people to weigh the pros and cons of a variety of perspectives), honest (promoting an open exchange of views), and productive (opening up new lines of thought, bringing disagreements more clearly into the open, and building common ground). They can help you:

- Create better communication with key actors.
- Benefit from the hands-on expertise of those closest to the action of what you are trying to achieve.
- Gain their buy-in and participation.
- Avoid unnecessary backlashes by bringing people's confusion and resistance out in the open early on, so they can be addressed.

What stakeholder dialogues are not

Not focus groups

While they overlap with focus groups in many respects, they also differ in important ways. Focus groups are research sessions where a sample of group x or y is recruited, and typically paid an incentive, to respond to a series of research questions. Stakeholder dialogues are meetings where leaders and/or constituents of group x or y (or both) agree to donate their time to learn about and weigh in on your initiative. Whereas a focus group can tell you about the concerns and views of a group of people, it is less effective as a means to build common ground, shared understanding, and new agreements on how to work together—all goals that well-constructed dialogues can help achieve.

Not Community Conversations

Stakeholder dialogues are also distinct from broad-based community forums aimed at engaging publics more generally by bringing large numbers of people from diverse backgrounds together. Instead, they target specific critical groups.

Neither lectures nor gripe sessions

Communication in a stakeholder dialogue is not one-way: They are neither lectures meant to educate an audience, nor are they gripe sessions meant only to blow off steam. They are open (yet structured) discussions, with give and take, aimed at promoting better communication, understanding and problem solving.

A step toward action, but without an immediate action agenda

Finally, while dialogue is ultimately about action (at the least in the form of your Achieving the Dream initiative), dialogue sessions are best thought of as groundwork for, and prelude to, action, rather than as hard-core action planning sessions themselves. In

other words, they can be very helpful first steps toward action and new partnerships, but there should not be pressure to have concrete action outcomes at the end of the meeting.

There are some dialogue theorists, in fact, who think that there should be no action goals in a dialogue, as this can amplify power dynamics and thereby raise the immediate stakes of the conversation, making the honest and insightful exchange of values and ideas more difficult. Other more action-oriented and pragmatic types believe words without concrete actions immediately flowing from them are meaningless.

The middle ground that is espoused here is that dialogue is best used to promote mutual understanding and communication about a shared problem, and to help identify general potential ideas and directions for solutions, which can then lead to concrete action as a next step. It is a platform for action planning, but it is not the same thing.

Through dialogue common ground is identified, concerns and confusions are clarified, and the ideas for action and collaboration that generate the greatest support are separated out from those that are non-starters. Such insights form a strong foundation for concrete action, planning for which can often fruitfully follow from dialogue. But if a dialogue begins with the admonition, “We are not leaving this room without a concrete action plan that maps out every one of our responsibilities,” it can stifle the thoughtful and honest exchange of perspectives and ideas. Therefore, such an action-planning session may be appropriate as a follow-up to dialogue, but should not define the parameters under which it takes place.

Designing and conducting successful stakeholder dialogues

Dialogue can take place in different kinds of settings and be moderated by different kinds of people. They can last for an hour (although an hour can only scratch the surface), several hours or even (intermittently) several days or weeks. They can comprise homogenous or diverse groups in a given session.

The precise form is up to you based on your best assessment of what’s appropriate for your local culture and situation. What we can do here is explain some of the essential principles of successful dialogue that you can incorporate for your own purposes.

Deciding on and recruiting participants

You can hold stakeholder sessions with a specific stakeholder group (such as faculty) or with several key stakeholders (such as faculty, students, employers and four-year college admissions officers). You might choose the former if you wish to develop more of an in-depth understanding of, and relationship with, a specific stakeholder group that has not before been part of your circle. Or you might go with a cross-section of stakeholders if your aim is to get broader input and also to explore how different kinds of groups can work together more effectively.

In either case, it is always important to reach beyond those who inevitably attend meetings on issues such as those you are concerned with. For this initiative, it is particularly important to include low-income participants and people of color.

While this may bring certain figures immediately to mind, do not stop with the first and easiest invitations you might make. Perhaps there is a recently growing immigrant community with less established leadership. Including stakeholders from that group may take more time than inviting a leader from a long-standing, low-income or minority neighborhood in your area. The point is to take seriously the concept of diversity and outreach, to put in the time to bring new faces to the table along with established figures, and to make sure you are getting broad representation of the stakeholder group you wish with to engage and not just one or two spokespeople who claim to speak for an entire group.

Factors that can help you more effectively include diverse communities in stakeholder dialogues are:

- Enlist co-sponsors for the dialogue process. Often, the right combination of cosponsors can create a more open, interesting and inviting profile for the dialogue than can any one institution.
- Give yourself enough time for person-to-person outreach to ensure diverse participation.
- Enlist the right people to help you with the outreach. They should be those with knowledge of, and credibility within, the groups you are seeking to include.
- Pay attention to cultural differences, from language issues to comfort level with different physical settings, which could affect participation by different groups.

Addressing power dynamics

One of the greatest challenges for dialogue is to level the playing field and minimize power dynamics, so people can speak freely, thoughtfully and creatively, without worrying that their ideas will be unduly criticized or, worse yet, come back to haunt them. Here are some tips for minimizing the negative impacts of power discrepancies:

- Consider holding the dialogue in an environment that minimizes power dynamics, some kind of neutral setting that doesn't feel like one person's home turf.
- Avoid auditorium setups where authority figures are up on a stage looking down at row upon row of passive participants.
- If you have more 20 or more participants, do much of the dialogue work in small groups. Dialogue takes place best in small-group settings of 10 to 15 participants. We find 12-14 to be ideal. Much smaller than that and you lose energy and diversity in each group. Much larger and it's hard to have enough time for people to really explore the issues and contribute to the discussion. If you are working with larger groups, create a program where you move back and forth between larger plenary

sessions to introduce ideas or share results, and smaller breakout sessions where most of the real dialogue takes place.

- If resources permit it, consider using professional, neutral moderators to facilitate the groups, especially if the issues you are dealing with are highly controversial. Short of this ideal situation—which, we recognize, may not always be possible or practical—make sure the small groups organize themselves so that someone takes on the facilitator role and someone else takes notes. Make sure to specify clearly that the facilitator’s role is about encouraging broad participation and helping the group compare different points of view. It is *not* about pushing a specific agenda, or achieving a perfect consensus.

Additional tips

- *Be clear up front.* Make sure the purpose of the session is clearly stated, as well as the plan for the session.
- *Find the right person (or team) to spearhead the effort,* someone who believes in open, inclusive dialogue and who has a knack for it.
- *Connect issues to people’s values and leave room for their concerns.* This can mean either doing some preliminary work to understand people’s starting point for the conversations (see the earlier discussion of focus groups in this section), or building in a process at the outset that allows people to get some of their pressing concerns off their chests. Either way, it is important that the dialogue make room for things that are of pressing concern to people. For example, some community leaders may be worried about the impact it can have on housing values if student achievement data is aired in public. Addressing these sorts of pressing concerns, or even just acknowledging that they are there, can help free up people’s attention.
- *Provide needed background without overwhelming people.* Some background on Achieving the Dream is likely to be useful, along with, perhaps, testing data broken out over time and by different student groups, or other accessible, to-the-point information. But remember, too many bare facts, statistics and tables can put the “regular folks” in the room at a disadvantage and effectively hand the meeting over to the professionals and experts. Ask yourself, “What is the essential background information that will help people talk about what is most important to them as concerned citizens and us as educators.” Some information can be provided in advance, though you can’t assume everyone has studied it and will need to review it.
- *Consider a “Choicework” approach* to starting the conversation. With the general public we always recommend beginning a conversation like this through “Choicework” –i.e., providing several alternative directions people might go to respond to the question, as a way to jump start people’s thinking and discussion. (More on Choicework in Appendices 3 and 4.) With an experienced leadership group that has a great deal of expertise in the issue at hand, you can begin the conversation through either a Choicework approach or through more wide-open discussion.

- *Diverse breakout groups are important.* If your design calls for breakout groups, make sure each one is as diverse as the group overall. Dialogue is greatly enriched if there are diverse perspectives at the table.
- *Be prepared for hot button issues.* Every community has its hot button issues, and there's a good chance that Achieving the Dream will push some of them. For example, the nature of the reform makes it possible that issues of race and class might come to the fore, because achievement gap data will be front and center, because some colleges have much fewer resources than others, and so on. Preliminary focus groups can give you a heads-up on what hot button issues are most likely to come up in your situation.

How can organizers manage these issues productively in college personnel dialogues?

- Acknowledge that the college is confronting tough issues, some of which people may have strong feelings about, and everyone needs to work together to make sure they are handled constructively if they do.
- Remind people of the purpose of the dialogue and suggest that tough issues are fair game to the extent they relate to and inform that purpose—in that case, they are worth the effort they will require to deal with them.
- Reinforce the idea that in a dialogue it is fine to agree and disagree, but that it is best not to get personal with disagreements. Disagreements should be dealt with on the level of ideas, not personalities.
- In addition to making these points to participants in introducing and setting the tone for the dialogue session, remind your facilitator (or facilitators if you are using several for breakout groups) so they can reinforce them as well.
- *Provide moderators with guidelines* to help them do a good job. On the most basic level, the task of the moderators is to make sure that participants—in each small group if that is how things are organized—understand what they are there to discuss, understand the ground rules, and stay reasonably focused and on schedule. Beyond this, they work to make the conversation as highly participatory, constructive and productive as possible.

Successful moderators are comfortable with the goal of an open dialogue without a preset outcome. It is essential to the credibility of the process that moderators be neutral as to the *substantive* outcomes of the conversations and avoids appearing as biased or having an agenda. The moderators do, of course, have an agenda with regard to the *process* of the session, to facilitate a civil, productive, constructive dialogue among participants, not to lead people toward a “correct” answer.

Moderators look for opportunities to keep the conversation stimulating and on track by, for instance:

- Encouraging people (without being pushy) to participate and share their views.
- Keeping especially assertive individuals from dominating the discussion.
- Making sure a point someone is making is well understood.
- Asking participants *why* they feel the way they do – e.g., have they had particular experiences that have led them to their current views?
- Pointing out tensions between different perspectives.
- Occasionally summing up and refocusing the discussion.
- Occasionally introducing important arguments (in a neutral manner) that people are overlooking to see what people think.

A sample dialogue agenda

Let's suppose you want to concentrate one of your stakeholder dialogues on the theme of "Preparing Community College Students to Succeed in College and the Workplace." You've already had a preliminary discussion with several employers, and now you've decided to organize a dialogue among a cross-section of stakeholders who can all inform your thinking and perhaps open up new possibilities as they cross-fertilize the conversation from their varied perspectives. Your dialogue will include:

- A number of employers who hire community college students and graduates.
- Several community business leaders, including minority business leaders.
- Several representatives of community-based organizations that address employment and workforce development issues in low-income and minority neighborhoods.
- Perhaps a representative from the mayor's office who oversees economic affairs.
- Several faculty members.
- Several students, including low-income students and students of color.
- Several recent graduates currently in the workforce.

Your agenda might be something along the lines of:

- 10 minutes: Welcome by college president or other senior administrator covering:
- Purpose of dialogue.
 - Brief background on your college's focus on making a significant impact on student success over the next several years, your participation in the Achieving the Dream initiative, and the planning process you are engaged in.
 - Turn over meeting to neutral facilitator and recorder (at a flip chart).
- 10 minutes: Participants introductions, with brief comments on how each of their work relates to the community college and/or its students

2 hours: Dialogue (in breakout groups if numbers warrant it)

- *Ground rules*

In general, ground rules should be few, simple and basic. (Complicated ground rules that require people to think before they talk stifle expression.) Their purpose should be to create an environment that is safe for people to participate and where there are equal opportunities for them to do so. A simple set of ground rules that will generally be useful is something along these lines:

- Let's work together to make sure everyone has good opportunities to participate. To do that, let's try to keep our statements at a reasonable length so no one inadvertently monopolizes the time.
- In this dialogue we are free to agree and to disagree with one another. If we disagree, let's do it respectfully, keep it on the level of each person's ideas, and avoid any personal attacks.
- Whatever is said here will only be recorded as a general statement, without names attached. While everyone has to take care of themselves as far as what they are willing to say in public, let's agree in principle that we should respect each person's privacy and that we will not talk to others about specific things people say. If we talk with others about this discussion, we will only talk about what was said in general, without quoting anyone. Agreed?
- *Dialogue question 1:* "What are the most important ways to help students succeed in college and prepare them for the workplace?" (Option: Use a Choicework guide to stimulate and structure the conversation.)
- *Dialogue question 2:* Here are three ideas that the college's Achieving the Dream leadership team is contemplating making central to its new initiative. What do you think of each of them?
- *Summary:* In our discussion today:
 - What were our most important areas of common ground?
 - What disagreements do we have that we should continue to talk through?
 - What are the questions or concerns or areas that require more study that we identified?
- *Partnering for Student Success:* "Given our discussion so far, how can we do a better job of working together to prepare community college students to succeed in college and the workplace?"

- *Next Steps:* How should we follow up on today's session?

Following up: Making dialogue count

There is no one way to follow up on dialogue sessions because there is no way to predict exactly what will come out of them. But there are some principles and guidelines that will generally make sense and help you get the most out of your dialogue experiences.

- Dialogue organizers should report back to participants what they heard and what they are doing in response to what they heard.
- Dialogue organizers should report on who will hear about the dialogue results, and, preferably, how they respond to it. For example, other community leaders who were not able to attend might be informed of the group's deliberations and invited to subsequent discussions. The results might be shared with the media as well.
- Participants should be encouraged (at the least) and actively helped (at best) to continue to stay involved in concrete ways. For example, you might:
 - Hold follow-up sessions to report on your Achieving the Dream progress and gain continued feedback and interest.
 - Continue discussing the issues raised in the initial dialogue. One format that can be used is to create some version of "study circles" (small groups that meet several times on their own to go more deeply into an issue than is possible at a single session). Another is to create a listserv of the participants to continue the dialogue online.
 - Replicate the dialogue to include more people in the process
 - Form planning groups or task forces from the dialogue group to translate general ideas into concrete action plans.
 - Inform participants about existing groups or initiatives that are addressing issues raised in the dialogue that they can plug into.

Appendix 3: Community Conversations

In some respects, Community Conversations are more challenging than focus groups or stakeholder dialogues. Simply put, because most college leaders are less familiar with them, and because they are very public events, they are inherently labor intensive and somewhat risky. That said, hundreds of communities have successfully engaged their publics in this manner, often with profound results. (For just one example, see the case study at the end of this section.)

Because it is difficult to do this work well, a measure of hands-on support and training is recommended for the inexperienced. Therefore, we do not provide a “how-to” set of guidelines in this section so much as a more detailed overview than has been presented so far of what is entailed in community forum work. If you decide it makes sense to go in this direction at this stage of your initiative, Achieving the Dream will do its best to support you. For example, all Achieving the Dream colleges will be supplied with Community Conversation Toolkits prepared by Public Agenda, which include Organizer Guides, Video Discussion Starters, and other useful materials. (Contact Public Agenda for more information.)

While there are a number of related approaches to broad-based community dialogue, most of them share with Public Agenda’s “Community Conversations” several core principles. Several of these overlap with the discussion of stakeholder dialogues, but they are worth collecting and reviewing here, in the context of a discussion of broad-based community forums. They are:

- Local, nonpartisan sponsors/organizers.
- Diverse cross-section of citizen participants.
- Small, diverse dialogue groups.
- Nonpartisan discussion materials that help citizens weigh alternatives.
- Trained, nonpartisan moderators and recorders.
- Forum follow-up.

Local, nonpartisan sponsors/organizers

Typically, Community Conversations are most successful when they are co-sponsored by several community leaders and organizations. The first order of business, then, is to create a nonpartisan/multi-partisan coalition to sponsor, organize and act on the public engagement process.

Diverse cross-section of participants

As noted several times, public engagement should involve more than “the usual suspects”—that colorful cast of characters that inevitably shows up to any public meeting on its pet topic, prepared remarks in hand. Indeed, in the original R&D work that went into developing the Public Agenda model, participants were asked what aspect of the experience they found most rewarding and useful. Most frequently, the answer was—and this is heartening to those who value democracy, pluralism and diversity—“talking to people I don’t usually talk to.”

Thus a major task confronting local organizers is to recruit a cross-section of the community to participate in the dialogue, including those who would not typically attend public meetings. As those who have toiled in the fields of civic dialogue or community organizing know, this is a labor-intensive process that relies on multiple strategies, with the most important being *one-to-one outreach*. Given sufficient time, motivation and the right set of strategies, it can be achieved.

A key to including low-income citizens and people of color is to build relationships and partnerships with community-based organizations and local leaders with roots and standing in those communities, and making them co-sponsors/organizers of the community engagement work. Who these public engagement partners are will change from one community to the next. In addition, paying attention to such variables as where a forum is held, how it is described, travel and child-care support, and language issues can all make a difference.

Small, diverse dialogue groups

Large halls with hundreds of people elicit speechmaking, not the honest give and take and self-reflection of quality dialogue. The latter requires small groups, and that’s where the real work takes place in the forums.

While there is plenty of room to improvise on the exact size, form and timeline, the typical Public Agenda Community Conversation involves between 60 and 130 participants and follows an evening schedule roughly along these lines:

5:30-6:30	Registration and dinner
6:30-6:50	Welcoming remarks
7:00-8:50	Dialogue in small diverse groups
9:00-9:30	Small group reports and final remarks

Whatever the precise structural design, the results of these sessions are always organized around the following themes. These results are then followed up in a wide variety of ways.

- Areas of common ground (a platform for common action)
- Areas of disagreement (where more dialogue may be needed)
- Questions and concerns raised by the discussion (including information that people need in order to move ahead in their thinking and actions)
- Ideas for action and collaboration (less a specific action plan than a prioritized set of ideas that most agree ought to be seriously explored)
- Next steps (by individual participants and dialogue organizers)

Nonpartisan “Choicework” discussion materials that help citizens weigh alternatives

In developing its approach and materials, Public Agenda set out to do everything possible to make the discussion accessible and engaging for average citizens, and ensure that regular citizens could participate effectively in discussions where some people are bound to have a great deal more experience and expertise than others. Our approach drew heavily on Dan Yankelovich’s seminal work on how citizens progress from knee-jerk reaction to “public judgment” (solidly held views that emerge only after people have had opportunities to reflect on what is most important to them and what, practically speaking, they think makes the most sense).

Drawing on decades of hands-on study of public opinion formation, Yankelovich stresses the usefulness of presenting citizens with a variety of *choices* to weigh against each other as a means to help them learn about an issue, sort out their views, work through their resistances to making tough decisions, and move toward public judgment. As he explains:

Choices are so necessary to working through [toward public judgment] that in many contexts the process does not begin until the choices become real... [As an example], parents...want the colleges to do everything: teach the basics, prepare young people for jobs, help them be good citizens, impart moral values to them, introduce them to the arts, make them good drivers, teach them to be computer literate, engage them in sports, and help them cope with emotional difficulties. Our colleges are in crisis today partly because people have refused to work through the hard choices.²

² *Coming to Public Judgment: Making Democracy Work in a Complex World* by Daniel Yankelovich (Syracuse University Press, 1991) pp. 166-167.

Trained, nonpartisan moderators and recorders

Skilled, fair-minded moderators help discussion groups deepen their dialogues and stay on track. Well-prepared recorders capture the group's deliberations to enable effective follow-up. Public Agenda trains local volunteer moderators and recorders to use both the discussion model and the materials so that a community can build capacity for future dialogue.

Forum follow-up

Sponsors and organizers of forums should think early on about how to create the conditions for effective follow-up to their forums. At the very least, they are advised to:

- Provide a summary report to all participants.
- Report results to decision-makers, and, when possible, convey decision-maker response(s) back to participants.
- Disseminate the results in other ways, such as online and through media channels.
- Suggest or help create ways that participants who are inspired can stay involved, such as joining organizations dedicated to some aspect of the topic at hand, helping with future forums, or joining task forces to plan and promote specific policies or new initiatives.

Community Conversations and Achieving the Dream Colleges

Throughout late 2005 and early 2006, Public Agenda worked directly with six of the Round One and Two Achieving the Dream colleges, providing technical assistance as they planned community conversations. Those six colleges are Tallahassee Community College in Tallahassee, FL, Valencia Community College in Orlando, FL, Jefferson Community College in Stubenville, OH, Housatonic Community College in Bridgeport, CT, Norwalk Community College in Norwalk CT, and the Alamo Community College District in San Antonio, TX. (As a follow on the initial system-wide conversation, each of the four San Antonio colleges held their own, local, conversation.)

As well as providing hands-on technical assistance, Public Agenda developed the aforementioned integrated Toolkit of organizer and moderator guides, print and video Choicework discussion materials (including Spanish translation versions), and other materials that all Achieving the Dream colleges - as well as community colleges across the country - can use to jump start community conversations and stakeholder dialogues on "Helping all Community College Students Succeed." See Appendix 4 for a copy of the "Success is What Counts" Choicework discussion guide.

Each of the six conversations held in the fall of 2005 and spring of 2006, attracted between 80-130 students, community members, and college faculty/staff each. While follow-on work differed from college to college, each gleaned important information

about community members' priorities and perceptions relevant to their Achieving the Dream work, while at the same time demonstrating to their communities a serious commitment to student success and achievement.

Most planned to integrate the Community Conversation model into their strategic planning efforts going forward. One organizer from Valencia Community College said,

We will use the [Community Conversation] approach as part of our qualitative research for our situational and needs analysis phase of our upcoming strategic planning cycle, starting this summer. We are in the process of revamping strategic planning for the whole college, and have been focusing on how we can better use qualitative research in strategic planning. The Community Conversation model is exactly what we were looking for. We have not been able to find any other model that is nearly as successful in providing the kind of potential for sustained connection with the community.

As another example, Jefferson Community College is using the Community Conversation process to strengthen their relationship and alignment with the local K-12 system.

Appendix 4: “Success is What Counts” Choicework Discussion Guide

Following is the content of the Choicework discussion starter that Public Agenda created for Achieving the Dream colleges for use in stakeholder and community dialogues about student success, called “Success is What Counts: A Community Conversation to Help All Community College Students Succeed.” This Choicework guide, along with a video version and other ancillary materials such as moderator/recorder and participant guides are available in the public engagement toolkit which Public Agenda has produced for all Achieving the Dream colleges. The toolkit has all the materials your college needs to host a community conversation.

It is important to note that Choicework materials such as these are not meant to limit the conversation to only three ideas, but to provide a useful, stimulating starting point for dialogue. When properly moderated, they help people who are not experts to effectively enter the conversation.

Success Is What Counts: A Community Conversation to Help All Community College Students Achieve

Community colleges serve a wide variety of students with a wide variety of goals. For example:

- They offer a first step into higher education, often the best step for students who can’t afford tuition at a four-year college or who don’t have the necessary grades.
- They are an option for students who prefer to stay close to home.
- They provide marketable job skills to both recent high school graduates and older students who want to upgrade their careers.

Like all community colleges, our college has some students who are struggling. In other words, we have some achievement gaps—and we want to do something about them. Our goal in this dialogue is to think about how the college and community can work together to close achievement gaps and help all students succeed.

We’ll begin by describing three areas that the college and community could focus on to achieve these goals:

- Making sure students are able to do college-level work.
- Helping students deal with the pressures in their lives.
- Ensuring a rigorous and engaging academic experience.

Of course, each of these approaches to student success may be of value. And you may have other ideas to add. But, it's also important to set some priorities so that we can put our resources to the best possible use.

We'll begin by reviewing these three approaches in greater detail. Which do you think is likely to have the greatest impact on student success, and why?

Approach 1: Focus on Making Sure Students are Ready to do College-level Work

For a variety of reasons, too many community college students arrive without a solid enough academic foundation. With adequate preparation, these students are better able to take advantage of the educational opportunities the college has to offer, and less likely to be thrown off course by the pressures in their lives.

Therefore, we should do things like:

- Strengthen remedial education and tutoring to help struggling students catch up.
- Support improvements in K-12 education and the transition from high school to college.
- Offer English as a Second Language programs for non-native English speakers.

Those who like this approach say:

“With many students arriving at community college without the academic skills and attitudes it takes to succeed, it's critical to make sure they're ready for college-level work.”

But others say:

“The college has a big enough task providing a quality education once students arrive. It's not practical to expect it to make up for things students should have learned before they get there.”

Approach 2: Focus on Helping Students Deal with the Pressures in Their Lives

Community college students tend to be busy people with busy lives. Most have jobs, many have children, and few have a great deal of money. As a result, there are many pressures in their lives that can make it difficult for them to stick with their studies and meet their goals.

Therefore, we should do things like:

- Ease the burden on lower-income students by providing scholarships and childcare.
- Encourage employers to allow flexible work schedules to help students balance college and work.

- Mentor students who need support and guidance in managing the challenges in their lives.

Those who like this approach say:

“By helping community college students cope with the pressures that can derail their studies, we can increase their chances of success.”

But others say:

“These are adult college students who need to take responsibility for their personal lives, however complicated they may be. The college should keep its focus on teaching and learning.”

Approach 3: Focus on Ensuring a Rigorous and Engaging Academic Experience

The most important thing we can do to promote student achievement is provide a quality educational experience, one that is challenging and engaging, and gives students the skills they need to meet their educational and career goals. If we do that, we’ll be able to help every motivated student to succeed.

Therefore, we should do things like:

- Raise academic expectations and standards.
- Train faculty in effective teaching strategies, including those that help less successful students.
- Invest in up-to-date technology.

Those who like this approach say:

“Having high academic expectations for students and providing them with a rigorous and engaging course of study is the key to student achievement.”

But others say:

“Community colleges serve many different kinds of students, and we shouldn’t assume that all of them need or want an equally rigorous academic experience. Some have more immediate and practical goals.”