



Dr. Steven Ender
President
Grand Rapids Community College
143 Bostwick Ave., NE
Grand Rapids, MI 49503-3295

Dear President Ender:

We are delighted to have Grand Rapids Community College (GRCC) as part of the Achieving the Dream (ATD) National Reform Network, and are deeply appreciative of you and your colleagues' continued commitment to student success and equity. After reviewing your 2014 Annual Reflection and receiving input from your ATD coaching team, we offer several observations in this letter about your institution's progress to date. We have arranged the review using the five broad principles that ATD views as key to institutional transformation, which also serve as the section topics for your Principles Assessment Survey. This feedback is offered in support of your institution in its efforts to achieve the student success and equity goals identified by your team.

Reflections on the Five Achieving the Dream Principles

Committed Leadership

We continue to be impressed by the strength and dedication of the leadership at Grand Rapids. Notably, the leadership from John Cowles, Donna Kragt, and other initiative chairs has been crucial in the positive strides the college has made over the past year in improving students' experience and success. This committed leadership has helped the college achieve notable improvements in almost all areas of the Principles Assessment Survey, which shows that GRCC is gaining a clearer understanding of institutional responsibility for the student experience.

We strongly encourage the college to ensure that all student success activities, initiatives, and results are communicated in an effective manner to both internal and external stakeholders. It is particularly important to ensure that faculty and staff are aware of all changes in policies and practices supporting student success. A communications plan is an excellent tool to guide those involved in implementing the identified tasks and greatly increases the likelihood of regular communication with key audiences. Assigning this responsibility to a particular individual will help make certain that this important task is executed consistently and effectively.

Additionally, as you move forward with replacing your provost, it will be crucial to highlight the importance of candidates for this position to demonstrate their commitment to student success and equity to ensure that they are well-positioned to support your existing efforts. Any new leadership will also need to be quickly oriented to the college's student success work to maintain momentum. It might also be prudent for the college to develop strategies to continue the excellent work on highly effective but costly initiatives, such as Fast Track.

Use of Evidence to Improve Policies, Programs, and Services

We are excited to note the college's recent success in implementing the switch to the new Blackboard Analytics product. It is pleasing to see that the college is focusing not only on preparing the new technology, but also preparing staff and faculty to adopt the new system into their existing work processes. We are also impressed by the college's use of evidence in its decision-making process, particularly the recent decision to add Hispanic students to the existing emphasis on the academic success of African American students. An emphasis on finding "lost" students will bring strength and focus to your fine work.

We encourage the college to develop a clear communications plan for student success news and data to ensure that any changes or successes are effectively communicated to the faculty and staff, as well as external stakeholders. This will help promote your institution's excellent work and further engage broader groups in data analysis, which will in turn help reduce the pressure on the institutional research and planning (IR) department. It may also be useful for the college to streamline the data request process in IR and include absolute due dates so initiatives needing data are guaranteed to have it. Any issues regarding workflow in the IR department should also be examined to ensure they have the resources and support they need as the college moves forward with implementing its student success work.

Broad Engagement

The adoption of a clear and strong set of institutional goals (student success, transfer, and workforce development) is exciting progress and should help facilitate communications with broad internal and external audiences. We commend GRCC's program review process, which has increased faculty assessment of academic programs, learning outcomes, and student success. We are encouraged by the effectiveness of the dean-led teams working to address complex issues as they will automatically engage many college offices and processes. We encourage the college to leverage these teams to intentionally build engagement in more departments throughout the institution. For example, the college could consider making an open call for volunteers to participate in student success and reform efforts, which could be included in a fall data summit. It would also be worthwhile for the leadership to develop ways to actively encourage participation from adjunct faculty and part time staff in the college's student success work and data analysis as they play a large and important role in students' first courses at the college.

Systemic Institutional Improvement

We are delighted to commend your college on aligning its student success work with its accreditation process by joining the Higher Learning Commission's new pathway for Student Persistence and Completion. This demonstrates your college's deep commitment to institutional improvement and student success. We also celebrate the recent steps taken to improve access to and understanding of the institution's data by faculty and staff, which should help relieve the pressure on the IR department. The college could consider ways to build on this work by providing professional training for faculty and staff in data analysis to facilitate optimal use of this database.

We encourage the college to both be patient and move urgently in its student success work. Patience will be required as the college community waits for policy, process, and program changes to affect student outcome measures. These improvements are usually not seen immediately, which can be frustrating for stakeholders so it is important to communicate often regarding progress in implementation and adoption, including data where appropriate, so it is clear to stakeholders that the initiatives are moving forward successfully. However, we also encourage the college to act urgently to scale up when the data indicate that specific changes are producing outcome improvements. The biggest impact on student outcomes will occur only when successful initiatives are scaled up to reach a large proportion of students.

Equity

We commend the college's efforts to focus resources on ensuring the success of initiatives designed to target students with the greatest level of need, such as the Minority Male initiative and Fast Track. It is also pleasing to note the college's recent efforts to incorporate a concern for equity into the college's recruitment and hiring considerations. We encourage the college to continue with this practice and design efforts to communicate the need for more staff and faculty to reflect the student population. Offering professional development on multicultural issues in the classroom and in the college's processes and policies would be an excellent way to incorporate equity into the culture of your institution.

Final Thoughts

GRCC has made substantial progress over the last year with its individual initiatives and institutional change work. Your leadership has made key changes to policies, procedures, and programs that have positioned the college to move to the next level of institutional improvement over the next few years. These efforts demonstrate GRCC's potential to be selected as a Leader College within the ATD Network next year, should you decide to apply.

As we reflect on all of your work leading up to and during the past year, we are most impressed by these accomplishments.

- The impressive results from the FastTrack program to refresh student skills in math, English and reading before they enroll in developmental courses.
- GRCC's increasing resolve to identify and impact the success of sub-sets of your student population through careful data analysis.
- The leadership exhibited by the president and cabinet officers, which continues to be crucial to your improvement efforts.

We recognize that the distinct environment of each college poses unique challenges and opportunities. In terms of next steps, we would like to suggest the following as possible ways to improve student outcomes over the next year.

- Consider empowering the staff involved in the strategy teams to determine which strategies remain as part of ATD and which are moved to departments for management. This would give the teams the opportunity to focus on identifying additional strategies that would move the needle on student success by reaching a broader group of students.
- We encourage the college to consider expanding the leadership group charged with keeping track of all student success initiatives, whether ATD, HLC, Title III, or other college actions, to include faculty and staff from key departments.
- We encourage you to share the great information that your Annual Reflection includes about initiative successes with the broader college audience through internal publications that are routine, easy to understand, and honest.

We appreciate the hard work, time, and resources that your institution devotes to its Achieving the Dream efforts. We encourage you to discuss the feedback in this letter with your Leadership Coach and Data Coach, who are ready to support and guide you moving forward. Please consider reviewing this letter with your ATD Core Team and college at large if you so wish. It may assist you in shaping the direction of your ongoing student success efforts. We look forward to working with you in the coming year and welcome your questions and comments along the way.

Sincerely,



Carol A. Lincoln
Senior Vice President