

**COLLEGE ACTION PLAN for Western Technical College**

**College Background**

Western Technical College is one of 16 institutions that comprise Wisconsin's Technical College System. In addition to the main campus in La Crosse, the college includes multiple regional centers across all or part of 11 counties in Western Wisconsin. Western's credit headcount in the fall of 2014 was 4580 students, and roughly 2500 students were enrolled in pre-college coursework as well. Pre-College includes Adult Basic Education, Adult Secondary Education, English Language Learning and our initial levels of Developmental Education. Historically, over 40% of students entering Western are not academically ready as measured by our placement test, COMPASS, or the alternative measure of the ACT.

Western values the success of students and holds itself accountable for providing excellence in student learning based on the diverse needs of each student and built on a foundation of integrity, teamwork, and respect. Western provides courses relevant to the current job market so that students receive the quality education and training necessary to succeed in today's competitive technical job market.

**Overview**

Western's selection to participate in this summit was extraordinarily timely for the College. Although we are only in the beginning stages of evaluating and redesigning our developmental education program, there is strong institutional support for doing so. Western's Developmental Education program is relatively unique in that it spans two divisions of the college. In essence, the first half of what is typically a two-level sequence lives in the Learner Support and Transition Division (which is part of student affairs) and is free to students other than nominal material fees and book costs where appropriate. The subsequent courses are tuition-bearing and reside in the General Studies Division (which is housed in academic affairs). Historically, we would not have categorized the courses in General Studies as "developmental," but as they only serve as pre-requisite courses required by low placement testing, they clearly are. This bifurcated structure is one of the initial items our evaluation team is examining.

Western is a newly minted Achieving the Dream College and between that work and the ongoing work of our Strategic Enrollment Management team, there is considerable momentum for identifying and eliminating barriers to student success. A team of six staff members (consisting of the president, a vice-president, two deans, a project coordinator, and a faculty member) participated in the summit and learned about the challenges and opportunities in Developmental Education nationally. The team was granted facilitated work time to develop a plan of action to bring back to our college. The challenge was to identify "Big Bets" for Western to improve outcomes for students who take developmental courses.

Western's team identified a short-term big bet and a longer-term project. This approach will create immediate improvement in academic outcomes for students, while keeping our long-term goals aligned with other work being done on campus. The short-term big bet we selected was an expansion to scale of

the promising Accelerated Learning Program (ALP) that has been piloted on our campus in recent semesters. The long-term project we selected was to join the growing college discussion on placement and readiness in order to give students the best chance to succeed.

In developing this action plan we were asked to address the following: data collection, data refining, data sharing, refining big bets, news ideas to consider, steps to take back home, and key insights from the summit. This paper will examine each of those areas from Western's perspective.

### **Data needs**

Course sequencing data is an important data need. At Western, when students complete their developmental course sequence, they have the opportunity to either immediately enroll in the associated credit course or wait to do so. Typically they can still take courses in their program sequence regardless of their choice. We believe it is important to know empirically how students move along this course sequence and the impact these decisions have on their success.

In addition, Western needs to refine the data point associated with First Time in College students succeeding in associated credit courses within two years of completing developmental coursework. After further examination, it appears our initial calculation may have been inaccurate due to our own misunderstandings of the parameters and definitions. While we remain certain that there is considerable room for improvement on this measure, we also need to have an accurate baseline so we can evaluate the efficacy of our big bets.

Western's last data action plan is simply to communicate the data points concerning students who take developmental education courses to our internal stakeholders. Unfortunately, our developmental education outcomes have not been broadly communicated and have not become a part of the general college discussion. This lack of understanding has hindered the college from understanding the entire student journey. A focused effort to enlarge the conversation about developmental education will not only allow for greater understanding, but will also bring fresh perspectives to the discussion. We believe that there is a general lack of understanding of both the strengths and challenges of developmental education and a broader college conversation is an important remedy to this issue.

### **Steps to refine College Big Bets**

Our immediate big bet is to rapidly and aggressively expand our Accelerated Learning Program (ALP) within the communications area. We would pair our Beginning Composition and Written Communication courses in the ALP format so that students could complete two semesters in one and accelerate their path to their goals. Western has been piloting ALP for five semesters with very promising results. These results include not only the acceleration of the course sequence, but a marked improvement in student success in all the courses in the sequence. The increase in C or better pass rates ranges from a 5.8% to an extraordinary 35.3%. While there is some variance from term to term and instructor to instructor, ALP is clearly a promising practice at Western Technical College. In order to fully scale ALP at Western, collaboration will be essential. General Studies, the scheduling office, and student services all have a key role to play in taking this promising practice to scale. Western's plan is that by the spring of 2016, the ALP approach will be the primary way that students who place into Beginning Composition meet their communications requirement.

Our longer term big bet is to reexamine our approach to placement and student readiness. The overarching goal of this bet is to redesign the student intake process to accelerate the on ramp to programs. Implementing this big bet will involve collaboration with existing college initiatives to identify and utilize promising practices related to student placement. All too often discussions about placement devolve into discussions about getting the “right student” and we need to help the discussion focus on success for all students. As mentioned earlier, there appears to be a confluence of interest and momentum that makes this a great time to look at this issue.

### **New ideas to consider beyond Big Bets**

There were a number of ideas that either came from the presentations we attended or arose in our discussion time that we think are worthy of exploration for our college in the future. These included the Statway and Quantway math curriculum projects that are showing promise across the country. Locally we would like to continue to explore our curriculum alignment and configuration so that it best supports student success. Lastly, we discussed the idea of a “math tank” point of entry for students so they could enroll immediately and begin to develop their math skills even prior to taking coursework. This idea could support our Adult Learner population particularly well, as a quick and focused brush-up often allows them to access prior learning without necessarily taking an entire course.

### **Steps for Back Home**

We have identified a number of important steps we must take to move our work forward. The first is to meet with our Institutional Research office to refine Western’s developmental education success measures. Next, we need to educate the college community about this data so that we can choose measures that all stakeholders understand, take responsibility for, and use on a regular basis. As an example, we have monitored the pass rates in developmental courses for a number of years, but if students who pass those courses don’t persist toward graduation at a high rate or in a timely fashion, perhaps that measure isn’t helping us. It is also imperative that we connect these measures to the College’s Key Results explicitly so that they are valued moving forward.

A third step for us is to build the momentum for our big bet on ALP by educating faculty and staff on the methodology and the benefits for students and staff. We believe our odds of success with this rise dramatically the more we can create a grassroots network of support. This allows us to avoid the “initiative fatigue” that hinders so many organizations. While doing this work we will need to continue the evaluation process we had already initiated of all of our developmental coursework at Western.

Our last piece of work will be to integrate into the groups already examining assessment and placement on our campus so that our perspective and learning can inform this crucial work. We believe by joining existing teams we will increase the odds of real change occurring and not being lost as just one more thing to work on.

### **Key Insight from Summit**

While we had many insights from the Summit, our primary takeaway was about the amount of education and engagement that needs to be done on our campus about the role and benefits of effective developmental education. This will broaden the participation and ownership of this work which will allow for developmental education to play a primary role in resource allocation and facility

development. Western is currently planning a major renovation of the Academic Resource Center and the work of this plan must inform that process.

### **Summary**

This summit was a wonderful opportunity for Western Technical College to engage in work that reminds us that our mission includes all students who come to our door. We take great pride in being an open access institution and in the work it takes to honor that mission. We left with a clear focus on a short-term win that will not only benefit students, but will also energize our faculty and staff with the possibility of bringing success to populations of students that we may not have succeeded with before. We enter into this work with great excitement and are anxious to follow the journey of the other colleges that participated in the summit. It is a very exciting time to be in developmental education.