Yuba Community College District
Feedback Memo

The Aspen Institute College Excellence Program

September 2016

INTRODUCTION

We thank the Yuba Community College District (YCCD) leadership for inviting us in to your community for a discussion of your unique history, evolution, priorities, and concerns. The thoughtfulness and candor of your district executive team; campus leaders; and college faculty, staff, and students offered a clear window into YCCD's deep commitment to lifting up the surrounding region and the strong desire to improve student outcomes.

The following memo serves as a complement to the individual site visit reports prepared for the Yuba and Woodland campuses. Specifically, the memo focuses on the role the YCCD system leadership can play to support the work of each campus to improve student success and institutional effectiveness. While the college site visit reports are organized around six domains (learning, completion, transfer and bachelor's degree attainment, equity, labor market success, and institutional culture), this memo instead offers four cross-cutting recommendations that YCCD can pursue to strengthen these areas at each campus.

OVERVIEW of YCCD

YCCD leadership is driven by a clear goal and strategic sensibility—to improve students' lives and the surrounding community through a collaborative approach whereby the community both benefits from and contributes to student success. Representing a vast geography with constrained employment opportunities and high poverty, YCCD is positioned to be a central convener and vital driver of mobility in its region, offering learners a potential path to transfer and living-wage jobs.

To achieve those goals, YCCD has several opportunities to improve. YCCD can start by signaling a new day. YCCD has certainly dealt with its challenges over the years, including scarce resources, relatively rapid leadership turnover, inadequate data systems, and the structural tension associated with starting a new college and transferring a long-time center from one college to another. At the same time, student outcomes need to improve. As an example, transfer and bachelor's degree completion rates fall significantly below national averages and well below exemplary colleges considered for the Aspen Prize (for more information, see chart on page 10). Perhaps due to the challenges the system has faced—especially insufficient systems for generating, sharing, discussing, and acting on data—relatively few individuals across the district are familiar with these lackluster outcomes.

The district now has a huge opportunity to change the district culture and student outcomes for the better, with new leadership in the district's chancellor, key executive positions, college presidents, and vice presidents. The leadership team's engagement of the Aspen Institute in this site visit demonstrates a desire to move in the direction of deepening a culture of inquiry and evidence-based decision-making, focused on intentional improvement of student achievement. The board of trustee's designation of eight success measures this spring, the district's adoption of the Completion by Design framework, and emerging

collaborations with regional employers offer important momentum on which to build. Perhaps most notable, despite years of challenges, practitioners at all levels of the district expressed a commendable openness to change and hopefulness that current conditions can improve—for their lives and the lives of the students they serve.

YCCD has a vital role in helping its colleges make good on the recommendations we offer in our campus site visit reports. Below, we offer four specific recommendations designed to generate urgency and action across the district, provide appropriate and reliable information infrastructure, leverage the support of outside partners, and expand the capacity of top-level leadership through professional development. Through these recommendations, we believe YCCD can help its institutions achieve immediate, tangible successes and set a course for continuous improvement.

RECOMMENDATION 1: TAKE IMMEDIATE ACTION IN ONE OR TWO STUDENT SUCCESS AREAS.

Given the current climate across the district and the "grace period" often awarded to new leadership, YCCD leadership has a window in which to pursue decisive action that demonstrates the capacity of the colleges to measurably improve student success. Two specific areas emerged from our visits as offering particular opportunity.

- *Increase the number of students completing a clear strong educational plan.* Strategic advising plays a critical role in setting students on a course toward completion and helping them stay on track. Currently, advising happens at the front door of YCCD's colleges, focusing on helping students establish short-term education plans that only take them through their first semester. Beyond an initial conversation with a counselor upon enrollment, students must take the initiative to return for advising and additional long-term term planning. Not surprisingly, few return, and typically, those leaners who do are least likely to need this support. We strongly suggest shifting from preliminary first-semester planning and increasing the number of students creating a full educational plan that leads to a specific credential or transfer goal. YCCD leadership can work with college presidents and deans of student services to set specific campus-level goals for increasing the completion of full educational plans by the end of a students' first year at their respective institutions. Deans of student services can work with their teams to identify the approaches to achieving these goals that make the most sense for their campuses (e.g., wrapping education planning in the first-year experience at Woodland or proactively tracking and contacting students who enter through Yuba's Quick Registration process).

  Additionally, each college should identify specific ways to systemically and systematically invite students back for additional support as they move through their plan, requiring student check-ins

with an advisor past the first semester to monitor progress toward their goals and update their plans as needed. This approach to advising will help determine if/when students are falling off track and provide the opportunity to help them regain a foothold, either through the application of services and supports and/or the revision of their course selection. The adoption of tools and systems discussed below in Recommendation 2, including education planning and degree audit systems, will be critical to delivering this type of sustained advising, particularly given limited human resources for counseling across the district's campuses.

- *Increase the number of students on path to an associate's degrees for transfer (ADTs).* Data suggest that YCCD has a large number of students aiming to transfer across the district and a tremendous opportunity to connect those students to a bachelor's degree through priority acceptance of those with ATDs by the California State University (CSU) system. At the beginning of the year, YCCD leadership could identify the percent of students with a stated transfer goal who have an education plan leading to an ATD and set a specific goal for increasing that number. Then, the system could support colleges with professional development for student services professionals on how to help students make choices and complete planning for an ATD, invite representatives from key transfer destinations for conversations with both practitioners and students, and use regular communications and other leadership tools to keep the campuses focused on helping students complete long-term education plans that lead to the completion of an ATD. At the end of the academic year, the district could assess and celebrate progress against the goal.

Succeeding in one or both of these areas—or some other measureable, meaningful, and achievable improvement in student success metrics—would affirm the system's collective ability to make headway on strengthening student success. Through these efforts, district executives can model a culture of inquiry and evidence-based decision-making by:

- Presenting clearly defined and easily accessed datasets to make plain the need and allow for benchmarking of progress (see Recommendation 2 below);

- Creating the time and space for faculty, staff, and administrators to understand and make sense of the data and to discuss how to make needed changes to achieve target goals;

- Highlighting the goals and activities widely across the district, by emphasizing them at the beginning of the school year (e.g., at commencement and in fall FLEX days), by providing regular updates at standing committee meeting and other venues, and through written email, newsletter, and other communications;

- Engaging campus-based leads to guide and champion these activities on the ground at their colleges; and

- Measuring the impact of these efforts, publically celebrating their success of and identifying the learning generated through the pursuit of these activities.

Simply put, we recommend YCCD do something that is both confined and important to student success that engenders trust in the collective ability of the campuses and the system to take positive, meaningful action that results in measureable improvements in student outcomes. Other ideas for specific action are embedded in the additional recommendations that follow.

RECOMMENDATION 2: IMPROVE DATA AND INFORMATION INFRASTRUCTURE.

Conversations with individuals across all levels and functions in the district reveal an urgent need to establish a reliable, accessible, and useful data infrastructure for both YCCD practitioners and students. While this effort will take an extended period of time to complete, the district should start this long-term effort immediately while, at the same time, identifying a few areas where value can be demonstrated to faculty and staff over the short-term.

The challenge. During the site visit, when faculty, staff, and administrators were asked about the current status of student outcomes, they were almost never able to cite data or even draw general conclusions from evidence they had reviewed. Moreover, staff never promised to retrieve data that might help respond to our queries and circle back to the site visit team. This strongly suggests that basic data on student success are both unknown and seen as unavailable. Indeed, respondents often noted the lack of human and technical capacity across the district for accessing useful information. They further expressed distrust in the data that is produced locally and for state reporting purposes, citing problems with basic data entry processes. They also shared frustration over the absence of meaningful conversations about evidence as it relates to student learning and achievement.

Build key data systems. We recommend that YCCD invest in key systems for supporting data collection, reporting, and analysis and for information dissemination. We recommend assessing current structures, determining gaps, and either upgrading and/or establishing new systems for collecting reliable data on all elements of the student experience. The district should ensure that the staff inputting data into any of these systems understand the meaning and import of the information they enter and are trained to enter the data in a manner that produces clean results. Automated data cleaning processes should be put into place to assure that the data that is entered is accurate and within acceptable ranges.

Create reliable and meaningful reports tied to student success. We suggest the district identify three to four specific student success goals and related metrics to pursue in the next one to three years. One senior YCCD

leader aptly stated, "It's one thing to talk about student success, it's another thing to share outcomes." These goals should be designed to create a sense of urgency and make the case for change across the district. It would make sense to align goals to the seven measures of success outlined by the board of trustees and the Completion by Design framework already embraced by the district. However, district leaders need to choose just a few metrics on which to focus. What select measures are of unique importance to YCCD students right now? YCCD leadership should then (1) publicize these goals and metrics widely to all campuses throughout the 2016-2017 academic year; (2) repeatedly communicate their importance through conversations, written communications, and other means with all functions of each institution in a way that directly connects their work to the goals; (3) establish the conditions for collaboratively discussing and planning how to achieve those outcomes by a date certain; and (4) establish a system for tracking and communicating progress related to these outcomes in future years.

District leaders can review examples of four key performance indicators currently employed nationally in several settings as part of pathways reforms here. Many colleges have also found Achieving the Dream useful for focusing colleges on their success data and developing cultures of evidence and inquiry.

Establish accessible ways for students to use data. Discussions with both district educators and students revealed the inadequacy of publicly available information to students. Program offerings and the new course catalog were described as problematic in many ways. Students apparently have no effective system through which to track their progress—from enrollment, placement, progress, and completion. We suggest that YCCD adopt both education planning and degree audit systems that allow learners at any campus to effectively identify goals and map course taking, and enable college practitioners and students alike the ability to determine where an individual is on their educational pathway. The statewide Education Planning Initiative offers one potential resource to support such an effort. Moreover, we recommend that the district's two colleges each (1) produce an updated catalog organized around programs that are tied to transfer and career pathways, and (2) align website content for easy access to this critical information.

RECOMMENDATION 3: ENGAGE EXTERNAL PARTNERS.

Community colleges that achieve exceptional outcomes do more than improve internal systems, they change the value proposition for students. This means visibly tying education to what students aim to do immediately *after* leaving the district's institutions: either (1) directly entering the workforce with a good paying job or (2) transferring to a four-year college and obtaining a bachelor's degree. Strong relationships with local and regional employers and with leaders from top transfer destinations can help ensure that students achieve those goals. Multi-campus districts are especially well positioned to help campuses develop those relationships.

YCCD has already begun engaging employers in important ways. Internally, YCCD reported nascent conversations about workforce training priorities within the district, particularly given the recent reorganization of the Lake County center under the direction of Woodland College. The district also takes part in regional planning conversations that include consideration of which community colleges will offer specific programs and is actively involved in pioneering statewide initiatives related to workforce development (e.g., the Doing What Matters Taskforce).

As a next step, YCCD leaders can work both internally and externally to advance employer engagement. District and college executives, including key administrative leaders and select CTE deans, should start by collecting data about projected labor market demand and presenting it to the leadership team for consideration of college programs (1) that are best positioned to meet that growing demand, and (2) that lead to jobs offering substantial number of students family sustaining wages. As a next step, system and college leaders should speak to employers in one to two areas of specific labor market growth and/or replacement across the region, sharing the data gathered and asking about their perceptions of particular jobs where they see need. Refining projections based on these conversations, leaders can then work to engage their colleges' CTE faculty on how to meet this demand, asking questions such as:

- Which of the college's existing programs are well suited to meet these demands? Are they large enough? What would it take to scale them if they are inadequate to meet current demand?

- Which areas of labor market demand is the college least well positioned to meet? What would it take to change that in terms of revamping existing programs or beginning new ones?

Having developed ideas based on data and employer conversations, the chancellor, campus presidents, and CTE deans would then be well positioned to go back to employers to develop additional areas of partnership. Specifically, campus leaders can explore:

- Opportunities employers might provide for applied training for students while they are taking courses, both as a way to deepen learning and to assess the quality of future employees;

- Arrangements that might enable students to work while attending the community college, with the explicit goal of delivering job-ready students without preventing them from completing their degrees; and

- Contributions that the employer might make in equipment, scholarships, or other educational goods and services that can enhance education and increase the likelihood of completion.

Through these kinds of partnerships, the district can continually deepen trust with key regional employers, providing that the colleges understand their specific workforce pipeline needs and have the capacity to deliver programs that respond accordingly.

In terms of deepening partnerships with four-year transfer institutions, the site visit revealed little activity centered on facilitating regular conversations and smoothing pathways between YCCD colleges and receiving institutions. To begin closing this gap, YCCD leaders should start by gathering data from the National Student Clearinghouse (or state data tied to data on starting cohorts at your community college) to identify which institutions YCCD transfer to, the rate at which they earn bachelor's degrees from each destination, and the fields in which they earn them. If possible, it would also be helpful to plot the number of transfer students from each YCCD college by the number of college-level credits they earned before they transferred, and calculate the percentage of these students who earned a certificate or associate's degree from the district's colleges before they transferred. Having identified where the largest proportion of transfer students go, YCCD leaders, including the individual college presidents, should approach top leadership at those universities for a discussion of this transfer information and for an exploration of opportunities to increase student migration and attainment of bachelor's degrees. As mentioned above, emphasizing the ADTs in college efforts will also help strengthen this connection.

RECOMMENDATION 4: BUILD LEADERSHIP CAPACITY FOR CHANGE MANAGEMENT.

Successfully implementing improvements in student success—beginning with the above recommendations—will require skilled and thoughtful leadership, equipped with the ability to listen attentively, craft and articulate a shared vision, build coalitions, hold people accountable, celebrate progress, and allocate necessary resources. A significant number of new leaders in key positions, both in the central YCCD administration and on its campuses, offer a great opening for this cultural and operational change to begin. These leaders—including executives at the district office and presidents and vice presidents at the individual colleges—commonly cited the need for considerable improvement, recognizing weak student outcomes and tenuous climate in both colleges. We were impressed by the motivation, determination, and passion these leaders have for advancing student outcomes, and their universal recognition of the need to do better. At the same time, while these individuals had a sense of what needed to be done, they seemed unsure of how to proceed, expressing frustration with the status quo culture and offering limited suggestions for how it might be improved.

District and campus leaders would benefit from professional development focused specifically on building their capacity to lead and manage change. By pursuing this professional learning as a collective, this team can build a common language and skill set for facilitating change processes. They can use this venue for setting the strategic priorities for improvement discussed above and for tracking progress toward these goals. They can also create a unified approach to dissemination of and involvement with these priorities

across their campuses. Finally, they can commonly discuss how to manage and engage detractors and overcome obstacles that arise in their pursuit of these priorities. By taking this approach, top executives will have the opportunity to model effective professional learning and use this experience as a launchpad for further developing faculty, staff, and administrative leadership across the district.

Possible resources include the Aspen Institute's open access curricular materials on change management, which will become available late in 2016. The Research and Planning Group for California Community College's 2017 Leading from the Middle Academy may also offer a specific opportunity for this type of sustained, project-based professional development and support.

CONCLUSION

The site visit team believes the YCCD has an excellent opportunity to advance student success over the coming years. Many individuals are dedicated to supporting of students across the district and to expanding their capacity to better serve these learners. While some may resist change (as is always the case in any organization), our sense is that many working on behalf of the district are quite open to being engaged in strategies that will improve the student experience and in turn student outcomes. To begin activating these faculty and staff, leaders will need to build urgency around the current realities of student success using clear data points; engage stakeholders in a strategic effort designed to develop concrete strategies and action items, building on the CBD framework already adopted; and engage in immediate action focused on improving a specific aspect of the student experience. We believe these efforts will breathe important wind in the district's collective sails. We look forward to discussing these recommendations, as well as providing a debriefing on individual college reports, in the coming weeks. Again, we thank you for the opportunity to visit YCCD.