NC STATE UNIVERSITY

College of Education
Belk Center for Community College
Leadership and Research

THE INAUGURAL SUMMIT OF THE NATIONAL COMMUNITY COLLEGE RESEARCH ALLIANCE EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Across the nation, community colleges are uniquely positioned to increase postsecondary attainment among historically disadvantaged and minoritized populations. An unprecedented need for a college educated workforce – paired with rising awareness around racial, gender and income inequities in American society – presents community colleges with a momentous occasion to fulfill their mission as "gateways to opportunity" (Beach, 2012).

But with opportunity comes extraordinary challenges. From enrollment declines and inadequate funding models, to lingering impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, there has perhaps never been a more critical time for community colleges.

A GROUNDBREAKING ALLIANCE

To further advance the efforts of community colleges nationwide, representatives from research centers across the country joined forces to establish the National Community College Research Alliance (NCCRA). Launched in 2023, the Alliance aims to foster increased capacity, communication and collaboration among prominent centers of community college research to help community colleges overcome the challenges of today and prepare for the opportunities of tomorrow.

NCCRA partner organizations – along with individual researchers and representatives from national grantmaking foundations – convened for the first time at the NCCRA's inaugural summit in Raleigh, N.C. in March 2023. Based on the idea of collective impact, the convening allowed participants to lay the groundwork for a collective community college research agenda.

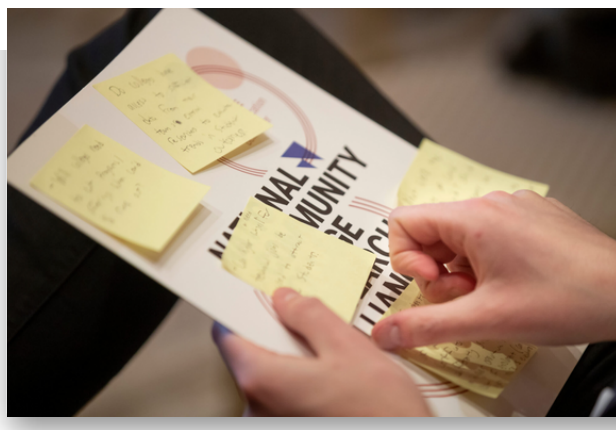NATIONAL COMMUNITY COLLEGE RESEARCH ALLIANCE — NC STATE College of Education Belk Center

A COMMON PURPOSE

The following goals were developed for the inaugural summit:

1. Establish and disseminate a collective community college research agenda informed by NCCRA's collective knowledge of pressing challenges, promising practices and proven policy solutions.
2. Exchange information and strategies related to data access, funding, visibility, influence and sustainability.
3. Identify opportunities to support, grow and promote each other's work.

ESTABLISHING A COLLECTIVE RESEARCH AGENDA

To establish a collective research agenda, attendees participated in two facilitated activities. In order to guarantee the research agenda produced by the Alliance was grounded in real-world issues, the first activity led attendees to identify the most (1) significant challenges and (2) promising opportunities facing community colleges nationwide. Sample challenges identified by attendees included:

- Federal, state and institutional funding structures
- Access to quality data to inform college decision-makers
- Institutional and/or political constraints hampering educational equity

Sample opportunities facing community colleges included:

- New delivery models for equitable learning
- Community and/or political support of colleges
- Programs that address the needs of students, community and workforce

The second facilitated activity asked attendees to generate research questions that corresponded to the challenges and opportunities previously identified by the group. This process led to more than 100 research questions that were then organized and distilled into three themes – each with overarching research questions that were reflective of the many identified by the attendees.

Later, at the "Thought Leaders for Community Colleges" panel discussion, executive leaders from The League for Innovation, Achieving the Dream, College Promise and The Aspen Institute weighed in on effective collaborative research approaches in response to some of the initial topics and questions identified at the summit. The group – who are collectively shaping the national conversation on education – discussed their organizations' top priorities for the year, which included equitable student access, pathways into and through community colleges and evaluating leadership training, among many others. The thought leaders then transitioned to a larger discussion focused on how they believe the impact of current research efforts across the nation can be improved.

The collective research agenda produced by the group at the convening, and then narrowed down through participant surveys was:

1. **Student Pathways Into and Through Community Colleges**
   - What system - or institutional-level policies expand the transfer pipeline and expedite completion?
   - Do dual-admission transfer systems yield better outcomes (transfer rates, attainment and equity) within both institutions? Where do existing dual-enrollment pipelines fall short? What concrete policies can help increase access to and strengthen these pipelines?
   - What are the economic returns of career-focused community college degrees, transfer programs and short-term credentials? Is there variation by program, region or by different populations of students? If so, why?

2. **Workforce Development, Market Alignment and Social Mobility**
   - Where do we have the most robust community college/employer partnerships? How can similar partnerships be replicated?
   - How can connections with business and industry be conducted in a way to support inclusive economic development? How do community colleges lift up and improve social and economic conditions at the local level?
   - What are the economic and social impacts of attending a community college, and how does it vary among groups?

3. **Building Effective Community College Leadership**
   - What political and/or institutional structures and practices help and/or hinder the recruitment and retention of community college executive and mid-level leaders? To what extent do these structures and practices vary by context and climate?
   - To what extent does executive and mid-level leadership turnover impact institutional culture, reform efforts and effectiveness at community colleges?
   - What are the components of a comprehensive framework or model for community college leadership development? How can this framework be tested, validated and scaled?

EXCHANGING INFORMATION AND STRATEGIES

Conversations shifted to the significance of data access and management challenges and success strategies, where relationship building, data sharing and transparency emerged as common themes. Panelists noted that building trust and transparency will be key to data sharing relationships in the future, which can take the form of partnerships beyond grants, proper data security protocols, and open communication about the research methods and iterative findings.

Later, at the "Developing a Framework for Sustainability'' panel discussion, representatives from national grantmaking organizations, including the ECMC Foundation, the Lumina Foundation and Ascendium Education Group, shared their funding processes and goals for the coming years. The group discussed how collaboration among research centers, colleges and funders will be essential to advancing student success.

"There's an opportunity for us, researchers and practitioners, to partner in new ways to curate, and disseminate strong, action-based or reflective practice research that's being produced at the college-level. This might require us to think about how we can work together to build stronger supports for our IR offices to support this type of action research. Not every community college IR office can do this, but many can if they get support and encouragement to do so." – Dr. Karen Stout, president and CEO of Achieving the Dream

At the "Increasing Visibility, Influence and Impact" session, researchers addressed the goal of strengthening community college research centers by identifying common challenges, effective strategies and opportunities for collaboration to improve our collective reach and impact.

The group focused on accessibility of online information, data integrity in storytelling, and disconnects between researchers, practitioners and leaders as the most pressing issues. While top strategies included increased social media presence, promoting innovative research and best practices to industry media and influencers, and elevating student voices and perspectives.

We also discovered collaborative new ways to lift each other up, like participating in peer learning networks, referencing other centers' research, sharing data templates and resources, and partnering on events like annual research retreats.

LOOKING AHEAD

At the conclusion of the two-day summit, participants gathered to build out a 90-day plan that will continue to move forward the groundwork laid at the event. Some of the group will be gathering again in Chicago for the annual convening of the Council for the Study of Community Colleges (CSCC). Other members of the group have also volunteered to serve on subcommittees focused on the different identified research topics.

In addition to the research questions, we also identified other ways to move forward, including sharing NCCRA-generated ideas at upcoming college research conferences, creating an online community for these and other research centers and scholars to share their work, and determining ways that future convenings could capture voices and ideas from those not present at the inaugural summit.

Keeping momentum going will be our key to success in the months ahead. The groundwork we've laid is just the beginning of the National Community College Research Alliance's collaborative approach to shape conversations on postsecondary education and improve their visibility, reach and impact.

"We are really pleased to be able to bring these research centers from across the U.S. together. While we see and uplift each other's work at existing academic conferences and online, this convening gave us all a chance to hear about community college research priorities in other states, and what different centers are working on. We think that the work we accomplished at the Alliance may support combined efforts to answer the crucial research questions that are more collaborative, thorough and efficient."
– Dr. Holley Nichols, NCCRA event organizer and associate director of research and evaluation at the Belk Center.

PARTICIPATING CENTERS

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