

WHAT ACTUALLY SUSTAINS IMPROVEMENT IN COMMUNITY COLLEGES

Why student success depends on institutional design, not initiatives alone

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Introduction

Community colleges have spent decades building programs, reforms, supports, and initiatives intended to improve student success. Much of this work has been necessary, thoughtful, and grounded in a deep commitment to access and opportunity. Yet across the sector, a familiar problem remains. Even when individual efforts succeed, institutions often struggle to convert those efforts into improvement that is broad enough to reach most students, strong enough to alter outcomes, and durable enough to survive leadership changes, fiscal pressure, and shifting external demands.

This essay argues that the central challenge is not a lack of commitment or a shortage of good ideas. The deeper challenge is that student success depends on institutional design. Students experience the college as a system: the way courses are scheduled, the way advising connects to programs, the timing of financial aid information, the clarity of requirements, the fit between learning expectations and student realities, and the routines through which faculty, staff, and leaders notice problems and act on them. When those conditions align, student momentum becomes more likely. When they do not align, even strong initiatives can become compensatory efforts that help some students while leaving the broader system largely unchanged.

The argument has become more urgent as community colleges face a more demanding environment. Demographic change, financial pressure, employer expectations, new technologies, adult learner needs, and public skepticism about the value of higher education are placing greater strain on institutions that were already working hard to improve outcomes. In this context, sustained improvement and institutional resilience are closely related. Colleges will need to do more than launch new efforts. They will need to build the capacity to learn from evidence, clarify ownership, adapt routines, align resources, and make student success less dependent on exceptional effort and more likely by design.

The purpose of this essay is to examine what actually sustains improvement once the language of reform has been adopted and the initial energy of an initiative has passed. It focuses on the less visible work beneath student success: operations, culture, decision rights, feedback loops, resource alignment, and leadership practices that determine whether good ideas become ordinary institutional behavior. The claim is simple but consequential. Community colleges will not sustain improvement by adding more activity to structures that remain largely unchanged. They will sustain improvement when their systems are designed to carry commitment into daily practice.

Community colleges are filled with people who care deeply about students, and this is one of the sector's enduring strengths. Spend time on almost any campus and you will encounter a kind of earnest attentiveness everywhere: advisors lingering after hours to reach one more

student whose momentum seems to be slipping, faculty revising assignments in the hope that clearer expectations might help students persist, administrators balancing financial pressures while still trying to hold onto the human stories beneath the data.

This is not a sector starved of commitment. If anything, it is distinguished by a moral seriousness about opportunity, fairness, and second chances.

And yet, those who have spent years working inside these institutions often feel a quiet and persistent tension. Despite sustained effort, thoughtful programs, and genuine innovation, the outcomes that matter most frequently change more slowly than hoped. When progress does occur, it can feel fragile, easily disrupted by a budget shortfall, a leadership transition, or a shifting external priority.

Part of this tension reflects a familiar pattern in community colleges. Commitment is widespread, yet progress often remains constrained by scale. Institutions regularly produce two kinds of outcomes: efforts that generate meaningful change for relatively small numbers of students, and efforts that reach many students but produce only modest effects. Both outcomes matter, and both reflect serious work, yet neither consistently reshapes the overall student experience.

Over time, this pattern can quietly normalize itself. High-impact programs become celebrated exceptions, while broadly implemented efforts are judged acceptable because they touch many lives, even if the depth of impact remains limited. What remains elusive is the capacity to produce improvement that is both meaningful and ordinary, strong enough to matter and widespread enough to endure.

Impact tends to be deep or broad, but rarely both.

It is within this context that institutions can slip into an initiative-centered understanding of change, one in which improvement is treated primarily as something added to existing structures rather than something that invites their reconsideration. When outcomes stall, attention often turns toward identifying the next effort that might restore momentum, while the deeper question of how the institution itself is organized remains largely outside the frame of inquiry.

Community colleges are also entering a period in which fragile improvement will matter less than adaptive capacity. Recent national research argues that the sector must be designed for resilience amid demographic change, financial pressure, employer demand, technological disruption, and rising skepticism about the value of higher education. In that context, the question is no longer only how colleges improve a particular outcome, but whether they are organized to notice changing conditions, act with enough speed, and adjust their routines without losing coherence. Sustained improvement is not only a student success concern. It is now part of whether community colleges can remain relevant, responsive, and trusted in a changing environment.

The comfort of initiatives

Initiatives hold a natural appeal within complex organizations because they offer a sense of clarity and immediacy. They can be named, scoped, staffed, and scheduled, and they allow

Improvement becomes something we add, not something we redesign.

colleges to respond quickly to visible student needs without reopening deeply embedded systems that feel risky or difficult to change. They also grow out of humane instincts. When students struggle, the impulse is to help directly. When processes feel confusing, the response is to build better tools.

When staff feel stretched, training seems like the appropriate answer.

Many of these efforts genuinely improve students' day-to-day experience, and they often emerge from the best instincts of dedicated professionals. Over time, however, institutions can drift into an initiative-centered understanding of change, one in which improvement is treated primarily as something added onto the organization rather than something redesigned within it. When outcomes stall, the question subtly shifts from how the college functions to which new effort might restore forward motion.

What results is rarely failure in the obvious sense. It is activity without sufficient traction, a condition in which movement is constant but direction remains uncertain.

When motion replaces momentum

At a certain point, busyness begins to outpace progress. Colleges remain energetic, innovative, and well-intentioned, yet the deeper patterns of student movement remain stubbornly resistant. This is not because initiatives lack value, but because they often attempt to compensate for structures they do not fundamentally alter.

Students do not experience colleges as collections of discrete programs. They experience them as systems, shaped by registration timelines, course availability, advising handoffs, financial aid sequencing, and classroom expectations that either align smoothly or clash repeatedly. When these systems are inconsistent, even the strongest supports struggle to generate durable results.

Systems thinking gives this observation more discipline. A college is not only a collection of offices, programs, technologies, roles, and initiatives. It is an organized set of relationships, rules, signals, expectations, and purposes that produces patterns of student movement over time. When the same patterns repeat across cohorts, those patterns should be read as evidence of how the institution is configured. The work, then, is to examine the connections among advising, scheduling, financial aid, curriculum, classroom expectations, and review routines, because those connections determine whether institutional effort accumulates into momentum or dissipates into activity.

In recent years, many community colleges have made meaningful progress in using evidence to inform decision making, and that progress merits genuine recognition. Analytic capacity has grown, data literacy has deepened, and the use of evaluation to guide action has become more routine across many institutions. At the same time, evidence most naturally attaches to activities that can be clearly specified, bounded, and measured, making programs, pilots, and interventions especially amenable to analysis and comparison.

Students experience systems, not initiatives.

The deeper work of operations and culture unfolds on a different plane. It stretches across organizational boundaries, evolves over time, and reveals itself through patterns of coordination, decision making, and behavior rather than through discrete, isolatable actions. Because most institutional evidence is generated without a true counterfactual and within environments where multiple changes occur simultaneously, causal claims are necessarily modest, even when analytic rigor is high. As a result, colleges may become increasingly skilled at improving what can be measured while leaving largely untouched the structural conditions that most powerfully shape the student experience.

This is why evidence has to function as a feedback system rather than as a reporting system alone. A dashboard, survey, evaluation, or early alert has limited power unless the information arrives early enough, reaches people with authority to act, and enters a routine where decisions can be made. When evidence is delayed, routed to people who cannot change the conditions being revealed, or reviewed after the semester, budget cycle, or scheduling cycle has already hardened, the college may become better informed while remaining only modestly more adaptive. Evidence begins to change outcomes when it is connected to decision rights, operating routines, and timely action.

Why execution so often weakens before improvement takes hold

The difficulty is not simply that colleges launch too many efforts or evaluate too little of what they do. A deeper challenge is that improvement depends on an execution system that is often less fully designed than the strategy itself. Plans can name priorities, describe desired outcomes, and express a coherent vision for change while still leaving unanswered the practical questions that determine whether the work will actually move through the institution.

Strategy execution weakens when the practical conditions for action remain underdeveloped. Ownership may be spread across committees or teams in ways that make responsibility difficult to locate. Broad priorities may never reach the daily decisions of departments, programs, and service areas. Too many initiatives may compete for the same time, attention, and capacity. Next steps may remain general rather than specific enough for people to know what to do, by when, and with what authority. Progress may be reviewed too infrequently to support timely adjustment. And even when the plan is clear, existing cultural habits may pull the institution back toward familiar patterns of work.

For community colleges, these are not abstract management problems. They are visible in the ordinary places where student experience is shaped. A pathway redesign depends on whether someone owns the coordination between advising, scheduling, curriculum, and financial aid. A retention strategy depends on whether the people closest to students know what actions they are expected to take, what authority they have to act, and how quickly they are expected to respond. A student success priority depends on whether it becomes part of regular department conversations, manager routines, and resource decisions, or whether it remains a goal that is broadly supported but only loosely connected to daily work.

This is where execution becomes a design problem rather than a communication problem alone. It is not enough for people to understand the strategy or agree with its purpose. The institution has to specify who owns the work, how decisions will be made, what will be reviewed, which priorities will be deferred, and how people will know whether the work is

changing the student experience. Without those conditions, strategy remains dependent on interpretation, goodwill, and local initiative.

This helps explain why improvement can feel sincere, energetic, and still incomplete. The plan may be sound, the values may be widely shared, and the evidence may be persuasive, while the operating conditions required for sustained execution remain underdeveloped. In that environment, progress depends too heavily on personal commitment, informal coordination, and local improvisation. Those qualities matter deeply, but they are fragile substitutes for institutional design.

Execution also weakens when strategy is layered onto a resource model that has not changed. A plan can name a priority, but if schedules, staffing, technology, budget authority, and workload expectations remain organized around earlier assumptions, the plan must compete with the inherited operating model. In that environment, promising work depends on local improvisation while the institution's default routines continue to allocate time, attention, and money in familiar ways. Sustained improvement therefore requires a closer connection among strategy, budgeting, staffing, technology, and the operating routines through which students actually move.

The pattern beneath the effort

When attention shifts from initiatives to endurance, a different set of questions begins to matter. The question is no longer only whether a college has identified the right priorities, but whether the institution has built the conditions that allow those priorities to reach daily work, survive competing demands, and adjust as evidence accumulates. Lasting improvement is sustained through the interaction between operations and culture, because those are the forces that determine whether strategy becomes a dependable way of working or remains an aspiration carried unevenly across the organization.

Operations determine how the institution actually works, shaping decision rights, responsibility, coordination, review cadence, and the predictability of the student journey. Culture determines how people interpret and inhabit those systems, influencing whether coordination feels routine or heroic, whether follow-through is expected or optional, whether evidence invites shared responsibility or quiet defensiveness, and whether new priorities are absorbed into daily practice or treated as temporary demands layered onto existing work.

This is also where the higher-leverage work resides. In systems terms, colleges change less through surface adjustments and more through the information people receive, the rules that govern action, the authority people have to change conditions, the goals that shape priorities under pressure, and the assumptions that define what the institution treats as possible. For community colleges, these leverage points often appear in modest operational forms: who sees which student signals, who can act on them, how course schedules are built, how resource decisions follow evidence, how quickly curriculum can adapt, and how clearly priorities are reduced when capacity is constrained.

Operations and culture are the invisible architecture of outcomes.

These forces are inseparable. Operations teach culture by signaling what matters in practice, while culture shapes operations by determining whether processes are honored, adapted, or quietly bypassed. Together, they form an invisible architecture that ultimately governs student outcomes more

powerfully than any single initiative ever could.

Leadership in practice

Work at this level rarely announces itself, and it is seldom concentrated in a single office or role. It does not lend itself easily to launch events or branding campaigns, in part because it unfolds through the accumulated decisions that determine whether priorities are translated into practice. This work shows up when ownership is clarified enough that people know who is responsible for progress. It shows up when decision rights are explicit enough that teams do not wait unnecessarily for permission to solve problems already visible to them. It shows up when review routines are frequent enough to identify drift while there is still time to adjust. It shows up when leaders reduce the active priority list rather than asking already stretched teams to treat everything as equally urgent. It also shows up when planning conversations end not with general agreement, but with named next actions, clear responsibility, and a shared understanding of what will be checked next.

Because this form of leadership is embedded in daily practice, it belongs to many across the college. Deans who align schedules with program pathways, managers who resolve handoffs between units, faculty who reinforce shared expectations across courses, and staff who ensure that information moves reliably rather than heroically all participate in shaping whether effort translates into progress. Taken together, these actions determine whether good ideas encounter friction or find a structure capable of carrying them forward.

This kind of leadership unfolds slowly and depends on trust, since culture shifts only when people experience consistency over time and across roles. It often receives less recognition than visible innovation, yet it may matter more, because institutions structured for follow-through give good ideas somewhere to land. Where that shared responsibility for leadership is absent, even the most promising initiatives struggle to survive beyond their first wave, not for lack of effort, but because the surrounding conditions never fully support their continuation.

Making success ordinary

The most powerful institutional improvements are often the least dramatic, unfolding not through moments of visible transformation but through the steady alignment of everyday experience. Students know which courses they need and can reasonably expect when those courses will be offered.

Advisors have access to timely, reliable information and the space to focus on guidance rather than on resolving uncertainty. Faculty understand how individual courses fit within broader programs and how those programs connect to students' aspirations.

The most powerful improvements are often the least dramatic.

Across units, employees share a practical understanding of ownership and responsibility, reducing the need for workarounds and informal heroics.

When these conditions are present, success becomes less dependent on extraordinary individuals compensating for misalignment and more the ordinary outcome of an institution functioning coherently.

That coherence is built through countless decisions made by people at many levels of the college, decisions about scheduling, communication, handoffs, and expectations that quietly shape whether effort accumulates or dissipates.

Over time, deliberate attention to these choices allows reliability to replace improvisation, enabling student success to emerge not as an exception that requires special intervention, but as the predictable result of a system designed to support it.

This is what institutional resilience looks like in practice. It is not simply the ability to withstand pressure. It is the ability to notice changing conditions, learn from experience, and adjust the college's routines while preserving coherence around mission. A resilient college does not depend entirely on extraordinary effort to recover from misalignment. It builds enough clarity, feedback, authority, and trust into its ordinary operations that adaptation becomes part of how the institution works.

Conclusion

This essay is not an argument against initiatives. Community colleges will continue to need focused efforts that address urgent student needs, test new approaches, and respond to changing circumstances. Many initiatives are valuable, and many are sustained by people working with care, creativity, and persistence under difficult conditions. The point is that initiatives alone cannot carry the full weight of institutional improvement when the surrounding systems remain unchanged.

The stronger argument is about emphasis and design. When most institutional energy is devoted to what is added, and too little attention is given to how the college itself operates, improvement tends to remain fragile. Programs can help students navigate complexity, but they do not automatically reduce the complexity students encounter. Supports can soften the effects of misalignment, but they do not necessarily change the conditions that produce the misalignment. Innovation can create momentum, but without redesign of operations, decision rights, feedback routines, resource commitments, and cultural expectations, that momentum can dissipate before it becomes a dependable way of working.

The more durable work asks community colleges to examine the structures that shape everyday experience and the execution routines that determine whether strategy becomes action. It asks whether evidence reaches the right people early enough to matter, whether those people have authority to act, whether priorities are connected to budgets and staffing, whether review routines support timely adjustment, and whether culture reinforces shared responsibility rather than local improvisation. This work is quieter than launching a new initiative, and it often receives less recognition. It is also the work that determines whether improvement becomes embedded in the institution or remains dependent on extraordinary effort.

The future facing community colleges makes this work more urgent. Colleges are being asked to serve students whose needs are changing, employers whose expectations are accelerating, communities whose confidence must be earned, and public systems whose resources are constrained. Resilience in this environment means more than endurance. It means the capacity to notice changing conditions, learn from experience, adjust routines, and preserve mission coherence while adapting to new demands. That capacity cannot be produced by goodwill alone. It must be designed into the way the institution receives information, makes decisions, allocates resources, coordinates work, and learns from its own experience.

Community colleges are filled with people willing to work hard for students. The next step is to build institutions that make that work more coherent, more scalable, and more likely to endure. Becoming a college that requires fewer compensatory initiatives because its ordinary design already supports students every day is demanding work, but it is also hopeful work. It honors the commitment people are already giving by building systems capable of carrying that commitment forward. That is what actually sustains improvement.

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