

WHAT ACTUALLY SUSTAINS IMPROVEMENT IN COMMUNITY COLLEGES

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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.

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.

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.

The work beneath the work

When attention shifts from initiatives to endurance, a different set of questions begins to matter. If lasting improvement is not primarily produced by what colleges launch, then it is sustained by the interaction between operations and culture.

**Operations and culture
are the invisible
architecture of**

Operations determine how the institution actually works, shaping decision rights, responsibility, coordination, 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, and whether evidence invites shared responsibility or quiet defensiveness.

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 of many people who shape how the institution actually operates. This work shows up in the quiet clarification of long-ambiguous decision rights, in the willingness to simplify processes that once made sense but now impede momentum, and in the steady establishment of routines that make coordination ordinary rather than exceptional.

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.

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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.

A humble conclusion

This reflection is not an argument against initiatives. Many are necessary, meaningful, and sustained by people working with care and persistence under difficult and often under-resourced circumstances. The effort, creativity, and moral seriousness that animate these initiatives deserve recognition and gratitude, because they reflect a deep commitment to students and to the mission of community colleges.

It is, instead, an argument about emphasis and direction. When most institutional energy is devoted to what is added, and too little to how the institution itself operates, improvement tends to remain fragile. When innovation proceeds without accompanying redesign, people are asked to compensate for misalignment through effort, ingenuity, and goodwill, rather than being supported by systems designed to make success more likely and more reliable.

The deeper work is quieter and slower. It asks institutions to examine operations, decision rights, and cultural norms that have accumulated over time, and to engage changes that may feel less visible but more consequential. This work resists simple metrics and travels less easily in conference sessions, yet it is precisely the work that allows improvement to endure beyond individual initiatives or moments of momentum.

The challenge before community colleges, then, is not a lack of commitment, but the opportunity to direct that commitment toward changes that are harder, more structural, and ultimately more durable. Becoming institutions that require fewer initiatives because their design already supports students every day is demanding work, but it is also hopeful work, grounded in the belief that effort deserves systems capable of carrying it forward.

That is what actually sustains improvement.

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