Data to Action
Building Evidence-Based Change in California Community Colleges through the Bridging Research, Information and Culture (BRIC) Initiative

Over the last decade, foundations, governments and advocacy organizations have launched numerous efforts to increase student success in community colleges. Key to many of these initiatives is the use of data to identify gaps in achievement, articulate areas for improvement and highlight effective approaches. However, there is often a disconnect between data being made available and colleges’ abilities to integrate this information into their improvement efforts.

The Bridging Research, Information and Culture (BRIC) initiative sought to bridge the gap between data availability and use in California community colleges. The initiative focused on how data could inform the development or refinement of common and critical institutional processes such as student learning outcomes (SLO) assessment, program review, cohort-tracking and integrated budgeting and planning. This brief outlines key lessons learned from BRIC for supporting evidence-based change processes.
Operating between 2009-2011, BRIC supported California’s 112 community colleges through a combination of technical assistance, professional development and online resources.

- **Technical assistance to colleges.** Through Technical Assistance Projects (BRIC TAP), teams of three practitioner consultants each, composed of community college researchers, faculty, student services professionals and administrators, were assigned to 13 colleges to help increase each institution’s capacity to analyze and act on information, based on locally-identified needs.

- **Resources for community college practitioners.** Online tools, including 10 inquiry guides addressing common problem areas for translating data to action, plus numerous professional development opportunities such as webinars and conferences, addressed how to support cultures of inquiry and increase the usability of common data collection processes.

- **Dedicated support for institutional researchers and planners.** Both online and in-person support focused on strengthening researchers’ abilities to support the use of evidence.

The initiative had several key characteristics:

- **Targeting senior-level leaders, middle-level managers, faculty and student services practitioners.** Senior leadership was advised on ways they could support cultures of evidence and inquiry. Middle-level leaders, particularly deans, committee and division chairs and institutional researchers, were engaged in a more intensive process of assessing the usability of data generated by commonly-used reports and institutional processes. Those who work most closely with students—faculty and student services professionals—were able to bring their expertise into the process and guide the development of more authentic learning measures.

- **Leveraging practitioner consultants to lead the work.** By engaging researchers, faculty and administrators from community colleges in advising peers at other colleges, the initiative was able to provide directly-relevant support. Consultants had first-hand experience with evolving challenges, such as steep budget cuts, and could more rapidly discern effective practices that fit within the local college cultures and contexts. Furthermore, using practitioner consultants expanded the impact of the initiative—while providing support to other colleges, many consultants were able to take lessons learned back to their home institutions.
• Providing a flexible design for support. Rather than develop a rigid model for increasing the use of evidence, support was based on how specific institutions or practitioners defined their own needs. For example, the technical assistance program enabled applicants to identify the type of supports they needed within six broad areas and consultants worked with the college to build a work plan that addressed local concerns. Similarly, regional workshops began by assessing the key problems experienced by participants and then shared resources that spoke directly to these concerns.

WHAT DO COLLEGES NEED TO MAKE BETTER USE OF THEIR DATA?

Technical assistance and professional development requests overwhelmingly focused on clarity, breadth and sustainability in data collection processes.

• In times of shrinking resources, colleges need to streamline data collection. Throughout the California community college system, BRIC found that colleges had created complex, difficult-to-sustain data collection systems, particularly for accreditation-related activities such as SLOs and program review. The initiative supported colleges and practitioners in simplifying various processes, clarifying the types of data that would be most useful for practitioners and incorporating these measures into existing systems.

• Additional types of data are needed to drive improvement efforts. Many college data collection systems focus on accountability reporting requirements, rather than on the types of data that could help drive program improvement. For example, researchers indicated a need to better track student cohorts to assess questions such as the efficacy of specific interventions, the college’s ability to support equitable outcomes and the needs of various student populations.

• Colleges need models that can be adapted to their own institutions. Many institutions are constructing systems from scratch because they do not have easy access to relevant effective practices. While numerous examples have been documented, institutions do not have the capacity to sort through these options and determine which would fit with their own culture and local needs. Practitioners were seeking examples that had been field-tested at other institutions and spoke directly to their own institution’s context. BRIC
found that colleges benefited from having a structure to engage stakeholders—particularly department and division chairs and researchers—in the review and adaptation of these models.

- **Colleges need the time and space to review data, develop action plans and test new ideas.** In evaluating what made the technical assistance component effective, colleges emphasized the value of having a dedicated opportunity to focus on improvement. Access to data is no longer the primary barrier to evidence-based improvement efforts. Practitioners lack the time to review and discuss research, analyze its meaning and develop plans of action. In addition, if colleges do not reward the process of inquiry—such as examining mistakes and having the freedom to test new models—data are unlikely to trigger deeper changes.

### WHAT KINDS OF CHANGES DID BRIC SUPPORT?

In evaluating BRIC’s professional development and technical assistance efforts, several themes emerged.

- **Deep campus conversations about acting on data were started or expanded.** Bringing forward evidence that spoke more directly to practitioner concerns and creating a space for conversations to occur led to stronger engagement with information. Participants in BRIC technical assistance and professional development programs reported that they were more likely to discuss topics such as understanding student success and acting to improve it, assessing whether current research and assessment mechanisms yielded useful data and determining how to make existing processes more meaningful. Furthermore, participants reported that they had these conversations with a broader range of their colleagues. Many noted that the BRIC structure—where expert practitioners from peer institutions raised these questions and led these conversations—made the change possible. BRIC provided both the space and the political cover for these discussions.

- **When given a framework, colleges were able to swiftly develop more meaningful and sustainable processes.** When colleges worked with BRIC technical assistance teams and had access to relevant models, many were able to overhaul program...

“Now, we realize that this stuff is possible! It seemed so overwhelming, mysterious and possibly insurmountable, but we changed our attitudes. Now we think about our plan and we look at what other colleges are doing. We look for the data and the research behind making decisions. We were not thinking like that before.”

— BRIC TAP participant
review processes, integrate various SLO assessment tracks or create improvement processes in a short period of time. These efforts were even more successful when paired with other dedicated improvement initiatives, which ensured that there was top-level leadership support and a concerted institutional focus.

- **Statewide efforts to produce useful data gained momentum.** BRIC enabled the question of data usability to be raised in numerous forums, heightening practitioner awareness about the need to change the way data are collected and reported. Within two years of the initiative’s launch, two practitioner groups approached the RP Group and asked the organization to help them develop statewide data collection tools that would better answer program improvement questions. Career technical education (CTE) deans helped develop an employment outcomes survey for CTE program participants and developmental education faculty designed a tool for tracking developmental education students through the pre-collegiate sequence. In both cases, the reporting tools were designed so that they would have minimal impact on already-overloaded institutional research offices.

Based on the BRIC experience, the RP Group recommends that initiatives to enhance the use of evidence for improvement efforts consider the following:

- **An external point of view from peers enables practitioners to better connect research to practice.** Since community college practitioners understand the context in which data will be used, they are able to (1) assist with identifying important findings in a neutral manner, (2) find models that would be relevant within the institution’s culture, (3) name likely obstacles and political considerations, (4) identify potential conflicts and (5) provide perspective on how local concerns relate to experiences in other institutions.

- **Offering a flexible design that builds local solutions means that efforts are more likely to take root.** Prescriptive, “off-the-shelf” solutions are less likely to last because they are dependent on external expertise or funding sources. They also may require substantial shifts to institutional cultures. By tailoring interventions to pressing institutional concerns and linking them to existing efforts, data usage
initiatives can help build momentum, rather than divide resources among competing efforts.

- **Building a coalition of faculty and student services practitioners who work directly with students, middle-level managers and senior administrators helps drive systemic change.** When change is top-down, efforts are vulnerable to shifts in senior leadership and may encounter significant resistance from those who are expected to implement them. Yet bottom-up efforts can be stymied by lack of resources and institutional support. Engaging multiple practitioner groups helps build credibility, adds analytical depth and extends the reach of change-oriented data initiatives.

- **Practitioners need opportunities to share tools and practices.** Colleges that received technical assistance, practitioners who provided consulting and those who participated in professional development all noted the value of being able to share what they learned from data review efforts and discuss potential solutions. Few colleges have the resources to convene these gatherings and most system-wide conferences are based in institutional roles (e.g., presidents, faculty or chief student services officers), rather than being focused on change initiatives. Given the lack of awareness about relevant models, gatherings that are focused on sharing key insights and tested tools could lead to more rapid cross-pollination of effective practices.

- **Sustained interventions are more likely to flourish.** Although BRIC established a strong basis for improving the use of data for improvement, all participants noted that the timeframe was too short for deeper, lasting change. Most colleges in the technical assistance program were limited to ten months of support, and professional development efforts met only a few times over the two years of the project. Since time and space are such critical components for ensuring that data are translated into action, providing support over a period of years will better enable colleges to test and refine data processes and interventions that they develop as a result of data analysis and action planning.

- **Since colleges often default to focusing on procedural changes, linking data usage to a specific type of change may be more effective.** BRIC provided a good jumping off point for data usability, but it was not sufficient to trigger deeper changes within the time window of the project. Two years after beginning the technical assistance process, most participating colleges reported that they had made meaningful improvements to core systems, but that they were only just beginning to see the fruits of that redesign. An intervention that combines new data structures with rethinking entire systems of student engagement or support might yield swifter change.
As BRIC was sunsetting in 2011-2012, the RP Group had an opportunity to leverage the lessons learned from BRIC in a number of contexts.

For example, we supported colleges participating in the Gates Foundation’s Completion by Design initiative to explore student outcomes and map out institutional redesigns. For this work, the RP Group adapted the concepts that we used to drive procedural reforms to create an applied inquiry framework that is intended to drive large-scale institutional changes. This framework describes the fundamental process by which data can be translated into action. It starts with a cycle of evidence-based improvement—a five-stage process on how to use data in a real, authentic and ongoing manner to ask thoughtful questions and improve student outcomes. These stages are strengthened by a series of catalyzing principles that enable greater and more effective use of evidence by a greater number of individuals on campus. The framework, plus a series of short videos that walk through these concepts, are available on the RP Group website.

We also adapted our BRIC experience to support an effort to improve the collection and use of career technical education (CTE) outcomes data to drive program improvement in California. Beyond our work with practitioners to gather data from CTE program participants described above, we also convened a broad range of stakeholders to define what types of data are needed and how to better support CTE practitioners in using data. This convening has influenced statewide conversations on topics ranging from accountability reporting to leveraging regional consortia to training practitioners on using available data.

The RP Group has also begun consulting with the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching’s Quantway and Statway initiatives to help translate data on developmental education redesign efforts for community college practitioners. Through partnerships with practitioner groups, state system offices, funders and national support organizations, we will continue to build bridges between research, information and culture.

Find Out More

To access the BRIC inquiry guides, student learning outcomes assessment models and other resources on using data for action, visit www.rpgroup.org/projects/BRIC.html. For resources developed for the Completion by Design initiative, visit http://www.rpgroup.org/projects/completion-by-design.