Leveraging the coalition of the willing for student success in Michigan

Jennifer Ballard Schanker | Erica Lee Orians

1Senior Director of Learning and Research, Michigan Community College Association, 110 West Michigan Avenue, Suite 110, Lansing, Michigan 48933, USA
2Vice President and Executive Director, Michigan Center for Student Success, Michigan Community College Association, 110 West Michigan Avenue, Suite 110, Lansing, Michigan 48933, USA

Correspondence
Jennifer Ballard Schanker, Senior Director of Learning and Research, Michigan Community College Association. Email: jschanker@mcca.org

Abstract
This chapter reflects on how the Michigan Center for Student Success (MCSS) has leveraged its position within a membership organization for community college presidents and trustees to engage in statewide student success efforts in a state with a unique higher education governance structure. With no formal higher education governing body to set policy or coordinate initiatives, the MCSS has relied on individual leaders and practitioners within institutions to create a coalition of the willing who have worked to move the student success agenda forward. The article provides a political and historical context for the center’s founding, explores the center’s accomplishments, and concludes by discussing considerations for coalition leaders in other states.

INTRODUCTION

In Michigan, community colleges started significant engagement in the college attainment agenda in the mid-2000s when several Michigan community colleges joined Achieving the Dream (ATD). Through 2022, community colleges have continued to invest in strategies, initiatives, and practices that aim to improve student success. In many other states, policymakers, including state legislators and governors, have had a significant role in establishing and adapting state policy to improve community college student success. Michigan is unique in that there is limited state policy governing community colleges and a significant reliance on the coalition of the willing to support statewide student success efforts. This article reflects on how the Michigan Center for Student Success (MCSS) has leveraged the coalition of the willing to engage in statewide student success efforts particularly in a state with a unique higher education governance structure. The chapter concludes by discussing considerations for coalition leaders in other states.

The state of Michigan is home to 28 public community colleges, three tribal colleges, 15 public universities, and approximately 30 non-profit, independent institutions of higher education. These institutions served a population of 541,096 students in fall 2018 with approximately 26% of students enrolled in public 2-year institutions (Snyder et al.,...
Enrollment varies widely at Michigan community colleges with the largest colleges enrolling over 35,000 students and the smallest institutions enrolling 1500 students. Michigan community colleges rely on three primary sources of funding including an annual state appropriation, local property tax revenue, and tuition and fees. On average, approximately 22% of operating fund revenue are from state appropriations, 33% from property taxes, and 37% from tuition and fees with the remaining 8% from other sources. The extent to which colleges are supported by each of these funding sources varies by institution due to the state appropriations funding formula accounting for institution size, location, and local property tax base. The average in-district tuition rate was $114.07 per credit hour in 2018–2019 with additional term and course fees (Michigan's Center for Educational Performance and Information, 2021). Michigan's average 2020–2021 in-district tuition and fees ($4,080) is the 19th lowest in the country (Ma et al., 2020).

**Unique higher education governance in Michigan**

According to the Education Commission of the States (ECS), state postsecondary governance models fall into one of four categories including a single, statewide coordinating board/agency (20 states); a single statewide governing board (eight states); one or more systemwide coordinating or governing board (19 states), and an administrative/service agency (11 states). Responsibilities vary by governance model and state, but the responsibilities of the state agency or board can include the approval of institutional charter, monitor institutional effectiveness, administer state financial aid programs, approve academic programs, engage in systemwide strategic planning, and manage cross-institutional policies and practices such as transfer, reciprocity, or tuition agreements (Fulton, 2019).

Every state-supported, public, community college in the country is governed by one of these four governance models, except Michigan. ECS points out that “Michigan does not have a statewide postsecondary board or agency or a major, systemwide board, and therefore does not fall under any of the governance models” (Fulton, 2019, p. 2). Michigan's governance structure is unique due to provisions in the Constitution of Michigan and the Community College Act of 1966. Article VIII, Section 7 of the Constitution of Michigan (effective January 1, 1964) grants considerable autonomy to locally elected boards of community and junior colleges and the Community College Act of 1966 (the Act) which consolidated laws pertaining to the establishment and governance of community colleges in Michigan. The Act addressed two important issues. First, the Act allowed for the formation of a community college district approved by voters and allowed the community college to establish an annual property tax. Second, the Act allowed the community college to be governed by a locally elected board of trustees. Similarly, the 15 public universities in Michigan are governed by 13 elected or appointed boards of trustees (Murphy, 2021).

While community colleges in Michigan are subject to applicable federal- and state law, accreditation requirements, and other standards, the Act has effectively limited the role of state government to establish policy impacting Michigan community colleges in a manner that would be typical in other states with one significant recent exception to this emphasis on local control. In 2020, Michigan established the Michigan Reconnect Grant Act which provides tuition-free community college for students who are age 25 and older. Community colleges must meet several requirements to be considered an eligible institution to enroll students funded by the Michigan Reconnect Grant Program including offering accelerated developmental education sequences. While 24 other states have used legislation to require or allow corequisite support in developmental education, the Michigan policy is tied to institutional eligibility for the Reconnect program (Whinnery & Pompelia, 2018).
Without a statewide governing board or administrative agency to implement legislation or coordinate institutional activities which is present in 49 other states, Michigan also does not have state-level staff to coordinate activities across institutions of higher education. While nationally there are an average of 60 full-time equivalent employees in state coordinating or governing boards with a median annual budget of $9.6 million (SHEEO, 2020), many coordination efforts in Michigan are mediated by the three non-profit associations representing community colleges, including the Michigan Community College Association (MCCA), the Michigan Association of State Universities (MASU) and the Michigan Independent Colleges and Universities (MICU), staffed by between three and 12 full and part-time employees.

Coalition of the willing

With the lack of a state-level governing body or coordinating board, it may seem like Michigan's 28 community colleges function entirely independently with little or no cross-college or cross-sector engagement. But since the 1960s, the MCCA, a 501(c)(6) non-profit organization, has led statewide efforts to support community colleges with a mission to foster collaboration, connection, and partnerships among the 28 Michigan public community colleges and their stakeholders. The MCCA provides strong legislative and public advocacy in Lansing and throughout Michigan, works to improve the image and credibility of community colleges, and advances numerous shared initiatives through the MCSS, Michigan Colleges Online, Collaborative Programs, and the Michigan New Jobs Training Program.

Over the past decade the MCCA has served more prominently as a convener and coordinator as colleges began adopting student success-focused reforms. In 2011, the MCCA created the MCSS to respond to the wave of attention directed at community colleges from national initiatives like ATD. Early investors in ATD included philanthropic foundations who wanted to support Michigan colleges but found themselves frustrated by the lack of a centralized entity from which to disseminate policy and practice recommendations across the 28 public community colleges in Michigan. The MCSS provided a focal point for investment in several projects intended to bolster student outcomes, including increased college access and enrollment, credential and degree completion and labor market participation funded by national foundations. Under the leadership of the MCSS, college leaders and practitioners who were committed to student success came together to craft a statewide student success agenda and a coalition of the willing to move it forward.

Building the coalition of the willing

The MCSS was initially supported by a generous grant from The Kresge Foundation and became the second Student Success Center in the country after Arkansas. The appeal for the foundation, according to Caroline Altman Smith, currently deputy director of Kresge’s education program, was the idea of a “small number of staff members in a state who wake up every morning focused on nothing but student success issues at the community college” (Couturier, 2014, p. 3). Sitting squarely at the intersection of research, practice, and policy in Michigan, the MCSS has now been working collaboratively with college leadership, faculty and staff to foster student success-focused reforms to accelerate developmental education, build guided pathways and mathematics pathways and strengthen associate-to-bachelor’s degree transfer pathways for 10 years.
A great deal of credit for the MCSS’s network building strategy stems from a decision made when the state initially applied to join the ATD network in 2004. Jim Jacobs, who was then an associate director at the Community College Research Center (CCRC) at Teacher’s College and an advisor to Michigan Governor Granholm’s commission to increase college graduation, observed that in a decentralized state, the only way to bring about broad-based change would be for every region to have a stake in student success (Hilliard, 2012). This observation led to an initial cadre of ATD colleges in Michigan who represented northern, central, southeastern, and southwestern Michigan, setting the stage for the statewide collaboration that has been the hallmark of the work at the MCSS.

With 28 autonomous community colleges in Michigan, the MCSS quickly learned to leverage the coalition of the willing to move objectives forward. Colleges are informed of new opportunities or initiatives through the MCCA’s various communication channels, including regularly scheduled meetings of the MCCA presidents’ committee, weekly newsletter to the board of directors, and invited to participate based on the alignment between the goals of the initiative and the strategic priorities of the college. This confluence of college priorities and available support allows MCSS to build networks where institutions are intentionally aligned to accelerate the momentum of reform.

Communities of practice as a core strategy

The MCCA’s original goals of the MCSS included convening communities of practice, promoting the use of data, establishing a state research agenda, and supporting policy efforts leading to increased student success (Hilliard, 2012). From early on, MCSS and the Michigan colleges have benefitted from deep engagement with national partners in the community college reform movement, including ATD, Jobs for the Future (JFF), the Accelerated Learning Program (ALP) at the Community College of Baltimore County, the Charles A. Dana Center, and the CCRC.

ATD was one of the earliest partners of the community colleges in Michigan. At the MCSS’s inception in 2011, with support from the Kresge Foundation, 10 colleges joined this national initiative along with four of the original ATD colleges. These 14 colleges formed the core of the first MCSS network. A 2012 report from JFF, Autonomy and Innovation: Systemic Change in a Decentralized State, documents Michigan’s experience during the early years of ATD, demonstrating that a non-system state could build a culture of student success by leveraging the advantages of autonomy (Hilliard, 2012).

The second of the Center’s original initiatives was launched in 2005 by the Charles Stewart Mott Foundation, JFF, and the National Council for Workforce Education. The Breaking Through network was dedicated to exploring ways that community colleges could create pathways to postsecondary technical credentials for adults with reading and math skills at or below the eighth-grade level—a population long neglected by both the higher education and workforce development worlds. Another 2012 report from JFF, Forging New Pathways: The Impact of the Breaking Through Initiative in Michigan documents how colleges in the Michigan network were able to leverage high impact strategies including accelerating learning, providing comprehensive support services, aligning programs, and ensuring labor market payoffs to meet the needs of the state’s large population of displaced workers at the height of the 2010 recession (Schanker & Taylor, 2012).

Beginning in 2013, the MCSS began combining multiple communities of practice, into a larger Michigan Student Success Network. The network meetings, held quarterly, focus on cross-cutting topics affecting all students including college readiness, intrusive advis-
ing, career planning, and placement. These meetings have allowed MCSS to disseminate learning from multiple initiatives across its full network of 28 colleges.

The Center’s network-building strategy began to attract attention from new partners eager to advance the completion agenda in Michigan. In 2012, the founding partners of the ALP at the Community College of Baltimore County approached MCSS with a proposal to build a network of colleges to implement a corequisite delivery model for English Composition that was demonstrating promise in several states. Between 2013 and 2015, colleges in the Michigan ALP Network reported a 50-percentage point increase in the numbers of students initially placed in developmental education who eventually successfully completed English Composition. In the most recent MCSS survey of developmental education practices, 18 of Michigan’s 28 community colleges reported being close to or fully scaled with corequisite English in early 2019.

The underlying approach for the Michigan ALP network was simple: convene a group of interested colleges and provide robust technical assistance, along with modest grant funding, to create momentum for a specific set of evidence-based practices. The success of the ALP network was a catalyzing experience for the MCSS. The center continued to use this coalition-building strategy in additional focus areas, applying the model to implement guided pathways, strengthen mathematics pathways, build associate-to-bachelor’s degree pathways, and launch a community of practice to provide holistic student support.

Funding and supporting the coalition of the willing

The initial funding for the MCSS was anchored by a substantial investment from The Kresge Foundation. This grant allowed the Center to be fully funded outside of the dues structure of the MCCA, making the MCSS an independent center of excellence within the network-centric structure of the MCCA. Funding from the initial grant covered the majority of the new Center’s expenses, including support for the executive director and a full-time associate director of MCSS who was temporarily loaned from one of the 28 colleges. In addition to this operating grant, the executive director was able to leverage additional initiative-specific funding from a variety of sources which supported the Center’s early priorities, including building a network for Michigan colleges participating in ATD and Michigan’s participation in national initiatives focused on increased awarding of associate degrees including Project Win-Win (Institute for Higher Education Policy, 2022) and Credit When It’s Due (Office of Community College Research and Leadership, 2020). MCSS also received additional funding from The Kresge Foundation to launch its first independent initiative, Pathways to Credentials, supporting six colleges seeking to increase the numbers of students who transitioned from non-credit workforce development programs to credit-bearing career pathways programs.

In 2014, the board of directors of the MCCA approved an increase in membership dues to support 50% of the operating budget for the MCSS. This was a significant vote of confidence for the MCSS team which put the Center on a pathway to long-term sustainability. Investments from The Kresge Foundation in 2014 and 2017 supported the initial implementation of the Guided Pathways Institute, which has become the MCSS’ signature initiative of the past 6 years. The Guided Pathways Institute and reform efforts at community colleges served as crucial infrastructure for colleges to participate in other initiatives led by the MCSS.

The MCSS was also able to secure a one-time appropriation from the state of Michigan in 2016 to update the Michigan Transfer Network website and to build ten MiTransfer Pathways. Through this strategic partnership with the MASU and the MICU, the
MCSS expanded the coalition to include university partners and public universities and independent institutions that share our interest in improving student outcomes.

In the past several years, the MCSS has focused on building relationships with a diverse array of funders and has been able to align new resources to support its ongoing strategic priorities including strengthening pathways for students in both transfer and workforce development programs, along with expanding holistic supports to increase student financial stability. New partners and funders include Ascendium Education Group, The Teagle Foundation, and The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, along with ongoing support for the MCSS Mentoring Network from the Student Success Center Network (SSCN) at JFF.

Assessing impact

As MCSS has expanded programming and engagement with colleges, the Center has intentionally sought efficient and effective methods to assess the impact on the colleges. The Center is engaged in ongoing monitoring of student outcomes as reported by the colleges to American Association of Community Colleges’ (AACC), Voluntary Framework for Accountability (VFA), and to Michigan’s Center for Educational Performance and Information (CEPI). The MCSS has also found a rubric from CCRC, the Scale of Adoption Assessment for Guided Pathways (SOAA), extremely useful in helping to address its impact on the colleges. The SOAA identifies a set of essential practices that signal a college’s adoption of the tenets of the reform. The SOA prompts colleges to self-identify their level of implementation of each practice, from not occurring to at scale” Michigan colleges have responded positively to this process, with one Guided Pathways team lead calling it “the glue that kept [our team] together (Coleman, 2020, p. 9).

The MCSS administered an early version of the SOOA for Guided Pathways in 2014, and has followed up in 2017, 2019 and 2020 at a cadence of roughly once every 18 months. Since 2017, the MCSS has also conducted validation calls after colleges complete the rubric. These calls have proved valuable in helping the Center better understand the state of the reform on individual campuses and in designing technical assistance tailored to the colleges’ needs. Since it has been so useful, MCSS now employs several versions of the SOAA, including one designed by the National Center for Inquiry and Improvement to address practices that support student financial stability. The MCSS has also adapted the SOAA to address practices associated with developmental education reform, and most recently, created a version using practices from the Aspen Workforce Playbook to measure implementation of essential practices to strengthen workforce pathways. During each SOOA administration, the MCSS captures qualitative information about the challenges each college faces as well as their goals to strengthen various practices. This information helps the MCSS team design technical assistance that meets the needs of the colleges, and helps the Center tell the Michigan story to funders and partners.

The next frontier for the coalition of the willing

Over the past 10 years, MCSS has invested time, effort, and financial resources in leading reform efforts with the coalition of the willing, individual leaders and practitioners within institutions who were committed to an agenda of student success. Results have been evident as colleges have implemented new practices, transformed processes, and made student success a central tenet of their mission. The progress that has been made is a testament to the commitment of the colleges and the leadership of the MCSS and MCC
throughout. Although the Michigan story presented in this chapter emphasizes what can be accomplished in a decentralized state, there are limitations to this coalition-focused work. When the MCSS encounters these limitations, they typically reflect either missing organizational structure, lack of authoritative policy, or natural competition among a set of autonomous institutions. As the MCSS has begun to engage more deeply in work that crosses Michigan’s educational sectors, including strengthening transfer and promoting dual credit, all three of these obstacles have presented challenges. To enlarge the coalition of the willing, MCSS has reached out to partners within state government and at MASU and MICU. The Center currently has several active cross-sector initiatives to advance mathematics pathways and strengthen transfer between community colleges and public and independent universities.

**Implications for building coalitions**

While MCSS has engaged in coalition-building out of necessity, along the way it has become clear that this approach is useful in less decentralized environments. Following are several strategies leaders in other states can employ.

**Leveraging national experts**

The national spotlight on community colleges has given rise to a generation of dedicated scholars and other professionals who have made student success the focus of their work. MCSS has been fortunate to partner with a number of these experts who have provided access to research and technical assistance for the colleges, and guidance and consultation for the MCSS team. These partners include the postsecondary team at JFF, the Guided Pathways team at the CCRC, the higher education team at the Charles A. Dana Center, the team at the National Center for Inquiry and Improvement, and the expert facilitators at Sova who have helped MCSS design and lead major projects over the years. These deep and ongoing partnerships have multiple benefits, not the least of which is a growing cadre of student success professionals who understand the Michigan context and how things work in this decentralized environment. Several of these partners have steered MCSS toward new funders and new student success work. Involving one or more national partners in an initiative also generates interest among college leaders who are tuned in to new developments in the field.

**Leveraging national networks**

ATD has served as a focal point for student success work in Michigan. With many colleges involved, the national DREAM conference has become another venue for Michigan colleges to share common challenges and lessons learned. Over the past 10 years, MCSS has organized multi-college presentations and hosted social events at DREAM. MCSS is also one of the founding members in the national SSCN managed by JFF (see Chapter one by Juncos in this volume for more information about the SSCN). The 16 Student Success Centers currently in the network are national leaders in scaling implementation of guided pathways and advancing completion goals. Colleges in these 16 states serve 68% of U.S. community college students, including three-quarters of students of color and more than half Pell Grant recipients (Jobs for the Future, 2021). Participation in the SSCN
provides multiple ways to interact with other centers and with practitioners from across the network, including in-person and virtual convenings and participation in network-focused professional development and funding opportunities. The SSCN has also provided access to shared services from national experts to enhance each center’s capacity and make effective use of available financial resources.

Strategies for building and maintaining coalitions

As described above, the core MCSS model for building a coalition includes recruiting colleges whose priorities align with those of a given initiative and providing access to technical assistance and, when possible, grant funding. Cross-college convenings associated with each initiative give colleges what they want most—an opportunity to network and learn from one another. The MCSS has also discovered a few practical strategies that have proved useful for network maintenance. Asking each college to identify a lead, or better yet, a set of co-leads for an initiative has enhanced communication between the Center and the colleges and has also allowed the MCSS team to build relationships that reach more deeply into the institutions.

The MCSS has leveraged the vast network of independently managed community college and higher education affinity groups from across the state. Michigan’s network of affinity groups include chief academic officers, chief student services officers, liberal arts and occupational deans, registrars and admissions officers, financial aid directors, institutional researchers, and other affinity groups that have a shared interest in student success and are key allies in building a coalition. The MCSS has leveraged these partnerships to develop relationships with key partners at community colleges, gather insights on the most pressing issues at community colleges, share information about student success work led by the MCSS.

Multi-layered engagement and participation strategies have also been beneficial. Traditionally, the MCSS relied on in-person meetings and convenings to provide technical assistance along with networking opportunities. With the arrival of the COVID-19 pandemic, the MCSS, along with the colleges, made the shift to online meetings and spent most of 2020 and the first part of 2021 refining our ability to engage college leads and keep initiatives moving in a virtual environment. With in-person encounters on hold, the MCSS amped up its efforts to connect “birds of a feather” on Twitter and build a community on LinkedIn. Twitter highlights from virtual meetings and monthly topical tweet chats helped the MCSS grow its Twitter followership over 120% in 2020 and a new MCSS organizational page on LinkedIn helped to connect with a diverse array of faculty, staff, and administrators from across the state and the nation.

Building relationships with key supporters

There is no question that adequate funding, particularly from the philanthropic community, is a crucial component of coalition building. Student success centers and other coalition-led organizations often operate with a small and nimble staff. Participating community colleges provide some financial support, but additional support from philanthropy is essential. Not only can philanthropy provide much needed financial support for project activities, but the generous and skilled program officers at education philanthropies are key thought partners in student success work. They are frequently engaged in national student success efforts, and they can be a helpful resource to expand connections with national
networks and experts as described above. Finally, philanthropy plays a vital role in recognizing the difficult and meaningful student success work at community colleges. Securing a new grant is a reminder that the coalition is doing “good work” despite the challenges faced by community colleges.

In addition to philanthropic partners, coalitions need other allies, especially those whose mission is aligned with community college student success. There is little doubt that higher education leads to family sustaining wages, reduced poverty, and lower incidents of unemployment. Identifying and building relationships with key partners that share a vision for student success, such as the United Way, community-based organizations, state departments and agencies such as health or human services, adult basic education, corrections, K12, or labor and economic development can be key partners that can play a vital role in supporting the mission of the coalition (and vice versa). In addition, these organizations likely have expertise that can benefit the colleges. Local food pantries may be willing to staff and host the college’s food assistance program, organizations may provide drop-in childcare, or community organizations may offer mental health counseling.

Prioritizing

There is a vast amount of student success work that needs to be done if we are to significantly increase college completion, eliminate equity gaps, and support thriving community colleges. Yet there are too often not enough resources or time to do everything necessary. Coalitions must prioritize and the MCSS uses a multi-dimensional strategy to identify priorities. Student success centers can identify gaps in support to colleges using an asset map or gap analysis to identify necessary supports. Student success centers and other coalition-led networks should use data to identify the most significant leaks in the pipeline toward completion. Perhaps there are too few students matriculating from high school to college, too few opportunities for working adults to access higher education, poorly designed developmental English and mathematics sequences, or weak transfer pathways from community colleges to universities. Using qualitative and quantitative data and evidence to help focus will help establish priorities. Finally, recognize where your organization fits in the larger context or ecosystem of community college student success. This requires a thorough review of the ingredients described above and a keen understanding on how the coalition-led organization can serve as a leader or participate in student success efforts.

CONCLUSION

The MCSS is not the only entity in Michigan focused on student success and it is important for coalition leaders to recognize that in addition to leading a coalition of community colleges, the organization is also a member of other, like-minded organizations. Given Michigan’s highly decentralized higher education governance, there are many groups in Michigan and across the country that share in MCSS’s vision for student success. It is crucial to establish priorities, but also to decide where MCSS is the right fit within the student success ecosystem. The MCSS regularly asks five key questions when considering its priorities: (1) What national expertise can be leveraged? (2) What organizations are key supporters? (3) How can we construct the coalition and sustain the work at community colleges? (4) How will the work be funded? and (5) Does our organization have the capacity to provide these supports?
REFERENCES

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHIES

Jennifer Ballard Schanker is the Senior Director of Learning and Research at the Michigan Community College Association and has been employed at the Michigan Center for Student Success since 2011.

Erica Lee Orians is the Vice President of the Michigan Community College Association and has served as the Executive Director of the Michigan Center for Student Success since 2015.