# Case Study of Elgin Community College:
# Six Drivers of Institutional Transformation

For almost ten years, Elgin Community College (ECC) has been launching a variety of initiatives and programs aimed at student success with particular focus on closing the achievement gap for Latinos/Latinas and African Americans. In September, 2015, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation asked SPEC Associates to conduct a case study to learn about ECC's transformation.

## Key Drivers of Transformation

Through document reviews, on-site observations and in-person interviews with ECC students, faculty, and staff, SPEC isolated six key drivers of ECC's institutional transformation:

- **Equity-focus:** ECC takes cultural diversity seriously with many support structures to improve performance of its Latino/a students, continuous trials of ways to support African American students, and a strategic plan that focuses on closing the achievement gap.

- **Broad definition of student success:** ECC sees the completion of degrees and certificates as only part of the story of moving low or no income students into better paying jobs. Student success is defined by each student in relation to his or her own goals.

- **Strong ties to an education-focused local community:** ECC serves a clearly-defined community that supports education and works together for success of students of all ages. ECC is in alliance with the four area public school districts and their 600+ elementary, middle and high school faculty, staff and board members and also collaborates on various adult education efforts and with the U.S. Department of Education.  This collaborative work is aided by Illinois being a common core state.

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**ELGIN COMMUNITY**

*ECC serves Community College District 509, a 360 square mile area approximately 30 miles northwest of Chicago*

*District 509 has approximately:*
- *430,000 residents*
- *11,000 businesses*
- *4 public school districts*
- *15 high schools*

*The average family income of the area is $70,000/year*

*Educational attainment of Elgin, IL*
- *87% of Elgin's community graduated high school (86% nationally)*
- *34% of Elgin's community graduated with a bachelor's degree (28% nationally)*

*Source: American FactFinder tool at census.gov; includes the city of Elgin as well as all surrounding municipalities ECC serves*

*Ethnicity of the community:*
- *45% Hispanic*
- *45% Caucasian/White*
- *10% African American, Asian, and other groups*

*Over 90% of ECC students live within District 509 and their ethnicities roughly mirror the community's*

*Major sources of ECC revenue:*
- *53% from District 509*
- *9% from State of Illinois*
- *38% tuition and fees*

*In 2009, winning by a margin of 35 votes, approximately 40,000 community residents approved a $178 million bond referendum to finance the renovation and expansion the ECC campus*

*Sources: ECC Institutional Research Office; interviews with ECC administrators*

☝ **Low staff turnover:** Possibly due to a relatively high compensation and a union environment, ECC faculty and staff have long tenure. They know generations of past and present students and have long-standing relationships among themselves. They know how to work within the college system to benefit students.

☝ **Innovation-distributed leadership:** ECC encourages and enables innovation from top-down, bottom-up and middle-outwards. There is a strong emphasis on developing leadership among faculty, staff and students.

☝ **Subtle and less disruptive approaches to scaling:** ECC thinks about scale in terms of spread, leverage, diffusion, capacity and sustaining ideas rather than transferring or expanding specific projects. One example is the Student Success Infrastructure, which scales up ideas and capacity through Data Ranger-facilitated evidence-based interventions and data-informed hunches.

Important across these drivers is ECC's prioritization of personal interactions over technology in support of student success. ECC has average information technology capacity, but the Data Rangers use it effectively for data analysis and for facilitating information sharing and sense making. ECC also has a value system that priorities personal interactions with students over technology. The importance of personal interaction and relationships was evident by the collegiality and professional respect at all levels of the college and within and between teams, task forces and academic departments that was observed during the site visit.

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**STUDENT CHARACTERISTICS\***

*In the 2013/14 school year:*
- *About 17,000 students enrolled at ECC*
- *70% of students were part-time*
- *Average student age was 27 years*
- *About 60% received some form of need-based aid, including 40% PELL grant recipients*
  *Source: Fall 2012 IPEDS student financial aid submission report on nces.ed.gov/ipeds*
- *54% of first-time full-time students ultimately transferred to a four-year institution and/or graduated from ECC with degree or certificate within three years*
  *Source: Fall 2011 cohort per IPEDS, Transfers to 4-year colleges who obtain certificates are re-classified as completers*

*Most students are enrolled part-time or enrolled part-time at some point in their stay at ECC and this distinction between full-time and part-time students may be an over simplification:*
- *All non-certificate part-time students we interviewed started out as full-time students in their first year*
- *In 2010, 2011 and 2012, fall-to-fall persistence rates for full-time students averaged 75%; persistence rates for part-time students averaged 50%*

*All full-time students SPEC interviewed combined their studies with paid work.*

*\* Sources: ECC Institutional Research Office; focus groups with ECC students*

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