MEMORANDUM

TO: The Alamo Colleges’ Family
FROM: Dr. Bruce Leslie, Chancellor
SUBJECT: Our Strategic Priorities
DATE: February 13, 2015

Two years ago, I published the “Chancellor’s Call to Action,” held meetings with our faculty, staff, and administrative and trustee leadership, held Town Hall meetings across the organization, and engaged with many groups in conversations about the “Call.” The purpose of this extensive outreach effort was to share and exchange information with the Alamo Colleges’ Family about the key pressures impacting the Alamo Colleges and, in fact, higher education across the nation. The ultimate objective was to work collectively and collaboratively to address these increasingly cogent forces.

Six forces of change were identified:

1. Technology
2. The public’s lack of trust in education
3. The public’s demand for performance
4. The learning approach of today’s students
5. Competition from for-profit and online education providers
6. The speed of change/disruptive innovation

These six forces are even more relevant today, as higher education and the general media are increasingly focused on these pressures and their expanding impact. CNN’s recent release of “The Ivory Tower” joins the Chronicle of Higher Education and daily reports from similar media outlets regarding financial, technological, instructional, organizational, and student forces that are resulting in a myriad of changes. Evidence of sweeping changes nationwide may be seen in: college closures; lay-offs of faculty and staff; termination of programs; new learning delivery systems, such as MOOCs and Competency-based Learning; disruptive technologies; social unrest at colleges and universities; increasing state demands for greater accountability and cost-efficiency in public higher education; and state funding shortfalls.
As a result, we have realized two things:

A. Our strategic plan, though well developed, has too many priorities. The Board’s charges to the Chancellor, while reinforcing the strategic plan, added an additional layer of complexity causing confusion over what is important and what specific strategies might have the greatest impact. With our focus on Student Success, our first step was to develop a systematic process for the student experience (MyMAP - Monitoring Academic Progress) that streamlines access, entry, testing, orientation, college readiness, major/career selection, completion, transfer, and employment. Our second step was to achieve agreement to focus on a few major initiatives that support achievement of our “Wildly Important Goal” (WIG). As a result, the PVC last spring aggregated the many strategic tasks into Six Key Strategies that have the greatest potential to improve Student Success:

1. AlamoENROLL
2. AlamoADVISE
3. AlamoINSTITUTES
4. Increase Student Completion via 4DX
5. Expand Dual Credit/Early College High Schools/Academies
6. SACSCOC Accreditation and Reaffirmation

B. We lacked the formal skills to define, describe, organize, and execute complex projects. As academics, most of us had never been formally trained in project management, which includes the critical aspect of seeking stakeholder input to guide the development of project alternatives, to inform project design, and to support project implementation. Thus, we set out to provide project facilitation training to our senior staff first, and to initiate a program that will formalize this training to all involved in project development, design, and execution. We also committed to providing organizational support to create a culture of effective project facilitation and communication across the Alamo Colleges.
Both of these issues, (focusing our key priorities and establishing a skill set around a model of collaborative project design, facilitation, and execution), have fundamentally changed how we focus on engaging early and often as broad a spectrum of stakeholders as possible across a very direct set of strategies that will have the greatest impact on Student Success and positive benefit to our state performance funding. This was expressed in my Chancellor’s Call to Action II report, published last January, that called for Participatory Leadership, the basis for the document I shared with you all in December. Participatory Leadership reinforces the way we wish to operate and engage a broad spectrum of both internal and external voices, and is intended to fulfill our Principle-Centered Leadership goal that values broad participation, with the belief that, in order to ensure Student Success and organizational efficiency and effectiveness, everyone should accept the responsibility of leadership by being proactive, accountable, and responsible for contributing to the design and execution of our strategic agenda. There is much research and expanding application of this approach under the term “Collective Impact.”

The Six Strategic Priorities listed above are based on internal discussions and agreements, local and national data and research, college policies, legislative and Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board (THECB) direction, Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges (SACSCOC) principles, and evidence-based best practices. These Six Strategic Priorities have emerged over the past several years as having the greatest potential to help us build a system and environmental culture that emphasizes Student Success above all. The colleges that are being recognized by the Aspen Institute are pursuing all or most of these strategies as well, further validating their importance and positive impact.

DRIVING PRINCIPLES

Behind these Six Strategies are at least 12 principles that have emerged over the past 10 years, spurred by Achieving the Dream research, from such sources as: the Community College Research Center at Columbia University; the results of improved local data assessment; numerous national and state initiatives by Lumina Foundation, the Greater Texas Foundation, and the Houston Endowment; and legislatively-directed fiscal demands for greater efficiencies. They include:

1. Students should be ready the first day of class.
2. Students don’t do optional.
3. Students require a welcoming and supportive environment.
4. Students benefit from intrusive advising.
5. Developmental education is a barrier to Student Success.
6. Acceleration strategies enhance Student Success and degree completion.
7. Every course should count, as students who lose transfer credits are less likely to complete the baccalaureate degree and/or become successfully employed.
8. Students should have clear career and academic goals to completion, transfer, and employment.
9. Clear Pathways is proving to offer the most valuable strategy to enhance Student Success and degree achievement.
10. Employers require an additional set of skills, increasingly referred to as “essential skills” - - what we refer to as “leadership skills,” in order that students may be successful in their careers and community.
11. Internships, work study, service learning, apprenticeships, and similar learning strategies outside of the classroom substantially enhance Student Success and better prepare students for their careers.
12. Academic support services, deliberately aligned with student support services and the student’s pathway, are crucial to students’ academic success.

These 12 principles have emerged as the most crucial to ensuring Student Success, and they form the foundation of our Six Key Priorities. In addition, the state’s “Closing the Gaps” strategic plan, which is being replaced by the THECB to reflect the changing needs of Texas, has called for greater access to
higher education through improved college readiness and clear “marketable skills” for every program. Thus, increasing access to the Alamo Colleges continues to be a crucial factor, as is pathways development as envisioned through AlamoADVISE and the AlamoINSTITUTES. This is especially significant as Texas continues to lag behind the U.S. and the world in adults with relevant and in-demand degrees and certificates. Dual credit initiatives provide one critical means to achieve this objective. The list of resources at the end of this memo provides information about the emerging strategic agenda for 2030 being completed by the THECB.

OVERVIEW OF THE SIX PRIORITIES

Each priority is interconnected, forming a unified whole within MyMAP:

1. **AlamoENROLL:** The Working Theory is that simplification of student admissions and registration processes, while enhancing student college readiness, will benefit all of our students. This initiative focuses on ensuring the smoothest possible transition to the Alamo Colleges, emphasizing readiness for college and preparation for success. It includes all aspects of case management from advising, to financial aid, orientation, registration in appropriate courses, and making payment. Our web site, outreach to potential students, customer service, and the entire intake process is included. The goal is to ensure that every student is **ready for the first day of class** and has a clear career and academic plan. Our long-term operational goal is to eliminate the many complexities traditionally built into the admissions/registration system, including re-registration every semester, purging and re-registering students, and the enormous waste of student and employee time and resources required to maneuver through this process.

2. **AlamoADVISE:** The Working Theory is that universal support systems that customize each student’s career and academic plan and provide a clear pathway to success greatly benefit all of our students. This initiative focuses on a proactive and intrusive “case management” educational process throughout each student’s journey with us, not just in the beginning or during times of personal crisis. It is designed to ensure that each student achieves critical milestones throughout her/his educational plan. Research indicates that achieving intermediate steps helps individuals reach a long-term goal. These intermediate steps include: determining the student’s career goal and academic plan by the 15th hour, if planning to transfer; determining the desired university/college by the 30th hour, if planning on immediate employment; preparing the student’s resume/portfolio; and employer engagement. Students also will be connected with a faculty “mentor” by the 30th hour, and the advisor and mentor will work with the student as a team to ensure the student remains on course and is able to overcome “life” challenges he/she faces. Research support specialists are built into our team-based model to ensure that we know as much as possible about our students, individually and by various cohorts, so that we may continuously improve our systems and interventions. Much of this is already provided for our AAS students who have a greater rate of completion and employment than our AA and AS students.

A second aspect has two parts. (1) Awarding degrees or certificates to our students, both enrolled and not currently enrolled, who have achieved the requisite hours and credentials for a degree/certificate, and (2) Maximizing reverse transfer, currently state law, but necessitating close engagement with our university/college partners to maximize results.

3. **AlamoINSTITUTES:** The Working Theory is that a clear pathway for students, beginning in 8th grade, through community college, to employment or university, and then a career, with support for the several changes in direction students invariably will make, increases student degree completion. This initiative focuses on research from many national completion Thought Leaders, including Davis Jenkins of the Community College Research Center at Columbia
University, who was our convocation speaker in August and a resource to the trustees at our November board retreat. The strategy of developing clear, guided pathways for students in order to expedite graduation has been adopted increasingly by universities and community colleges nationwide, such as Arizona State University and Miami Dade College, with very positive student completion results. The legislature’s adoption of HB5 establishing five “Endorsements” that now require each 8th grader to select a pathway to a career, aligns perfectly with our model and our efforts to align our degrees with our university/college partners, providing a collaborative grades 8 – 16 approach for us to build across our traditionally “silied” educational systems. The THECB’s new strategic plan, calling for “Marketable Skills for Every Program,” further reinforces this approach. Thus, our model, while still under development, will be a fundamental component of AlamoADVISE to help students determine the path to graduation and their desired career.

4. **4DX: The Working Theory** is that our collaboration, discipline, and innovations resulting from this approach will greatly increase student degree attainment. This initiative focuses the entire organization on helping students complete degrees and certificates. Our success this year has been substantially beneficial to students and has helped us as a maturing organization understand the power of a systemic, disciplined focus and approach. The impact we now have by collectively supporting a single “Wildly Important Goal” (our WIG), even though each department may be taking its own approach, in a bottom-up process, has been extraordinary. The unanticipated benefits of this approach, by engaging employees in creative strategies never previously considered and including students who are helping each other succeed, has increased student graduation numbers and demonstrated the power of collective focus.

5. **Dual Credit, Alamo Academies, and Early College High Schools (ECHS):** The Working Theory is that further expansion of these approaches greatly benefits our communities and students. Increased interest from our 60-plus regional Independent School District (ISD) and open-enrollment charter school partners, across our eight-county service area, in expanding tuition-free dual credit opportunities, has dramatically increased our engagement with the K-12 sector. We currently partner to operate the Alamo Academies and nine early college high schools with two more set to open in fall 2015, and three others in preliminary stages of development for 2016. This growing high school student cohort has been a key factor in maintaining our enrollments, and comprises a progressively greater part of our student body. The success of this cohort also is reducing the need for developmental education and is an increasingly important strategy in the re-design and re-development of our college readiness efforts. Several models have emerged across our current ISD/charter partners that serve 9,000-plus students. These emergent models include: the traditional, small-school, on- or near-the-college campus model, including Travis ECHS and Judson Early College Academy; the rural, off-campus model used in Seguin and Comal; the whole-school model used in Seguin and being planned at South San Antonio ISD; and the specialized model, such as the STEM Academy design at Harlandale ISD. Our Alamo Academies, recent recipient of the national Bellwether award, has become a nationally recognized, award-winning model of success that the community wishes to expand further. We have even begun development of an 8th grade “pre ECHS” model in partnership with SAISD. Of particular value is the interface between the faculties of the ISDs/charters and our colleges that create supportive pedagogies, high expectations, college-level rigor, and curricular alignment to promote a more seamless transition from high school to college. To date, approximately 85% of our ECHS graduates attain an associates degree before having earned a high school diploma, compared to a much lower national ECHS associate degree attainment rate of 25%.

6. **SACS-COC:** The Working Theory is that accreditation of NLC and re-affirmation of the other colleges through our unified strategies increase Student Success. This initiative focuses on NLC completing its accreditation journey and SAC, NVC, and SPC successfully achieving re-
affirmation of their accreditation. Of course, this also directly supports the other five priorities.

However, as we have learned through 4DX, the whirlwind of our day job will always impose itself, which means we must all learn to manage, focus, and be disciplined about pursuing our priorities, so that we are not fully distracted by the urgent, but less important, forces we face. This also means that we must achieve a higher level of collaboration within, and eliminate the internal forces of competition and disagreement that can be greater distractions than external forces and can ultimately diminish our impact on Student Success and benefit to our community stakeholders.

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<td>2. AlamoADVISE – students identify career goal and academic pathway</td>
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<td>3. AlamoINSTITUTES – the pathway to employment, transfer, and career</td>
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<td>4. Dual Credit – expanding access and college completion</td>
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<td>5. 4DX – the collective discipline, focus, and impact for student degree/certificate achievement</td>
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<td>C. Complete degrees for those not enrolled</td>
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<td>6. Accreditation</td>
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In the near future, as we become more skilled in using project facilitation, you can expect to see greater clarity around each of these priorities and their component parts, more frequent and descriptive communications, and extensive outreach efforts within Participatory Leadership to engage you and our stakeholders in our efforts to bring the greatest value to our students and community. Leadership teams also will be issuing more formal reports on each of these priorities to further describe and explore these initiatives and prepare for greater engagement in their formation.

There are hundreds of links related to pathways and related research and best practices. Following are several links to research and presentations that directly support these strategies. You are invited to study them and, if interested, seek to become involved in these initiatives and to communicate your positive suggestions that will help enhance Student Success. Should you have any questions or concerns about this document, or should you wish to become more involved in engagement efforts, please contact my Office of Community Partnerships at: 210-485-0011, or dst-communitypartner@alamo.edu.

**SUMMARY OF RELATED RESOURCES**

1. Reclaiming the American Dream, American Association of Community Colleges
2. Announcement of “Free Community College,” President Barack Obama
3. Guided Pathways, Strategy Labs/Lumina Foundation
4. Strategic Planning Committee Report 1, Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board
5. Strategic Planning Committee Report 2, Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board
6. Strategic Planning Committee Report 3, Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board
7. Advising/Pathways Model, Arizona State University
8. Workforce Summit PowerPoint, David Marquez, Bexar County Economic Development Director
9. Ivory Tower Film Trailer, CNN
10. Chancellor’s Call to Action I and II, Dr. Bruce Leslie, Chancellor, Alamo Colleges
11. Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, States Are Still Funding Higher Education Below Pre-Recession Levels, Michael Mitchell, Vincent Palacios, and Michael Leachman
12. Charges to the Chancellor, Alamo Colleges Board of Trustees
14. Participatory Leadership Memorandum, Dr. Bruce Leslie, Chancellor, Alamo Colleges
15. Closing the Gaps 2015, Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board

c: Alamo Colleges Trustees
    Alamo Colleges Foundation Directors

Dr. Bruce Leslie, Chancellor
Alamo Colleges
201 W. Sheridan, Bldg. A
San Antonio, TX 78204-1429
(210) 485-0020 (Phone)
(210) 486-9165 (Fax)