

# Mike Leach

By: Ashmi Patel & Alison Kadlec  
April 2020



## Personal Story

With a background in community organizing and public policy and advocacy, Mike Leach, Director of the Center for Student Success at the Arkansas Community Colleges, has been fighting for better opportunities for underserved populations for decades.

Mike first became familiar with the mission of community colleges to extend real access to upward mobility for more students through his community organizing work. He participated in creating a career pathways program at a local community college, one that leveraged state and Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) funds to support higher education attainment for low-income parents, and learned more about community colleges as vital institutions for community development. The program expanded into a statewide program at every community college in Arkansas funded at \$15 million per year.

To continue to drive innovation within the community college, in 2010 the Arkansas Center for Student Success (CSS) was established, and Mike was appointed to lead the new Center. Armed with the mission to help more community college students attain credentials of value in a timely fashion, and equipped with a background in community organizing, Mike's leadership of the Center has focused on supporting 22 community colleges in Arkansas to engage in whole-institution student-success reform work aimed at producing better and more equitable outcomes for students. While formally a part of Arkansas Community Colleges, CSS also supports student success work undertaken by the 11 four-year institutions in the state. Chief among those cross-sector collaborations is work focused on scaling multiple measures for placement, Math Pathways, and co-requisite support in math and English across Arkansas.

## Policy-Related Overview

The CSS's involvement in scaling statewide reforms under Strong Start Arkansas focuses on three pillars unified by the goal of dramatically improving gateway course completion. First, with the Arkansas Department of Higher Education mandating that institutions move away from the use of single high-stakes placement tests, the Center is supporting institutions implement a range of approaches to multiple measures placement. Second, the Center is supporting institutions scale co-requisite remediation with the goal of having at least 75% of developmental education courses delivered in a co-requisite, credit-bearing format. Given the uncertainties about the effectiveness of models for serving students in the lowest GPA bands and with ACT scores lower than 15, the movement to scale co-requisite remediation is informed by a commitment to better understanding what students facing the greatest barriers need to be successful in integrated support models. Third, in partnership with the Charles A. Dana Center, CSS is involved in scaling differentiated math pathways aligned to different career aspirations for non-STEM majors.

When we asked Mike to reflect on some of the lessons learned about how to advance complicated developmental education redesign work in a state like Arkansas, he focused on using existing policy levers to advance the work in creative ways and the importance of engaging frontline faculty and staff as leaders of large-scale reform efforts. As one example of how these two lessons come together, Mike talked about using the established Arkansas Course Transfer System (ACTS) to advance math pathways work, despite the latter not being formally connected to the former. ACC has leveraged the ACTS process, designed for faculty from all the disciplines to regularly review courses for transfer and applicability, to create a venue for faculty to deliberate and make recommendations about what is the right math for non-STEM programs. Transfer, and more importantly applicability, is one of the biggest barriers to scaling math pathways across a state's higher education sector. The ACTS statute allowed Arkansas math faculty to proactively address the applicability issue within the statutory authority of the ACTS statute. While not a previously recognized part of course review charge, the inclusion of math pathways conversations in the faculty review process has resulted in math course recommendations for most non-STEM degrees which in turn is driving substantial growth of students in non-STEM programs taking more appropriate gateway math courses, primarily Quantitative Literacy.

As recently as three years ago, the overwhelming majority of non-STEM students were taking college algebra when it was not needed for their degrees and careers. Today, over 40% of students are taking the Quantitative Literacy course, suggesting that many more students are taking math that is more appropriate to their programs and plans. While there is much more work to be done, particularly in providing effective professional development to advisors and faculty to ensure students have access to the right math for their programs, the gains so far are substantial. As the Center continues a partnership with Complete College America (CCA) and seeks additional funding to provide professional development and training for faculty to effectively teach English in a co-requisite model, the CSS's commitment to scaling co-requisite remediation is strong for English as well as math.

With so much developmental education reform work underway in Arkansas, Mike remains focused on the lessons of community organizing to advance and scale. By designing math pathways work, for example, to ensure that the creative commitment of frontline faculty is fostered through their empowerment, Mike focuses on cultivating leadership from those closest to students. As he described it to us, *"The biggest lesson from community organizing is the importance of appreciating that if you're trying to change the world for people, you need to involve them in doing it and make them the people who actually do it... With the math pathways work we had the choice to focus just on organizing a leadership team of Chief Academic Officers and other folks in the administration, but we said that we wanted to make this work more about the math faculty themselves who would be teaching these new math courses to students. We felt that if we could get their commitment, their buy-in, that the work would really move in a way it might not otherwise."*

Citation:

Kadlec, A. & Patel, A. (2020, April). Mike Leach (People in the Reform series). Denver, CO: Strong Start to Finish, Education Commission of the States.

Supported by:



**EDUCATION COMMISSION**  
OF THE STATES  
Your education policy team.