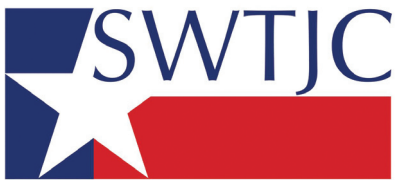# Moving from "Woe is me" to "Wow" – Lessons Learned from Southwest Texas Junior College's Amazing Transformation

In 2011, the Aspen Institute recognized Southwest Texas Junior College (SWTJC) as a Top 10 Finalist for the Aspen Prize for Community College Excellence. What makes this achievement so remarkable is that SWTJC had been placed on probation by the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges (SACSCOC) just a few years earlier in 2007.

What accounts for Southwest Texas Junior College's (SWTJC) significant improvements in student success since 2007? The answer lies in part in the College's focus on identifying small cohorts of students for whom a specific, targeted intervention could make a real difference. SWTJC chose ZogoTech's data warehouse and user-friendly tools to gain easier access to data and has been able to quickly and easily identify students meeting specific (and often complex) criteria, create cohorts for longitudinal tracking, and intervene directly with those students. By connecting interventions to outcomes (e.g., course success and completion, persistence, graduation), ZogoTech's software allows SWTJC to evaluate the effectiveness of these interventions. The bulleted lists below outline some of the interventions SWTJC found to be highly effective, as well as lessons learned along the way.

Best Practices

- Identify and contact high-performing students within a few credit hours of graduation to ensure they register for courses counting toward their degree or certificate the following semester

- Treat core completion as a measure of success, working with students who have completed 75% or more of the core to successfully complete remaining core courses

- Incorporate results of common course finals measuring Student Learning Outcomes directly into the data warehouse. Tie SLOs to course grades and other measures of success, and review SLO data over time, by faculty type and faculty member as part of a continuous improvement process

- Prevent registered students from being dropped for non-payment by extending the registration period and contacting students with outstanding bills early and often

Best Practices *(continued from front)*

- Offer a single course combining the last in the developmental sequence (math or English) with the gateway course in order to move those students most likely to succeed (using course grades and placement test scores in the warehouse) through the developmental and gateway courses quickly

- Encourage developmental education faculty to identify and refer two students "on the bubble" to one of the College's success centers, which could increase developmental education success rates by five percentage points in a semester

- Engage faculty in success initiatives through professional development, highlighting practical approaches that pose a minimal burden to faculty, evidence those approaches are effective, and resources (technology, time) to enable implementation

- Implement a daily attendance policy to prevent non-attending students from falling behind, dropping the course, and possibly losing financial aid eligibility. Incorporate attendance into the data warehouse to determine whether students with higher rates of attendance are more successful

- Require students with attendance and/or academic performance issues to visit a success center in order to maintain financial aid eligibility and hopefully, succeed in attaining their academic goals

Lessons Learned

- Offering the final developmental education course together with the gateway course resulted in poor success rates initially. Outcomes noticeably improved when this linked course was offered only to those students with a high probability of success (measured by grade in the previous developmental course and/or test scores)

- Providing supplemental instruction resulted in some improvement for participants, but ultimately proved too difficult to scale due to challenges in finding qualified instructors (or the funds to pay them) in SWTJC's rural setting

- Engaging faculty was a key component of the college's transformation, but it took time to overcome faculty perceptions that initiatives were of limited value to students and/or an additional burden given already heavy teaching loads