

# Not Fade Away



The Arizona Advanced Manufacturing Institute (AzAMI) is still a year away from the end of the U.S. Department of Labor grant that expanded the program. But already, AzAMI Executive Director Leah Palmer at Mesa Community College (MCC) in Mesa, Arizona, is fielding calls from companies that have

hired her students through the institute.

“Are you OK?” she says they ask her. And more importantly: “Are you going to be around?”

It’s a very good question. As state funding dwindles and colleges strive to advance their student success and completion agendas, grants have become a primary way to institute new, innovative programs. But those time-limited grants require college leaders to walk a fine line between the lure of grant funding and the challenge of maintaining those programs after grants expire.

Some colleges are finding ways to sustain programs past the sunset of their grants. MCC, for instance, has approved a sustainability plan for AzAMI and submitted it to leaders at Maricopa Community Colleges. The question is how much of AzAMI’s proposed \$300,000-per-year operating budget will come from the college and how much will come from the district.

For AzAMI and all the other grant-funded programs at community colleges, stakes are high.

“If this [partnership with industry] stops, you will not get it back,” Palmer says. “You can’t stop services and expect [partners] to come back.”

AzAMI could be just about any large, grant-funded initiative. But it’s also a good example of how to build a grant-funded program into a college and move the college, the community and the industry forward.

## THE LURE OF GRANTS

If anyone knows the lure of millions of dollars in grants, it’s Eunice Bellinger, president of BridgeValley Community and Technical College in West Virginia. She has served in administrative roles at community colleges since 2005 and taught for 23 years before that. When it comes to grants, she placed them at a level of high importance: a seven out of 10, she says.

“Because funding is so tight these days, we’re looking more and more to grant funding,” says Bellinger, who assumed the presidency at the college this summer. “But the problem is, how do you sustain it?”

It’s the catch-22 of community college funding, says Richard Kahlenberg, senior fellow at the nonprofit Century Foundation. Kahlenberg has studied higher education funding, and what he’s found won’t surprise anyone in college leadership. In recent years, public community colleges

received an average of \$13,000 per student. Meanwhile, public four-year institutions spent about \$37,000 per student, and private universities spent a whopping \$68,000 per student.

“The irony is that most educators would acknowledge that first-generation college students, low-income students, students who haven’t received adequate preparation at the high school level all deserve to have more spent on their education,” he says. “Grant programs can try to make up some of the difference, but there’s enough of a chasm in public funding for community colleges versus four-year institutions that it can’t fully be made up by private money.”

This leaves college leaders to make tough decisions. Bellinger says that her approach has been to be thoughtful about the grants she takes on in the first place, seeking out grants that dovetail with programs that are already a part of the college—that is, not launching a bunch of new programs that won’t integrate into her systems. Then, she and her team work hard to replace current grants with new ones. This is easier to do when the grants are aimed at a specific population—say, veterans. It requires jumping through a lot of hoops, she says, but it can be done.

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**Leah Palmer**, AzAMI executive director, Mesa Community College

She also tries to steer away from grants designed to bring on new staff or faculty. Not only do such grants put people’s livelihoods at stake, she says, but it’s not a sustainable way to grow staff in the long run. Instead, she prefers to use smaller grants to fund programs that faculty propose—professional development programs, for instance, or innovations in instruction that faculty propose. That way, faculty are invested in the college’s growth and loyal to the institution.

Finally, she says, the goal is to avoid taking on a new grant if you don’t also plan to sustain it.

“I have been at colleges where turnover of personnel and changes in services to students have been ridiculous, because you constantly have people coming on and off of programs funded by grants,” Bellinger says. “It really becomes, to my mind, irresponsible to enter into grants and forget they need to be sustained afterwards.”

Image Credit: Arizona Advanced Manufacturing Institute/Mesa Community College



The Arizona Advanced Manufacturing Institute (AzAMI) trains students to meet Arizona's workforce demand.

### THREE STEPS TO SUSTAINABILITY

When MCC got the \$2.5 million, three-year Trade Adjustment Assistance Community College and Career Training (TAACCT) grant, funded by the U.S. Labor Department, in October 2013, Palmer knew she'd have to act fast to make this program so essential to the college that leaders would want to keep it around after the grant expired.

Her strategy was three-fold: Build off of your strengths, get active buy-in from college leadership and integrate yourself into the institution. Put together, these three approaches counter the main problem with grant-funded programs, she says: namely, that they're often siloed away from the main mission of the college and therefore easy to relinquish when the grant expires.

"The more you make yourself part of the fabric of the institution, the harder it is for an institution to think of letting you go," Palmer says.

The first step was to build off the college's strengths. MCC already had a manufacturing program and, importantly, an institutional knowledge base in the form of faculty, who could guide the construction of curriculum along with intensive conversations with industry about what they needed.

Then, she turned to her college's leadership. She set up a meeting with MCC President Shouan Pan, now chancellor of the Seattle Colleges, and his cabinet.

"We need you at the top, not just as a signatory of the grant, but we need your leadership out in front," she told Pan. "We need people to know it's being supported from the top down, that this is not a unique, special program apart from the college."

Pan says he readily signed on. The grant and program fit his philosophy on grant funding, that grant funding shouldn't be used for operations, but used instead to "stimulate innovation and extend successful programs."

Plus, it was an opportunity to meet the college's mission not just to help students transfer to four-year institutions, but also to prepare students for jobs and to help them upgrade their skills.

"It would have been foolish to turn the money down," he says. "But more importantly, it would help us address a community need and expand an existing program."

But there was one hurdle: to bring Palmer on as the head of the program, which seemed like the right fit, Pan says, she'd have to move from a position with more permanent funding to this grant-funded position.

She was willing to take the risk.

### A UNITED FRONT FOR SUSTAINABILITY

So the pair worked together. Palmer would invite Pan and his cabinet to industry roundtables, open houses and advisory

meetings—even Rotary Club meetings. And Pan would show up, ready to sing AzAMI's praises.

"Whenever she needed me to talk to an individual one on one, whenever she needed me to host a community advisory group or meet with a community advisory group, I made sure I was there," Pan says. "I made sure to tell the public and the community that this program had the full support of the college."

This is essential because people administering grant-funded programs are often doing all the outreach, organizing and relationship-building with other funders and industry partners themselves. "They're one-man marching bands," Palmer says.

That isolation doesn't bode well for a program's sustainability.

"Unless the president feels accountable to the community, to even the Rotary Club, there's no way you will touch enough people that they will then tell your story to someone else," she says. "And without that, you'll never get enough traffic to make the program successful. It's not just about resources and funding. It's about perceived need."

### A PROVING GROUND FOR INNOVATION

At quarterly meetings with Pan and his cabinet, Palmer laid out the progress of the program and how it fit in with MCC's mission. Palmer reported on her work realigning pathways to streamline student experience, moving them from first encounter with the college to credential. It was here that she reported on the success of navigators—staff members who were more than advisors; they were case managers with expertise in advanced manufacturing curriculum and ability to assess student readiness. She explained to Pan how the navigators were keeping students on track and moving them toward completion.

When she implemented a prior-learning model, to give students credit for what they already knew, she reported that to leadership. When she created short-term boot camps after

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Image Credit: Arizona Advanced Manufacturing Institute/Mesa Community College



AzAMI's TAACCCT funding ends soon, and advocates hope to sustain the program.

which students were increasingly able to pass Boeing's most important certification test by more than 85 percent, she also told Pan and his team about that. When she implemented a tracking database that allowed other internal teams to identify students who might fall through the cracks—students who hadn't been to the lab or talked to their navigator lately, for instance—she told them about that, too.

After Palmer created a two- to three-week boot camp that taught employability skills like promptness, teamwork and communication—a course that students had to pass by 80 percent in order to move on to the rest of the curriculum—she could report that to them, as well.

And then she was able to bring them hard data—data not collected by the state to judge completion but that nonetheless argued for AzAMI's importance for students earning industry-recognized certifications, getting jobs and getting promotions. The navigators also reported promotions and raises from graduates, providing data on the role of the college in the community. She worked with industry partners to figure out how many workers they would need in the pipeline—another rationale for the program. Finally, she talked to economic development programs so she could place AzAMI in the context of the state's economy.

"I've got 65 percent of my students employed," Palmer says. "There's nothing more powerful to perseverance and retention than employment."

## SHARING SUCCESS DISTRICT WIDE

But all this information didn't just stay with Pan at the college level. Like Palmer advocating within her college, Pan advocated within the community college system. He took that data,

those success stories, and shared them with his chancellor and governing board. He invited the chancellor to tour the facility and brought local members of the governing board on site, too, to tell them AzAMI's success story. He found ways to squirrel away some funds to sustain the program when the grant ends in 2017. And he asked the chancellor to use her influence in the community to find organizations willing to help continue AzAMI's funding when the TAACCCT grant ends.

"We were purposeful and intentional in saying that it would be wrong, it would be foolish to let this program die—not just for Mesa but for Maricopa at large," Pan says. "Everyone knew that the administration of Mesa was very interested in maintaining the program. From day one, people knew that was our intention."

Before Pan left Mesa Community College this summer, he signed a sustainability plan and sent it to the district.

## THE FUTURE OF FUNDING

At the time of publication, Maricopa Community Colleges hadn't made a decision about AzAMI's future, says Randall Kimmens, Maricopa Community Colleges' associate vice chancellor for workforce development. And this is where college leaders have to make even harder decisions: Kimmens says that there are multiple TAACCCT grants administered at several of Maricopa's 10 colleges. And all, eventually, will be asking for sustainability funding.

"We are looking at [this grant] from a different perspective" than the college's, he says. "We're thinking about what kinds of programs are going to come out of this grant and the sustaining actions you take. Will it mean, just as an example, that machining remains at Mesa, and if it's successful, do we need to offer it at other sites?"

When they consider programs, he says, all the deans from all the colleges get together to talk about it. So it's not as simple as approving this sustainability plan for this program at this college. Once it enters the district level, there are even more competing interests to consider.

As for Palmer, she's excited about the future. She's already lined up a few new grants, some of which will allow the institute to offer innovative new programs on so-called additive manufacturing, and she is working with some four-year institutions to add the curriculum on the process to their programs as well. She's also working with local school districts to help improve the pipeline of workers for years to come.

"I can tell you that a huge piece of my sense of accomplishment is tied to ensuring that this program lasts a long time," Palmer says. "That was the focus I came in with. It doesn't matter the good work I've created if we haven't found a way to maintain it." ■

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