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Partnership works to ensure education for young adults in Mesa

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Submitted by Mesa Counts on College board members Chris Brady, Mesa city manager; Shouan Pan, president of Mesa Community College; and Michael Cowan, superintendent of Mesa Public Schools.

Mesa Community College, Mesa Public Schools and the city have become partners in establishing a community-driven focus in college completion and career readiness with what started as a Bill & Melinda Gates funded initiative: Communities Learning In Partnership.

Awarded to only four cities across the nation in fall 2010, the purpose of the CLIP grant was to challenge municipalities and educational institutions to find better long-term solutions through community partnerships to double the number of low-income young adults who graduate with a degree or certificate that has value in the marketplace.

This initiative required new approaches and a vision of increasing the number of educated and career-ready residents so that Mesa can be stronger economically and better flourish as a community. Our organizations began to work together in ways that tested our traditional roles and challenged us to go beyond our individual programs and practices, and to redefine how we worked together in the past.

Our Mesa Counts on College initiative was designed with this goal in mind. Now, Mesa is recognized as a city and community focused on sustaining a long-term commitment to college completion through inclusive leadership and collaborative programs and services.

Why is this important to us? Like many cities across Arizona and our country, data show that too many of our young people are not graduating from college during a time when today's job market increasingly requires a college degree or certificate. This has a direct impact on the success of our entire community.

If Mesa is going to remain a vibrant and economically healthy place in which to live, work and play, college completion is key. An educated workforce is also critical to attracting [new businesses](#) that offer high paying wages that will benefit our entire community.

This completion goal can't be accomplished by any organization or just educational institutions acting in isolation. As Gates recognized by funding us, it takes the engagement of our entire community. Doubling the number of our college graduates requires working together and understanding what is needed to best help individuals succeed.

To this end, Mesa Counts on College brought together not only [education](#) and government, but also business and industry, community groups and non-profit agencies — all focused on changing business as usual to help our young people succeed.

Mesa Counts on College has shown promise as a sustainable model for how Mesa organizations can do [business](#) together in new ways. New partnerships and practices were developed to expose our high-school students to careers in health care and the education it takes to make success happen.

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New programs were created to assist returning students in acquiring their GED and moving on to college. Non-profit agencies were awarded grants to engage them in developing their own college completion initiatives for at risk clients.

Grant funding for Mesa Counts on College has come to an end, yet the work in our community has just begun. We know that to reach the goal of increasing the number of college graduates in Mesa, long-term commitment is needed.

Mesa Counts on College represents exactly that — a long-term commitment from our organizations to continue the great work that has begun. This year, the city will be leading Mesa Counts on College with continued support and commitment from Mesa Community College and Mesa Public Schools. Mesa United Way, A New Leaf, and other community organizations have joined Mesa Counts on College as active collaborators.

We have learned to work together in new and different ways and to think and act differently. This learning and growth will continue, just as our commitment to making Mesa a better educated community for a more vibrant Mesa future.

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