



Achieving the Dream™

Community Colleges Count

2018

LEAH MEYER  
AUSTIN AWARD

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TEXARKANA  
COLLEGE

The **Leah Meyer Austin Award** is Achieving the Dream's highest honor and recognizes institutions that have demonstrated outstanding progress in designing a student-focused culture and aligning institutional strategies to promote student success.

“The Active and Cooperative Learning initiative at Texarkana College has transformed the culture for both students and faculty.... The result: greater course success and persistence rates.”

— Jamie Ashby  
Associate Professor of Mathematics

**Texarkana College** is the winner of the 2018 Leah Meyer Austin Award. The college is recognized for significant innovations that have resulted in critical progress including increasing the graduation rate for first-time, full-time students by 21 percentage points from 10% to 31% and an 18 percentage point increase in the graduation rate for Black students from 4% to 22% during the same time period.

**Snapshot:** Annually, Texarkana College serves over 5,600 students; 64% are White, 20% are Black, and 7% are Latino. One-third of students attend the college full-time. Nearly three-quarters of students (69%) are age 24 and under. About 40% of students receive Pell grants; among first-time, full-time student this rate increases to 65%.

## CHALLENGE

In 2011, Texarkana College had significant struggles. First, the college's 3-year graduation rate hovered around 10% with the graduation rate for Black students in the single digits (4%). Completion rates for developmental courses were also low, and students were depleting their financial aid before enrolling in credit-bearing coursework. Second, the college was the subject of sanctions by its accrediting agency. Third, the college faced financial challenges due to the decline in local and state funding. Texarkana College was on the brink of closure.

In addition to the above, the college was under-resourced from both technological and human resources perspectives. The college needed new personnel for key positions. And the enterprise resource planning software essential for collecting, analyzing, and using data and for supporting implementation of student success efforts was not as helpful as it needed to be.

## SOLUTIONS

To address its financial crisis and put student success at the center of its work, Texarkana College embarked on a holistic change process which began with the appointment of a new leadership team and an institutional commitment to evidence-based decision making.

Texarkana College also joined Achieving the Dream and devised an implementation plan which became a rallying point for faculty and staff. Specifically, the college articulated strategies to increase student success and persistence. The plan charted a path for the redesign of the developmental and gateway education course sequence to help students quickly advance to

college-level courses, thereby maximizing their financial aid and enabling them to sustain academic momentum. The college instituted a new student success course called Learning Frameworks that was designed to help learners discover how best to learn. The plan also advocated for the use of active and cooperative learning in more classrooms as a tool to help increase students' critical thinking skills and overall course success. Although institutional funds were limited, the college invested in professional development for faculty to help ensure that these efforts would be implemented successfully and benefit all students. Texarkana College branded this vision for student success under the banner *Connect: Start Smart, Finish Strong*.

The college designed a robust first-year experience that included a designated faculty advisor and a structured pathway tool to help guide first-year students through their academic programs. In addition, to maximize the value of student financial aid, Texarkana College advanced a new policy to ensure that students chose majors early and took courses required for their major. The college also relocated student support services to the school's library, which was rebranded as the Academic Commons, a hub for student support and research.

The college also strategically used new technology to support the redesign of enrollment services in order to provide a more personalized approach to recruiting, enrolling and advising, and stronger connections between academic and student support services. Using its new enterprise resource planning tool, the college created a stronger data infrastructure. Faculty and staff now use an early alert system and monitor student progress, attendance, and grades to provide targeted student support.

"We've focused everything that we do on one central goal, which is student success, centered around persistence and completion," said Dr. Donna McDaniel, the college's vice president of instruction. "Why do we believe those efforts are important? It's the heart of our institution. Students are what we do. If they're not successful, we're not needed."

Finally, to help address its financial shortfall, the college worked with community leaders to successfully expand the size of the local tax base from which it draws revenues. The measure that local citizens approved increased eligibility for in-district tuition rates and significantly increased Texarkana College's tax revenue. Community organizations also donated to the college and Texarkana's most famous alum, H. Ross Perot, pledged \$5 million. "Without so many people helping, we simply wouldn't be here," noted James Henry Russell, president of Texarkana College.



College leaders say Achieving the Dream was essential in helping guide the college's reform efforts. President Russell said, "Our Achieving the Dream coaches gave us the faith and confidence that we could turn this place around and achieve great results. They helped so much to get us partnered with the right people and the right best practices, and they were huge cheerleaders." Echoing President Russell, Jamie Ashby, Texarkana College's Achieving the Dream core team leader and math instructor, said, "Achieving the Dream provided the cornerstone for change and helped us identify what our biggest challenges were." Moreover, she said, "Achieving the Dream really encouraged us to embrace change at scale."

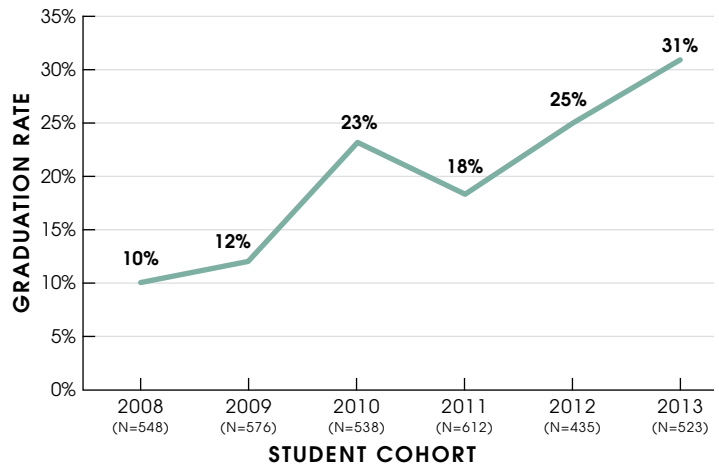
Texarkana College tackled a great number of reforms all at once. According to McDaniel, "even though during the course of the transformation it felt like the college had a lot of balls in the air, we just kept pushing forward, tying it back to student success and student completion. Trying to get all [the problems] fixed at once was a challenge, but we decided to really go big. We took big swings and we made sure that we were scaling up." Moreover, she said, "we tried to intentionally tie every little piece together" into a cohesive strategy.

## RESULTS

It's clear that Texarkana College's strategy paid off. A few key statistics underscore the college's remarkable transformation.

As a result of its efforts to increase student success, Texarkana College increased its 3-year graduation rate for first-time, full-time students from 10% to 31% for the 2008 and 2013 cohorts, respectively. The college's equity gaps are narrowing too. For example, the 3-year graduation rate for Black students increased from 4% to 22% for the 2008 and 2013 cohorts, respectively.

### TC IPEDS 3-Year Graduation Rate (150%)



Texarkana College's remarkable turnaround, the product of seven years of hard work, has positioned the college for continued success in the days ahead.

## WHAT STUDENTS ARE SAYING

The most impressive part of my experience as a Texarkana College (TC) student is how smoothly everything went, from start to finish. As a freshman straight out of high school, I was pretty nervous about being new on campus. My very first class was the Learning Frameworks course. My professor was welcoming and made us all feel at ease. She divided us into small success groups, which helped me meet new friends and helped us connect as peers. Communication is the big thing at TC—it's part of the culture. When I was at TC, I felt like every person who worked there really wanted me to succeed. Last year, I graduated with my associate degree, and I'm now working toward my bachelor's degree at a university. I feel like TC gave me a solid foundation and the momentum I needed to achieve my dream of becoming a high school history teacher."

— Sean Daniel, Associate of Arts - History, Fall 2016

Texarkana College (TC) helped me start my college degree while I was still in high school. I was able to earn more than 30 dual credit hours at TC before I earned my high school diploma. After graduation, my TC advisor listened to my career goals and mapped out a clear path for me to earn my degree quickly and efficiently—I knew I wouldn't be wasting my time on classes that wouldn't count toward my degree. I'll never forget my first day on campus in my Learning Frameworks class. My professors gave me their personal contact information and wanted to connect with me. I made new friends and during the semester, we grew together as leaders by volunteering our time for service projects and developing our study skills. When I think of TC, three words come to mind—family, growth and leadership. When you become a TC student, you join a big family where everyone is rooting for you to succeed, grow, find your place in the world, and finish strong."

— Allison Haley, Associate of Behavioral Science, Fall 2017



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## ABOUT ACHIEVING THE DREAM

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Achieving the Dream (ATD) leads a growing network of more than 220 community colleges committed to helping their students, particularly low-income students and students of color, achieve their goals for academic success, personal growth, and economic opportunity. ATD is making progress closing achievement gaps and accelerating student success through a unique change process that builds each college's institutional capacities in seven essential areas. ATD and more than 100 experienced coaches and advisors work closely with Network colleges in 39 states and the District of Columbia to reach more than 4 million community college students.

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## ABOUT OUR SPONSOR

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The Kresge Foundation is a private, national foundation that works to expand opportunities in America's cities through grant-making and social investing in arts and culture, education, environment, health, human services, and community development in Detroit. In collaboration with nonprofit, public, private and philanthropic partners, the Foundation helps create pathways for vulnerable people to improve their life circumstances and join the economic mainstream.

### FOR MORE INFORMATION ABOUT ACHIEVING THE DREAM:

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