

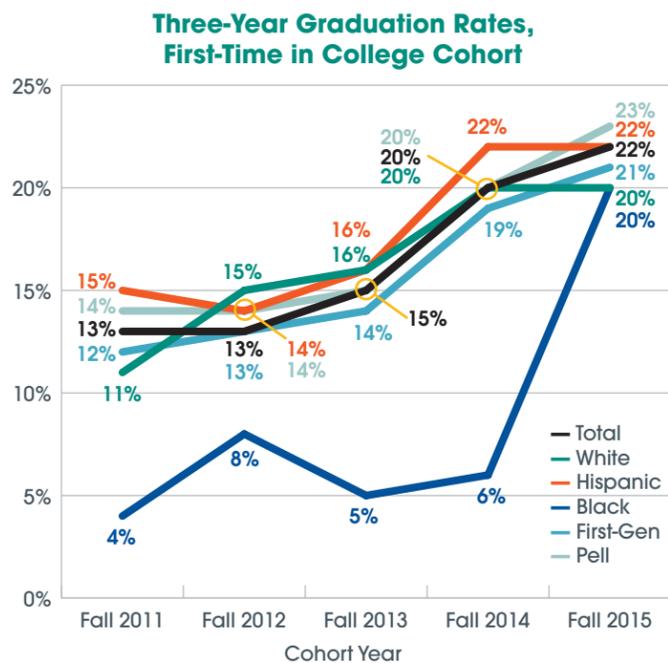
“ I felt welcome the first time I stepped into class.”  
 — Amarillo College student’s comment from fall 2018 developmental math course evaluation survey

## RESULTS

The changes Amarillo College implemented as a result of coaching and the adoption of Achieving the Dream promising practices have transformed the college’s relationship with data and opened the door to greater understanding of its students’ experiences. Data summits, annual community-wide reviews, initiatives to directly address poverty issues, mandatory tutoring, course redesign—these are all measures the college began to undertake in its first year of participation in the network, says Dr. Lowery-Hart. They led to #ACcultureofcaring’s approach to integrating data analytics with accelerated learning and holistic, student-centered support services, creating the data ecosystem to drive change.

- In fall 2017, ARC social workers emailed 820 students who had dependents and earned less than \$19,000 a year (based on FAFSA data), encouraging them to visit the ARC and access services before they found themselves in a financial bind. Nearly 90 percent of the students visited the center. Of those who received services, 69 percent returned in the spring while only 33 percent of those who did not receive services returned.
- The success of eight-week courses has allowed the college to transition nearly 20 percent of its students from part time to full time, reducing part-time enrollment from 75 percent in fall 2015 to 57 percent in fall 2018. Students are taking more courses each semester, are able to qualify for grants only available to full-time students, and are completing certificates and degrees on time.

- When Amarillo College joined Achieving the Dream in 2011, its three-year graduation rate was 13 percent; today it is 22 percent. Amarillo College has made equity gains in the three-year graduation rates as well. Between cohort years 2011 and 2015, three-year graduation rates for Black students moved from 4 percent to 20 percent, Hispanic student rates moved from 15 percent to 22 percent, and first-generation student rates went from 12 percent to 21 percent.



Achieving the Dream™

# 2019 | LEAH MEYER AUSTIN AWARD



# AMARILLO COLLEGE

Achieving the Dream’s **Leah Meyer Austin Award** is the highest honor a college in the Achieving the Dream Network can earn. The award recognizes institutional strength, aligned policies and procedures, a student-focused culture, notable increases in student outcomes, and reduction of equity gaps.

## OVERVIEW

**Amarillo College**, one of two 2019 Leah Meyer Austin Award winners, exemplifies how radically an institution can transform itself when it truly understands the needs of its students.

Since 2014, the Hispanic-serving institution has made sweeping changes in its use of data and its ability to quickly and decisively address poverty as the issue students say most affects their success. The college introduced predictive analytics to understand trends in student performance and identify where crucial improvements needed to be made. It redesigned developmental education to accelerate student progress and improve retention. Working with community partners, it launched a web of nonacademic interventions and holistic student supports to address the poverty barriers. The results have been significant gains in graduation rates among all students and key subpopulations.

The college has nearly doubled its three-year graduation rate from 13 percent for the fall 2011 cohort to 22 percent today for the fall 2015 cohort. During the same period, three-year graduation rates for Black students increased fivefold, from 4 percent to 20 percent. For Hispanic students, rates moved from 15 percent to 22 percent; for first-generation students, from 12 percent to 21 percent; and for students receiving Pell Grants, from 14 percent to 23 percent. All student groups are now graduating at similar rates.

“ Without Achieving the Dream, there would be no Amarillo College success story to tell.”  
 —Dr. Russell Lowery-Hart, President

Achieving the Dream™

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## SNAPSHOT

As of fall 2017, the latest year of IPEDS reporting, Amarillo College served over 10,000 students, the majority of whom are people of color (41 percent Latino, 5 percent Black or African American, 5 percent Asian or multiracial) and first generation (71 percent). In 2016-17, 68 percent were younger than 24 years old, and nearly two-thirds (71 percent) attended part time. The majority were low income: 61 percent of beginning full-time students received Pell Grants, and 39 percent of all Amarillo College students did.

## CHALLENGE

In 2010-11, Amarillo College participated in a community-wide study to understand why poverty was increasing and educational attainment was declining in the region and what the city could do about it. The college's profile reflected those trends. More than half of students lived in poverty; 61 percent needed developmental education classes to become prepared to do college-level work; and, 71 percent could attend only part time, because of work and family demands. IPEDS data showed a three-year, first-time, full-time student graduation rate of 13 percent, and only 10 percent of students were transferring, despite 80 percent saying transfer was their goal.

As an anchor in the heart of the Texas Panhandle community, Amarillo College was determined to move more students to complete degrees or transfer, but it also recognized it didn't have a handle on what was standing in the way of their students succeeding and how to address those barriers.

In the fall of 2011, Amarillo College held a college-wide summit for all faculty and staff. Analyzing the data on their students, they saw a contradiction in how they understood their own effectiveness, says Amarillo College President Dr. Russell Lowery-Hart (who was then vice president for academic affairs). They followed up on the summit by holding student focus groups to learn what most interfered with students' progress. Food, housing, transportation, childcare, and mental healthcare topped the list. They learned poverty, not academics, was the most powerful barrier to student success.

"The students really helped us identify what their experiences were on our campuses, and frankly, we were shocked and changed by their answers," says Dr. Lowery-Hart. To help students succeed, "we had to come to terms with who they really were, not who we thought they were, or wished they were."

## SOLUTIONS

In 2012, the college adopted a theory of change to guide a new strategic approach: "Removing poverty barriers in an accelerated learning platform, within a relational/ loving culture, will lead students to succeed academically and graduate with the skills and credentials they need to earn a living wage." At the same time, the college became an integral part of an economic development community partnership called "No Limits No Excuses," a plan to reduce poverty and increase educational attainment so as to promote economic diversity and create higher skilled, better paying jobs.

And the college joined Achieving the Dream. With its tailored coaching, rigorous attention to evidence-informed decision making, and opportunities for knowledge exchange with other colleges, the ATD approach made achieving transformative culture change and institutional restructuring possible, says Dr. Lowery-Hart. "Without Achieving the Dream, there would be no Amarillo College success story to tell."

### Introducing #ACcultureofcaring

Amarillo College undertook its own No Excuses Poverty Initiative, shifting the college mindset from one not engaged with nonacademic concerns to a culture of caring where every employee understands and takes responsibility for students' real-life challenges. Its strategic plan, No Excuses 2020, has the goal of a 70 percent completion rate by 2020.

#ACcultureofcaring became Amarillo College's core initiative, embracing holistic systems change by integrating accelerated learning, predictive analytics, and wraparound social services to overcome student poverty barriers. #ACcultureofcaring speaks to the very personal focus Amarillo College directs at its predominantly first-generation students, who lack the cultural capital of families with a college-educated relative and who can be burdened by inequities associated with lower academic achievement

“Prior to joining Achieving the Dream, Amarillo College had collected a significant amount of data, but we really hadn't used it in a thoughtful manner.”

—Cara Crowley, Vice President of Strategic Initiatives

and degree attainment.

To accelerate learning pathways to college readiness, the college's Academic Success Division redesigned the developmental education program. Faculty compressed developmental education courses, incorporated them into well-defined pathways, and linked them to academic credit courses, streamlining the process of making students ready to do college-level work.

### Redesigning courses to promote retention

Data showed the college was losing students in week 10 of the 16-week semester. Peer-to-peer learning fostered through the Achieving the Dream Network helped at the college-to-college level, too. Odessa College, an Achieving the Dream Leader College and 2018 Leah Meyer Austin Award winner, had improved persistence rates by re-engineering its traditional 16-week semester into two eight-week terms. Amarillo sent a team of 30 faculty and advisors, administrators, and board members to Odessa in October 2015 to observe the result and plunged into redesigning 20 percent of courses by spring 2016. At the same time, the college established nine academic communities and restructured programs to include stackable certificates leading to an associate degree.

The effect was immediate, with double-digit gains in success rates overall and greater gains for Hispanic and African-American men in particular. Using Title V federal dollars, the college went on to redesign gateway courses, the 26 most highly enrolled courses, career and technical education programs, healthcare programs, and transfer-level programs into eight-week modules. "Eight-week courses are exciting," says Carol Buse, Dean of STEM. "Not only can students emerge after a single semester with an industry-viable certification and the possibility of immediate local employment, but they can then carry these credits forward in pursuit of an associate degree here at AC. The new format has certainly led to student success. With only two or three classes to keep up with at a time, both students and faculty are more engaged." As a general rule, the college does not offer programs that don't lead to family-sustaining jobs.

### Beginning and ending with data

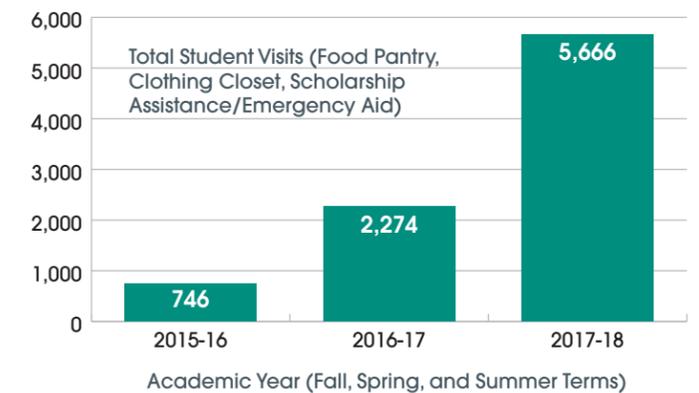
The college relies on data analytics and predictive modeling to improve instruction and design holistic student support systems. It creates an at-risk profile for all incoming, first-time-in-college students and uses student management systems, such as Accutrack, to follow student support needs and the Ellucian Colleague system to track performance data for all students. AC's Office of Institutional Research has created dashboards, accessible by all AC employees and

faculty, to share institutional data from the program level to the overarching goals of its No Excuses 2020 strategic plan. The college has received national recognition as a result of its work, including a featured story in *The Atlantic*, numerous conference spotlights, a 2018 grant to assess the academic success and educational attainment outcomes of its No Excuses Poverty Initiative, and the 2017 Bellwether Award.

### Putting support centers at the hub

Over the past six years, Amarillo College has opened student support centers, including a counseling center, legal aid clinic, a career and employment center, and a childcare center. At the heart of its holistic student support system is the Advocacy & Resource Center (ARC), which uses data analytics to drive its outreach. ARC collaborates with over 60 local nonprofits that have federal, state, and private funding sources. ARC houses five intervention projects—Social Services, Scholarship and Tuition Assistance Program, Food Pantry, Clothing Closet, and the No Excuses Fund Emergency Aid Program. Funded by the Amarillo College Foundation, the No Excuses Fund has dispensed nearly \$300,000 since it opened in 2012, changing the game for students who in the past might have dropped out when faced with financial emergencies.

### Advocacy & Resource Center Total Student Visits



### Fostering connection

The college uses regular professional development, careful hiring, and consistent communications to inform and keep all employees on the same #ACcultureofcaring page. The president meets annually with every department, holds monthly "No Excuses ATD" all-staff meetings, and Friday morning updates in person or via live stream. "I continue to see constant care and support of the Amarillo College community," says Grant Accountant Shannon Gonzales. "Through avenues such as greeting, mentoring, and community involvement, we are able to take the time to show others we truly care about them and their success."