

# WE ARE STILL HERE FOR YOU

Coahoma Community College and ATD



Achieving  
the Dream 



**Achieving the Dream (ATD)** is a partner and champion of more than 300 community colleges across the country. Drawing on our expert coaches, groundbreaking programs, and national peer network, we provide institutions with integrated, tailored support for every aspect of their work — from foundational capacities such as leadership, data, and equity to intentional strategies for supporting students holistically, building K-12 partnerships, and more. We call this Whole College Transformation. Our vision is for every college to be a catalyst for equitable, antiracist, and economically vibrant communities. We know that with the right partner and the right approach, colleges can drive access, completion rates, and employment outcomes — so that all students can access life-changing learning that propels them into community-changing careers. Follow us on Twitter, Facebook, and LinkedIn.

# INTRODUCTION

A small, rural community college in the Mississippi Delta region, Coahoma Community College serves a county with one of the nation’s highest poverty rates. Founded in 1924 as Mississippi’s first agricultural high school for Black students during the era of racial segregation in the American South, Coahoma is one of only 15 Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCU) community colleges in the country—a distinction in which its efforts to support students is firmly rooted. The college’s president, Dr. Valmadge Towner, opens his statement on the college’s website with a simple message: “We Are Still Here for You.”

“I meet people who graduated in the 1950s, and they tell me stories about how somebody on campus bought them shoes, or took them home, or bought them food. They just went above and beyond,” says Dr. Towner. “I hope we have that same attitude today.”

As one of the first two Mississippi community colleges to join the Achieving the Dream (ATD) Network, Coahoma benefitted from coaching, resources, and the support of peer institutions to strengthen its ongoing mission to support students and ensure their success. This case study details how the college’s students and its community benefitted from participation in ATD’s Foundations of Transformation engagement, and outlines lessons learned that other institutions can benefit from.



## About This Case Study

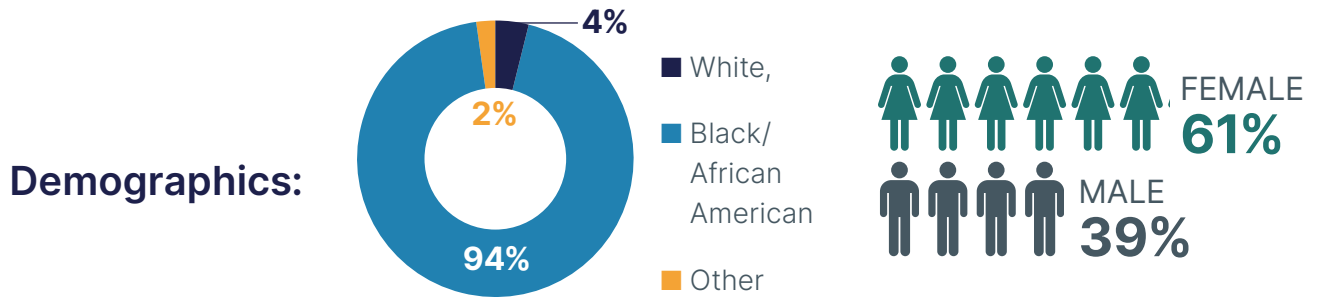
This case study draws from efforts of ATD to support institutional capacity-building at two Mississippi institutions, Coahoma Community College, and Mississippi Gulf Coast Community College (MGCCC). The Woodward Hines Education Foundation (WHEF), which works to increase postsecondary attainment in Mississippi, provided the financial support to allow Coahoma Community College and MGCCC to join the ATD Network and benefit from coaching, resources, and peer supports. The case study draws from Higher ed Insight’s evaluation of ATD’s work with the two institutions, as well as interviews with faculty, administrators, and students.



# DATA SNAPSHOT:

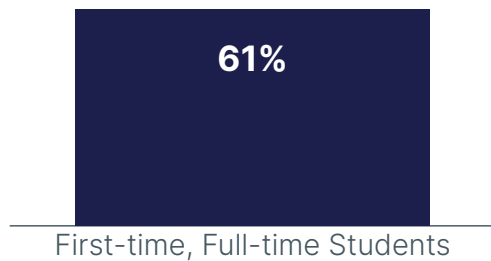
## COAHOMA COMMUNITY COLLEGE

**Main Campus:** Clarksdale, MS

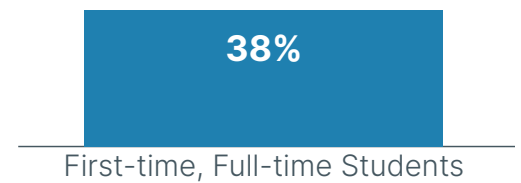


### RETENTION

**Student Outcomes:**



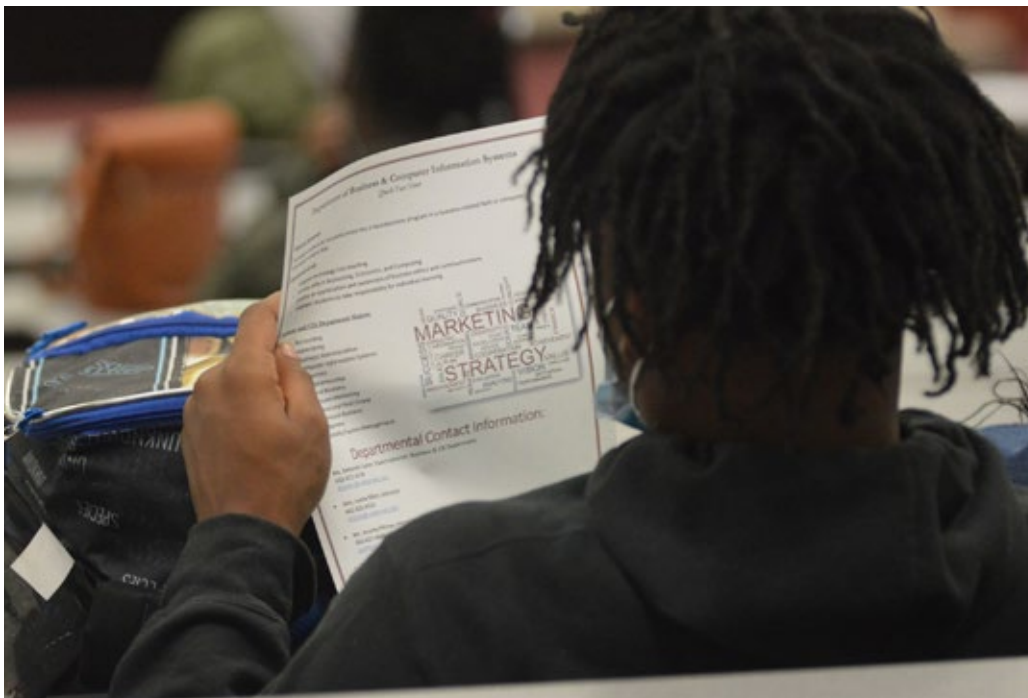
### GRADUATION RATES



# THE CHALLENGE

As Coahoma began working with ATD in 2018, its leaders recognized the challenges the institution—and the community it serves—faced. “We know we have a retention challenge. We have enrollment challenges because of several confounding variables that affect our community, including economic downturns, population migration, and people having to leave the area for work,” Dr. Towner says. “We do a lot of things trying to get students into college, as well as make certain that they stay.”

However, like many small, rural colleges, the institution faced three key challenges. First, its institutional research department had only one staff person who spent most of her time on accreditation-related issues. Second, the sharing of data beyond that department had been limited, Dr. Towner says, because of “people being protective and not wanting to look bad.” Finally, while Coahoma was committed to its historical mission focused on student success, too often it was in the form of separate, siloed programs, which contributed to initiative fatigue. It was clear a more comprehensive approach to increasing student outcomes was needed. “We provide a lot of ad hoc help to the students, but how can we marshal those resources into a systematic approach?” Dr. Towner asks.



# THE RESPONSE

Working with ATD coaches, Coahoma leaders reviewed student data and gained additional insights into student needs through the use of ATD's Institutional Capacity Assessment Tool (ICAT), which provides stakeholders with the opportunity to weigh in on seven aspects of student-focused campus culture. As part of a facilitated three-hour workshop with ATD coaches, Coahoma leaders identified potential areas of improvement in the college's institutional capacity, including orientation, the availability, use, and sharing of data, the need for advising and mentoring to support student success, and faculty professional development and sharing of best practices.

Based on the insights from this work, Coahoma leadership developed an action plan with the help of ATD coaches, focusing first on two key areas:

**Orientation.** Data revealed that only 45 percent of students were enrolling in a required orientation class during their first 15 credit hours, when the strategies to support the transition into college are needed the most. After researching best practices provided by ATD, Coahoma leadership developed a strategic approach to orientation, requiring that students enroll in the course during their first 21 credit hours. Staff redesigned the orientation curriculum as an eight-week course with a focus on connecting students to campus resources and offered the class in person and online—an option which helped students stay connected after the COVID-19 pandemic closed the campus in early 2020. Students provided positive feedback on the length and engagement of the redesigned orientation curriculum, and as a result, Coahoma is shifting developmental coursework to match this shorter course model to allow students to take developmental courses sequentially.

**Advising.** Coahoma recognized the importance of students interacting more frequently with their advisors. “It’s vital that we have that conversation with [students] throughout the semester and not just once or at the point where it’s just time to register,” Dr. Towner says.

Students now are required to meet with their advisor twice each semester. At the same time, technology adopted by the college provided students and advisors with course planning information and allowed advisors to text students with reminders about appointments and deadlines.



More frequent discussions have broadened the focus of advising to include career planning, graduation and transfer requirements, and non-academic challenges such as transportation or internet access. To bolster support, the college also has added “student navigators,” support staff that help guide at-risk students to additional support services, as well as a new retention module for faculty.

Undergirding work in both areas was an increased capacity for data sharing, a need surfaced during the ICAT self-assessment process. ATD data coach Daryl Davis helped build the institution’s first Tableau dashboard and trained Coahoma’s data lead on how to leverage data in a variety of other areas. Implementing Tableau has helped end users across campus access data on the college’s website, leading to new use cases. For example, Tableau is being used to assess Coahoma’s revised orientation programming by tracking retention and graduation rates based on whether orientation was in-person or online. Increased data capacity also played a critical role in the college’s accreditation process, and Coahoma is now analyzing data by student characteristics such as athletes versus non-athletes or those living on campus versus off, recognizing that these subgroups of students might be experiencing different barriers.

# LESSONS LEARNED

- **Small institutions can address capacity issues by aligning initiatives.** Coahoma worked through ATD's institutional capacity-building process at the same time as it was undergoing reaccreditation, which provided the opportunity to bring more faculty on board with student success initiatives by charging the college's accreditation team with implementing the ATD action plan around orientation and advising. These efforts also helped align institutional efforts around student success.
- **Expanding data capacity depends on ensuring information is relevant to stakeholders.** For example, as an HBCU in which the vast majority of students, faculty, and staff self-identify as African American, Coahoma saw limited value in analyzing student outcomes by race or ethnicity. However, the ICAT process revealed that faculty had limited metrics to identify and address equity gaps, and as a result the college's leadership worked with the ATD coach to consider other student characteristics such as residential status, full-time or part-time status, and athletic participation.
- **Institutional coaching relies heavily on context.** As the ATD data coach working with Coahoma, Davis' background helped address some of the institutional resistance to sharing and allowed staff to approach equity through a new lens. "It's not just because I'm African American, but I do understand some of the issues, when I talk to [the leadership] about what their students are going through," Davis says. "Because I've gone through some of those issues—I haven't lived in the [Mississippi] Delta, but I've lived in places just like the Delta."
- **Access to external resources and networking opportunities led to meaningful changes.** As a rural institution, Coahoma lacked opportunities to build networks, even within the state of Mississippi. Faculty and staff at all levels of the institution participated in ATD activities that connected them with peers at other ATD Network colleges. As one staff member said, "We're with people that can tell you, 'You're not alone. I was just in that room. This is how we got out of that room.'" Participating faculty and staff also gained insights into new opportunities to improve student success. As one said, "It's a language that we can understand ... I met someone who's from a school [whose] demographics are different but they're similar... I wouldn't have met that person except for being in the Achieving the Dream Network. That's why I say, it's just those relationships you build with people that, 'Hey, I was doing that and that didn't work. Don't do that [any] more.' That kind of conversation helps a lot, saves a lot of time. That's priceless."
- **Institutionalizing the caring approach of faculty and staff can deepen and sustain a culture of support.** As an HBCU, Coahoma's mission has always empowered faculty and staff to support their students no matter what challenges they face. Participation in ATD helped Coahoma identify actions its faculty and staff were taking individually and find ways to scale and institutionalize them to expand their impact. One faculty member provided a clear example: "We are always bringing granola bars and chips and helping students that way. [Through ATD] we knew we needed an organized way to be able to help our students ... We ended up starting a food pantry on our campus that has been beneficial to meeting the needs of some of our students." While the food pantry was not an official part of Coahoma's ATD plan, this strategy came to faculty from the ATD Network and is rooted in the ATD approach to creating systemic solutions to helping students across the campus. For Coahoma, these strategies are embedded in a campus culture that was always supportive and family-oriented yet needed to align and systematize facets of student support rather than rely only on one-off, relationship-based support.



# CONCLUSION

The redoubled focus on student success served Coahoma well when the COVID-19 pandemic shut down campus activities—a particular challenge in a rural community with limited internet access and infrastructure for online instruction. The institution distributed laptops, added a new position to move faculty to online teaching, and provided students with access to CARES Act funding and vaccinations.

As the college continues its transformation journey with ATD, its newly enacted strategic plan includes an explicit focus on enhancing teaching and learning, including creating a Center for Success in Teaching and Learning, providing more professional development and support to faculty implementing high-impact practices in the classroom, and supporting efforts to build a culture of evidence and inquiry. The strategic plan also emphasizes an intentional focus on student equity. “During the 2021-22 academic year, as Coahoma has re-engaged with ATD leadership and data coaching, the college has collaborated to address student success from an equity and justice lens,” says Dr. Jacqueline S. Taylor, ATD leadership and teaching and learning coach. “CCC is re-evaluating the student experience and planning to harness the power of its retention suite to create a circle of care that honors students’ stories and lived experiences while intentionally addressing the challenges to student success in the rural region of the Mississippi Delta.”

These efforts demonstrate that the college’s historical commitment to its students has only been strengthened through the challenges its community faced over the past two years. As one student said, people at an HBCU like Coahoma know “what it’s like to grow up Black in America. They understand that in order to make it, you really have to fight. Teachers are rooting for you and making sure you leave Coahoma successful—with the qualities and skills you need to survive.”





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