



FINISHING
STRONG

How a Multi-Campus Community
College Leveraged its Strengths
to Support Students Through
Uncertain Times



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

Located about an hour and a half outside of metropolitan New Orleans on the Mississippi coast, Mississippi Gulf Coast Community College (MGCCC) serves four counties in southeast Mississippi across 10 locations, including three campuses, six centers, and a training academy.

MGCCC has a longstanding emphasis on student success, including a “one-stop shop” approach where each campus has a center in which students can speak with an advisor about any topic, from financial aid to transferring credits, and receive additional support as needed. The approach exemplifies the college’s commitment to “help all our students be more successful as they work toward their dreams for an education and a better life beyond college,” MGCCC President Dr. Mary S. Graham says.



As one of the first two Mississippi community colleges to join the Achieving the Dream (ATD) Network, MGCCC 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 benefited from its participation in the ATD institutional improvement process, and outlines lessons learned that can benefit other institutions.

About This Case Study

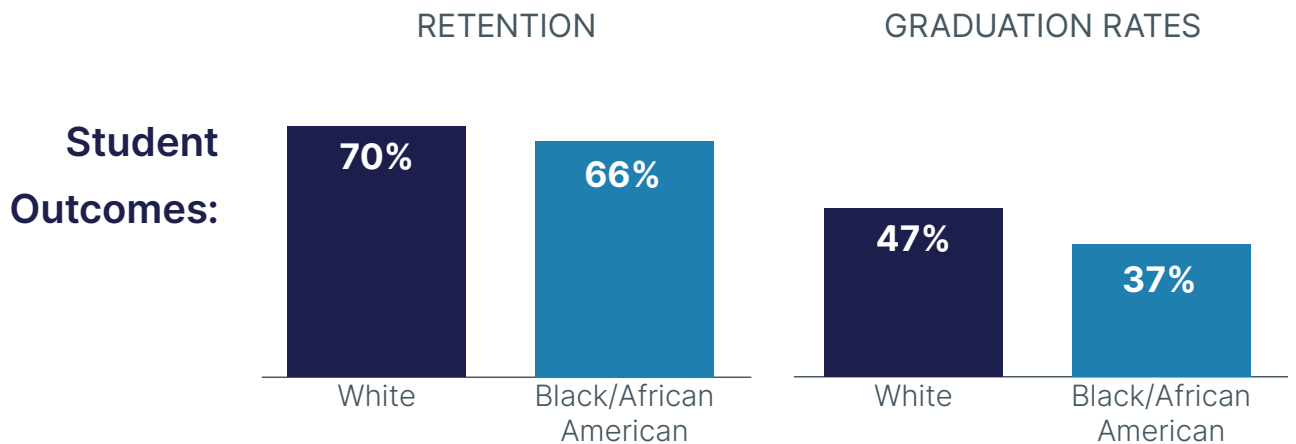
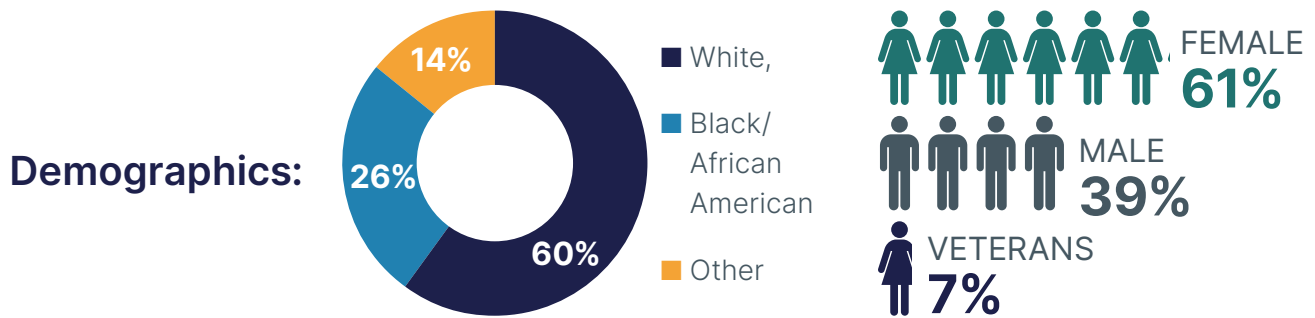
This case study draws from ATD’s efforts to support institutional capacity-building at two Mississippi institutions, Coahoma Community College (CCC) and Mississippi Gulf Coast Community College (MGCCC). The Woodward Hines Education Foundation (WHEF), which works to increase postsecondary attainment in Mississippi, provided the financial support to allow CCC 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 MGCCC faculty, administrators, and students.



DATA SNAPSHOT:

MISSISSIPPI GULF COAST COMMUNITY COLLEGE

Main Campus: Perkinston, MS, and additional campuses and centers



Graduation rates **substantially increased** from the 2011 to 2018 cohorts, **+17%** for White students and **+18%** for Black/African American students.

THE CHALLENGE

As MGCCC began working with ATD in 2018 to better understand student needs, a key consideration was the fact that the college's eight campuses and centers serve distinct student populations. The college's locations range from a residential community largely serving traditional-aged college students on its main campus to commuter campuses and program-specific centers which serve older and predominately part-time student populations, along with students from rural as well as suburban areas. Thus, any student success efforts had to consider a range of different student needs and contexts.

However, across campuses and centers, administrators and faculty identified a common opportunity to improve support for all students: enhancing access to quality advising. "We wanted to take advising to where the students are, not make the students come to where we are," says Dr. Phil Bonfanti, the college's executive vice president of student services and enrollment management.



THE RESPONSE

Working with ATD coaches, MGCCC leaders administered ATD's Institutional Capacity Assessment Tool (ICAT), which provides institutional stakeholders the opportunity to weigh in on seven aspects of student-focused campus culture. Administrators also conducted focus groups with students during classes, asking questions about advising, orientation, and the campus experience. As one administrator said, "The process forced us to not take a top-down approach, but to go to the whole college and say, 'Here's our problem'... help us figure out how to attack this problem."

For MGCCC, the insights from the process resulted in a bottom-up and representative decision-making approach that included voices from across the different campuses in creating an action plan. "The college family as a whole was so engaged and involved. Everyone had a voice in the movement and helped identify our challenges," says Dr. Graham.

Among the areas of focus in MGCCC's engagement with ATD:

Advising. MGCCC wanted to expand access to quality advising by meeting students where they are, cutting out the need for students to go out of their way to seek support. Based on feedback that most student-faculty interactions were within the college's learning management system, MGCCC built an online advising course, which it called "Finish Strong," on the Canvas learning management system. More than 40 administrators from departments across the college came together to develop the new course, which they initially planned to pilot with a small group of students.

The COVID-19 pandemic changed those plans in March 2020, as MGCCC's leadership realized that all students, who were dealing with many new and more urgent challenges due to the pandemic, needed the extra support and resources provided by Finish Strong. In just a few weeks, the MGCCC team expanded the pilot to all students, creating nearly 400 "Finish Strong" advising course sections, placing students into these course sections, and assigning faculty as advisors. An added benefit during a time of high uncertainty was the ability to quickly and directly communicate deadlines, changes to schedules, and other information. One faculty member noted that she was able to quickly and proactively reach her nursing students, who have a large number of spring deadlines and paperwork, with changing information through the Canvas advising course.

“Little did we know we were actually preparing for a pandemic,” Dr. Bonfanti says. “The ATD program got us focused [and] helped us start down this path ... There we were, ready to assist students in a way that I don’t think we’d have been prepared to do earlier.”

Students spoke highly about the online advising program, calling it “easy to use” and “very effective.” The college has since invested in an early alert system to flag struggling students which will be integrated with material from Finish Strong.

Financial literacy. ATD coaches also surfaced needs around financial literacy early in the process, which subsequent conversations and student focus groups identified as a common concern. One student noted, “A lot of us still don’t know how to do taxes. We don’t know how to take out loans. We don’t know what loans we want to take out, subsidized or unsubsidized ... What is interest?” These needs also were reflected by high student loan default rates, with one of every five MGCCC students defaulting on their loans in 2018.

MGCCC first planned to incorporate information on personal money management and financial literacy into a student application, and ATD helped structure content for an online financial literacy course. However, the pandemic shifted the focus to Finish Strong. The college is now preparing to expand the financial literacy information available on its website, including information about paying for college and options for payment plans, and to hold workshops led by the financial aid office for current and prospective students to enhance their financial literacy. These offerings will be particularly valuable as MGCCC moves away from its practice of automatically deregistering students who are behind on tuition payments. The college plans instead to extend payment deadlines for students who attend workshops on financial literacy.

Data-informed decision making. MGCCC had substantial data capacity, including an office of institutional research and effectiveness led by a statistician and supported by two full-time programmers. Even so, Dr. Adam Swanson, the college’s associate vice president for institutional research and effectiveness, saw significant changes in how senior administrators worked together to make data-informed decisions. “[ATD] got us all to sit down together, with all the important stakeholders, to study, to see what’s working and what’s not. It forced us to make a plan,” he says.

The college also worked with its ATD coaches to make the data it already collects more accessible to faculty and staff and guided the college through the development of student focus groups to inform decisions. These structures allowed the college to be introspective and spend more time with the data before making any major changes to the student experience. This approach served the college well both in its ATD journey and during the collection of qualitative student data for its accreditation-related Quality Enhancement Plan.

LESSONS LEARNED

- **Data collection can be both a learning tool and a consensus builder.** Data collection, including the work MGCCC did with the ICAT and student focus groups, is as much about connecting decision makers with stakeholders as it is about developing a baseline of knowledge to inform future decisions and strategies. Students are experts in their own experiences, and therefore their input was essential in addition to that from faculty, administrators, and other student success experts.
- **Institutional data capacity and internal comfort with data must be leveraged.** Even at institutions with substantial data operations like MGCCC, efforts will only be as successful as their leadership and staff's comfort level in engaging data to craft strategy. Dr. Swanson reflected that the most valuable aspect of ATD's approach was getting other senior administrators to unite around data-informed decisions.
- **Aligning initiatives can enhance the focus on student success.** Along with its work with ATD, MGCCC was developing a strategic plan and participating in the reaccreditation process. Intentional efforts by college leaders ensured that these processes were aligned. "In my mind, they all blurred together, because all three activities are designed to make you a better institution," Dr. Bonfanti says.
- **Approaches to equity must reflect institutional consensus.** Shared definitions of equity and approaches to data disaggregation are essential. In MGCCC's case, the college focused on socioeconomic diversity as a common issue across its campuses and centers. This became a more urgent priority when the onset of the pandemic exacerbated existing challenges for students from low-income or rural areas.



CONCLUSION

MGCCC leaders say ATD’s work with the college helped the institution gain better feedback from stakeholders and engage more faculty and staff in deeper dialogues about how to best serve students. As one senior administrator noted, ATD “is much more of a mirror than it is a window.”

“I think my expectation was that ATD was going to come to the table with a lot of various ideas,” says Dr. Jonathan Woodward, the college’s executive vice president of teaching and learning. “But mostly, the ATD process is very much about introspection.”

Although this project with ATD has come to an end, the collaborative efforts served as a launchpad for extensive expansion of capacity at the college. Building on the work the college developed with the support of ATD, MGCCC launched a new student success plan in Fall 2021. It will leverage new funding, including a generous grant from philanthropist MacKenzie Scott, to enable the college to move in new directions, including expanding its already strong focus on workforce development. MGCCC’s work with ATD had significant impact, according to Dr. Graham.

“[We] gained key insights into what equity means to the institution and its constituents as well as how to approach it in an organized, methodical, data-driven manner,” notes Graham. “We are excited about what we have discovered and continue to discover about how to help all our students be more successful as they work toward their dreams for an education and a better life beyond college.”





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