



# Community Colleges as Hubs of Social and Equitable Mobility and Equitable, Antiracist Communities

ACHIEVING THE DREAM'S  
STRATEGIC VISION

2021-2025

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.

# Raising the Stakes to Build Equitable Communities and Bolster Student Success

For nearly two decades, Achieving the Dream has been on a transformational journey to expand and strengthen student success in higher education and transform our nation's community colleges into equitable, student-centered organizations that help our diverse student population earn credentials that have significant value in the marketplace.

Our fundamental commitment has always been to address the institutional, economic, and social barriers that many students must overcome to gain access to and succeed in higher education and to close equity gaps for racially and economically marginalized students. We continue to learn what students, institutions, and communities most need to succeed and work with institutions to strategically integrate reform efforts and innovations to help them adopt and scale the best evidence-based practices to improve student success.

Our new strategic vision builds on those lessons learned and the collective knowledge of institutional leaders, faculty, staff, and students from across the ATD Network as well as our many partner organizations and institutions. It builds on ATD's nearly two-decade track record of success in:

1. Strengthening community colleges' capacity to create transformative change across all aspects of the institution through coaching, supports, and targeted services
2. Unleashing the power of the largest reform network in higher education to facilitate peer learning, and fine-tune solutions that work in local settings
3. Leveraging the power of data, research, and the wisdom of practice to meet ever more challenging goals and to measure progress toward them

Today, our work is needed more than ever. Our nation and our communities face ongoing challenges, all of which came into full relief during the COVID-19 pandemic — economic and social inequities, ongoing structural racism, political turmoil, and a damaging divisiveness that is tearing at the fabric of our country. Community colleges — the most versatile, local, credential-oriented, and community-serving of our higher education institutions — must be a lever for change for our students and our communities. To make this happen, our institutions must transform to become profoundly accessible hubs of learning, credentialing, and economic mobility that eliminate inequities in educational and workforce outcomes.

In the past, community colleges were lifelong learning institutions. In the future, they will also become lifelong career-matching institutions — a source of upskilling, a rational pathway to career development that weaves together opportunities for students to move in and out of work and school that is designed to progressively lead to a career in a particular field.

Achieving the Dream will continue to bolster institutional capacity, but we're raising the stakes to address core challenges outside our colleges that have become too large to ignore. We invite you to learn more about our direction and to join us as partners as we take these important steps in our transformational journey.

**Dr. Karen A. Stout**, *President and CEO*,  
Achieving the Dream



# MEETING THE CHALLENGES OF THE FUTURE

In the next decade, changes in work and the economy and the need to address longstanding equity challenges confronting our society will require community colleges to expand on their role as a stepping-stone into college for millions of Americans and the primary place workers look to upgrade their skills to advance in jobs.

The knowledge economy requires more workers with postsecondary credentials, specialized and technical skills, and a willingness to continually upgrade those skills. This requires providing more students with access to affordable higher educational opportunities that lead to jobs that pay enough to support families—particularly for students and workers from marginalized communities, who deserve equitable opportunities to pursue high-paying, high-satisfaction careers.



Community colleges will need to become even more student-centered institutions. They will be challenged to provide greater personalization in everything from making teaching and learning more inclusive and culturally responsive to providing necessary supports students need to persist and succeed, from providing skill and job matching to career guidance, whether that leads to transfer to bachelor's degree programs or short-term credentials. They also must serve as an anchor institution working in partnership with community-serving organizations, schools, employers, and workforce development agencies to bolster all facets of community development and be hubs of equitable change.

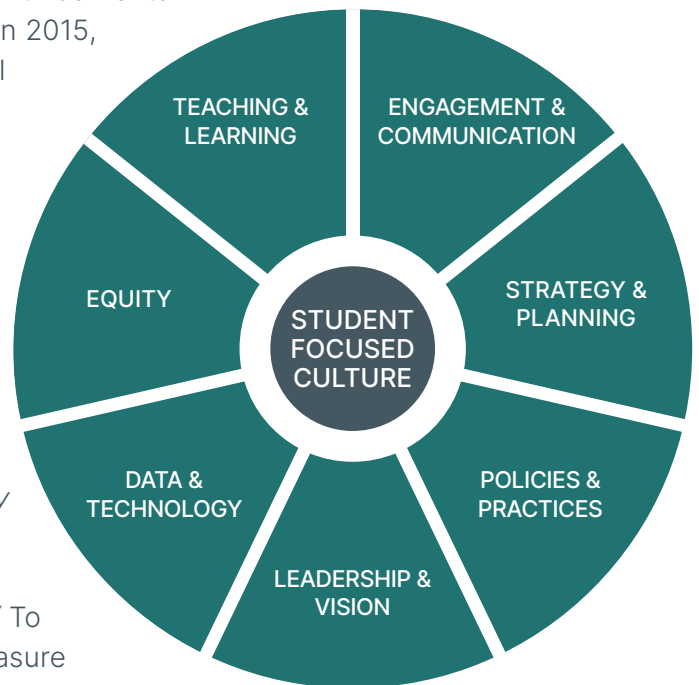
The new measure of success will not only be captured in number of degrees or credentials earned. It will be found in measures indicating how well these essential institutions help revitalize communities so that all talent, young and old, realizes its potential for success (earning, learning, and well-being) and in how well communities themselves thrive from better serving and supporting the talent they keep beyond the next generation.

# BUILDING FROM OUR FOUNDATIONAL WORK

Since 2004, Achieving the Dream (ATD) has partnered with 300 of the most innovative community colleges in the United States to lead deep institutional transformation that drives student success.

After 15 years of helping colleges advance equity, strengthen data-driven decision-making, accelerate the adoption of student-centered strategies to bolster student success, reform developmental education, and build a nationwide network for peer learning to advance institutional transformation, we began to offer additional services that help build fundamental capacities in crucial areas vital to student success. In 2015, based on our learning, ATD released our Institutional Capacity Assessment Framework and Tool which helps Network colleges assess seven fundamental institutional capacities. Through that work, ATD has grown and gained a fuller understanding of the needs of its nearly 300 Network colleges and the more than 400 colleges its work reaches.

Beginning in 2017, we developed a strategic plan that broadened our vision of success to look beyond students and institutions to also include community success. Our vision: *“to help all students — particularly the most underserved — realize substantial value from their postsecondary experience and their earned credentials, thereby strengthening their communities.”* To realize this vision, we are building mechanisms to measure the value of our work through indicators of the well-being of graduates and communities. Our approach to philanthropic support and fee-for-service revenue provides stability and the resources needed to innovate and drive our work with the colleges.



# THE NEXT STEP IN ATD'S TRANSFORMATIONAL JOURNEY

In fall 2020 through June 2021, we turned our attention to a refreshed vision to determine how ATD can use its strengthened position to help colleges achieve the more holistic view of student and community success. This renewed vision is based on our commitment to:

- **Make our work to advance equity more systemic and intentional.** Equity has always been at the core of our work. Yet most community colleges have not closed racial equity gaps. Colleges must develop into antiracist institutions capable of designing and advancing solutions (e.g., policies, practices, student services, teaching approaches) that more directly address the root causes of inequitable outcomes.
- **Introduce and implement a radical access agenda to expand the population of students that colleges support.** Community colleges are tasked with serving each and every member of the public who wants to realize the benefits of higher education. But individuals who have been disconnected from employment and educational opportunities — and who stand to benefit significantly from community colleges — often remain excluded. ATD can help colleges move from “opening doors” to “ushering in” by actively engaging community members on their terms and designing services for their success.
- **Innovate on deeper, more flexible modes of college engagement beyond the “typical” three-year experience.** Our work leading reforms in teaching and learning (T&L) and holistic student supports (HSS) have distinguished ATD from the field and enabled our partner colleges to dive deep into areas of interest. ATD can evolve our model to help more colleges access this kind of intensive engagement, particularly as they seek to effect community-wide transformation.
- **Ensure the continued impact of our services and the sustainability of our financial model.** As our organization has matured, so has our ability to consistently deliver high-quality support for institutional transformation while maintaining our solvency. We can develop processes and programs that ensure we consistently and sustainably deliver impact.



- **Strengthen our capacity to measure our Network colleges' growth and our impact.** ATD has put consistent emphasis on assessment as a tool for colleges and coaches to guide the transformation journey. Colleges, partners, funders, and our organization will all benefit when we extend this work to more fully evaluate how ATD's services contribute to colleges' institutional transformation. Our renewed vision prepares us to support colleges in creating community-wide transformation.

Now, ATD is poised to build on our strengths and partner with community colleges to meet this moment with a renewed vision.

## ATD's Renewed Strategic Vision

To help our Network colleges catalyze equitable, antiracist, and economically vibrant communities through institutional transformation that advances community colleges as profoundly accessible hubs of learning, credentialing, and economic mobility that eliminate inequities in educational and workforce outcomes.

By deepening our focus on whole-college transformation, we will help colleges recognize and realize the connective, supportive role they can play not just for their students, but also for the community. This also requires that we reimagine the ways in which principles of equity, antiracism, localness, and access can be more fully embedded across our organization.

# ADVANCING EQUITY, ACCESS, AND COMMUNITY

Our new strategic vision is built on the fundamental belief that community colleges must strive to be more equity-centered, profoundly accessible, and community-driven.

## **Equity at the Center**

ATD's vision recognizes that oppression of racially minoritized individuals is the most significant and persistent barrier to achieving equity in higher education. For years, we have focused on inequities in outcomes, and those inequities persist. For example, while the overall six-year graduation rate for students who start at community college (42.2 percent) still has significant room for improvement generally, disaggregated data show the need to better support Black and Latinx students, who are completing at 30.1 percent and 36.8 percent, respectively. Low six-year graduation rates and the lag time to completion affects students' lifelong economic security as timely and successful credential and degree completion significantly increase lifetime earnings. But we now recognize that to make progress, ATD and its partner colleges must commit to an antiracist approach that does not problematize students and community members, and instead courageously names and accurately analyzes institutionalized racism as the culprit in racial disparities in education, economic well-being, and community well-being.

The strategy recognizes that racial oppression must be addressed alongside other forms of oppression. A clear commitment to eliminating systemic oppression expands opportunities for colleges to address other forms of oppression faced by students because of their gender, sexual orientation, immigration status, primary language, and socioeconomic status.

## **Profoundly Accessible Institutions**

Profoundly accessible colleges bring community members into the institution. But institutions also need to go into the community to provide those who do not see themselves as bound for postsecondary education — including adult workers and youth who are structurally disconnected from the educational system — with educational opportunities. This requires colleges to understand who is being left out, why they are being left out, and make intentional effort to welcome those community members into the institution.

We know that access is meaningless unless students can complete their education and earn credentials. Yet, most students who start community college do not finish. Certificate and degree attainment rates over six years remain barely over 40 percent, even though over 80 percent of students entering community college hope to earn a bachelor's degree. As part of our radical access agenda, we will help colleges craft educational experiences cognizant of students' financial, family, learning, and emotional needs.



Access must therefore be more than an entrance into a discrete academic or training endeavor. It must include access to a broad set of supports — academic and holistic — and a commitment to provide all the services that are required to help working people with complex lives — who at times may need food, housing, childcare, transportation, emergency funding, and regular advising — to complete their education. This access agenda must place a premium on extended and ongoing engagement with learners, designed around a portfolio of programs and supports that match the life cycle of education and training needs of our students, workers, and employers.

## **Vibrant Communities**

The renewed vision commits ATD to advancing community vitality. The most relevant community colleges take the form of their communities while also shaping the future form of the communities they serve.

This involves developing stronger relationships with our K–12 partners to ensure that our early college and dual enrollment programs as well as our general school-to-college pathways are not narrowed by privilege. Likewise, community colleges need strong partnerships with our four-year partners and to make bachelor’s degree completion one of the sector metrics, a pathway that continues to reflect one of the largest and most persistent equity gaps.

Our vision also requires a deeper connection with community partners who provide much-needed support and guidance to our students and their families. And central to the vision is transforming community colleges into lifelong career-matching institutions that build strong partnerships with local employers. Now more than ever our institutions must take a central role in local and regional workforce development and provide our students with greater opportunities for social and economic mobility. This requires next-generation metrics that focus on measuring success based on community vibrancy.

These metrics may include the more obvious measures such as employment of community college graduates, unemployment and labor participation rates, and measures of college mobility, but should also consider metrics that demonstrate community vibrancy such as adult literacy, intergenerational mobility, the percent of opportunity youth who complete high school, and other possible success indicators that require institutions to be more deeply embedded in their local communities.

Fundamentally, our vision is to support Network colleges to “leverage their localness” to drive antiracism, equity, and economic mobility. It recognizes that antiracism and equity in communities is not possible without equity in education, and vice versa. It affirms that community colleges are institutions of hope, support, and promise for students of all backgrounds.

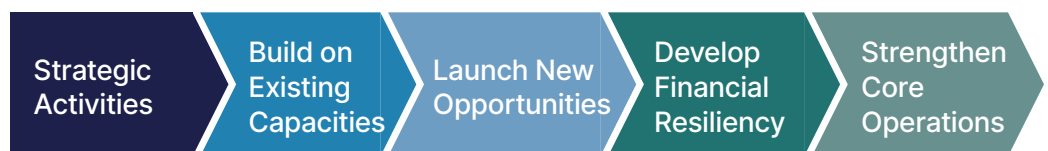
# OPERATIONALIZING OUR VISION

Much of ATD's work will remain fundamentally the same, but with a renewed and broader purpose and vision. To achieve our renewed vision, we will:

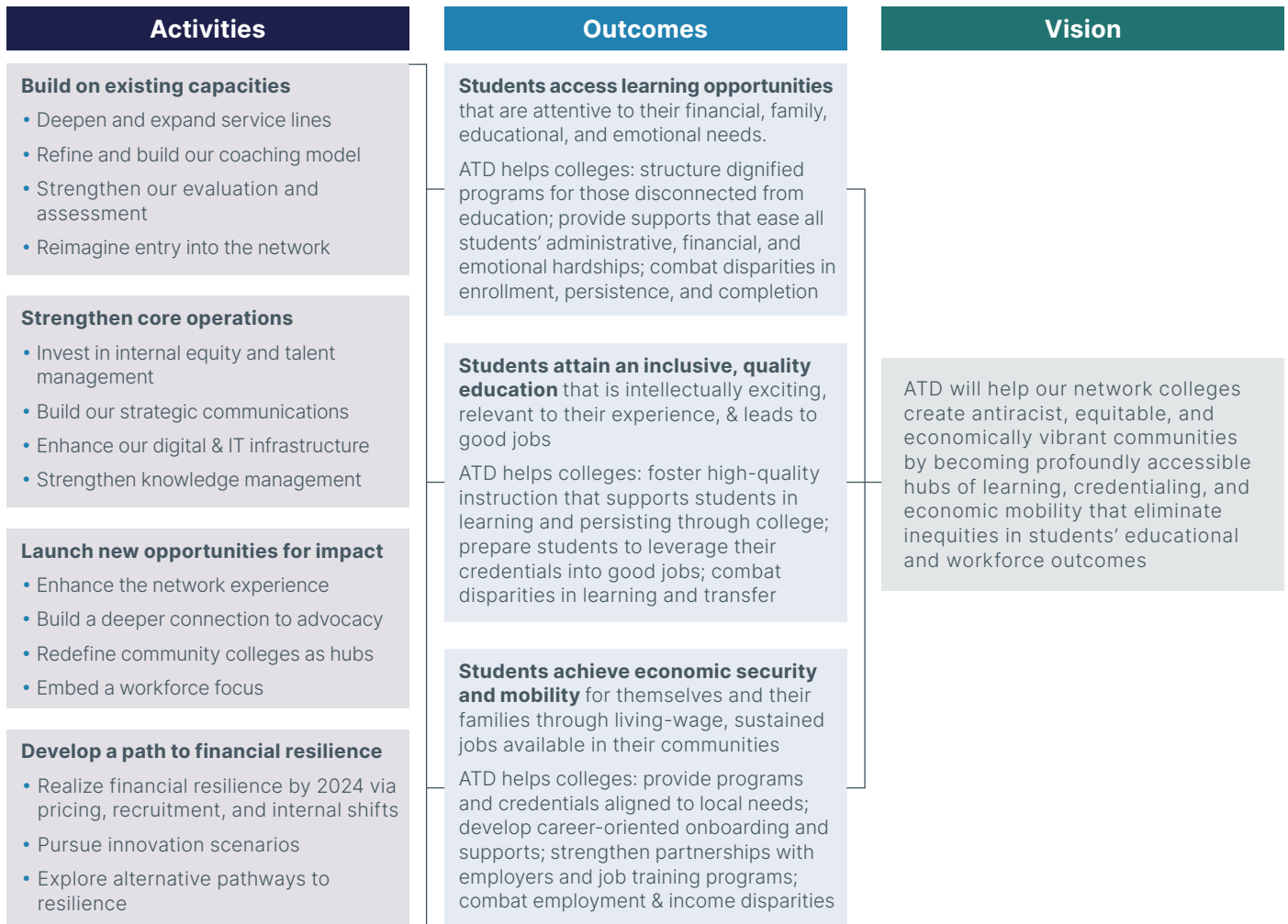
- 1. Build** on our existing capacities and strengths. We will embed principles of equity and access throughout our work and develop new ways for colleges to engage with the Network.
- 2. Launch** new opportunities for impact and innovation that advance radical access through community and workforce engagement while strengthening our field leadership with a connection to advocacy.
- 3. Develop** a path to financial resilience that ensures we can maintain stability in the face of unexpected shocks to the field or philanthropic investment.
- 4. Strengthen** our core operations to support the evolution of our services. We will ensure that our internal operations not only align with the principles of diversity, equity, and inclusion that we are advancing with colleges, but also make sure we have the tools and technology to deliver on our vision effectively and securely.

These changes represent a tremendous opportunity for ATD to continue to innovate and boldly lead the field and will be phased in to ensure ATD can absorb and implement them with integrity.

At the same time, to advance its bold vision, ATD will align its work to a revised theory of change. The theory of change aims to meet ATD's ambitious vision, while honoring the time ATD will need to develop its institutional capacities to realize the fullness of the vision.



The revised theory of change moves us away from the siloed, institution-oriented framing of college reform to an integrative, student-oriented one that will enhance transformation efforts. Our current service lines focus on the key areas in which institutions can build capacity. The process of specialization has had the unintended consequence of causing organizational silos. With this insight, we must work with colleges to drive integrative, systems change that prioritizes the student.



## CONCLUSION

We are at an important turning point for community colleges and our organization. Working with our Network colleges and partners, we are seeking to broaden and deepen our reach and more aggressively support the centrality of community colleges as drivers of social change and economic mobility. Our new vision is aimed squarely at helping community colleges eliminate inequities in students' educational and workforce outcomes.

This shift toward addressing the important equity and economic links between our institutions and the communities we serve marks an important next step in ATD's leadership to promote real change for students and communities. We know that it isn't enough to make changes in institutional management or to better support individual students through completion. This is our opportunity to advance social and economic change in these communities where community colleges are anchor institutions that, working in partnership with community-based organizations, employers, and government agencies, serve as a local hub for opportunity, workforce development, and economic recovery.



**LEARN MORE ABOUT ACHIEVING THE DREAM, INC.**

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