

# 2023

# LEAH MEYER AUSTIN AWARD



## SINCLAIR COMMUNITY COLLEGE

### INTRODUCTION

**The Leah Meyer Austin Award** from Achieving the Dream (ATD) is the highest honor awarded to colleges in the ATD Network. Since 2008, the award has been bestowed each year to a college that demonstrates outstanding long-term gains in both overall student success and institutional equity. ATD is pleased to award the 2023 Leah Meyer Austin Award to Sinclair Community College, an institution whose consistent and strategic commitment to student success has led to substantive and equitable improvements in outcomes — improvements that have been sustained even following the disruptions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic.

“

This honor reflects years of effort to maximize equity and student success,” said Dr. Steven L. Johnson, Sinclair’s president and CEO of 20 years. “From comprehensive high-level policy reviews to individual student-advisor conversations, Sinclair has demonstrated its commitment to ensuring that all students achieve their goals.” ”

### ABOUT SINCLAIR

With roots dating back to 1887 when it was a YMCA workforce training school, Sinclair Community College in Dayton, Ohio, is one of the nation’s oldest community colleges. Today, ATD is proud to support and strengthen Sinclair’s focus on equitable outcomes. “ATD has been a big part of that work for the past two decades,” Dr. Johnson said.

Since 2005, Sinclair has actively engaged with ATD’s services and resources, including the Foundations of Transformation program, customized coaching, the *Teaching & Learning Toolkit*, and participation in workshops, communities of practice, webinars, and the annual DREAM conference. Sinclair earned

ATD’s Leader College status in 2011, and in 2019, through the persistent work of its leadership, faculty, and staff, was named a Leader College of Distinction. One of ATD’s coaches described Sinclair as “a national leader among community colleges.”

The Leah Meyer Austin Award represents ATD’s most significant recognition of the college’s efforts. Eligible colleges must report four years of data and show a substantive three-year upward trend on three separate metrics. In addition, colleges must demonstrate, through disaggregation, that they have narrowed equity gaps across at least two student characteristic categories on two or more metrics.

“These rigorous requirements are meant to motivate and recognize sustained, proactive reform efforts that result in greater student success and equity,” said ATD President and CEO Dr. Karen A. Stout. “ATD congratulates Sinclair Community College on meeting these rigorous standards and standing out as a leader in student success and institutional equity.”

## Going ‘All In’ On Student Success

Over the past decade, Sinclair has implemented aligned initiatives across the college that focused on developmental education support, academic planning, and shortening the time to a degree. At the same time, the institution’s administrators, faculty, and staff have developed a heightened understanding of students’ basic needs, particularly after data surfaced by ATD coaches revealed that more than 40 percent of Sinclair students who stopped out had A and B averages. To strengthen student services, the college secured a dedicated social worker to connect students to resources on and off campus.

“We had to be honest around the data on food and housing insecurity and become more specific and targeted about bringing those resources to students as opposed to having students go find them,” said Dr. Scott Markland, senior vice president for student development at Sinclair.

In addition to recognizing effective holistic student supports, the college’s Leah Meyer Austin Award reflects the determination of Sinclair’s leadership, faculty, and staff to execute on a strong vision of student success. “There is a bigger and more important story behind those actions,” Dr. Stout said. “Sinclair faculty and staff are all in on student success, as demonstrated by their work with ATD and peer institutions through efforts such as the Ohio Community of Practice, their nimbleness, and their overall dedication to supporting students.”

Sinclair’s attitude of being “all in” on student success resulted in numerous student-centered programs and policies. The college’s efforts have also resulted in better and more equitable outcomes for students:

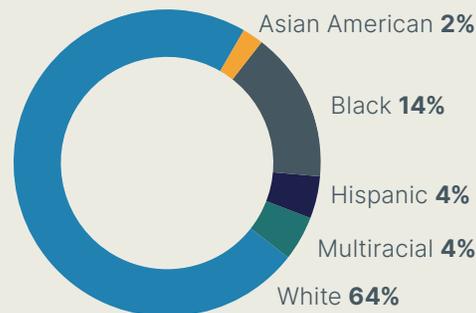
Even as the pandemic continues to impact colleges across the country, Sinclair has improved outcomes on two leading metrics, increasing gateway math completion from 35 percent to 38 percent and overall credit completion from 61 percent to 65 percent over the last four years.

In the last four years, the college has improved credit completion among Black students by 14 percentage points from 47 percent to 61 percent, and has made meaningful inroads on gateway math completion rates among Black students, which have increased from 15 percent to 24 percent.

## SNAPSHOT

### SINCLAIR COMMUNITY COLLEGE

Total enrollment (fall 2021): **18,544**



60% of Sinclair students are under 24

81% attend part-time, 19% full-time

42% are in distance education, 20% in hybrid learning

37% of first-time, full-time students receive Pell Grants

80% receive some form of student financial aid

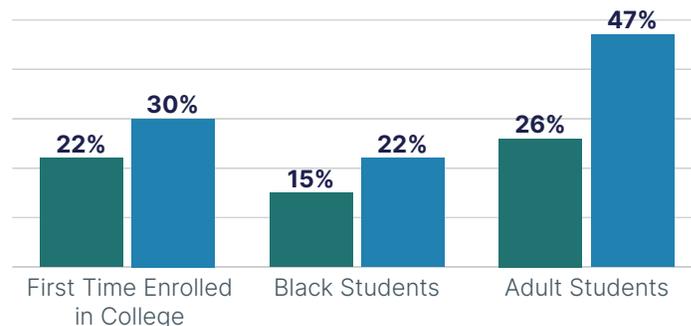
Source: IPEDS, U.S. Department of Education, Sinclair College

Sinclair is seeing greater increases for recent cohorts on these leading indicators and expects these improvements to drive increases in overall college completion in the future.

Even more impressive is the college’s 8 percentage point improvement on four-year completion, which increased from 22 percent to 30 percent over a four-year period. For Black students, four-year completion increased from 15 percent to 22 percent. For adult students aged 24 and older, a quarter of whom are Black, four-year completion increased from 26 percent to 47 percent, a 21 percentage point increase. These outcomes are impressive and further demonstrate Sinclair’s deep commitment to continuous, equitable improvement.

### Increases in Four-Year Completion

■ Fall 2015 cohort ■ Fall 2018 cohort



# Developing an Intentional Equity Practice

Faculty, staff, and administration have demonstrated a deep commitment to increasing equitable practices. Sinclair's equity efforts are guided by a simple mantra its leaders call "customization at scale."

"We have learned there is no one-size-fits-all for our diverse population, so we have worked to customize services and education for all of our students," said Dr. Kathleen Cleary, senior vice president of workforce solutions. Substantive improvements in student success have been accompanied by narrowing equity gaps, particularly for Black students.

In 2004, Sinclair leaders attended an ATD Equity Initiative convening as a vanguard Learning College. At the event, they were confronted with disaggregated data showing disparities in success rates among student subgroups that Dr. Johnson called "shocking and horrifying." To visually depict the results, he asked about 150 faculty and staff members to stand up. Group by group, he asked attendees to sit down until only 16 were still standing — representing the number of Black males who had graduated on time the previous year. "Not 16 percent — 16 in total," Dr. Cleary recalled. "We all [thought], this can't be right." It initially engendered denial before galvanizing faculty and staff to drive change.

In the years that followed, Sinclair worked closely with ATD coaches and staff, the Teaching and Learning team, and the Equity team to learn how to successfully address inequities. "Research presented by ATD has helped us to reflect on students' cultures and identities as cognitive tools that scaffold learning in all modalities," Dr. Johnson said.

The result has been a holistic and wide-ranging approach to addressing equity gaps. Sinclair made racial diversity central to faculty recruitment and student success and shared this work with other community colleges in presentations at DREAM. For example, the Grow Our Own (GOO) program, ongoing since 1991, is a faculty recruitment initiative that offers racially minoritized candidates the opportunity to gain teaching experience while pursuing advanced academic studies. Each year, Sinclair strategically recruits and hires up to five full-time, tenure-track faculty at the rank of instructor, with the expectation that they will obtain a master's degree within three years. During this time, GOO faculty receive support through mentoring, graduate program tuition assistance, and career planning.

Sinclair's targeted approach revealed that traditional math placement widened equity gaps. To reverse this trend, Sinclair began using multiple measures for placement, with high school GPA placing more students into higher levels of mathematics,



where they were supported through embedded coaching, corequisite support, and courses aligned to majors and programs of study. Sinclair's Center for Teaching and Learning also introduced faculty training and staff development focused on pedagogy. Faculty analyze curriculum, pedagogy, and course delivery and make changes so that work with students is culturally responsive and inclusive. The college has offered more than 370 DEI professional development opportunities for faculty, staff, and community leaders since 2020.

Sinclair has also introduced targeted programs such as the African American Male Initiative (AAMI), which Dr. Markland described as an "intensive, intrusive model." The college hired two full-time staff members to coordinate AAMI's academic, social, financial, and career development components, including a club called Brother to Brother. Doing so created "an atmosphere where students are supporting and challenging each other and upping the bar through peer-to-peer nudging that is so important," Dr. Markland said.

Sinclair continues to deepen its equity practice across the institution. In 2018, the Sinclair Board of Trustees institutionalized these efforts, selecting alignment, growth, and equity as the three pillars of the college's strategic planning process. The board also allocated \$1 million to further improve attainment rates, remove barriers, and expand educational outcomes for racially minoritized and poverty-impacted students. The following year, Sinclair reached a milestone: The number of Black men earning degrees or certificates hit an all-time high, up 78 percent from 2018.

# Leveraging Capacity to Drive an Effective Pandemic Response

Just a year later, the COVID-19 pandemic would upend teaching and learning at Sinclair, along with colleges across the country, forcing the campus to close and exacerbating the challenges many students faced. However, Sinclair ensured student needs were supported — 65 percent of students who accessed services during the pandemic enrolled the following semester, and 67 percent were academically successful during that semester. Key indicators of student success continued to grow after a brief dip during the pandemic.

Sinclair's proactive response to the pandemic demonstrates how strong leadership and vision, engagement and communication, and strategic planning capacities lead to nimble and effective solutions. In January 2020, before the pandemic's potential impact was fully understood, Sinclair's leaders convened an emergency response team to plan for potential disruptions. "We got a six-week jump on the rest of the world," Dr. Cleary said. "Before it became a worldwide crisis, Sinclair was planning. It was an unbelievable marriage of planning, vision, and adaptation."

Sinclair leaders attributed their success to their adaptive approach to decision-making as the pandemic unfolded. "We shared widely we didn't need to get every decision perfect — let's get it 80 percent right, and if it's not right, we'll fix it," Dr. Markland said. "We made it through the pandemic successfully because of our outstanding people who so deeply care about our students and our community. Through all the massive challenges, it comes down to outstanding people."

## Building a Foundation for Future Success

Sinclair has continued to make institution-wide progress and improvements across all of ATD's seven essential capacity areas. By implementing ATD's Institutional Capacity Assessment Tool (ICAT) a second time in spring 2021, Sinclair identified strengths and opportunities to meet the college's goals and further reduce equity gaps. Sinclair has institutionalized practices to maintain strength in each capacity area, such as using data to drive decision-making and leveraging multiple

modalities including video, email, and social media to reach out to staff, faculty, students, and the community.

Sinclair has ambitious goals for equitable student outcomes: The college aims to award 13,000 degrees and certificates and improve its overall completion rate to 50 percent by 2027, ensuring all students are represented equally in those goals. "We will not consider our goals achieved until we completely erase any gaps based on disaggregated demographic data," Dr. Johnson said.

To ensure the college can respond nimbly to future challenges, Sinclair continues to refine its strategic planning process. A group of more than 30 faculty members, administrators, and staff came together in summer 2021 to prioritize goals, strategies, and resources through a six-month structured compression planning process. These goals were presented to the board of trustees in January 2022, after the board had gone through its own strategic prioritization process. Leaders hope to integrate these structures with the wide range of other planning activities that take place on Sinclair's campus, from accreditation and workforce development to advisory committees. Dr. Johnson estimated these discussions brought together nearly 600 stakeholders, providing opportunities to guide continued change throughout the college — a process the president called "make a way or find a way."

A key piece to implementing this process is community support. This support was realized in November 2022 when voters renewed a tax levy request by a margin of more than 70 percent. This funding will help Sinclair operate and update more than 300 education and job training programs for healthcare, manufacturing, IT, engineering, and public safety, ensuring graduates will continue to meet the workforce needs of the local labor market.

"The issues aren't going away, and we are going to continue to respond," Dr. Johnson said. And in doing so, Sinclair will continue to serve as an example of what vision, leadership, and committed staff can do to serve their students and community.

"We're a stronger college now for having gone through COVID, and the marriage between discipline, nimbleness, and innovation is going to continue to make us stronger," Dr. Cleary said. "That's in our DNA."



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