



Achieving the Dream™

Community Colleges Count

2017

LEAH MEYER  
AUSTIN AWARD

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PIERCE  
COLLEGE  
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Achieving the Dream's Leah Meyer Austin Award, generously supported in 2017 by the Kresge Foundation, annually recognizes an Achieving the Dream college that has demonstrated outstanding progress in designing a student-focused culture found at all levels and in all structures of the organization. Award-winning institutions take bold action to design policies, processes, and programs that reinforce each other in a comprehensive strategy to achieve the institution's student success and equity goals. Their approach aligns whole-college solutions, resulting in significant and sustainable institutional improvement and greater success for all students.

Achieving the Dream is pleased to present the 2017 Leah Meyer Austin award to Pierce College in the state of Washington. Celebrating its 50th anniversary, Pierce College today encompasses colleges in Lakewood and Puyallup, Washington, education centers at Joint Base Lewis-McChord, virtual education through its distance learning program, and extensive community education opportunities, as well as additional programs at sites throughout Pierce County. The college offers two bachelor's degrees, 38 associate degrees, 44 professional certificates, and 68 programs of study. In the fall of 2015, the college enrolled 20,230 students.

Founded 50 years ago in an abandoned grocery store, Pierce College today enrolls more than 20,000 students in multiple physical locations in Lakewood and Puyallup, Washington, and online. Driven by a mission to create quality educational opportunities for a diverse community of learners, Pierce has always taken pride in its student-centered culture.

Several years ago, however, when Pierce began a concerted look at its aggregated student success data, the college was startled to find that its retention, course completion, and graduation rates were not at acceptable levels. Fall-to-fall retention rates hovered just above 50 percent, for example, and three-year graduation rates were below 20 percent. Moreover, when data were disaggregated, the numbers showed that Pierce was not living up to its own expectations for delivering equitable education for all its students.

“Equity was a key element, whether that had to do with ethnicity, first-generation students, Pell grantees, gender issues, or single parents,” says Dr. Michele L. Johnson, the chancellor of Pierce College. Given that Pierce is an open access institution, Johnson says, “it’s a falsehood if we open the door and then don’t provide resources for success.”

Pierce saw that to fully deliver on the promise of its goals for student success in a genuinely student-centered culture, it needed to better understand its data and to learn to make better evidence-based decisions. That realization sparked the college into action that would eventually result in broad-scale cultural changes.

In 2012, Pierce joined ATD, which provided critical supports to help the college jump-start a broad reform strategy. Tom Broxson, dean of natural sciences, credits ATD coaches for providing “an outside perspective that cuts through the internal noise of the institution and keeps us focused on the task that we need to do.” Engaging 200 faculty and staff in planning, Pierce expanded its capacity to collect and analyze data, including hiring new staff. It gave all faculty direct access, via dashboards, to data that helps them assess student classroom success according to a wide variety of factors—and compare their performance to that of peers. Deans can identify where additional training or assistance might be needed.

Deidre Soileau, vice president for strategic advancement, suggests that the idea is to use data as a carrot rather than as a stick. “One of the key things is to use the data as a tool for improvement, not a punishment,” she says. Sharing data widely signals that “we’re all in this together,” Soileau says, and that “we share a strong commitment to the mission.” Data transparency helped faculty and staff collaborate and use evidence to answer the question “Now that we know what’s going on, what are we going to do?” The answer to that was a comprehensive set of activities that together constituted a major strategy for reform.

- Branding a series of re-engineered student experiences under the umbrella Start2Finish, Pierce made new student orientation, once optional, a requirement. Over three years, it phased in a mandatory college success course focused on student skills like self-assessment, goal-setting, and career exploration. It added the requirement the students meet with their advisors in order to register for courses. The college doubled the size of its tutoring program and trained hundreds of faculty and staff to help students improve their reading skills.
- Over four years, Pierce reallocated \$3 million from existing budgets to better support its student success priorities.
- Recognizing that the majority of Pierce’s new students placed in developmental rather than college-level math, the college redesigned its pre-college math sequence in ways that focused on improving basic math skills and persistence. Pre-college English was also overhauled.
- Pierce also reached beyond students who were college-ready and those with pre-college skills to also help students with only basic skills to prepare to go to college.

“Taking on all of those things was really important,” Broxson says. “Rather than just taking on one thing, we set out to fundamentally redesign the way the college functions.” Dr. Johnson underscores the importance of that comprehensive

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“The key takeaway message that we would share with other ATD schools would be that you have to be mission-driven.... The institution has to be all-in and it has to be all-in about our organizational change that is focused on student success for all students.”

Dr. Michele L. Johnson, Chancellor

approach. From the beginning, she says, Pierce decided not to just undertake pilot projects that would affect only a relatively few students, but rather intentionally decided to pursue widespread, cross-institutional change, driven by data.

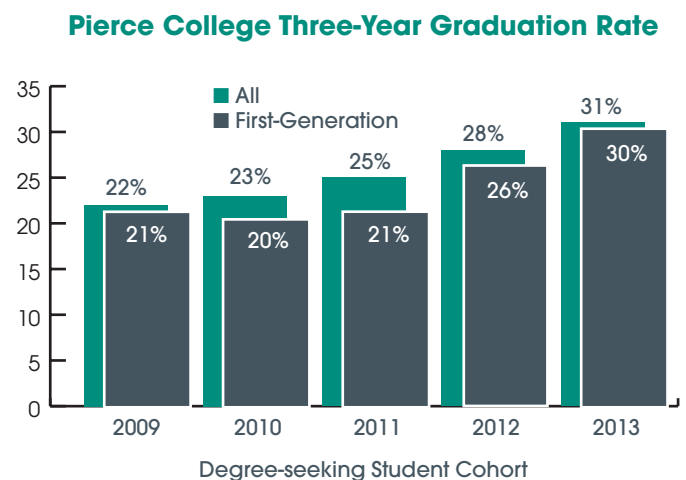
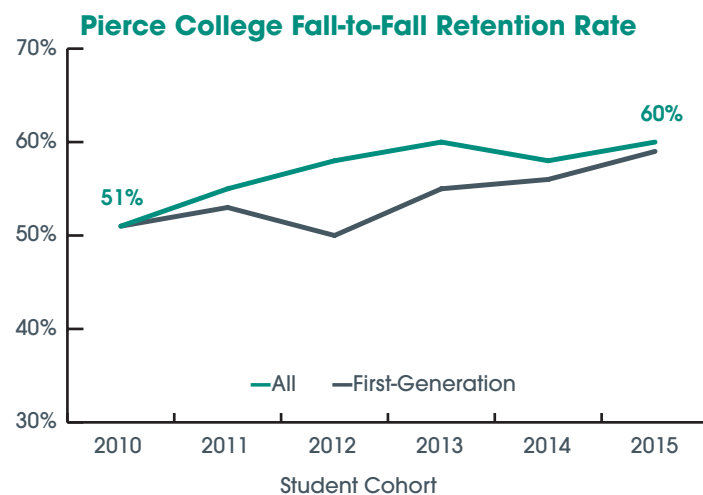
Students are noticing: “So my favorite thing about attending Pierce is the environment here. It’s very supportive, the staff and faculty are very eager to see students succeed. A lot of people put forth as much effort as they can into helping the students here,” says Pierce College student John Euler.

“...They set you up all the way from basically your first year here all the way to your last year... and then as you kind of figure out yourself and really get to know who you are and what you want to be, they help you change it in the right way.”

Chambre Perry, student

## THE IMPRESSIVE RESULTS SPEAK FOR THEMSELVES

- Fall-to-fall retention rates improved from 51 percent to 60 percent for all students
- Fall-to-winter persistence rates increased from 81 percent to 88 percent
- Three-year graduation rates improved from 22 percent to 31 percent for new degree-seeking students; and 21 percent to 30 percent for first-generation students
- Pierce ranked third among 34 Washington state colleges in accumulating student achievement points



## LESSONS LEARNED

Reflecting on its intentional and ongoing work to improve student success, Pierce College identified several important capacities that enabled it to make significant progress:

- Empowering, engaged leadership from the trustees, administration, and faculty
- Grassroots ownership of system-changing proposals, with broad participation from faculty and front-line staff
- Bold reallocation of funds toward priorities
- The “democratization of data,” providing real-time, desk-top access to departmental, course, and instructor-level student success data,
- An institution-wide, actionable, drive towards equity.



## ABOUT ACHIEVING THE DREAM

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Achieving the Dream leads a national network of more than 200 community colleges dedicated to helping their students, particularly low-income students and students of color, achieve their goals for academic success, personal growth, and economic opportunity. Achieving the Dream is working toward closing achievement gaps and accelerating student success through a change process that builds colleges' institutional capacities in seven critical areas. More than 100 coaches and advisors and 15 state policy teams are working throughout 35 states and the District of Columbia to help Achieving the Dream reach more than 4 million community college students.

## ABOUT OUR SPONSOR

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The Kresge Foundation is a private, national foundation that works to expand opportunities in America's cities through grant-making and social investing in arts and culture, education, environment, health, human services, and community development in Detroit. In collaboration with nonprofit, public, private and philanthropic partners, the Foundation helps create pathways for vulnerable people to improve their life circumstances and join the economic mainstream.

### FOR MORE INFORMATION ABOUT ACHIEVING THE DREAM:

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or contact us at [info@AchievingtheDream.org](mailto:info@AchievingtheDream.org) or call (240) 450-0075  
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