



Exceptional Experiences: How South Texas College Transformed Advising Using Technology and Data

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INSTITUTIONAL PROFILE

Located in McAllen, Texas, South Texas College (STC) is a public, nonprofit, mostly nonresidential institution that primarily serves students from Texas. STC was founded in 1993 as an associate's college offering certificates and two-year degrees and now also offers baccalaureate degrees in applied technology, applied science, and nursing. STC enrolled 28,233 undergraduate students (8,806 FTE and 19,427 part time) in fall 2020. Student body demographics include 41% men and 59% women. Most students come from the state, and more than 90% are enrolled in at least

one distance education course. STC also offers a Dual Credit Program in partnership with 21 school districts and 70 high school partners in neighboring counties. More than 60% of students (excluding dual enrollment) are the first in their families to attend college. More than 42% of students receive some sort of financial aid, and 38% of students receive Pell Grants. Regarding race and ethnicity, 95% self-identify as Hispanic or Latino/Latina, 2% White, and less than 1% each for Black or African American, two or more races, Asian, or Indigenous (American Indian, Alaska Native, Native Hawaiian).

COMMITTING TO A CULTURE OF CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT

South Texas College has been working toward greater student success since the national conversation shifted two decades ago to focus on student achievement. STC was a member of the inaugural cohort of Achieving the Dream (ATD). ATD is a partner and champion of hardworking leaders at more than 300 community colleges across the country and was founded to close gaps and accelerate student success nationwide.

- STC met its licensure exam target rate of 90% on average for FY 2017–18 through FY 2020–21.
- The matriculation of dual enrollment seniors was between 17% and 23% for fall 2018 through fall 2021.
- STC met its graduation target rate of 29% for full-time, first time in college (FTIC) students in FY 2018–19 and FY 2020–21.

SHIFTING THE FOCUS TO ADVISING

STC's early efforts focused on data use in college-wide decision-making, expanding dual enrollment and increasing professional learning opportunities. The focus shifted to advising redesign when the college was awarded two grants between 2013 and 2018. STC took advantage of the grant funding to support the implementation of DegreeWorks, a web-based academic advising and degree audit tool. The software offered lead advisors more transparent and streamlined ways to track students' progress toward degree and certificate completion. The initial round of funding also offered students academic guidance by allowing them to create their own pathways and track academic progress.

In 2014, the college hired a new vice president for information services, planning, performance, and strategic initiatives, who took a digital transformation (Dx) approach to technology implementation (see sidebar). The work focused on using technology to meet stakeholders' strategic goals in advising and student affairs. A new project management style was introduced, and a consultant was hired using reallocated funding to digitize the academic catalogs and help train the curriculum office.

DegreeWorks provided new data points that highlighted changes in policies and processes that benefited students. These changes included eliminating the need for students to apply for graduation, shifting to a model supporting students' understanding of their academic progress, and expanding reverse-transfer efforts. Now STC is teaching students earlier in their academic journeys how to map out degree plans and perform self-advising tasks.

DIGITAL TRANSFORMATION DEFINITION

Digital transformation (Dx) is a series of deep and coordinated culture, workforce, and technology shifts that enable new educational and operating models and transform an institution's business model, strategic directions, and value proposition. Dx can make institutions more resilient, flexible, and relevant as they face an array of increasingly difficult challenges.

Dx is being driven by technology trends and changes that are enabling an innovative approach to everything from how digital architectures are being incorporated to how campus leaders interact with the IT organization, all targeting improved student outcomes, more effective teaching and learning methods, new research capabilities, and an evolution in business models. Dx requires agile and flexible leaders at all levels who can enable the college or university to achieve its strategic aims rapidly and efficiently.



For more information visit the [Digital Transformation page](#) in the EDUCAUSE Library.



BUILDING BRIDGES ACROSS TECHNOLOGIES AND PEOPLE

The second advising redesign grant, in 2015, equipped STC with the funds to implement and support a customer relationship management (CRM) tool and an early-alert system. These tools offered the college greater capacity to personalize the student experience at scale. Students were connected to critical resources. The college was able to tailor its communications to different student populations. During this phase of the advising redesign, the college facilitated greater adoption of the tools by staff, faculty, and students. This broad integration allowed staff to put all the new data collected by the tools into a central system. It gave the college a more comprehensive look at students' academic progress.

Changes made included creating and enforcing a mandatory advising policy, creating new protocols to guide how faculty and primary role advisors work together, and strengthening the faculty advising program using funds from a Department of Education Hispanic Serving Institution (HSI) grant. The last effort included developing a more comprehensive training program, assignment of students to faculty advisors, systematic collection of advising notes, and periodic training updates.

The COVID-19 pandemic presented STC with challenges as well as opportunities. Having technologies in place was critical to helping manage the uncertainty of the pandemic and sustaining students as more classes and services moved online. When services had to be modified, STC officials first spent time examining how processes and roles needed to be adjusted to assist students. One change the college made was to have advisors create their students' degree maps before they met. This modification allowed the students to see their full pathways earlier and helped them engage in more informed advising conversations.

BALANCING CONSISTENCY WITH PERSONALIZATION

STC's advising redesign grants helped illustrate the importance of delivering consistent, quality student services. The college leveraged the technologies to redefine processes and procedures. Leaders were able to define what a good advising experience looked like and what was expected of different stakeholders. Advisors were able to tailor their approach to the specific student they were advising. The team at STC drafted scripts for advisors to use in certain situations to help guide their interactions with students. STC was able to ensure all students were given the information on the steps they needed to take to accomplish their goals.

Over the past few years, the college has been exploring how to maintain consistency in the quality of the student experience while also building in flexibility for meeting the personalized needs of different student populations. As an HSI located close to the US–Mexico border, the college serves large populations of immigrants. STC also serves many veteran learners, as well as learners serving in the police force, border patrol, Coast Guard, and the Navy. College leaders recognize that to serve such a diverse student body, they need to fully understand what different students need to be successful. The advising technology tools STC implemented can support the college in personalizing the support students receive if the college's processes are designed with a full understanding of different populations' needs. STC hosts a lab and lounge area for veterans and their dependents. An additional study room, referred to as the Foxhole, is available to provide a quiet study area for veterans at the Pecan, Mid-Valley, and Starr County campuses.

One example of balancing consistency with personalization is in how STC is using its CRM platform with Starfish, the early-alert system. Following the launch of these advising tools, the college has been able to ensure that information sent to students from the college is accurate and consistent in tone and messaging. Previous communications sent by different departments were not easy to track or review, which led to instances of conflicting information and duplication of messages.

The tools equipped the college to create more personalized messages to send to different student populations—messages that grab the student's attention and ensure they do not receive blanket messaging. Messaging campaigns are crafted for students at risk of dropping out and are focused on connecting them with resources to support their success. One campaign is focused on outreach programs dedicated to bringing K–12 students to STC campuses and encouraging their parents to complete their academic credentials. STC leaders want to ensure that the student population is given as many opportunities as possible to learn about the academic opportunities offered. The college is also working with dual-enrolled students. Most first-generation students attending STC do not know how to use any of the college tools needed for enrollment purposes. To facilitate key learning, academic affairs incorporated training into all the first-year classes at STC. Dual-enrollment students are now successfully being assisted by technologies that help them keep track of their academic progress.





ENSURING STUDENTS “EXPERIENCE EXCEPTIONAL”

STC’s Dx approach to technology implementation has led the college through significant cultural transformations. The use of technology and data is baked into how everyone at the college functions, and leadership is confident there is no desire to go back to how things were done before the advising redesign efforts. Additionally, through these efforts, new partnerships across the college’s different departments have been and continue to be built. STC’s strategic plan, which takes the college through 2025, charges leadership at all levels to continue to build cross-functional relationships and partnerships. The college notes that these closer relationships across departments have translated into concrete improvements in the student experience.

The strategic plan aims for the college to continue to improve how it serves the community to ensure that every student “experiences exceptional.” One approach is to build a culture and processes that guarantee support and engagement for all students. For STC, this means continuing to explore what different student populations need to achieve their goals. Two examples show how the college is working collaboratively to personalize the student experience:

- College officials have been deepening their understanding of adult learners (students aged 25+). Many of these learners dropped out of college during the pandemic as they juggled homeschooling children, job changes, lost income, physical and mental health issues, and many other challenges. So STC charged the dual-enrollment team with examining processes through an adult-learner perspective. An example of the recommendations this team made to facilitate collaboration between the departments at STC was to replicate their successful Fast Track program and adjust it for adult learners. The program allows high school students to complete multiple enrollment steps in one go and in one location, including connecting with an advisor and the coordinator who works with first-generation students.
- Another population the college is focusing on is continuing education (CE) students. The college uses its CRM system to maintain contact with these students even after they finish their classes so they are aware of how the college can support them in taking the next step in their careers. As an example of how the college is working to assist students studying for credits, as well as those taking short-term classes offered through the CE department, if a student takes phlebotomy through the CE department, the student can then get credit toward competitive entry programs, such as vocational nursing. This clears unnecessary obstacles for students who want to take the next step in their learning. To move toward even greater consistency for these students, wherever possible faculty from the for-credit programs teach the relevant CE courses.

For STC, the journey to technology transformation has been pivotal. What began in 2013 as the opportunity to buy a new technology has turned into nine years of structural, process, and cultural change with students at the center. The college has received a multitude of national and regional awards attesting to its success. Yet college leaders know there is still work to be done. They are committed to the work outlined in their strategic plan and are working with Achieving the Dream coaches and other consultants to support continued improvement.

LESSONS LEARNED

- **Involve students in the planning process.** STC staff facilitated focus groups to gather student input into the planning process. Although students wanted to know how far they were in their degree pathways, they did not want to be bombarded with too much information. They wanted a tool that could share this information in a simple and easily navigable way.
 - **Approach technology implementation as a lever for people and process change.** Looking beyond the technology to view it as a tool for lasting change is the key to STC's success. College leadership needs to map out a clear plan before any meetings on tech implementation can take place.
 - **Mapping your processes is not a one-time or solo activity.** Process mapping was a critical starting point for the college's technology implementation. STC maps out critical processes every few years to identify steps that are hindering student success. The college finds new improvements and implements them to help students in their academic journeys. There are also clear benefits to the college's sharing the process maps between departments.
 - **Allow time for institutional collaboration and acceptance.** STC was deliberate about listening to students and taking their needs into consideration when implementing the technologies. College officials held several early conversations with faculty and staff to secure collaboration for the innovative tools. During these conversations, challenges and concerns were discussed, which allowed those involved to mitigate or eliminate issues. When the technology was rolled out, the college worked hard to obtain feedback from faculty, staff, and students.
 - **Prioritize the integration of technologies on the technical and user sides.** With any recent technology implementation, it is important to think ahead to how it will integrate technically with other tools to help boost user adoption. Also important is planning for how different departments can use the tool to support their own work or connect with other departments.
 - **Clarify expectations about the adoption of innovative technologies for all stakeholders.** It is important to be clear from the beginning and set up ongoing training and supports when technology becomes mandatory. Where students should be using the tools, embed training on the value of the tool and the technical steps for using it early in the students' experience.
 - **Project management skills can make or break a Dx strategy.** STC benefits from having multiple senior leaders with project management credentials leading many of the efforts outlined in this case study. Project plans are clear and detailed and include strategies for mitigating or eliminating challenges. When adjustments are necessary, these skills allow leaders to efficiently reassess the timeline and expectations.
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WHERE TO LEARN MORE

For more information on the work being done at South Texas College, feel free to reach out to Matthew S. Hebbard, Vice President for Student Affairs and Enrollment Management (mshebbbar@southtexascollege.edu).

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