



# Making a Difference in Mississippi

UPDATES ON FOUR ATD NETWORK COLLEGES

By Elizabeth Fischer

## Introduction

There are 15 community colleges in Mississippi, which together serve more than half the undergraduates enrolled in the state's public institutions. According to the 2020 Mississippi Community College Board Annual Report, the state has the oldest community college system in the United States, dating back to the 1920s.<sup>1</sup> From all regions of Mississippi, community colleges offer degrees and certificates in over 142 different career and technical programs that range from short-term to two years in length. In 2022, 15,508 graduates earned 18,831 awards from community colleges and 11,000 students with bachelor's degrees attended community colleges for occupational skills development in an average year.

To keep up with growing workforce demands, the United States Economic Development Administration awarded two grants to the Magnolia State to build workforce training centers. Mississippi has invested \$50 million in creating jobs and providing training since 2016. Workforce training development centers train students in their local communities, and over 2,000 apprentices are registered through the Mississippi Apprenticeship Program (MAP). A comprehensive wraparound program, MAP collaborates closely with companies to identify occupations and skill sets needed on their job sites.<sup>2</sup>

Former Mississippi Governor William Winter said, "The road out of poverty runs by the schoolhouse." Mississippi community colleges are remarkable vehicles for achieving the dream of higher education and driving economic growth. Leaders at the state level understand that it is essential to support community colleges to build a strong workforce and narrow the income inequality gap. Subsequently, Mississippi community colleges recognize the importance of supporting their students. By enrolling, retaining, and graduating students, and providing upskilling in economically crucial fields such as health care, tech, and green energy service industries, community colleges can simultaneously increase their student base, add to their region's workforce, and improve living conditions for individuals in surrounding communities.

Resilient and robust, the Mississippi Achieving the Dream (ATD) Network colleges — Coahoma Community College, East Mississippi Community College, Meridian Community College, and Northwest Mississippi Community College — have strong working relationships with their students and their communities, and ATD is helping them grow even stronger by supporting them in building capacity to collect and use data and in redesigning advising and support services to better meet student needs.

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1 *Mississippi Community College Board Annual Report FY2020*. (Jackson, MS: Mississippi Department of Archives and History, 2020). <http://da.mdah.ms.gov/series/sbcjc/sbcjc-ar/detail/572035>

2 Alexis Elmore. "Upskilling the Future of Mississippi's Workforce" in *Site Selection Magazine* (Atlanta, GA: Site Selection, 2022). <https://siterelection.com/issues/2022/nov/upskilling-the-future-of-mississippi-s-workforce.cfm>



## Mississippi Colleges

With the financial support of the Woodward Hines Education Foundation (WHEF), which works to increase postsecondary attainment in Mississippi, three of the four colleges were able to join the ATD Network while EMCC is covering the cost in-house.

**Coahoma Community College (CCC)** joined the ATD Network in 2018. It is a small, rural college in the Mississippi Delta region. CCC serves a county with one of the nation's highest poverty rates. It is also one of only 15 community colleges in the country designated as a Historically Black College and University (HBCU). CCC has a long tradition of going above and beyond to serve its community. Since joining the ATD Network, CCC has had the opportunity to gain experience from peer institutions steeped in their student success work and receive tailored coaching from experts in data and leadership.

**East Mississippi Community College (EMCC)** joined the ATD Network in 2021. From its humble beginning as an agricultural high school, EMCC has been committed to partnering with local industries to ensure the state develops a highly skilled and knowledgeable workforce. As Mississippi continues to establish itself as a national leader in industrial and high-tech economic development, the need for STEM-specialized professions increases. To that end, EMCC is working diligently to connect students with Mississippi businesses and encourage them to explore the myriad career opportunities available in STEM fields. With a current enrollment of 4,022 students, EMCC has seven locations serving its six-county district.

Since its beginning in 1937, **Meridian Community College (MCC)** has worked to meet the diverse needs of its growing community. MCC joined the ATD Network in 2022. In addition to a strong university transfer program, the college offers opportunities in over 50 areas of study, including health care, manufacturing, and many career-technical curricula. Continuing education courses designed for personal and professional enrichment, student support services, cultural enrichment events, and adult basic and developmental education programs are also available to equip students for expanded opportunities.

**Northwest Mississippi Community College (NMCC)** is an open-access, public, two-year institution primarily serving Benton, Calhoun, DeSoto, Lafayette, Marshall, Panola, Quitman, Tallahatchie, Tate, Tunica, and Yalobusha counties. NWCC, which joined the ATD Network in 2021, is a learning-centered community providing educational opportunities with high-quality instruction for all its students. The college fosters a culture of innovation, collaboration, and student success and is part of [ATD's Rural Resiliency Cohort](#).



## Strategic Priorities and Outcomes

Through their partnership with ATD, and thanks to deep dedication from faculty, staff, and leadership, the four colleges identified three key areas of focus for their early work with ATD:

1. Connecting students to advising and support centers
2. Expanding workforce development efforts
3. Building capacity across campuses to use data in decision-making

Working with ATD coaches, all four colleges are gaining insight and strategies to improve their teaching and learning practices. Using ATD's Institutional Capacity Framework and Assessment Tool (ICAT), they have been able to create a more student-focused culture promoting student success. ATD coaches are also helping them learn how to capture data to analyze student support programs and find gaps in their course offerings and enrollment and retention practices.

Across all three areas of focus, these colleges have shown a strong commitment to improving outcomes for their students. The following are just some of the ways they are shoring up student supports, increasing workforce training options, and using data to meet student needs.

**Through intentional work over the last year, EMCC has made strides toward closing equity gaps in key student success metrics. [The college] will enhance the lives of residents in the communities we serve through equitable education opportunities.**

**— Susan Baird, dean of institutional research, effectiveness, grants, and sponsored programs and co-leader of the ATD partnership, East Mississippi Community College**





## Connecting Students to Advising and Support Centers

The four Mississippi ATD Network colleges have support centers that focus on **student advising and retention** and provide a haven to students seeking information, guidance, and training. These centers offer vital assistance in the form of career support and learning services that help maintain and improve student success outcomes. They also counsel students on the myriad course selections and guided pathway options leading to certificates at each school. The centers help students move forward in their educational journeys to degree or certificate completion.

At CCC, the **Career Services and Placement Center** helps guide students with career planning, job search strategies, résumé preparation, and workforce development. The focus is on helping students earn credits toward certification and graduation. The institution also has a mentoring program, Communicating Opportunities through Mentoring Practices to Achieve Student Success (COMPASS), designed to improve academic success and retention and provide students with academic support. The intensive supplemental instruction that CCC provides to students has increased student success in gateway courses.

One key lesson CCC has learned, with the help of ATD coaches, is to be more intentional when directing student support initiatives toward targeted groups. For example, ATD data coaches helped CCC realize that FTEIC (first time ever in college) students and students with GPAs under 2.0 need further support. They are now using data and technology to identify at-risk students and gaps in student support services. For example, Signal Vine is a communication platform CCC implements to send students text messages about class activities, schedules, and homework tasks. Improved and directed communications are helping students stay on target with their educational goals.

Staff at EMCC's **Office of Advising, Retention, and Student Success** help improve equitable outcomes for students by bolstering student retention and completion and expanding holistic support to meet their ever-changing needs. EMCC is taking steps to reduce the number of students who do not graduate. Such steps include expanding tutoring time.



EMCC's ATD action plan identified two priorities that were incorporated into the college's strategic plan: 1) to increase student course completion in gateway English and math within the first year by 5% for 2023 and by 10% annually through 2025, and 2) to raise the percentage of students earning at least 12 credits in the first semester (grade C or higher) by 25% by 2025. Officials at ATD are working with EMCC to guide them through the transformation process and help them achieve these and future goals.

At NMCC, their **Advising and Retention Center** (ARC) is a significant factor in supporting student success in course selection, career pathways, and retention and enrollment. The college has also established a first-year experience class and has designed professional development courses that focus on the needs of students in the classroom. Students receive counseling, advocacy support, and community referrals at MCC's **Support Services Office**. The office helps students realize their academic potential and eliminate physical, programmatic, and attitudinal barriers.

MCC, ATD's newest Mississippi college partner, joined the 2022 cohort of the ATD Network to holistically advance equity, access, and student success. MCC is committed to tailored engagement in whole-college transformation and gaining access to a nationwide network of peer support and expertise.

**The renewed focus at EMCC is on the student.**  
 — Scott Baine, faculty development/instructional design coordinator, East Mississippi Community College

## Expanding Workforce Development Efforts

Mississippi community colleges are helping lead the way in workforce development by providing cross-institutional support services that promote education, professional development, and training opportunities.

CCC's **Workforce Development Center** offers non-credit education and training to aggressively respond to the regional needs of businesses in northwest Mississippi, the incumbent and future workforce, and the community. The center's overarching goal is to holistically address patrons' needs and develop a seamless, customized training system that engenders a high-performance workforce. The center helps advance the region's economic prosperity by supporting existing and prospective industries and creating new high-skilled and high-wage career opportunities.



NMCC, with support from Accelerate Mississippi, the state’s Office of Workforce Development, is working with the North Delta Planning and Development District in Panola County. Using a \$4 million grant provided by the United States Economic Development Administration, the college is relocating its workforce development programs to a vacant outlet mall in Batesville. This space is being converted into a workforce training center with a target of retaining 350 jobs and creating \$11 million in private investment.<sup>3</sup> The college will relocate its electric vehicle manufacturing and maintenance upskilling programs to the center by 2026 when it is set to become operational. Participants within these communities can advance their skills to improve their employment and wage opportunities.

## Building Data Capacity to Facilitate Decision-Making

The four Mississippi colleges are all deep into their student success work with their individual ATD coaches and are benefiting from ATD’s arsenal of coaching expertise, extensive resources, and other Network peer institutions. The colleges are learning to build data capacity to help with strategic planning and strengthen student support programs.

Through increased advising and support, CCC has been able to provide better mental health support and improve the success rate for English Composition and College Algebra. The college hopes to secure further funding to increase holistic student support and grow its ARC services.

CCC reports that it has been using ICAT to create guidance for faculty and staff on the preferred methods of communication, as well as spur the development of a plan to address Wi-Fi dead spots on campus.

To help EMCC achieve its strategic goals, ATD coaches Dr. Paula Pitcher and Dr. Mary Fifield have been meeting members of EMCC’s ATD teams to guide them through the transformation process.



**With ATD coach support, the college has been able to increase the success rate of our students in our gateway courses.**

— Joseph McKee, director of financial aid, Coahoma Community College

<sup>3</sup> Elmore, “Upskilling the Future of Mississippi’s Workforce.”



At EMCC, early in the ATD process, students, faculty, and staff shared their definitions of success and offered suggestions for making improvements. During the three-year Foundations of Transformation program begun in 2021, data was measured using qualitative and quantitative evidence to drive changes in policies and practices across the institution.

ATD coach Dr. Jacque Taylor is working with MCC staff to focus on their Quality Enhancement Plan (QEP) work and student success agenda to offer campus leaders justice, equity, diversity, and inclusion training. Dr. Taylor facilitated the Justice, Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion (JEDI) four-hour training to level set and further the understanding of 30 campus senior leaders and 10 leadership academies. During the JEDI training, faculty admitted to not engaging in courageous conversations around equity and justice. During this first year of their two-year cycle, they took the first step and believed in each other enough to continue their engagement to transform their college. MCC is working hard to engage students through focus and strategy teams and have difficult conversations to develop and deliver equitable opportunities for student and employee success.

To further develop a data-informed culture and measure progress on the actions identified in the ATD plan, coaches recommended that NMCC leadership consider increasing the capacity of the institutional research office. In a time of increasing demands on the budget, NMCC is considering creative ways to expand its data capacity, such as faculty release time.

**All students have challenges, and sometimes we can remove nonacademic barriers for them to help.**

— **Laura Damm, director of planning, research, and grants, East Mississippi Community College**





## Conclusion

The lessons learned in the student support centers benefit the Mississippi colleges at the heart of their work. Student support services are vital and encourage higher performance and retention. Career training, upskilling, and wraparound support can help increase student earning potential and fill gaps in the current workforce needs in Mississippi.

Colleges throughout the ATD Network can learn from the success the Mississippi Network colleges achieve with their student support centers. The centers are helping students navigate educational paths toward income prosperity and social mobility. By looking at student metrics, Mississippi colleges are demonstrating the importance of tailoring services for each student to help them on their journey to success.

Mississippi colleges also pave the way for their communities through workforce development efforts. The partnerships that these colleges are making in communities and the job sites they are creating and maintaining with their state agencies are excellent examples that can be implemented to develop workforce strategies in other areas throughout the country. Rural, urban, and suburban institutions of higher learning can learn from ways Mississippi colleges are transforming the workforce landscape and supporting their communities.

ATD is a partner and champion of hard-working leaders at more than 300 community colleges from around the country. The Mississippi cohort benefits from the collective learning of the national ATD Network and from their specially chosen coaches who can help colleges tailor support for every aspect of their work, from foundational capacities such as leadership, data, and equity to intentional strategies for supporting students holistically.

Together, the Woodward Hines Education Foundation and ATD understand that the stakes for the success of colleges and their students have never been higher and that the future of the country rests on strengthening communities by addressing systemic inequities within higher education to improve social and economic mobility for learners and families.

**Achieving the Dream partners a student-centered approach with best practices to equip institutions to meet the challenges providing transformational educational opportunities that overcome barriers and open doors. We are so excited about being chosen to work with ATD and look forward to how that partnership will make a genuine difference in our college and the community we serve.**

**— Dr. Thomas Huebner, president, Meridian Community College**



## Appendix

Follow these links to find out more about each college.

<https://www.mccb.edu/colleges/meridiancc>

<https://www.mccb.edu/colleges/coahomacc>

<https://www.mccb.edu/colleges/eastmscc>

<https://www.mccb.edu/colleges/northwestcc>





[www.achievingthedream.org](http://www.achievingthedream.org)

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](#).

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