

Fond du Lac Tribal and Community College



The Leah Meyer Austin Award from Achieving the Dream (ATD)

is the highest honor awarded to colleges in the ATD Network. Since 2009, the award has been bestowed annually to a college that employs a holistic approach to reducing equity gaps between student groups and increasing success for all students. The award recognizes institutional strength, aligned policies and procedures, a student-focused culture, and notable increases in student outcomes. It is with immense pride that ATD awards the 2024 Leah Meyer Austin Award to Fond du Lac Tribal and Community College.

Fond du Lac Tribal and Community College (FDLTCC) is a college unlike any other. Serving just under 2,000 students with its on-campus and dual enrollment programming, FDLTCC is a unique institution that originated through the efforts of the Fond du Lac Band of Lake Superior Chippewa. Founded and chartered as a Tribal College by the Band and recognized by the Minnesota Legislature in 1987, the college has maintained an enduring commitment to meeting the educational needs of a diverse population — something it has long reflected in its mission statement. The Tribal and community college concept gained momentum in the early 1980s as the Reservation Business Committee documented a need for higher educational opportunities among Fond du Lac Band members and the residents of both Carlton and St. Louis counties in Minnesota. The college exists today as the only college in the nation established as a TCU under federal law while also operating as part of a state higher education system.

“Fond du Lac Tribal and Community College’s spirit of innovation and inclusivity is part of what drives their equity work and their intense commitment to their students while also helping to shape their relationship with other Network colleges,” says ATD President and CEO Dr. Karen A. Stout. “I am overjoyed to acknowledge their transformational student success work and their leadership within the Network with the Leah Meyer Austin Award.”

A Union of Cultures

With a diverse student body composed of Black, white, and Native students (representing 14 different Tribes), FDLTCC prides itself in being home to a “union of cultures” that celebrates its diversity while still being grounded in the culture and values of the Anishinaabeg, the collective group of Native peoples with whom the Chippewa and several other Tribes from the Great Lakes region are affiliated.

“We are equity-focused by nature,” says FDLTCC President Anita Hanson. “By meeting the higher education needs of the Fond du Lac Reservation, serving [other] Native Americans from the state of Minnesota, and the non-Native students that come here, equity has been in the forefront of our existence for 36 years.”

President Hanson believes that, as a “union of cultures,” the college provides an atmosphere of respect and understanding that benefits all of its students. “We know what we do to preserve the language and history of the Anishinaabeg for our American Indian students and what it means to educate our Non-Indian students in a diverse environment. Bringing all cultures together, in our opinion, makes the world a better place.”

A true intersection of art, architecture, and nature, FDLTCC’s campus embodies and exemplifies the college’s inclusivity,

representing plurality through its many different construction materials; windows of various shapes and sizes; and in the design of its academic building, shaped like a thunderbird, which combines straight lines and circular elements to depict the college’s role of bringing people from diverse backgrounds together in a safe, respectful place.

Perhaps the most obvious manifestation of the college’s identity as a union of cultures in its physical campus, however, is the inscription in the floor of its main hallway with its five core values, written in both English and the Ojibwe languages: *manaaji’idiwin* (respect), *gwayakwaadiziwin* (integrity), *ganawenjigewin* (stewardship), *maamamiikaajinendamowin* (innovation), and *zhawenjigewin* (compassion).

The bilingual inscription is noteworthy not just for the unity of cultures it represents, according to the college’s long-time ATD coach, Shara Davis, but for the deep self-knowledge conveyed by such a permanent display of moral principles. “Fond du Lac’s institutional values never change,” she explains. “A lot of other colleges, when they go through a strategic planning process, they revisit their core values, their mission, their vision. Fond du Lac never revisits their values. They know who they are at their core.”

A Targeted Approach

The college’s journey with Achieving the Dream began in 2017 when, under the leadership of former president Larry Anderson, it joined the ATD Network as a cohort member of Project Success (a U.S. Education Department and Ascendium Education Group-funded initiative to support TCUs in student persistence, retention, and financial management).

President Hanson acknowledges that the college’s immense progress would not have been possible without the coaching it received from ATD. “The ability to work with Achieving the Dream and understanding best practices and having access to coaches — data coaches and success coaches — allowed us to not have to do that on our own ... because you don’t have the time to understand what’s going on nationally when you’re a small institution just trying to do your work,” she says.

She credits ATD with providing a broad perspective that helped move the college toward a more focused approach that maximizes the effect of its student success efforts: “[When] we got involved with ATD, [the work] ramped up ... And I think the intentionality took off... We went from multiple, different things going on to a few targeted things that would impact more students.”

ATD’s emphasis on gathering data — and particularly disaggregated data — to inform decisions was instrumental

in setting the college on the right track. One of the first orders of business as a new Network college, of course, was taking the Institutional Capacity Assessment — the results of which demonstrated a notable opportunity for data-informed decision-making.

In response to these results, Davis says the college “jumped in with both feet,” hiring an institutional research director, and, within the span of a year and a half, brought their data and technology score on the Institutional Capacity Assessment from a 2 to a 3. Given their first glimpse into their disaggregated student data, FDLTCC immediately zeroed in on student groups who deserved customized supports — Black, Native, first-time-in-college, and residential students — and began tailoring its reform strategies accordingly.

One of the college’s earliest interventions was its Housing Student Success Initiative, which began in 2018. The effort included developing specific academic standards for housing students (many of whom were also first-time-in-college, Black, and Native students), clearly communicating expectations to students and reaching agreements with them, gathering academic progress reports at identified intervals, calling on faculty to identify struggling students, and ensuring that the follow-up occurred in a focused and intentional manner.

Within two years, unsatisfactory academic progress was reduced by 19 percentage points (with a 27-percentage-point reduction among Native students), GPAs of 2.0 or higher rose 8 percentage points, and fall-to-spring retention rates for first-time college students climbed 9 percentage points.

As part of the Project Success initiative cohort (and subsequently Project Success 2.0 and 3.0 cohorts), the college continued to be guided by data and moved forward with highly targeted interventions. In 2020, FDLTCC also became part of the Serving Native American Students with Holistic Student Supports initiative cohort, thereby gaining the additional benefit of intensive and highly customized ATD coaching around holistic student supports.

With guidance from the American Indian Higher Education Consortium and the American Indian College Fund on how best to adapt student success tools and coaching to the specific needs of TCUs, ATD successfully engaged with FDLTCC through both initiatives. Alina Randall, assistant director for Tribal Colleges and University Programs at ATD, credits the college with embracing coaching to the fullest and making the most of its ATD experience. “The college’s talented team of staff and administrators brings enormous energy to the work,” she shares. “In a relatively short span of time, they accomplished an impressive amount of progress.”

Indeed, FDLTCC’s efforts in both initiatives yielded a myriad of effective interventions. For example, in the summer of 2020, the college redesigned its orientation process for first-time and transfer students by creating an online module that includes a basic needs intake survey, introduces students to a variety of support services, and triggers student services staff to follow up as needed with referrals to the college’s social worker and other college support programs.

The success of the orientation module and the benefit of its 24/7 accessibility prompted the college to make it available to all students beginning in the 2021–22 year. As a complement to the online orientation, All School Meet and Greets, held prior to fall and spring term start dates, provide new and transfer students with in-person connections to other students, staff, and faculty to help build relationships and foster a sense of belonging.

FDLTCC also redesigned its advising program in the 2019–20 year using a guided pathway approach of teaming professional advisors with faculty program coordinators for better coordination between student services and learner services. The revamp involved assigning student service advisors to specific academic programs, allowing them to become intimately acquainted with academic planning, course sequencing, and other specialized requirements related to specific academic majors, which, in turn, enables them to advise students with more detailed knowledge customized to their personal needs.

Now, onboarding for new students begins immediately, often with a phone call just days after an application is received. Once new students arrive on campus, advisors proactively set

up advising meetings where they cover topics from community resources, such as the campus food pantry and emergency funding, to academic planning and assistance with registration, labor market statistics, instruction in how to use the college’s various online systems, and the financial aid process.

Knowing that the chance for student success is far greater when early intervention processes are in place, FDLTCC sought a systematic structure for assessment and intervention at the most critical points during a student’s college career. In academic year 2020–21, the college configured and rolled out Starfish, a student success case-management platform, which the college rebranded as North Star.

With North Star, faculty are alerted of struggling students during the term and can use the platform to make referrals to the appropriate student service staff. Intervening staff members can then record and share notes from student meetings with faculty members as a way of reporting back and “closing the loop” on student issues.



Academic year 2020–21 also saw continued emphasis on guided pathways through the adoption of a corequisite math model in an attempt to combat both low numbers of first-year students who enroll in math classes and low numbers of completion among enrollees. By taking developmental math and college-level statistics in the same semester, students get maximum exposure to ideas and concepts and reduce the time to completion of their college-level math credential. This model allows them to achieve completion and gain momentum in college in one semester, instead of taking multiple terms of developmental math.

FDLTCC, according to Davis, has a thoughtful and systematic approach to all of its reform work that gets results. “They listen, they learn, they focus, and they do,” she says.



A Record of Success

The college’s targeted approach is showing promising results. The implementation of the corequisite math model, for example, has resulted in both instructional faculty and advisors reporting increases in learning and outcomes and an elevated math enrollment. While only 18% of students placed in developmental education satisfactorily completed college-level math within the 2019–20 year, that percentage swelled to 61% in 2022–23.

Gains in this gateway math metric were made within multiple student groups, thus narrowing several equity gaps. For Pell-eligible and first-generation college students, the success rate doubled (from 10% to 20% and from 8% to 16%, respectively); it more than doubled for Native American students (from 7% to 17%); and it increased five-fold for Black students (from 10% to 50%).

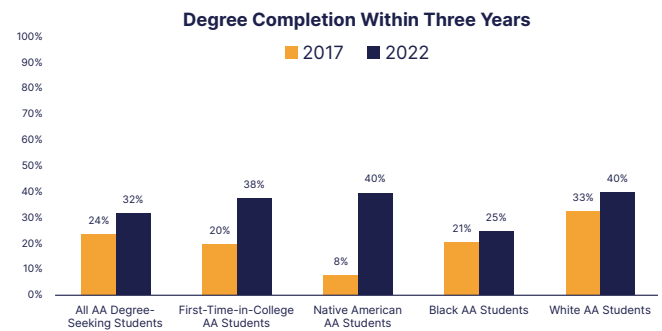
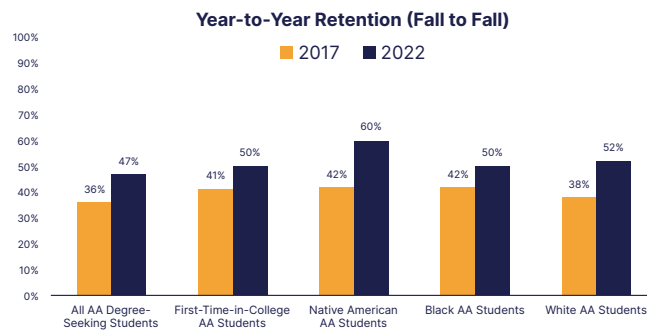
Native American students also saw improved four-year completion rates in the period of 2020 to 2023 with an 8 percentage-point rise (20% to 28%).

While FDLTCC offers an array of occupational-based programs in nursing, law enforcement, and other career fields, a large portion of its students pursue an A.A. degree. Given this high percentage and that data disaggregation encouraged by ATD during the initial three-year experience revealed equity gaps in retention and completion for these students, A.A. seekers were identified as a priority population.

As a result of FDLTCC’s transformational reform efforts in recent years, the college has witnessed significant improvements for this group. Despite the difficulties posed by the COVID-19 pandemic, the fall-to-fall persistence rate for first-time in college A.A. students rose from 41% among the 2017 cohort to 50% among the 2022 cohort. Among all A.A. students, the rate increased from 36% to 47%.

A.A. seekers’ three-year completion rates improved as well, rising 8 percentage points from 24% among the fall 2017 cohort to 32% among the fall 2020 cohort. Particularly notable is that substantive progress was made across *all* student groups, including Black students (4 percentage points), white students (7 percentage points), and first-time-in-college students (18 percentage points). Most impressive is that Native American A.A. degree seekers saw a dramatic 32-percentage-point increase. Now, Native American, first-time-in-college, and white A.A. students are all completing degrees at similar rates: 40%, 38%, and 40%, respectively.

“It’s remarkable that a college that came into the Network six and a half years ago with no IR office and no disaggregated data could so profoundly move the needle the way FDLTCC has on certain metrics,” Dr. Stout comments. “Their ability to tackle the retention and completion rates among their Associate of Arts students so significantly is a case in point.”



A Path of Perseverance

The list of student-focused interventions at FDLTCC goes on — as do the impressive data. But numbers do not tell the full story of this college. Behind each intervention and corresponding percentage point is authentic conviction — a genuine desire to put students first, born from a value system that is ingrained in the hearts and minds of faculty and staff as permanently as it is inscribed in the floor of the main building.

It’s a feeling that Taylor Warnes, director of marketing and communications, says is clearly apparent on the campus. “That passion, that care for our students is in everybody who works here — every instructor, every staff member. Everybody is here to do what needs to be done for our students,” she states. “The level of care that everyone has here is unmatched by anything else I’ve ever seen.”

But as crucial as its core values are to its operation, FDLTCC's story seems to be molded by one value whose role the college has, perhaps, not fully recognized: a tireless determination, a persistent resolve, a dogged tenacity to move forward in the face of obstacles. It's a steadfastness that Davis, a veteran coach, says she rarely sees.

Indeed, the success of the college's reforms did not come easily for FDLTCC. The road to LMA Award-winner status hardly unfurled at its feet. Rather, the college blazed a new trail through untrodden terrain with intense motivation that would not be extinguished, no matter the hindrance.

The hurdles began immediately after joining the ATD Network when coaches recommended that FDLTCC hire an IR director — an action that was easier said than done. It not only involved finding the funding but also required posting for the position at least three times in order to find the right candidate. Nonetheless, the college persevered and filled the position within the first year of its ATD experience.

The obstacles associated with instating an IR director were followed by challenges of far greater magnitude in March of 2020 as COVID-19 struck. COVID, of course, impacted virtually every institution of higher learning in the world, but those serving Native communities were among those hit the hardest in the United States. With higher-than-average infection and hospitalization rates and the highest mortality rate of all racial or ethnic groups in the country, Native Americans suffered a disproportionate impact from the pandemic, as it exacerbated previously existing inequities in Tribal communities.

According to President Hanson, the barriers to access alone were monumental in the educational sphere. "Students from our Tribal communities struggled ... The pandemic brought to light the larger barriers that existed and still exist in Indian Country related to access," she says. "We had students struggling to find internet connectivity. Some of our students, based on where they were living, couldn't get online at all and couldn't access their classes once things transitioned to distance delivery. And so, our instructors had to get creative."

The college had a unique response to the hardships of the pandemic. At a time when many institutions felt a sense of accomplishment from barely keeping a semblance of normalcy around basic, daily institutional functions — let alone, from embarking on new efforts — FDLTCC was ignited by the pandemic to work on behalf of its students with more fervor than ever — and its increased intensity translated to its student success work with ATD. "Fond du Lac was literally on *overdrive* with their transformational reform efforts during the pandemic," notes Davis.

President Hanson says that the elevated concentration on their students came naturally. "Everybody just did what they needed to do," she shares. "Things just ramped up. I think it was just like, 'We're not going to lay back just because nobody is around. We have work to do to help our students be successful.'"

As if the turmoil of the pandemic were not enough, in July of 2020, then President Stephanie Hammit, who led the institution from 2018 throughout most of 2022, experienced a health matter that kept her away from campus for a few months, leaving the college without its leader during an already difficult period of time.



Hanson, who, at the time, served as FDLTCC's dean of student services, says that the college's student success efforts still went full steam ahead. "When Steph was dealing with her initial medical setback, she was still telling us: 'There is no stopping anything,'" she recalls.

A little over two years later, in October 2022, the college learned that President Hammit was dealing with another significant health issue.

Davis recalls that she was due at the college for a site visit within days of receiving the news from Hanson. She asked Hanson if she should cancel her visit. "We both talked about it, and then we both said at the same time, 'What would Stephanie want us to do?' Simultaneously, we said, 'Move forward. Got to keep moving forward.'"

President Hammit unexpectedly passed away shortly thereafter.

Hanson says that, for her personally, doubling down on student success work during this trying time stemmed from her respect for and reflection on the college's leaders, including Hammit, who preceded her and what mattered most to them:

You just think of our previous leaders and their focus on students, on student success. You think about what they did to help the college be successful, and it's why we are all here. It's because of the students. And so, I think it's just natural for us to continue to focus on how we help our students reach the goals that they have set for themselves. It's just an honoring of our previous presidents in the work that they did for students. It's why this college exists.



According to Davis, the resiliency with which the college bounced back from the tragedy — and the persistence it demonstrated in continuing its student success efforts — was representative of FDLTCC's unwavering drive — stories of which she tells to other colleges to inspire them when they are feeling overwhelmed with fitting student success work onto their full plates:

"In six and a half years, they have had three presidents," she explains. "If other colleges [were to experience that turnover], they would have said, 'Oh, wait a minute. We've got a new

president. We've got to do some listening and learning. We've got to rethink our student success agenda.' Not once, not once did [FDLTCC] waffle. Never did they deviate from helping more of their students. [What FDLTCC experienced] would have brought any other college to their knees. That's what I mean about their resiliency. They never stopped. They never put it on hold, and they kept moving forward because, to them, it is wholly about their students."

A Spirit of Humility and a Sense of Self

As remarkable as it is for a college to successfully implement so many reform measures during such taxing times, it is even more impressive to consider the many ways that FDLTCC made contributions to the ATD Network despite their tribulations. According to President Hanson, giving back is an integral part of Anishinaabeg culture. As Davis puts it, "They have given back to ATD time and time again — everything we have asked them to do — because that's who they are."

"You can't just take. You share and give back," Hanson says. "I think that is the purpose of [ATD's] Tribal College network: to use the knowledge that we gained and to share it. We want to be a good partner in that."

And a good partner they have been. In 2021 and 2022 alone, FDLTCC gave no less than four presentations at DREAM conferences; administrators and staff have made multiple presentations on facets of the college's student success work to other Tribal Colleges and Universities; a faculty member served as a coach for a year-long virtual teaching and learning seminar series for TCUs; the college participated in an Aspen Institute case study, which was used as an ATD coach guide; President Emerita Hammit guest-blogged for ATD; and President Hanson twice traveled to Washington, D.C., to participate alongside Dr. Stout in panel discussions at the Department of Education's Raise the Bar Summits.

The college is also a current member of ATD's Community Vibrancy Cohort, and, as such, FDLTCC administrators provide input to create relevant ATD resources to address systemic inequities at both community and institutional levels.

"Fond du Lac has stepped up for ATD on numerous occasions, and I am so grateful for their partnership," says Dr. Stout. "They are always willing and eager to share their knowledge with other Network colleges, which is particularly useful to other TCUs. Their contributions have been highly impressive, and they truly rise to the level of being a model institution as befits an LMA Award winner."

The spirit of humility is not only evident in the college's willingness to serve ATD and other Network TCUs by sharing

what they have learned, but it is also apparent in President Hanson's propensity to champion other Tribal Colleges whenever she has the opportunity.

She is quick to credit other colleges in the Tribal network and points to the COVID pandemic as just one example of a time when TCUs across the country worked vehemently on behalf of their students. "[The student success work during COVID-19] wasn't just at FDLTCC," she clarifies. "This was at every Tribal College. All of the Tribal Colleges were doing this work in support of their students... For whatever reason, we earned this award, but I tell you, the great work is being done at numerous other Tribal Colleges."

President Hanson notes that the "great work" at TCUs does not all look identical — nor does it always look exactly like the work at non-Tribal institutions. FDLTCC's administration, she explains, is always mindful about how recommended reform measures will work for the specific circumstances and campus culture of the college. "Yes, there are 200 colleges doing it this way, but how does it work for *our* institution? How does it work for *our* students? That's always been in the forefront ... We've got to do what makes sense for this institution as a Tribal College and as a community college."

It's a philosophy that comes from the college's grounding — in its core values and mission, the reason for its existence, and the knowledge of who it serves — and that grounding makes FDLTCC both receptive to change and intensely determined to implement it. On the student success front, that's a winning combination.

"We know who we are and who we serve as a unique institution of higher education" says President Hanson.

And visitors to FDLTCC need only look as far as the floor design in the main building to know too.

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