

Chattanooga State Community College



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

is the highest honor conferred to colleges in the ATD Network. Bestowed annually since 2008, the award signifies outstanding gains in student success; recognizes a holistic approach to reducing performance gaps between student groups; and celebrates institutional strength, aligned policies and procedures, and a student-focused culture. It is with great pleasure and pride that ATD presents Chattanooga State Community College with the 2025 Leah Meyer Austin Award.

Chattanooga State Community College, or ChattState, as it is familiarly known, is a comprehensive community college in Southeast Tennessee, located on the Tennessee River and just minutes away from downtown Chattanooga.

One of 37 community and technical colleges that fall under the jurisdiction of the Tennessee Board of Regents (TBR), ChattState offers more than 150 degree and certificate programs to more than 7,000 students hailing from six Tennessee counties and seven border counties in North Georgia and Northeast Alabama. With a long history of serving the region's business and industrial needs, the institution is the only college in the state with a Tennessee College of Applied Technology (TCAT) fully integrated into its organization.

ChattState joined the ATD Network in 2016 and was one of only four Tennessee community colleges in the Network prior to the entry of nine others in 2018 (ushered in, in part, by Dr. Flora Tydings, former president of ChattState and current chancellor of the TBR) and by the TBR's 27 TCATS in 2020.

Since partnering with ATD, the college has been on a swift, steady, and powerful student success trajectory that launched it to Leader College status in 2019 and Leader College of Distinction status in 2023. “From their early embrace of using data to make informed decisions to their expansion of support services, adoption of teaching and learning reforms, and increased focus on career exploration, Chattanooga State Community College has been ‘all in’ when it comes to their student success agenda,” says ATD President and CEO Dr. Karen A. Stout. “With significant improvements in both early momentum metrics as well as milestone metrics, they embody what the Leah Meyer Austin Award is all about.”

Dr. Rebecca Ashford, ChattState’s president, who took the helm from Dr. Tydings in 2017, is credited by her colleagues and ATD coaches with the leadership skills and the focus on students that have been critical pieces in the college’s transformation journey. Dr. Ashford herself credits many things with the institution’s success throughout the years, but one thing stands out undeniably: A driving force behind recent progress is ChattState’s latest strategic plan, *Vision 2027*.

A far cry from a document obligatorily written and then stashed on a shelf, *Vision 2027* is a credo that is lived and breathed by the administration, faculty, and staff on a daily basis. It was born, to a large extent, through the work Dr. Ashford performed as an Aspen Institute New President Fellow in 2021–22. “Through that fellowship, I really came to understand this idea that it’s not just about access. It’s not just about success. [It’s about] the impact of employment post graduation on our students’ lives,” Dr. Ashford says.

From that deepened understanding grew what was to become ChattState’s new vision: “Five thousand Chattanooga State students of every race and income level will earn a credential that creates a pathway to family-sustaining wages.” The plan is anchored by five key intertwining pillars: program innovation, holistic student supports, organizational culture and inclusive practices, teaching excellence, and fiscal stewardship. As ChattState’s Vice President of Institutional Effectiveness, Research and Planning Dr. Traci Williams points out, those pillars, the plan they support, and the vision they collectively reinforce are truly ever-present at the college. “I can’t remember a message verbally, written, or in any other medium that isn’t tied to our strategic plan, our pillars, our vision, our mission,” she shares. “It’s *always* there. It’s *always* evident in everything we do. ... It’s *constant*.”

Dr. Beth Norton, vice president of academic affairs, agrees wholeheartedly and credits the college’s singular focus on the plan with the progress ChattState has made. “The five pillars of our strategic plan have helped us to really focus all of our efforts,” she states. “All of our projects are wrapped around that strategic plan, and that, to me, has been a game changer.”

From serving as the framework around which job descriptions are written to informing the layout of meeting agendas, *Vision 2027* truly is ubiquitous at ChattState — and nowhere is its influence more evident than in the college’s student success efforts. As Dr. Ashford notes, “The focus on student success [is] our ultimate goal.”

Program Innovation

MAKING BOLD CHANGES

Central to ChattState’s substantive increases in student success and workforce readiness are several strategic initiatives. Year-round scheduling has expanded access and accelerated completion, while the implementation of Guided Pathways and the use of detailed academic maps provide clear, structured routes to graduation. The addition of a full-time executive director of pathway alignment has strengthened both internal academic pathways and external partnerships, increasing opportunities for short-term training and streamlining prior learning assessments to maximize student credit for existing skills and experience.

Arguably the most impactful programmatic reform, however, is the college’s transition from 15-week to seven-week academic terms, initiated in the fall of 2021. With documented benefits ranging from quicker recovery for students who experience an unsuccessful course attempt to enabling a more immersive experience in fewer courses, Dr. Williams sums up the value of shorter terms in a way that gets to the heart of the matter. “It’s really about trying to reduce the amount of time where life can interrupt [students’] learning,” she says. “It’s trying to get

them to a shorter finish line, where they can accumulate credits over the course of a semester at a better rate so that they’re not having to sit there for 15 weeks hoping nothing comes up that’s going to force them to withdraw or stop out.”

The college was very methodical in how it implemented the transition, creating three task forces: one focused on student success, one focused on faculty success, and a third dealing solely with the necessary logistics.

Members of the administration are quick to credit ATD with guiding the college through what was, at first, an overwhelming — and not universally popular — process. The college worked with their coaches to prepare for the shift, identifying important implementation considerations from a (then) draft version of ATD’s Shortened Academic Terms Guide (later published in May of 2021), which is shaped by the experiences of colleges that have made a scaled transition to shorter terms.

ChattState also benefitted from the support of other Network institutions that had already forged the path to shortened

academic terms. “It really came down to a lot of faculty-to-faculty conversations from individual departments, and that happened from multiple schools in the ATD Network, which was fantastic,” says Dr. Williams.

Dr. Norton reinforces the point, stating, “We could not have done this without [the ATD Network’s] support.”

According to Vice President of Student Affairs Dr. Amanda Bennett, the advice from other ATD colleges helped forge relationships that are still yielding benefits. “[The ATD colleges] were wonderful, and still to this day, ... you can pick up the

phone and call them for support,” she reports. “The Network has been really advantageous for us, [enabling us] to make these great strides.”

The college was able to see the benefit of the transition almost immediately. “After the first seven weeks, we had a campus-wide session where we talked through the data that was available at that point, and we immediately began to see overall success rates increase,” Dr. Williams recalls. “That was the first time that our full-time, first-time [in college] freshmen retention rate broke over 50%.”

Holistic Student Supports

CONNECTING STUDENTS TO PEOPLE — NOT PROCESSES

Much of ChattState’s success of late may be attributed to dramatic changes in the way it supports its students. New students, in particular, benefit from a variety of reforms pertaining to the onboarding process, as they are now promptly assigned to an advisor at the point of matriculation and are required to attend an advising workshop where they discuss managing college-life balance, explore academic resources, and receive a personalized academic plan for their first year.

In addition, advisors are more proactive than in the past in terms of initiating interaction, lending a personal touch that Julius Dodds, dean of academic success, believes is instrumental in cementing a sense of belonging. “Advisors are ... reaching out to those [new] students, introducing themselves, inviting them in ... And that has been extremely helpful for us in the sense of attaching that new student to a *person* — not a process, but a *person*,” he explains.



The college has also ramped up its efforts to make students feel welcome through the implementation of new student communication cycles and by mandating an in-person component to orientation, which itself has been redesigned to be far more intimate. According to the college’s longtime coach Dr. Rene Garcia, ChattState has fully embraced the importance of this work and its long-term impact. “Chattanooga State is very aware of the importance of feeling a sense of belonging and how that is related to actual performance,” he says.

Efforts to support students through advising are not restricted to the new student population, however. The college has established a centralized academic advising center that matches advisors to students based on their program of study and focuses on proactive outreach and follow-up. The acquisition of new technology has facilitated advising teams in their work, providing an early alert system that promptly identifies academic challenges and triggers contact from advisors as well as a tool that tracks students’ progress to completion and generates a mid-term grade that helps identify where additional support is needed.

The centralized relational advising model, with its emphasis on sense of belonging, has been particularly valuable to first-generation students who are identified during the initial advising session and thoroughly acquainted with the college’s academic resources. An annual event celebrates the accomplishments of ChattState’s first-generation students and employees each fall.

Having recently developed a system-wide definition of what a first-generation student is and calling attention to it in the admissions application, administrators are committed to further tracking this group, which nationally comprises 45% of community college students. “We are definitely becoming much more intentional about this subpopulation,” says Dr. Bennett. “We’re going to [eventually] have a lot more and better data about our first-gen students, and hopefully we continue to see the growth and [increased] success rates.”



Organizational Culture and Inclusive Practices

PROMOTING LEARNING WITHOUT LIMITS

Vision 2027's emphasis on creating an organizational culture inclusive to all manifests boldly in ChattState's student success plan. Dr. Ashford is forthright about the college's obligation to serve *all* students. "We are intentional and determined in our commitment to create an expansive, responsive, engaging, and transformative community where situational differences and life barriers do not hinder student access, completion, and sense of belonging," she says.

And ChattState walks the walk. Considering itself a "poverty-informed institution," the college, through philanthropic and community partnerships, provides bus rides through the regional transportation authority at no cost to students (and employees); maintains a student food pantry, the Tiger Cupboard, and campus gardens to alleviate food insecurity; supplies free laptops to at-risk students; provides access to emergency funds, and is poised to open a free student health center on campus. Many of these benefits came to fruition after ChattState implemented an annual financial student wellness survey that revealed significant need. "We knew that there was a population that we serviced ... and [that] there was a population out in our community that we were not reaching that ... were living in the

crisis of poverty," says Dr. Williams. "And so, we just started talking through all of the supports that were necessary."

Again, the college called upon ATD Network institutions for guidance. "We ... [looked to] ATD Network colleges that had done some of this work around the culture of care ... and just started thinking through how to implement those similar structures with us here," Dr. Williams shares.

Dr. Bennett emphasizes the importance of destigmatizing services aimed at easing financial burdens and implementing them universally (and, therefore, confidentially). "If you're a student at ChattState, you have access to these services, regardless of what your personal circumstances may be," she states. "We care about *all* students, and we want them to have access to all of these services without having to self-identify as someone who is struggling. It just changes the way that we do college, and everyone benefits."

According to Dr. Norton, being poverty-informed and inclusive sometimes means taking bold steps. "Part of our vision is learning without limits," she shares. "I think we are just courageous and not looking at limitations."

Teaching Excellence

COMMITTING TO SUCCESS IN THE CLASSROOM

Of course, the financial strains on college students stem from sources well beyond basic needs. Required expenditures more directly tied to education are also a hindrance to many students. One of the measures ChattState has taken in the realm of teaching and learning addresses the financial burden of course materials: the adoption of affordable learning resources (ALR). Very similar in concept to free open educational resources (OER), ALR at ChattState refers to course texts and resources that are \$50 or less. With the goal of ensuring that 85% of the top 20 highest-enrolled courses within the next year use ALR, ChattState is currently at around 50%. "We're taking it to scale pretty quickly," notes Dr. Williams.

ChattState's work towards providing affordable learning resources builds upon previous work with ATD on OER. In 2022, the Tennessee Board of Regents partnered with ATD to prepare and support college faculty with professional learning around OER courses. ChattState hosted a two-day Summer Institute on Open Educational Practices for faculty and staff from eight colleges across the state as the formal launch of the ATD/TBR project.

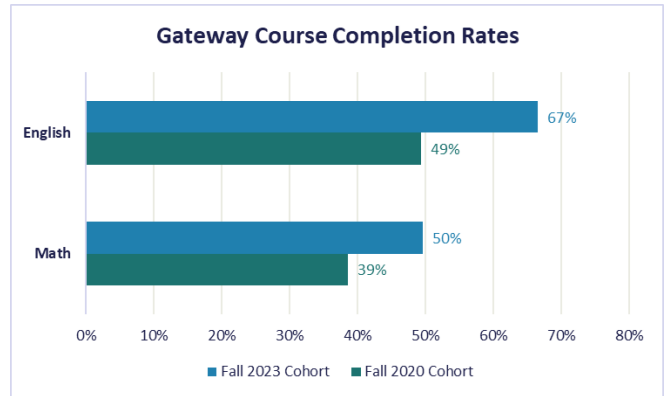
In the 2022–23 academic year, the first year ALR was implemented at ChattState, the effort led to an estimated savings of \$944,635 for students. The college's ATD teaching and learning coach, Dr. Michael Bates, predicts immense success from the reform: "I think, probably in the next three to five years, [ChattState] will be likely a leader in [ALR] because of the commitment from the president and execution from the staff and faculty leading this work," he prophesies. Faculty regularly host workshops through the college's teaching and learning center to share proven instructional strategies and approaches around ALR — as well as shortened academic terms, other reforms, or general pedagogy — with colleagues.

Another boost to ChattState's success in the classroom is the redesign of highly enrolled courses. In addition to injecting the College Success Class with a greater emphasis on career assessment and exploration of pathways that lead to economic mobility and jobs that pay at least family-sustaining wages, the college has undertaken significant reforms pertaining to gateway courses in English and math, resulting in a 9.5 percentage point increase in the completion rate of these two courses from the fall 2020 cohort to the fall 2023 cohort.



With an explicit focus on the successful completion of gateway courses, *Vision 2027* calls for a co-requisite model that places students in supplemental learning support classes — complete with embedded tutors — alongside their college-level courses. Every effort is made to provide students the same instructor for the support class as they receive for the college-level class. Assessments of student success in gateway English and math courses show that those utilizing academic support services in the writing and math centers achieve better outcomes than those who do not. Therefore, in addition to online tutoring that is available 24/7, the support centers now boast additional staff and are accessible six days per week.

For gateway English, specifically, which saw a 17.2 percentage-point increase from 49.3% to 66.6%, the college consolidated two required three-credit support courses — in reading and writing, respectively — into one three-credit course, thereby reducing the course load (and the cost). In addition, an innovative essay submission process allows students to electronically submit assignments for feedback before meeting with a tutor. Gateway math completion rates, which jumped 11 percentage points, from 38.5 to 49.5, were aided by a data-informed policy, implemented in 2021, that called for math support courses to be exclusively taught in person.



The success of reforms implemented around teaching and learning is showing promise too among students developing essential college-level academic skills — a population that composes approximately 45%–48% of ChattState's student body. Administrators credit the improvement, in part, to a concerted effort in the hiring process to acquire faculty who are not only adept at teaching both support courses and college-level courses but who are committed to and invested in supporting *all* students.

Financial Stewardship

INVESTING IN STUDENTS

At ChattState, financial stewardship is not just about balancing budgets; it's about making strategic investments that directly support student success. "We make it very clear in our strategic

planning that we put our money towards what's important," Dr. Ashford explains. "We're really aligning the work, not just across the academic and student support divisions but also across the financial areas — because they are all related to the work of the strategic plan." She praises ChattState's business officer, Susan Joseph, who, though relatively new to her position, is, according to Dr. Ashford, "completely on board with ensuring that the priorities are funded."



Whether it's hiring an additional instructional designer to redesign classes for a seven-week term, revamping orientation and advising, funding a student health clinic, allocating funds to affordable learning resources, or investing in professional learning for faculty, student success efforts cost money. Dr. Ashford sees them as worthwhile investments.

"[She] recognizes that this work takes time, but it's valued by the institution ... [and] good for students," says Dr. Bates. "They really put resources into supporting faculty and students."

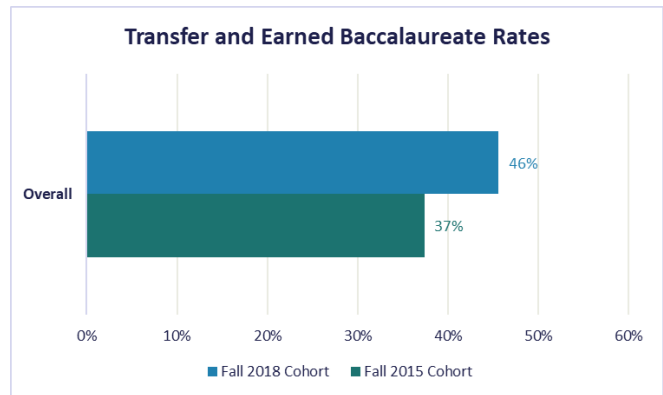
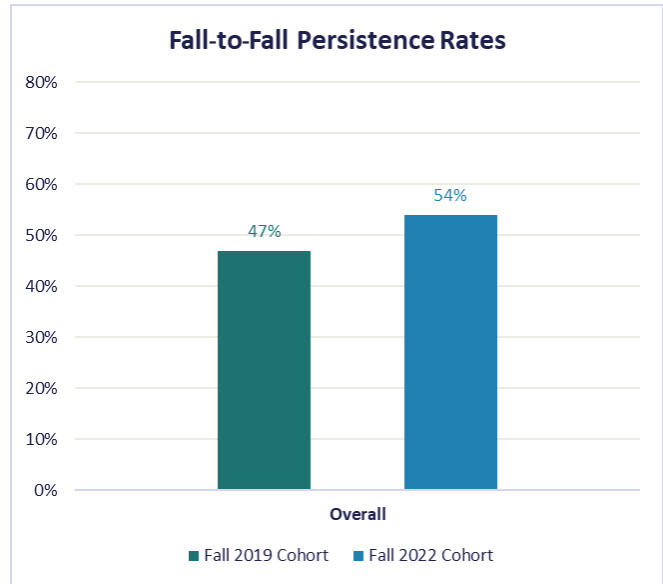
The Power of People

TURNING A VISION INTO REALITY

If *Vision 2027* conjures up any clear mental image, it is one of thriving students. Just three years into the plan, the reforms that it has spurred have resulted in significant progress in overall success metrics. The credit completion rate jumped from 54.6% among 2020's fall cohort to 66.4% among 2023's fall cohort — a striking increase of 11.8 percentage points. Also impressive, the fall-to-fall persistence rate from the fall 2019 cohort to the fall 2022 cohort saw a 7.1 percentage-point gain.

And thanks to the strategic plan's focus on creating college-to-university agreements, ChattState's meticulous work in outlining the courses needed to complete a Tennessee Transfer Pathway — as well as pathways to other colleges and universities with whom the college has articulation agreements — has led to an 8.2 percentage-point climb, from the fall 2015 cohort to the fall 2018 cohort, in the rate of students who transfer and earn a baccalaureate degree within six years of matriculating.

Given the immense influence of *Vision 2027* in forging ChattState's path forward, it can be easy to forget that without the people behind the vision, the plan is just words on a page. As ATD coach Dr. Garcia readily points out, even the best laid plans are meaningless unless executed by the right individuals. "It starts with people," Garcia says. "When you have specific strategies and techniques and efforts, all of that is fine in the abstract. But ultimately you need people who believe in it and who are willing to put in the time and effort to try to make it happen, even if obstacles emerge."



Fellow coach Dr. Bates says he clearly sees the motivation behind the hard work of the people at ChattState who are carrying out the vision. "They are very focused on doing right by students. I've seen that with just about every faculty and staff member we've spoken to and certainly the leadership," he states.

Clearly, ChattState has a winning combination of people who share a common understanding of their student success vision. Through their seamlessly coordinated collective action, they have breathed life into their strategic plan, as if lifting the words from its pages with the force of their commitment and infusing them with the power to create lasting change. It's a group effort that is not missed on Dr. Ashford. "I have never worked anywhere where it felt like everybody was on the same page like we are now," she shares.

And, undoubtedly, that page is one from *Vision 2027*.

