Achieving the Dream

Connecting Access and Credential Attainment to Economic Mobility and Community Vibrancy:

Fifteen Colleges Test ATD's New Transformational Framework

Part of the Community Vibrancy Profile Series

# The Need for a New Strategic Framework for Success

At a time when higher education is under attack for its value and relevance, community colleges continue to educate nearly 44% of all undergraduates in the United States, including high percentages of first-generation students, working parents, part-time adult learners, veterans, and traditional students. Community colleges are significantly more affordable and geographically accessible than other colleges and, often, the only real option for many students. Community colleges also are a key component in a workforce development system that is more important than ever.

Today, community colleges are poised to move the 20-year-long student success movement to the next level by asking new questions about who is missing from community college campuses and programs that are preparing graduates for satisfying and sustainable careers. They also are aligning their programs closely with the needs of industry and communities to demonstrate the value of a credential to students and families. If there is any sector that can quickly win back public trust for the higher education enterprise, it is the more than 1,000 community colleges that are prized for their localness, student support, and accessibility as they educate nearly 9 million students.

This is a challenging time for these institutions. Despite some recent recovery, overall community college enrollment is just now back to pre-pandemic levels,[i] yet well below peak enrollments in the early 2000s.[ii] The U.S. Census Bureau points to an imminent demographic cliff, with ongoing downward adjustments to its long-term population projections, and many institutions are facing growing financial pressures.[iii] With more Americans questioning the cost and value of higher education, the overall picture has negative implications not only for colleges and universities but also for labor markets, which continue to face an ongoing shortage of skilled workers,[iv] particularly in middle-skill occupations,[v] and for the economic viability of communities, regions, states, and the nation itself.

However, a growing number of community colleges are responding to these challenges based on the view that there is no shortage of potential learners and workers who need opportunities to succeed in college and work. Community college leaders and staff must see their communities in new ways to better understand who their institutions are not reaching and who they must partner with to identify and serve those learners. By connecting their work with what the community needs, they can further extend college transformation.

Achieving the Dream (ATD) established a new logic model based on the premise that completion alone does not go far enough to ensure lifelong student success, which is tied to the well-being of the community. Community colleges must move to a broader definition of completion to include associate and bachelor's degrees as well as non-degree credentials. And their leaders must connect this broader understanding of completion to the overall return on student investment in education, as well as how the return on education translates into measures that lead to community vibrancy.
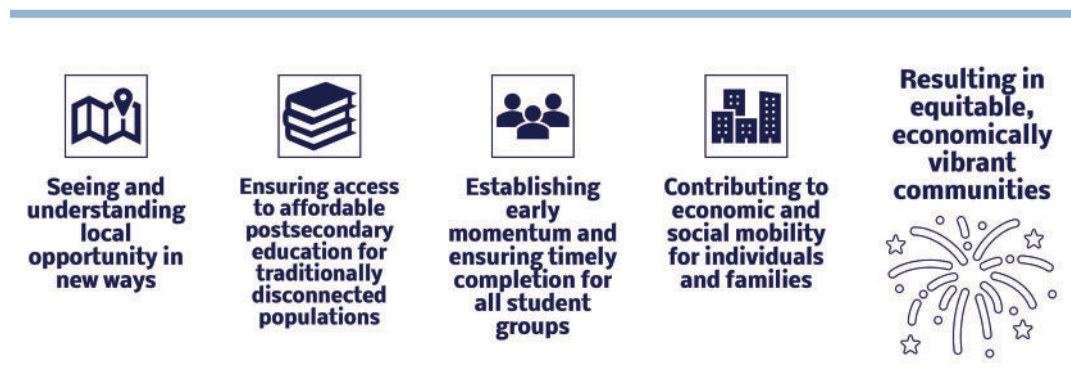
This approach is a key part of ATD's transformational new Community Vibrancy Framework, which is aimed at expanding access to higher education, creating greater social and economic mobility for more learners and their families, and helping communities flourish across a broad range of measures. ATD Network colleges are expanding the use of data from local, state, and national sources to create a more comprehensive picture of what the future might look like if community colleges reached their potential to serve more students in better ways as part of the drive to improve student success.

"The framework is a new roadmap for community college sustainability, a pathway for ensuring relevance with value, and a redefining moment for what the student success movement is all about," says Dr. Karen A. Stout, ATD's president and CEO.

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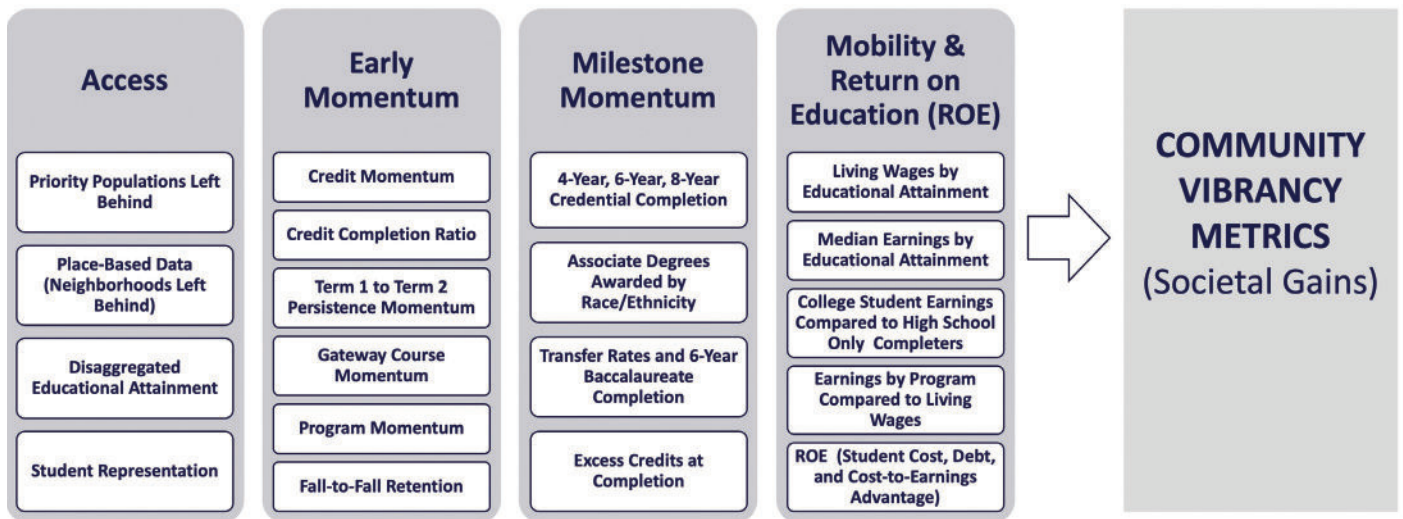
"The community vibrancy work is the next phase of the student success movement, answering the question, success to do what?" says Chris Whaley, president of Roane State Community College. "We want to help students get a job, have a family-sustaining career, and be a more well-rounded citizen. Ultimately, what we want is for enough of those folks in a community to have economic and social mobility so that we're not just lifting up one or two individuals, but, hopefully, with the work that we do in partnership with the local community, we are lifting up the entire community. We can't do that on our own, but we certainly have an important role and responsibility in that work."

The framework is:

- **A new model for institutional transformation.** The framework is designed to move student success work beyond completion and connect institutional transformation efforts with community impact. Now the backbone of ATD's approach to innovation, coaching, and service delivery, the framework helps colleges:

  1. Conduct intentional outreach connecting their work to populations left behind by postsecondary education

  2. Expand affordable access to provide financial support and keep student debt down

  3. Create early momentum by improving first-year progression and persistence

  4. Ensure completion of degrees and credentials of labor market value

  5. Spark upward mobility promoting economic and social advancement

  6. Establish vibrant communities with individual, family, and societal gains

- **An integrated approach to whole college transformation that drives community transformation.** By design, the framework brings together all key areas of student success reform, including the heart of the ATD approach up to now — early momentum and milestone momentum — into an integrated and aligned approach to better serve students and communities.
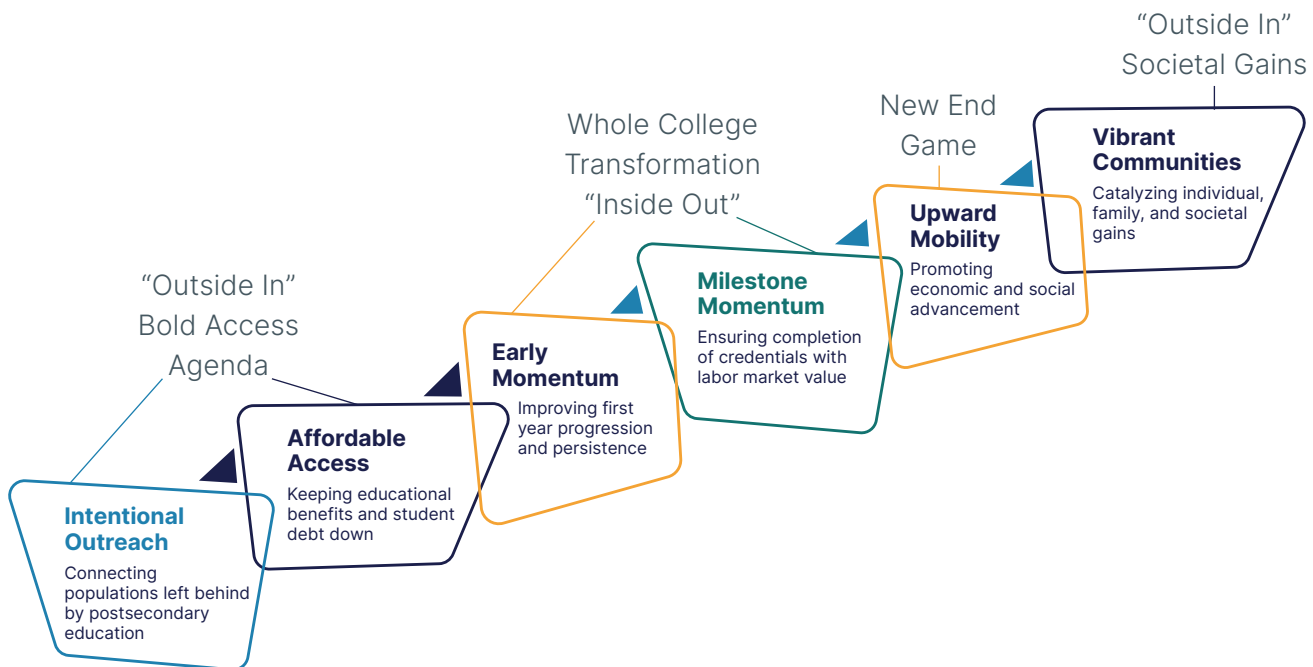
- **A new outside-inside vision of how colleges can think about their work to accompany the ongoing — and equally important — inside-outside approach.** The framework helps colleges anticipate and account for important changes by looking not just inside-out but also outside-in — deeply understanding students and how transforming institutions supports their success and influences communities, while understanding how community context influences and informs the work community colleges do to support student success. The framework holds college and community transformation in mind simultaneously to help community colleges become learning, credentialing, and economic mobility hubs that eliminate inequities in college and workforce outcomes. It is at the intersection of the inside-out and outside-in approaches where new possibilities abound.

Access	Early Momentum	Milestone Momentum	Mobility & Return on Education (ROE)	COMMUNITY VIBRANCY METRICS (Societal Gains)
Priority Populations Left Behind	Credit Momentum	4-Year, 6-Year, 8-Year Credential Completion	Living Wages by Educational Attainment	
Place-Based Data (Neighborhoods Left Behind)	Credit Completion Ratio	Associate Degrees Awarded by Race/Ethnicity	Median Earnings by Educational Attainment	
Disaggregated Educational Attainment	Term 1 to Term 2 Persistence Momentum	Transfer Rates and 6-Year Baccalaureate Completion	College Student Earnings Compared to High School Only Completers	
	Gateway Course Momentum		Earnings by Program Compared to Living Wages	
Student Representation	Program Momentum	Excess Credits at Completion	ROE (Student Cost, Debt, and Cost-to-Earnings Advantage)	
	Fall-to-Fall Retention			

- **A new way to see communities.** The framework guides colleges to identify through new metrics and data analysis who is missing in all phases of their work — from outreach and support to job development and credentialing. These potential learners could include households whose wages fall below the poverty line or are not sufficient to meet basic household needs, justice-impacted populations, working adults, student parents, Native Americans and tribal communities, Black and Latinx students and families, English language learners, and others. The framework also encourages colleges to bring new strategic partners that are willing to engage in boundary-spanning efforts to expand the institution's reach, capacity, and impact.

ATD has developed a comprehensive Community Vibrancy Curriculum and a suite of tools that include training materials, implementation guidelines and strategies, and useful data and information to help colleges assess market potential among opportunity populations, track the right institutional metrics, and monitor both workforce outcomes and community vibrancy metrics. The metrics also include data on graduates' mobility and return on investment (ROI) as well as five community vibrancy metrics: educational milestones of the community, quality employment opportunities, improved economic outcomes, improved social outcomes, and long-term societal gains that will be different in different communities.

COMMMUNITY VIBRANCY METRICS

Achieved Educational Milestones → Improved Quality Employment Opportunities → Improved Economic Outcomes → Enhanced Social Outcomes → Realized Societal Gains

Testing the Community Vibrancy Framework in the Field

Community Vibrancy Cohort Colleges

Alamo Colleges District

Durham Technical Community College

Elgin Community College

Fond du Lac Tribal & Community College

Grayson College

Harper College

Lee College

North Central State College

Northern Virginia Community College

Passaic County Community College

Patrick & Henry Community College

Pierce College

Roane State Community College

United Tribes Technical College

Western Technical College

Fifteen colleges that educate over 200,000 students and reflect the varying geographic and socioeconomic contexts of colleges in the ATD Network participated in the inaugural Community Vibrancy Cohort. They are testing what the new framework could look like in practice, refining the model, and providing valuable insights for community colleges in the ATD Network and beyond.

This report was written during the early implementation stages of the project and is meant to share information and lessons on how the institutions are using the framework to help ATD continue to iterate the model and tools to support implementation and help other colleges understand both the specific aspects and full scope of the framework. In some cases, colleges had previously or recently addressed key aspects of the framework or are connecting community vibrancy planning to their long-term strategic plans and will phase in aspects of the framework over time.

For the pilot, ATD provided coaches to help each institution work through the curriculum and data and build their own localized plan focused on community vibrancy. ATD also supported the cohort through convenings and a learning community to help bolster implementation.

"These 15 case studies offer a look into the future of community college reform," says Dr. Stout. "Each story offers a new vision for how our student success efforts must move beyond completion for our work to activate the kind of student and community transformation that we seek as a sector."

Community Vibrancy as a Strategic Planning Foundation for Greater Student Success

Interviews with all 15 presidents and other key leaders of the Community Vibrancy Cohort colleges reveal that the framework has been a valuable tool to inform and give new context for their strategic planning and student success agendas. At Western Technical College in Wisconsin, for example, senior leadership's work with the Community Vibrancy curriculum led to a commitment to approach its upcoming strategic planning process through a community vibrancy mindset.

"We already know the top of it's going to be community impact," President Roger Stanford says, with an emphasis on regional workforce, strategic leadership, and belonging. President Stanford envisions those three focus areas encompassing institutional priorities such as improving GED completion, persistence, and work with underserved populations — for example, justice-involved students or students with children — but not without richer input from community partners.

> " We were determining the success of the individual in college and after college but neglected the third leg of the stool — the cumulative impact of the college's work in the community. "

The framework also has informed the tools by which institutional leaders develop these plans. When leaders of Durham Technical Community College in North Carolina first encountered ATD's Community Vibrancy modules and metrics, for example, they realized that the metrics they used were missing crucial measures and drivers of institutional success that would carry weight in the counties the college serves, says President J.B. Buxton. "We were determining the success of the individual in college and after college but neglected the third leg of the stool — the cumulative impact of the college's work in the community," he says.

Together, these efforts can shape colleges' long-term direction. Pierce College used the Community Vibrancy Framework to inform its 2025–2032 strategic plan, which includes mission and vision statements that are community-focused and forward-looking. The college aims to not only continue robust efforts to bolster individual student success but also give its diverse community of learners a sense of belonging and agency to "thrive in a rapidly evolving world" (Pierce's mission) and enrich "our local and global communities" (Pierce's vision). "If we aren't paying attention to our communities and their well-being, we're missing the point," says Dr. Julie A. White, the Washington college's chancellor and CEO. "We must reclaim the notion that education is a public good."

Focusing on the Framework Components

These colleges have already begun putting the transformation model into action, focusing on different parts of the framework based on their local context and where they have gaps in their work.

Expanding Access Through Intentional Outreach

Many of the cohort colleges used the community vibrancy metrics to identify or target specific populations left behind by postsecondary education.

At Elgin Community College in Illinois, for example, leaders used the Community Vibrancy Framework to develop a better understanding of the important role that family and extended family play in many of its student communities, particularly its Latinx community. It has begun to conduct intentional outreach and bring key community partners onto campus to participate in planning and decision-making. Seeing the community in new ways, according to interim President Dr. Peggy Heinrich, was one reason Elgin partnered with ATD "as a means to ... create a shared understanding among our leadership of what we were trying to accomplish with our many new community-oriented initiatives."

Several institutions focused on outreach to justice-impacted populations. Alamo Colleges District in Texas, for example, reviewed the ATD Community Vibrancy Data Workbook for Bexar County, which led to an "oh wow" moment, says Dr. Mike Flores, chancellor of Alamo Colleges. The college realized that expunging students' criminal records could unlock the transformative potential of earning a credential while supporting "second chance" hiring initiatives by regional employers and multinational companies in its service area. At North Central State College, an analysis of national, state, and local data led to a similar reckoning: the 2% to 4% of the population that had been incarcerated in the past year or was currently incarcerated added up to "thousands of people" in the college's service area, according to Tom Prendergast, the Ohio college's executive director of strategic and institutional transformation. "That cemented it for us," he says. "This is a potential workforce that, if we can reach [it], we can create more workers in the community."

At Passaic County Community College in New Jersey, the Community Vibrancy curriculum has led to a redoubled focus on reconnecting adult learners with some college and no degree with education to improve both individual outcomes and the region's overall economic vitality. "The lost opportunity of having these folks who started college at one point in their lives out there made us more aware of the economic development potential," says President Steven Rose. "Community vibrancy reinforced a lot of things we had taken for granted and had been doing for a long time [and] reiterated their importance to our college." In similar fashion, Elgin and Pierce College have both used data to target Asset Limited, Income Constrained, Employed (ALICE) populations, households that earn more than the federal poverty level but are still unable to afford basic needs such as food, housing, transportation, child care, health care, and technology.

Affordable Access: Keeping Student Costs and Debt Down

Cohort colleges are working on ways to better inform students about the costs of college and resources, and some have recently eliminated student loans. They are moving career advising to the front end of the college experience, sometimes from the first day a student enrolls in the school, to help keep debt down, ensure students understand the wage gain potential in the field they are choosing, and promote careers that pay living wages.

> "The rent is due every day. We have to earn the credibility that we are a critical factor in community vibrancy."

Grayson College in Texas is seeking to create a local labor market ecosystem that begins with K–12 education and connects it to the college and the workforce. An aligned approach is particularly critical given the high-tech nature of the region's evolving labor market. "It turns out that third grade math matters if we're going to have engineers working at our plants," President Jeremy McMillen says.

Grayson has worked with every high school senior in its service area through its Promise Program, helping increase the FAFSA completion rate from 50% to 75% and the percentage of high school graduates going directly to college by nearly 15%. "They didn't all come to us, but a large number did," President McMillen says. "But we want to increase the overall educational attainment of the region," a universal community vibrancy metric highlighted in the ATD data workbook.

To that end, the college is exploring the possibility of creating an adult Promise Program in partnership with local workforce partners and a university partner.

"The rent is due every day," he says. "We have to earn the credibility that we are a critical factor in community vibrancy."

United Tribes Technical College in North Dakota is working to bolster institutional enrollment and inform students about resources that can help eliminate student loan debt. Today, 95% of UTTC students are Native American and eligible for the Native American Tuition Waiver, and about 80% of the student body is eligible for Pell Grants. Recently, the college decided to eliminate loans and use $1,800 of the Native American Tuition Waiver up front to create more affordable access and promote economic mobility. This ensures students have less cost, aren't scared off by potential debt, are more able to attend college, and won't incur student loan debt that can negatively impact their economic future.

Creating and Sustaining Momentum

Cohort colleges are also using the Community Vibrancy Framework to focus on the student experience, from enrollment through completion and into the workforce. This is at the heart of the decade-long ATD approach, yet it now goes deeper with a focus on ensuring that the program portfolio (degree and non-degree) and curriculum learning outcomes align with the needs of industry and communities.

Harper College in Illinois is using the framework as a catalyst to reinvent the first-year experience as the first step in creating what Dr. Avis Proctor, the college's president, calls "an inescapable new model for student success." Beyond building a new first-year experience, the college is sticking to key milestones from its previous work and connecting these "inside-out" measures looking at how students move into and through colleges and programs to an "outside-in" approach to community vibrancy. The college's research shows that students will graduate at a 75% rate if they complete five milestones of student success by the end of their first year. These include everything from selecting a major and having an academic plan to completing gatekeeper courses in English and program-specific courses in college-level math, as well as earning 24 credits if full time or 12 credits if part time.

Harper has introduced new measures of institutional performance, including indicators that address post-graduation student success, and is working to ensure that its academic portfolio is serving student, industry, and community needs. "We wanted to make sure that we are giving the best quality of education possible, not only in the classroom, but also their student experience," says Dr. Proctor. "Have we made a difference in how they see the world and the role that they play in it to be contributing members of society?"

As a technical community college, Western's community impact is focused first on career and technical education (CTE) programs with clear connections to regional employers. The college recently completed an intensive three-year effort to revise its curriculum for seven-week sessions and infuse community needs for a simple reason: "If we can connect students to the community and give them exposure to employers, they'll stay in this beautiful community we have," says President Stanford.

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More than 400 staff and faculty members participated in aligning Western's entire curriculum — more than 1,000 courses — to incorporate community- and work-based learning experiences.

Elgin Community College also is working to ensure that the credentials it offers are of worth and to identify areas where the college needs to establish programming in industries and communities where there is current or predicted future job growth.

Promoting Social and Economic Mobility

All of these efforts serve an end goal of community vibrancy — the economic and social mobility of those who live and work in a college's service area. At Roane State Community College, for example, leaders reviewed community vibrancy data for answers on how to improve opportunities for the rural region's residents, focusing on Morgan County, the part of its nine-county service area across Eastern Tennessee with the highest poverty rates and the highest percentage of 16- to 24-year-olds who are neither in school nor working. The college convened 35 county leaders to explore ways to attract new business, enable remote digital jobs, and drive regional economic development. "This is the work of a community college," says President Whaley. "This is the community part of our name."

Fond du Lac Tribal and Community College is connecting its "inside-out" approach on student success metrics to an "outside-in" approach, looking closely at labor market data to inform student advising, program relevancy, and new program development — all of which are important for reaching upward mobility. The college is building on a partnership ATD developed with Lightcast, a global labor market analytics company, to create an environment that makes students more aware of regional labor market conditions, particularly availability of jobs. Fond du Lac is now providing all students with career data from the moment they enroll and throughout their time at the college. The college will use data as part of its metrics of student success to be "more deliberate on how we advise our students, how we promote our majors and job placement information, and how we make decisions on adding new programs," says President Anita Hanson.

While Durham Tech is seeking to ensure that all graduates earn at least median wages in their fields, a key strategy for moving forward might be to focus on influencing employment rates and livable wages among key populations that would further drive interest in the college's certificate programs with community partners. One such partnership, the BULLS Life Sciences Academy, may provide a template for the kind of work that could be done on a larger scale across many fields, President Buxton says. The program aims to move individuals who are 18 to 25 — the majority intended to be people of color who are not in stable employment or stable educational situations — into the life sciences. After completing a four-month process technician credential, workers can secure jobs that pay $40,000 to $50,000, which, according to the ATD Community Vibrancy Data Workbook, is a sustaining wage in the region.

The life sciences recruits brought on board by community partners receive $10,000 living stipends and are organized into 25-member cohorts that operate at different times of the year. Durham Tech and its partner Made in Durham provide wraparound support and help students move through the curriculum with the assistance of success coaches who also connect the learners with job opportunities in their field.

Supporting Vibrant Communities

Cohort colleges have learned through the Community Vibrancy curriculum and coaching to take a broader view on impact, recognizing that by catalyzing individual and family returns on education, they can influence their communities' overall vitality.

> "We're coming to understand the need to serve communities we are not serving as well as we need to.

Northern Virginia Community College (NOVA) saw in the framework a reaffirmation of the need to participate in broader efforts to improve overall community outcomes, especially for residents in poverty-impacted neighborhoods.

"We do a lot of work in understanding who our students are and what supports they need," says Dr. Anne M. Kress, president of NOVA. "As part of looking at the data more closely, we're coming to understand the need to serve communities we are not serving as well as we need to."

At Grayson College, leaders are using the framework to create an entirely new local labor market ecosystem to support the dramatic shift in the regional economy as the semiconductor industry prepares to build

multibillion-dollar plants in North Texas. The community recently approved a $456.5 million facilities bond tied to supporting the next-generation talent pipeline, which benefited from planning and case-making based on the Community Vibrancy Framework. "We're talking about cities doubling their population in the next five to 10 years," says President McMillen. "We're grappling with what it means to be a vibrant community and to be prepared for the future community we'll have."

In rural Southside Virginia, Patrick & Henry Community College used the Community Vibrancy Framework to respond to fast-changing demographic and employment shifts that are reversing the region's longstanding economic challenges with an emerging advanced manufacturing base. At the same time, it is identifying ways to bring back the 20% of the region's population who travel across the state line to North Carolina for work, ensuring that its community will grow even more vibrant as the college expands "our lens of economic mobility, economic viability, and the work we have to do in the community accordingly," says Dr. Greg Hodges, president of Patrick & Henry. "This is the work … If there's going to be transformation, it's going to rest on our shoulders to make it occur."

Lessons Learned

While the work continues at the 15 cohort colleges, their leaders point to a growing understanding of the value of the community vibrancy approach and how the framework can be implemented in ways that support all institutions, students, and communities.

OUTSIDE-INSIDE

The following lessons address how community context influences and informs the work community colleges do to support student success. These lessons focus on the parts of the framework that address access, mobility, return on education, and community vibrancy metrics.

Start With Intended Community Outcomes in Mind

As with most planning, presidents say that it is crucial to identify intended community outcomes early, as the biggest goals can be a useful tool to organize planning to drive results, and the process of goal setting is one many people can participate in to better understand the purpose of the work. "Community vibrancy positions the college as the economic engines of their respective communities, and it provides a matrix of metrics and a nomenclature that allows leaders to clearly and succinctly articulate the institutional 'why,'" says Dr. Hodges, president of Patrick & Henry. "It is our true North Star."

Bring the Community Voice in Early

Involve the community in the planning process. The presence of a plan is a vehicle to connect with funders and the community about what the college is capable of doing and how it can move to the next level of success, including how to address important needs based on workforce data and individual student perspectives. "For tribal colleges, the activity is crucially important to complete as a community, because the majority of people who need to be involved will come from the tribe itself," notes Leander "Russ" McDonald, president of United Tribes Technical College. Harper College seeks involvement of community leaders in the planning process by inviting heads of organizations to serve as facilitators, panelists, and respondents in community dialogues and on issue-oriented panels and by asking them to respond to specific community-related goals. Municipal leaders, including village managers, are particularly helpful in identifying gaps in services and supports and identifying creative solutions to close them. In determining where to start, Durham Tech's President Buxton suggests asking community leaders, "What's a real metric that we all share, that makes sense for us, and that we would want to organize change around within the college?"

See Local Opportunity in New Ways Using a Data-Informed Approach

Through their work with the Community Vibrancy curriculum, college leaders examined data on everything from postgraduate outcomes and bachelor's degree attainment to regional incarceration rates. The result was eye-opening for presidents and sometimes disheartening, revealing that education isn't worth the same thing for everyone. They suggested the following:

Use data to identify opportunities across groups that are underserved to recognize how transformational work within the broader community can also meet existing institutional objectives — and to recognize when the community is quickly evolving. Colleges can look more deeply into key subgroups they serve or those that have been off their radar, such as ALICE populations.

Seek richer data sources. Participating college leaders not only drew from new national and local data sources as part of the Community Vibrancy curriculum but also identified gaps in data that constrained their ability to understand their populations. Along with institutions near state borders unable to access nearby labor market data, others found gaps within their own statewide longitudinal data systems and other internal and external sources. Many are working to refine their own data collection practices. Fond du Lac uses its own graduate follow-up survey to track related job placements, specific employer placements, and clearinghouse reports to measure transfer results and successes. To understand postgraduate outcomes, Western conducts surveys of graduates and uses third-party data.

Some of the colleges have started to pay closer attention to labor force participation for 18-to-64-year-olds who are not in the traditional workforce and difficult to track. At Patrick & Henry, that includes people working in the informal and gig economies. Even so, the region's employment engagement rate had fallen to between 55% and 60%, meaning that 40% to 45% of eligible workers were not showing up on payrolls anywhere.

Cast a narrower net. Most colleges have already identified underserved populations, but community vibrancy data helped leaders identify even more specific populations and develop narrowly focused strategies to reach them. "Previously, we were canvassing with a wide net and hoping [students] got caught up with it," Patrick & Henry's Dr. Hodges says. "But now we're being much more deliberate and throwing the net specifically in their direction."

Work with local leaders and partner groups to confirm and understand the data. Roane State learned that available data isn't always accurate and could conceal underlying realities. For example, a seemingly high homeownership rate of 81.5% masked the fact that the housing stock was old and not in livable shape because elderly residents, who make up 20% of the population, could no longer afford the upkeep. Similarly, while the data shows that more than a third of 16- to 24-year-olds are not in school and not working, the county has a near universal high school graduation rate of 99.1%. The county's hidden problem is not 16- to 18-year-olds not in school but what happens to graduates who don't go on to postsecondary education, with a college degree attainment rate (19% of adults with an associate degree or higher) less than half that of the state average (39%).

It's also important to ensure community partners feel confident with the data, says NOVA President Dr. Kress, who stresses the value of "cultural brokers" to ensure partners aren't intimidated by the data and have confidence that it is trustworthy.

Strengthen the Value Proposition

Establish a unifying language anyone can support. The language of community vibrancy requires that colleges talk about strengthening the local talent pool, increasing economic mobility, and helping communities thrive — something that everyone can agree on, whether they are inside or outside the institution or are champions or skeptical of higher education's value. Internally, the presidents noted, working through the Community Vibrancy Framework helps create a shared understanding among the leadership team and staff of what the college seeks to accomplish taking on an "outside-in" focus. Externally, demonstrating what the college seeks to accomplish in partnership with the community can help college leaders make a powerful case for their institutions that reflects each college's mission and values that go beyond workforce development.

> "Simply put, no one can argue with good paying jobs, family-sustaining wages, and vibrant communities."

Use community vibrancy to change the narrative. Amid "a lot of noise and counternarrative," colleges and their leaders "must reclaim the notion that education is a public good ... It's a message we've lost," says Dr. White of Pierce College. Dr. Hodges, president of Patrick & Henry, agrees, noting that community vibrancy offers a message that counters negative narratives about the declining value of higher education: "Simply put, no one can argue with good paying jobs, family-sustaining wages, and vibrant communities," he says.

Emphasize the college's history as a trusted partner in the community. College leaders said the goodwill that has already been established is a key part of the value proposition and provides leaders with credibility in connecting their goals with the broader community.

Reimagine and Deepen Community Partnerships

Partnerships are crucial to extend an institution's reach, expertise, and capacity to achieve greater impact. In the words of President Stanford of Western Technical College, "What we can do here is great. What we can do with our partners is even better because resources are limited."

Determine the extent to which current community partnerships are having the desired impact. Institutions often began thinking about partnerships by evaluating capacity — both of their own college's ability to work with partners to align and deliver improved services and the readiness of those partners to engage in collective impact. The Community Vibrancy curriculum helped college leaders recognize that existing partnerships and services delivered with community partners were typically too narrowly focused to deliver collective impact. Dr. Lynda Villanueva, president of Lee College, uses the example of astronauts — all of whom must understand each other's roles well enough to work together in challenging circumstances — to describe the "shared mental model" needed to drive community change. "You need a deeper connection to create a vibrant community," Dr. Villanueva says.

Many institutions systematically sought to identify gaps and find ways to make partnerships more intentional. "[Make] sure that partnerships are not simply transactional or solely focused on referring students for supports," Western's President Stanford says. Elgin Community College, for example, is working to create a college-wide program that matches the specific expertise and focus of college leaders, faculty and staff, and programs with community needs. Some leaders also focused on building work around local people from the college and service providers who have already established strong relationships built on trust.

Work collaboratively with peer colleges. "It doesn't make sense for all of us to reach out to the same organizations," Dr. White of Pierce College says. "If the colleges were serving all the folks in our region who could use advancement and a family-sustaining wage, none of us would have an enrollment problem if all those families and communities are engaged."

Shift the Mindset From Completion to Post-Completion and From Post-Completion to Community Impact

Colleges involved in the cohort sought to shift institutional and student mindsets about success from graduation to post-completion measures of mobility and, ultimately, the well-being of the community.

"Students need to know the [return on investment] of their education and career paths, and how to get the most out of the educational experience," says President Hanson of Fond du Lac Tribal and Community College. "This comprehensive focus on careers that pay family-sustaining wages helps send a message to current and potential students that the college's technical programs are tied to thriving careers, that each step requires mastering specific skills and knowledge that are part of their programs, and that the college is invested in each student's success. And with its AS and AAS degrees, the college needs to ensure that its students are not taking any job but are able to find success in good-paying careers."

Colleges also are working with industry to ensure their programs are aligned with what industry needs, removing programs that are not and starting new ones where needed. Fond du Lac seeks to be "more deliberate on how we advise our students, how we promote our majors and job placement information, and how we make decisions on adding new programs," President Hanson says.

"We're trying to find some niches for our students, including building connections between employers and program graduates," says President Rose of Passaic County Community College. "If they're getting $25 an hour and we can get it so they're earning $30 an hour, that little edge is ultra valuable. This emphasis on sustaining wages coincides with the emphasis on economic mobility for individuals and families within the Community Vibrancy Framework."

> "This comprehensive focus on careers that pay family-sustaining wages helps send a message to current and potential students that the college's technical programs are tied to thriving careers."

Establish outcome measures that are workable and can be agreed upon. One of the hardest economic outcomes to evaluate, notes Durham Tech's President Buxton, is the effectiveness of the institution on the wages and employment of students who have "some college" — students who attended the institution over the past 10 years but who did not necessarily graduate or complete. The percentage of those students who earn more than an individual with a high school diploma is often not nearly as high as one might expect, he says. Durham Tech has been exploring what students with some college studied and where they find themselves in the local labor market. "We're looking at where our students have been matched with degree programs that don't suit them and what programs actually deliver better results in this regional market versus where they're enrolled, particularly for students from particular racial and ethnic and socioeconomic backgrounds." A key strategy for moving forward might be to focus on influencing employment rates and livable wages among key populations, which would further drive interest in the college's certificate programs with community partners.

INSIDE-OUTSIDE

The following lessons focus on internal matters such as how transforming institutions supports student success and influences communities. These address the parts of the framework that advance early momentum and milestone momentum, internal strategy, and capacity building and restructuring.

Build Internal Support

Signal the importance of the effort. At Alamo Colleges, for example, Dr. Flores purposefully identified the leadership team as the central operating unit to advance the framework and designated key leaders throughout the institution to move the work along. "We made sure that the community vibrancy work was elevated within our colleges, recognizing its importance even as it may not be the central focus of the district's overarching strategic enrollment management efforts," Dr. Flores says. Involving students in cohorts navigating the Community Vibrancy curriculum, as NOVA did, can also reaffirm the centrality of student outcomes in transformation and help institutional leaders "to see the lives and experiences behind what we saw in the data," says Dr. Nathan Carter, NOVA's chief institutional effectiveness and inclusion officer.

Build board support. College governing boards play a key role in strategic planning, and there are few champions associated with the institution who are more committed and capable of seeing what will have an impact on the community. Durham Tech's President Buxton suggests involving board members in thinking about three or four areas where the institution might be able to take on a community-facing issue that speak to the kind of impact the institution wants to have on the local community.

Point to direct benefits to the institution. At Grayson, for example, the Promise Program has led to a 35% increase in high school students going directly to the institution, and other presidents highlighted the importance similar of "win-win" messaging. "We can be a little more deliberate about understanding not only the benefits to our communities, but to ourselves," Passaic's President Rose says. "All institutions are looking for new markets, and getting [nontraditional] students back on our campuses is going to help our communities and our own bottom line."

Measure Program Relevance and Value

Connect internal metrics to external needs to promote relevance. Colleges need to connect their current inside-out focus — how students move to graduation through early momentum metrics and milestone metrics — to outside-in perspectives from industry and other partners to think in new ways about program portfolio relevancy and value. Harper College's Dr. Proctor is rethinking who is sitting at the table offering advice to faculty on curriculum development and asking key questions: "Is every student getting the knowledge, skills, and abilities that they need? Are the expectations of our programs appropriate for what industry needs? Do we actually have the right programs, or do we have a gap?"

Emphasize Place-Based Planning

Identify what's doable for the institution and grow the work from there. The initial Community Vibrancy Cohort represented a wide range of community colleges — large, small, rural, and urban, as well as technical and tribal colleges. Their leaders found ways to connect the framework to their contexts and to affirm that transformation is a priority no matter the institution's size or focus. For Roane State Community College, which does not have the resources to take on all 10 counties in its service area at once, it made sense to apply a place-based approach to initiate the work. They started in a rural county with changes focused on more than just bringing in a company or two but connecting to the new digital economy, encouraging entrepreneurship, and understanding the culture. It might take time to get these elements in place and be worth starting small before expanding across other rural counties.

Inform and Align Internal Strategy

Integrating community vibrancy into planning is crucial for setting direction, communicating priorities to staff and stakeholders, and making effective forecasting. This will help the institution keep an eye on where it wants to go, according to many of the presidents who are using the Community Vibrancy Framework to develop their strategic plan.

Durham Tech's President Buxton says that the Community Vibrancy Framework has already breathed life into the college's aspirations and provided important focus. "It will give us a deeper insight into the work we're trying to do, how we think about it internally and message it, and about what tools we might be able to use to drive the work. We're going to be able to show the board some of this community vibrancy work and what we've learned from it, and where we think it might provide an agenda for us moving forward."

Pierce College is currently establishing an enrollment management plan that prioritizes reaching out first to students in the targeted ALICE population who haven't returned, because they are the learners most likely to need the support to re-enroll and continue their studies.

Self-Reflect on College Capacity Building and Restructuring

College leaders express the importance of taking time to reflect, collaborate across the campus, and tap into external expertise. They also say they need to reset expectations and recalibrate their work during planning and implementation of the framework. This includes, in the words of Harper College's Dr. Proctor, "addressing internal issues by looking externally to understand outside perspectives and needs and then reorganizing internal processes to meet those needs."

"Redirecting an institution to achieve large-scale social change requires leaders to have time to take time to reflect, collaborate across the campus and with the community, and to tap into external expert knowledge to move the college in new directions," says Dr. White of Pierce College.

"Leadership has to communicate the urgency to the rest of the college," says Roane State's President Whaley. "Every time community colleges recalibrate what's important — from focusing on enrollment in the last century to student success over the past 20 years to completion and today's wraparound services and community success — institutions need to reset the priorities and communicate the urgency and the benefit to the institution over the long haul."

It is also essential to ensure that leaders at all levels of the institution have the capacity to fully understand student and community needs and act on them. Northern Virginia Community College, for example, has introduced equity data summits for academic deans and plans to include community vibrancy components in forthcoming leadership training. Without these steps, Dr. Carter says, "the tone at the top may not resonate throughout the organization."

Based on the to-do lists of presidents currently in the cohort, here are some things that institutions say they have needed to consider:

• Setting effective goals and objectives for community impact

• Determining institutional capacity for improving community vibrancy using ATD's new Institutional Capacity Framework and Assessment Tool (ICAT 2.0)

• Identifying the college's role and span of control within the community, including whether the college will be the lead convenor of other organizations or serve as a strategic partner alongside others

• Invest in data resources and data literacy (labor market data, defining and measuring mobility)

• Assessing current community-serving programs and ensuring that the college and its partners have the capacity to meet their promises

• Identifying possible structural changes and new support systems

• Training staff and faculty to support and teach underserved groups

• Bolstering the fundraising office to be able to take on collaborative community grant seeking

• Addressing internal pay discrepancies before having conversations with other employment sectors

• Eliminating silos by linking the workforce development, noncredit parts of the institution with credentialing

• Identifying what a new first-year experience might look like

Look to the Future

Take the long view. Institutions need to plan in new ways for a sustainable future. "We are looking at the literature and using research, but I hope we won't have to wait another 50 years to build the leadership and capacity, community connections, and educational delivery modules that we need," President McDonald of United Tribes Technical College says. "That's why work like community vibrancy and Achieving the Dream that cultivate student success is so important in addressing the complex needs within our communities."

Conclusion

ATD is in the early phases of introducing the Community Vibrancy Framework and will continue to learn from colleges and communities about its potential to be a catalyst for student and community success nationwide.

The framework helps colleges expand access to previously underserved communities, strengthen early momentum and completion of degrees and credentials, establish greater economic and social mobility for their students, and connect these gains with stronger and more vibrant communities.

Community vibrancy encourages colleges to become boundary-spanning institutions. It is enabling college leaders to think bigger, build for the future, and break down barriers to student success. It expands our vision of what student success is beyond the credential to family-sustaining careers and community resurgence.

Community vibrancy is defined by the contributions colleges make to their communities that are a central organizing focus of student success. That means reimagining how community colleges work with a broad range of partners to create greater social and economic mobility for more learners and their families and help communities flourish across a broad range of measures. ATD looks forward to expanding this work across its network of colleges and beyond as it makes the framework the backbone of its approach to innovation, coaching, and service delivery.

Notes

i Current Term Enrollment Estimates: Fall 2024, National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, January 23, 2025, https://nscresearchcenter.org/current-term-enrollment-estimates/.

ii *Community college enrollment crisis? Historical trends in community college enrollment*, American Association of Community Colleges, 2019, https://www.aacc.nche.edu/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/Crisis-in-Enrollment-2019.pdf.

iii Dan Bauman, "Colleges Were Already Bracing for an 'Enrollment Cliff.' Now There Might Be a Second One," *Chronicle of Higher Education*, February 7, 2024, https://www.chronicle.com/article/colleges-were-already-bracing-for-an-enrollment-cliff-now-there-might-be-a-second-one.

iv Roberta Matuson, "The Forever Labor Shortage," *Forbes*, September 13, 2023, https://www.forbes.com/sites/robertamatuson/2023/09/13/the-forever-labor-shortage/.

v Lois Elfman, "Report Highlights Shortages of Credentials Aligned with Middle-Skills Occupations," *Diverse Issues in Higher Education*, September 5, 2024, https://www.diverseeducation.com/opinion/article/15683067/report-highlights-shortages-of-credentials-aligned-with-middleskills-occupations.

ATD's Community Vibrancy Framework brings ATD's strategic vision to life by supporting colleges in moving their student success work beyond completion and connecting their institutional transformation efforts with community impact. The framework helps colleges expand access to previously underserved communities, strengthen early momentum and completion of degrees and credentials, establish greater economic and social mobility for their students, and connect these gains with stronger and more vibrant communities. It also encourages colleges to become boundary-spanning institutions and is the backbone of ATD's approach to innovation, coaching, and service delivery. To test the framework and associated curriculum, ATD engaged 15 ATD Network colleges to be part of its first Community Vibrancy Cohort. This profile is one in a series that explores how colleges are using the framework and lessons learned to date.

Achieving the Dream

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