



FOND DU LAC TRIBAL AND COMMUNITY COLLEGE:

Encouraging Affordable Access and Helping Students Focus on Careers from Day One

When Fond du Lac Tribal and Community College (FDLTCC) joined the first Achieving the Dream (ATD) Community Vibrancy Cohort, the college recognized that its participation could be a powerful impetus to help address inequities within the college and the Native American community that it serves. College officials also saw their participation as a potential first step in improving student outcomes for its diverse student population and improving student economic mobility overall. In doing so, their work has helped other Tribal Colleges and Universities (TCUs) in the ATD Network.



As part of the Community Vibrancy curriculum, the college reviewed data gathered by ATD on FDLTCC students' success throughout college and after graduation. Careful attention to student economic data reinforced the college's concerns about how it can ensure student success after they leave FDLTCC. The college has emphasized return on educational investment, which is embraced by the Community Vibrancy Framework, data, and curriculum.

Fond du Lac Tribal and Community College was founded in 1987 as a close partnership between the Fond du Lac Band of Lake Superior Chippewa and the state of Minnesota. FDLTCC serves over 1,500 students. It became a Network college in 2017, a Leader College in 2021, and a Leader College of Distinction in 2024. FDLTCC also won ATD's highest award, the Leah Meyer Austin Award, in 2024.

"Some of the debt data on our students came as a revelation," says FDLTCC President Anita Hanson. "A good portion of student debt often begins with the process of transfer. An interesting finding lay in the borrowing activity of students beyond tuition and fees. A sizable portion of students have their tuition and fees paid for via Pell, state, or tribal scholarship support, but they often need loan support for other life necessities in support of their education."

Expanding Recruitment

The Community Vibrancy curriculum and conversations have led the college to be more focused on recruiting individuals who are emerging from poverty and addiction. The college has targeted students who are in community housing as well as those who attend any of four regional treatment centers within the college's 25-mile service area that serve Native Americans.

Roxanne DeLille, the college's dean of Indigenous and academic affairs, has a high level of social capital in these areas. Her outreach has included setting up and leading informational meetings once a semester that include brief college-awareness presentations highlighting FDLTCC's offerings, such as a peer recovery specialist certificate and two-year human services or chemical dependency programs. The dean's visits have resulted in one-on-one conversations after the presentation and have encouraged more students to apply and enroll.

Using Data to Inform Students of Career Options

The college is also seeking to address transfer results and using employment data to make students more aware of where the good-paying jobs and career pathways are.

The college's senior leadership has made it a priority to know if the college is setting students up effectively for transfer and providing them with the skills to finish their four-year degree. And with its AS and AAS degrees, the college wants to ensure that its students are not taking just any job but are able to find success in good-paying careers.

Among its changes, the college has committed to boosting the percentage of students who identify a bachelor's degree-related career while still at FDLTCC and who then transfer upon completion of their AA degree as the next step toward that career.

Building on a partnership ATD developed with Lightcast, the global labor market analytics company, for the inaugural Community Vibrancy Cohort, FDLTCC is working to create an environment that makes students more aware of regional labor market conditions, particularly the availability of jobs.

ATD provided a free one-year subscription to Lightcast for all of the colleges in the cohort to help them connect program health and relevancy to economic mobility. College leaders say the Lightcast partnership has boosted information access beyond government-reported job data to include regional job postings and just-in-time employment information, including which companies are currently hiring.

The college is now providing all students with career data from the moment they enroll and throughout their time at FDLTCC, and it posts comprehensive career information on its website. To nudge students to constantly be aware of the connectedness between what they study and future job prospects, FDLTCC is implementing Lightcast's career widget on all liberal arts department webpages in addition to the program webpages.

The college will update transfer guides and transfer pathways this academic year and will train frontline staff and faculty in 2025 through FDLTCC's institutional research director and Lightcast coaching hours.

Equally significant, FDLTCC 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.



LESSONS LEARNED

Other key lessons FDLTCC leaders identified include:

- **Help students think ahead.** Students need to know the ROI of their education and career paths, as well as how to get the most out of the educational experience. “Sometimes this may mean that less is more,” President Hanson says. “They may see that it will be better for them to earn micro-credentials and/or badging courses than degrees.”

- **Own the data about students even after they have moved on.** College leaders recognize that they need to follow students into the future to see if they are set up for success after community college. FDLTCC’s graduate follow-up survey is the primary tool for the college to track related job placements and specific employer placements. For transfer analysis, clearinghouse reports are run to measure transfer results and successes. FDLTCC wants to give students 150% time to degree completion, so the college plans to continuously review its latest transfer results annually to properly formulate strategies around transfer pathways and students’ academic planning.



This comprehensive focus on careers that pay family-sustaining wages, President Hanson says, 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 will help them find their way.

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.



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