


# PIERCE COLLEGE:

## Using ALICE Data to Address the Needs of Marginalized Communities and Build Institutional Sustainability

When Pierce College in Washington first engaged with the Achieving the Dream (ATD) Community Vibrancy Framework and curriculum, college leaders saw an opportunity to explore their community through a new lens and strengthen community engagement efforts. In particular, they felt a strong affinity with the data-based approach to increase access and opportunity for populations left behind by postsecondary education.





**Pierce College** serves nearly 13,000 students on two campuses in Pierce County, Washington. Pierce has been an ATD Network college since 2012, a Leader College from 2014 to 2018, and a Leader College of Distinction since 2018. Pierce also received the Leah Meyer Austin Award in 2017.

“It was really the ALICE data that grabbed us,” says Dr. Julie A. White, the Pierce College District’s chancellor and CEO.

ALICE (Asset Limited, Income Constrained, Employed) data focuses on individuals and families who earn above the federal poverty line, but still not enough to make ends meet and afford the basics of housing, child care, food, transportation, health care, and technology. While 13% of U.S. households earned below the federal poverty line, 29% are currently ALICE, with households of color being disproportionately ALICE.

“The data allow us to identify the students we’re serving from an intersectional lens. We are an Asian American and Native American Pacific Islander-Serving Institution and soon will meet the threshold

for becoming a Hispanic-Serving Institution. So we’re largely students of color, and those [racially minoritized subgroups of students] are where our institutional performance gaps are the greatest,” Dr. White says.

The intersectional ALICE lens helps the college focus more inclusively on students who are not just Black and Brown but are also single parents and poverty-impacted students. “[The data] give us a way to talk about our population that is inclusive of all those folks who have been left behind,” Dr. White adds.

Pierce has prioritized recruitment by expanding outreach to target particular ZIP codes that have high percentages of families meeting the ALICE criteria. This represents both a population-based and a place-based data approach as intended by ATD community vibrancy resource materials. The 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 most likely learners to need the support to re-enroll and continue their studies. In doing so, the customized Community Vibrancy Data Workbook supplied by ATD is informing the college’s strategic enrollment management priorities.

The college is also building relationships with organizations and individuals in ZIP codes with high ALICE population density, including the Puyallup, Nisqually, and Muckleshoot tribal reservations. To date, the college has met with each tribe to strengthen partnerships. Leaders from Pierce College have also been meeting and partnering with the county department of health, which serves similar populations, to reach trusted messengers and address health disparities.

## **New Strategic Plan**

Pierce College used the Community Vibrancy Framework to inform its 2025–2032 strategic plan, “possibilities. realized.,” which includes mission and vision statements that are community-focused and forward-looking. The plan, vetted with campus and community partners, aims to not only continue the college’s 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” (their vision).

“If we aren’t paying attention to our communities and their well-being, we’re missing the point,” Dr. White says. “We must reclaim the notion that education is a public good. It’s a message we’ve lost,”

and one that has been replaced with “a lot of noise and counternarrative.”

Pierce’s overall community vibrancy strategy is preliminarily outlined in the strategic plan:

“Pierce College builds and strengthens relationships with P-12 school districts, local business and industry, Tribal governments, non-profit and community organizations, and four-year colleges and universities to advance educational opportunities that align with economic mobility and social justice. We emphasize partnerships with organizations and community leaders that best support growth for low-income and Black and Brown students and communities.”



### **The purpose of all this work, according to Dr. White, is to:**

- Identify and articulate what makes Pierce unique. In a county that has three other community and technical colleges, “We need to do a better job of telling our story and how we contribute to communities.”
- Become more “in tune” with its community to better understand community needs and where the college can make a significant difference.
- Achieve long-term sustainability. In the future, community colleges will face increased competition from new providers and online colleges with no connection to the local community. In such a world, as Dr. White quotes ATD president and CEO Karen Stout, “We will need to leverage our localness to remain relevant and sustain the enterprise.”

### **Institutional Capacity Issues**

The college’s leadership understood that creating this deeper community engagement and creating and implementing a new strategic plan in a meaningful way required internal structural changes and new support systems.

Pierce College already had a senior-level position for equity, diversity, and inclusion, but when that position became vacant, the college aligned the position with its new efforts, reframing the job as a vice president for equity, engagement, and belonging.

Recognizing that the college needed new types of professional learning for staff and faculty, Pierce College will use its own faculty and a tribal college’s expertise to help the college serve local Indigenous communities. Pierce is working with the Muckleshoot Tribe to offer professional learning on the reservation to help faculty and staff indigenize their approaches to supporting and educating Native learners.

Dr. White notes that a key part of the work is expanding individual relationships into strong institutional connections and services. For instance, the college has been successful working with the tribes because staff members belong to the tribes and are advising and opening doors for college leaders. The college is considering building out a community ambassadors’ program, but first is thinking through contractual and logistical issues, such as how to pay for staff time and restructure roles to be of greater service to the community.

# LESSONS LEARNED

## Other key lessons Pierce leaders identified include:

- **Be a boundary-spanning institution.** There are different ways colleges can cross boundaries to bolster opportunity and economic and social mobility in the region. For Pierce College, which serves the large, geographically diverse, and densely populated Tacoma and Puget Sound region, there are other community and technical colleges in the area to collaborate with and powerful equity-focused nonprofits, such as United Way, that have anchored regional collaboration.
- **Plan the work and work the plan.** In advancing career vibrancy, under-resourced colleges can't do everything. It is important to have a plan that establishes clear priorities and concrete objectives and sticks to them.
- **Provide leadership support.** Redirecting an institution to achieve large-scale social change requires leaders take time to reflect, collaborate across the campus and with the community, and tap into external expert knowledge to move the college in new directions.
- **Encourage cooperation versus competition.** Work cooperatively rather than compete with peer institutions to reach and inform underserved communities about the availability of financial aid and the value of college. "It doesn't make sense for all of us to reach out to the same organizations," Dr. White 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."

**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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