WESTERN TECHNICAL COLLEGE:

Building Boundary-Spanning Approaches Through a CTE Lens

Western Technical College is using the Achieving the Dream (ATD) Community Vibrancy Framework for transformation to forge deeper relationships with partners across its 11-county service area. As it seeks to sustain opportunities for students and employers across its sprawling rural region, the effort "will set our direction," says President Roger Stanford. "It sets us up to say we've got to be a stronger stakeholder for all of our communities."

Bringing Community Partnerships to the Next Level

As a technical 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.

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. Meeting this strategic goal prepared the college to focus more deeply on community partnerships, and President Stanford saw an opportunity for Western's leadership team to rethink the nature of those relationships. Participating in ATD's Community Vibrancy Cohort "pushes us at the right time," he says, adding that the framework and associated curriculum provides a structure "for the senior leadership to dig in."

Data and Capacity Building

Western's senior leaders have used ATD's Community Vibrancy Framework to strengthen their capacity to serve as "anchors and stakeholders in the dialogue on collective impact for the greater good of the institution," President Stanford says.

Community vibrancy data and professional development provided by ATD expanded the team's thinking on how to measure the college's impact as well as the sources of data it needs to better understand student outcomes after graduation. Fortified by a Title III Strengthening Institutions Program grant, the institution is now looking beyond its traditional measures of student success to measures of community vibrancy. The college is disaggregating student success data, and the team is now looking at postgraduate surveys on employment and federal, state, and third-party labor market data to begin to analyze student return on education from their program completion. Ultimately, the goal is to build data dashboards that track economic mobility "and help us stay connected to our students," President Stanford says.
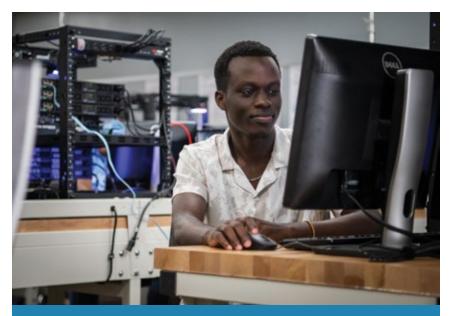
Through this work, participation in the Community Vibrancy Cohort has "re-grounded our senior team in our 'why' — our student success 'why' — and that broader conversation got us excited," President Stanford says.

Redefining Relationships

As a result, the leadership team is now thinking through how to document the college's relationships with its more than 60 community partners, including employers and community service organizations. "We've worked on those relationships, but we haven't defined what a partnership is," President Stanford says. "How are we making sure that we've mapped out that entire experience and ensure that we are acting jointly and in reciprocal ways through our partnerships with the community?"

The senior leadership also intends to approach its next strategic plan through a community vibrancy lens. "We already know the top of it's going to be community impact," President 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 want to engage the community on what those goals are," he says. "If we can identify what we believe are the best directions holistically, then we could ask our community, our workforce partners, and our students to determine what's most important and what our priorities are."

> "The vibrancy is that every organization in this community wants our graduates," he says. "We're really considered a community partner because their next jobs are directly in their neighborhood."

"Community vibrancy will lead our strategic plan," President Stanford adds. "I think it will speak to our communities and our employers. Doing this will help take us to the next level."

LESSONS LEARNED

Other key lessons Western Technical College leaders identified include:

- **Recognize the value of collective impact.** "The collective impact piece is really important to us," President Stanford says. "What we can do here is great. What we can do with our partners is even better because resources are limited."

- **Build real partnerships.** "Mapping out relationships with each of the college's community partners can identify strengths but also plays another important role — making sure that partnerships are not simply transactional or solely focused on referring students for supports," President Stanford says.

- **Develop richer data sources.** To understand postgraduate outcomes, Western conducts surveys of graduates and uses third-party data, but the Community Vibrancy Framework helped surface the importance of additional sources. "We need better data to truly know what our students are doing," President Stanford says.

- **Create campus-wide approaches to tapping community resources.** President Stanford says that individual departments or initiatives at Western are strong on the "who" (identifying students who need support) and the "how" (integrating external resources). "It's just not structured campus-wide," he says. For example, justice-involved education programs have rich partnerships with addiction recovery organizations in the community, he says, "but other units could benefit from that as well. What I'm talking about is us really defining those community partnerships and having those things accessible for all."

- **Connect community vibrancy to the institutional context.** The college's efforts to infuse community- and work-based learning into its curriculum reflect its CTE lens and the need to focus more broadly on employers as critical community partners, according to President Stanford. "The vibrancy is that every organization in this community wants our graduates," he says. "We're really considered a community partner because their next jobs are directly in their neighborhood."

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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