

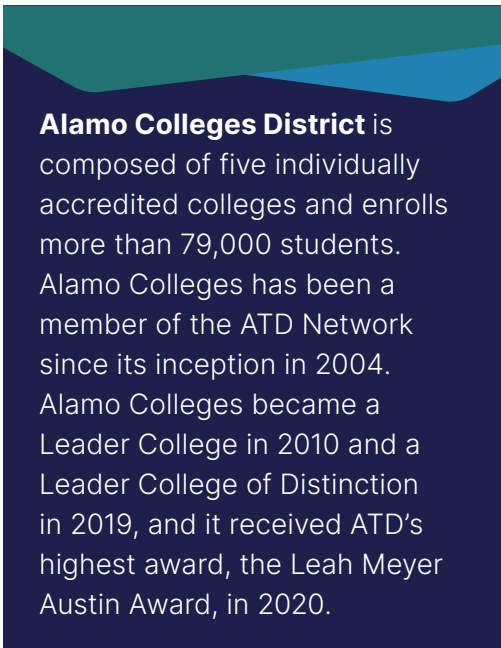


ALAMO COLLEGES DISTRICT: Transforming Lives Through Community Vibrancy and Expungement Initiatives

Ten years ago, when the Alamo Colleges District sought ways to address the unmet needs of its students, it would turn to a United Way resource guide and delegate the problem to a helpful partner.

But now — as part of its work through the Achieving the Dream (ATD) Community Vibrancy Cohort — Alamo Colleges is expanding its approach to supporting underserved populations, says Dr. Mike Flores, chancellor of the Alamo Colleges District and a member of ATD's board of directors.





Alamo Colleges District is composed of five individually accredited colleges and enrolls more than 79,000 students. Alamo Colleges has been a member of the ATD Network since its inception in 2004. Alamo Colleges became a Leader College in 2010 and a Leader College of Distinction in 2019, and it received ATD's highest award, the Leah Meyer Austin Award, in 2020.

"I think this is critical because our students are not isolated islands," Dr. Flores says. "We are actually in a comprehensive ecosystem."

Dr. Flores notes that the Community Vibrancy Framework gives college presidents a roadmap for embarking on this work. It connects the college's internal needs with community concerns by starting with a better understanding of the external systems and needs.

Addressing the Needs of Two Underserved Populations

Alamo Colleges is initially focusing on addressing the needs of two underserved populations. "We want to lift the recent immigrant and second-chance populations, particularly students impacted by the criminal justice system," Dr. Flores says.

While Alamo Colleges has launched a successful expungement pilot program for justice-impacted students, it is just getting underway in focusing on immigrant populations.

Dr. Flores says that the "oh, wow" moment occurred when Alamo Colleges discovered a powerful opportunity while reviewing the ATD-provided Community Vibrancy Data Workbook for Bexar County. By taking a single action — expunging students' criminal records negatively affected by their involvement with the criminal justice system — Alamo Colleges could open pathways to the middle class for more individuals and unlock the transformative potential of earning a credential.

"We are focused on helping individuals clean their records for things that have lapsed and been addressed but may still be on their record. Often, these are just oversights," Dr. Flores says. "We know that some folks may not have the means to hire attorneys or pay the high fees to be able to figure out who to go to and how their records can be expunged. We want to alleviate that burden from students who do not have the means."

Expunging records, says Julia Stotts, the Alamo Colleges Foundation's director of strategic planning and partnerships, helps students overcome the stigma associated with involvement in the criminal justice system and removes barriers to securing meaningful employment.

Expungement also helps to expand community economic development and supports corporate hiring efforts, Dr. Flores says. "Many regional employers and multinational companies that are part of the Texas Business Leadership Council, such as Toyota, want to hire 'second chance' individuals to have access to a larger talent pool than is available."

Identifying Those in Need

Stotts says that one of the most significant issues Alamo Colleges has faced is determining which students need help with expungement. "This is not collected on the state's higher-education application form. It doesn't ask, 'Do you have any type of interaction with the law that could have resulted in a criminal record,' which seems to be the most sensitive way to ask the question."

In trying to identify students with criminal records, Alamo Colleges discovered that this information was already being collected as part of the intake process at two of its college advocacy centers.

As part of this initiative, Alamo Colleges has partnered with Easy Expunctions, a company that offers a patented, automated expungement process. This service is now being implemented through Alamo Colleges' \$50,000 pilot program. The cost per expungement is \$500 and is guaranteed.



Through career and education pathway workshops, Alamo Colleges helps students explore their future career possibilities while providing a realistic view of their professional journeys. For those with justice involvement, Alamo Colleges provides information about expungement. It tells students that, as part of the pilot, Easy Expunctions will do a background check for \$10 and identify what is eligible and ineligible for expungement and what could become eligible after a waiting period. The college's career services team also integrates this information as part of its career-path advice for graduates who seek a particular license, sit for a professional entrance exam, or are in line for a teaching position who may be ineligible for that license or position because of their record.

Stotts notes that the earlier in life students begin the expungement process, the better.

According to Easy Expunctions, older adults tend to have lengthier records with fewer eligible charges for expungement. However, in the pilot, most of the students are younger. On average, 50% will have some information that can be expunged.

Alamo Colleges is also creating strategies to help students select the best career path and share their stories with potential employers during job interviews.

"This has helped students reclaim their story and their life because this information has haunted them for a long time," Stotts says.

Building Partnerships, Synthesizing Requirements

The community college district has partnered with the Texas Business Leadership Council, which has hosted workshops and built strong awareness of the importance of giving workers with justice impact a fair shot at a family-sustaining wage. Alamo Colleges has several partners, including the county adult probation and re-entry office, the city and county district attorney's office, the city economic and workforce development office, and community-based organizations and employers, including those that serve immigrant populations.

Alamo Colleges' academic success and student success teams have come together to identify which career paths and licensing boards require a background check and what their requirements are. The college plans to share the information it gathers with other colleges, nonprofit agencies, and the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board.

The Alamo Colleges leadership team will soon review a charter document that identifies a comprehensive model for serving students with justice impact.

The model identifies various supports — from housing to liaising with probation officers. As part of the charter, a task force will be formed to develop intentional support systems and partnerships to address the unique challenges faced by students with justice impact, empowering them to achieve equitable educational and career outcomes.

The goal is to establish a center on one of the campuses for people released from the justice system or with justice impact, potentially co-operated by Alamo Colleges and community partner organizations.

“I think over time, we’ll build that ecosystem that helps these individuals succeed,” Dr. Flores says. “ATD’s Community Vibrancy Framework and dialogue allowed us to connect seamlessly with business leadership groups and community partners. We’re part of the educational system and increasingly part of a human services and support system for our students.”

LESSONS LEARNED

Key lessons Alamo Colleges leaders identified include:

- **Signal the importance of the effort.** To launch the work, Flores purposefully identified Alamo Colleges’ leadership team as the central operating unit to advance the framework. Alamo Colleges designated its institutional research director and associate vice chancellor for community impact as the main points of contact and then appointed leaders, including directors or deans from the colleges, who convened advisors or team leads to host workshops, develop innovative pilots, lead conversations about helping learners with justice impact, and 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.
- **Use ATD’s credibility to build leadership buy-in.** At a board of directors budget retreat in the summer of 2024, Dr. Flores emphasized the importance of collaboration when the college’s leadership team presented its vision for supporting populations affected by the justice system. He noted, “The team made it clear that they were partnering with ATD, an organization well-regarded and trusted by both my board and district leaders.”

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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