

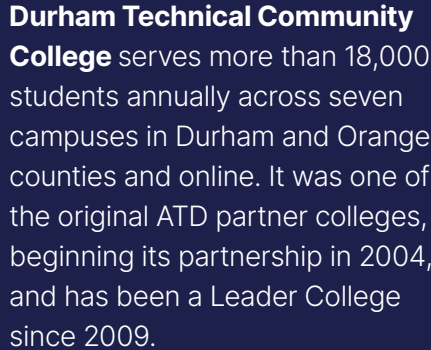
DURHAM TECHNICAL COMMUNITY COLLEGE:

Creating the Right Metrics and Partnerships to Demonstrate the College's Cumulative Impact

Many community colleges have identified new success measures in recent years. Typically, these focus on student outcomes: completion rates, whether a student enters the workforce or transfers, and, more recently, graduates' net earnings.

Durham Technical Community College's approach to measuring success has been a variation on this theme. The college's current strategic plan focuses on getting 60% of students to completion and 80% into jobs where graduates earn at least median wages in their fields.





Durham Technical Community College serves more than 18,000 students annually across seven campuses in Durham and Orange counties and online. It was one of the original ATD partner colleges, beginning its partnership in 2004, and has been a Leader College since 2009.

But when Durham Tech leaders first encountered the Achieving the Dream (ATD) Community Vibrancy modules and metrics, they realized that the metrics they used were missing crucial measures and drivers of institutional success that would carry weight in counties the college serves, says Durham Tech 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,” President Buxton says.

The college is just beginning to explore what it will measure as it goes about establishing a new strategic plan for 2026–2031, but 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,” President Buxton says.

When President Buxton next talks to Durham Tech’s board of directors, he will introduce some preliminary thinking for developing the college’s strategic plan, with overall community impact as a driver of the plan. “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.”

Metrics That Work for Students

The community vibrancy work is not only informing the overarching approach to strategic planning but also how the college thinks about the different student groups they serve and how they will measure success. “We have to determine the kind of variables and metrics that we think we can actually move,” President Buxton says. “Or, even if we don’t see movement in a year or two, as a lagging indicator it will be something that we know we want to organize around because it will help us do work at the college that will eventually move that needle.”

For example, he says, one measure might be child poverty rates. The college could show its impact on better educating the general population and helping promote more college-going among schoolchildren, but that would be a generic measure. The goal is to develop far more specific metrics that will show real impact, whether it be on child poverty rates or other measures.

One of the hardest economic outcomes to evaluate, President Buxton notes, is determining 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 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, President Buxton 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, ethnic, and socio-economic backgrounds.”



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 program has been successful because there is a clear credential that leads to higher pay. The life science 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.

President Buxton says the ability to demonstrate impact on a large scale is challenging — but choosing the right partners can help provide significant results that could lead to larger replication of the program into other fields, such as clean energy, which has high demand for workers.

LESSONS LEARNED

Other key lessons Durham Tech leaders identified included:

- **Integrate community vibrancy with (a) the strategic planning process and (b) efforts to bolster the community's understanding of institutional impact.** Integrating community vibrancy into planning is crucial to make effective forecasting possible, helping the institution keep an eye on where it wants to go. Similarly, connecting community vibrancy with strategic communications and high-level public affairs activities makes the work more significant and externally meaningful. Otherwise, it may seem as if the college is simply aggregating community engagement activities in one place for its own sake without connecting its value to elected officials, community leaders, and partners who can further extend the institution's impact.

"Ultimately, this is a mission-driven sector where people see themselves making an impact in their communities, not just the individuals coming out of their classes and getting jobs," President Buxton says. "We sometimes miss developing a way to talk about our impact on economic mobility. Externally, how you talk about your college's impact locally gets to the heart of your language, mission, and values. It is more than just workforce development."

- **Work with the local community, elected officials, and your major institutional partners.** 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?" He says that these conversations should begin early and subtly to remind the community about the institution's impact. Work with your local community in areas that make the most sense for them and where the college aligns. Getting your staff to help flesh out what you want to accomplish for the greater good is also important.
- **Build board support.** College governing boards play a key role in strategic planning, and there are likely few champions associated with the institution who are more committed and capable of seeing what's possible and what will have an impact on the community. 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 speaks to the kind of impact the institution wants to have on the local community.

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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www.AchievingtheDream.org

Contact us at info@AchievingtheDream.org or call (240) 450-0075

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