

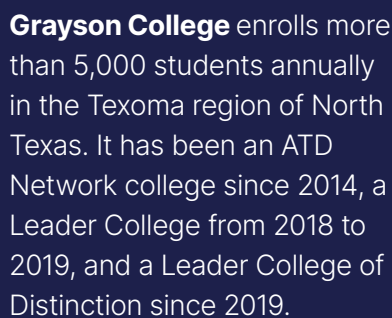


GRAYSON COLLEGE:

Responding to a Sea Change in the Local Economy

As the semiconductor industry prepares to build multibillion-dollar plants in North Texas, Grayson College is using the Achieving the Dream (ATD) Community Vibrancy Framework for transformation to support a dramatic shift in the region's economy.





Grayson College enrolls more than 5,000 students annually in the Texoma region of North Texas. It has been an ATD Network college since 2014, a Leader College from 2018 to 2019, and a Leader College of Distinction since 2019.

“We’re talking about cities doubling their population in the next five to 10 years,” says President Jeremy McMillen. “We’re grappling with what it means to be a vibrant community and to be prepared for the future community we’ll have.”

Credentials of Value for a Changing Labor Market

For much of President McMillen’s tenure at Grayson, the region’s economic picture was stagnant, bookmarked by the 2008 real estate crash and subsequent budget cuts. Now the potential economic impact of the semiconductor industry in the college’s service area — estimated at \$30 to \$40 billion — portends transformation in the community for decades to come.

“We will see a rapid shift in the economic base,” President McMillen says. Average household wages are already rising, but the rising cost of living is prompting some students to move out of the region.

To address these challenges, the college is redoubling its efforts to create credentials of value, supported by the state’s new performance funding mechanism and the Texas Association of Community Colleges’ Texas Success Center. While adding new programs for the emerging sector, Grayson leaders also recognize that every job connected to the semiconductor industry creates six to seven jobs in fields in which the college already offers credentials, including health care and law enforcement.

“We needed to rebrand and explain what this means for the community, then make a concerted effort to explain that to sustain this for our students, we need to have things to braid together to create a credential of value,” President McMillen says.

Making the Case for Growth

To meet these growing needs, the college used the Community Vibrancy Framework to develop its case-making for a \$456.5 million facilities bond, which was approved by voters in 2024.

“We used the background of the framework at the same time as we were doing this case making — it was an interesting place for us to land. We discussed what was needed to have a vibrant community,” President McMillen says. “We used language around building for growth and filling a talent pipeline without increasing the overall tax rate.”

The Community Vibrancy curriculum also reinforced the importance of deepening partnerships to support new talent pipelines.

“We want to create a local labor market ecosystem with [K–12], workforce, and our college tied together,” President McMillen says. “Every time we dug down into what these things mean, it’s about wanting to be a partner in a more

sustainable community and seeing how these things can connect to our work.”

An aligned approach is particularly critical given the high-tech nature of the region’s evolving labor market. “It turns out that third grade math matters if we’re going to have engineers working at our plants,” President McMillen says. “Because of the types of jobs coming here, we want to demonstrate strong collaboration as a network across K–12, our college, and university transfer.”

For example, Grayson has worked with every high school senior in its service area through its Promise Program, helping increase the FAFSA completion rate from 50% to 75% and the percentage of high school graduates going directly to college by nearly 15%. “They didn’t all come to us, but a large number did,” President McMillen says. “But we want to increase the overall educational attainment of the region,” a universal community vibrancy metric highlighted in the ATD data workbook.

To that end, the college is exploring the possibility of creating an adult Promise Program in partnership with local workforce partners and a university partner. Grayson has also added a vice president of community engagement who is tasked with “making sure we’re at the table early to learn what the new things are,” President McMillen says.

“The rent’s due every day,” he says. “We have to earn the credibility that we are a critical factor in community vibrancy.”

A “Larger Leap”

Grayson leaders are also focused on ensuring that economic growth benefits everyone. Through its work with the Community Vibrancy curriculum, college leaders examined data on everything from postgraduate outcomes and bachelor’s degree attainment to regional incarceration rates. The result, President McMillen says, was “disheartening.”

“Education isn’t worth the same thing for everyone,” he says. “How do we transform our community to make a case that an education is valued for all as opposed to just for some? That’s a bigger call, a larger leap.”

Grayson has three strategic planning goals: connect, commit, and complete. While they are all focused on attracting students and ensuring they succeed, they are a natural fit for the Community Vibrancy Framework.

“Students don’t come to us to complete their studies — they come to us to improve their ability to have an impact on their communities and families,” President McMillen says. “That makes it beyond the success of students, but how you turn your college into a powerful force for community vibrancy.”



LESSONS LEARNED

Key lessons Grayson College leaders identified include:

- **Use the college's history to demonstrate commitment.** Grayson's six decades of operation in its region gives the college credibility in connecting its goals with the broader community. "We're in a unique spot to be able to do that because of the history we have," President McMillen says.
- **Focus on what matters most in the college's local context.** For Grayson, rapid change in the region's economy provided a natural focus area for community vibrancy work. "There are a lot of options in the Community Vibrancy Framework," President McMillen says. "Making it work at your institution means the local context is important. You have an opportunity to define what those things mean in ways that are brilliant and beautiful."
- **Recognize the importance of data — and identify gaps.** Through its Promise Program, Grayson connected data from participating high school students and its higher education partners. At the same time, the college's proximity to the Oklahoma border means that critical pieces of workforce data aren't available.
- **Point to direct benefits to the institution to garner internal support.** At Grayson, for example, the Promise Program has led to a 35% increase in high school students going directly to the institution — as well as more who attend other institutions. "We're doing things in a way that backs up the community vibrancy branding, and we can point to those to explain why we're doing it," President McMillen says. "It helps build confidence."
- **Emphasize improving outcomes for all by setting the example.** Grayson leaders consider equal opportunities to share in the region's growth an essential component of community vibrancy. "We must come together as a community to amplify the voices of others and to ensure that every individual, regardless of their background or circumstances, is treated with dignity and respect," President McMillen says. At Grayson, for example, work focused first on building fair compensation plans based on experience. "We must be willing to do the work to get our own house in order to be a leader in the community. Together, we can create a more inclusive and compassionate world where everyone has the opportunity to thrive," President McMillen says.

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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