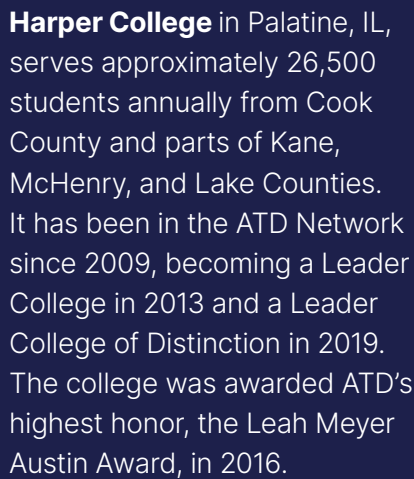


# HARPER COLLEGE:

## Creating an “Inescapable” Student Success Model from the First-year Experience to Post-Completion Outcomes

Dr. Avis Proctor, president of Harper College, says she and her team found in the Achieving the Dream (ATD) Community Vibrancy Framework a new way to view the college’s student success work and other strategic goals that ultimately serve community needs.





**Harper College** in Palatine, IL, serves approximately 26,500 students annually from Cook County and parts of Kane, McHenry, and Lake Counties. It has been in the ATD Network since 2009, becoming a Leader College in 2013 and a Leader College of Distinction in 2019. The college was awarded ATD's highest honor, the Leah Meyer Austin Award, in 2016.

Harper participated in the inaugural Community Vibrancy Cohort “to stay ahead of the curve in terms of innovation in our success agenda for our students and how we continue to equip faculty and staff in supporting student success,” Dr. Proctor says.

Specifically, Harper is using the framework as a catalyst to identify underserved groups to support, which currently involves reinventing the student first-year experience as the first step in creating a new model for student success. To achieve key institutional effectiveness measures, including indicators that address post-graduation success, the college is working to ensure that its academic portfolio is serving student, industry, and community needs.

### **Key Outcomes to Achieve by 2026**

An essential part of the college's planning was reviewing new data sets provided in ATD's Community Vibrancy Data Workbook. The data expanded the college's awareness of priority populations and labor market outcomes in Cook County. Dr. Proctor notes that the data review helped the college focus on community, economic mobility, and collective impact, especially as they prepare for their next strategic plan.

The goal was to identify measures that could “help accelerate the vibrancy of our community and inform the college's practices and reshape [and] readjust what the college does,” Dr. Proctor says.

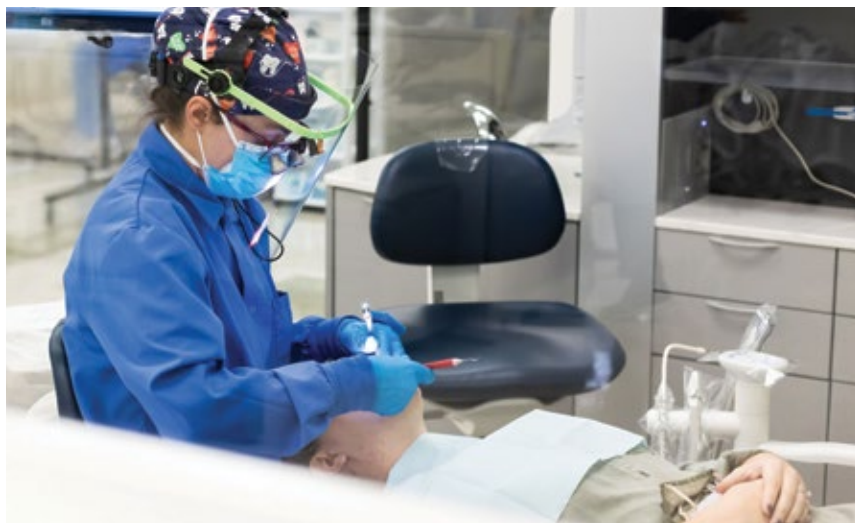
The Community Vibrancy Framework reaffirmed that reaching target institutional effectiveness measures of post-graduation success can contribute to the economic mobility of the community. The measures focus on five strategic areas of improvement that cover:

- Student enrollment
- Completion of gateway courses in mathematics and English
- Graduation rates and post-completion success (including satisfaction with their college experience and having stable employment with family-sustaining wages)
- Increased student financial support and faculty and staff diversity (indicators of support and inclusiveness)
- The financial well-being of the institution

Specific progress and performance data is shown on the college's [Institutional Effectiveness Dashboard 2026](#) for all to see.

## Creating an “Inescapable” Student Success Model

The biggest lift for the college likely will lie in its efforts to support specific student populations. They’re exploring which groups to focus on, including justice- and poverty-impacted students, and — as a newly designated Hispanic-Serving Institution and Asian American and Native American Pacific Islander-Serving Institution — racially and ethnically minoritized students.



The college has already begun to develop a new strategy to serve its first-year students. “I asked the leadership team last year, and I committed to the trustees that our approach to support the success of all of our first-year students will be different than the multiple initiatives that we have,” Dr. Proctor says.

The college will take elements of many of its successful initiatives and coalesce them into what Dr. Proctor calls a new “inescapable” student success model for first-year students. “We’re trying to make sure we do it in a way that is not delivered to small groups of students, but it really is comprehensive for all of our first-year students.” This model seeks to improve on the already promising Path for Success data that shows that students will graduate at a 75% rate if they complete five milestones of student success by the end of their first year. Those include:

1. Selecting a major or program of study
2. Meeting with an advisor and creating an academic plan
3. Completing a college success “Start Smart” course
4. Completing English 101 and a program-specific college-level math course
5. Earning 24 credits (if full-time) or 12 credits (if part-time)

She says the college wants to “bake into the new model” what the college can do across the institution to help all students succeed. “We’re trying to make sure we’re not duplicating efforts and stretching resources thin in that regard.”

## Strengthening the College’s Academic Portfolio

A key component of the Community Vibrancy curriculum, supported by ATD’s partnership with Lightcast, was focusing on program relevancy as a step toward improved economic mobility for students. To that end, the college is working to bolster its academic portfolio by examining how well its programs serve students, industry, and the larger community. “We want to know, who is sitting at the table offering advice on the curriculum development to our faculty?” Dr. Proctor says. “Is every student getting the knowledge, skills, and abilities that they need? Are the expectations of our programs appropriate for what industry needs? Do we actually have the right programs, or do we have a gap?” Currently, the college is determining which programs to expand, eliminate, or add. New offerings include cybersecurity and aviation management, as well as maintenance tied to the aerospace industry. An artificial intelligence and cloud computing program is also on the horizon.



# LESSONS LEARNED

**Other key lessons Harper leaders identified include:**

- **Use the Community Vibrancy Framework to strengthen or reaffirm your institutional student success reform agenda.** The entire process was an example of looking externally to understand outside perspectives and needs and then using an evidenced-based and community-based approach to examine and reorient internal processes to meet those needs.



- **Find the right model for local needs.** The framework helped the college recognize that, rather than taking on the role of a “backbone institution” or the lead convenor of other organizations, the college would be better served building a collective approach with community partners based on community needs.
- **Involve community leaders in planning.** Harper College involves community leaders in the planning process by inviting heads of organizations to serve as facilitators, panelists, and respondents in community dialogues and on issue-oriented panels and by asking them to respond to specific community-related goals. Municipal leaders, including village managers, are particularly helpful in identifying gaps in services and supports and creative solutions to close them.

**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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