



# LEE COLLEGE


## Building New Partnership Capacities To Move Beyond Completion

Through its work with the Achieving the Dream (ATD) Community Vibrancy Framework, Lee College's leadership has identified gaps in the resources needed to build a transformative coalition and recognized a growing impetus to address unmet basic needs.

"Our students can't wait," says Dr. Lynda Villanueva, the college's president. "The urgency keeps me up at night."







**Lee College** serves a geographic area of more than 220,000 residents east of Houston, Texas, enrolling nearly 9,000 students. It has been an ATD Network college since 2006, a Leader College from 2011 to 2018, and a Leader College of Distinction since 2018.

## Identifying Critical Needs

As the college's leaders progressed through the Community Vibrancy curriculum, they focused on evaluating capacity — both of the college's ability to work with partners to align and deliver improved services and the readiness of those partners to engage in collective ownership of transformative change.

"We are in a community that's very caring and has a lot of organizations," President Villanueva says. "The partnerships are strong, but the ability to provide aligned services is not."

The college leadership has seen its role in partnerships and coalitions as the "chief storytelling officer and connector," says President Villanueva, who currently serves on the local United Way board. But Lee College's work with the Community Vibrancy Framework has reinforced another key need: helping community partners to support a broader mission.

"If we're doing this work in a way that's breaking generational poverty, addiction, and building the workforce, we have to adopt a collective mission to support a vibrant community," President Villanueva says. "That's a big message for people to not only hear and receive, but to act on in a collective way."

Lee College leaders recognize that the college currently doesn't have the bandwidth to coordinate that shift across all community organizations on its own. "We had to understand our span of control," President Villanueva says.

## Creating Internal Supports with a Community Lens

Because of gaps in the college's programs and those of its partners, "we have created and expanded services that are under-resourced in our community," President Villanueva says. Most center around unmet basic needs. After receiving a \$5 million donation from philanthropist MacKenzie Scott in 2021, for example, the college created a student resource and advocacy center, including a large food pantry. It also expanded mental health and counseling services and emergency aid.

This work, which is taking place alongside other large-scale initiatives to improve pathways and student outcomes, is based on a critical understanding of community needs, according to Villanueva.

"Students don't come to us to earn degrees or transfer. They come to us to improve their lives. I know the urgency with which we must act," she says. "We are the pathway to ensuring that the most underserved students and populations are provided with pathways to careers that will provide family-sustaining wages."

As Lee College continues efforts to develop services and deepen relationships with community partners, President Villanueva credits the Community Vibrancy Framework for providing clarity on what's needed.

“Community Vibrancy provides the tools to understand what the picture is and identify the gaps,” she says. “This could be the primary framework with which ATD does its work with its Network colleges. It’s helping them build capacity to understand who they are and what their gaps are.”



## LESSONS LEARNED

**Key lessons Lee College leaders identified include:**

- **See all of the college’s work through a community lens.**

For example, when Lee College received its \$5 million donation from philanthropist MacKenzie Scott — the largest donation in the college’s history — leaders “saw that as money that was not ours, but as stewards of the community’s money,” President Villanueva says.

- **Deepen partnerships with community organizations.**

The Community Vibrancy curriculum helped college leaders recognize that existing partnerships and services delivered with community partners were too narrowly focused. President Villanueva uses the example of astronauts — all of whom must understand each other’s roles well enough to work together in challenging circumstances — to describe the “shared mental model” needed to drive community change. “You need a deeper connection to create a vibrant community,” President Villanueva says. “That’s an ongoing challenge.”



- **Develop an understanding of the college's capacity to drive change in its context.**

The Community Vibrancy Framework has helped Lee College recognize its own bandwidth limitations and define its role within broader community efforts. "We're clear and laser-focused on the role we play and our span of control," President Villanueva says.

- **Recognize the importance of leadership commitment to being part of the community.**

President Villanueva's personal leadership role in the United Way, which channels resources and support to a wide variety of community service organizations, has helped deepen the college's understanding of its partners and community needs. The same approach holds true for driving change within colleges, she adds. "The implementation to address performance gaps along with the cultural change that has to happen in the college are predicated on understanding that the president must own the work, but they can't do it on their own," she 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.

**Achieving  
the Dream**

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