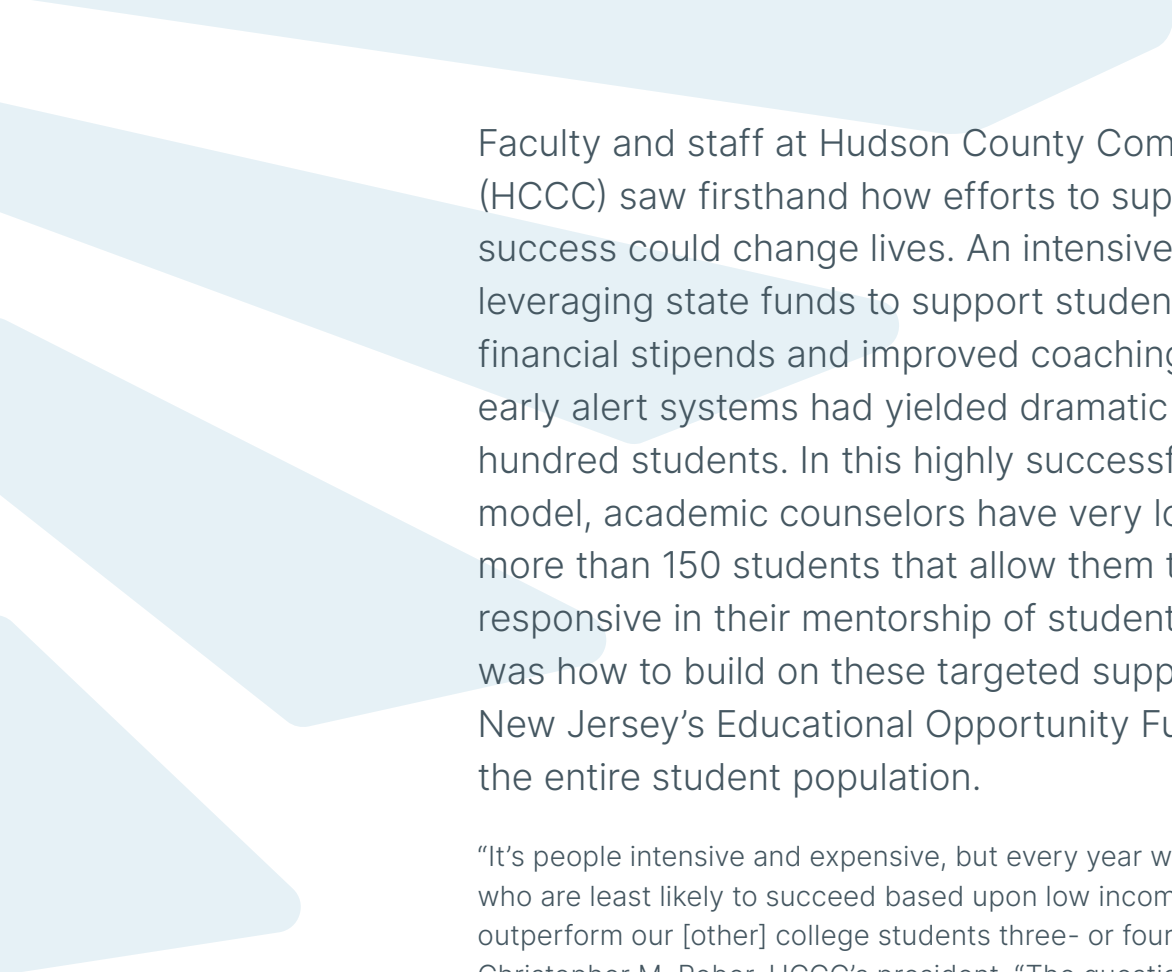


# 'Hudson is Home'

Supported by ATD coaching, Hudson County Community College's Hudson Scholars program brings student supports — and success — to scale.





Faculty and staff at Hudson County Community College (HCCC) saw firsthand how efforts to support student success could change lives. An intensive program leveraging state funds to support student cohorts with financial stipends and improved coaching, mentoring, and early alert systems had yielded dramatic results for several hundred students. In this highly successful student retention model, academic counselors have very low caseloads of no more than 150 students that allow them to be present and responsive in their mentorship of students. The question was how to build on these targeted supports, funded by New Jersey's Educational Opportunity Fund (EOF), to serve the entire student population.

"It's people intensive and expensive, but every year we see our EOF students, who are least likely to succeed based upon low incomes and other constraints, outperform our [other] college students three- or four-fold," says Dr. Christopher M. Reber, HCCC's president. "The question is how to scale."

Working with coaches from Achieving the Dream, HCCC developed a strategic roadmap to deliver similar high-touch supports to thousands of students on its urban campus in the shadow of New York City. Leveraging deep experience in data and institutional leadership, the two ATD coaches working with HCCC leadership, faculty, and staff became deeply embedded in the college's strategic planning. They helped develop a deeper analysis of disaggregated student data and supported HCCC leaders as they made evidence-based decisions that allowed them to scale what would become the Hudson Scholars program and connect it to the college's student success action plan.

Serving nearly 4,000 students since the program's inception, Hudson Scholars has become both self-funding and an academic success, with HCCC's 150% completion rate nearly doubling over the past eight years.

"Achieving The Dream has been instrumental in developing ways to focus our work — identifying where to start, what to prioritize, how to use feedback, and how to expand our work," Dr. Reber says.



## ‘Getting More of Our Students to the Finish Line’

Located in downtown Jersey City, HCCC serves one of the most diverse student populations in the country — and one of the poorest served by New Jersey’s 18 community colleges. Eighty-seven percent of students are nonwhite, about 35% are over age 25, and more than 20% are parents. Three-quarters experience food or housing insecurity, according to college officials.

When Dr. Reber arrived in 2018, he heard a consistent message from faculty and staff: the need to “get more of our students to the finish line” by leveraging the college’s diversity as a strength, he says.

To address these needs, Dr. Reber drew from his experience as an active participant in the Achieving the Dream Network at his previous institution. To build support, he shared his experiences with ATD during a town hall meeting and invited ATD President and CEO Dr. Karen A. Stout to visit the campus and discuss the Network. After receiving near-unanimous support from faculty and staff in a survey conducted by the All College Council, HCCC joined the ATD Network in 2019.

Soon afterwards, HCCC began working with two ATD coaches, Dr. Mary Fifield, president emerita of Bunker Hill Community College, and Dr. Rene Garcia, a long-tenured professor of psychology and statistics and director of enrollment management at Miami-Dade Community College. Their diverse backgrounds allowed the two coaches to support leaders at all levels of the institution, according to Dr. Heather DeVries, associate vice president for academic affairs and assessment.



ATD coaches meet with HCCC students during their biannual visit.

“We benefit from the balance and depth of experience they bring,” she says. “Mary brings a really strategic focus and lens, and Rene, with his background in data and enrollment, focuses more on the nitty gritty. It’s an incredible balance we have benefitted from.”

The coaches work closely with the college’s cross-functional Dream Team. With more than 30 members representing a wide range of roles and departments, the team develops the agenda for coaching visits based on current priorities and the institution’s strategic plan.

During visits, Dr. Fifield and Dr. Garcia meet not just with the Dream Team but also with leadership and staff at all levels, as well as faculty and students. “Everybody knows [our coaches],” Dr. Reber says.

Following visits, the Dream Team reconvenes to review the detailed feedback provided by the coaches and plot next steps. Team members also regularly share progress with the broader college community during town hall meetings.

“Everyone knows it’s a priority. They all celebrate the wins,” says Dr. Lisa Dougherty, senior vice president for student affairs and enrollment.

## Keys to Coaching Success

### **Building institutional support for external capacity building from the top down — and bottom up.**

From the president down, HCCC leaders clearly communicated the need to build institutional capacity for transformational change. But they also put the question of joining ATD to the All College Council, which surveyed faculty and staff and found 95% support. “It’s work owned by the whole college community,” says Dr. Reber. “While there’s support from the top from the board, president’s office, and administration, we’ve tried to focus on the organic ground-up engagement of the entire college community.”

**Strategic alignment with institutional priorities.** Coaching is aligned with the college’s strategic plan and its student success action plan, which has grown to encompass a wide range of strategic priorities, including a focus on recruiting and retaining adult learners as part of a national initiative led by ATD and Jobs for the Future (JFF).

**Staff and faculty leadership.** Each strand of work supported by coaches identifies specific leaders and internal and external stakeholders, along with measurable goals and a specific timeframe. “The work is organized around a cross-section of the community having leadership in each specific area where we’re trying to achieve continuous improvement,” says Dr. Reber.

**Leveraging coaching throughout the institution.** Instead of only meeting with top institutional leaders, ATD coaches meet with faculty and staff at all levels, and their feedback is shared widely. “The college adopted a very transparent and broad-based way of communicating that ATD isn’t a program or initiative but a way to organize — and that everyone should have a voice in it, including students,” Dr. Fifield says.

**Empowering faculty, staff, and students by ensuring coaches are collaborators, not outside consultants.** Faculty and staff “need to see them not only as coaches but true partners in the community,” Dr. DeVries says. “Transparency and honesty and vulnerability are a key part of success.” According to Vice President of Academic Affairs Dr. Darryl Jones, one key is preparing staff to accept feedback from coaches. Urgola agrees: “You need to take the perspective that they’re not someone calling you on the carpet,” he says. “They are truly coaches, here to help and brainstorm with you and help you move forward.”

**Emphasizing data analysis — and living with its limitations.** Urgola calls data work “the best part of the work we do with the coaches,” noting that Dr. Fifield and Dr. Garcia have also encouraged action in the face of less-than-perfect data.

“They encourage us to make data-informed decisions, but they’re also realistic about what’s available and the need to use whatever you can get your hands on to move forward,” he says.

**Ensuring external feedback from multiple sources.** Along with routine feedback from ATD coaches, HCCC works with two advisory groups representing the African American and Latino communities. Meeting quarterly, they both bring important feedback to college leaders and share out good news about the college to the community, Jones says. A President’s Advisory Council on Institutional Engagement and Excellence, composed of more than 40 students, faculty, staff, trustees, and community representatives, leads and supports the integration of diversity, equity, and inclusion principles into student success outcomes.

**Involving students.** A student working group participates in coaching meetings and played a key role in building a student-centered culture by collecting “Hudson is Home” testimonials from peers.

“Every visit we conduct, we meet with students,” Dr. Fifield says. “It speaks to the culture of how HCCC cares about them.”

## Driving an Action Plan for Student Success

Early in the coaching process, a data analysis and assessment using ATD's Institutional Capacity Assessment Tool (ICAT) identified key needs that helped shape initiatives around diversity, equity, and inclusion, as well as institutional research and the college's first student success action plan, approved in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic. That plan focused on scaling up effective practices and wraparound services to create a "culture of care." As they worked closely with ATD coaches, college leaders and more than 17 cross-functional teams "turned a nice phrase into actionable steps," Dr. Garcia says.

First, a deeper dive into disaggregated data — a core focus of ATD's coaching model — helped college leaders identify serious barriers to student success for the vast number of first-time, full-time students who were not making it through developmental math and English, as well as those entering the pre-nursing program.

The college then quickly narrowed its focus to how "we could better serve those students with advising protocols," Dr. DeVries says. This drove efforts to create the Hudson Scholars program.

Looking to build on the success that a high-touch advising model had with HCCC's small cohort of Educational Opportunity Fund students, leaders set out to do what John Urgola, the college's associate vice president for institutional research and planning, calls "EOFin' the campus."

Recognizing its allocation of state funds was insufficient to scale support, the college earmarked federal stimulus funding to expand advising, mentoring, and intensive supports to additional high-need student populations, creating the Hudson Scholars program. "EOF was the spark, but the fire it grew into owes its existence to Hudson Scholars," says Dr. Fifield.

The stimulus funding allowed Hudson Scholars to hire 10 full-time equivalent academic counselors and provide stipends to reward students when they achieve monthly goals. Before doing so, however, leaders conducted data analyses with coaches to ensure the program would be sustainable over time. They also committed to tracking student outcomes to measure impact.

"Assessment is at the heart of this program," Urgola says. "We knew we had seed funding, but we wanted to understand if this was going to be financially sustainable even before we made the decision to move forward."



Hudson Scholars and President Reber convene during a welcome reception.



ATD coaches routinely visit with Hudson Scholar counselors, faculty mentors, and participating students. They have also consistently challenged the HCCC team to meet its goal of expanding the EOF model by “pushing the limits to support as many students as possible,” says Dr. Gretchen Schulthes, associate dean of advisement.

Ongoing data analysis has helped refine the program to ensure that the students who are least likely to seek support participate and remain engaged. For example, data revealed that the attrition rate drops by 60% if students attend their scheduled first meeting with advisors. In response, the college shifted the timing of the stipend and the language in invitation letters. College leaders have also maintained a laser focus on outcomes.

“We’ve measured the impact of student persistence and completion every step of the way and found that at the much larger scale, students were doing even better than during the EOF years,” Dr. Reber says.

Along with more than doubling the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System three-year completion rate to nearly 30%, the college has also seen its two-year completion rate rise from “nearly zero” to 12%, with 20% of Hudson Scholars students completing in two years or less. Data also show that Hudson Scholars helped narrow equity gaps by 70% and increased the likelihood of students graduating in three years by 90%. And because participating students are far more likely to persist — and often increase the credit hours they take — the program now pays for itself through improved retention that also generates increased revenue for the college. Dr. Reber calls this “the student success dividend.”

“We’re seeing the needle move in all areas of student retention and completion,” he says.



Students celebrate at HCCC's 2024 Commencement ceremonies.

## Next Steps

Nearly seven years after Dr. Reber became HCCC president, the needs that surfaced during his initial meetings with faculty and staff — getting more students to the finish line and leveraging the college's diversity as a strength — remain the driving goals behind the institution's student success action plan. For example, college leaders recently developed a plan with HCCC's faculty union to scale intensive student supports by training nearly two dozen volunteer faculty mentors to work with students in their third year of the Hudson Scholars program.

Plans are currently underway to expand Hudson Scholars to ultimately support the entire for-credit student population, and ATD coaches continue to play an instrumental role. "Now that we're four or five years into it and had tremendous success, it gets harder and harder to scale to even more students," Dr. Reber says. "Our coaches are at the forefront of sharing perspectives and suggestions."

"You need to scale what works, and Hudson has been able to do that in part because of its relentless focus," Dr. Garcia says.

The coaching relationship has worked so well that HCCC has invested in doubling the cadence of coaching visits to four times a year. Dr. Reber points to the collaborative nature of their work and the broader support of the ATD Network as the reasons these efforts have become deeply engrained at all levels of the institution.

"The work has evolved," he says. "I think a principal reason for our success is that the work is owned by the whole college community."

But the final word comes from the students who have benefitted from Hudson Scholars and other initiatives. Their feedback has become the institutional tagline: "Hudson is Home!"

"It captures the culture of care here," says Dr. DeVries.



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