

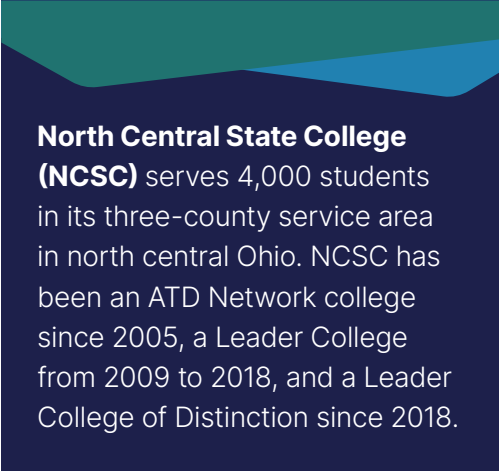


# NORTH CENTRAL STATE COLLEGE:

## A Deeper Dive on Serving Justice-Impacted Populations

North Central State College (NCSC) saw an opportunity in the Community Vibrancy Framework and curriculum from Achieving the Dream (ATD) to improve postsecondary attainment in its rural service area by connecting more deeply with populations that have traditionally been underserved in higher education.





**North Central State College (NCSC)** serves 4,000 students in its three-county service area in north central Ohio. NCSC has been an ATD Network college since 2005, a Leader College from 2009 to 2018, and a Leader College of Distinction since 2018.

“We are focusing on anyone and everyone who can be part of this process in order to enhance educational attainment,” says President Dorey Diab.

The Ohio college is using the Community Vibrancy Framework to build on its existing work with incarcerated and recently incarcerated students — a population its leaders now recognize as key to both ensuring equitable access and meeting workforce needs.

“It’s easy to say, ‘We’re a college. What are we supposed to do about that?’,” says Tom Prendergast, NCSC’s executive director of strategic and institutional transformation. “But [the justice-

impacted population] is already here. How are we serving those who are our students, and is it possible that others aren’t availing themselves of higher education?”

## Meeting Workforce and Attainment Needs

NCSC leaders approach community vibrancy through an institutional lens of improving access and attainment, which drives all of the college’s strategic initiatives. Ohio’s performance funding system has only increased the emphasis on postsecondary attainment. While the college has seen equal or greater state support since the performance-based model was implemented, attainment in its rural three-county region remains more than 20 percentage points below the state average.

The region’s employers also face challenges recruiting talent in key sectors such as health care and manufacturing, particularly since residents can commute to urban areas outside of the college’s service area where salaries tend to be higher. The college has responded with new bachelor’s degree programs in engineering and manufacturing and nursing by partnering with nearly 50 local high schools to offer career centers and internships, as well as the College Now program, which allows high school students to complete their associate degree before they graduate.

Even so, the workforce needs continue to grow and will likely accelerate as Intel and other high-tech manufacturers relocate in the state.

“It’s difficult for local employers to pay those wages, and that creates more stress upon us to reach down to harder-to-reach populations to meet employers’ needs,” Prendergast says.

As part of the Community Vibrancy Data Workbook provided by ATD and coaching provided through the Community Vibrancy Framework, NCSC leaders identified incarcerated and formerly incarcerated adults as a population with the potential to meet those needs. Two prisons serving 5,000 men are located within 10 minutes of campus, and, as part of an analysis of national, state, and local data, leaders determined that the 2% to 4% of the population that had been incarcerated in the past year or were currently incarcerated added up to “thousands of people” in the college’s service area, according to Prendergast.

“That cemented it for us,” he says. “This is a potential workforce that, if we can reach [it], we can create more workers in the community.”

NCSC had previously launched a small business certificate program at one of the local correctional facilities, targeting inmates who were soon to return to society. Over the past two years, 30 incarcerated people had received an 18-credit certificate, and college leaders saw this as an opportunity to create similar programs that could reach other parts of the justice-impacted population in its region.

“We’ve got some momentum going. How can we go a little deeper?” Prendergast asks.



## Building Community Connections

NCSC recognizes the importance of community collaboration when working with the justice-impacted population. The college was already a member of the local re-entry coalition, its community’s collective impact backbone organization that supports the justice-impacted population. Made up of a wide range of social service agencies and community organizations, the coalition meets monthly to coordinate services for individuals leaving correctional facilities.

As part of the institution’s community vibrancy work with ATD, NCSC leaders identified additional partners through which the college could offer programming, including a community-based correctional facility (known colloquially as a “pay-to-stay jail”).

While these conversations are still in the early stages, the college’s leadership is also working to shift the internal mindset. For example, a formerly incarcerated individual was told based on scant information they couldn’t be a nurse — even as employers and regulators had relaxed these sanctions to meet both workforce and societal needs. Such attitudes, Prendergast says, reinforce a key barrier for justice-impacted students. “They’re intimidated by the belief that ‘I’ve got a record. Why should I go through the process of getting a certificate or degree just to have the door slammed in my face?’” he says. “Employers that are regulated are dying for workers as much as everyone else. We can’t assume a [criminal] record bars you from certain careers — we will help you figure it out.”

That line of thinking will drive NCSC’s ongoing work with justice-impacted populations. “We call it navigating the nuances,” Prendergast says. “There are barriers when you are justice impacted — there are no ifs, ands, or buts about it. But we will help you navigate them, so when people are getting released, the prison systems are telling them, ‘Hey, go to your community college. They get it. They’ll work with you.’ And that’s what we’re trying to do.”

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## LESSONS LEARNED

### Key lessons NCSC leaders identified include:

- **Use data — but not just data — to identify opportunities.** “It’s overwhelming, because where do you start?” Prendergast asks. “We did some soul-searching.” The college ultimately opted to target the justice-impacted population because of both data showing its size locally that surfaced during its community vibrancy work and the potential demonstrated by its existing program within a correctional facility. “We felt we had the capacity to make some improvements,” Prendergast says.

- **Focus on shifting internal mindsets.** NCSC leadership recognizes that their college and its staff need to rethink how they approach the justice-impacted population, including internal biases about what careers may be good fits. “It’s a tricky and fragile population,” says Prendergast. “You have to have your head and heart in it ... With justice-impacted populations — or any challenging population — it’s the college that has to adapt and change.”
- **Align new initiatives with the mission.** NCSC leaders frame community vibrancy within the lens of its overall mission of educational attainment and workforce development. “It’s what we’re here for,” President Diab says. “What we’re really doing is helping our companies and partners in the community, because the prosperity of the community is a key outcome for us. We stick to our core mission and align resources to achieve that mission.”
- **Ensure the college and its partners have the capacity to meet their promises.** While the state prison education superintendent has expressed interest in additional programming, NCSC is proceeding cautiously. “We want to make sure we have the capacity to fulfill it,” Prendergast says. “You don’t want to play with people’s emotions and do it lightly. We’d rather serve a smaller population and do it correctly than try and go big and splash and not have any impact.”
- **Demonstrate impact.** In presentations to the community, President Diab focuses on socioeconomic mobility by demonstrating what he calls “return on education.” He notes that the ROI of an education at NCSC — calculated by dividing the average wages earned by students six months after graduation by the average tuition — has increased from 289% to 413% over the past two years. “That’s the reason we try to convince others that you have to continue on with education,” he says. “That’s why we’re reaching out to underrepresented populations like the justice-impacted population.”

**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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