




NORTHERN VIRGINIA COMMUNITY COLLEGE:

Looking Beyond Students to “Pockets of Poverty”

Northern Virginia Community College (NOVA) has long focused on serving students from poverty-impacted communities in the region — including some that are among the most economically marginalized in the state. NOVA students are up to four times more likely to come from ZIP codes with the highest poverty rates in the service areas of its six campuses. Working with the Achieving the Dream (ATD) Community Vibrancy Framework for transformation has prompted NOVA to focus more extensively on looking at the complete portrait of the community and their obstacles to success.





Northern Virginia Community College (NOVA) enrolls more than 53,000 students annually across six campuses in the Washington, D.C., suburbs. It has been an ATD Network college since 2007 and a Leader College since 2010, and it became a Leader College of Distinction in 2019.

“We do a lot of work in understanding who our students are and what supports they need,” says Dr. Anne M. Kress, president of NOVA. “As part of looking at the data more closely, we’re coming to understand the need to serve communities we are not serving as well as we need to.”

Addressing Shifting Student — and Community — Needs

Historically thought of as a transfer institution, NOVA has embraced social mobility and workforce development over the past decade. Even so, the average student age remains just over 22, suggesting more opportunities exist to bring adult learners into workforce training, according to Dr. Kress. Engaging with the Community Vibrancy Framework is prompting college leaders to target adults “who would value having a short-term credential and the economic opportunity and social mobility that credential would provide,” she adds. “As we look at the data, there’s more we could do for adult learners. We have to ask ourselves questions.”

With 3.5 million Virginians with some college but no degree, Dr. Kress wants institutional leaders to better understand the barriers to attending college — especially when there are NOVA and Virginia Community College System (VCCS) initiatives that make tuition virtually free for economically marginalized students. “Community colleges are everywhere,” she says. “Are they actually accessible to those who need them the most?”

The Community Vibrancy modules and coaching have also prompted NOVA’s leaders “to be honest with ourselves around our retention work,” says Dr. Nathan Carter, chief institutional effectiveness and inclusion officer. “The vibrancy modules really springboarded us ... to have some real conversations on what retention work looks like in 2025. It doesn’t look the same way it did pre-pandemic.”

Mirroring an approach highlighted in the VCCS strategic plan, NOVA college leaders are exploring the supports needed to ensure all students can successfully complete their programs of study. “We really need to approach that work with a focus on social mobility and supporting students’ holistic needs,” Dr. Carter says.

NOVA is also working with regional partners to better define its role in serving the wider community and identify holistic needs and supports. NOVA is focused on addressing the poverty-impacted communities in its service area, including identifying gaps in areas such as health care, says Dr. M. Annette Haggray, provost of NOVA’s Alexandria Campus. “We need to make sure we’ve got the supports to reach out to them.”

Disaggregating — and Democratizing — Data

As a large institution, NOVA has robust data collection capabilities; in fact, its institutional research department, the Office of Strategic Insights, has long been not only a user of workforce data but also a resource for others in the region. After engaging with the framework, college leaders are thinking more carefully about how they can leverage NOVA's data capabilities to better support community partners.

"We're trying to understand how we use the best resources — including data — to help us make decisions with our partners, with the hope that they're able to see the same kinds of data that we're seeing in trying to determine what needs are relevant to their communities," Dr. Kress says.

NOVA has also focused on building the capacity for data-informed decision-making at all levels of the institution, while making an effort to avoid fostering a "savior mentality." NOVA followed up on its community vibrancy work by hosting data summits with the college's academic deans to help them discuss student and community needs with faculty. The concepts will also be included in NOVA's leadership development program in the coming year, which will include "components and actionable steps needed to be successful in community vibrancy and aligned work," Dr. Carter says.

"We need to ask questions about how we have contributed to some of the results we see and what our responsibilities are," Dr. Carter says. "[But] we need to make sure [disaggregated data] is not used to reinforce traditional processes that fall short of contextualizing the larger issues that are in society."

To ensure that the college's senior leaders are also contextualizing those needs, NOVA had students join them as they progressed through ATD's Community Vibrancy modules and data workbook. "We took the time to talk to the students about what they saw in the data — and to see the lives and experiences behind what we saw in it," Dr. Carter says, calling the process essential.

"This involves intellectual and emotional commitment," he says. "It's going to take both for community vibrancy to be successful."



LESSONS LEARNED

Other key lessons NOVA leaders identified include:

- **Seek links between community vibrancy and existing institutional initiatives.** NOVA leaders saw multiple connections between the framework and their own newly revised strategic plan — which includes calls to “look much more closely at how we connect with students and provide points of access to non-students,” as Dr. Kress puts it — as well as with their core values, which include “inclusion, respect, integrity, care, and excellence.” Leaders also saw the framework supporting statewide efforts through VCCS to improve retention and holistic student supports.
- **Assess institutional capacity for community vibrancy work.** Before assessing community partners, “look inside your institution first to see what you’re doing,” Dr. Kress says. “Are you ready to engage in as deep an analysis of what you should be doing for the vibrancy of the community as is needed in this work?”
- **Bring voice to student and community needs.** The NOVA students who participated in the Community Vibrancy modules and data work reinforced the importance of understanding students and their needs in new ways. “It reaffirmed, not just in this work, but in a lot of things the college is doing, that we have to do even more listening to students,” Dr. Carter says.

Educate stakeholders — internal and external — on data use. As institutions consider their data in new ways, they must ensure internal and external stakeholders understand the intent behind its use. “When you look at data and you’re not careful, you might forget to be self-reflective as an individual, as a department, as an institution,” Dr. Carter says. When working with community partners, institutions need what Dr. Kress calls “cultural brokers” to ensure they aren’t intimidated by the data work. NOVA approached this by providing a granular overview of data, including definitions and sources, to build understanding of and trust in the data.

The same capacity-building is also essential internally. “We recognized that middle managers had different levels of comfort with looking at, talking about, and leveraging data,” Dr. Carter says. Without the data summits and leadership training NOVA is putting in place to support greater data use, he adds, “the tone at the top may not resonate throughout the organization.”

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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