Achieving the Dream

PASSAIC COUNTY COMMUNITY COLLEGE:

Digging Deeper to Reconnect Adults with Economic Mobility

Passaic County Community College (PCCC) leaders have long seen the college as a regional anchor institution in urban northern New Jersey. Through its work with the Achieving the Dream (ATD) Community Vibrancy Framework, PCCC is redoubling its efforts to reach adult learners with some college and no degree to better support the region's economic vitality.

Part of the Community Vibrancy Profile Series

Passaic County Community College (PCCC) enrolls more than 11,000 students annually across its four campuses in northern New Jersey. PCCC has been an ATD Network college since 2011, a Leader College from 2014 to 2018, and a Leader College of Distinction since 2018.

"The lost opportunity of having these folks who started college at one point in their lives out there made us more aware of the economic development potential," says PCCC President Steven Rose. "It means we have to focus on them."

Reinforcing Mobility and Community Vitality

Examining local data as part of the Community Vibrancy curriculum reinforced the value of ongoing efforts to reach adult students who have some college but no degree as a key to both improving individual outcomes and the region's overall economic vitality.

"Community Vibrancy reinforced a lot of things we had taken for granted and had been doing for a long time," says President Rose. "It reiterated their importance to our college."

The redoubled focus has centered around the college's Reconnect program, a grant-funded initiative that invites former students to visit PCCC campuses to "learn about [options] they never thought of," President Rose says. For example, former students have visited PCCC's health sciences campus, which has seen significant growth in recent years, and met with the leaders of its surgical tech program to discuss career opportunities.

Once enrolled, Reconnect students receive ongoing support, including individual academic plans aligned to career goals and regular check-ins — which can be as frequent as every two weeks. The focus, President Rose says, is on "not only attracting but retaining these students."

The redoubled focus on retention has led to a growing recognition that "there's no silver bullet" to meet all the needs of this varied population of adult students, President Rose says. The college has hosted the county's one-stop center on its campus for years and refers students for a variety of benefits and social services, but staff are now "making a real effort to work more closely with them," President Rose says.

Emphasizing regional vitality has led PCCC to develop new career-focused programs. Following the growth of its successful health sciences campus, the college recently completed a trades-focused facility that will expand capacity in areas ranging from welding and HVAC maintenance to emerging trades and fields.

The Community Vibrancy Framework "made us aware that students are looking for all kinds of different things," President Rose says. "We had found a niche in the healthcare arena and were successful, but we have to expand in other arenas as well."

The college is also building partnerships with employers in the emerging solar energy and electric vehicle fields. "We're trying to find some niches for our students," President Rose says, including building connections between employers and program graduates. "If they're getting $25 an hour and we can get it so they're earning $30 an hour, that little edge is ultra-valuable." This emphasis on sustaining wages coincides with the focus on economic mobility for individuals and families within the Community Vibrancy Framework.

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LESSONS LEARNED

Key lessons PCCC leaders identified include:

- **Create career programs that meet evolving needs.** As part of the emphasis on attracting and retaining adults with some college but no degree, PCCC is underscoring "thinking about careers, not just the first job," President Rose says. The institution's focus on emerging fields such as solar and EVs also speaks to the importance of continuously assessing workforce needs. "Labor markets are changing, demographics are changing," President Rose says. "We need to constantly reevaluate this work." The Community Vibrancy Data Workbook is a valuable resource for this reevaluation.

- **Develop strategies for both specific and universal barriers to success.** While PCCC's community vibrancy work has reinforced ongoing efforts with adult students, President Rose stresses that the college serves an urban community and an overwhelmingly racially minoritized and poverty-impacted student population. "All of our students are struggling," he says. "That changes our perspective a little." With that lens in mind, PCCC has focused on understanding and addressing both specific and universal barriers to success. For example, the college has collected data about the number of single parents it serves to target services, and it also has conducted significant faculty and staff development on "how life gets in the way" for all students, President Rose says.

- **Recognize the value of community vibrancy in helping build "win-win" goals.** President Rose says the Community Vibrancy Framework can help college leaders recognize how transformational work within the broader community can also meet existing institutional objectives. "We can be a little more deliberate about understanding not only the benefits to our communities but to ourselves," he says. "All institutions are looking for new markets, and getting [nontraditional] students back on our campuses is going to help our communities and our own bottom line."

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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