Advancing Rural Student Success in the Digital Economy

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Achieving the Dream | education northwest

About Education Northwest

Education Northwest is a nonprofit, nonpartisan organization dedicated to helping all children and youth reach their full potential. We partner with public, private, and community-based organizations to address educational inequities and improve student success. While most of our work centers on the Pacific Northwest, our evaluations, technical assistance, and research studies have national impact and provide timely and actionable results.

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Overview

Rural community colleges are essential in improving rural residents' quality of life. These institutions often drive or support efforts to unite communities, advance residents' education and workforce opportunities, and foster a sense of belonging in the community. In December 2020, Achieving the Dream (ATD) launched the *Building Resiliency in Rural Communities for the Future of Work* initiative to recognize community colleges' vital role in their communities. As stated by an ATD coach:

> *"In most rural communities, the community college is the engine that's driving economic development and economic mobility. They're not a partner; they are the partner. The college is viewed as ground zero for economic development and students' economic mobility. That helps an institution in rural America grasp its purpose."*
>
> – ATD coach

Achieving the Dream's Rural Resiliency Initiative

ATD is a partner and champion of more than 300 community colleges nationwide. Drawing on expert coaches, groundbreaking programs, and a national peer network, they provide institutions with integrated, tailored support for every aspect of their work. ATD's vision is for every college to be a catalyst for equitable and economically vibrant communities so all students can access life-changing learning that propels them into community-changing careers. Learn more at **www.achievingthedream.org.**

ATD launched the *Building Resiliency in Rural Communities for the Future of Work* initiative (the Rural Resiliency Initiative) in December 2020 by opening a competitive request for proposals from rural community colleges. The initiative aims to increase equitable student success by strengthening rural colleges' capacity to prepare students for careers in today's economy. Based on the literature and research in the field, ATD established **four project goals** for the Rural Resiliency cohort:

1.
Prepare and connect students to careers in the digital economy

2.
Identify and close equity gaps

3.
Foster a culture of evidence

4.
Develop and strengthen community partnerships

Eligible[1] colleges across the country submitted applications outlining strategies and initiatives to support community and economic development; the strategies they use to align curricula, programs, and student learning with current and emerging workforce needs in the region; and their goals for participating in the initiative. ATD selected seven rural community colleges to participate. Over the following four and a half years (January 2021 to June 2025), ATD facilitated and supported this cohort in its work to meet the four goals of the initiative. Each college varied in geographic location and student characteristics (table 1).

The Rural Resiliency cohort includes:

- Berkshire Community College (BCC) in Pittsfield, Massachusetts

- Clovis Community College (CCC) in Clovis, New Mexico

- Columbia-Greene Community College (C-GCC) in Hudson, New York

- Halifax Community College (HCC) in Weldon, North Carolina

- Louisiana State University at Eunice (LSUE) in Eunice, Louisiana

- Northwest Mississippi Community College (NWMS) in Senatobia, Mississippi

- Southeast Kentucky Community & Technical College (SKCTC) in Cumberland, Kentucky

Figure 1. Colleges in Building Resiliency in Rural Communities for the Future of Work initiative

Berkshire Community College

Clovis Community College

Columbia-Greene Community College

Halifax Community College

Louisiana State University-Eunice

Northwest Mississippi Community College

Southwest Kentucky Community and Technical College
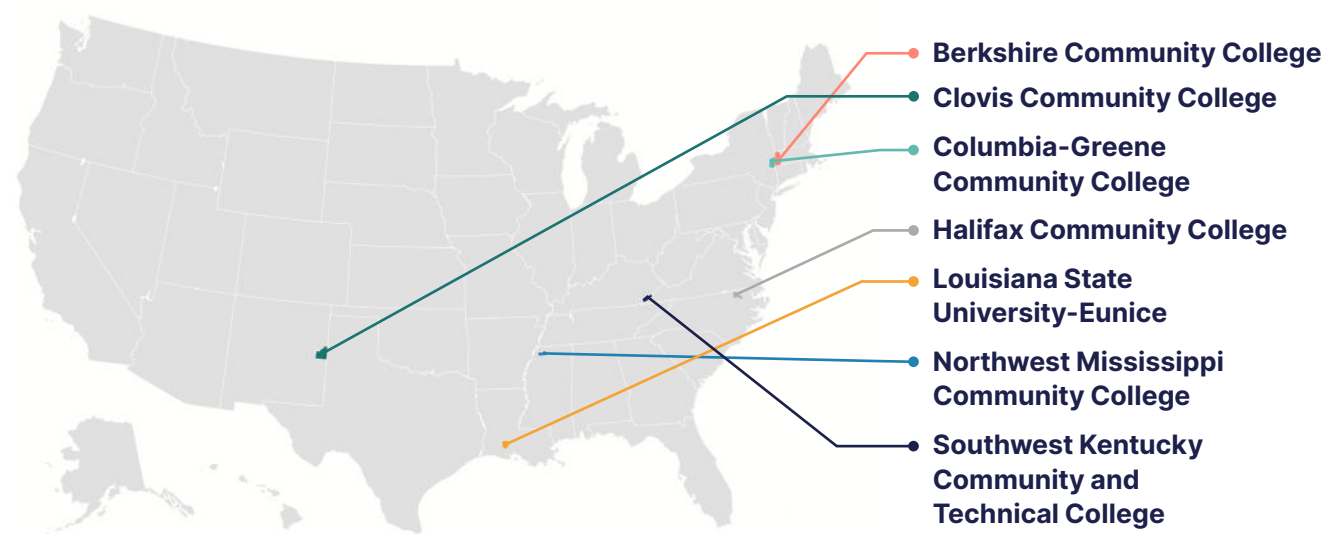
[1] Eligibility criteria included rural locale and colleges that were not part of the ATD network.

Table 1. Characteristics of the colleges in the Building Resiliency in Rural Communities for the Future of Work initiative, 2023–24 academic year

	BCC	CCC	C-GCC	HCC	LSUE	NWMS	SKCTC
Enrollment (full and part time)	1572	2328	1696	1013	3623	7520	3144
Percentage of full-time first-time students with Pell grants	53	65	46	58	56	56	79
Percentage of students in any online courses	52	56	35	100	62	67	54
Percentage of students under age 18	27	30	40	37	31	27	36
Percentage of students over age 24	34	41	27	27	21	13	27
Percentage of Black students	8	4	13	49	26	35	2
Percentage of Hispanic students	13	47	11	6	1	7	1
Percentage of fall 2022 full-time students retained*	60	57	61	74	53	60	72
Percentage of fall 2022 part-time students retained*	52	42	37	63	29	38	34

*The percentage of first-time degree-/certificate-seeking undergraduate students in the fall 2022 cohort who either reenrolled or successfully completed their program by fall 2023.

Source: Data from IPEDS 2025 for the 2023–24 academic year.

ATD provided a variety of supports to the cohort colleges, focusing on building capacity to collect and analyze data, identifying and addressing institutional performance gaps, preparing students for the digital economy, and expanding data-informed decision making (i.e., using data to identify priorities for improving student outcomes, implementing supports needed to close institutional performance gaps, and tracking student progress). ATD also supported the colleges in developing and refining action plans that identified priority goals for improving student success. Additionally, ATD onboarded the cohort

colleges to the National Student Clearinghouse's Postsecondary Data Partnership (PDP). All these supports were achieved through the following targeted and ongoing activities across the cohort:

- **Coaching.** Each college worked with two ATD coaches: a workforce/leadership coach and a data coach. Coaches conducted two site visits per year at each college, held monthly coaching calls, and offered professional learning opportunities to faculty and staff members. Coaching support included helping the colleges gain and sustain momentum in their work toward the four goals of the initiative, building capacity, and progressing toward their action plans.

- **Assessment and customized tools.** ATD staff members and coaches provided the colleges with a variety of tools and resources to support their work on the project, including the Institutional Capacity Assessment Tool, the Partnership Analysis Tool, the Digital Skills Program Review Tool, and the PDP Accelerator Course.

- **Convenings.** ATD held multiple convenings to provide the cohort with opportunities to learn from one another and the broader network of ATD colleges. These included three rural convenings for the cohort colleges, the annual Data and Analytics Summits, and the annual DREAM conferences.

- **Community of practice.** In the final 18 months of the initiative, the cohort participated in a regular community of practice with virtual and in-person sessions to provide a collaborative space for exchanging ideas, promising practices, and useful resources.

Methodology

To identify lessons and outcomes resulting from this work, ATD partnered with Education Northwest to conduct a qualitative, participatory, and formative evaluation of the Rural Resiliency Initiative. Over the four years of the initiative, Education Northwest collected extensive data from the seven colleges and ATD coaches and used qualitative methods to identify how colleges advanced student success and prepared students for the digital economy. Data collection included three site visits, two virtual and one in person, at each of the seven colleges. During each site visit, the evaluation team spoke with administrators, faculty members, advisors, board of trustees' representatives, students, and community partners about their successes and challenges while working toward the project's four goals. In addition, each year the evaluation team interviewed ATD coaches and reviewed documents and deliverables submitted by the colleges and coaches throughout the evaluation to understand the colleges' progress toward each of the project's goals. In the final year of the initiative, the evaluation focused on the following four topics:

- The role of the **rural context** in the colleges' progress toward the four project goals

- The **conditions that enabled successful implementation** of effective practices

- What the colleges experienced as their **most effective practices** for preparing students for the digital economy and advancing equitable student success

- Strategies that facilitated **sustainable, effective practices**

The Education Northwest team conducted a thematic analysis of all interview and focus group transcripts across the four-year evaluation. A codebook was created with codes aligning to each of the four project goals. Within each goal category, subcodes were created that reflect the evaluation topics above. The team then coded the transcripts using a qualitative data analysis software called Atlas.ti. The team also documented the colleges' activities by conducting a systematic content analysis of deliverables created by the coaches and college teams (e.g., annual reflections, site visit engagement reports). For a more detailed summary of the methodology, see appendix A.

Report outline

This report presents the results of this formative evaluation, providing outcomes and lessons learned from ATD's four-year partnership with the seven Rural Resiliency cohort colleges. The report includes the following findings:

- **Community colleges' essential role in rural communities.** The report begins with an overview of the important role of community colleges in rural communities.

- **Conditions that enable implementation of effective practices at rural community colleges.** The next section presents results about the conditions that led to successful implementation of effective practices in rural areas, particularly related to preparing students for the digital economy and advancing equitable student success. This includes findings about the colleges' work to establish cultures of evidence (goal 3) and to develop and strengthen community partnerships (goal 4), as these were essential conditions that facilitated the colleges' work to advance equitable student success.

- **Effective practices to prepare students for the digital economy and advance equitable student success.** The third section presents actions taken by the colleges to prepare students for careers in the digital economy (goal 1). With an emphasis on supporting the whole student, the colleges worked to identify and close equity gaps through holistic student supports and implemented student-centered teaching and advising practices.

- **Strategies for sustaining momentum toward institutional change.** The report closes with strategies the colleges are using to gain and sustain momentum toward institutional change and to sustain effective practices to prepare students for the digital economy and advance equitable student success.

Throughout the report, we highlight vignettes from each college that describe how they established the conditions necessary to successfully implement new practices as well as the resulting impacts from that work.

Community colleges' essential role in rural communities

A changing economic landscape

Rural communities in the United States are home to over 60 million people—representing nearly 20 percent of the nation's population and covering most of the country's geography (Harmon et al., 2022; Koricich et al., 2018, U.S. Census Bureau, 2020). Historically, rural communities were characterized by their economic drivers (e.g., "coal country," "the rust belt"). Today they continue to power key sectors of the economy, including agriculture, manufacturing, and industries that rely on natural resources. To remain resilient, rural communities must identify new workforce opportunities as some industries experience declines or change how they operate (e.g., by increasingly relying on technology; Ajilore & Willingham, 2020; Buckwalter & Toglia, 2019; Harmon et al., 2022; Koricich, 2015). Many rural communities are seeing growth in the service and hospitality sectors, as well as industries focused on communications and power infrastructure (e.g., building and maintenance of wind turbines and cellular towers; Harmon et al., 2022).

The demographics of rural communities are also changing. Some areas are experiencing population increases due to recreational opportunities and shifts to remote work, but high-poverty communities are experiencing population declines. These population decreases have widespread impacts as smaller tax bases often reduce funding for social services which, in turn, creates difficulty in attracting new employers that pay family-sustaining wages (Dabson, 2020; Harmon et al., 2022).

Community colleges and rural workforce development

To overcome these challenges, rural communities must adapt to changing industries and demographics. Rural community colleges are well positioned to support these efforts. Across the country, there are 600 publicly controlled, rural community colleges and Tribal colleges with 800 campuses. Two-year colleges are more common than four-year institutions in rural communities—49 percent of rural colleges are two-year institutions, while 33 percent are four-year institutions (McCauley, 2022). Rural community colleges can support communities by taking a "place-based approach to education" (Warner-Griffin & Liveoak, 2023, p. 6), focused on partnering with local employers to provide opportunities for residents to learn skills that prepare them for stable, well-paying jobs (Koricich, 2015; Miller & Kissinger, 2007; Reed & Friedel, 2022).

Preparing residents of rural communities for stable, well-paying jobs increasingly requires the development of foundational and advanced digital literacy skills.[2] Current labor market data demonstrate that jobs across industries often require, at minimum, foundational computer skills. Furthermore, moving beyond foundational skills is desirable, since jobs that require more advanced skills tend to pay higher wages. Even industries that traditionally have not required digital skills, such as agriculture or manufacturing, now require employees to engage with various forms of technology. Therefore, supporting digital skills by providing access to technology and related training is essential to supporting economic mobility and reducing pay disparities for students in rural areas (Muro et al., 2017; Pham & Donovan, 2019).

Addressing gaps in access for community resilience

By supporting digital skill development, rural community colleges may help address technology access and opportunity gaps in their regions, which in turn can impact the resilience of the community. Rural community colleges predominantly serve learners who live in rural areas, have low incomes, and are people of color. Data show that these populations tend to have less access to affordable and reliable broadband internet, large screen devices, and other information and communication technologies compared to nonrural, high-income, and primarily white communities (Atske & Perrin, 2021; EdTech Center, 2022; Pew Research Center, 2021). Lack of access to technology contributes to fragmented knowledge, like when a person is comfortable with digital tasks they engage in frequently (e.g., taking and editing photos or videos) but lacks other skills such as formatting text in documents or entering data in spreadsheets (Gonzales, 2021). Disparate access to technology and fragmented skills are particularly concerning given that every industry in America reports digital skill gaps (Bergson-Shilcock, 2020; Hecker & Loprest, 2019; Muro et al., 2017).

Rural community colleges can play an essential role by providing communities furthest from opportunity with access to technology and digital skills training. Doing so can have a cascading effect on the entire region: Preparing residents with the appropriate skills for the local workforce not only paves the way for individual economic mobility, but also makes the rural community more resilient.

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[2] Digital literacy is the ability to use information and communication technologies to find, evaluate, create, and communicate information, requiring both cognitive and technical skills (American Library Association, as cited by National Digital Inclusion Alliance, n.d.).

Rural colleges as a community hub

In addition to their role as workforce development hubs, rural community colleges also serve as cultural centers, economic drivers, and spaces for community engagement, business, and recreation (Miller & Kissinger, 2007; Reed & Friedel, 2022). Rural community colleges play a key role in improving the quality of life of rural residents by bringing the community together, advancing residents' education and workforce opportunities, and fostering a sense of belonging. Additionally, community colleges provide "capacity for change in the region" (Harmon et al., 2022, p. 323), enabling rural communities to adapt to economic or demographic shifts and meet the changing needs of residents and employers (Harmon et al., 2022; Reed & Friedel, 2022).

Rural community colleges in the Rural Resiliency Initiative

The four goals of the initiative are intended to build upon the existing assets of rural community colleges and expand their ability to fulfill their vital community role well into the future. ATD launched the Building Resiliency in Rural Communities for the Future of Work initiative to recognize the vital role of community colleges in rural communities and the importance of their efforts to support prosperity and a high quality of life for rural residents. During interviews, administrators, faculty members, staff members, and students at participating colleges spoke of the critical role that each college played in its community. The rural colleges formed a bridge between students, families, businesses, and industries by connecting students to internships and jobs within the community, preparing students with job readiness and digital skills, and increasing higher education access for local adults, many of whom are the first in their families to attend college.

Conditions that enable implementation of effective practices at rural community colleges

The Rural Resiliency Initiative aims to increase equitable student success by strengthening rural colleges' capacity to prepare students for careers in today's economy and lay the groundwork for long-term, sustainable change. At each participating college, the definition of "equitable student success" varied depending on each college's context, student population, and identified needs. The colleges focused on closing institutional performance gaps among students of color, male students, low-income students, students who are underprepared for college, and/or adult learners.

When asked to reflect on how their colleges made progress on implementing effective practices to achieve equitable student success over the four-year initiative, the cohort described the importance of building, maintaining, and strengthening the following four conditions:[3]

1. Committed leadership with support from cross-campus teams creates a strong foundation for institutional reform

2. Successful implementation of effective practices requires capacity building through aligned professional learning for faculty and staff members

3. Building a culture of evidence supports effective planning, implementation, and evaluation of effective practices

4. Strong relationships with community partners are essential for supporting students and strengthening rural communities

This section of the report describes these four conditions and expands on how they lay the foundation for implementing effective practices that advance equitable student success and prepare students for the digital economy.

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[3] These conditions align with some elements of **ATD's Institutional Capacity Assessment Tool,** a tool used by the cohort to integrate and align their work toward creating an equitable and student-centered culture. The colleges administered a survey about seven essential capacities of the tool and hosted a capacity café to discuss the capacities for their college community at the start of the initiative in fall 2021.

Committed leadership with support from cross-campus teams creates a strong foundation for institutional reform

Members of the Rural Resiliency cohort said that public support from college leadership for new practices that support students' digital skills and advance equitable student success was essential to signal institutional commitment to the practices and grow cross-campus interest in implementing them. Some participants referenced the role of the college president as a "cheerleader" of the work. Others shared how leaders at all levels—including board members, presidents, vice presidents, deans, directors, and faculty leaders—played a role in modeling data use, engaging community partners, and ensuring the goals of the project were centered in every meeting.

Some participants also noted that leaders' relationships on and off campus were important to the success of new practices: They shared that leaders who were well respected and had strong connections across campus and in the community were better able to engage others in the work. In particular, board members play a critical role in facilitating strong connections between the college and the broader community. For example, board members often also serve on local workforce development boards, which can help the college to shape the changing local economy, provide students with access to opportunities in the community, and facilitate two-way feedback between the community and college.

A shared leadership model is also essential to developing and implementing new practices. Interview participants across roles spoke about the importance of creating a shared leadership model with faculty and staff members because they work directly with students and may be more aware of students' needs. Faculty and staff members can provide feedback and guidance on what works or is needed in the classroom and often play a role in implementing new strategies or interventions. They can also support communication across campus if they take new ideas or practices back to their programs or offices. Our research also found that faculty members and advisors have limited capacity to participate in various committees, and faculty members are often on nine-month contracts. One ATD coach shared that an ideal structure is to have an administrator lead the work with a committee that includes faculty and staff members. This approach leverages administrators' ability to provide long-term, consistent support and faculty members' expertise and experience working with students.

The Rural Resiliency cohort implemented this approach in a variety of ways. In some cases, colleges created new committees to guide and structure the work. Participants shared that it could be difficult for rural institutions to increase the number of committees given their small size, but they found opportunities to do this through aligning with state or local priorities. Other colleges leveraged existing teams to guide the ATD Rural Resiliency work. Highlights include:

- CCC leveraged its retention team, which includes administration, all the faculty chairs, and leaders from across student services, to lead the ATD work by prioritizing and making progress toward the four project goals. The team reviews data and collaborates to develop new strategies to increase student success.

- At C-GCC, the chief diversity officer led an **Inclusion, Diversity, Equity, and Accessibility Committee** that included students, faculty members, and staff members. This committee developed an equity, diversity, and inclusion plan for the campus to develop policy and programming, build awareness, and create a common language for the college around institutional priorities, which included closing institutional performance gaps. This new committee aligned with a pillar of C-GCC's strategic plan, as well as the State University of New York system's Diversity, Equity & Inclusion Plan.

- NWMS created a new digital literacy skills committee led by the director of housing and residence life that includes faculty members and a digital librarian who supports students' access to a maker space and other specialized technology. The committee is working to prepare students for emerging technologies and local workforce needs by integrating digital literacy skills across academic programs and student services and assessing students' digital skills to tailor supports.

Successful implementation of effective practices requires capacity building through aligned professional learning

As college leaders and teams developed plans for implementing new practices, many recognized the need to support faculty and staff members with professional learning. In particular, the colleges saw a need to build capacity around providing holistic instructional and advising practices and supporting students' digital skills. Administrators shared that engagement in professional learning could be challenging because faculty and staff members have many responsibilities and the institutions have limited resources to support engagement in additional, and often expensive, activities. To address these challenges, participants shared several strategies they are using to increase engagement in professional learning opportunities:

- Establish learning communities to focus on a specific topic or resource

- Send a small number of faculty members to an off-site training opportunity, then create opportunities for participants to share what they learned with others in the department

- Negotiate faculty contracts to include training hours around specific topics like student-centered teaching and advising practices or creating inclusive spaces in online learning

- Offer stipends for engaging in professional learning, including for adjuncts and other instructional staff members

- Leverage experts on campus to lead professional learning (e.g., writing center staff members providing professional development on supporting English language learners)

- Use data to highlight the impacts of professional learning on student outcomes

See the BCC vignette for an example of a multifaceted professional development approach to pilot and scale implementation of open educational resources.

Berkshire Community College reduced barriers for students by taking a multifaceted approach to increase the use of open educational resources

Berkshire Community College (BCC) is in Pittsfield, MA, a town with just over 43,000 residents located about 40 miles southeast of Albany, NY. BCC offers more than 30 associate degree and certificate programs. In recent years, the Commonwealth of Massachusetts has passed legislation providing free community college for state residents, with one program for individuals age 25 and older and another for anyone, regardless of age or income. As a result, BCC has seen increased enrollment.

Strategy overview. *In recent years, Massachusetts has worked with institutions of higher education to increase the use of open educational resources (OER) through a collaborative project called "Massachusetts Open Education: Achieving Access for All." In alignment with this statewide initiative and the college's own focus on reducing barriers for students, BCC has been working to strengthen the use of OER across programs and courses.*

Conditions for success. *BCC created a task force to pilot the creation and use of OER, lead efforts to expand engagement, and measure success. A staff member in the Division of Teaching and Learning leads the task force. Other members include faculty members from various programs who can pilot the development and use of OER, and staff members, including a librarian and a coordinator of instructional design, who can provide professional development for faculty members and build the repository of materials. In 2022–2023, BCC supported the team's participation in the AAC&U OER Institute, which provided professional development and guidance around expanding OER. The team is gathering data about the impact of the use of OER on students' costs and outcomes.*

Impacts. As a result of this work, BCC is increasingly engaging faculty members in the development and use of OER. Last academic year (2023–24), over half of the courses offered used either low-cost (less than $50) or no-cost course materials. Through these efforts, courses with OER are reducing costs for students (with a combined savings of over $700,000 in the 2022–23 and 2023–24 school years) and closing institutional performance gaps in D, F, and withdrawal (DFW) rates. For example, for students of color who paid for instructional materials in the 2022–23 academic year, the DFW rate was 31 percent, but for students of color enrolled in no-cost sections, the DFW rate was 21.8 percent (for white students, the DFW rate for sections with instructional material cost was 23.1% and 19.3% for no-cost sections).

Strategies for sustaining momentum. BCC's OER efforts align with statewide priorities and the college's strategic plan. To scale and sustain engagement across campus, BCC is investing in additional professional development and stipends to faculty members to identify or create OER and showcasing successful examples of OER (see an example here). BCC has also launched a communication campaign that shares resources for students and faculty members and highlights key data points about the impact of OER (e.g., the money saved by students as a result of OER; see example here). The OER task force has evolved into a standing OER Committee that includes student members. Recently they hosted an event celebrating OER Faculty Champions. BCC recently implemented a system to mark low and no-cost courses in the schedule, allowing students to see when they register for courses. With the continued support of professional development, increased transparency to students, and recognition for faculty members who use OER, BCC is committed to continual efforts to remove barriers to student success.

Building a culture of evidence supports effective planning, implementation, and evaluation of effective practices

In alignment with the third goal of the initiative (foster a culture of evidence), all participating colleges worked closely with ATD coaches to build their capacity to collect, analyze, use, and share data. Participants across roles shared how using data supported their ability to identify students' needs, develop new programs and practices, and see the impacts of these practices on student outcomes.

The colleges honed three key capacities while building a culture of evidence, usually led by strong institutional research offices. The most effective offices of institutional research had staff members with deep knowledge of data and institutional effectiveness as well as the capacity, staffing, and resources to institutionalize data practices across the college. Strong institutional research offices enabled colleges to use data to understand the student population, share and communicate data, and use data for decision making and continuous improvement.

Using data to understand the student population

Some colleges deepened their capacity to use data by disaggregating their existing enrollment, retention, or completion data by student characteristics. The colleges then developed and implemented new tools to better understand their students, such as intake surveys, student experience surveys (e.g., CCSSE and SENSE[4]), student focus groups, and feedback surveys. See the C-GCC vignette for a description of how the college used intake survey data to develop a new team focused on providing holistic student supports.

The colleges also worked with ATD to review early momentum metrics (e.g., completion of gateway courses, credits completed in the first semester or year, and fall-to-spring persistence in the first year)[5] to gain a better understanding of students' needs and barriers to success. Through these efforts, the colleges identified student populations furthest from opportunity, which varied widely across colleges and included students of color, student parents, working students, first-generation students, English language learners, adult learners, LGBTQ students, and others.

Sharing and communicating data

As the colleges strengthened their approach to gathering and analyzing data about their student population, they also created new processes for sharing data across the college. These included creating norms about reviewing data in every meeting; ensuring that the cross-campus teams, such as those described in the previous section, had access to data; sharing key data points at campus-wide events like convocation; sending out newsletters with key data points; and creating data dashboards and other virtual tools accessible to all faculty and staff members. At HCC, the institutional research officer held data summits focused on engaging faculty and staff members across the college around key data points that measured progress toward ATD goals. As the institutional research offices built capacity for communicating and sharing data, they highlighted the importance of engaging the entire community in conversations about data governance, data democratization, and building trust in data. BCC is now focused on developing and communicating a consistent set of high-level outcomes aligned with the strategic plan to address initiative fatigue and provide clear and consistent communication to the campus community.

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[4] The Community College Survey of Student Engagement (CCSSE): **https://cccse.org/ccsse/survey;** The Survey of Entering Student Engagement (SENSE). **https://cccse.org/sense/survey**

[5] Belfield, C. R., Jenkins, D., & Fink, J. (2019). Early momentum metrics: Leading indicators for community college improvement. Community College Research Center. **https://ccrc.tc.columbia.edu/media/k2/attachments/early-momentum-metrics-leading-indicators.pdf**

Using data to guide decision making and assess progress toward goals

With more detailed data about the student population and better processes for communicating data, participants across roles shared how they used data to guide planning at every level. Administrators shared that the amount of data could be overwhelming, and ATD coaches worked with the colleges to make sense of data by selecting a few key indicators (aligned with the strategic plan) and disaggregating and tracking those indicators over time to guide planning and assess progress toward goals. Administrators, faculty members, and staff members found it helpful to use early momentum metrics instead of longer-term indicators (e.g., completion rates or transfer rates) to guide planning and assess progress. This shift was valuable as they could see whether new interventions impacted student success more quickly and adapt new practices if they were not having the desired effect.

To facilitate data-informed decision making, many colleges began including institutional research staff members in cabinet meetings and other leadership meetings and created norms to review data at the start of every meeting. The research also showed that the use of data varied across roles. For college leaders and administrators, data-informed decision making typically related to developing and measuring key performance indicators in the strategic plan or using data to identify and align priorities across initiatives. Program leadership shared how they use data, including workforce and wage data to justify the development of new programs and courses, and faculty members shared how they use data to adjust instructional practices. Advisors and other student services staff members shared how they use data to develop or adjust student services.

> *"I think we're always trying to use data as we're making decisions, even for something simple. For example, at the start of each semester we try to either do a Saturday registration day or extend our hours to support students. So we looked back at the usage of those times, how many students came to a Saturday registration, how many students registered when in the evening. This year we had 15 students come to a Saturday registration. But our evening sessions are much more robust. So, we really extended our evening hours and provided three and a half weeks of extended hours to support students. So even just a small thing like that, we are using the data that we had to create or to make that decision around our hours."*
>
> – Advisor

Columbia-Greene Community College's CARES team provides a proactive and holistic approach to supporting students' needs

Columbia-Greene Community College (C-GCC) is located in Hudson, NY, a town of 5,894 about 40 miles south of Albany, NY. C-GCC is part of the State University of New York system and offers more than 60 associate degrees, certificates, and microcredential programs.

Strategy overview. Over the past four years, C-GCC has strengthened its approach to understanding and addressing students' academic and basic needs. The first step was developing an intake survey that assesses students' needs. The college uses the survey data as a contact point to connect students to resources (e.g., counseling, tutoring, technology, emergency aid) within 72 hours or less. As the use of the intake survey has expanded, the college created a CARES team to provide personalized outreach to students to connect them with resources proactively and be a contact point for faculty and staff members across the college who can make referrals throughout the year.

Conditions for success. By documenting student needs on the intake survey, C-GCC was able to respond to an increased need for resources by creating the CARES team. This team includes faculty and staff members from offices across campus, including the Registrar, the Director of Health Services, the Bursar, and others. The team also uses the intake survey data to expand available resources and create services to better serve the student population. The CARES team is working with community partners to increase the availability of support like broadband internet and child care.

Impacts. The CARES team is seeing an increase in the use of available resources as more students complete the intake survey. Faculty and staff members see that students are connected to resources more quickly as a result of the intake form and through referrals to the CARES team. A critical resource the CARES team connects students to is the Persistence Program, which provides students experiencing unforeseen financial hardship access to funding to cover expenses that could derail a student's academic progression; funding is made available through the Columbia-Greene Community College Foundation. To measure the impact of these referrals and ensure this program supports students' outcomes, the Office of the Dean of Students began adding attribute codes in the student information system for recipients in spring 2025, allowing those with need to be more intentionally monitored for check-ins. C-GCC is seeing overall improved student outcomes, including increased completion of gateway courses, particularly for students from historically underserved groups. In the pilot year (2023–24), the college saw an increase in fall-to-fall retention from 61 to 63 percent.

Strategies for sustaining momentum. Holistic student supports is a key component of the college's strategic plan. The CARES team is expanding the use of data to evaluate and communicate the team's impact by linking intake data to relevant institutional dashboards, including those in academic affairs and enrollment management. This will raise awareness about the diversity of academic and nonacademic resources students might benefit from using. As one of the college's primary retention initiatives, CARES activity will be tracked as an indicator of improved student outcomes. The CARES team is also working with the foundation to invest in additional resources for students (e.g., emergency aid).

Strong relationships with community partners are essential for supporting students and strengthening rural communities

In rural areas, community colleges often have deep, longstanding relationships with large local employers: The colleges are often the only training providers for local businesses and have built pathways for students to gain the necessary skills for in-demand occupations. In alignment with the fourth goal of the Rural Resiliency Initiative (develop and strengthen community partnerships), many colleges entered the project with strong partners, particularly larger employers in health fields. Through working with ATD, the colleges developed a broader and more strategic approach to engaging community partners, which resulted in stronger support for students and a stronger presence in the local community.

Over the course of the four-year initiative, the colleges expanded their thinking about community partners to go beyond the region's primary employers and include organizations and smaller employers or businesses that could address other student needs and reduce barriers to student success. For most colleges, the region's primary employers comprised the following industries: hospitals, health care, or other allied health partners; cybersecurity; information technology; K–12 schools; or agriculture.

> *"One of the beautiful things about being in a rural community and a small community is that that oftentimes we are working together, pulling together our resources and trying to help our students, our common students, be successful … That's one thing that we are working on very, very closely— tightening up those partnerships—because it will help our students be more successful, and we'll start to close a lot of those equity gaps."*
>
> – Administrator

Some of the community partners that the colleges identified through this work included:

- **Community-based organizations, nonprofits, and cultural liaisons** facilitated the colleges' efforts to support students furthest from opportunity by expanding access through focused outreach to incoming students, filling gaps in the colleges' ability to understand and address students' basic needs, and providing professional development and other services (e.g., translation and interpretation) to the college community.

- **Educational institutions** such as other higher education institutions, extension offices, K–12 school systems, vocational programs, and adult education centers supported alignment and streamlined students' transitions across institutions. The colleges highlighted how K–12 partners were particularly important in supporting students' digital skills as they worked with teachers and principals to align offerings and understand gaps in students' access to technology.

- **Regional, county, state, and federal agencies,** including human services agencies, labor departments, chambers of commerce, legislators' offices, and rural transportation groups, helped the colleges to identify available funding, provide staff member capacity for advancing educational opportunities within the community, and provided an opportunity to collaborate around shared community goals and workforce needs.

- **Small businesses** expanded the colleges' thinking around workforce partnerships to look beyond the one or two large employers in rural areas. Colleges found that many of the small businesses had common needs, and by training students on those common needs they could create a path for students to stay in the community in a well-paying job.

As the colleges expanded their partnerships, they reviewed and thought strategically about the purpose and engagement level of their community partners and identified gaps that could be addressed with new partners. In recognition of the importance of these relationships, some of the colleges created new positions around community engagement to lead the work. For example, BCC has a new executive director of workforce development and community education who previously served as the mayor of Pittsfield. The colleges also used ATD's partnership analysis tool to structure their strategic thinking about community partner engagement and create a shared understanding of the goals of each partnership and the approach to building or maintaining the relationship.

A well-defined approach to engagement allowed for more clarity across the college around who was engaging with different partners and could reduce the burden on faculty members and administrators. Across many of the colleges, the following structure emerged:

- The college leader served as the face of community engagement efforts and modeled a strong presence in the community.

- Faculty members often worked closely with employers through advisory boards and began to expand engagement with K–12 systems to align course offerings.

- Advisors and student support staff members had less contact with community partners, but over the course of the initiative, they developed relationships with community-based organizations to increase student support, and some began to strengthen relationships with K–12 systems related to registration and enrollment.

- Other offices, including institutional research and media relations, were increasingly involved in thinking strategically about identifying key metrics to communicate with external partners. For example, SKCTC conducted an economic impact study that demonstrated the important role of the college in educating students and bringing grants to support workforce needs. The college is sharing this with the community so they can see the benefit that SKCTC brings to the region.

Community partnerships also supported positive institutional and student-level outcomes. For example, successful partnerships resulted in funding and resources, such as scholarships, training equipment, tools, technology, or instruction, which supported student learning and streamlined pathways into the workforce by developing highly qualified, highly skilled students within a particular major of study. LSUE interviewees reflected that nearly every graduate from their allied health program secured a job prior to graduating. See the SKCTC vignette for a description of how the college engaged community partners to support emergency aid funding for students.

Successful partnerships with employers led to the creation of work-based learning opportunities, such as internships and apprenticeships, specific to certain fields of study. At most colleges, internships were provided for students in allied health, medical, and career technical fields. For example, in some of NWMCC's career technical programs, students attend class for a portion of the week and spend the remaining time interning in the field. Internships are paid, allowing students to earn money as they gain experience. Similarly, LSUE's partnership with Ochsner Health System supports paid internships for students in the respiratory therapy program, which offers employment at program completion. The colleges had varied approaches to engaging community partners around these opportunities and connecting students with employers. While this work was often managed at the program level, C-GCC has a director of career success and experiential learning who builds and maintains a database of internship opportunities by connecting with alumni and community partners to pilot new internships across all programs. Students valued the visibility and availability of internships and saw them as an important step in selecting or transitioning into a career.

Additionally, successful relationships with community partners laid the groundwork for other partnerships. Many participants shared how strategic work with community partners in the early years of the initiative led to additional partners approaching them to develop new programs in the last year. They also saw success in having community partners hold events and trainings on campus, which increases familiarity with the college and builds bridges between the campus and the surrounding community. For example, the New York State Energy Research and Development Authority heard about C-GCC through another

community partner, then asked the college to hold an environmental job fair on campus with other local energy companies.

As the colleges strengthened relationships with community partners, many shared how they measured success by developing shared goals and meeting each other's needs, which was particularly important in rural communities.

> *"[Success is] when we can come to the community with something and they provide a solution. And we can go to the community and provide a solution. There is an open line of communication, and we just naturally help one another … [The rural context] helps the community partnerships because with us helping the community and the community helping us being a such a small context it should be a cycle, a circle."*
>
> – Administrator

Southeast Kentucky Community and Technical College is working with community partners to expand the availability of emergency aid funds

Southeast Kentucky Community and Technical College (SKCTC) is located in Cumberland, KY, a town of 2,237 about 120 miles northeast of Knoxville, TN, and about 140 miles southeast of Lexington, KY. The college also has six campuses across the state. SKCTC is part of the Kentucky Community and Technical College System and offers over 50 associate degree or certificate programs.

Strategy overview. The college recognized that finances are a barrier to students' postsecondary access and success, exacerbated by the high poverty level of the community (57%, compared to 16% in Kentucky). To reduce this barrier, the college is working to increase outreach to students about emergency funding and working with community partners to increase funding for emergency aid. To increase access to emergency aid for students, advisors and success coaches connect with students earlier and more frequently throughout the semester to ask about needs, and faculty members use Starfish, an early alert system, to identify students who may be facing challenges so that advisors and coaches can follow up and quickly connect students to emergency aid if needed.

Conditions for success. SKCTC is bringing together its advancement office, foundation, student services team, and workforce programs to engage community partners in supporting the college with emergency aid funds for students. The college is also tracking retention and reviewing data on students that are not retained to better understand how to tailor outreach strategies.

Impacts. *SKCTC is seeing increased enrollment despite decreased community college enrollment across the state. SKCTC is also seeing increases in retention as a result of the work done to strengthen academic and basic needs support, including emergency aid. The college is also seeing strengthened relationships with community partners who reach out to the college for training needs.*

Strategies for sustaining momentum. *This strategy is aligned with the strategic enrollment management plan and builds on the Quality Enhancement Plan (part of the accreditation process), which focuses on advising. The college is also developing a strategy for increasing communication with community partners and alumni, highlighting student needs and the important role that community partners can play in supporting student success.*

Effective practices to prepare students for the digital economy and advance equitable student success

The four conditions described in the previous section laid the groundwork for the colleges to implement effective practices that prepare students for the digital economy and advance equitable student success. The analysis demonstrated three effective practices that support the whole student by attending to their success in the classroom, workforce, and beyond:

1. Campus-wide engagement fosters a shared understanding of and approach to supporting students' digital skills and preparing students for the digital economy

2. Holistic student supports address barriers for students furthest from opportunity

3. Strengthened teaching and advising practices improve equitable retention and student success

Campus-wide engagement fosters a shared understanding of and approach to supporting students' digital skills and preparing students for the digital economy

Supporting students' digital skills is important for their long-term success. However, this can be challenging in rural locations due to disparities in access to the internet, technology, and digital skill development for future careers. To address this gap, a key goal of the Rural Resiliency Initiative is preparing and connecting students to careers in the digital economy, which starts with supporting students' digital skills. (See Brey et al., 2024 for an additional description of how to prepare students for the digital economy.) Across the cohort, supporting students' digital skills was a challenging endeavor, and colleges needed to develop new practices and systems to support a comprehensive approach. The study analysis identified the following key steps as colleges worked to support students' digital skills and prepare them for workforce needs. See the LSUE vignette for a description of how the college implemented multiple strategies to increase support for students' digital skills and align skills with workforce needs.

Step 1. Develop a shared understanding of digital skills. Through these efforts, most colleges developed a college-wide definition of digital skills, which often ranged from foundational digital skills to advanced technical skills aligned with particular workforce needs. Many participating colleges used a digital skills program review process provided by ATD to conduct meaningful conversations around digital skills in program curricula. Some colleges tasked a committee to lead this work. Others created opportunities for conversations more broadly by engaging faculty and staff members in dialogue with the goal of defining digital skills. In some cases, colleges focused on individual programs to evaluate the extent to which digital skills were included in the curriculum. Some colleges developed their overarching frameworks into tailored definitions of digital skills for each of the colleges' programs. For example, HCC developed a tool to organize digital skills into three categories (communication skills, practical skills, and professional skills) and used the tool to engage advisory committees in a review of associate degree programs to identify gaps within each category. Many participants found this process challenging but shared that it was spurred by the pandemic, which forced an abrupt shift to online learning and created urgency to more effectively support students' digital skills more broadly, as well as deepen understanding of the strategic nature of investment in digital skills aligned with workforce needs.

Step 2. Review current programming related to digital skills. After creating shared language around digital skills, the colleges sought to understand where and how these skills were supported. Program chairs often led these efforts by working with faculty members to review courses and identify where digital skills were taught in the curriculum. One strategy that enabled this work was creating a foundational set of skills and/or a template for the programs, which they used as a starting point to develop their own set of skills. At some colleges, this process was built into the program review and course evaluation processes to promote consistency and sustainability across the institution. For example, BCC conducted an assessment of student learning to understand courses where digital skill learning is happening and incorporating digital literacy as a core learning outcome. While the assessment of digital skills is not integrated across campus, BCC developed frameworks for teaching digital skills that can be adapted for each program. This process was often affirming for the colleges, and many participants shared that they were surprised at how many digital skills were already included in their courses.

Step 3. Understand students' needs for digital skills and resources. As the program chairs and faculty members inventoried their courses for the inclusion of digital skills, the colleges also developed strategies to better understand students' needs related to technology and digital skills. For example, CCC distributes a basic needs survey each fall that includes questions about students' needs for technology. Through this process, many participants reported that they had to adjust their assumptions about students' technical skills and knowledge. With that came the need to recognize that while students were adept at some digital skills (often those supported by a phone), computer skills needed to be developed and further supported. Through this process, the colleges also learned that many students lacked access to laptops and Wi-Fi. As the colleges expanded their understanding of students' needs, they were able to

identify important contextual factors such as misalignment between the K–12 system and the community college (e.g., Chromebooks were different from laptops used by the colleges).

Step 4. Identify gaps in digital skill programming based on workforce needs. After reviewing curricula for digital skills and understanding students' needs, the colleges sought to identify gaps in their current programming related to digital skills. This was facilitated by engaging with close community partners and employers to gather feedback. Colleges highlighted how the rural context afforded close and responsive relationships with community partners who provide feedback and input on the colleges' approaches and support the colleges with resources and technology. Many colleges worked with advisory committees to ensure digital skills aligned with workforce needs. For example, NWMCC's business technology program engages community businesses and industries to understand the digital skills students need to work at their companies. Many businesses requested that students understand basic computer skills and earn certifications to demonstrate digital proficiency. As a result, the program has embedded opportunities for students to earn certifications, such as in Microsoft Word or Excel, in coursework. In addition, C-GCC uses noncredit courses and microcredentials to serve as a pilot for new programs and courses and respond quickly to student or community partner needs. One example is a health care facilitator microcredential that trains students to be a telehealth counselor.

Step 5. Develop strategies to address student needs and gaps in programming. After gathering information from program chairs and faculty members, students, and community partners, the colleges developed strategies to address gaps. For example, BCC hired digital coaches to provide students with access to technical assistance and support. NWMCC is partnering with Base Camp Coding Academy to provide students with college credit for participation in a yearlong coding program. Some of the most effective strategies included:

- Providing students with access to hot spots and laptops

- Including digital skills support in student services such as orientation, first-year experience courses, advising, and technology support integrated into student boot camps

- Creating resources that students could access as needed, such as websites, digital technology coordinators, and a technology drop-in center

- Providing faculty members with access to professional development to build their own digital skills and strengthen their instructional approaches

- Creating opportunities for all students to develop specialized technical skills like 3-D printing and the use of drones

- Integrating badges and microcredentials (e.g., NorthStar, LinkedIn Learning, Microsoft) into coursework

- Leveraging noncredit programs to pilot new courses related to specific digital skills

• Engaging community partners to provide needed resources such as technology used in the workforce and opportunities for students to learn digital skills specific to the workforce

Step 6. Evaluate progress and refine strategies to improve student education and workforce outcomes. In this final step, the colleges are now using data to assess the effectiveness of this work. Participants highlighted a variety of metrics they use to assess progress, including a reduction in students' technology support needs (measured by IT staff members), student performance in assessments that were developed with a focus on digital skills (e.g., ePortfolios and research projects that require digital skills), and students' completion of digital badges and certificates that are valued by employers (e.g., Excel, Word, Information Literacy). Some colleges are also gathering information from community partners about job performance and from students about employment outcomes after they enter the workforce. For example, many of the colleges work with local health care providers to ensure students in allied health fields learn how to use the technology they will need once they enter the workforce.

Louisiana State University at Eunice has developed a comprehensive approach to supporting students' digital skills

Louisiana State University at Eunice (LSUE) is located in Eunice, LA, a town of 10,398 about 40 miles north-west of Lafayette, LA. LSUE is part of the LSU system and offers 25 associate degree and certificate programs and more than 100 transfer programs.

Strategy overview. Over the past four years, LSUE has developed a multipronged approach to supporting students' digital skills led by a committee that includes faculty and staff members:

- *The college has supported students' foundational digital skills through integrating NorthStar badges in key skills like Using Email, Microsoft Word, Internet Basics, and Basic Computer Skills in widely taken classes (e.g., the first-year experience course), which verify and articulate students' digital skills. The college also updated orientation (which is attended by more than 90% of new students) so that students bring laptops and learn how to locate and use the learning management system, catalog, academic calendar, their degree plan, financial aid information, and fee (billing) statements. The orientation team also shows students how to use their email, register their vehicle, and where to locate tutoring, disability services, and advising services.*

- *The college provides boot camps to students who have been identified as underprepared through placement tests. The boot camps provide benchmarks to assess and build skills before the semester starts and incorporate digital badges in a game-based approach to motivate students to obtain as many badges as possible.*

- *The college worked with program directors to identify relevant digital skills in each program using a common template. Program directors were also provided with foundational digital skills, then*

asked to define how their programs supported additional, more tailored skills for students to be successful in the workforce.

Conditions for success. *The work is led by a cross-campus team that includes faculty and staff members and collaborates with program directors and institutional effectiveness to support the use of data. The college worked with employers to identify what skills are taught when students enter the workforce and what skills students need to develop at LSUE. The college is also working with high schools to align digital skills and foster a smoother transition for students.*

Impacts. *Faculty members find that students value digital badges. Staff members also find that there is a reduction in technology support needs. The college is documenting increases in students' obtaining digital badges: 324 students have earned 1,510 badges to date. Two-thirds of these badges (1,011) were in the required/integrated courses. However, the remaining 499 badges were in elective topics such as Your Digital Footprint, Windows, Social Media, PowerPoint, Mac OS, Information Literacy, Google Docs, Career Search Skills, and Accessing Telehealth Appointments, suggesting that students appreciate the opportunity to build their digital skills and obtain badges to document their learning. The college is in the process of measuring student outcomes in capstone courses, but results from the boot camps and the orientation course show increased student learning in key digital skills and are eager to better understand the progress made in the 2024–25 academic year.*

Strategies for sustaining momentum. *The college is planning to scale the use of digital badges to additional programs and build digital skill support in other summer programming. LSUE is also aligning the digital skills work with its strategic plan, and every digital skill in the planning system is linked to one of the three strategic goals of the college.*

Holistic student supports address barriers for students furthest from opportunity

Students have needs beyond digital skill development. Providing holistic student supports can help students in the classroom and beyond. As described in the previous section, many of the colleges began their work with ATD by reviewing data disaggregated by race and ethnicity, age, gender, or socioeconomic status, then used the findings to plan and implement initiatives to strengthen support for students facing barriers to success. ATD coaches worked with the colleges to frame asset-based conversations around students' needs, focusing on learning about and centering the strengths and capacities of rural community college students. For example, colleges became increasingly aware that many students hold jobs, care for families, and are the first in their families to attend college. Participants highlighted how the rural context often made barriers more easily identifiable. For instance, since rural institutions are often

small, administrators and staff members can talk directly to the students to ask about their needs, barriers, and how best to support them.

After examining data about their student populations, all cohort colleges expanded the quantity and quality of their holistic supports and services available to students. These included mental and physical health services, food and financial support, clothing closets, emergency aid, language supports, and increased use of open educational resources (see BCC vignette above). The colleges also worked with community partners to address gaps in basic needs services (e.g., mental health services).[6]

To increase the quantity and quality of holistic supports and services, all colleges implemented new practices to strengthen collaboration between advisors and faculty members to more quickly address students' needs. For many colleges, this included the use of an early warning system where faculty members and advisors could flag students who missed class or disclosed family emergencies. ATD worked with the colleges to create consistent processes for flagging students and to create clear roles and procedures to connect students to needed support effectively. At SKCTC, student success coaches call any student who has been flagged to provide them assistance and connect them to resources. Colleges found that these systems increased retention and closed equity gaps by disproportionately impacting students who face the highest barriers to success. At C-GCC, faculty and staff members also refer students to the CARES team that follows up and connects students to resources.

> *"I do think that [early alert system] is really, really important. It's increased communication across student services and academics that has really given a good safety net, a good way to watch out for students. It is really being effective at keeping students in class and keeping students successfully completing classes. It's about the communication across the college to make sure that these students succeed."*
>
> *– Administrator*

In addition to the individualized outreach described above, colleges increased outreach to students by creating structures that provide all students with information about basic needs services through language on syllabi and regular messages through the learning management system. The colleges also implemented strategies to support tailored outreach to students as needs arose through case management provided by a staff member (e.g., a basic needs navigator) or team (e.g., the CARES team described in the C-GCC vignette). Many of the colleges are now using a chatbot on the website which

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[6] See previous section for more detail about the colleges' built strong relationships with community partners to support students.

provides 24-hour support to students and connects them to resources when advisors and other support staff members are unavailable. LSUE also uses a chatbot to nudge students periodically throughout the semester to self-report needs and concerns (financial, emotional, academic, basic needs, etc.) and connect them to appropriate resources.

Strengthened teaching and advising practices improve equitable retention and student success

In addition to expanding holistic supports, the colleges strengthened their approach to teaching and advising as they worked to improve educational outcomes and set students up for future success. As described in the previous section, the colleges laid the foundation for student-centered teaching and advising through committed leadership that supports implementation of new practices and provides faculty and staff members with professional learning.

Student-centered advising

Many of the colleges implemented institution-wide practices to support student-centered advising. Student-centered institution-wide practices included being more responsive to workforce needs, increasing the use of professional advisors, and shifting faculty members' roles in formal advising to the second year as students prepare to transfer or enter the workforce. Effective advising practices that the colleges implemented included:

- Many colleges are strengthening holistic advising practices, enabling advisors to spend more time in initial advising sessions. This, in turn, allows advisors to gather important information about students' lives and establish strong, trusting relationships with students so they can connect them to both academic and nonacademic resources as needed.

- BCC is implementing opt-out advising (a shift from opt-in advising), which has led to significant increases in student engagement in advising. Participants shared that this practice was culturally responsive for many students who were reluctant to ask for help, and they found the greatest benefits for students with the highest needs.

- Many colleges are integrating career coaching into advising sessions with the goal of helping students complete a degree and become employed with a living-wage job. Advising sessions focus on helping prepare students with skills that will be important to their career, including connecting to internships and apprenticeships as appropriate.

Teaching practices for equitable student success

Colleges developed supports and resources to institutionalize the implementation of responsive, student-centered teaching practices across classrooms. For example, colleges are creating norms and toolkits for faculty to implement that will foster a sense of belonging for students. Similarly, colleges are creating resources for students—like adding language to syllabi, creating study tools, and integrating work-based learning opportunities in the classroom—that support academic learning. Effective practices that the colleges implemented to support students in the classroom included:

- Many colleges implemented practices to create a sense of belonging such as providing warm handoffs between student services offices (e.g., advisors walking students to the financial aid office) and establishing a norm where every campus employee greets any student within five feet. See the CCC vignette for a description of the inclusion toolkit used by faculty members to strengthen students' sense of community and awareness of campus resources.

- C-GCC is including a commitment to equitable student success in materials like the admissions college application and all course syllabi. After including this language in the application, the college experienced increased enrollment among students from underrepresented groups.

- Many colleges are investing in new tools and resources for students to support academic success, such as virtual tutoring, note-taking, and study tools.

- Many colleges are creating opportunities for work-based learning experiences and leveraging the rural context to facilitate connections to employers, as highlighted by a faculty member:

> *"Community organizations know us as an institution, and they know us as individuals, too. And so when we say, 'Hey, can we bring our class into your lab to take a look at what you're doing?' they know who we are, and they're more than happy to allow us to come, because they recognize that our students are going to be their employees at some point."*
>
> – Faculty member

Clovis Community College developed and implemented an inclusion toolkit to strengthen students' sense of belonging

Clovis Community College (CCC) is located in Clovis, NM, a town of 38,567 about 100 miles northwest of Lubbock, TX, and seven miles from Cannon Air Force Base. CCC offers more than 50 associate degree and certificate programs. CCC is a designated Hispanic-serving institution.

Strategy overview. CCC developed an inclusion toolkit to foster a sense of belonging and connect students to resources (e.g., tutoring, the food pantry). The toolkit provides a series of inclusion activities for faculty members, such as name tents, get-to-know-you surveys, and personalized check-in notes. Faculty members complete one activity each week. Some of the activities focus on orienting students to campus, which reduces barriers to participating, as previously orientation took place prior to the semester. For example, in the second week, students tour campus to learn about available resources during class time.

Conditions for success. In the first year of working with ATD, the core team reviewed disaggregated data for early momentum metrics, which was a new practice for the college. These results were eye-opening for the team and sparked a shared commitment to increase student engagement, belonging, and inclusiveness and to increase student academic outcomes by providing students with access to academic and non-academic resources and building a sense of community. These goals are reflected in the activities of the inclusion toolkit. The initial version of the toolkit, created in collaboration with ATD coaches, was approved by the cross-campus ATD/Retention Committee and piloted in fall 2024 in in-person MATH 1130 courses.

Impacts. Faculty members who piloted the toolkit value the opportunity to build stronger relationships with students and foster a strong sense of community in their courses. The student surveys showed that students felt a strong sense of belonging, and early student data from the pilot show higher pass rates and lower D, F, and withdrawal (DFW) rates. The ATD/Retention Team committed to developing an ATD faculty toolkit to promote a more student-centered instructional approach. During its pilot semester, the toolkit contributed to a 20 percent increase in A grades, a 1 percent increase in B grades, an 11 percent decrease in F grades, and a 7 percent reduction in withdrawals. In addition to these gains in course completion, student quarterly surveys reported increased engagement, inclusiveness, and a stronger sense of belonging. This collaborative achievement by the ATD/Retention Team, faculty members, and student services staff members demonstrates meaningful impact and sets a strong foundation for expanding this initiative to other courses campus-wide.

Strategies for sustaining momentum. The toolkit was piloted in MATH 1130, a course that is required across multiple programs in the 2024–25 school year. Faculty engagement was high as the activities are easy to integrate and do not create a burden. CCC collected survey data from students about each activity

in the toolkit, and the college is now evaluating the survey data as well as course success rates from the pilot data to develop plans to scale the use of the toolkit across additional courses and refine the toolkit for future use.

In addition to broad support available to all students, colleges are strengthening tailored support for specific groups of students (e.g., working students or first-generation and low-income students) based on students' academic needs identified through placement tests. A key priority for the colleges is increased access to gateway courses by redesigning developmental education and strengthening support such as tutoring and co-requisite courses. Some colleges now offer week-long boot camps for students who would benefit from additional support (based on placement test data) to build confidence and ensure students start the semester with a strong foundation. LSUE is implementing pre-semester boot camps, which transition into learning communities as the semester begins. They have found that this approach reduces students' time to completion of gateway courses. See the NWMS vignette for a description of the college's approach to increasing college-level math success. Other tailored support include:

- BCC is scaling its TRIO program after seeing the positive impact it had on student outcomes. The expansion includes hiring additional professional advisors, reducing advising caseloads for existing advisors, and providing program-specific coaches to support students based on income and first-generation status.

- HCC is expanding night and evening courses for working students. In addition, HCC is working with employers to provide funding for students to pursue customized training programs in high-need positions that pay a living wage. The college expects to see an increase in students entering workforce positions in the community that pay a living wage.

Northwest Mississippi Community College is increasing student success in college-level math courses through reducing barriers and increasing access to supports

Northwest Mississippi Community College (NWMS) is located in Senatobia, MS, a town of 8,165 about 40 miles south of Memphis, TN. NWMS is a residential college with more than half of enrolled students living on campus. NWMS offers over 30 associate degree and certificate programs.

Strategy overview. After reviewing course-level disaggregated data, the core team determined that completion rates for college-level math courses are a key area of growth for the college. To increase student performance, NWMS is developing and implementing strategies to decrease the time for students to access college-level math and increase access to supports available for students enrolled in college-level math (i.e., tutoring and a math lab). To decrease the time to access college-level math, NWMS is offering

condensed eight-week courses for developmental math and providing additional opportunities for students to take placement tests and demonstrate their existing math knowledge. To increase access to support, NWMS math faculty members are taking students on a tour of the math lab on the first day of class, and the math tutor visits classes to meet students and increase familiarity. Faculty members also use an early alert system to communicate with advisors who can reach out to provide individualized support to students. Advisors also send periodic messages to students (based on a communication plan) with information about the math lab and math tutor.

Conditions for success. *The work is driven by a shared commitment to increasing student performance in college-level math courses and increased opportunities for collaboration between faculty and staff members to provide wraparound supports and different course structures based on students' needs.*

Impacts. *NWMS is experiencing increased completion, retention, and persistence rates for developmental and college-level math courses. Early data show that condensed courses are particularly impactful as students are deeply engaged in the content (taking math four days a week) and progress through the developmental coursework more quickly to be successful in college-level courses and beyond.*

Strategies for sustaining momentum. *NWMS plans to scale the use of the early alert system to increase collaboration between faculty members and advisors in other courses. The college is also aligning its work to increase student performance in college-level math with goals in the strategic plan and the strategic enrollment management plan.*

Strategies for sustaining momentum toward institutional change

In the final year of the Rural Resiliency Initiative, the colleges established systems and structures to ensure that implementation of effective practices continues. The analysis found the following four strategies for sustaining momentum toward institutional change:

1. Aligning goals across initiatives helps the colleges prioritize new practices and build toward sustainable change

2. Investment in infrastructure and new positions is a lever for sustainability

3. Sustaining effective practices requires a documented approach for implementation, scaling, and evaluation

4. Strategic communication plans support transparency and provide an opportunity for colleges to build on success

In addition to these systems and structures, administrators at the colleges are implementing cultural shifts that they believe will support the sustainability of the work. These shifts include using data to inform decision making, engaging in continuous improvement, and adapting practices to support students' needs.

Aligning goals across initiatives helps the colleges prioritize new practices and build toward sustainable change

Alignment of initiatives was a key condition for the work at the outset of the Rural Resiliency Initiative, and the colleges have continued to prioritize alignment across initiatives as essential to successfully achieving sustainability. This is highlighted in many of the vignettes where the colleges' initial goals or implementation of new practices were guided by the strategic plan or a state or system-wide priority. For example, BCC's efforts to increase the use of open educational resources were identified as a priority because they aligned with the statewide priority, **"Massachusetts Open Education: Achieving Access for All."**

For many of the colleges, alignment begins with the strategic plan, which guides the work of other initiatives, including strategic plans; accreditation plans; strategic enrollment management plans; and diversity, equity, and inclusion action plans, among others. Further, a few colleges are in the process of developing new strategic plans and have noted that priorities from the Rural Resiliency Initiative, such as digital skills, are an important component of those new plans. By aligning internal plans and priorities, the colleges can foster a shared understanding of college priorities and support the use of common metrics for assessing progress. The colleges are also aligning the Rural Resiliency work with statewide initiatives that strengthen external support, deepen partnerships, and increase funding opportunities.

Investment in infrastructure and new positions is a lever for sustainability

Throughout the Rural Resiliency Initiative, the cohort colleges took advantage of the opportunity provided by the work with ATD and other resources (e.g., American Rescue Plan Act funds) to invest in new positions or infrastructure to support the momentum of institutional change efforts. The colleges made the following investments:

- Creation of new student spaces, which provide centralized spaces for services like tutoring, math labs, and writing centers.

- Upgrading technology systems to modernize classrooms and expand the capacity to offer hybrid and online courses. Many colleges began technology upgrades during the pandemic in response to the move to online learning. For example, BCC and LSUE leveraged pandemic-related funding, like the American Rescue Plan Act, to increase their capacity for online learning through purchasing hot spots and laptops for students and developing new online learning modules and orientations.

- Purchasing new software to communicate with and support students by connecting students to resources such as chatbots, early warning systems, note-taking aids, and virtual tutors.

- Creation of new positions to lead and support efforts to address students' basic needs; provide services for specific groups of students; implement initiatives related to diversity, equity, and inclusion; engage community partners; and expand professional advising. In some cases, this required hiring new staff members to fill these positions. In others, existing staff members were assigned new positions and responsibilities. See the HCC vignette for a description of the colleges' approach to redistributing advising responsibilities from faculty members to professional advisors.

The colleges also prioritized new programs, practices, and services by reallocating resources, including faculty and staff members, funding, and time to support sustainable change. Some colleges restructured to facilitate implementation. For example, BCC moved its marketing team into the workforce development division to facilitate communication with community partners. SKCTC is beginning a more transparent

and intentional budgeting process tied to the college's strategic plan. Rather than leaving budgeting up to the president and chief financial officer, SKCTC is in the beginning stages of collaborating with the ATD core team to align strategic initiatives with appropriate funding streams, allowing for a strategic needs analysis to drive the budgeting process. Similarly, the C-GCC chief financial officer works closely with the ATD core team to support the allocation of resources to improve student outcomes.

Sustaining effective practices requires a documented approach for implementation, scaling, and evaluation

With a strong culture of evidence, the colleges systematically assess the outcomes of new practices. For practices that show evidence of preparing students for the digital economy and advancing student success, the colleges are developing plans for scaling with clear benchmarks that will allow for progress monitoring in alignment with goals identified in the colleges' strategic plans.

To ensure consistency and quality as they scale and sustain new practices, colleges in the cohort document the approaches used. Documentation includes developing formalized plans that provide an overview of the strategy or practice, its goals, associated policies, and key staff members leading or overseeing the work. One example of this is the advising syllabus described in the HCC vignette, which will be available as the college expands its use of professional advisors to support onboarding and ensure consistent, high-quality advising approaches. Another example is the inclusion toolkit for strengthening students' sense of belonging described in the CCC vignette. During the 2024–25 academic year, the college piloted the toolkit in one course. The college is now creating a plan to scale the toolkit across additional courses, thereby broadening the population of students who will benefit from its impact.

Sustaining effective practices also requires engaging faculty members in implementation and providing funding and professional development opportunities to support implementation. For example, C-GCC has identified four faculty fellows to lead professional development related to new educational technology and high-impact instructional practices. This approach will increase access for faculty and staff members to work effectively with new technologies and develop skills that align with both the Rural Resiliency Initiative goals and the college's strategic plan.

Scaling what works in Halifax Community College advising redesign

Halifax Community College (HCC) is located in Weldon, NC, a town of 1,444 about 90 miles northeast of Raleigh, NC, and serves both Halifax and Northampton counties. HCC offers 58 degrees, diplomas, and certificates, and all students at the college are enrolled in at least one online class, reflecting the college's commitment to flexible learning options.

Strategy overview. Over the past four years, HCC has engaged in a campus-wide, data-informed effort to enhance academic advising. At the start of the process, the college had a faculty advising model, but through a data-informed process that centered students' needs, the college is shifting to a collaborative advising model in which professional advisors support first-year students and faculty advisors engage students in their second year. Thanks to federal grant funding, professional advisors have been hired to serve students enrolled in college transfer pathways, such as the Associate in Arts in General Education, and the college is implementing a structured, intentional advising framework to ensure that both professional and faculty advisors are equipped to meet the evolving needs of students.

Conditions for success. At the start of the advising redesign process, faculty members expressed hesitation about transitioning advising responsibilities to professional advisors. Many valued their role as advisors, seeing it as a meaningful way to build relationships with students and provide discipline-specific academic and career guidance. To better understand the existing advising model, faculty members began documenting their advising sessions with students. A review of this data revealed that much of the advising occurred informally—often outside of scheduled office hours—and it was difficult to ensure that all students received at least two formal advising sessions per year. Additionally, advising during the summer was a persistent challenge, as faculty members are on nine-month contracts and are not typically available during that time. By collecting and reviewing data on advising touchpoints, the college was able to facilitate a transparent, data-informed conversation with faculty members about advising capacity, consistency, and student needs. These findings supported the strategic shift to a collaborative advising model. The college is now focusing on expanding its advising capacity by providing new professional advisors with targeted training and professional development in areas such as case management and academic program requirements.

Impacts. Faculty members are now supportive of the shift to professional advisors, having been engaged in the data-informed redesign process. One key benefit of this shift is that students now have access to advisors during the summer months, allowing them to receive one-on-one support for course planning and registration during a critical time. Although student outcome data related to the new model is not yet available, the structural improvements lay a strong foundation for future evaluation and continuous improvement.

Strategies for sustaining momentum: To ensure the long-term success and sustainability of the advising redesign, HCC implemented the following strategies:

- ***Alignment with accreditation.*** *HCC launched its advising redesign strategy as part of its Quality Enhancement Plan, developed to meet SACSCOC accreditation expectations.*

- ***Investment in ongoing professional development and summer advising.*** *New and existing professional advisors will continue to receive training in case management, college transfer pathways, student engagement strategies, and academic program requirements. Summer advising is now a formal responsibility of the professional advising team, ensuring year-round student support.*

- ***Documenting faculty-advisor roles and collaboration.*** *The college is defining advisor roles and formalizing the advising journey to enhance clarity and consistency for students. Regular communication, cross-training, and planning sessions will strengthen the partnership between faculty and professional advisors.*

- ***Data-informed implementation monitoring and sustainability planning.*** *The college will monitor advising touchpoints, gather feedback, and use student data (once available) to refine the model. HCC is also working on a sustainability plan to maintain professional advisor positions beyond the grant period.*

These strategies are designed to maintain momentum, reinforce the advising culture, and ultimately improve student persistence, satisfaction, and success over time.

Strategic communication plans support transparency and provide an opportunity for colleges to build on success

In the final year of the Rural Resiliency Initiative, the colleges worked closely with coaches to develop and implement communication strategies highlighting the progress toward preparing students for the digital economy and advancing student success with both internal and external audiences. Communication plans were often co-developed by individuals who led the Rural Resiliency Initiative at each college and members of the marketing or media relations office. Some colleges expanded their collaborations to include college foundations, individuals in the student success office, outreach teams, and the president's office as well as faculty members, staff members, and students. The plans highlighted how the colleges' Rural Resiliency goals aligned to strategic plans and described the audience, key messages, calls to action, media outlets, timelines for communication efforts, and teams involved in creating and approving the communications.

In addition to external communications plans, some colleges outlined strategies to strengthen internal communications. Such plans were designed to ensure that all faculty and staff members understood how their work connected to the colleges' goals around student success, often in alignment with the strategic plan. For example, the CCC internal communication plan includes creating videos of individuals in a variety of roles talking about their jobs and how they support students. LSUE intentionally selected ATD core team members from across the college so that ATD supports and messaging around student success goals would be fully integrated. In addition, colleges are creatively engaging students to inform future work. For example, HCC holds student forums to communicate upcoming initiatives and gather feedback for improvements to bring back to college leadership.

Most colleges focused on strategies that strengthen external communications with potential students, staff members, community partners, or funders, emphasizing the important role the college plays in the community. When creating plans for potential students, the colleges often focused their outreach to populations who were furthest from opportunity and highlighted how the college could meet their needs and support them in working toward their goals. In another example, C-GCC integrated the goals identified from the ATD work into job descriptions for staff and faculty roles. When communicating with potential community partners, the colleges highlighted their contributions to community vibrancy, describing the return on investment for current community partners, or shared stories of students who have made a difference in the community. When communicating with potential funders, the colleges focused on communicating identities, successes, and the students and communities served by the college.

The colleges found that the communication plans were an essential part of creating a shared understanding of goals and successes as they worked to advance equitable student success and prepare students for the digital economy. This shared understanding is essential to continue the implementation of effective practices after the Rural Resiliency Initiative ends.

Conclusion

The colleges participating in this initiative are situated in communities with diverse workforce opportunities and serve students with various lived experiences, strengths, needs, and career goals. Over the past four years, the Rural Resiliency cohort colleges have made significant progress toward the four project goals. They developed a common language and strengthened their approaches to preparing students with valuable digital skills (goal 1) and adopted new policies and practices to reduce disparities and increase equitable student success (goal 2). These efforts were bolstered by the colleges' successes in building a culture of evidence as they developed new practices for gathering, analyzing, and sharing data and using data to guide planning and improve services (goal 3). The colleges were also supported by strong relationships with community partners and their successes thinking strategically about partnership and developing new partnerships with a wide range of entities (goal 4).

As the colleges worked to prepare students for the digital economy and advance student success, they noted essential conditions that needed to be in place for the work to succeed. First, they needed strong commitments from leadership to prioritize and create clear visions for the work, which includes cross-campus teams to support planning, implementation, and evaluation of new practices and strategies. Second, the colleges needed to identify and create opportunities for professional learning so that faculty and staff members could develop new skills and create a shared understanding of new practices. Another essential condition was the use of actionable data to understand students' needs and measure progress toward the colleges' goals. Finally, for rural colleges, strong partnerships within the community were essential for expanding the capacity of colleges to address students' needs and prepare them to meet their educational and career goals successfully.

With these conditions in place, the colleges undertook an intentional and comprehensive approach to supporting students' digital skills, with an emphasis on aligning skills with workforce needs. The approach included developing a shared understanding, reviewing current programming, identifying gaps, and developing and evaluating progress and refining strategies. Colleges worked in close partnership with community employers to provide feedback and input on the digital skills students will need when entering the workforce and ensuring that students are adequately prepared. Through these efforts, the colleges implemented new practices to provide students with computers and software, created opportunities for students to learn basic computer skills through existing coursework, developed new programs and pathways, and provided students with opportunities to certifications in high-need skills.

For students to advance their digital skills, colleges need to first ensure that students' basic needs are met and that they have adequate instructional and advising support to succeed in college. The colleges implemented a variety of new practices centered on increasing student access to holistic supports and improving the implementation of student-centered teaching and advising practices. Through this work, the colleges have increased enrollment and retention, reduced equity gaps, and increased students' access to technology and digital skills, which will support students' successful transition into the workforce and meet regional workforce needs.

As the colleges moved into the final year of the Rural Resiliency Initiative, they began to lay the foundation for sustainability through ensuring that the Rural Resiliency goals aligned with other initiatives and the strategic plan. Colleges also invested in infrastructure and new positions to support and carry out the Rural Resiliency work. They also developed plans to scale and continue evaluating effective practices. Finally, to support a shared understanding of the work and increase community investment, the colleges developed strategic communications plans. Through these efforts, the rural colleges are well situated to increase student completion and pathways into careers, contribute to economic mobility for students and communities, and serve as a strong foundation for vibrant and resilient rural communities.

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Appendix A.
Evaluation methodology

This appendix includes information about the methodology used to rigorously collect and analyze information for the evaluation of ATD's Rural Resiliency Initiative. The findings in this brief came primarily from data collected and analyzed between January 2024 and April 2025 (phase 2, see below), so the methodology will focus on that period. However, data from 2021–2023 (phase 1) also informed some of the findings, so a summary of those methods is included as well.

Phase 1

ATD launched the *Building Resiliency in Rural Communities for the Future of Work* initiative and selected seven rural community colleges to participate in December 2020. Over the following three years (January 2021 to December 2023), ATD facilitated and supported this cohort of rural community colleges in their work to meet four goals.

To identify lessons learned through this work, ATD partnered with Education Northwest to conduct a qualitative, participatory, and formative evaluation of the initiative. The goals of the evaluation are to work with ATD and the colleges to identify common successes and challenges as the colleges worked toward the four project goals to support ATD's future work with rural colleges and to contribute to the fields of postsecondary education and rural community development.

Data sources

The evaluation team co-developed a participatory, qualitative approach with ATD and the colleges. The methodology focused on a document review and annual interviews and focus groups with administrators, faculty members, advisors, board of trustees' representatives, students, and community partners at each of the colleges. For the document review, the team collected and reviewed the colleges' action plans, president's letters, and other documents created and shared by the colleges. For the interviews and focus groups, the college teams selected participants for each interview, which allowed them to guide and showcase key components of the work.

In the 2021–22 school year, the evaluation team conducted virtual sites visits at each college to interview administrators, faculty members, advisors, board of trustees' representatives, and community partners and conduct focus groups with students. The team also administered a student survey at each of the colleges and interviewed ATD coaches. During the 2022–23 school year the evaluation team travelled

to each college for in-person site visits to conduct interviews and focus groups with administrators, faculty members, advisors, board of trustees' representatives, students, and community partners. See table A1 for additional details about the interview and focus group participants in phase 1. The team also reviewed the college's action plans and documents created by the coaches about each college to understand the colleges' goals, activities, areas of progress, challenges, and support received each year.

Table A1. Interview and focus group participants in each role (phase 1)

Role	Participants in 2021–22	Participants in 2022–23
Administrators	16 (7 colleges)	21 (7 colleges)
Advisors	15 (6 colleges)	18 (7 colleges)
Representatives from the Board of Trustees	4 (4 colleges)	5 (5 colleges)
Community partners	8 (6 colleges)	10 (6 colleges)
Faculty members	13 (6 colleges)	19 (7 colleges)
Students	20* (6 colleges)	37 (7 colleges)
ATD coaches	8	7
Total	**84**	**117**

*2021–22 data collection also included a student survey with 1,149 students across the seven colleges.

Source: Authors' analysis of interview and focus group data.

Analysis

The team conducted a thematic analysis of the transcripts (Braun & Clarke, 2006) using a codebook with codes for each of the four project goals: preparing students for and connecting them to careers in the digital economy, identifying and closing equity gaps, developing and strengthening community partnerships, and fostering a culture of evidence. Within each goal category, the codebook included subcodes specific to each goal that allowed the evaluation team to identify common lessons learned and challenges across the colleges as well as bright spots that emerged at each college. The team collaborated to develop the final codebook and tested for interrater consistency by double-coding a subset of transcripts. The evaluation team coded the transcripts using Atlas.ti. Information from the document review was used to guide interview probes at each college, contextualize findings from the interviews and focus groups, and gain a better understanding of the goals and priorities of each college.

Phase 2

In fall 2023, ATD secured funding to continue supporting the cohort in this work for an additional 18 months. In phase 2, the colleges focused on continuing their work toward the four project goals. In addition, the colleges focused on gaining and sustaining momentum through an additional focus on communications and aligning efforts with strategic plans or accreditation.

Education Northwest continued to serve as an evaluation partner and engaged the colleges in a participatory, learning evaluation of their efforts in phase 2. This evaluation focused on working with the colleges to identify high-impact, effective practices that strengthen their student success efforts using the following four evaluation questions:

1. How are the colleges meeting the following four goals in Rural Resiliency 2.0? How have their approaches adapted over the course of the initiative?

2. What high-impact practices are the colleges using to make progress toward each goal? How do the colleges define or measure success for each goal? How are the colleges gaining and sustaining momentum in their work toward each goal?

3. How does the local context and rural setting impact the colleges' work toward each goal?

4. How have ATD's coaching and other support helped the colleges in their work toward the four goals?

Data sources

To address these evaluation questions, the evaluation team conducted virtual site visits at each college, interviewed the coaches, and conducted a document review. Each data source is described in more detail below, with a summary of participants in each role provided in table A2.

Before collecting any data, the Education Northwest Institutional Review Board reviewed and approved the evaluation design and data collection protocols to ensure the protection of human subjects. The board has 12 members, including scientists, nonscientists, and at-large and unaffiliated members. Education Northwest is guided by *Ethical Principles and Guidelines for the Protection of Human Subjects of Research* (known as the **Belmont Report)** from the National Commission for the Protection of Human Participants of Biomedical and Behavioral Research (1978).

At the beginning of each interview or focus group, an evaluation team member reviewed a consent form with participants and obtained verbal consent from every participant. The consent form included a description of the project, the risks and benefits of participating, information about the voluntary nature of participation, and a description of the data confidentiality and storage practices. Participants in focus groups with two or more individuals were asked to keep any information shared during the session

confidential. All student participants received a $50 gift card. All participants consented to recording, and Education Northwest used Zoom or a recording device to collect an audio recording of the session. The recordings were transcribed by a third-party service (Zoom or Rev.com) which is compliant with guidance from the General Data Protection Regulation for handling personally identifiable information. After receiving the transcripts, the evaluation team removed identifying information before analysis. Education Northwest stored all notes, recordings, and transcripts in restricted access project folders in secure online cloud storage.

Interviews with college core team leads. The evaluation team conducted interviews with core team leads at each of the seven colleges between April and June 2024. These interviews focused on the colleges' goals and priorities for phase 2, how they are building on their successes in the first three years, and updates to the college's action plans.

Virtual site visits with interviews and focus groups. The evaluation team conducted virtual site visits with all seven colleges during the 2024–25 academic year. During these visits, the team conducted interviews and focus groups with administrators, faculty members, advisors, and students. The team worked with evaluation partners at each college to identify individuals for each session in order to highlight the unique strengths and priorities of each college. We also provided a variety of ways for students to participate, including virtual focus groups, interviews, email, and online tools (like Zoom whiteboards). Through the virtual site visits, the evaluation team gathered information from individuals in different roles about high-impact practices that strengthen student success efforts, their work to gain and sustain momentum in the work, and the unique qualities of their community that aid or challenge their efforts.

Coach interviews. Between January and March 2025, Education Northwest interviewed the seven Rural Resiliency coaches. These interviews focused on the high-impact practices the colleges are using to support student success and to gain and sustain momentum in the work. ATD coaches also reflected on the unique challenges and opportunities afforded by rural communities.

Document review. In spring 2024 Education Northwest reviewed the colleges' annual reflections to learn more about their planned activities, areas of progress, communications plans, sustainability plans, and reflections on the work. In spring 2025 Education Northwest reviewed the coaches' engagement reports, site visit agendas, presidents' letters prepared by coaches after each site visit, and communication plans to gain a deeper understanding of the work of the colleges and the supports provided by ATD.

Table A2. Interview and focus group participants in each role (phase 2)

Role	Participants in 2024–25
Core team leads (spring 2024)	21 (7 colleges)
Administrators	17 (7 colleges)
Advisors	19 (7 colleges)
Faculty members	22 (7 colleges)
Students	28 (7 colleges)
ATD coaches	7
Total	**114**

Source: Authors' analysis of interview and focus group data.

Analysis

Interview and focus group data. Education Northwest conducted a thematic analysis of the transcripts from the administrator, advisor, faculty member, and coach interviews (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The analysis used a codebook that included codes based on each of the four project goals: preparing students for and connecting them to careers in the digital economy, identifying and closing equity gaps, developing and strengthening community partnerships, and fostering a culture of evidence. Within each goal category, the codebook included subcodes that aligned with each of the evaluation questions: approaches to the goal (EQ1), high-impact practices (EQ2), measures of success (EQ2), strategies for gaining and sustaining momentum (EQ2), role of the rural context (EQ3), and ATD support (EQ4). To analyze student interviews, Education Northwest conducted a thematic analysis with a codebook that included codes for students' goals, challenges, the impact of the rural setting, their experience with equitable student supports (related to project goal 1), their experience with technology and digital supports (related to project goal 2), and their experience engaging with community partners (related to project goal 4).

The evaluation team coded the transcripts using Atlas.ti. Common themes in the interview and focus group data across colleges were used to develop the findings for the report. In addition, a review of the data across roles within each college was used to identify practices to highlight in each vignette. Quotes were selected for the report if they exemplified a practice or finding. To maintain participant anonymity, all quotes in the report were attributed based on participants' role (e.g., administrator, student).

Document review. Education Northwest developed a rubric to review each document that allowed for documentation of the college's activities, strengths, areas of progress, challenges, and recommendations and support provided by coaches based on each of the four project goals, and the evaluation questions. Data from the document review was used to support findings from the analysis of interview and focus group data, and to add additional detail to the vignettes.

ATD resource review. After coding the transcripts and documents, the evaluation team also reviewed resources used by the coaches to support the colleges during their time in the cohort. These included the **Institutional Capacity Framework and Assessment Tool** (ICAT), the **Strategic Partnerships for Holistic Student Support Toolkit,** the Equity Toolkit: A Research-Based Guide to Operationalizing Equity (available upon request; please email **network@achievingthedream.org),** the Community Vibrancy Framework (**summarized here),** the Partnership Analysis Tool, and the Digital Skills Program Review Tool.

These tools were reviewed after coding the transcripts to understand the recommendations, frameworks, and language used by ATD and the coaches as they supported the colleges in their work toward each goal. This review also revealed several areas of alignment with the evaluation findings. For example, several of the capacities in the ICAT were identified by the rural cohort college participants as conditions that enable implementation of effective practices, which may be due to the college's engagement with the ICAT in the first year of the Rural Resiliency Initiative. Similarly, the coaches worked with the colleges to align their work with other initiatives or the strategic plan in phase 2 to support sustainability. The findings in the briefing represent emergent findings from the colleges. The briefing also highlights how ATD support and resources shaped the colleges' approaches to advancing equitable student success.

ABOUT ACHIEVING THE DREAM

Achieving the Dream (ATD) is a partner and champion of more than 300 community colleges across the country. Drawing on expert coaches, groundbreaking programs, and national peer network, the organization provides institutions with integrated, tailored support for every aspect of their work—from foundational capacities such as leadership, data, and equity to intentional strategies for supporting students holistically, building K–12 partnerships, and more. ATD calls this Whole College Transformation. Its vision is for every college to be a catalyst for equitable and economically vibrant communities. ATD knows that with the right partner and the right approach, colleges can drive access, completion rates, and employment outcomes—so that all students can access life-changing learning that propels them into community-changing careers. Follow us on X (Twitter), Facebook, and LinkedIn. To learn more, visit the Achieving the Dream (ATD) website: www.achievingthedream.org.