

North Central State College



North Central State College (NCSC) in Mansfield, Ohio, is a small rural institution primarily serving the counties of Ashland, Richland, and Crawford but drawing students from 15 counties in the state. With just under 5,000 students — including both credit and noncredit learners — NCSC reflects the profile of many institutions in the ATD Network, where approximately 38% of colleges are rural. The college offers 30 associate degrees in health sciences, public service, business, and engineering; 32 certificate programs; and two bachelor's degrees — in mechanical engineering technology and nursing.

Having earned ATD's Leader College status in 2009 and Leader College of Distinction status in 2018, the college's relationship with ATD dates back to 2005 when, unable to secure philanthropic funding to join the Network at the time, it managed to become a self-funded Network institution through its own boldness — setting a course that would become emblematic of the college over the two decades that followed.

The Leah Meyer Austin Award from Achieving the Dream (ATD) is the highest honor conferred to colleges in the ATD Network. Presented annually, the award recognizes institutions that demonstrate systemic, student-centered excellence across all Community Vibrancy Framework domains; sustained, measurable impact on economic mobility and postcompletion outcomes; and practices embedded in culture and planning, producing durable, community-level outcomes. Based on the following sustained, data-informed outcomes, Achieving the Dream, with great pride, bestows the 2026 Leah Meyer Austin Award on North Central State College.

- **Strong and sustained student momentum:** From the fall 2014 cohort to the fall 2021 cohort, fall-to-fall retention increased by 22 percentage points, reaching 58%, and completion rose by 27 percentage points.
- **Reduced student debt and expanded affordability:** The share of entering students taking out federal loans declined from 62% among the 2014–2015 cohort to 27% among the 2022–2023 cohort, reflecting lower out-of-pocket costs and improved access for low-income and first-generation students.
- **Improved economic mobility after completion:** Median wages for graduates increased from \$28,604 for 2017–2018 graduates to \$42,792 for 2023–2024 graduates, reaching near parity with the regional labor market.
- **Institution-wide, durable impact:** These gains were achieved across multiple cohorts and student populations through practices embedded in the college's culture, planning, and data-informed decision-making, with an emphasis on community-level outcomes.

The College at a Crossroads

When President Dr. Dorey Diab began his tenure in 2013, he knew the college was confronting a situation that needed courageous action. The decade of the 2010s had gotten off to a rocky start with the economy still feeling the aftereffects of the Great Recession. Locally, the closure of the Mansfield/Ontario General Motors plant dealt a significant blow to the regional economy, hampering enrollment in general and leading to a sharp decline in the number of students pursuing continuing education at NCSC as noncredit learners.

Furthermore, a state mandate in 2012 requiring colleges like NCSC to transition from quarter-based terms to semesters created a strong push to complete as many students as possible prior to the switch, leaving enrollment lagging in the post-transition period. Exacerbating the situation was a rise in competition for enrollments as online programs boomed nationally.

By 2013, NCSC's completion rate was at 11%, and by 2014, the college had lost 20% of full-time equivalents within two years.

Financial reserves had plummeted to dangerously low levels. With the added pressure in 2014 of Ohio's transition to 100% performance-based funding for institutions of higher education, Dr. Diab knew that bold steps were necessary for the level of change warranted.

Fortunately, the college did not enter this period without preparation. By the time these challenges intensified, NCSC had already spent years engaged with Achieving the Dream, building the habits, structures, and leadership capacity associated with a mature Network institution. That long-standing relationship meant the administration had the tools to respond with disciplined inquiry, deep reflection, and decisive, data-informed action — rather than reactive or short-term fixes.

And so began an ambitious yet careful era of reform that was bold, courageous — at times unpopular — but always data-informed, responsive to both the student body and the community, and grounded in the belief that transformation must translate into meaningful economic mobility for students.

Letting Data Set the Course

A hard look at the institution's data revealed three key issues, the first of which was a fractured advising model. As early as 2006, NCSC's Community College Survey of Student Engagement (CCSSE) results showed advising frequency at a statistically significant negative level, signaling that students were not consistently receiving the guidance they needed to persist and complete. In addition to implementing an early alert system that keeps advisors and faculty abreast of students' progress, NCSC responded by doubling its full-time advising staff; assigning each advisor, known as a liaison, to case-manage an academic division; and retaining the liaison-student relationship even after assignment of a faculty advisor upon a student's completion of 15 credit hours.

The new model has not only benefited students by providing enhanced and continuous relationships, but it has also, particularly in recent times after 16 staff members participated in ATD's 2024–2025 Strengthening Advising Seminar Series, improved the liaison-faculty advisor partnership. Dr. Kelly Gray, vice president of academic and student affairs, notes that while liaisons and advisors once saw themselves as having separate roles, they now view their collaboration as an essential component of student success.

"Now they really see that it's a partnership of helping students all the way along, and I think our participation in the Strengthening Advising Series really helped get that," she shares. "It's been extremely beneficial because we built that relationship during the seminar series, and we've continued it. It's amazing the difference it makes, how it helps students when we're all on the same team for them."

NCSC's longtime ATD coach, Shara Davis, recognizes the success. "The redesigned NCSC advising model is an exemplar practice for integration of academic and nonacademic affairs," she comments.

A second challenge NCSC identified was college affordability. In 2013, 62% of entering full-time students took out a federal loan — data that, in combination with other indicators, led the college to examine how financial pressures were affecting students' ability to persist and complete. To address this, the college implemented multiple efforts to reduce student expenses, packaging numerous state and institutional scholarships. The administration even created the college's own self-funded "Promise" program in 2016 with no support from state or local officials. Designed with multiple pathways to meet students where they are — whether entering with limited dual enrollment or career-technical credit, pursuing certificates, or returning as adult learners — the program's Tuition Freedom Scholarships function as last-dollar scholarships that can significantly reduce or eliminate tuition costs for eligible students.

Additionally, leading a statewide initiative, the college incentivized faculty to adopt open educational resources, decreasing students' need to purchase textbooks. Currently, a quarter of all courses offered are textbook-free.

The third concern identified, students' time scarcity, was examined in a way that recognized its inextricable link to financial hardship. According to the results of multiple administrations of the CCSSE, NCSC students spent significant time working and providing child care — activities that reduced their ability to focus on their studies.

The college tackled this issue in a variety of ways, including redesigning its approach to developmental education. The traditional progression through developmental courses was replaced with a corequisite model, first launched by the math department in 2012 and deployed at scale by 2017. Simultaneously, developmental education and placement pathways were consolidated, and, in 2020, NCSC began allowing students to submit high school GPAs in lieu of placement test scores.

The college also addressed time scarcity and students' need to maintain employment and child care by enhancing flexibility wherever possible. At a time when many Ohio campuses were closing child care centers, NCSC kept its center open and expanded its offerings for online learning, providing course options that could work around job and family schedules.

Based on a review of their data and Davis' advice, the NCSC administration explored shortened academic terms and did so with support from both Davis and ATD coach Dr. Laurie Fladd. Drawing on emerging data that pointed to gains in retention, faster completion, and stronger academic outcomes, they

believed that a compressed term format could meaningfully improve student success.

The college began implementing compressed terms in 2022, incentivizing faculty to get on board. At first, some faculty members were hesitant, having experienced the upheaval 10 years earlier of shifting from quarters to semesters and, more recently, having endured the course format changes dictated by the COVID-19 pandemic. But, the administration, according to Dr. Gray, stood firm on a rationale that was grounded in data and the potential benefit to the students. "This isn't about what's best for us," she recalls telling the faculty. "This is about what we're seeing in the data from other places — in student success, momentum, and getting your students across the stage and giving them more opportunities in a year if they hit a bump in the road."

As observed by Davis, the progress was driven by a disciplined, sustained approach. "NCSC used a strong change leadership approach to make the case for change, identify early faculty champions, and maintain focus over the last three years to implement shortened terms, including the redesign of all general education courses this past year," she notes.

Unwilling To Be Derailed in Delivering Results

The switch to shortened academic terms was by no means the only reform effort that was met with reluctance. All of NCSC's student success efforts — from advising reforms to Tuition Freedom Scholarships to developmental education redesign — took considerable resources, something that some people were hesitant to invest in during lean times. Dr. Diab, however, was persistent. Guided by the needs of the student body and the adage that "nothing changes if nothing changes," he pressed on. "We're there to do [the work]. We want to do it," he explains. "We know our community needs it, and that's why we continue to look at our revenues, our costs, and make sure that we're able to focus mainly on the students."

According to Tom Prendergast, executive director of strategic and institutional transformation, neither skeptics nor setbacks prevented the college from chugging along in the pursuit of student success. "It's almost like we feel like we're the little engine that could," he says.

In no way does the administration claim that they have always had the right answer; but they have had the comfort of knowing that their decisions were always made in the interest of their students and with research to back them up. "We can't just sit around and wait till we have the perfect answer," Dr. Gray reasons. "You just have to make sure that you've looked at the data, and you're making the best decision with the data that you have at the time. And if you realize it's going the wrong way, then you shift and adjust."

Most impressive are the momentum outcomes across the student journey experienced as the result of the college's sustained

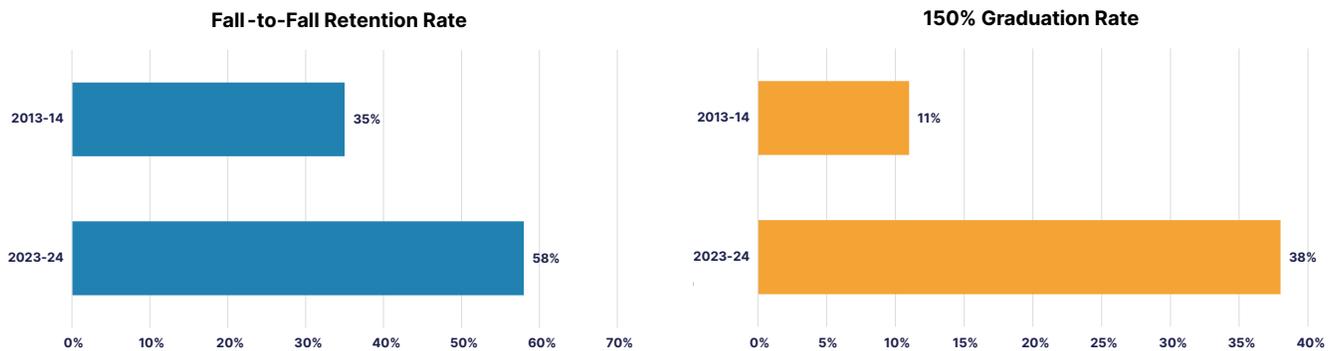
change strategy. Developmental education reforms accelerated early momentum, with the share of first-time students enrolling directly in college-level gateway courses increasing from 44% in 2015 to 83% by 2020. **The fall-to-fall retention rate from the fall 2014 cohort to the fall 2021 cohort increased by 22 percentage points to 58%, and the 11% completion rate that Dr. Diab inherited in 2013 increased by 27 percentage points.** Dr. Diab attributes those gains to NCSC's reform efforts. "By reducing [students'] costs, they don't have to work as much.



They can focus on their education. And through eight-week terms, reducing the cost of textbooks, and keeping our tuition affordable, they were able to pursue it, and that’s the reason we have been able to increase the graduation rate,” he remarks.

The success does not seem to be slowing down, as preliminary numbers show that the fall 2024 to fall 2025 persistence rate is at approximately 60%. “We haven’t seen that level of persistence in years,” marveled Prendergast.

Early and Milestone Momentum: Gains in *Student Retention and Graduation



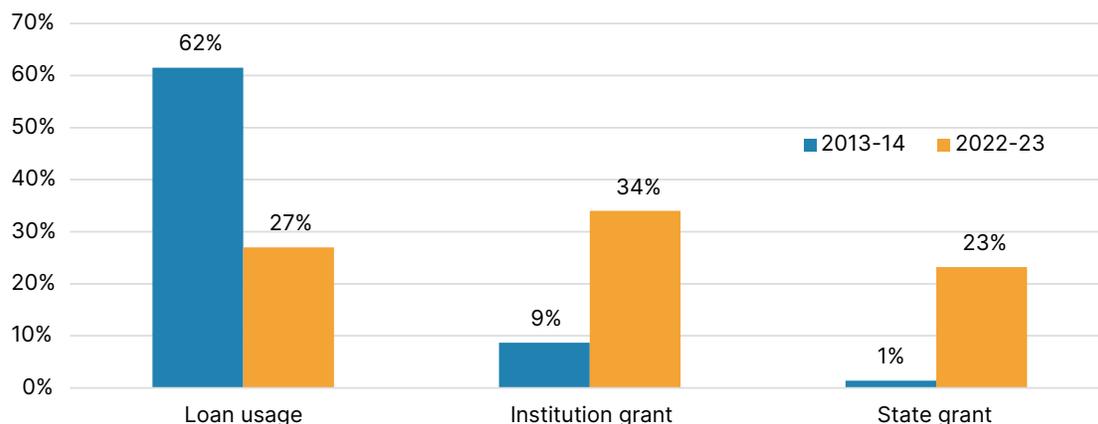
*First-time, full-time degree/certificate-seeking students

The college’s persistence yielded measurable gains in advising engagement, student borrowing, and perceptions of affordability as well. On the advising front, NCSC moved from statistically negative advising frequency on the CCSSE in 2006 to positive significance by 2023. **Student usage of loans — which require repayment — dropped from 62% among the 2014–2015 cohort to 27% among the 2022–2023 cohort, as more students were supported with institutional grants (34% of students) and state grants (23% of students) that directly reduced out-of-pocket costs.** By lowering the true cost of college, these grants reduced student debt and shortened the time it takes for

postsecondary education to yield a financial return, expanding access for low-income and first-generation students while accelerating long-term economic mobility.

Complementing these grant-based efforts, NCSC’s adoption of open educational resources reduced textbook costs, generating approximately \$142,600 in student savings during the 2025 fall term alone, further strengthening affordability across the student experience. The 2023 Trellis Student Financial Wellness Survey underscored this impact, with 81% of students agreeing that NCSC helps make tuition more affordable.

Increasing Access and Mobility: Decline of Student Borrowing and Increase of Grant Support



The college's redesign of instructional delivery also yielded clear benefits. With strong engagement and innovative instruction from the faculty, the compressed format had been adopted by nearly 50% of courses within three years of being implemented. By 2024–2025, average credits attempted and completed per postsecondary school student reached a five-year high.

"We've seen that the students have been very successful in [compressed terms]," says Dr. Gray. "It gives them a sense of encouragement to complete eight weeks and then complete another eight weeks, and they're really able to focus on fewer content areas at one time ... It gives them some momentum to continue."

The Next Leg of the Journey

As a long-term ATD Network college, NCSC has known for some time that improved completion rates, while essential, are not the ultimate objective, however. Nudged by Davis, the college joined ATD's inaugural Community Vibrancy Cohort — recognizing the important role that a community college plays in bringing vitality and prosperity to the entire community it serves. It was a concept that the college discovered through ATD. Dr. Diab explains: "Being part of Achieving the Dream, I feel like we got an early preview of the next big thing in higher ed. [The organization] helped us move from that decade of access to the decade of success, and now the decade of what happens postgraduation. ... It's not just about completion; it's about community prosperity and community vibrancy."

Composed of 15 colleges that tested the organization's Community Vibrancy Framework, the cohort tried out new tools and training materials to help them understand local communities

in new ways that lead to upward mobility for individuals and their families and result in flourishing communities.

Through its work in the cohort, NCSC identified the Asset Limited, Income Constrained, Employed (ALICE) population in its community as one that is underserved — and growing. While 36% of households in the NCSC service area were considered ALICE households in 2019, the current figure is 44%.

Equipped with solid data of its own, as well local labor market data from Lightcast and transfer rates by program through the National Student Clearinghouse, the college took a deliberate approach to the program review process to improve wage viability. In addition to shifting the focus of transfer degrees from the liberal arts to applied fields, the administration focused on creating stackable certificates, concentrations within degrees, two bachelor's programs, and new certificate programs, such as the Licensed Practical Nurse (LPN) and Police Academy



certificates, that lead to well-paying jobs within a relatively short period of time. The college also made their Tuition Freedom Scholarships applicable to certificate programs to defray costs. If changes could not be made to a program to increase wage viability, it was retired, despite resistance at times.

Efforts to serve the ALICE population included the forging of a variety of new community relationships. For example, NCSC partnered with regional hospitals to upskill their staff to the LPN level by covering all costs, providing support in both gaining program acceptance and in completing coursework, modifying the length of the program, and accommodating work schedules — even offering an evening cohort and Saturday lab sessions.

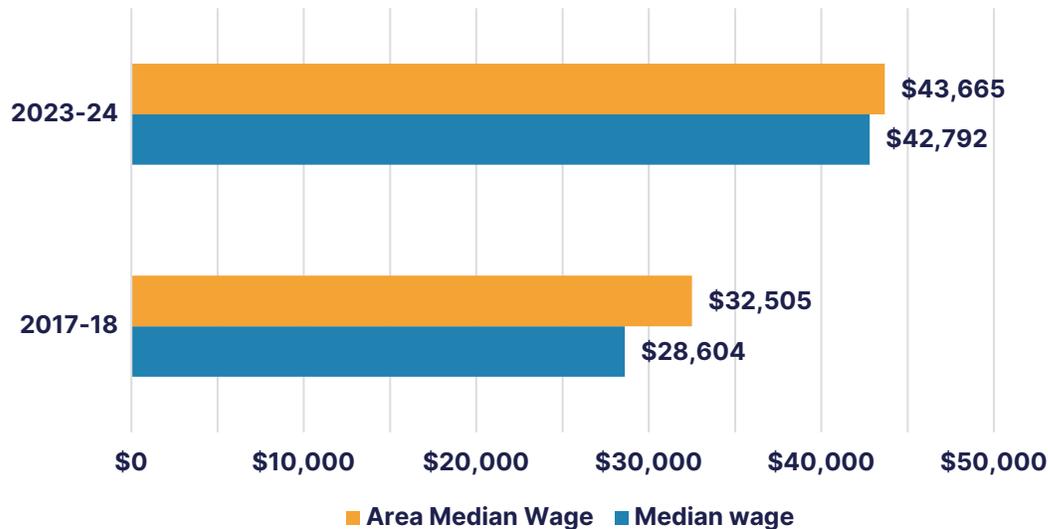
The endeavor relied on the active involvement of faculty, who adapted curricula and provided hands-on instruction, and on dedicated staff who supported students every step of the way — from enrollment to scheduling to accessing resources — so they could succeed despite work and family obligations. As Dr. Diab says, “[The success] comes through the effort of all faculty and staff coming together.”

Prendergast notes the success of the effort, calling it a “slam dunk as far as getting people to a livable wage in a much shorter amount of time.” Enrollment in the program grew from 73 students in 2020–2021 to 131 in 2024–2025, and the completion rate increased from seven to 51 with a near 100% licensure pass rate.

Community partnerships aimed at reaching the ALICE population also included relationships with area high schools serving economically challenged areas to create robust dual enrollment programs. These resulted in up to a five-fold expansion in a given high school’s number of dually enrolled students.

Results of NCSC’s community vibrancy efforts have been extremely promising. **The median wage for 2017–2018 graduates was \$28,604 (88% of the Bureau of Labor Statistics’ median wage for the area). By 2023–2024, graduate wages were \$42,792 (98% of the regional median wage).** Additionally, major certificates have surged 135% in the past four years, while bachelor attainment of transfer graduates has increased 13 percentage points in the past two years. An increase of 19% in NCSC’s Pell-eligible population over the past year indicates that the college is succeeding in reaching economically marginalized learners.

Economic Mobility: Increase of Graduate Earnings Relative to Regional Benchmarks



NCSC’s commitment to elevating the ALICE population through its community vibrancy work intersected with its participation in another ATD initiative: Strategic Enrollment Management for Adult Learners. As part of this cohort, NCSC received support from ATD in crafting strategic enrollment management plans focused on learners aged 23 and over.

As NCSC’s team delved into ways to serve its adult population, they were able to identify *low-income* adults specifically as a target population. Because adult students at NCSC reported

higher work and child care commitments on the CCSSE than did peers at other small colleges — and the 150% graduation rate for adults dropped 19 points from 2015 to 2017, bottoming out at 14% for the 2019 cohort — the college realized that its adult learners were particularly burdened with the twin challenges of time and financial resource scarcity.

Many of the aforementioned actions taken by NCSC to expand flexibility and promote momentum (increasing online courses, shifting to shortened terms, broadening pathways with multiple

entrance and exit points through stackable certificates) served its economically marginalized adult learners well, but the college knew it could do more. The administration aggressively pursued scholarships specifically for adults and now offers Tuition Freedom Scholarships for adults seeking certificates.

Adult learners are now attempting more credits (attempts in 2024–2025 were the highest in five years) while the course pass rate has increased by three percentage points. The 150% graduation rate for adults increased from 14% for the fall 2019 cohort to 46% for the fall 2021 cohort, and, of the 203 certificates issued last year, half were earned by adults.

Keeping the Compass True

Ironically, the college partly credits the hardships that befell it in the early 2010s with the extent of its success. The times of struggle, explains Dr. Gray, initiated the introspection that really solidified the college's focus on the students. "It allowed us to really look at why students want to come here. What do we have to offer them, and how are we going to make them all successful in their own life?" she reflects. "As long as your focus is on the student, I don't think it matters what else is happening, whether it be changes in industry or changes in how the state funds you. If your focus is on the students, you'll have good outcomes."

Undoubtedly, another crucial part of NCSC's success equation has been its willingness to fearlessly trust the data — even when doing so may seem perilous to some. "We take calculated risk," says Dr. Diab. "You have to be courageous and bold in today's environment because the competition is so strong, the challenges are so many, and, to overcome that, you cannot be sitting on the sideline waiting for things to happen. It just does not work that way."

That courage, Dr. Diab emphasizes, is not exercised in isolation. He is quick to credit his team at every turn. He also acknowledges the support of ATD. "I give credit to all our coaches," he notes. "Getting involved with Achieving the Dream, going to DREAM, presenting at DREAM, learning from DREAM — all of those things have helped us get to this point."

Just as NCSC is grateful for its partnership with ATD, the organization deeply values the college's generous investment of time and effort in service to the Network. "They give back to the Network in a big way," says Davis. "They're a small college, limited in personnel, time, and resources, yet they always give back."

That spirit of generosity and shared learning is inseparable from the college's broader approach to reform — an approach that, as ATD President and CEO Dr. Karen A. Stout notes, consistently translates commitment into lasting impact.

"North Central State Community College exemplifies what is possible when a college approaches reform with courage, curiosity, and an unwavering focus on students and community," she states. "Time and again, the college leaned into opportunities to learn, test, and strengthen its work — often at moments of uncertainty — because it believed doing so would better serve its students and region. That willingness to engage deeply, reflect honestly, and act boldly translated into

meaningful, measurable change. North Central State is receiving the Leah Meyer Austin Award not just for saying 'yes' to new ideas but for what it did with them: transforming institutional practice, advancing economic mobility for its students, and contributing to the vitality of its community. We are deeply grateful for the leadership, partnership, and generosity the college has brought to the ATD Network — and even more inspired by the impact it has achieved."

For Dr. Diab, that recognition is not a signal to pause or to declare victory. It reflects a mindset that has guided the college's work all along: a belief that meaningful reform requires constant movement. He says that when contemplating whether to engage in a new pursuit, he tries to imagine the state of the college in the future. "A few years from now, if we don't take this initiative on, we're either going to be moving backward or moving forward, right?" he poses. "And so, we're not afraid to take things on — because it's never, never about us. It's never a destination: it's always a journey."

And a journey it is — one powered by steady momentum, moving forward, even uphill, on tracks built of evidence, persistence, courage, and an unwavering commitment to those along for the ride.

