Re-Architecting Student Support & Academic Planning Bolsters Completion By 45.8%

Once the fastest growing community college in the country 10 years running, Austin Community College District (ACC) looked to funnel its explosive energy for growth into breaking down the persistent student success barriers faced by its diverse student population.

A Foundation Based on Equal Footing

ACC was built on this cornerstone value: champion student success and equity to the level where all students have equal opportunity and support to achieve their academic goals. The principle of equal opportunity was the central tenet of ACC from the beginning—even before there was an ACC. More precisely, in 1972, the people of Austin's Independent School District used the ultimate lever of social equality—their individual votes—to launch ACC into existence.

When Academic Obstacles Are Life Obstacles

As ACC continues on its mission to provide open-door access to an affordable college education for students from all walks of life, it is this very college-for-everyone precept that presents challenges that go beyond the academic. They are the kind of life struggles that may be difficult to overcome without the right kind of support.

These hardships have taken the form of food, housing and financial insecurity, other life demands, as well as the institutional factors that have proven to be obstacles to scholastic success.

According to Trellis Wellness Survey, 2019:

50%
have run out of money 3x+ during the year

61%
worry about having enough money to pay for school

34%
have very little food security

49%
help support their family financially while in school

A Battle with Two Front Lines

Beyond these difficult life situations, there are the challenges that are more directly correlated to a student's academic journey. Students may ask: *What happens if I decide to change programs? How do I master a perplexing class? What are my career options? How do I schedule work around school?* Tragically, if there isn't a synchronized system to support and engage students, they may struggle in silence.

At the same time, administrators are challenged to make sure students are aware of available resources. In the midst of that, it can be difficult to understand what programs or initiatives are truly helpful—rather than just highly used—to address persistent student challenges. And in regard to at-risk students—without an institutional framework to unlock the predictive power of student data and rally a focused response or referral, student success teams will be unable to see the crack before it becomes a break.

Creating a Culture of Caring and Innovation

ACC worked to build a district strategy for Institutional Analytics, Learning Support Services (learning labs, tutoring, supplemental instruction, academic coaching), Student Life, and ACCelerators (a technology-enhanced, adaptive learning support environment built on collaboration, student assistance, and student customer service).

ACC made headway:

11.7pp
Lift in Persistence
from improved degree planning, with 20K students served

15.5pp
Surge in Persistence
through advising case management, with 9K students served

4 to 13pp
Lifts in Persistence Impact
from all care programs

10%
Reduction in Time to Degree
in three years

45+%
Improvement in Awarded Degrees
from 6,721 in 2015 to 9,802 in 2019

Analysis from 2018-2019.

To further increase student retention, persistence, and completion, they formed a data analytics team responsible for the expansion of continuous and real-time data analytics throughout student affairs and the institution. The team has been instrumental in creating a quantitative and qualitative data-informed culture that is improving student success measures across ACC's eleven campuses.

Academic Cartography: A Map for Every Student

Armed with this kind of previously-untapped information, ACC is optimally positioned to make the most of *Guided Pathways*. This model is an essential component of the culture of care that can provide clear road maps to students' end goals; create on- and off-ramps for their success; and ensure that advising is embedded and tracked so that faculty and staff can provide students with information throughout their educational path. The result is empowered students who can make sound decisions that positively impacts their academic growth and career mobility.

Being able to learn from every interaction with its students, ACC was able to harness the power of its data and transmogrify it into both a Rosetta Stone and the oracle at Delphi. The predictive and prescriptive potential of student data, once made universally-accessible to ACC staff and faculty, empowered their student success teams to work together in helping more students navigate their educational journey.

In one term alone:

1,300
more students continued

$1.36M
in ROI

This data-informed, team-based approach at ACC led to the creation, and improvement, of many programs:

- **Special Populations.** ACC centralized Student Accessibility for greater student impact and heightened process efficiencies. It also improved student delivery of Emergency Aid: website, single application, and raising of additional funds, such as the Michael & Susan Dell Foundation.

- **Student Learning Support.** Districtwide alignment of all learning labs. Students saw the difference, resulting in record visits—35,000 in 2017—and growing to approximately 100,000 annually over three years.

- **Student Data Analytics.** Real-time data now informs student services and instructional practices. Using Civitas Learning's propensity score matching and data science, ACC can now determine the effectiveness of interventions.

- **Conduct & Compliance.** Established a Compliance Unit to address Americans with Disabilities Act, Title VI, and Title IX complaints. Extensive faculty and staff training resulting in a process that honors individuals with a quick, comprehensive, and consistent response.

- **Academic Guidance.** ACC changed the culture of advising—from transactional to coaching. It made sure every student with less than 12 hours is assigned an advisor, and that all students could track their academic progress by utilizing the latest technology. ACC saw an 11.7 pp increase in student persistence in those who used Civitas Learning's platform.

- **Licensed Counseling.** District counseling team created to meet the psychosocial needs of students who are experiencing significant issues and to deliver on regulatory/statutory requirements.

- **Student Engagement.** Creation of the Riverbat Ambassadors program. Currently, 21 paid student ambassadors who help facilitate the AoS info sessions and support student engagement.

Focusing on the Individual Student

ACC is one the largest colleges in the country, and its continuing relationship with Civitas Learning has helped this eleven-campus, 70,000-student institution digest and analyze what was previously considered a staggering amount of student data in real time. It may be the kind of computing power that impresses engineers, but it's the wider and deeper level of insight which can help predict at-risk students, that make educators go, "Aha!" This kind of data enrichment—bolstered by Civitas' student-centric platform—has helped ACC see measurable improvement in tutoring, advising, persistence, and on-time completion.

– MEASURABLE IMPROVEMENTS –

Increased Communication and Awareness of Efforts, Internally and Externally:	Expanded Student Affairs Resources:	Doubled Coordinating Board Graduation Rate:
• *Tutoring 250,000 student visits annually; ACCelerators 150,000 visits* • *Awarded additional grants and recognized with multiple awards*	• *Reorganized and properly resourced student life department and staff to demonstrate the alignment of guided pathways with student engagement outside-of-the-class which also contributes to retention and completion.*	• *Continuous data-tracking with pro-active reach with early interventions*

Ensuring Students' Basic Needs

In addition to all that it was doing to create a more protective, caring culture, ACC enrolled in a study from **#RealCollege**, the movement determined to help refocus higher education on the needs of students who come from far less wealth and social advantage. The 2019 National #RealCollege Survey report reconfirmed the

student challenges that ACC had been battling for years. But what particularly concerned Dr. Richard Rhodes, the ACC chancellor, was that there was a disturbing number of students who were not fully aware of the college's efforts to ensure that students' basic needs were met.

– SOME EXAMPLES OF NEW & EXISTING ASSISTANCE PROGRAMS AVAILABLE AT ACC –

- ✔ *Community Referrals*
- ✔ *Childcare*
- ✔ *Textbook Help*
- ✔ *Emergency Aid*
- ✔ *State Benefits Assistance*
- ✔ *Assistive Tech*
- ✔ *Accessibility Support*
- ✔ *Food Distribution*
- ✔ *Student Safety*
- ✔ *Financial Wellness*

Shortly after the #RealCollege report, Dr. Rhodes announced:

"The college is launching a public awareness push to ensure that all of our students are aware of the free support services and resources available to help them succeed. From free tutoring and the student emergency fund, to child care and career services, we want our students to know that ACC cares and that their success matters to us. Each one of our students is unique with unique needs whether it's academic, financial, or personal. We want to support every student — no matter where they are in their journey. That means not only improving the free support services and resources, but also doing more to make sure students are aware these resources are available to them. We want students to know that ACC cares about them and their success. We say, college is for everyone; ACC is for everyone."

The Caring Campus: From Insight to Action

One of ACC's big initiatives has been to eliminate siloed information and programs. As it continues to integrate services along the **#RealCollege** framework, ACC is focusing on its students experiencing food, housing and financial insecurity to make them more aware of its assistance programs. For example, ACC has successfully advocated for the partnership with the Central Texas Food Bank on campus. Students can find a food pantry at each campus and monthly food distribution at its Riverside Campus. And since many students are also parents, reduced rates for on-campus childcare are available with some parents being eligible for childcare scholarships. Low income and foster care students are also made aware of the availability of intensive case management through the Support Center.

In addition to adding more student supports, ACC created an infrastructure to keep the pulse of students' experience with these services. The ACC staff was challenged to work differently, and they did. Now the staff can observe and discuss program impact and has real-time information and feedback to improve the performance of these essential services.

Another core component of ACC's work was their programmatic mindset, which included the instrumentation of *Guided Pathways*. As a result, ACC now has ten meta-majors and advisors have a more advanced form of

degree planning to help students explore their options. And advising itself has been re-architected to leverage a case management approach. That means a team of people are now on a student's side, and each team member has access to all of the same information.

By ensuring the dissemination of intelligence to key stakeholders, ACC was able to increase accountability and improve resource allocation. Now that the success of student initiatives can be quantified, people know what works, and budget requests can be targeted at the most impactful programs.

The third crucial pillar for ACC is ensuring equity for students and staff. ACC has been building bridges across academics and student affairs for decades and recognizes how important collaboration is to expanding the safety net. It goes without saying that faculty need to know what resources are available for students.

Timely intervention for students in academic distress is critical, and faculty and staff know an intrusive and proactive mindset can inform intervention strategies—making the difference between having an action plan to overcome the issues students face or losing them altogether. All in all, it is by embracing communication and innovation that faculty and staff can ensure effective and efficient operations, which creates space to try and learn.

Conclusion

Continuous data-tracking has allowed ACC staff and faculty, district-wide, to anticipate persistence obstacles early, allowing them to intervene before it is too late. And tragically, when it comes to higher education there really is such a thing as "too late". According to the 2014 National Student Clearinghouse study, 87% of the students who drop out of college NEVER return. In fact, public community colleges must be the most vigilant about nurturing their students' success because most college dropouts (69%) were enrolled in those institutions before leaving school.

In the continuing effort to build on its strides in persistence, ACC has made its data-informed, team-based approach the centerpiece of its strategy to—weaving it into the very fabric of the institution. And a tight-knit fabric is exactly the right metaphor—because it represents a comprehensive and concentrated student-focused effort that provides future-seekers with a welcome mat, a safety net, a security blanket, and increasingly, a victory flag.

About Civitas Learning

We help colleges and universities harness the power of their student data to improve student success. We embed actionable insights and applied analytics into connected workflow applications to support the student journey. Equipped with our platform, leaders, advisors and faculty have the tools they need to measurably and sustainably improve enrollment, course success, persistence, graduation and equity.

Today, we support more than 400 colleges and universities, reaching nearly 9 million students. Together with our growing community of customers, we are making the most of the world's learning data to help a million more students graduate.