Achieving the Dream™

Community Colleges Count

2018 | LEAH MEYER AUSTIN AWARD

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ODESSA COLLEGE

The **Leah Meyer Austin Award** is Achieving the Dream's highest honor and recognizes institutions that have demonstrated outstanding progress in designing a student-focused culture and aligning institutional strategies to promote student success.

Odessa College Three-Year Graduation Rates

	2009 Cohort	2014 Cohort	Increase
All Students	12%	23%	11%
Hispanic Students	10%	25%	15%
White Students	14%	21%	7%

Odessa College is the winner of the 2018 Leah Meyer Austin Award. The college is being recognized for significant innovations that have resulted in critical progress in metrics such as decreasing course drop rates, increasing student persistence, and increasing degree completion. The college increased, and nearly doubled, its three-year graduation rate for all students. In addition, the college increased, more than doubling, the graduation rate for Hispanic students, the college's largest demographic group. For White students, the college's second largest demographic group, the graduation rate increased, but not quite doubled, during the same time period. Now, with Hispanic students graduating at a higher rate than white students, the college has closed their equity gap.

Snapshot: Annually, Odessa College serves more than 8,000 students; 61% are Latino, 28% are white, and 4% are Black. One-third attend college full-time. Approximately three-quarters of students (73%) are age 24 and under. About 40% of students receive Pell Grants.

CHALLENGES

Getting students to start and stay enrolled is a challenge that all community colleges face. However, for Odessa College issues of persistence are exacerbated by regional hiring practices in the oil and gas industry, which encourage students to drop out of college periodically in order to go to work. Due to the college's enrollment and persistence challenges, the Texas state legislature considered defunding Odessa in 2011.

SOLUTIONS

To address Odessa College's enrollment and completion chal-

Fall-to-Spring Persistence by Ethnicity
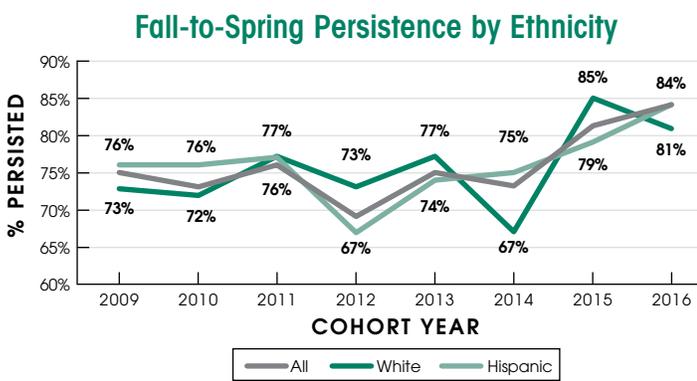
lenges, the college's trustees hired a new president, Gregory D. Williams, with the mandate that he improve student success. Williams, in turn, challenged the college community to rethink and reengineer its practices, and put virtually every dimension of the college's operation on the table for reform. To help lead that reform effort, Williams appointed Donald Wood to serve as vice president for institutional effectiveness.

In order to advance reform, Odessa College began to increase its institutional capacity for improving student success. Specifically, the college began working closely with its Achieving the Dream data coach to develop a deeper understanding of important metrics. This process of data discovery led to the development of a set of leading indicators for student success, including enrollment, in-class retention, course success, and persistence toward degree completion. With everyone focused on the same metrics, the college now uses these data points to guide its student success activities. "We credit Achieving the Dream, not only for helping us to become more data-informed, but for making us so uncomfortable with what we had been doing that we had to change," Williams said.

In assessing the college's course completion rate, Wood found that course drop rates were not a function of an instructor's teaching methods. Instructors with lower drop rates had what Wood describes as "a common thread of higher connectivity" and relate to students from the beginning of each course, enhancing the learning environment.

These findings led Odessa College to implement the Drop Rate Improvement Program, through which faculty implement specific classroom practices that increase a student's connection to the course. These practices include interacting with students by name during the first day of a new term; monitoring student behavior and progress and intervening when an issue arises; meeting with students one-on-one and communicating routinely about their course performance; and, maintaining a structured course while allowing for some flexibility. Today, when a student walks into a class at Odessa College on the first day, they have already met with their success coach and faculty advisor and already have an academic game plan and pathway designed for them.

Odessa College also created a new dean of teaching and learning position to support instructors. Faculty also receive real-time data on each of their students that enables them to make data-informed decisions about how to improve their approach to educating students.

> "Every semester I make every effort to ensure that my classroom environment is inviting, exciting, and most of all safe for learning by encouraging students to participate in class individually or in groups. I use personal experiences and my own personal background to try to relate to and connect with my students.
> I have participated in several professional development workshops at previous institutions and at Odessa College and I am able to implement teaching strategies and best practices to accommodate all learning styles and language barriers. I am passionate about teaching and I want my students to have fun while learning."

**— Milagros G. Carrasco, M.A. Ed.,
Instructor, Department of Mathematics**

To help improve student academic persistence and course completion, the college reengineered its traditional 16-week semester into a structure based on two eight-week terms. The eight-week term structure enables students to focus on fewer courses, without incurring any additional tuition costs or delaying progress to a degree. The college also changed its registration pattern, which had required students to register each term. Students now benefit from automatic term-to-term enrollment and are encouraged to pursue courses in a sequence based on their academic goals.
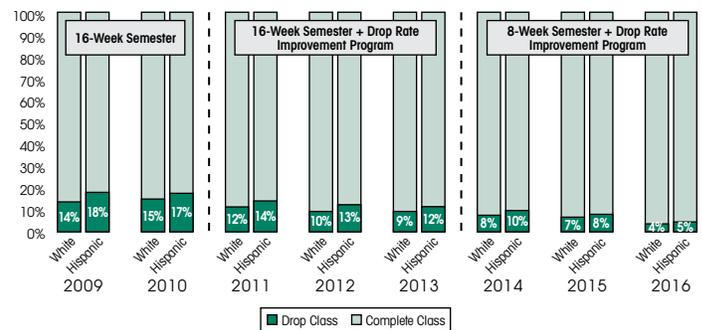
RESULTS

Most importantly, students at Odessa College are reaping the rewards of the college's work.

The college credits its Drop Rate Improvement Program and introduction of the eight-week semester with increasing student success. By keeping students in class and continuously assessing student performance, the college knows immediately if a student runs into a challenge. The administration can then respond by providing support to both students and instructors. Odessa College's use of data helps keep students in class and on track to meet their academic goals.

The college increased, and nearly doubled, three-year graduation rates by 11 percentage points, from 12% to 23% for the 2009

Odessa College Duplicated Class Drop Rates

16-Week Semester	16-Week Semester + Drop Rate Improvement Program	8-Week Semester + Drop Rate Improvement Program

2009: White 14%, Hispanic 18% — 2010: White 15%, Hispanic 17% — 2011: White 12%, Hispanic 14% — 2012: White 10%, Hispanic 13% — 2013: White 9%, Hispanic 12% — 2014: White 8%, Hispanic 10% — 2015: White 7%, Hispanic 8% — 2016: White 4%, Hispanic 5%

Legend: ■ Drop Class □ Complete Class

cohort and the 2014 cohort, respectively. In addition, the college increased graduation rates for Hispanic students by 15 percentage points, from 10% to 25% for the 2009 cohort and 2014 cohort, respectively. For White students, the college's second largest demographic group, the graduation rate went from 14% to 21% during this time period. Now, with Hispanic students graduating at a higher rate than White students, the college has closed their equity gap.

President Williams hopes that Odessa's work can be a model for other colleges—and, indeed, a number of other institutions have visited with Williams and his team to generate ideas for reform.

WHAT STUDENTS ARE SAYING

"It's a faster class, but I think it's more of a challenge for yourself so you can prepare yourself better and study more. I have more spare time, so now I have to be focused on actually studying. Before, it was eight or nine hours, but now I have to make a planner of what I have to do and take an hour or two to study.

I feel comfortable here. We're all equal, we're not treated different. Even though I speak Spanish and English, I don't feel judged by how I speak. I feel comfortable in the classrooms too – just because I'm Latino, they don't treat me differently. In Junior High, I was scared of talking with people because I didn't know the English. Now it doesn't matter to me. I just like to talk to people and have a good time.

When I came here for the first time, I liked the mood, the way the students were talking about their classes. They were excited about it.

I felt that here, they were going to give me more feedback on what I was doing wrong, and that's how it is."

— Kevin Quintana, 19 years old
Pre-Rad Tech, Odessa High graduate, 2017
Lived in Mexico until he was 8, Chihuahua, Chihuahua

Achieving the Dream ™

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ABOUT ACHIEVING THE DREAM

Achieving the Dream (ATD) leads a growing network of more than 220 community colleges committed to helping their students, particularly low-income students and students of color, achieve their goals for academic success, personal growth, and economic opportunity. ATD is making progress closing achievement gaps and accelerating student success through a unique change process that builds each college's institutional capacities in seven essential areas. ATD and more than 100 experienced coaches and advisors work closely with Network colleges in 39 states and the District of Columbia to reach more than 4 million community college students.

ABOUT OUR SPONSOR

The Kresge Foundation is a private, national foundation that works to expand opportunities in America's cities through grant-making and social investing in arts and culture, education, environment, health, human services, and community development in Detroit. In collaboration with nonprofit, public, private and philanthropic partners, the Foundation helps create pathways for vulnerable people to improve their life circumstances and join the economic mainstream.

FOR MORE INFORMATION ABOUT ACHIEVING THE DREAM:

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