



Achieving the Dream™

2021 | LEAH MEYER AUSTIN AWARD



Northeast Wisconsin
Technical College





Achieving the Dream's **Leah Meyer Austin Award** is the highest honor awarded to colleges in the Achieving the Dream National Network. The award recognizes institutional strength, aligned policies and procedures, a student-focused culture, notable increases in student outcomes, and reduction of equity gaps.

OVERVIEW

Northeast Wisconsin Technical College (NWTC), winner of ATD's 2021 Leah Meyer Austin Award, has a core value that permeates all of its objectives: Everyone has worth.

"We are committed to embracing the worth of every individual, providing an inclusive place for all people, and creating a respectful and stimulating environment," says NWTC president Dr. H. Jeffrey Rafn.

In 2009, NWTC began asking itself: Who are we missing? Who are we not being successful with? Where do we need to go? And how do we get there? The college, which has also earned Leader College of Distinction, joined the Achieving the Dream Network in 2010 and developed tools to answer those questions.

The keys to answering those questions were data, and a commitment to shift focus from helping students become "college-ready" to making the college "student-ready." NWTC has implemented a system of improvements to promote student success, including early intervention, expanding the college's institutional research team, transitioning from 15-week to eight-week courses, providing NWTC staff with supportive skills and mandatory trainings, and improving communication with students about their pathway to success.

Not only has the college substantively increased student persistence, credit completion, and the proportion of students who successfully transfer and earn a baccalaureate degree, they have also narrowed equity gaps for students receiving Pell grants, part-time students, and student parents. Specifically, the college has:

- ▶ increased fall-to-fall persistence rates from 57 percent to 62 percent over four years, a five percentage point increase;
- ▶ decreased persistence rate gaps for Pell recipients compared to non-Pell recipients by five percentage points over four years;
- ▶ decreased persistence rate gaps for students with children by five percentage points over four years;
- ▶ increased the successful credit completion ratio from 71 percent to 75 percent, a four percentage point increase; and
- ▶ seen an increase in students who earned a bachelor's degree within six years of starting at NWTC from 27 percent to 34 percent in a three-year period, during which time the existing equity gap on this measure between students who received Pell grants and those who did not was halved.

“It's not the work of a small committee or a small team. It's really been embedded into our culture. Success is the way we build our budget. Student success is part of what we talk about when we interview candidates, it is how we build our professional development, it is how we evaluate our employees based on our values.”

—Vickie Lock,
Dean of Student Success



SNAPSHOT

Northeast Wisconsin Technical College serves 27,000 students living in northeast Wisconsin and beyond. Nearly half (49 percent) of students enrolled at NWTC are first-generation college students, 34 percent of students are Pell-eligible, and 80 percent of students are employed full- or part-time. Over 94 percent of NWTC graduates have careers within six months of graduation and hundreds continue their education through NWTC's transfer agreements with nearly 40 colleges and universities.

CHALLENGES

Shifting away from the notion of a “college-ready student” and toward a “student-ready college” meant implementing evidence-informed initiatives to help all students succeed. With data and equity as the focal point for each initiative, NWTC set out to implement a system of improvements to support student success.

Though faculty were aware of the student success goals, the college's wide variety of data was difficult for staff to find and use. Determined to create a culture of evidence where data collection and analysis drove efforts to identify obstacles to student success, NWTC created the Dream Core Team.

The Dream Core Team reviews student success data annually as they prioritize interventions, discuss new high-impact practices, and recommend initiatives. Changes resulting from their analysis include hiring additional

student support staff, project managers, and institutional researchers; using grants to implement and scale initiatives; training employees on the use of data; creation of guided pathways; and use of multiple measures for placement. Additionally, the Dream Core Team presents to the board of trustees and prepares an annual report of how the work has progressed.

SOLUTIONS

Working with Achieving the Dream coaches, participating in shared dialogues, attending the ATD Teaching and Learning Institute, and following ATD's team approach to institutional change fortified NWTC's goal of not merely acquiring usable data, but converting that data into action to create an equitable “student-ready college.” This led to the creation of the Data Jedi Council.

To grow the culture of evidence and more deeply embed principles of rigorous formative and summative evaluation into daily practice, there was a need to better organize the college's data and reporting infrastructure. The Data Jedi Council subcommittee consolidated resources into an intranet site called the DataMine, a central online source for reports on student success, enrollment, program performance, and other meaningful measures to support student-centered success.

Training for faculty began with a focus on skills in accessing and understanding key data resources and resulted in a universal process to facilitate ongoing evidence-based improvement known as the F.O.R.C.E. (Focus on Outcomes, Results, Collection, and Evaluation).

“Our data is a place where we start rather than where we finish. We've incorporated a lot more formative assessment and leading indicators into our evaluation so that we can — as we go — follow the success or lack of success of our interventions. You don't have to wait until the end of a program to work on continuous improvement.”

—Dr. Matthew Petersen, Manager of Student Retention

“We have a lot of folks at our college who, if you mentioned data, there was a kind of fear factor kicking in. And that probably started for a lot of people in math class in school. I think the Star Wars element, and the fun that we had, and dogs dressed as Yoda incorporated in our PowerPoints, softened the message.”

—Dr. Matthew Petersen, Manager of Student Retention

The college’s approach for data collection and analysis for student success work was scaled statewide when the Wisconsin Technical College System implemented a modified NWTC course for instructors using the F.O.R.C.E. strategy.

Data, once made easily accessible to faculty, became a strong tool for the action required to develop the solutions necessary to foster substantive, sustainable gains in the academic lives of NWTC students, translating to long-term success.

Early Interventions Key to Improving Successful Student Credit Completion and Persistence

The key to making the college “student-ready” involved intervening early. NWTC created a mandatory Student Orientation and Registration (SOAR) session to provide orientation and registration guidance and a mandatory student success course. After some student feedback that not everyone could — or wanted to — attend an in-person session, NWTC created SOAR Online to provide flexibility in student onboarding. Not only did the online option add flexibility, but it is also accessible to the student permanently and they can pause, re-watch, and complete it at their own pace. Of students that responded to a survey, more than 80 percent said they were very satisfied or extremely satisfied with the SOAR Online experience.

“I love how in-depth and understandable it was.”

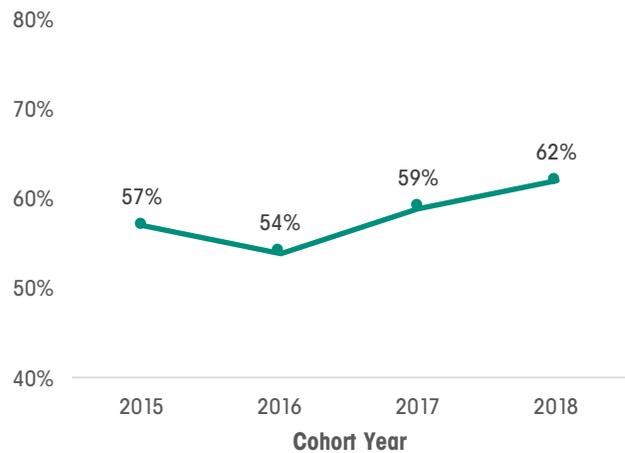
—Student survey response to the SOAR Online session.

Eighty-three percent of respondents agreed that it helped them learn more about NWTC’s student resources, and 75 percent said they learned more about paying for college.

The college scaled early alerts to all faculty, added a referral process to help students find critical services like academic coaching, and implemented a student intake survey to enhance placement and connect students with services even before classes start. In addition, all students are mentored by program faculty whose professional development is bolstered by four advisors who have become certified coaching trainers.

Wrap-around services to prevent basic need barriers were also implemented, such as an emergency fund, on-campus food pantry, childcare support and subsidies, career closet, and financial coaching. The emergency fund in particular, has made a big difference for students — and not just because it helped a student make rent or fix a broken appliance, but in also because of the message it sends. “It really has made a huge difference in the way that students know that we care about them. Sometimes it’s not the \$50 gas card. Sometimes it’s just the fact that we reached out and they know somebody cares and they know that we want them to be successful,” said Dean of Student Success Vickie Lock.

FTEIC Fall Cohort Fall-to-Fall Persistence



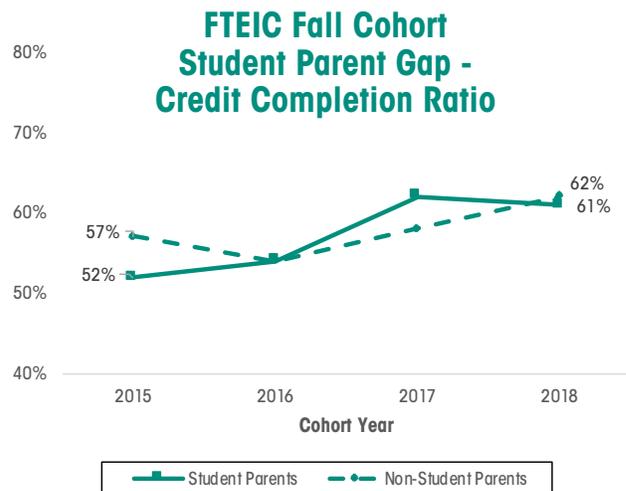
“I think the tricky part is getting the right service to the right student at the right time. So, we’ve been working hard on that. Faculty and staff have the ability to send a referral for a student that is struggling. We also have students complete an intake survey the very first time he or she registered that asks the student to self-identify any barriers that they think they might have. We would ask: Do they have reliable transportation, and do they need help with childcare? Do I need to make more time to study, do I have the flexibility in my schedule to do that? We asked them how much they’re working. Now we are asking them if they have children. We have always asked if they are caring for others, but it could be siblings. It could be parents. Now that information goes to our student services teams and then they reach out proactively to offer resources, to help a student be sure the student knows what the resources are and help them in advance.”

—Vickie Lock, Dean of Student Success

In addition to increasing successful credit completion and persistence overall, the college has narrowed equity gaps in successful credit completion for low-income students who receive Pell grants as well as students who attend college part-time. The college has also decreased equity gaps in fall-to-fall persistence for students who receive Pell grants and student parents.

To increase successful credit completion, the college has focused on academic coaching. Academic coaching assistance increased from serving 781 students in 2012–13 to serving over 2,400 students in 2019–20. Coaches provided weekly, hour-long sessions for over 50 courses during the 2019–20 year. Students who attended academic coaching were more likely to increase their grade in the course and less likely to fail the course or withdraw from the course. Mandatory academic coaching sessions have been added to all developmental courses including reading, writing, math, and general chemistry. A referral to academic coaching was set up in the early alert system. NWTC has presented its innovative coaching model at state and national conferences.

As part of what is now ATD’s Holistic Student Supports approach, ATD provided strategic assistance to more than 20 colleges, including NWTC, to leverage technology and relationship-building to provide proactive, personalized, and holistic supports that meet the individual needs of each student. The Gates Foundation-funded initiative iPASS (Integrated Planning and Advising for Student Success) resulted in the launch of Starfish EARLY ALERT and Starfish CONNECT in 2013 at NWTC. As a result, NWTC has institutionalized the software into everyday practices.



“We took a close look at the students that we were serving — who was actually coming to us for support, who was being referred to us — and really disaggregated whether we were really serving the students in an equitable way. We purposely reached out to students of color that were doing well in class to come back and coach for us the next year, the next term. We really tried to be very purposeful about how we review our data and self-reflect on whether or not we are serving students in an equitable way.”

—Vickie Lock, Dean of Student Success

Full-time and part-time faculty alert students of their progress and connect students to resources. During the COVID-19 pandemic, Starfish became an even more crucial system for faculty and students to communicate, identify gaps, and create solutions. Students can also schedule appointments with faculty and advisors in Starfish, see their personalized success network, and keep track of any flags or kudos. In 2017–18, NWTC added a noncognitive student intake survey, faculty mentoring, and a success coaching methodology that all rely on Starfish to track progress and document student interactions. All three practices have shown to increase retention five to 10 percentage points for students who participate.

Improving the Student Experience to Increase Momentum and Successful Transitions

NWTC has worked to build pathways that integrate academic and student services into an intentional plan that guides a student into and through the college to the successful completion of a career pathway and the transition to a baccalaureate program or the labor market. NWTC attributes these efforts to improvements in students’ fall-to-fall persistence and successful completion of a baccalaureate degree within six years of entering NWTC. Several ways the college has improved the student experience and increased successful student transitions within and out of the college include the following efforts.

Become Student-Ready and Center Equity

NWTC expanded its institutional research team and conducted an in-depth Student Climate Survey of the experiences of NWTC’s diverse student population. As a result of the survey findings, NWTC created the position of Chief Officer for Diversity, Equity and Inclusion in 2020 as part of its executive leadership team; created the “iRespect!” campaign to promote equity; built a unity lounge; added a peer mentoring program; fostered Women of Color and Men of Color student groups; and implemented policies

“They might be working a job. They might be a single parent. They might go through a whole day without anybody telling them that they did a good job. And then they go home, and they get these kudos, which are just little messages that say, ‘Hey, I noticed what you’re doing and you’re doing great.’”

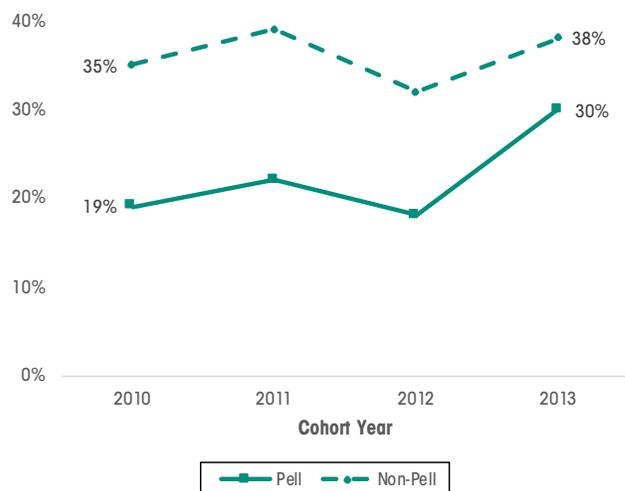
—Dr. Matthew Petersen, Manager of Student Retention

to increase the diversity of the college’s workforce. These improvements help foster an inclusive culture and students’ sense of belonging.

Learn to Improve Student Success: Professional Development for Faculty and Staff

Beyond the supports provided to students, NWTC employees learned new skills and were encouraged to take risks and try out ideas to improve student success. Faculty trained to partner with academic advisors in integrated advising to help students plan their futures. Advisors, student services staff, administrators, and faculty worked with InsideTrack to learn new techniques for student success advising. The Faculty Quality Assurance System, a peer-review process for eight-week courses, revised a teaching methods class and a new Teaching and Learning Center ensures faculty have the skills necessary to provide great learning experiences. NWTC created mandatory equity courses including “Living Inclusively,” “Serving Inclusively,” “Teaching Inclusively,” and “Managing Inclusively” for employees and extended On Course training to part-time faculty.

FTEIC Fall Cohort Pell Gap - Transfer & Earned Baccalaureate



Achieving the Dream learning events like DREAM, webinars, and other networking events were a crucial component to both learning and teaching new support skills. According to President Rafn, “They [faculty] would always come back [from DREAM] and ... want to try something new or do something together. And when we went to DREAM, they always met after and stayed at the end of the day and debriefed and talked about what they do. So, we provided the focus for our team to really get into it and be the ambassadors.”

“One of the first meetings I ever had with my supervisor, she told me that I should take risks and that I wouldn’t ever be punished for trying something, even if it doesn’t work. That really stuck with me because after that, I can’t actually think of a time that if I had an idea that was based in student success, that NWTC told me no.”

—Kristin Sericati,
Developmental Reading & Writing Instructor

Improve Communication with Students

NWTC improved the way faculty communicate with students about their pathway to success. The college implemented a Customer Relationship Management (CRM) system and partnered with SWIM Digital to communicate more effectively with students from their first inquiry through academic planning to graduation and beyond. The college has improved and increased advising, improved transfer information on the college website, and developed more seamless transfer agreements with colleges and universities. From the start of a student’s experience at the college, they know NWTC is examining their academic history holistically, increasing and more clearly communicating credit for prior learning opportunities, and marketing pathways that allow each student to ladder credentials and plan for transfer options. NWTC has improved students’ momentum to earning a credential and recognizing value after leaving the college.

Adopt and Scale Eight-Week Terms

Most recently, NWTC’s 8-Week Advantage began as a pilot project in 2019–20 with 63 students. Data showed that eight-week course success rates were 78.7 percent, compared to 73.8 percent for the same course held over 15 weeks in the previous year. In fall 2020, 48 percent of NWTC’s degree and diploma programs are in eight-week formats, and in fall 2021, all programs will shift to eight-week terms.

“Students love the eight-week term ... The number of students that leave midway has drastically dropped.”

—Kristin Sericati,
Developmental Reading & Writing Instructor

RESULTS

NWTC is committed to a student-first approach — a vision that has permeated the faculty culture and objectives, and that has paved the way to tangible outcomes. Since joining Achieving the Dream, NWTC has closed equity gaps, increased successful student outcomes, addressed inequities with direct feedback from students, and made wrap-around services more accessible and encompassing.

NWTC, with support from Achieving the Dream, is getting results:

- ▶ Increased fall-to-fall persistence rates from 57 percent to 62 percent over four years, a five percentage point increase. During this time the college also closed existing equity gaps on this measure between student parents and students without children as well as students who received Pell grants and those who did not.
- ▶ Increased the ratio of college-level credits successfully completed with a C- or higher from 71 percent to 75 percent, a four percentage point increase. Narrowed existing equity gaps on this measure between students who received Pell grants and those who did not as well as between part-time students and full-time students.
- ▶ Increased the proportion of students who earned a bachelor’s degree within six years of starting at the college from 27 percent to 34 percent. During this time, the college also halved an existing equity gap between students who received Pell grants and those who did not.

“We were very intentional about our culture to the point where we not only identified values, but we identified behaviors that we would expect to see if in fact you are valuing that,” says President Rafn.

“I think if you pulled any employee — part-time faculty, full-time faculty, non-student facing employee, if you pulled any one of them out of a hallway and asked them what NWTC was about, they would say student success.”

—Dr. Matthew Petersen, Manager of Student Retention

NEXT STEPS

NWTC's priorities for 2020–21 keep students as the focal point. The college will redesign credentials and support systems for the successful 8-Week Advantage program, increase graduation success of underserved populations, and build up diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) efforts. With the continued support of Achieving the Dream, and a persistent student-centered approach, NWTC will achieve its 2023 goals of a 60-percent credential attainment rate, a 65-percent graduation rate, a 71-percent gateway course completion rate. In support of the greater college mission, and to become a student-ready college where every student adds value, NWTC will reduce equity gaps and provide deeper support for under-resourced students.

NOTE: NWTC would like to extend a deep appreciation to all the ATD coaches that who have worked with the college, especially now-retired data coach Bruce McComb.

“What I see as being the most urgent and most important work that we do next is really embedding that equity-minded approach to student success into our work and into our culture so that we don't think about student success and equity separately, but that they are tied together and integrated in a way that we always think about equity as we start a new project.”

—Vickie Lock, Dean of Student Success

“We believe everyone — no matter where they are in their personal and professional journeys — can dream big and soar higher.”

—President Dr. H. Jeffrey Rafn



Achieving the Dream™

Achieving the Dream leads America's largest network of community colleges working to become strong engines of student and community growth. Since 2004, Achieving the Dream has helped hundreds of colleges and millions of students achieve their goals of success. Our proven model helps colleges identify emerging needs and ways to improve practices across the full spectrum of capacities required for whole-college reform.

