



Achieving the Dream™

2020

LEAH MEYER  
AUSTIN AWARD



# ALAMO COLLEGES DISTRICT

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.

“We are increasingly focused on economic and social mobility, because we know that a college credential provides a ticket to the American middle class.”

—Dr. Mike Flores, Chancellor, Alamo Colleges District

## OVERVIEW

**Alamo Colleges District**, one of two 2020 Leah Meyer Austin Award winners, shows how a system of colleges can work together to build a structure and culture organized around student success. The five individually accredited community colleges — Northeast Lakeview College, Northwest Vista College, Palo Alto College, San Antonio College, and St. Philip's College — serve the 1.5 million people living in San Antonio, Bexar County and seven surrounding counties.

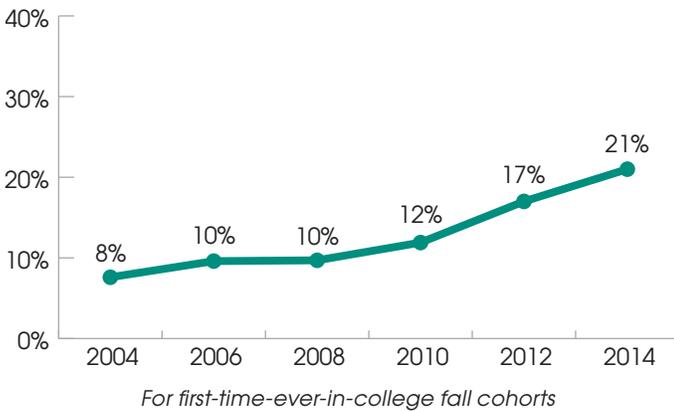
Mirroring the broader community, the student body of 60,692 students (Fall 2019) are 63 percent Hispanic, 23 percent White, 8 percent African American and 6 percent Asian or other. Approximately 60 percent of students are female; 81 percent of students attend part-time; 70 percent receive financial aid; 53 percent are economically disadvantaged; and 12 percent of students are in the top economic quintile.

“We take pride in ensuring that we provide access to students from a broad cross-section of the community,” says Alamo Colleges District Chancellor Dr. Mike Flores, the first Hispanic chancellor in the district's history.

# CHALLENGES

In the mid-2000's, the district's colleges recognized that their graduation and completion rates were untenable, given the context of a growing community, a struggling local economy, and high levels of poverty. The district joined the Achieving the Dream Network in 2004, leading the colleges to come together over what the data were telling them and to transform their cultures and practices to support student success. Today, focused innovations have yielded increases in student completion and in equity for the area's most vulnerable populations. From academic year 2004-2005 to academic year 2017-18, the District saw an increase from 8 percent to 21 percent in the four-year graduation rate.

## 4-Year Graduation Rates



Over the past five years, the Alamo Colleges District has introduced its own methodically grown advising systems, pathways effort, and transfer advising guides (TAGs) that have further improved completion and shortened students' time to degree completion.

In 2018, San Antonio had the highest urban poverty rate in the nation. Local feeder school systems have struggled to produce college-or work-ready graduates. Across the Alamo Colleges District, 55 percent of students are living below the federal poverty level. A 2018 student survey showed that 48 percent were food insecure in the prior 30 days, but only 23 percent had received food benefits. Additionally, 60 percent of students were housing insecure and 17 percent were homeless in the previous year.

By 2040, the San Antonio area population is expected to increase by one million residents. In the next decade, national workforce experts estimate that 65 percent of jobs will require credentials beyond high school. With only 33 percent of adults in the region having an associate degree or higher, the Alamo Colleges District believes the education it provides is an essential investment in the prosperity and vitality of the San Antonio area community.

“My investment in my degree from one of the Alamo Colleges became the passport to my future.”



—Erica Molina, Assistant Vice President of Education and Future Workforce Development, San Antonio Hispanic Chamber of Commerce.

# SOLUTIONS

Joining Achieving the Dream has served as the catalyst for the district's colleges to work together to align processes, become data informed, and focus on student success and performance excellence. Together, core cross-college data and change-management teams have collaborated, innovated, and applied learning from ATD Network experiences.

“We use discovery, incubation, and acceleration to build proof-of-concept at one college, then develop it, and bring it to scale at another,” says Flores.

The Alamo Colleges District Board of Trustees drew ideas from Achieving the Dream's best practices and principles and the institutional capacity areas, on which it has modeled its strategic framework for measuring progress in student success.

## Making Progress the Alamo Way—“Always Inspire, Always Improve”

The Alamo Way—In 2010 and 2011, the Alamo Colleges District Board of Trustees passed several policies that have produced dramatic results. Most seminal was the Alamo Way, an overall education governance and leadership philosophy. The Alamo Way is comprised of three components that guide performance improvement: Student Success, Principle-Centered Leadership and Performance Excellence. A cornerstone to strategic planning, the Alamo Way has produced numerous approaches and programs leading students to success in career development, transfer and employability. As the programs have proven effective, the board has invested heavily to scale them across the colleges.

AlamoADVISE is a proactive case management academic advising program where students are assigned to the same academic advisor from entry to completion. Advisors are extensively trained and professionally certified and carry a manageable caseload of 350 students. The students work with one advisor on a plan, meet with their advisor after completing the 15th, 30th, and 45th credit hours of their studies, and, as a result, stay on track to completion.

AlamoINSTITUTES is a pathways academic program including six career pathways that lead to high-wage, high-demand jobs. Within each institute are pre-major program maps called Transfer Advising Guides (TAGs) that lead to seamless transfer and degree applicability—and savings for students.

AlamoPROMISE, introduced in 2019, aims to bridge the gap between financial aid and tuition and fees. Through AlamoPROMISE funding, the Alamo Colleges District offers last-dollar scholarships to eligible graduating high school seniors to close funding gaps and ensure they can afford a college education.

**Student Advocacy Centers**—Through partnerships with multiple area organizations, advocacy centers at each of the colleges are able to provide resources such as job assistance, food security, clothing, childcare, utility and transportation assistance, counseling and more.

**Summer Momentum**—This plan allows students who earn 18-24 credit hours in the fall and spring semesters at any of the five colleges of the Alamo Colleges District, to receive three to six credit hours in the summer semester at no cost. The Summer Momentum Plan enables more students to achieve the life-long benefits of college, with less financial stress. Students can earn their degree in less time, save money and use their financial aid more effectively.

**High School Programs**—The Alamo Colleges District has committed to intervening earlier in students' lives to create a college-going culture in the high schools, focus equity strategies and fight intergenerational poverty. Working with school districts, it expanded its dual credit

programs and advising to help students map out their goals and start earning college credits at no charge before they finish high school.

“Equity comes when we provide interventions as early as we can to ensure that students’ trajectory through programs and pathways are faster, more efficient and less costly to parents and to the community,” says Dr. Robert Vela, president of San Antonio College.



## Keeping the culture focused on student success

To include over 5,000 faculty and staff in transforming the district’s culture, Alamo Colleges’ board invests heavily in professional development. Colleges are intentional in consistently engaging in equity and student success conversations. For example, in 2018, faculty signed up for more than 1,160 hours of training on diversity, equity and inclusion. In addition to redesigning the developmental education curriculum, faculty promoted the creation of centralized Advocacy Centers at each of the colleges.

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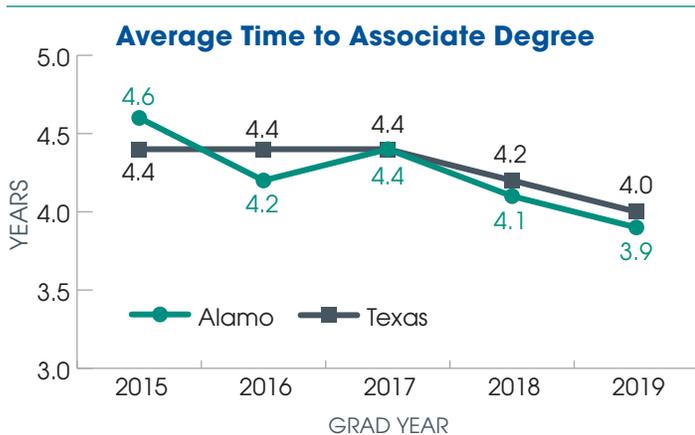
“We’re part of the community, and one of the things we want the students to realize is that we’re here not only for them, but also for their families.”

—Dr. Archie Wortham, Professor of Speech, Alamo Colleges District.

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# RESULTS

**Time to degree:** AlamoINSTITUTES has resulted in a decreased time to degree, from 4.6 years in 2014 to 3.9 years in 2018, and a reduction in excessive semester credit hours from 92 to 82 hours over that same time period. The colleges have created 1,276 TAGs, with average savings per student of \$8,802 at public institutions and \$52,767 at private institutions. Notably, a recent study shows that the average time to degree at the University of Texas San Antonio is only 1.7 years for students who transferred from Alamo Colleges, a lower rate than that for students who began at the university as native first-time-in-college students.



**Completion:** Alamo Colleges District's student success agenda has yielded increases in graduation rates overall and among students of color, veterans and Pell Grant recipients. Overall, the District saw an increase from 8 percent to 21 percent in the four-year graduation rate from academic year 2004-2005; 2017-2018.

Among subgroups, increases have been as follows for the four-year graduation rate:

- For Hispanic students, from 13 percent for the 2011-2015 cohort to 21 percent for the 2014-2018 cohort, an 8 percentage point increase;

- For African-American students, from 10 percent for the 2011-2015 cohort to 15 percent for the 2014-2018 cohort, a 5 percentage point increase;
- For Pell-recipient students, from 14 percent for the 2011-2015 cohort to 22 percent for the 2014-2018 cohort, an 8 percentage point increase;
- For veteran students, from 21 percent for the 2011-2015 cohort to 27 percent for the 2014-2018 cohort, a 6 percentage point increase.

**High school outreach:** Programs and advising for high school students have resulted in 13,500 dual college enrollments annually, \$27.5M in waived tuition, and \$1,000-\$5,000 savings (on 12 to 60 credit hours) of Alamo Colleges District tuition for each student. This allows students to save their Pell Grant dollars for university transfer.

**National recognition:** The Alamo Colleges District student success transformation has brought local, regional and national recognition including the 2018 Malcolm Baldrige National Quality Award. Alamo Colleges was the first community college district to achieve this honor. The district also had four of its five colleges listed in the Aspen Institute's 2018 Top 150 Community Colleges, with Palo Alto College being recognized as a Rising Star.

## NEXT STEPS

Last year, the Alamo Colleges District declared a "moonshot" of ending poverty in the greater San Antonio area by expanding partnerships to address economic and social mobility. The goal is to close the gaps among students of color, align workforce development programs to high-wage, high-demand careers, and scale Student Advocacy Centers to serve all students.

Community colleges are the nation's launchpad to good jobs for millions of students who dream of a better tomorrow. The Alamo Colleges District strongly embraces this role and is bringing economic hope to the San Antonio region.



Achieving the Dream™

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