

HOW COLLEGES CAN DRIVE SOCIAL MOBILITY FOR STUDENTS OF COLOR AND STUDENTS FROM LOW-INCOME FAMILIES

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PARTICIPANT PERSPECTIVES

Amarillo College

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LIFTING BARRIERS AND PROMOTING SOCIAL MOBILITY

Amarillo College (AC), a two-year public community college located in the Texas Panhandle, **embraces systems of change by integrating accelerated learning, predictive analytics, and wrap-around social services to overcome the barriers facing students from low-income backgrounds.** We educate over 10,000 students each year. Our students are overwhelmingly first generation (71%); part time (61%); and, low income (51% are Pell Grant recipients). AC is a minority-majority institution, and 55% of our students are students of color. The average age of our students is 27. By learning who our students are, listening to them and understanding the reality of their educational attainment and completion journey, we have transformed our institution and ourselves.

In 2015, AC established a dynamic five-year strategic plan, *No Excuses 2020*, with a clear goal of reaching 70% completion by 2020. Our strategic plan is bold and clear in its mission to transform higher education, student success and student completion rates. By creating caring systems to address poverty barriers, students succeed. When our students identified the top 10 barriers to completion, none was academic. Each barrier was life related. Initially, we were so focused on academic success that we failed to realize that poverty was a more powerful and debilitating barrier.

In response, we developed **our theory of change: If AC removes poverty barriers in an accelerated learning platform, within a relational/loving culture, students will succeed academically and graduate with the skills and credentials needed to earn a living wage.**

Since 2012, AC has created a cohesive system to address the top 10 barriers to student success. The Advocacy & Resource Center (ARC) is the hub of this system, which is designed to eradicate poverty barriers. The ARC collaborates with over 60 local non-profits, which have federal/state/private funds, to help our students meet life's basic needs. Through these partnerships, students can access funds for transportation, housing, utilities and childcare.

Thanks to changes like these, **AC has seen a 60% increase in our student attainment/transfer rates over the last five years (from 30% to 48%).** We have seen a 75% growth rate in first-generation students graduating with a degree/certificate (21% growth rate in first-generation transfers to four-year colleges). We have also seen a 64% rate increase in graduations and a 29% increase in transfers to four-year colleges by Pell Grant students.

AC recognized the needs of our first-generation students and works across the institution to create systems that embrace and support their needs. AC's culture of caring centers on humanity for all — students, faculty, and staff. AC works daily to ensure student success by connecting students with our faculty and employees; assisting students with available resources across our campus and throughout our community; and, providing them an environment that focuses on encouragement, success, and opportunities.

When we love our students from enrollment to graduation, they thrive in school, achieve their educational dreams, and support the economic future of our community!

In conjunction with this event, The Education Trust and TIAA Institute invited event participants to share their perspectives on social mobility, race, and higher education. Any opinions expressed herein are those of the author, and do not necessarily represent the views of TIAA, the TIAA Institute, or Ed Trust.