

Benchmarking Excellence in Community Colleges Related to Tri-C Themes

Introduction

In Spring 2025, Cuyahoga Community College (Tri-C) convened twenty-two (22) listening sessions to inform its forthcoming mission statement, institutional values, and strategic transformation plan. These sessions provided a platform for faculty, staff, students, alumni, the Tri-C Board of Trustees, the Tri-C Board of Visitors, the Tri-C Foundation Board, community partners, and interfaith leaders to voice their aspirations, concerns, and innovative ideas. At the heart of this initiative was the recognition that meaningful change emerges not from the confines of administrative offices but from the lived experiences of those in our community. Through candid feedback, internal and external stakeholders have called for bold actions, urging Tri-C to embrace agility, transparency, and innovation to foster a transformative educational experience.

This white paper identifies exemplary practices from other community colleges across the nation that have excelled in areas aligning with the thematic insights derived from these listening sessions. Specifically, these best practices, supported by detailed case studies, provide valuable models from institutions that have demonstrated exceptional performance:

- **Academic and Career Support Innovations:**
 - **Odessa College (Odessa, Texas):** Successfully implemented innovative academic scheduling and advising reforms, significantly increasing graduation rates and academic performance.
 - **Miami Dade College (Miami, Florida):** Pioneered industry-aligned programs such as artificial intelligence and cloud computing certifications, directly responding to regional workforce needs.
- **Enhanced Student Experience and Engagement:**
 - **Amarillo College (Amarillo, Texas):** Recognized nationally for building comprehensive support services addressing students' basic needs, thus dramatically improving retention and completion rates.

- **Bunker Hill Community College (Boston, Massachusetts):** Developed targeted initiatives to foster inclusivity and belonging, notably the HOPE Initiative, significantly enhancing student engagement, particularly among historically underrepresented groups.
- **Financial Transparency and Campus Affordability:**
 - **Broward College (Fort Lauderdale, Florida):** Embraced financial transparency and affordability by deploying resources and educational opportunities directly into economically challenged neighborhoods, increasing access and community trust.
- **Inclusivity and Support for Diverse Student Needs:**
 - **Valencia College (Orlando, Florida):** Noted for robust support systems tailored specifically to non-traditional, international, and first-generation students, which substantially improved overall student outcomes and equity in educational attainment.
- **Values for Community and Holistic Wellbeing:**
 - **San Antonio College (San Antonio, Texas):** Recognized by the Aspen Institute for integrating comprehensive mental health and holistic wellness services into everyday campus culture, fostering student resilience and success.
- **Skills for the Future Job Market:**
 - **Northern Virginia Community College (NOVA) (Annandale, Virginia):** Strategically partnered with global technology leaders to offer cutting-edge curricula, including cloud computing specializations, directly preparing students for high-demand careers.

By exploring and adopting these best practices from leading institutions, Tri-C can strategically position itself to address immediate student concerns, proactively anticipate future educational trends and workforce requirements, and reinforce its ongoing commitment to excellence and innovation. The case studies presented in this paper serve not only as examples of proven successes but as actionable blueprints to inspire transformative change at Tri-C.

Transformational Change and Agility

Change is a constant in today's educational environment, and the most agile community colleges have proactively transformed themselves to better serve students. A prime example is **Odessa College** in Texas, which underwent a dramatic turnaround by embracing a culture of innovation and rapid adaptation.

Odessa College's Journey: In the early 2010s, Odessa College faced low graduation rates and high course withdrawal rates. College leadership knew bold action was needed. Starting in 2011, Odessa implemented a "Drop Rate Improvement Plan" and other reforms that began improving student outcomes. Then, in Fall 2014, Odessa made a game-changing move: it converted roughly 80% of its courses from a traditional 16-week semester format into two 8-week terms. This shift was motivated by data showing that students performed better in shorter "flex" terms and by the recognition that many Odessa students' lives (in an oil-and-gas region) were disrupted by work and family barriers over long semesters. By focusing students on fewer classes at a time, the college theorized, they would be less overwhelmed and could earn credits more efficiently even if life events forced a stop-out. This was a risky institutional change requiring "transformative change focused on student success," but Odessa's leadership and faculty embraced it fully. They communicated extensively, monitored data in real-time, and stood ready to pivot if student performance suffered. Fortunately, the results were overwhelmingly positive.

Within just a few years, Odessa College saw *dramatic improvements* in student success. The shorter terms accelerated momentum: students who might have dropped out in a 16-week term were able to complete 8-week courses and immediately continue. The college created continuous enrollment on-ramps – with six start points a year – so that a student who missed the start of one term could begin in the next 8-week module rather than waiting an entire semester. This agility paid off in both enrollment and completion. Two years after launching 8-week terms, Odessa's enrollment had grown 13%, and after five years it was up 25%, countering the enrollment declines many community colleges experienced. Graduation rates also climbed. In fact, Odessa nearly doubled its three-year graduation rate overall in the span of several years, *more than doubling* the graduation rate for its largest student demographic (Hispanic students) and essentially closing the completion equity gap between Hispanic and White students. These achievements led to national accolades – Odessa won Achieving the Dream's Leah Meyer Austin award in 2018 for its "significant innovations" and was recognized as an Aspen Prize Rising Star and finalist in 2017 and 2019. As the Aspen Institute noted, Odessa's "innovative model of eight-week semesters" allowed students to better balance college with life and "increased enrollment, graduation rates, and financial aid awards" at the college. Equally important was the

cultural agility Odessa developed: faculty from different departments collaborated to eliminate redundancies and focus on essential learning outcomes, and every department – from advising to IT to the bookstore – was aligned in supporting the new model. Odessa’s experience shows that with bold leadership, data-informed decisions, and teamwork, a community college can transform itself relatively quickly to improve student success.

Holistic Belonging and Student Success

Leading community colleges recognize that students are most likely to thrive when they feel a genuine sense of belonging on campus and when their academic, social, and basic needs are holistically supported. Creating this environment of inclusive support has been a priority for colleges aiming to improve equity and completion. **Amarillo College** in Texas stands out as a powerful case study of instituting a “culture of caring” to drive student success, especially for underserved populations.

Amarillo College’s Culture of Caring: Amarillo College serves a student body in which a large proportion are low-income, first-generation, or balancing college with work and family obligations. About a decade ago, Amarillo confronted a hard truth: many of its students were dropping out not due to academic inability, but because life obstacles – poverty, housing insecurity, hunger, childcare – were derailing their educational journeys. Under the leadership of President Russell Lowery-Hart, Amarillo College made an institutional commitment to address poverty as an educational barrier head-on. The college started by using data to identify the most common challenges its students faced and then responded with an array of wraparound supports to meet those needs. In 2017, Amarillo opened an **Advocacy and Resource Center** on campus, a one-stop hub where students can get help with non-academic needs. This center includes a food pantry and a clothing closet for students who lack basic necessities, as well as staff who connect students to emergency aid, public benefits, and community resources for issues like housing or utility assistance. By 2018, the Advocacy and Resource Center was seeing over 5,600 student visits in a year – a clear indication of both high need and student trust in these services. The college also added a campus childcare center, a legal aid clinic, free mental health counseling, and a career closet to provide professional attire. Essentially, Amarillo aimed to eliminate the dilemma of “food or textbooks” and ensure that no student had to choose between life necessities and college. Beyond services, Amarillo College worked to embed a sense of belonging and care into its campus culture. Faculty were trained to recognize signs of student distress and proactively refer students to the Advocacy Center. Amarillo’s message to students became: *“We see you, we hear you, and we will help you succeed, no matter*

what obstacles you face.” This holistic, student-centered philosophy yielded rapid improvements in student outcomes. Advisors and staff would actively reach out if a student was struggling – for example, if a student stopped attending class, someone would check in to find out why and connect them with help. Amarillo also streamlined its advising and pathways, but the real differentiator was the college’s willingness to tackle out-of-class challenges.

The results were impressive. Amarillo College’s completion rates began rising as more students persisted through hardships. From 2016 to 2020, Amarillo saw some of the fastest improvement in graduation rates in the country – an 8 percentage point increase in just four years. By 2021, over 50% of Amarillo’s students were completing a degree or transferring within three years, which was a marked improvement and above national averages for similar institutions. In recognition of its strides, Amarillo earned a “Rising Star” award from the Aspen Institute in 2021 for rapid improvements in outcomes. The college also won the 2019 **Leah Meyer Austin Award** (Achieving the Dream’s highest honor) jointly with Columbus State Community College, specifically for its holistic approach to reducing equity gaps. The award citation praised Amarillo’s “transformative use of data to quickly and decisively address poverty-related obstacles that impact student success,” highlighting how the college not only put robust support services in place but also *proactively contacts* students to connect them with help. Importantly, Amarillo’s efforts virtually eliminated performance gaps between student groups – by treating students as “whole people” and making them feel truly valued, the college saw retention and completion rise for all, including those who might have been left behind elsewhere. Amarillo College’s story powerfully demonstrates that fostering a sense of belonging and offering holistic support is not just a compassionate mission, but a strategic imperative that leads to better academic outcomes.

It’s worth noting that Amarillo is not alone in prioritizing belonging. In Massachusetts, **Bunker Hill Community College (BHCC)** launched the HOPE Initiative (Halting Oppressive Pathways through Education) in 2017 to improve success for Black and Latino male students – a group with historically lower completion rates at many colleges. HOPE began as a grassroots effort by BHCC faculty and staff who were “concerned about the empowerment of males of color on campus”. It grew into a well-resourced program emphasizing mentorship, leadership development, and an asset-based view of students’ cultural wealth. As one BHCC staff member put it, “So much about being in college is about mattering. We look for opportunities to make students feel connected to the College, and to create that sense of belonging so that the students feel they are part of something.” This statement encapsulates why belonging is critical: when students feel they truly matter to the institution, they are more likely to stay engaged and succeed. BHCC’s initiative has

improved the engagement and persistence of its participants, reflecting a broader movement in community colleges to cultivate inclusive environments. Across the country, colleges have created similar mentoring programs, cultural centers, first-year experience courses, and professional development for faculty on inclusive teaching – all aimed at making every student feel at home on campus.

Innovative Future-Ready Learning Models

In a dynamic economy, community colleges must prepare students for the future of work and citizenship by implementing forward-looking learning models. “Future-ready” learning can take many forms: cutting-edge academic programs in emerging fields, innovative teaching methods and technologies, or new credentialing models that meet students’ and employers’ evolving needs. Several urban colleges have become innovation leaders in this regard. **Miami Dade College (MDC)** in Florida, one of the nation’s largest and most diverse community colleges, offers a compelling case study of embracing innovation to stay ahead of the curve in workforce education.

Miami Dade College’s Tech Initiatives: Miami Dade College recognized early on that its region (Miami/South Florida) was fast becoming a tech and entrepreneurship hub, and that the college needed to proactively equip students with skills for high-growth industries. MDC responded by launching a series of programs and partnerships to integrate emerging technologies into its curriculum and expand access to tech education. Notably, in 2018 MDC became the first college in Florida to offer a Bachelor of Science in Applied Artificial Intelligence, developing this program in consultation with industry partners. This new degree, along with related programs in data analytics and cybersecurity, positioned MDC students at the forefront of AI and machine learning – fields that are transforming the job market. Miami Dade also created technology bootcamps and short-term certificate programs through its **Miami Code** initiative and other workforce training efforts, recognizing that some students and adult learners need accelerated pathways into tech careers. To support these programs, MDC established state-of-the-art facilities like an AI Center at its downtown Wolfson Campus, which quickly became a community hub for tech innovation, hosting events, hackathons, and workshops that bring together students, industry experts, and entrepreneurs. The college’s vice president of innovation, Antonio Delgado, described MDC’s strategy: through strategic partnerships and cutting-edge programs, the college is “harnessing the immense potential of its students and the community at large through exposure to emerging technologies”. Indeed, MDC has attracted global corporate partners – Amazon, Google, Microsoft, Tesla, and others – to

collaborate on curriculum and offer internships, because those companies know MDC graduates have future-ready skills. For example, MDC partnered with Amazon Web Services to incorporate cloud computing content into courses and with IBM to create a Skills Academy for artificial intelligence. The impact is evident in the workforce: MDC's tech program graduates are landing jobs in the region's growing tech sector, and employers have confidence that MDC's curriculum keeps pace with industry needs. Miami Dade College's focus on *innovation in learning* is not limited to technology programs; it also revamped traditional programs by embedding digital skills and active learning. However, where it truly excelled was anticipating the "next big thing" (like AI) and ensuring a public community college could lead rather than lag in offering that education. MDC's example illustrates how being agile in curriculum development and open to non-traditional learning models (such as bootcamps, online programs, and employer-driven academies) can make a college a regional talent catalyst.

Another notable example is **Northern Virginia Community College (NOVA)**, which serves the Washington, D.C. metro area. With the emergence of cloud computing and Amazon's HQ2 in its backyard, NOVA forged a partnership with Amazon Web Services to create one of the nation's first associate degrees in Cloud Computing. Launched in Fall 2018, this *A.A.S. in Information Systems Technology (Cloud Computing specialization)* was explicitly designed to meet the high demand for cloud-skilled workers in the Northern Virginia region. AWS helped advise the curriculum, ensuring that students learn on the platforms and tools (like AWS cloud services) that employers use. The program also established a direct transfer pipeline to George Mason University for those pursuing a bachelor's degree, and even outreach into local high schools so that students can start learning cloud skills early. NOVA's innovative degree is a model of a future-ready learning program: it's career-focused, industry-aligned, and flexible enough to adapt as technology evolves. In its first years, NOVA's cloud computing graduates quickly found well-paying jobs or continued on to university, validating the approach. NOVA has since expanded into other forward-looking areas, such as data center operations and cybersecurity, often in partnership with major employers in the capital region.

Community colleges are also innovating in *how* learning happens. Competency-based education (CBE) and modular credentialing are examples of new models gaining traction. Colleges like **Sinclair Community College** (Dayton, Ohio) and **Western Governors University** (an online institution) pioneered competency-based degrees where students progress at their own pace upon mastering skills, an approach that can be very future-focused and workforce-relevant. While not every community college has adopted CBE widely, elements of it – like industry certifications embedded in degrees, or "badges" for specific skills – are becoming common. Online and hybrid learning innovations have also

accelerated (especially due to the COVID-19 pandemic). For instance, **Wake Technical Community College** (Raleigh, North Carolina) created a virtual reality lab for immersive learning in fields like anatomy and engineering; **Austin Community College** (Austin, Texas) transformed an old mall into a high-tech learning center (the ACCelerator) where students use technology for personalized learning in developmental math. These creative approaches show that being “future-ready” often means re-imagining the learning environment to be more engaging, flexible, and tailored to workforce needs.

Authentic Community Partnership and Regional Impact

Community colleges are deeply rooted in their local communities, and the most impactful institutions actively collaborate with partners to uplift their regions economically and socially. Urban and suburban colleges that excel in this realm go beyond their campus walls – they form authentic partnerships with employers, K-12 schools, universities, non-profits, and government agencies to drive positive change. Two illustrative case studies are **Broward College** in Florida for its community-embedded education initiative, and **Columbus State Community College** in Ohio for its leadership of a regional education and workforce alliance.

Broward College’s Broward UP Initiative: Broward College serves Broward County, which includes Fort Lauderdale and surrounding communities. In 2018, Broward College launched an ambitious outreach program called **Broward UP™ (Unlimited Potential)** with a mission to “*raise the educational attainment levels and social mobility*” in the county’s most underserved neighborhoods. Instead of expecting residents to come to the college, Broward UP takes the college to the residents. The college identified six zip codes in Broward County with the highest unemployment and lowest college attendance rates – areas struggling with intergenerational poverty – and decided to focus extra effort in those communities. Broward UP is built on partnerships: the college teamed up with city governments, local non-profits like the Urban League, faith-based organizations, libraries, and others to host classes and support services *within* the neighborhoods. By 2020, Broward UP had formal partnership agreements with 9 municipalities and over 10 community organizations, and was offering courses at 19 different community locations (up from just one site at the start). These are places like city halls, community centers, and churches – easily accessible venues where residents already gather. Broward College provides free workforce courses, workshops, and college readiness seminars in these locations, lowering barriers of cost and transportation. In the first year alone, nearly 2,500 residents enrolled in Broward UP courses right in their neighborhoods. The programs range

from basic computer skills and ESL classes to certification training in areas like logistics, healthcare, and manufacturing that can lead directly to jobs. Broward UP also brings academic advisors and career counselors to those community sites to help students chart pathways to degrees or employment. The philosophy is “wrap services around the community” rather than making the community come to campus. Early outcomes have been promising – residents who never thought college was for them are gaining credentials. The initiative attracted major support, including a \$30 million federal **Promise Neighborhoods** grant in 2025 to expand its cradle-to-career pipeline in partnership with Florida Atlantic University. Perhaps just as important as educational outcomes, Broward UP has strengthened trust and goodwill between the college and local communities. By co-locating and co-programming with city and nonprofit partners, Broward College demonstrated a genuine commitment to meeting people where they are and tackling the county’s opportunity gaps together. This authentic collaboration model is now being watched by community colleges nationwide as a template for how to deeply engage communities for collective impact.

Columbus State’s Regional Compact: Columbus State Community College (CSCC) in Ohio provides another take on partnership – one that convenes stakeholders across an entire region to improve educational attainment. CSCC recognized that to significantly boost college completion and workforce readiness in Central Ohio, the effort had to start before students ever set foot on a college campus and continue through university transfer or job placement. Thus, Columbus State spearheaded the **Central Ohio Compact**, a coalition that brings together K-12 school districts, four-year universities (including Ohio State University), employers, and civic leaders in the region. The Compact’s shared goal is to increase the number of Central Ohio adults with high-quality degrees or certificates, and it works by aligning curricula, smoothing transitions, and jointly supporting students. For example, under this partnership Columbus State has helped local high schools expand dual enrollment programs so that students can earn college credits (and gain confidence) before graduating high school. Columbus State also worked with Ohio State and other universities on transfer pathways – creating clearly mapped “2+2” programs and articulation agreements so that community college students can transfer as juniors into bachelor’s programs with no loss of credit. The college even developed over 1,000 detailed transfer advising guides with universities, so students know exactly which courses to take for a seamless transfer. On the employer side, Columbus State partners with industry councils in fields like IT, healthcare, and advanced manufacturing to ensure the training matches the skills companies need; many employers in the region have committed to offering internships or hiring graduates from Columbus State programs. What makes this a case of *authentic* partnership is that Columbus State is not acting alone – it is orchestrating

a collective strategy where each educational segment and employer has a role. Their faculty collaborate with high school teachers and university professors to align curricula and expectations. Thanks to these efforts, 97% of Columbus State's new students now participate in some form of student success intervention (orientation, coaching, tutoring, etc.), which has led to higher retention and helped narrow achievement gaps between Black and white students in course completion. The regional approach is paying off in outcomes: Columbus State saw significant increases in its graduation rates over the last decade and earned national recognition (Aspen Prize finalist and winner of the Leah Meyer Austin Award in 2019, alongside Amarillo) for its holistic pipeline strategy. The big takeaway is that by acting as a *community convener* and investing in partnerships that span educational levels and sectors, a college can multiply its impact on student success and workforce development beyond what it could achieve alone.

Beyond these two cases, other colleges exemplify community partnership in action. **Lorain County Community College (LCCC)** in suburban Ohio, for instance, built a renowned University Partnership program that hosts more than 100 bachelor's and master's degree programs from 13+ university partners on the LCCC campus – enabling nearly 7,000 local students to earn four-year degrees from partner universities without leaving their community. This model, started in the 1990s, required deep collaboration with universities and has dramatically expanded higher education access in Lorain County. LCCC also partners with all local K-12 districts to offer college courses in high schools at no cost, and works with the regional manufacturing industry through apprenticeship and innovation initiatives. In a different vein, **Bunker Hill CC** in Boston partners with community-based organizations on programs for immigrants and English language learners, leveraging the strengths of local non-profits to reach populations the college alone might not reach. The key elements in all these examples are trust, shared goals, and mutual benefit. The colleges approach partnerships not as one-off transactions but as long-term relationships where all parties have input and investment in the outcome. By doing so, these institutions have increased their regional impact – whether it's higher educational attainment, a stronger workforce pipeline, or improved quality of life indicators – and firmly established themselves as

Empowered Culture and Bold Leadership

Behind every successful institutional initiative we've discussed – whether it's a new program, a holistic support service, or a community partnership – there is a campus culture and leadership ethos that makes it possible. Truly empowered cultures are those in which

faculty, staff, and administrators at all levels are united around a student-centered mission and feel ownership of a college's success. Bold leadership provides the vision and support for such a culture, encouraging innovation, demanding excellence, and fostering collaboration. In the past decade, several community colleges have exemplified how strong, values-driven leadership coupled with broad employee empowerment leads to standout results.

Throughout the earlier case studies, elements of leadership and culture were apparent. At Odessa College, for instance, President Gregory Williams and the leadership team did not unilaterally impose the 8-week term change; they engaged faculty senate leaders from the beginning and built a coalition for change, showing trust in their faculty and staff to carry out a daring idea. Odessa's mantra became "You must be committed to student success in a way that you look at it every day." That daily, relentless focus on student success permeated the culture, so when the bold move came, everyone rallied to make it work. Similarly, Amarillo College's leadership explicitly told employees that caring for students was part of everyone's job, and empowered a task force to reimagine student support – the result was a college where every staff member, from professors to custodians, feels responsible for helping students overcome barriers. This empowerment is evident when Amarillo's staff proactively connect students to resources without needing a top-down directive each time.

A more formal recognition of how leadership and culture drive success comes from Achieving the Dream's Leah Meyer Austin Award. In 2025, this award was given to **Chattanooga State Community College** (Tennessee) and **Southwestern Oregon Community College** – two very different colleges that nonetheless shared a common factor: they achieved whole-college transformation through bold, inclusive leadership and a culture of continuous improvement. As ATD's President Karen Stout remarked, award winners "do not just demonstrate pockets of excellence; they employ a holistic approach to student success that permeates their entire institution" – and critically, these colleges "have the bold leadership and the across-the-board commitment of faculty and staff that make them true standouts in their student success efforts". In other words, leadership set a vision and tone that empowered everyone to work toward common goals. At Chattanooga State, this meant the president and cabinet prioritized equity and completion, and provided professional development and data to faculty to help change practices in the classroom; at Southwestern Oregon, a small rural college, it meant every employee embraced a "students first" philosophy, especially focusing on adult learners, and leadership supported new ideas like tailored orientations and communication reforms to better serve those students. Both colleges saw substantial increases in graduation rates and narrowing of equity gaps as a result, showing how culture and leadership translate into outcomes.

Another noteworthy example is **San Antonio College (SAC)** in Texas (2021 Aspen Prize winner). SAC's president, Robert Vela, led a comprehensive reform of advising and pathways as mentioned earlier. What's pertinent here is how the leadership team aligned resources to strategic priorities – SAC actually reallocated budgets to hire more advisors and student success staff, sending a clear message that certain initiatives were not just add-ons but central to the college's identity. SAC also cultivated an empowered culture by involving faculty in creating those 1,000+ transfer guides and redesigning gateway courses, rather than handing down decisions. When SAC received the Aspen Prize, President Vela poignantly reflected, "Where we were six, seven years ago is not reflective of who we are [now]" – signaling how a shift in culture and leadership focus had utterly transformed the college.

Empowered culture often shows up in how quickly a college can adapt and in the college's level of frontline empowerment. When challenges (like the COVID-19 pandemic) hit, colleges with an agile, empowered culture were able to pivot quickly – for example, staff at Odessa and Amarillo personally called thousands of students to keep them engaged during campus closure, an extraordinary effort made possible by an ethos of "going above and beyond" for students. In colleges with bold leadership, innovation isn't seen as the sole domain of top administrators; instead, leaders encourage shared governance and idea generation from faculty and staff. Recall how BHCC's HOPE Initiative started from concerned faculty and staff – it's a testament to a college culture where people on the ground are motivated to drive change for student benefit. Bold leaders set this tone by celebrating grassroots innovations and providing support (funding, staffing, policy flexibility) to scale them up. They are also transparent about challenges and rally the college community around

Conclusion

The experiences of these leading community colleges offer a roadmap – and an inspiration – for Tri-C as it strives to elevate from "good" to "great" in the coming years. Several overarching insights emerge from the case studies:

- **Whole-College Commitment:** Lasting success comes when initiatives aren't isolated but part of a holistic strategy. Colleges like Odessa, Amarillo, and Chattanooga State achieved transformation by ensuring every department and individual was aligned toward common student success goals. Tri-C's themes are interdependent; progress in one accelerates progress in others. For example, bold leadership empowers culture, which in turn enables agility and innovation.

- **Student-Centered Design:** Whether it's redesigning semesters, providing wraparound supports, creating new programs, or partnering externally, the most impactful colleges started by deeply understanding their students' needs and barriers. They then designed solutions with the student perspective in mind (shorter terms to combat fatigue, resource centers to fight poverty, AI programs to access tech jobs, etc.). Tri-C can continue this practice of empathetic design – using student input and data to guide decisions – so that every change tangibly improves the student experience.
- **Willingness to Innovate and Take Risks:** All the exemplars took calculated risks – Odessa upended a 50-year academic calendar, Broward ventured off-campus into new territory, NOVA launched an unproven degree in a new field, and so on. Their courage was rewarded. In a rapidly changing world, *not* innovating is perhaps the biggest risk. Tri-C's challenge (and opportunity) will be to foster innovation at all levels, pilot new ideas, and not fear an initial failure. A culture that learns and adapts (rather than avoids change) will keep Tri-C ahead of the curve.
- **Collaboration and Partnership:** Internally, this means silos must come down; faculty, staff, and administrators work as teams. Externally, it means engaging partners as co-creators of value. Tri-C's greatest victories will likely involve partnerships – with K-12 to smooth pipelines, with universities to expand opportunity, with employers to align training, and with community groups to extend reach. By leveraging the collective strength of the community, Tri-C multiplies what it can do for students.
- **Equity and Inclusion as Guiding Values:** A thread running through every case study is a focus on equity – making sure *all* students succeed, especially those historically underserved. From Amarillo's poverty initiative to BHCC's HOPE program, these colleges made equity a lens for decision-making. Tri-C has demonstrated a commitment to equity and can further embed it by regularly reviewing outcomes by race/ethnicity, income, and other factors, and addressing gaps with targeted strategies. An environment where every student feels they belong and can achieve is foundational to excellence.

In moving forward, Tri-C can take heart that it is not starting from scratch. The College's own achievements – Ohio's first community college with decades of service, countless successful alumni, recognition in areas like veteran services and workforce programs – show that Tri-C is already a leader in many respects. By learning from the exemplars detailed in this paper, Tri-C can accelerate its journey of transformation. It can aspire to set new benchmarks that perhaps in a future white paper, other colleges will study "the Tri-C

model” of agility, student support, innovation, partnership, and leadership. The hard work, dedication, and progressive mindset are all in place at Tri-C. Now is the moment to be bold – to adapt the best practices from peers to Tri-C’s context, to implement with fidelity and creativity, and to nurture the culture that will sustain excellence. In doing so, Cuyahoga Community College will not only fulfill its strategic goals but also solidify its legacy as an institution where students from all walks of life can truly succeed and as a cornerstone of the Greater Cleveland community’s vitality and prosperity.

.....

For any questions regarding these listening sessions or this document, please reach out to [Gregory Stoup](#), Vice President of Institutional Progress and Effectiveness.

Sources

1. Achieving the Dream – “*Shorter terms at Odessa College: ‘An overnight success several years in the making’.*” (Story/Case Study, July 6, 2021) – Excerpt on Odessa’s transition to 8-week terms and its impact. (achievingthedream.org)
2. Odessa College – “*Road to Aspen*” (Press release, Sept. 13, 2016 & updates) – Quote from Aspen Institute executive on Odessa’s innovative 8-week model increasing enrollment and graduation rate. (odessa.edu)
3. Achieving the Dream – “*2018 Leah Meyer Austin Award – Odessa College.*” (Feb. 20, 2018) – Recognition of Odessa for doubling graduation rates overall and for Hispanic students, closing equity gap. (achievingthedream.org)
4. The Kresge Foundation – “*Amarillo College, Columbus State Community College honored for student success gains, reduced achievement gaps.*” (Feb. 20, 2019) – Describes Amarillo’s approach to poverty-related obstacles (Advocacy & Resource Center visits, etc.) and Columbus State’s holistic student success pipeline. (kresge.org)
5. Higher Ed Dive – “*Guided pathways improvements lead San Antonio College to the Aspen Prize.*” (Natalie Schwartz, May 18, 2021) – Details San Antonio’s advising model, transfer guides, and outcome improvements; notes Amarillo’s Rising Star award and resources like food pantry for students. (highereddive.com)
6. The Aspen Institute – “*2023 Aspen Prize for Community College Excellence Awarded to Amarillo College & Imperial Valley College.*” (Press Release, Apr. 20, 2023) – Highlights Amarillo’s 8 percentage point graduation rate improvement in four years and strong post-graduation outcome. (aspeninstitute.org)
7. Bunker Hill Community College – “*Breaking Barriers*” (*BHCC Magazine*). (2017) – Profile of the HOPE Initiative; includes quote on importance of belonging for Black and Latino male students. (bhcc.edu)
8. Innovations of the World – “*Miami Dade College – Leading Innovation in Workforce Development.*” (2023) – Discusses MDC’s partnerships with tech companies and programs like the BAS in Artificial Intelligence, quoting MDC’s leadership on innovation. (innovationsoftheworld.com)
9. Amazon Web Services – “*Northern Virginia Community College Case Study.*” (AWS Educate, 2018) – Describes NOVA’s collaboration with AWS to launch a cloud

computing specialization, one of the first in the nation, to meet regional employer demand. (aws.amazon.com)

10. Broward College – “*Broward UP™ Quick Facts.*” (PDF brochure, 2020) – Explains the Broward UP model of delivering courses in underserved zip codes, noting 2,500 residents served in the first year and expansion to 19 community sites with multiple city and agency partnerships. (broward.edu)
11. Lorain County Community College – “*25 Years of Impact – University Partnership.*” (LCCC publication, 2021) – Reports that the University Partnership has grown to 15 partner universities offering 100+ programs with nearly 7,000 total graduates produced through the partnership. (lorainccc.edu)
12. Achieving the Dream – “*Achieving the Dream bestows highest honor to Southwestern [Oregon] for improved student success.*” (News, Feb. 19, 2025) – Karen A. Stout’s quote emphasizing holistic, whole-college transformation and bold leadership at award-winning colleges (Southwestern Oregon CC and Chattanooga State CC). (socc.edu)
13. Strategic Transformation Planning Summary - All Stakeholder Listening Sessions (February 17 – April 9, 2025) – “*Embracing Transformational Change and Agility*” (Internal report excerpt, 2025) – Reflects calls from Tri-C stakeholders for nimble systems, bold change, and rebuilding trust in a shared vision. (tri-c.edu) (Note: internal Cuyahoga Community College document confirming institutional context)