

Bold Strategies, Transformational Outcomes: Inspiring Possibilities for Tri-C

Cuyahoga Community College (Tri-C) stands at an important moment of opportunity, facing persistent enrollment challenges while striving to enhance our service to students and the broader community. It is valuable and timely to look toward institutions that have achieved extraordinary outcomes in difficult time through bold and transformative strategies. By examining these exemplary community colleges, we can thoughtfully and collaboratively move beyond incremental improvements toward truly transformative outcomes.

Tri-C has already made significant strides, actively engaging in all the innovative strategies highlighted within these six exemplary case studies—such as robust tuition assistance programs, accelerated course scheduling, comprehensive guided pathways, developmental education reform, and aligning curriculum closely with workforce needs. These efforts reflect a sincere commitment and measurable progress toward becoming a national model in community college education.

Yet, to genuinely achieve transformational outcomes, Tri-C must purposefully move beyond incremental improvements to adopt deeper, systemic changes. Incremental progress, while important, is inherently slow and may unintentionally leave behind some students who require immediate and substantial support. Embracing truly transformative approaches offers an opportunity to accelerate progress, equitably serve all students, and ensure no student is left navigating a prolonged pathway to success.

This short summary document is the result of a literature review of high performing community colleges who achieved excellence through transformative strategies and their holistic implementation. The findings were vetted by professionals in the field of institutional effectiveness. These colleagues provided valuable insights and feedback, enhancing the relevance and applicability of the findings.

Six Case Studies

Alamo Colleges District (San Antonio) – Free Tuition & Workforce Program Expansion

The five-college Alamo Community College District launched aggressive initiatives to boost college access and produce job-ready graduates. A cornerstone of this strategy has been AlamoPROMISE, a tuition-free program for local high school graduates, coupled with expanded dual-enrollment partnerships with high schools.

Equally important, Alamo Colleges invested heavily in workforce-aligned programs: the district is rolling out 30+ new high-demand degree and certificate programs (**with 59 new short-term certificates or “skills awards”** in areas like healthcare, advanced manufacturing, data science, and power utility technology) to meet labor market needs. It also became one of the first Texas community college systems to offer bachelor’s degrees in applied fields such as nursing, cloud computing, and cybersecurity, aiming to produce thousands more graduates in critical industries.

These strategic moves are backed by an outcomes-focused funding model in Texas that rewards high-demand credentials and transfers. The results have been striking: Alamo Colleges has bucked national trends by achieving record-high enrollment in recent years. In Spring 2024 the district enrolled over 66,700 students (a 9.7% jump from the prior year) – making it one of the few community college systems nationally to “stave off enrollment declines by sharpening its focus on student success.”

Overall, total enrollment has grown about 24% over the past half-decade, growth which district leaders credit to free tuition initiatives, robust dual-credit pipelines, short-term credentials, and innovative workforce training offerings.

This enrollment turnaround, paired with more graduates in high-wage fields, illustrates how an open-access college system can transform itself to better serve students and regional employers.

What we can learn: Tri-C has made commendable progress in creating dual enrollment opportunities and tuition-assistance programs, significantly increasing student access and accounting for a growing share of total enrollment. To achieve transformational outcomes similar to Alamo Colleges, Tri-C might consider further integrating these tuition incentives into clearly defined, robust career pathways strongly aligned with local and regional workforce needs. By enhancing employer partnerships, broadening regional visibility, and closely linking free-tuition initiatives directly to tangible employment outcomes, Tri-C can expand its positive impact on both students and the regional economy.

Odessa College (Texas) – Accelerated Courses & Student-Centered Support

Odessa College, a rural Texas community college, took dramatic steps to redesign its academic calendar and student experience – and in doing so, reversed an enrollment decline. Starting in 2014, Odessa converted the bulk of its courses from traditional 16-week semesters into two 8-week terms, allowing students to concentrate on fewer classes at a time and earn credits faster.

The college also introduced “technical baccalaureate” degrees (applied bachelor’s programs) in career-focused fields and began offering every first-time student their *first course free* as an incentive to enroll.

These curricular reforms were paired with intensive faculty training to improve instruction and a novel student engagement program (“Drive to Success”) that rewards students for academic milestones with points and prize drawings, even a chance to win a car. The overarching goal was to attract new learners – including working adults – and to keep students on track despite the life barriers many face in this oil-and-gas region.

The impact has been dramatic. While Texas community colleges overall saw an 11% enrollment drop over two years, Odessa’s enrollment has grown for seven consecutive years, rising from 5,568 students in Fall 2015 to 8,020 in Fall 2021. Even amid the pandemic (Fall 2020), Odessa saw a 3.9% increase in enrollment when most colleges were down.

Internally, the shift to 8-week courses led to stronger course completion rates – now 96–97% of Odessa students complete the courses they start, building “educational muscle” instead of dropping out at the first difficulty, according to college leaders. This accelerated, skills-focused model has positioned Odessa College as a state-recognized innovator (an Aspen Prize Top 10 finalist) and suggests that bold calendar and curriculum reforms can re-energize student enrollment and success.

What we can learn: Tri-C has demonstrated its commitment to flexible learning by piloting innovative course scheduling, including eight-week terms and hybrid options. These efforts reflect an important shift toward meeting the needs of today’s students. To build on this progress, we can look to Odessa’s full-scale adoption of accelerated structures as a model for institutional coherence and alignment. By expanding faculty training, strengthening accountability systems, and deepening student engagement strategies, Tri-C is well-positioned to amplify the benefits of its current initiatives and drive even stronger student retention and completion.

Ivy Tech Community College (Indiana) – Scaling Skills-Based Credentials Statewide

As a statewide community college system with dozens of campuses, Ivy Tech faced steep enrollment and completion challenges in the mid-2010s. In response, Ivy Tech undertook an ambitious, system-wide strategic realignment to focus on skills-based curricula and credential completion that directly meet Indiana’s workforce needs. In 2016 the college set a vision to award 50,000 “*high-quality credentials*” per year aligned to state labor market demand.

Achieving this meant overhauling academic pathways, forging closer partnerships with employers, and removing barriers to student progress. Ivy Tech restructured leadership roles – creating new vice president positions specifically for completion strategy and student success – to spearhead this completion agenda.

It also expanded short-term certificate offerings, integrated industry certifications into curricula, and launched the “Ivy+” initiative to make college more affordable (including open educational resources and free textbooks in many courses). The payoff has been measurable and substantial. Since 2016, the number of annual completions at Ivy Tech (degrees, certificates, and industry certifications) has surged by 119%. In the 2023–24 academic year alone, Ivy Tech awarded over 46,000 certifications, certificates, and associate degrees, up from roughly half that number before the reforms.

Today Ivy Tech accounts for nearly half of all postsecondary credentials in Indiana each year– a testament to its crucial role in producing skilled workers. This growth in credentials earned, even during a period when college enrollments have been flat or declining nationally, indicates that Ivy Tech’s focus on career-aligned programs and student completion has attracted students and helped more of them finish. By actively aligning programs with high-demand jobs (from advanced manufacturing to healthcare IT) and tracking outcomes, Ivy Tech has become a model of how to scale up skills-based education with data-driven success.

What we can learn: Tri-C has made meaningful strides in workforce alignment, including increased employer engagement, advisory board partnerships, and a growing portfolio of industry-responsive programs. These efforts lay a solid foundation. Ivy Tech’s example shows that by setting bold, measurable goals for credential attainment and integrating employer collaboration into every level of institutional planning, colleges can dramatically improve outcomes. Tri-C’s growing momentum in this space offers a powerful springboard for deeper employer collaboration and even more precise alignment with regional economic needs.

Borough of Manhattan Community College (BMCC), CUNY – Accelerated and Co-Requisite Developmental Education Models

Facing persistently low completion rates for students placed into traditional developmental education sequences, Borough of Manhattan Community College launched comprehensive reforms in developmental English and math between 2015 and 2020. These reforms centered on replacing lengthy developmental education sequences with accelerated courses and co-requisite support models, significantly reducing the time students spend in remediation.

In developmental English, BMCC fully implemented the Accelerated Learning Program (ALP) model. ALP pairs developmental students directly with college-level English composition courses, providing simultaneous remedial support through additional workshop sessions. Faculty underwent rigorous professional development to ensure alignment between the developmental support sessions and college-level coursework. Additionally, curricula were carefully restructured to provide intentional scaffolding, clear expectations, and targeted skills development.

For developmental math, BMCC introduced the Quantway and Statway models developed by the Carnegie Foundation. These alternative math pathways replace lengthy algebra sequences with contextualized, single-semester, statistics-oriented courses. Quantway and Statway curricula emphasize quantitative reasoning and real-world application of math concepts, supported by professional training and collaboration for faculty through regular workshops and instructional coaching.

To ensure successful implementation, BMCC invested in extensive training and ongoing support for faculty teaching these accelerated courses. Faculty participated in collaborative workshops and regular meetings to align teaching strategies, address instructional challenges, and share best practices. Additionally, the college employed data analytics to continuously monitor student performance, adjusting curriculum pacing and student support accordingly.

Outcomes Achieved:

- Course completion rates in developmental English courses jumped from approximately 40% to over 75% following the implementation of ALP, significantly shortening the path to credit-bearing coursework.
- Developmental math reforms resulted in a near doubling of student completion rates in math sequences, rising from roughly 25% to nearly 50% through the Quantway and Statway pathways.

- Students in these accelerated and co-requisite models showed substantial improvements in persistence, overall college retention, and completion rates of certificates and degrees, achieving a measurable reduction in equity gaps for historically underserved student populations.

What We Can Learn: Tri-C has already demonstrated openness to innovative course structures, including co-requisite and accelerated models in developmental education. BMCC’s example underscores the critical importance of comprehensive faculty training, robust curriculum alignment, and ongoing assessment to effectively scale these reforms. Tri-C can expand its promising initiatives by systematically training faculty in co-requisite pedagogy, engaging faculty deeply in curriculum redesign, and leveraging continuous data analytics for rapid improvement. Adopting intentional accelerated pathways could also streamline remediation, improve retention, boosting student completion and student educational goal achievement rates at Tri-C.

Bakersfield College (California) – Guided Pathways & Enrollment Surge

Bakersfield College’s main campus. Through guided pathways reforms and outreach, the college significantly increased student enrollment and completion momentum.

Located in California’s Central Valley, Bakersfield College (BC) faced low completion rates and stagnant enrollment a decade ago. In 2015, BC embarked on an ambitious Guided Pathways redesign to clarify program choices and better support students from entry to completion. This entailed mapping programs into clear career pathways, overhauling advising and counseling, and addressing achievement gaps. The college forged stronger high school partnerships (expanding dual enrollment opportunities across its large service area) and added additional term options (like a winter “early spring” session and more summer classes) to help students accelerate progress. Faculty and staff collaborated to align curricula with workforce needs – for example, reviewing courses in criminal justice to ensure content truly matched industry requirements.

BC also extended its reach into rural communities with new satellite centers and co-located a facility at a nearby university to ease transfer. The guided pathways strategy yielded transformative results. In a five-year span, Bakersfield College’s enrollment increased by roughly 50% – an enormous jump for an institution of its size. (This growth was driven in part by dual-credit high school students and adults drawn to the clearer program pathways.) Student success indicators also improved: for instance, the rate of students completing 15+ units in their first term rose from 12% in 2015 to 20% by 2018, indicating more students are staying on track early in their college careers. With far more students

entering and progressing through programs, BC had to expand student services capacity accordingly.

The college is now seen as a “proof of concept” for guided pathways; its redesign has produced more graduates and transfers in fields like agriculture, energy, and nursing that align with regional workforce demand. The dramatic enrollment surge and improved academic momentum at Bakersfield underscore how an institutional overhaul focusing on clarity, support, and workforce relevance can reverse declining trends.

What we can learn: Tri-C has invested in Guided Pathways, dual enrollment, and targeted advising reforms—all clear indicators of our commitment to student success. These foundational structures are commendable and have already created value for many students. To achieve the kind of transformational gains seen at Bakersfield, Tri-C can build on these successes by intensifying advising support, expanding seamless academic pathways, and increasing integration with K–12 and community partners. Our strong start gives us the credibility and capacity to take the next big leap.

Amarillo College (Texas) – “Culture of Caring” and Fast-Track Completion

Amarillo College approached the challenges of enrollment and completion by fundamentally redesigning itself around the needs of its predominately working-class student body. College leadership created a composite persona, “Maria,” to represent the average student (a 27-year-old Latina working two jobs and raising children) and used that insight to drive reforms.

Amarillo implemented a three-pronged strategy: removing life barriers (through extensive wraparound support for issues like childcare, housing, and food insecurity), providing expedited learning options, and fostering a deep culture of caring on campus.

Faculty and staff adopted intrusive advising and personal engagement practices – for example, ensuring each student’s first major exam grade is delivered in a one-on-one meeting, not just online, to build connection and intervene early

The college also compressed course schedules (similar to Odessa’s approach) and developed accelerated pathways so students could earn credentials faster. The outcomes at Amarillo have been nationally recognized. In just a few years, Amarillo College raised its completion rate from 19% to 48% – a remarkable improvement in graduates and transfers achieved by about 2019. (Amarillo was one of the 2023 Aspen Prize co-winners, reflecting these gains.) This jump of nearly 30 percentage points in completion was achieved in roughly three years after adopting the “Maria”-informed reforms.

By 2020, Amarillo had essentially reached its initial vision of a 70%* success rate (when including certificates), and it continues to set higher goals. Importantly, these student success gains translate to better workforce outcomes: Amarillo's graduates (many of whom are in technical programs and allied health fields) now enter the job market with a much higher rate of credential attainment. The president of Amarillo College, Russell Lowery-Hart, emphasizes that if community colleges are to be the “economic saviors” of their communities, they must redesign themselves to truly serve their students' realities. Amarillo's bold institutional reengineering – centered on radical student support and agile learning options – not only boosted enrollment persistence but also produced a pipeline of skilled graduates for the local economy.

What we can learn: Tri-C's student support services—including food pantries, emergency aid, and mental health resources—reflect a genuine and growing commitment to student well-being. Amarillo's example challenges us to take that spirit of care and embed it across the entire student experience, transforming support into a defining feature of our culture. With the systems we already have in place, Tri-C is well-prepared to evolve from responsive support to a truly holistic, data-informed model that anticipates and addresses barriers before they disrupt learning.

Additional Transformational Insights

Integrating Non-Credit and Credit Pathways (Louisiana and Washington)

The Louisiana Community and Technical College System reorganized their non-credit and credit offerings under unified leadership, creating seamless, industry-driven pathways. Similarly, Washington's Integrated Basic Education and Skills Training (I-BEST) model pairs foundational skills with technical education, significantly boosting student completion rates and college transitions.

What we can learn: Tri-C's robust portfolio of credit and non-credit programs shows our longstanding commitment to serving a broad spectrum of learners. While these offerings have historically operated in parallel, models from Louisiana and Washington offer a vision for integration that amplifies impact. Given Tri-C's strong infrastructure and existing partnerships, we are well-positioned to unify these pathways into coherent, stackable learning experiences that accelerate student progress from short-term training to long-term credential attainment.

Embedding Skills-Based Curricula (Ivy Tech and Alamo)

Ivy Tech and Alamo Colleges have effectively embedded short-term, workforce-aligned certificates within traditional academic programs. These stackable credentials directly complement existing curricula, significantly enhancing student marketability without displacing traditional academic pathways.

What we can learn: Tri-C has actively explored ways to integrate skills-based learning, evidenced by efforts to align academic programs with employer needs and pilot stackable credentials. These initiatives reflect our responsiveness to market demand and our intention to evolve. Institutions like Ivy Tech and Alamo provide a model for embedding skills-based learning more fully into academic pathways. Tri-C has both the ambition and the groundwork in place to expand this approach, enhancing student employability and broadening our appeal to a more diverse learner population.

Common Threads

The successes of these innovative community colleges share several common elements that can inspire and inform Tri-C's ongoing transformation journey. Each institution placed students at the heart of their strategies, directly aligning educational programs with workforce demands and removing critical barriers to success. Bold initiatives like free tuition, accelerated scheduling, and comprehensive guided pathways are underpinned by strong employer partnerships, rigorous data usage, and integrated support systems tailored to diverse student needs.

Tri-C has already laid important groundwork, demonstrating clear strengths in dual enrollment, tuition support, guided pathways, developmental education innovation, data-driven decision-making, and the thoughtful integration of non-credit and credit learning pathways. Our existing efforts reflect a solid foundation from which we can pursue even greater excellence. To fully leverage these strengths, Tri-C can adopt a coordinated and coherent approach that bridges fragmented initiatives into a unified strategy. We have the opportunity to deepen employer engagement further, embed robust data practices, cultivate a campus-wide culture of proactive and holistic student care, and comprehensively scale successful developmental education reforms such as co-requisite and accelerated models.

As we move forward in our Strategic Transformation Planning process, these common threads provide valuable insights into the power of ambitious goal-setting, comprehensive

implementation, and continuous improvement. By learning from these exceptional institutions, Tri-C is positioned to achieve transformative outcomes that not only reverse enrollment declines but also elevate the College's broader societal impact. Together, embracing these unified lessons, we can ensure Tri-C emerges as an inspiring leader, profoundly enriching the lives of our students and strengthening the vitality of our regional community.

Addressing Internal Complacency

It is natural and understandable that internal stakeholders might view our current progress as sufficient given the economic and demographic forces we are facing. Tri-C indeed has much to celebrate. However, to become a leader in this space will require continuous growth beyond incremental improvements. The successful institutions outlined here broke from the downward national and state trends underscoring the necessity of ambitious, comprehensive strategies. Let us acknowledge our strengths while also courageously addressing the areas where further transformation can position us as leaders in community-focused education.

Conclusion

The inspiring successes of these exemplary community colleges clearly demonstrate the potential rewards of bold, strategic, and comprehensive transformation. Cuyahoga Community College is well on its way, having already taken significant steps toward enhancing student success, expanding workforce alignment, and strengthening community partnerships. Our robust dual enrollment programs, on-going guided pathways work, tuition assistance models, data-driven approaches, and growing integration of non-credit and credit curricula underscore a firm commitment to progress and innovation.

However, as we move forward in our Strategic Transformation Planning process, there is a clear opportunity to leverage this momentum to achieve even greater heights. The institutions highlighted here provide compelling evidence that deeper integration, stronger employer partnerships, comprehensive faculty training and engagement, intentional developmental education reform, and proactive student support strategies can deliver

transformative outcomes—significantly boosting enrollment, retention, equity in achievement, and overall completion rates.

By building upon the foundation we have laid, Tri-C can aspire to become a national leader in student-centered, skills-aligned community college education. With input from our committed internal and external stakeholders, and by adopting and scaling the most successful strategies showcased in this review, Tri-C is poised not only to navigate current enrollment challenges but also to set new benchmarks in educational innovation and community impact.

Together, we could seize this moment to push beyond incremental improvements, embracing transformational change with clarity of purpose and shared commitment, ultimately elevating Tri-C’s role as a catalyst for individual opportunity, community prosperity, and regional economic strength.

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