



San Jacinto College: Leaders at All Levels

San Jacinto College cultivates and values leaders at all levels, including trustees, administrators, faculty, and staff. The college also relies on data to point the way and understands that failure is a part of a productive learning and continuous improvement process.

The Right Data for Each Person

Chancellor Brenda Hellyer says the college “looks at the data, sees where the gaps are, and then puts a team in place to figure out how to solve problems.” This approach depends on everyone seeing the data they need to do their job.

Board members, for example, regularly review top-line data on key performance indicators, such as semester-by-semester retention, success, and withdrawal rates. Trustees also see these data points disaggregated by race/ethnicity, gender, and enrollment intensity. They then want to hear from administrators about relevant strategies that can be implemented to make improvements.

Administrators, faculty, and staff also look at more fine-grained data, such as progress among students from individual high schools and among students with various income levels. “I joke with the faculty that we disaggregate so much that I could almost tell you about students who were wearing a blue shirt and registered on Tuesday afternoon at 4 p.m. when it was raining,” says Laurel Williamson, deputy chancellor and college president. “We look at data because we want to know our students — where they are struggling and why they are struggling — so that we can remove barriers to success.”

Leaders Are Everywhere

Because everyone looks at data, solutions come from individuals and teams throughout the institution. “We reorganized so department chairs became true leaders of faculty and were not just carrying out clerical department duties,” Williamson explains. “And the college also invests in its leaders through professional development.”

Students see the benefits of this approach in a variety of ways. For example, the business area pulled together a diverse team to address the college’s escalating and cumbersome



student fee structure, and that team led an effort to streamline the entire tuition and fee model. Now costs are more transparent to students and their families.

“Our cashiers identified that need,” Williamson recalls. “They regularly saw students who got to the cashier’s window and suddenly learned that their tuition bill was \$250 more than they thought it was going to be. And the students would often say, ‘I don’t have that money and so that means I can’t go to school.’”

In a related matter, about seven years ago, the board was concerned about the cost of textbooks and course materials. They considered a policy of college-wide textbook selection rather than letting campuses and departments choose their own course materials. “The faculty came forward and asked us to give them a chance to lower the cost of textbooks themselves rather than putting this policy in place,” Hellyer says. “And the board really listened to the fact that the faculty were going to take this challenge on and then report back to the board at least once a year on costs.”

The result: Faculty members implemented a plan to use low- or no-cost textbooks and course materials — and saved students more than \$36 million between 2017 and 2023. San Jacinto created these savings for students by increasing the use of open educational resources, which are free, and developing a program offered through the college bookstore that saves students up to 50 percent on some materials.

Embracing Failure — and the Support of the TSC

“One of our values is that San Jacinto is a safe place to fail,” Hellyer says. “We’re going to learn from it, and then we’re going to take the next steps for improvement.”

“We learn as much if not more from our failures than our successes,” Williamson adds. “When you’re successful, you say, ‘Yippie,’ and you move on. But when you fail, that’s when the critical thinking begins to occur. You can’t make real improvements if you don’t take risks and get out on the limb. And we will always be there to catch you if it doesn’t work out.”

San Jacinto was part of the first AACC (American Association of Community Colleges) pathways project. When the Texas Success Center (TSC) started Texas Pathways, the college was able to get more people involved and go deeper into the work.

“The TSC brought more local emphasis and more support,” Williamson says. “They really gave us time, direction, and an opportunity to refine the strategies to make them our own. The team time that we do through those Texas Pathways meetings has been absolutely phenomenal.”



“We originally thought that we will do this Texas Pathways initiative and we’ll be done,” Hellyer adds. “But as an institution, we have learned that it’s a continuous evolution. Every time we go, we dig a little deeper, see something new, and say, ‘Wow, we need to look into this.’”

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