



Amarillo College: Loving Our Students to Success

In 2023, Amarillo College (AC) was named a co-winner of the Aspen Prize for Community College Excellence after being recognized as a Top Five Institution and Rising Star for the Aspen Prize in 2021. The AC team believes this recognition grows out of their commitment to love their students to success.

In conversations with leaders at AC, the word “love” comes up often. “The culture of caring and our commitment to loving our students to success is something that we deeply value and build into everything that we do,” says Tamara Clunis, vice president of academic affairs.

She explains that when a student enrolls in college, they are making a commitment, and the college is too. “For us, it’s about delivering on that promise,” she says. “We need students to be successful. We need them to not just survive, but to thrive. And it’s something we take really, really seriously here. And that means we have to do everything we can to help them earn a credential.”

Amarillo helped pioneer what is now a national movement around strategic care for students. The culture of caring is deeply embedded at AC and reflected in its approach to academics and supports.

Faculty and Staff Team Up for Advising

“When we first started the culture of caring, we worked on changing the existing culture, but then we started hiring for it,” Clunis says. In fact, Clunis is the final interview for anyone who will be part of the faculty or supervise academic affairs staff.

“When they come to interview with me, it’s not about whether they have the credentials or whether they’re a great teacher,” she explains. “It’s about me having a conversation with them so they can understand our expectation of supporting students and then decide if they really want to work at Amarillo College.”

Faculty onboarding at AC includes the Transformation Academy, a nine-month professional development process that focuses on the college’s culture. “It’s how we really make sure that faculty, who are central to our work, become part of our culture,” Clunis says.



Making the Most of the Critical First Year

“Our data shows that earning 24 semester credit hours in the first 12 months is the sweet spot,” Clunis says. “If we can get them to 24 in the first 12 months, it is practically a guarantee that they will graduate or transfer.”

She continues, “For that reason, front loading in that first semester is important. We’re trying to move the needle in reducing the number of students that we lose in that first year.”

Part of that effort includes having students complete gateway math and English in their first year. AC no longer offers standalone developmental education, so students who do not meet the Texas Success Initiative (TSI) cut score for reading, writing, and/or math take the appropriate corequisite course.

In fall 2023, AC had a 73 percent completion rate for students taking a corequisite course in either English or one of the college’s four math pathways. The gateway English completion rate was 80 percent, and the gateway College Algebra (non-STEM) completion rate was 62 percent.

AC also redesigned its first-year experience seminar. The eight-week course focuses on career exploration and helping students understand themselves as learners. It is required for all students, and most take it within their first four months at the college.

“Students build their resilience as they explore their career,” Clunis says. “They also are assigned a success coach and a success team that wraps around the student.”

The success team includes the academic advisor, the success coach, a faculty member, and peer mentors. As part of the first-year experience, students also learn about tutoring and other AC supports.

The college developed a student engagement portal, which success teams use to coordinate support for students. Everyone on the success team can see the services each student needs and is getting so students are served efficiently and effectively. Faculty members use the portal to report attendance, which is mandatory at AC, so the success team can reach out to students who are not attending class.

Moving Quickly to Meet Student Needs

AC conducts a student survey each semester, and approximately 85 percent of students complete it. As part of the survey, the college asks students to rank their top 10 needs.



In response to students' concerns about child care, the college now has two child care centers as well as a federal grant that helps students pay for child care. The funding is available to parents, aunts and uncles, and grandparents.

"This survey showed us that we've been able to address the child care problem. It used to be at the top of the list, along with transportation, and now it is about eighth each semester," Clunis explains.

AC also has worked to introduce interventions more quickly. "When we do an intervention, we'll work through understanding the problem, the contributing factors, and possible interventions," Clunis says. "We'll figure out the cost and write a grant, and we've gotten better and faster at this process."

Major transformations that used to take a year to 18 months are now completed in nine months. "We've strengthened our innovation muscle and our change muscle, so we can move more quickly," she adds.

Appreciating the TSC

"We are all in with Texas Pathways and the Texas Success Center (TSC)," Clunis says. "We believe strongly in peer learning, and the TSC has been an important connector. We host other colleges so they can learn from us, and then we send people to go and learn from other institutions." AC has been an invaluable contributor to the statewide learning community, regularly sharing what it is learning with peers at the Pathways Institutes.

Clunis also values the support the TSC has provided throughout AC's journey.

"We consider them an important partner," she says. "When Amarillo College was named the Rising Star for the Aspen Prize, and when we were the co-winners last year, I felt like the Texas Success Center could have been standing right next to us because of the contribution they've made in keeping us on track."

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