



## Lee College: Intentional Structures, Powerful Support

In 2021, Lee College rethought every aspect of its Learning Frameworks course, including who teaches it, the curriculum, and even where it is housed. The updated class, which is Lee College's version of a traditional student success course, has had impressive results.

For example, pre- and post-survey data shows that Learning Frameworks increases students' sense of belonging, skills inside and outside the classroom, and confidence in their ability to succeed. After taking the class, higher percentages of students reported feelings of belonging on a variety of measures, including:

- Feeling accepted by faculty: 11 percent increase;
- Feeling accepted by peers: 9 percent increase;
- Having confidence in their ability to succeed in college: 10 percent increase;
- Understanding what study strategies work best for them: 20 percent increase;
- Having confidence in their personal financial literacy: 12 percent increase; and
- Understanding what major to pursue: 11 percent increase.

In addition, students who take Learning Frameworks have lower rates of stopping out and dropping out. In fall 2022:

- Among full-time students, 26 percent who did not take the Learning Frameworks class stopped or dropped out, compared to 13 percent who did take the course.
- Among part-time students, 47 percent who did not take the Learning Frameworks class stopped or dropped out, compared to 40 percent who did take the course.

(Students who did not re-enroll in the next semester but did return in the next 12 months have stopped out; students who did not re-enroll in the next 12 months have dropped out.)

Success rates for the class itself also have improved. In fall 2020, before Lee College revamped the class, 32 percent of students passed with an A, B, or C. In fall 2023, 78 percent passed with an A, B, or C. Also in that timeframe, the college eliminated developmental education requirements before taking this class.



## **Providing a New Academic Home**

“Instead of putting Learning Frameworks in the Academic Affairs Department, we put it in the Student Success and Belonging Department, where it would have a close collaboration with the first-year experience [FYE],” says Douglas Walcerz, provost and vice president of academic and student affairs. “It obviously is an academic, credit-bearing program, but we wanted its first loyalty to be to our incoming students. Giving it that kind of separation sent a signal for its identity.”

The college also decided that many sections of the course would be taught by full-time faculty. “Intro-to-college courses often are taught by adjuncts, and it’s very economical for adjuncts to teach them,” Walcerz adds. “But we had very specific goals, and we couldn’t achieve them without having a good cohort of full-time faculty driving the work.”

## **Using an Asset-Based Lens**

The college also overhauled the course curriculum. Instead of teaching a set of skills, which is the traditional approach for student success courses, the Lee College team focused on high-impact practices, discussion-based learning, and critical thinking.

Channell Cook, division chair of Learning Frameworks, explains that instructors shifted away from deficit-based thinking, in which instructors focus on students’ weaknesses, to using an asset-based lens. “With an asset-based lens, we know that each student has lived experiences. We know that students have learned many things that they bring to the classroom, and we try to use those existing skills to help students overcome any other difficult situation they come across.”

The Learning Frameworks course is intentional about this approach. For example, it uses a cultural wealth framework to help students — and their instructors — better understand what each person brings to the table.

“The cultural wealth framework says that everyone comes with assets,” Cook continues. “So when you deal with a difficult situation, who do you call for help? Who is part of your family capital? Who is part of your social capital? We also discuss navigational capital. We ask students what other things they have navigated so they can bring that knowledge into future experiences.”

She continues, “That framework is built into the entire curriculum. Throughout the whole term, students are going through different things. We talk about situations they are facing, situations they may face, and how they can overcome challenges by tapping into their cultural wealth.”



Other aspects of the class include self-regulated learning, study strategies, and financial literacy.

### **Sharing Vulnerability to Model Success**

Eight in 10 Lee College students attend college part time, many are first-generation students, and many come from low-income families.

“Last spring 74 percent of our students identified as having at least one unmet basic need,” says Lynda Villanueva, the college’s president. “They are like me in terms of my own background. They don’t see themselves as college material or as successful learners. The cultural wealth framework challenges that idea and sets our program apart.”

She continues, “We help our students feel like they belong and understand that they are not alone. I came from poverty, experienced sexual abuse, and suffered from mental health issues. All of these things help form who I am and still make me useful as a president of a college. I didn’t have support at the university that I went to. I didn’t see other presidents who look like me, and I never heard from other presidents who had similar lived experiences.”

Villanueva regularly shares her personal story with students. “It’s just one of my core values to share, to be vulnerable, and to be transparent about who I am,” she explains. “People know that they are seeing a real person who is just like everyone else.”

Faculty for the Learning Frameworks class also share their own experiences, which helps them develop strong relationships with their students.

“Without a doubt, all of my full-time faculty are exactly the same way, completely transparent,” Cook says. “I’m a single mother and working for my doctorate. So, when my students say they don’t have time, I say, ‘Let’s talk about this. Let’s talk about how we can manage our time.’ And I share my stories.”

Faculty also acknowledge how their own feelings affect their teaching. “I want each student to feel connected to the college,” says Jessica Thompson Falla, full-time instructor in the Learning Frameworks Department. “But I also am human, and sometimes a student will get on my nerves. In those times, I ask myself, ‘What is their familial capital? What is their aspirational capital? What are their hopes and dreams?’”

She continues, “Using this asset-based thinking helps me connect to students and to humanize every single experience. Keeping that language — students can versus students can’t — in the forefront is a way for me to constantly elevate myself as an educator.”



The full-time Learning Frameworks faculty actively engage with others throughout the college to expand the program's reach. "They provide professional development to help other faculty plug in to this asset-based approach," says Nicole Tunmire, director of guided pathways and quality service. "They explain what we are doing and how other faculty can reinforce it in their classrooms. They also bring asset-based thinking to committee work, which is powerful because it is so different from the usual approach that focuses on barriers."

### **Ensuring That Every Student Gets Support**

Learning Frameworks is required for all students in transfer programs (Associate of Arts and Associate of Science), and the college aims for students to take it their first semester. In addition, almost all dual credit students are required to successfully complete Learning Frameworks before they can proceed to any other dual credit classes.

At this time, Learning Frameworks is not required for students in Associate of Applied Science degree programs, which have only 15 credit hours of general education, or certificate programs, which have no general education component. The Lee College team, however, has plans to expand the reach of Learning Frameworks — and to do so without increasing the number of credit hours or taking away from instructional time.

They plan to have Learning Frameworks faculty co-teach an industrial safety course with a welding faculty member and a millwright faculty member. This approach will involve unifying the safety courses across the different industrial curricula. Students who are earning different industrial certificates or degrees will have a common safety course that includes key aspects of Learning Frameworks.

"It's a more equitable solution because it brings Learning Frameworks to a broader range of students," Thompson Falla says. "Students who are with us for only one or two semesters should be treated the same way as students who are here for longer. They should have the same sense of belonging. And now they will have access to the same great curriculum without having to take additional credit hours that might not count toward their certificate or technical degree."

"Lee College is very boldly saying that we will support all students, regardless of their backgrounds," Villanueva adds. "We are doing everything we can to ensure that they belong so we can support their dreams and help them improve the quality of their lives."

### **Learning From the TSC**

The Lee College team notes that the Texas Success Center (TSC) Research Fellowship program and Institutes were helpful as they developed Learning Frameworks.



“Partnering with the Texas Success Center (TSC) through Texas Pathways has been very valuable,” Tunmire says. “Members of the Lee College team have been selected for all three cohorts of the Research Fellowship program, and their research helps inform our pathways work. We have also learned a great deal from our colleagues from around the state, and we appreciate the dedicated time to focus as a team at the Pathways Institutes.”

Cook was one of those research fellows, and her research topic was a study on learning frameworks. “Attending the Texas Pathways Institutes helped me identify areas of growth for the Learning Frameworks Department and our FYE programming,” she says. “The TSC also provided a great amount of support during my time as a community college research fellow. I was able to reach out as often as needed with questions or to get support, and that helped me deep dive into the impact of our course curriculum changes.”

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