FORUM FOR
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SOLUTIONS
aspen institute

BMWP in Action Series

Love-Centered Transformation

Austin Community College
Austin, TX

Can love serve as a discipline and a way of being in community with students and colleagues? Can a college organize itself around love?
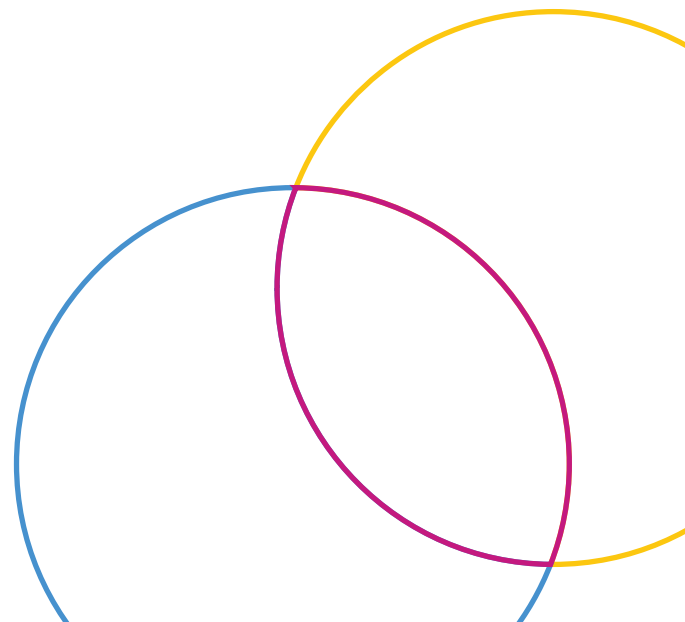
What if everyone who worked at the college were invited to help create its underlying theory of change? What if students were engaged not just as "subject matter experts," but as paid collaborators in the strategy development process?

Austin Community College is undertaking an ambitious process to rebuild its foundation for improvement around a new "north star," 70% student completion by 2030. Under the leadership of their new Chancellor, Dr. Russell Lowery-Hart, the college is living its new organizational values of Courage, Compassion, Joy and Yes by building a college-wide theory of change and creating plans that will help them reach their new goal. The college's efforts are anchored in Belonging, Meaning, Wellbeing and Purpose (BMWP) and model those constructs in the day-to-day work of building the theory of change and strategic plan as a campus community.

The BMWP in Action Series provides postsecondary practitioners and funders with concrete examples of how a diverse group of leaders are implementing a wide range of approaches to foster belonging, meaning, wellbeing and purpose (BMWP) amongst their students. The goal of the series is to:

1   **Celebrate the work of case study institutions**

2   **Increase awareness of BMWP**

3   **Encourage the spread of these approaches as a strategy to improve racial equity and student success.**

Participants at the ACC Data Summit

Austin Community College
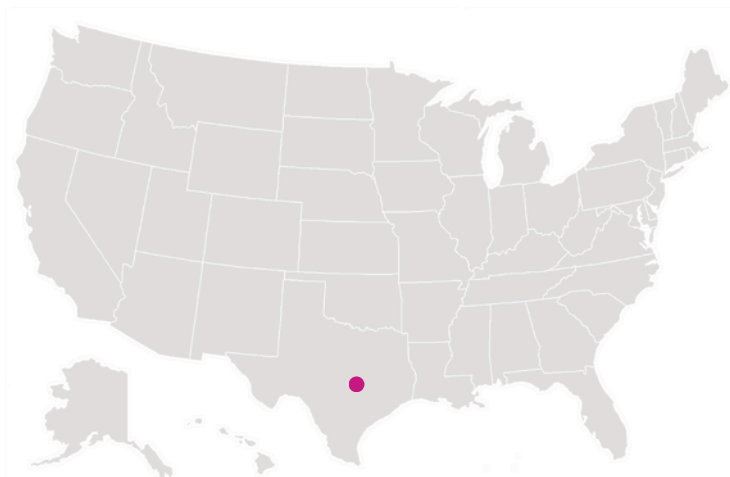
LOCATION:

Austin, TX

INSTITUTION TYPE:

Public 2-Year

TOTAL UNDERGRADUATE ENROLLMENT:

35,600*

* Enrollment figure is from fall 2023. Data from US Department of Education, National Center for Educational Statistics. College Navigator.

Policy and Practice Highlight

This document contains several *policy and practice highlight* callout boxes. Each box highlights a specific approach that this college is taking to help students cultivate a deeper sense belonging, meaning, wellbeing and purpose.

Context

Austin Community College (ACC) enrolls over 70,000 undergraduate students (34,537 FTE) across eleven campuses. The college offers over 100 degree and certificate programs in ten areas of study. In an attempt to reduce barriers to access, **the college recently launched a new program that eliminates the cost of tuition and fees for all 2024 high school graduates in the ACC service area.**[1]

> As a barrier removal strategy, ACC's free tuition strategy allows for full participation in the community, which fosters belonging. The practice also removes a barrier to an essential resource fostering educational and economic wellbeing.

The ACC Chancellor Dr. Russell Lowery-Hart joined the institution in October 2023 after helping his previous institution — Amarillo College (Amarillo, TX) — earn the Aspen Prize for Community College Excellence in April of that same year. The college earned this award after receiving a perfect score from the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges, earning a Star Award from the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board for its Quality Enhancement Plan, aligning curriculum with business and industry needs and other efforts. Along with structural changes, Lowery-Hart also helped bring about a tremendous cultural change at the institution. At the announcement ceremony for the 2023 Aspen Prize in Washington D.C., Lowery-Hart noted that the award validated, "the decisive leadership of our Board of Regents and the painstaking efforts of our faculty and staff, each of whom have ceaselessly striven to love our students to success."[2]

Lowery-Hart is the first to point out that Austin is not Amarillo. The colleges serve different communities, are the product of unique histories and maintain distinct cultures. Undergraduate FTE enrollment at Austin is nearly four times that of Amarillo. The transition to Austin represents, among other things, a bold attempt to scale up the same kind of transformative efforts that Lowery-Hart led in Amarillo — as well as the culture change needed to love students to success.

Following the data, trusting the people

In his welcome address to the Austin Community College (ACC) community, Lowery-Hart made his management philosophy crystal clear: "My leadership approach guides me by a singular principle – LOVE. Love for our institution, love for our mission, and most importantly, love for our students." This message set the tone for his first 100 day agenda and set in motion ACC's love-centered transformation journey. This journey is anchored around three broad strategies: listen deeply, establish a foundation for improvement and create engagement opportunities for those committed to leading with love.

1 Listen deeply

Lowery-Hart's first 100 days at ACC focused on listening deeply to students, faculty, staff and other members of the campus community. Campus listening began on day one and included four virtual town halls, thirteen campus tours and conversations, student focus groups and work sessions with the board of directors. One unique listening strategy involved engagement of student "secret shoppers" at the college. Modeled on the secret shopper model from the private sector, this tactic asks students to engage in a specific campus activity (e.g., requesting support with financial aid) with an eye toward process improvement. Students take notes on their experiences and the types and quality of service that they receive and report back to college administrators. Engaging students in this way helps to provide a more accurate and dynamic picture of student experiences at the college and identify opportunities for improvement.

2 Establish a foundation for improvement

Deep listening pointed a way forward for the college and illuminated key components of its new foundation. One component that grew from the listening tour was a **new set of organizational values: Courage, Compassion, Joy and Yes**. These values, co-developed with students, highlight the way in which ACC faculty, staff and administrators are expected to show up for their students and reveal ACC's, "dedication to fostering excellence, making a positive impact, and maintaining a culture of accountability within the ACC community."[3] Another component of the new foundation is the college's new "north star" goal: 70% completion by 2030. This is a huge step up from the college's current completion rate of 46% and one that will require deep, transformational changes to how the college currently operates. A third component of ACC's new foundation that came out of the listening tour is a clear articulation of the college's focal improvement strategies. These strategies emerged through a series of analyses conducted by ACC's Office of Institutional Research and Analytics (OIRA) that revealed key facilitators of and barriers to student completion. The analysis yielded fourteen strategies, which were then grouped into four "pillars": (1) Start Strong, (2) Enroll Closer to Full Time, (3) Meet Basic Needs and (4) Culture of Belonging & Connection. Campus leaders unpacked the pillars and improvement strategies with the campus community via a series of "data deep dive" webinars ensuring full transparency and opportunities for dialogue around the analyses.

> ACC's new organizational values are grounded in student perspectives on what they need to be successful.
>
> While there's not a perfect overlap, these values intersect well with the concepts of BMWP.

3 Create engagement opportunities

Building on this new foundation, Lowery-Hart and team turned their efforts to broadening and deepening engagement of the campus community. First, leaders convened a first of its kind Data Summit in March of 2024. All faculty, staff and administrators were invited to attend. In a very rare move, all college operations not related to the Data Summit were shut down for the day, emphasizing the importance of the event. ACC's Dr. Samantha Croft — Project Manager for the Theory of Change Design and Implementation — reflected on the significance of the event: "Our service area is the size of the state of Connecticut. We're huge. The logistics of getting thousands of people together across eleven campuses at the same time in the same place was a lot. It was shocking that you could walk through a space and look around and think, 'I've been here more than a decade. You've been here more than a decade, but I've never seen your face before.' **We spent the day truly getting to know each other and putting faces and names together and building this sense of connection and community as a greater whole.**" Students were featured prominently at the Data Summit — as presenters on stage, as central figures in videos shared during the summit as well as via the inclusion of student employees as participants in the summit.

The practice of investing meaningful time in relationship development is a practical and effective way to build belonging amongst stakeholders.

Following the Data Summit, leaders extended a second invitation to all faculty and staff at the college asking them if they'd like to be involved in implementing the ideas that emerged from the event. The college created an open nomination process wherein faculty and staff could self-nominate or nominate their colleagues. This approach was carefully selected with the belief that innovation must come from within the institution and that the college needed to move beyond hearing from the same group of leaders it always tapped for these kinds of roles. As Dr. Croft put it, "there are so many brilliant voices that you hear standing around the water coolers, but they never advance beyond that point. We know we have so many of these hidden gems just waiting for that opportunity to make a bigger contribution." During the two week nomination window, the theory proved to be correct: leaders received over 800 nominations to participate in the design teams.

From the self- and peer-nominations, Dr. Croft and colleagues selected co-chairs (in some cases, tri-chairs) for design teams focused on the fourteen improvement strategies identified through the OIRA analysis. Design teams share two common characteristics. First, in an attempt to ensure integration of perspectives from both academic and student affairs, all design teams are chaired by one faculty member and one staff member. Second, to ensure student voices are included in an authentic way, students are included as full participants in all design teams. Students are paid for their involvement as an acknowledgement of the commitment they are making to the college and the effort they are putting into design team activities.[4]
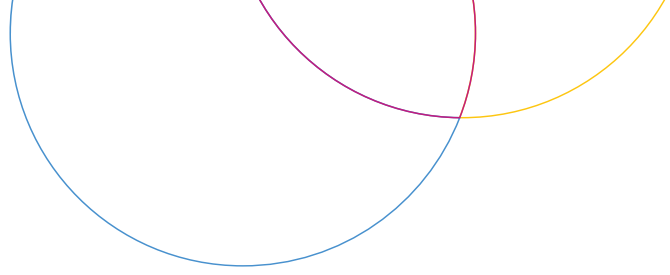
Listen. Build a foundation. Engage the community. These sound like simple steps, but to do them effectively takes immense effort. ACC is still early in its journey. Design teams kicked off in a phased approach fall of 2024 with the process scheduled to operate for over a year. During this time, teams will work through three phases of activity. During an initial discovery phase teams will review qualitative and quantitative data already on hand and engage with even more students, faculty and staff on campus in an effort to fully understand the dimensions of the issue at hand. Next, teams work through a benchmarking phase where they study the literature and visit other campuses to understand which policies and practices seem to be having the greatest impact on student outcomes based on previous research. Finally, **teams will build a clear plan for making improvements in their strategy area. Plans created by design teams go through several layers of internal vetting and refinement before they are handed off to an implementation team who will turn the plan into concrete changes in policy and practice.**[5]

Engaging students, faculty and staff to act as members of design and implementation teams serves multiple purposes. First, it accomplishes the essential goal of giving structure to the college's strategies. Second, as an authentic and time-bound problem to be solved, it helps members of the college community develop their own collaboration and leadership skills. Finally, design and implementation team spaces provide meaning making opportunities as teams make sense of their roles and how they can best influence student outcomes.

"There are so many brilliant voices that you hear standing around the water coolers, but [historically] they never advance beyond that point. We know we have so many of these hidden gems just waiting for that opportunity to make a bigger contribution."

Dr. Samantha Croft

Participants at the ACC Data Summit

Sustaining the Change

While the theory of change and strategy development process is a huge endeavor for ACC, it is a time-limited process. Leaders know that sustaining the change will require efforts to embed BMWP practices more deeply into its ongoing operational structures.

One way that ACC is planning to sustain the change is through a new approach to professional development called the [Theory of Change Institute](#) (ToCI). This effort — initiated in fall 2024 — engages participants from the pool of faculty, staff and administrators who completed the application process, but did not end up serving on a design team. Because these individuals were nominated for the design team process, the college believes that they are uniquely positioned to lead meaningful change at the college.

Through the ToCI, participants will engage in monthly meetings, collaborative training sessions, and special events focused on innovation and problem-solving at the college. Participants engage in guided exploration through topics such as the theory of change, effective teamwork, change management, organizational structures, and data storytelling.

While individual learning and development is a clear priority, descriptions of the Institute make clear that leaders also view this as a site of culture building:

ToCI's mission is to foster a culture of collaboration and innovation, empowering participants to become ToC change champions and future leaders. Our vision is to develop passionate and capable individuals who lead ACC to a collaborative culture of continual improvement and innovation.

If faculty, staff and administrators are going to uphold the strategic pillar focused on creating a culture of belonging and connection they must first belong and learn how they can foster belonging amongst others in the community. In this way, the Theory of Change Institute serves as a critical capacity building opportunity at the college and a key part of "walking the talk" in ACC's love-centered transformation journey. The initial ToCI cohort will engage over 100 participants who will move together through a curriculum that was designed by a cross-functional team of leadership development experts at the college.

ACC Data Summit participant

"You can't pour from an empty cup"

ACC is advancing BMWP on two levels. First, the college is unambiguously centering the belonging, meaning, wellbeing and purpose of its students — putting their experiences at the center of their operations and designing programs and services that can help achieve their "north star" goal. Second — on a parallel track — the college is consciously engendering BMWP amongst the people implementing the theory of change. The faculty, staff, students and administrators who are engaged in the work of design teams, acting as "secret shoppers," participating in the Theory of Change Institute are all being sent messages that they belong to something bigger than themselves, that their contributions matter and that their purpose is valuable.

Reflecting on these two layers of BMWP, Dr. Croft expressed a deep belief that everything at the college is interconnected. "Everything that we do, everything that we feel ends up getting reflected to the students. You can't pour from an empty cup. We try to be really conscious about engaging all of our employees — not just those who work directly with students — and making sure that they belong and feel empowered." By taking this approach, the college has established a change process that taps into a vast source of energy by leveraging the reason that faculty, staff and administrators show up to work everyday. Too often, faculty and staff are discouraged in their day to day work because they feel that their ideas are not valued. ACC's theory of change process explicitly counteracts this dynamic by communicating to everyone at the college that their experiences and ideas are valuable, that they belong to the campus community, that their purpose is noble and that — through collective effort — the college community can thrive.

Dr. Croft does not think that the desire to improve student experiences and advance BMWP is unique to ACC. Offering advice for other college leaders, Dr. Croft suggests that they trust that, "the motivation is there in your employees. You may not realize that, but it's there. The people who are doing the work can see the negative impacts [current college policies and practices are] having on the students and on themselves. They feel that every day and they can see ways to improve it. They live it. All you have to do is give them an opportunity." Leaders don't need to have the solutions. Instead it is their job to, "empower their employees to put their hand up and say, 'I want to be involved in changing the path of the college.'"

Time will tell if Dr. Lowery-Hart and team can replicate the success of Amarillo at ACC through the "big bet" that he and his team have made in the theory of change process and the Theory of Change Institute. But the team maintains a strong learning disposition that helps reframe the false and all too common success/failure dichotomy. Dr. Croft shared, "I always tell my design teams that even one step forward is better than where we are today. Real improvement takes time and this effort shouldn't be viewed as 100 percent or nothing. Just going through the theory of change process — listening, empowering, having tough conversations — is shifting the culture of our college. And that is a win."

ACC faculty and staff connecting at the Truth, Racial Healing & Transformation Campus Center

Gratitude

The authors would like to thank Dr. Russell Lowery-Hart, Dr. Samantha Croft, Dr. Khayree Williams for the generosity of time spent sharing the resources, stories and perspectives used to create this document.

The authors strived to represent the vibrancy of this effort with accuracy. We take full accountability for any errors.

End notes

[1] Eligible students include: all 2024 high school seniors who graduate from a high school (public or private) or a homeschool in the ACC service area as well as all GED completers who live in the ACC service area and earned a GED on or after July 1, 2023. More information available on the ACC Free Tuition website.

[2] Amarillo College (2023). Amarillo College shares Aspen Prize for Community College Excellence.

[3] Austin Community College (2024). First 100 Days Report.

[4] The open call for student participants yielded 180 applications in a three week window. Ten students will be hired in fall 2024 with at least five more planned for spring 2025.

[5] Some members of the design team will also be a part of the implementation team. For example, the design team focused on advising includes faculty members who will not be a part of the implementation team because they do not play an advising role at the college.