

AtD Keeping America's Competitive Edge

Thanks to the economic slump in the United States, there has been much news of how America needs to regain its world status as having the highest percentages of adults with college degrees. Educational experts such as J. Noah Brown, president of the Association of Community College Trustees, have pointed out as recently as September of 2009 that community colleges can play a role in helping educate the American workforce as a means of increasing our economic recovery.

Ouachita Technical College, as one of the four Achieving the Dream two-year colleges in the state, recently enjoyed some good news concerning its efforts to educate Arkansans and maintain the state's competitive edge in attracting quality workers into quality jobs. According to Data Notes, an Achieving the Dream publication that tracks both national and college-specific student success data, Ouachita Technical College students are earning more credits, completing more degrees, and transferring on to four-year colleges at higher rates than their cohorts nationwide.

According to their national data, 40% of OTC students (as contrasted with 31% nationally at other Achieving the Dream institutions) earned credits, completed degrees, or transferred within two years—all early indicators that students will continue to move successfully through their college educations. And education is something that employers value—and reward with high pay—in the workplace. Typically, according to the U. S. Bureau of Labor, a person without a high school degree or GED will earn on average 64% less than someone who has an associate's degree or has taken some college courses. Nationally, two-year colleges are the premier institutions that lead to such degrees.

Ouachita Technical College is in its third year of an Achieving the Dream grant, aimed at using data to improve student success, especially the success of low income and minority students. The college has launched three initiatives to help with that success—two course-level initiatives (one in Intermediate Algebra, and one in Basic Composition) and one college-wide initiative to improve overall their students' first year experience.

The College also has strong ties between its academic undertakings and in being responsive to employers in the community, relying on a network of professionals on Advisory Committees to guide the college divisions in the needs of the workplace.

Recently, the College has received feedback from a benchmarking project that compares its students to students across the U. S. that documents the success with which OTC is educating its students. Nationally, course-level success rates (students receiving grades A-C in college-level courses) average 77%, while OTC's average 83% overall. And in some basic skills courses, students at OTC are making the transition into college-level courses at a higher rate (79% from Intermediate Algebra to College Algebra) than the national average (63%). The College also enjoys higher pass rates of Adult Education students in its GED program (82% for the college versus 73% nationally)—all indicators that the College is above the national norm in preparing students for the workforce or for additional educational attainment.