

March 8, 2021

Dr. Laura Gambino
 Vice President of the Commission
 New England Commission of Higher Education
 3 Burlington Woods Drive, Suite 100
 Burlington, MA 01803-4514

Dear Dr. Gambino,

I am writing in response to your letter dated January 25, 2021, regarding the Tunxis fall 2015 entering cohort with a 12% graduation rate, as reported to IPEDS in 2018-19. Below is the chart of the graduation rate identified by your letter in January, along with all community colleges in Connecticut.

While Tunxis (12%) exhibited a graduation rate lower than the system average graduation rate (16%), Tunxis ranked second in the system for transfer students, at 24%, while the system average transfer rate is 18%. The overall success rate of 60% for Tunxis is higher than the system average and ranked the top 5 within the 12 Connecticut community colleges.

Institution Name	IPEDS 2018 Graduation Rate Cohort 2015			
	Grad	Tran	Enroll	Success Rate
Asnuntuck Community College	39%	18%	11%	67%
Capital Community College	12%	19%	37%	68%
Gateway Community College	11%	21%	15%	48%
Housatonic Community College	12%	11%	23%	46%
Manchester Community College	15%	18%	22%	56%
Middlesex Community College	19%	25%	17%	61%
Naugatuck Valley Community College	17%	16%	21%	54%
Northwestern Connecticut Community College	24%	13%	11%	48%
Norwalk Community College	13%	15%	37%	65%
Quinebaug Valley Community College	25%	12%	14%	51%
Three Rivers Community College	17%	15%	22%	53%
Tunxis Community College	12%	24%	23%	60%
Connecticut Community Colleges	16%	18%	20%	55%

The 12% graduation rate has been a concern for Tunxis. In fact, during a NECHE Focused Evaluation visit in Fall of 2019, the graduation rates of 12% in both FY 2018 (Fall 2015 cohort) and FY2019 (Fall 2016 cohort) were noted by the visiting team. We discussed the efforts that have been undertaken in recent years to improve retention and graduation rates with the visiting team. For example, better promotion and utilization of the reading, writing, and math labs; a faculty- and student-centered early alert referral system; an improve First-Year Experience course; a comprehensive degree audit system (Degree Works); changes in the math curriculum; reorganizing academic and student support departments; developing new and revised academic programs; introducing a common hour (free period); adding student honor society and leadership programs; updating the policies for dual enrollment; using "M" grade, mid-term grade to monitoring student progress; and accepting advanced placement credits. The college joined and recently became an Achieving the Dream (ATD) participant (2019), and to emphasize our focus on retention and graduation efforts, the ATD team at Tunxis was named as the Student Outcomes And Retention (SOAR) Team.

We must emphasize "recent years" because much of the initiatives listed above were implemented in 2017 and/or later. All initiatives are centered around retention and student success with the goal of increasing our graduation rate. However, some initiatives would not have impacted the outcomes of entering Fall 2015 and Fall 2016 cohorts if we did not retain the students by 2017. Although we have not been able to evaluate every single initiate implemented since 2017, we have been, to our best ability, monitoring and adjusting some of those initiatives as we go. As demonstrated in the chart below, the 150% normal time graduation rate for the fall 2017 cohort for the FY20 reporting year (submitted to IPEDS in February 2021) is 16%, which is right at the system average and an overall improvement for Tunxis.

IPEDS Reporting Year	2017-18	2018-19	2019-20	2020-21
Tunxis Community College	17%	12%	12%	16%
Connecticut Community Colleges	16%	17%	16%	N/A

We would like to take the opportunity to update the Commission on some initiatives that we have implemented, evaluated, and modified. We believe that the graduation rate for the Fall 2017 cohort is the direct result of multiple initiatives that we have implemented. Some evaluation and modification for those new initiatives were stalled or pivoted due to the COVID-19 global health crisis.

Early Alert Referral System: We continued using our Early Alert Referral System (EARS) for the past two years, but in Spring 2021, the system underwent a significant overhaul. We took the Focused Evaluation team's advice and moved the EARS action timeline to the first two weeks of the semester. There are now several new pieces to this process, including more intrusive outreach

by a team of professional staff and faculty to students identified as being at risk of withdrawing or failing their courses.

The process starts with faculty identifying students in their class(es) within the first two weeks of the semester but is not limited to this time frame as students are identified at any point in the semester. In place of the former submission process, which some faculty felt was cumbersome and therefore shied away using the system, we created a new, easier-to-use process. Now, faculty input concerns directly into their class rosters, and then forward the information to our new Early Alert Referral Team. This Team – in combination with the student's faculty member - consists of a faculty lead, the head of our VISTA program lead (see below, on page 7), our Associate Dean of Student and Academic Affairs, the student veteran's staff, the learning disabilities/accessibility staff, and full-time academic advisors.

Once a student has been identified, he/she is entered into a shared spreadsheet so that multiple contacts have access to their information, to follow-up, and to offer support and direction. First, the students receive an email from the faculty lead who reaches out to talk about success strategies. If students do not respond within three days, they receive a phone call from a full-time advisor. We add all EARS students into our VISTA program as a cohort for multiple contact emails, text messages, and support meetings with the full-time VISTA staff. Additionally, the veteran's team reaches out to any veterans identified, and the accessibility staff contacts students who are receiving their services to offer supports.

Reading and Writing Labs: The college is actively engaged in assessing the Reading and Writing Lab usage and its relationship to student success. Data showed that developmental English and ESL students have heavily relied on the English tutors. About half of developmental English students and 68% of ESL (J162) Reading and Writing course students used the Lab at least once in Fall 2019 semester. For the same time period, we noticed that 85% of students who did not pass our English 101 Composition I course also did not use the Reading and Writing Lab.

The change in the placement process as the result of college closing due to the pandemic (now using self-reported high school GPA versus Accuplacer) has placed a disproportionate number of students into college-level English courses. These students, who were formerly placed into developmental courses, currently do not benefit from our embedded tutoring program if enrolled directly into college-level English. Additionally, the shift to online instruction has increased the student reliance on technology to access tutoring services, positioning technology as a significant barrier to accessing the Reading and Writing Lab and other support services. Due to the COVID-19 crisis, the motto to 'meet students where they are' is now more essential than ever.

The English and Humanities department and the Reading and Writing Lab recognized that an increase in technology issues and a shift in English placement had created a mismatch between

how the English Lab delivers services and what our students actually may need. Therefore, the department is expanding supplemental instruction (embedded tutors) to include ENG 101E (our six credit, embedded support English Composition course) and creating a technology readiness program – English Technology Meeting. The Technology Meeting has attracted students to the Lab (please see the utilization chart below).

Reading and Writing Lab Utilization:

Spring 2021	Fall 2020
58 tutoring appointments	8 tutoring appointments
10 virtual lab messages	3 virtual lab messages
3 E-tutoring submissions for Dev. ENG students	1 E-tutoring submission for Dev. ENG students

The English Lab also created a technology checklist identifying the major technologies a student must use to succeed in their English course and to access tutor support. These include Microsoft Teams, Blackboard, Blackboard Collaborate, Tutortrac, and more. Students must meet with Reading and Writing Lab tutors near the beginning of the semester to review the checklist and resolve any technology issues. The Reading and Writing Lab reported that Technology Meetings increased student success by reducing technological barriers to student success, freeing up professors to focus on content instruction, and introducing students to one-on-one support early in the semester.

These changes ensure that the Reading and Writing Lab and the English and Humanities department are proactive in addressing our students' unique challenges during the pandemic and should increase student success in these fundamental courses.

“M” Grades: (Piloted Midterm Grades) We began piloting midterm grades in Fall 2019 with full-time faculty and expanded to all faculty in Spring 2020, becoming the eighth college in the Connecticut Community College system to require midterm grades. Faculty have the option of an actual letter grade or a Pass/Fail notation. Feedback from students has been very positive, with many appreciating the opportunity to know where they stand academically early enough in the semester to improve or to withdraw. Advisors can also either see a student's grade or ask the student to self-report their grades, which has helped with advising and offered opportunities for in-depth conversations on students' progress.

Graduation Audit (Degree Works): Using Degree Works to audit graduation status, we noticed that some students met graduation requirements, however, they had not applied for graduation, which could impact the completion rate and ultimately lead to a lower graduation rate.

Working with Institutional Research, the Associate Dean of Student and Academic Affairs identifies students with enough credits to graduate or nearing graduation. She then reaches out to these students to show them the path to completion and how to apply to graduate. Fifty-eight students were audited and contacted as the result of auditing fall 2017 cohorts.

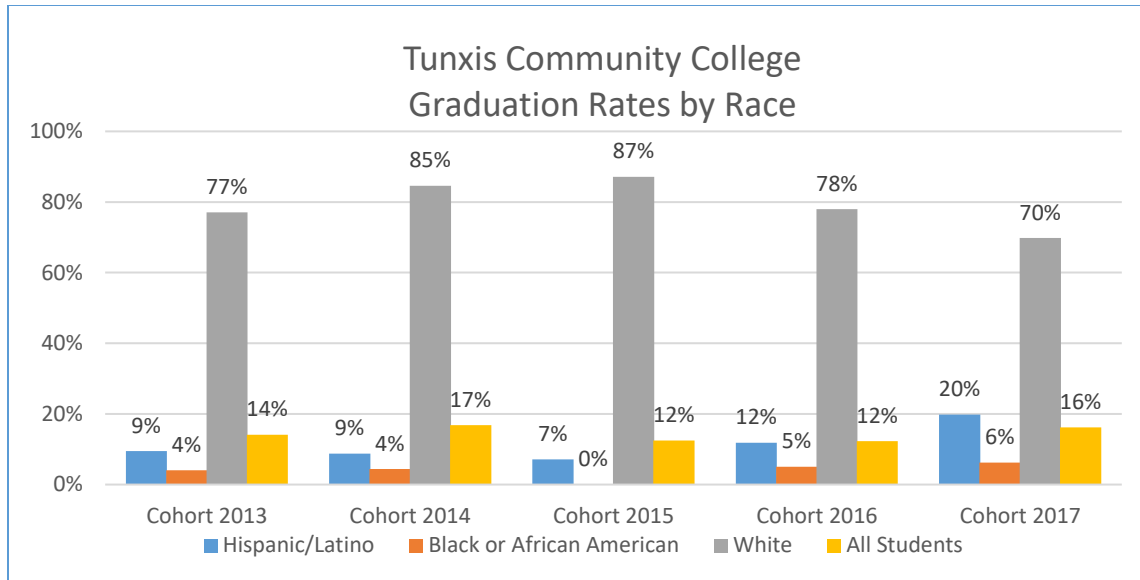
- Eight students who had already applied to graduate were contacted.
- Nine additional graduation applications were sent to students who wished to apply but unaware their requirements were met.
- Eleven eligible students were sent graduation applications.
- Several “Change of Major” forms were sent to students identified as taking classes towards one degree program but who enrolled in a different degree program.
- Additional information was sent to students on transfer credit evaluations.
- Several students were one or two classes shy to graduate, were contacted regarding enrolling in the summer term to shorten the time to completion.
- Working with advisors, approving course substitutions so students can finish requirements.
- We recently upgraded Degree Works to offer new features for degree auditing purposes; we are also actively training students to self-review graduation requirements and stay in touch with their advisors.

We will continue the degree audit and outreach efforts to ensure that students who meet graduation requirements can graduate on-time each academic year and for students nearing graduation to understand their options.

In addition to what has been implemented since 2017, Tunxis began using an ATD framework to guide retention and student success efforts. Examples are changing relevant academic policies, engaging with students through VISTA staff, and aligning organization structure and physical space to support students. Below are examples of recent actions that centered the student success and retention.

SOAR@Tunxis: The college joined the Achieving the Dream colleges in the summer of 2019. We have a team consisting of faculty, staff, and administrators representing a cross-section of college departments. The first year of SOAR was designed for data discovery and institutional capacity assessment. The Data Team analyzed trends in the top 20 highest enrolled courses success rates and gateways courses success rates disaggregated by race/ethnicity, gender, age, and financial aid status, to better understand student success. The SOAR team also mapped the student experience from application to registration to identify challenges and related obstacles. From this work, we have learned that Hispanic and Black students are struggling in classes, and we know that the graduation rate for Hispanic and Black students is lower compared to White students.

While in the last five cohorts, Hispanic and Black students made up about one-third of each cohort; the graduation rate for the two groups combined was between 3% and 11%, and Black students had the lowest graduation rate comparing to Hispanic or White students.



We identified the racial and ethnicity equity gaps in student success in our first year. We were determined to gather related data from Black and Hispanic students, but our efforts have been delayed because of COVID-19 and its impact on campus operations. This is our second year participating in the ATD. The SOAR Team has worked together to prioritize our efforts for the next two academic years. They are also implementing initiatives that will impact the equity gap for Tunxis students.

- Priority 1:** Review and implement best practices in equitable student support services.
- Priority 2:** Identify barriers and outline a plan to address disparity in student success in top enrolled courses for Black and Latinx students (for example, using quantitative and qualitative data).
- Priority 3:** Create an equity-minded campus by committing to ongoing training and professional development on issues of equity, inclusion, and anti-racist policies and practices.

Please note the following examples of our current retention and graduation efforts in relation to ATD priorities identified:

Change Process for Course Withdraws: Linking to Priority 1, we made changes in the “course withdraw” policy. Knowing that many students previously withdrew online for various reasons

and often did not consult with a faculty or staff member about options to complete the semester successfully, we changed our withdraw policy in Spring 2020. As a result, we require students to obtain a faculty signature before withdrawing. Students can also reach out to their assigned academic advisor, and if they are a veteran or receiving financial aid, they must also obtain related signatures before withdrawing. This policy change provides much-needed discussion and information sharing for students, and in many cases, helps students make better-informed decisions instead of withdrawing from their courses. We are confident that this policy change will afford students a better experience and lead to better retention rates.

Continuation of VISTA program: Linking to Priority 1, in the past two years, we applied for VISTA grant and hired a full-time staff under the grant. The VISTA staff has worked with over 339 students individually. For the academic year 2019-20, the VISTA staff worked directly with 126 students out of a 134 cohort who have been identified as members of an at-risk population from our two largest service towns – New Britain and Bristol. The VISTA staff has been in close contact with 32 of this cohort regularly. We were pleased to see that the students in our VISTA cohort had a 72% Fall 19 to Spring 20 retention rate, 22% higher than students from the same demographics without our VISTA intervention and 7% higher than students from New Britain and Bristol overall.

In fall 2020, our VISTA worked with 140 students and 27 individuals regularly. In spring 2021, she is working with 90 students and 17 individuals regularly. We attribute the drop in the cohort to COVID. We are continuously using data from Institutional Research to assess our success and make program changes when necessary. Retention from Fall 20 to Spring 21, which is very hard to analyze due to the impact of COVID, showed an 11% higher success rate in our VISTA cohort than students from the same demographics without our intervention.

Civic Engagement Institute Retention Project: Linking to Priority 2, Office of Institutional Research compiled a list of 272 Black and Hispanic students from cohorts of Fall 2016 and 2017 who have not graduated or transferred as of spring 2021. CEI Director, who is also a full-time faculty, contacted those students for interviews. Four virtual meetings were set in February and March this year with students to gather qualitative data about their experience at Tunxis, barriers to success both academically and outside of the classrooms. At the time of this letter, the interviews are ongoing. CEI will identify themes from the student interviews and make a presentation at a spring 2021 All College meeting. We expect that this study will lead to next steps of gathering more in-depth data if necessary, exploring new strategies, and recommending best practices in equitable student support services.

Create an Equity-Minded Campus: Linking to Priority 3, the College embarked on a pilot in Spring 2021 to establish an Office of Equity and Inclusion (OEI). The concept and practice of equity is one of the goals of Tunxis. In addition, multiple schools within the CSCU system have

established offices of equity, inclusion, and/or diversity, including the four state universities and Capitol Community College. The hope is that the OEI pilot will help identify equity work throughout the system and can assist in the framework of a possible expansion system wide. To achieve these goals: “The Office of Equity and Inclusion will develop and recommend policies and best practices to ensure the values of equity and inclusion are embedded throughout the culture of Tunxis Community College by addressing systemic forms of oppression. The work will cultivate equitable policies and practices that guide faculty, staff, and administrators in the quest to ensure student success. In addition, the Office of Equity and Inclusion will leverage resources for training and professional learning opportunities for campus stakeholders and will work with subject matter experts to promote an inclusive, responsive, and anti-racist culture.”

In summary, Tunxis is committed to supporting student retention and success. During onboarding, we created a new Admission and Enrollment Center as a one-stop office for seamless services. We moved the advising unit to enrollment management to better coordinate student advising services for new and returning students. To ensure student access to support services, we moved counseling into our academic success and tutoring center.

Since pivoting to a remote campus on March 12, 2020, we have learned to operate in a unique way that ensures our students have access to their academic programming and to the services needed to complete their courses and degree requirements. Below are some examples of how Tunxis has adjusted as a result of the current health crisis:

- We have focused on both web and print materials to better highlight and promote services/resources for students, including the use of social media and a dedicated section on our website: <https://www.tunxis.edu/welcome-home/>.
- To ensure our students' physical and mental wellness, we undertook an ambitious phone call campaign after pivoting to virtual/online.
- The ongoing involvement of student government and clubs is also vital to student success. To help ensure students are engaged, involved, and active, student clubs are still thriving during COVID, including the Healthy Minds, Business, and Human Service clubs. We have also held several events through our Student Government Association, including a drive-by “pick-up” event whereby participating students received a bag filled with food and Tunxis merchandise.
- Tunxis has been aggressive with promoting our college Textbook scholarship, rolled out a computer lending program, and moved our Food Pantry to a virtual pantry with ongoing appointment and pick-up services.
- All student support services – including our Computer Center, Academic Success and Tutoring Center (AS&TC), Mental Health/Counseling services, Academic Advising

Center, Bookstore, and Library - all have in-person/appointment options or fully virtual services. AS&TC now offers virtual tutoring appointments seven days a week.

All existing and new initiatives are centered around student retention and success. Tunxis serves a diverse student population from our region and the State, and will continue to forge ahead with student-centered initiatives that strive to meet our students' challenges and help close the equity gap.

Sincerely,



Dr. Darryl Reome
Campus CEO
Tunxis Community College