

North Arkansas College

Introduction

North Arkansas College (Northark) puts the “community” in community college, with many employees growing up in the area, attending the college themselves, and continuing to live and work in the same region. There is a deep interwoven social network that binds them to one another and to their students. So, when asked to share stories of how the college provides equitable supports to different students, it is natural for Rachel Nelson, Director of Student Success, to give a couple of examples and say, “Special students? They are all special, aren’t they?”

For years, Northark has acknowledged the full impact off-campus life can have on students’ educational pursuits. Centered in a sprawling rural service area with no public transportation options, its geography alone can be a barrier to students. In response, the college has cultivated a culture of care and a “family atmosphere” that humanizes and supports students as whole individuals. College personnel form a close-knit community, and it is common for college employees to be deeply familiar with students’ personal situations. Over time, this grassroots approach has become a natural, strategic, and intentional institutional priority, with senior leadership commitment and support.

Northark Help serves as a practical expression of this college ethos, housing various holistic student support efforts under one umbrella. At its foundation, Northark Help focuses on the “why” more than the “what” of the work, packaging initiatives together to coherently serve the whole student. Participation in the Working Students Support Network (WSSN) served as a catalyst for Northark Help and informed the college’s fundamental understanding of student financial stability. Through WSSN, Northark identified three primary areas of focus, which remain today: career counseling and career literacy, financial literacy, and resource and benefits access. In addition to leveraging WSSN’s framework, the college also made visibility an early priority. Front-and-center services like Pete’s Pantry (the college’s food pantry), effective amplification of student stories, and plain and

COLLEGE QUICK FACTS*

Location:

Harrison, AR

Campus Setting:

Remote Town

Fall 2020 Enrollment:

1,792

% Pell Grant Recipients:

54%

(First-Time, Full-Time Students)

**Most recent data available in Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS)*

STUDENT FINANCIAL STABILITY DEFINED

Colleges that foster student financial stability work to ensure that students are financially secure across their higher education journey, through both financial aid and other sources. They are intentional about helping students:

- **Cover college costs**, such as tuition, books, supplies, materials, and fees.
- **Address basic needs**, including housing, food, childcare, technology, transportation, health care, mental health, and utilities.
- **Make informed choices about their education and career** so their decisions improve their economic and social mobility.

simple branding have fostered both widespread community awareness of Northark Help and strong employee engagement.

Student Financial Stability in Action

Equipping Students to Meet Their Basic Needs

Central to meeting students where they are, Northark brings supports close to students wherever they are in their college journey, instead of front-loading services during the onboarding process. The goal is to help students “bump into” timely and relevant supports while reducing the need for them to retell their stories in order to access services.

During an extended onboarding process, all new students participate in an orientation, advising (which is required for each semester), and First Year Experience (which is mandatory for students who plan to transfer to a university). Each of these activities includes extensive information about financial supports, financial literacy, and career exploration. A strong network of referrals ensures that students can access additional services as necessary. Examples include comprehensive support programs (e.g., TRIO, Career Pathways) or a Career Coach (who provides additional career counseling). While these connections can happen at any point, it’s most preferable that they happen before the initial orientation or advising appointment, when the actual course registrations take place. Students are required to see a professional advisor for the initial onboarding and first semester enrollment. Then, they are assigned a faculty advisor at the beginning of their second semester.

Beyond the onboarding process, continuing students have multiple ongoing ways to disclose if they have a need. During their required advising/registration appointment each semester, all students complete a quick, online intake form identifying their life circumstances (e.g., educational plans, work and family responsibilities, basic needs) as well as interest in additional supports. There are no penalties for non-completion. Each question on the form has a corresponding “champion” at the college who can reach out to the student and assist with the specific need. Student responses are compiled and sent by Student Services to the individual champions across the college so the necessary outreach can happen.

In addition to asking students to identify their needs on an ongoing basis, the college has supported access and use of supports by increasing modes of delivery as well as bundling multiple services together. During the pandemic, the college increased access to certain relevant basic needs (e.g., technology) and converted all services online to make them accessible from anywhere (e.g., mental health virtual care group). Also, it intentionally bundled multiple services together, so that students seeking one service could receive other relevant services. For example, students who regularly visit the food pantry receive hands-on support applying for public benefits, are screened for other potential supports, and are referred to the MoneySmart curriculum for financial literacy along with resource referrals and benefits access. Career coaching is automatically bundled with financial coaching, given their interconnection. A typical career coaching session will touch on career and academic goals as well as smart budget planning and potential avenues for financial assistance.

When Northark launched Pete’s Pantry, it unexpectedly motivated many personnel, particularly faculty, to more passionately support students’ nonacademic needs. To leverage that interest and engagement, the college moved away from general awareness and passive referrals to more active direction of students. In turn, ongoing professional development priorities include building personnel capacity to identify and guide students to support in real time. Personnel have access to a simple yet comprehensive reference

sheet, and there are clear and transparent lines of communication: in short, faculty know to just pick up the phone and call point people for a given service.

In addition to these internal efforts, Northark knows the value of the community in building capacity to support student needs. The college continues to participate in the Boone County Resource Council and cultivate deep partnerships with community- and faith-based organizations and social services agencies (like Department of Human Services and Division of Workforce Services) to bring students and services closer together.

Supporting Students in Making Informed College and Career Choices

While covering college costs and addressing basic needs help students enter and stay in college, Northark acknowledges that informed decision-making about educational and career goals is key in supporting students' long-term financial stability. As Nelson explains, "If a student is making a decision to be a Fine Arts major and then live in the Harrison area, which is very rural, we need to make some informed decisions. So, that is a huge part of the career counseling." The college prioritizes career exploration, transfer pathways, and employment opportunities from the very beginning. Career exploration (including employment paths and growth, job offerings, and salary ranges) and financial literacy are deeply embedded in the First Year Experience as well as the revised curriculum of the new student orientation. As students are supported in making choices about pathways and programs, a large part of the college's current messaging centers on affordability, both in the value of technical programs leading to high-wage employment opportunities as well as the cost savings students can enjoy by first attending Northark and then transferring to a university.

As part of the college's guided pathways design, there is an interconnected relationship between career counseling and faculty advising. This relationship is the glue that connects educational pathways, financial stability supports, and employment opportunities. Each student begins with an in-depth advising appointment about areas of study, pathways to meet career goals, and available resources and supports. There are additional onboarding opportunities for students to explore programs and careers. Once a student selects a program, they are assigned to a faculty advisor. Faculty members provide academic and career advising to students and simultaneously receive professional development to build their awareness of on- and off-campus resources. Most times, the faculty advisor will also be the instructor of one or more of the student's courses, further encouraging connection and open lines of communication.

All students are required to have one advising session each semester with their faculty advisor, during which time, they discuss academic progress, suggested coursework, career and/or transfer goals, and other participations or affiliations. Beyond this session, students can also meet with a professional advisor or their department chair or dean. Professional advisors advise primarily new students, undecided students, and students working on college prep courses or pre-requisite classes for certain programs. Through intentional collaboration between Academic Affairs and Student Affairs, students can experience a coherent and seamless experience that supports their needs, both inside and outside the classroom.

Helping Students Know and Cover College Costs

Northark is simultaneously working to boost students' access to financial assistance and ensure they shoulder fewer educational costs. To maximize Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) completion, the college is proactively identifying eligible students and articulating specific actions needed to complete the application. Each day, the Financial Aid Office gets a list of students with advising appointments the following day. For each student, it looks at what is missing and shares that information

with the student's advisor. Where possible, they refer students to the college's three federally funded TRIO programs, which have a strong track record of helping students successfully file for financial aid.

In addition to helping more students secure federal and state aid, the college is also increasing student access to paid work experiences. Current employer-funded opportunities fall mainly in business, HVAC, automotive, information technology, and turf management, and the college is actively working to expand participating programs. Apprenticeships are offered through partnerships with the Department of Labor, which partners with the college to cover training, and employers who directly pay participating students.

Moving Forward

Long before the pandemic, Northark had been building its network of supports as well as bridges between non-academic supports and academic success. With the pandemic intensifying concerns around reduced enrollment and student engagement, the college's focus on supporting the whole student is even more urgent. To that end, the college has actively embedded the implementation of holistic supports into its current strategic plan.

To expand access and use of supports, the college is reevaluating and revising certain practices and policies. For example, Northark is developing a more equitable approach to awarding academic scholarships that doesn't rely on standardized test scores. Additionally, it is expanding qualifications for programs that provide comprehensive academic and support services. For example, non-custodial parents and teen parents living at home with a guardian are now eligible for the Career Pathways initiative, designed to support low-income student parents with higher education skills and credentials for long-term economic self-sufficiency.

Efforts are also underway to increase supports to address basic needs, particularly housing and food. To help address the critical housing crisis in its community, Northark has begun to offer students on-campus housing through the opening of a new residence hall in fall 2022. Given that Pete's Pantry offers shelf-stable and frozen food options, the college is planning to partner with an area grocery store and food bank to provide gift cards for fresh produce and refrigerated foods that cannot be stored on campus.

Northark knows that life and learning are connected and has long been leveraging the powers of community, connection, and collaboration to support that connection. No doubt, the college's journey to support the whole student, inside and outside the classroom, will continue to offer benefits and success for students, their families, the community, and the region in the coming years.