

HARPER COLLEGE

HOLISTIC STUDENT SUPPORT MODEL GROWS TO 1,000+ STUDENTS AS GRADUATION RATES HIT RECORD HIGHS

Transforming Student Success at Harper College with One Million Degrees

THE CHALLENGE

When Santiago Soto broke his hand, the injury put his college plans and his future in jeopardy. The Harper College student who's studying international business lives alone, works full-time, and juggles a heavy course load. His injured hand meant he had to take time off from work, which meant missing out on the paychecks that paid his bills and fund a fast-approaching study abroad program in Germany.

Santiago's story is not an unusual one at Harper. Since its founding in the late 1960s amid the rapid growth of Chicago's suburbs, Harper has embraced the mission at the heart of America's community colleges: to open the doors of higher education to all who are ready to walk through them.

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From its 200-acre campus in Palatine, Illinois — about 30 miles northwest of Chicago — Harper has become a fixture in the region. Its classrooms and hallways bring together more than 21,000 students each year — recent high school graduates, mid-career adults retraining for new careers, and first-generation students balancing work, family, and coursework. About half of Harper's students identify as Hispanic, Asian American, or African American. 31 percent are eligible for Pell Grants, and nearly 70 percent attend part-time. Most Harper students plan to transfer to a four-year college or university to complete their degrees. Many of these students are just one injury, car crash, or missed paycheck away from seeing their college dreams derailed.

A decade ago, shifting demographics and rising suburban poverty across Harper's district meant more students faced more challenges. In the years since, the college has invested heavily in student success initiatives. Through its [Hawks Care program](#), students can access mental health counseling, transportation assistance, food pantries, clothing closets, and access to laundry facilities. But many students didn't take advantage of these supports because they often didn't know these resources existed. Harper leaders viewed the issue not as a lack of services but as a lack of connection. Students didn't always know where to turn, and overburdened advisors didn't have the bandwidth to guide them. “In the past, our advising was stretched thin,” says Anita Vaughan, a Harper advisor. “Sometimes one advisor had 800 students. Given how many of our students are first-generation or from low-income communities, that's not the kind of high-touch support they need. Students would come to campus and not even know what was available to them.”

Harper officials knew they needed to ensure that more students like Santiago could get the help they needed. They discovered the solution in One Million Degrees, a Chicago-based nonprofit dedicated to helping community college students thrive.

THE SOLUTION

Founded in Chicago in 2006, [One Million Degrees](#) (OMD) supports more than 2,000 community college students each year through a wraparound support model that includes one-on-one coaching, career mentoring, financial stipends, and professional development. OMD primarily serves first-generation students, students from low-income communities, and students of color through a unique place-based partnership operated in collaboration with City Colleges of Chicago. [The results speak for themselves.](#)

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Traditionally, OMD's model places staff on partner campuses. In this instance, OMD team members were hired as Harper College employees, giving them direct access to the college's technology, databases, and day-to-day processes. This made it easier to respond quickly to students' needs and offer timely hands-on support.

For more than a year, Harper and OMD staff members met weekly to align the program's structure, goals, and workflows. This work resulted in a more personalized experience for students that was marked by smaller advising caseloads, consistent one-on-one meetings, proactive connections to important resources, and a cohort-based approach that brought students together rather than supporting them in isolation.

OMD provided each participating Harper student with a financial stipend of up to \$750 per year, plus access to an enrichment grant of up to \$250. Students served by OMD also took part in a professional development curriculum focused on career readiness, financial literacy, and personal identity. Harper also created a weekly non-credit seminar class that provides consistent touchpoints with students without impacting their financial aid status. The class also functioned as an informal wellness check. If a student misses the seminar, it signals to staff that outreach may be needed.

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“Harper moved away from transactional advising to something more relational,” says Tim Grant, an advisor with One Million Degrees. “These are students who haven’t always had someone in their corner. Now they do.”

THE RESULTS

Today, the OMD model is more than a one-off initiative. It's part of Harper's student success infrastructure. To better support a greater population of students, Harper has scaled its efforts and consolidated OMD and additional support programs by creating the SOAR+ Program. This new program is built upon the framework of OMD and several existing programs to provide students with an “inescapable opportunity” to incite long-term success. SOAR+ will support more than 1,000 students per year and is backed by a \$2 million investment from the college.

Inspired by the program's success, Harper restructured its entire advising model around OMD's approach to case management. The core OMD principles—cohort-based supports, career coaching, financial stipends, faculty and peer mentorship—will be all be vital components of the newly scaled, Student Success Model which will launch in Spring of 2026, and will continue each academic year as a comprehensive first-year experience program to bolster student outcomes.

Although not every college has adopted the OMD model at this scale, it's a direction the organization hopes more institutions will take. “What we've done at Harper became a foundation for what we're doing with other colleges,” says Melanie D'Evelyn, executive director of advisory and capacity building at OMD. “The leadership there was deeply committed. They really took this model and made it their own.”

For Harper students, the impact is deeply personal and often transformational. Dr. Dennis Baskin, Harper's associate provost of student affairs, argues that what makes the model so impactful is a sense of belonging. “The program really helped students believe they could be successful at a community college, especially students of color and those from low-income backgrounds,” he says. “That belief is a critical part of persistence.”

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“Over the past decade, Harper College has nearly doubled its overall graduation rates through a sustained focus on student success—including investments in advising, academic support, and external support partners.”

Harper’s investment in the OMD model has paid off. In 2016, OMD partnered with the University of Chicago’s Urban Labs to evaluate its impact through a randomized controlled trial that included Harper College. Early results showed increased full-time enrollment and first-year persistence. A later study published in 2021 found significantly higher three-year degree attainment for students served by OMD. In fiscal year 2021, OMD students at Harper achieved an 89 percent fall-to-spring persistence rate. Over the past decade, overall graduation rates at Harper have increased from 26 percent to 47.6 percent.

The program’s benefits go beyond persistence and completion. OMD is preparing students for life after Harper by helping graduates secure meaningful employment with strong wages after graduation. “If we want to talk about a real framework for student success, start here,” says Dr. Ruth Williams, Harper’s provost. “It’s about meeting students’ needs — academic, financial, and personal — in one integrated approach.”

It’s a sentiment echoed by students like Santiago. Through support from Harper and OMD, he received food assistance, gained access to emergency financial aid, and salvaged his trip to Germany. Just as importantly, he found a space to breathe.

“Sometimes I’d just go to the OMD room to relax before work, grab a snack, talk to people,” he says. “It’s a really friendly, welcoming place. It makes you feel like you’re not alone.”

