



A Students-First Approach to Success and Performance Excellence

by Mike Flores
Chancellor, Alamo Colleges District

Thirteen years ago, the Alamo Colleges District Board of Trustees and the district leadership adopted the Baldrige Excellence Framework as an organizational self-assessment and self-improvement approach to increase efficiency, operate effectively, and be accountable to all stakeholders. The district focused on the seven Baldrige categories: leadership; strategy; students; measurement, analysis and knowledge management; workforce; operations; and results. The Baldrige framework served as the foundation for a district-wide strategic plan that would take us a long way toward achieving our vision of “becoming the best in the nation in student success and performance excellence.”

We adopted the Baldrige Excellence Framework as the model to begin our journey to improve our services and, ultimately, to ensure that we provide students with the very best services and support to reach their goals.

In 2018, after more than a decade of dedication and hard work at the district, which includes five individually-accredited colleges and a support operation, we achieved a major milestone. The Alamo

Colleges District was named as the only community college system ever to be recognized with the Malcolm Baldrige National Quality Award, and at the time one of only five higher education institutions to win the award, a testament to our achievement of excellence in higher education.

The Board and leadership agreed achieving the highest level of excellence in student success is vital because Alamo Colleges District is the largest provider of higher education in the San Antonio region and the number one provider of workforce education as well. We serve many students who are first-generation-in-college and economically disadvantaged, so the highest level of excellence aligns with our vision of providing students with an education that leads to economic and social mobility for themselves and their families, which is essential in combating the generational poverty so prevalent in our area.

I know this because a college education allowed my parents and me to achieve this economic and social mobility and led to my fulfilling my father’s hope that I would become the first Hispanic chancellor of the Alamo Colleges District. Although I became chancellor shortly before the district’s Baldrige win was announced, I was familiar with the Baldrige model from my many years at Palo Alto College (PAC), one of the Alamo Colleges, where I previously served as president. During the district’s Baldrige journey, our progress was reflected in the fact that three of the colleges, along with the District Support Operations (DSO), were recognized with the Governor’s Texas Award for Performance Excellence, the state level recognition of performance excellence.

The district’s Baldrige win was made possible by the hard work of our outstanding faculty, administrators, and staff, who embodied our value of collaboration over the length of our journey. It took many years of planning, teamwork, and dedication to lead us to the



Mike Flores, the Chancellor of Alamo Colleges District, accepts the 2018 Malcolm Baldrige National Quality Award.

moment when we accepted our Baldrige Award at the national conference.

The award is important to us as an organization, but what is more important is that it helped us to put in place effective strategies and processes to increase student success, resulting in more students completing their degree or certificate. This completion is crucial because we know that a college degree is the best way for people in our community to achieve economic and social mobility. A graduate from one of our colleges will earn \$9,400 more annually and \$400,000 more in their working life than someone with a high school diploma working in Texas.



Mike Flores, the Chancellor of Alamo Colleges District, addresses the nearly 1,000 attendees at the 2018 Malcolm Baldrige National Quality Award Ceremony, explaining how the Baldrige Excellence Framework helped Alamo put students first.

“The Baldrige Award has increased community awareness of the educational excellence of the Alamo Colleges District. As a result of our Baldrige win, we are sought after by other educational institutions and organizations from as far away as New Zealand as a model of how to achieve organizational excellence, and we have shared our experience and what we have learned through workshops and presentations.”

Among the strategic initiatives that have resulted from our Baldrige journey are AlamoADVISE, our personalized pathways model that guides students to choosing their career and educational goal and keeps them on the path to completion. A related initiative is our AlamoINSTITUTES, which encompass these pathways, along with Transfer Advising Guides that help all their credits count when they transfer and continue their education. Other best practices arising from the Baldrige process include the Student Advocacy Centers at all five colleges that help students meet basic needs and receive support to ensure completion of their educations. Our Baldrige journey also assisted in the implementation of AlamoONLINE, which increases access to college by providing classes and support services online.

Our Baldrige journey also has culminated in our latest initiative, AlamoPROMISE, which eliminates the financial barriers that keep many students from attending our colleges by providing funds to bridge the gap between a student's financial aid and the cost of tuition and fees for three years. This program, which was launched this year, is open to high school

seniors from an initial 25 high schools and is projected to enable 9,000 students to enroll at our colleges in fall 2020. The recognition and high profile which our Baldrige win provided has been invaluable in garnering the support and raising the funds to make AlamoPROMISE a reality.

The Baldrige Award has increased community awareness of the educational excellence of the Alamo Colleges District. As a result of our Baldrige win, we are sought after by other educational institutions and organizations from as far away as New Zealand as a model of how to achieve organizational excellence, and we have shared our experience and what we have learned through workshops and presentations.

Our Baldrige win has brought us accolades at the local, state, and national level, including kudos from our city and county governments, chambers of commerce, state and national legislators, business and community partners, trustee organizations, and fellow educational institutions. This recognition contributes to the economic prosperity of our community by helping to attract employers considering bringing their companies to our area and also helps in obtaining funding from the state as well as private donors.

Ultimately, the Baldrige Award is important for us to celebrate because it recognizes that we have made significant progress that benefits our students, who are at the heart of all we do. Our success is their success, and I want to congratulate all of them on their achievements and assure them, and our community, that we will continue to strive to be “the best in the nation in student success and performance excellence,” because they deserve the best.