

ATD Institutional Designations Application

Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ), 2026

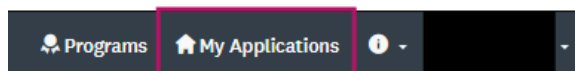
Last Updated October 14, 2025

Q: How do I register to apply?

A: On the [ATD awards portal](#) in SurveyMonkey Apply, click the **Register** button in the top right corner. You will be prompted to create a set of log-in credentials. Once logged in, applicants will see a message indicating they do not have any applications yet. Click the **View Programs** button. Applicants will see a list of available ATD applications from which to choose. Find ATD Institutional Designations and click the **More** button. This will bring you to the application landing page. Click **Apply** to start your application. You can find more SurveyMonkey Apply guidance on the [help page](#). If you need further help with the application platform, reach out to network@achievingthedream.org.

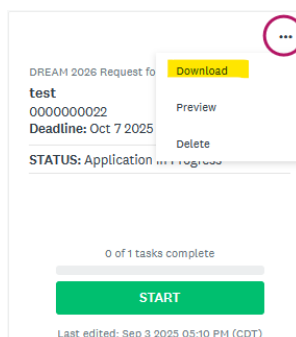
Q: Is there a way to download all of the application questions in order to save them outside of the application platform?

A: To download or print all of the application questions, log in to [My Applications](#).



Access your application on the [My Applications](#) page. Then, select your college's name under **Eligibility Check**.

The eligibility check will highlight for which institution is eligible. Next, **Application Here** select the would like to apply. Click on the corner of the tile of the download. Finally, select



The eligibility check will designation(s) your under **Begin your Narrative** designation for which you **Actions** icon in the top right application you wish to **Download**.

Q: Can I upload Supporting Data Visuals?

Colleges may upload one PDF labeled “Supporting Data Visuals [College Name]” in the “Uploads” section. The file may include charts, tables, or graphs that complement narrative responses. Each figure should have a number, title, and specify which question or section it supports (e.g., *Figure 1. Fall-to-Spring Retention, 2021–2024 – Early Momentum*). Applicants should reference visuals in the text (e.g., “see Figure 1 in Supporting Data Visuals PDF”).

This optional feature was added on October 14, 2025, in response to college feedback about the need to include additional data visuals. Colleges that choose not to upload visuals will not be disadvantaged; the addition simply allows applicants to illustrate their data stories more clearly if desired.

Q: Is there a character limit for narrative responses in the applications?

A: While there is no specific character limit, we encourage you to keep each narrative response to no longer than 500 words.

Q: How many levels of designations do you have?

A: We have three levels: Leader College, Leader College of Distinction, and the Leah Meyer Austin Award.

Q: What is the difference between the Leah Meyer Austin Award application and the Leader College application or Leader College of Distinction application?

A: There are three separate applications: one for Leader College, one for Leader College of Distinction, and one for the Leah Meyer Austin Award. All three applications use the same set of questions. The difference lies in the purpose of each recognition:

- **Leader College:** Recognizes colleges that have completed the Foundations of Transformation and are demonstrating meaningful progress in expanding access and improving early momentum outcomes. These colleges advance student success strategies that respond to their local context with emphasis on students who are missing or left behind. Colleges also highlight their contributions to the ATD Network.

- **Leader College of Distinction:** Recognizes colleges that are sustaining and building upon progress made as a Leader College and demonstrating improvements in milestone momentum outcomes, while continuing strong, sustained performance in access and early and milestone momentum. Colleges explain recent gains or capacity-building efforts with emphasis on students who are missing or left behind and demonstrate how they are evaluating the impact of their strategies. They also highlight contributions to the ATD Network.
- **Leah Meyer Austin Award:** Recognizes one college annually that exemplifies high levels of performance across ATD's Community Vibrancy Framework, with demonstrated impact on post completion outcomes and economic mobility. These colleges serve as exemplars in their communities and within the ATD Network, advancing student-centered, data-informed strategies that are deeply embedded in college culture and planning.

Q: My college is eligible to renew its designation or to apply for a new designation and/or award. Do you have guidance for which designation/award application I should complete if I am eligible for more than one?

A: Your college may be eligible to apply for more than one level of recognition through Achieving the Dream (ATD), including Leader College, Leader College of Distinction, and/or the Leah Meyer Austin Award. We've emailed your team with your specific eligibility.

Your team should complete the application for the highest tier of designation your college wants to earn. If your college does not meet the criteria for the highest tier pursued:

- If you apply for the Leah Meyer Austin Award, your application will still be assessed for Leader College of Distinction.
- If you apply for Leader College of Distinction, your application will still be assessed for Leader College.
- However, if you complete the application with a focus only on Leader College, your college cannot be assessed for the higher tiers: Leader College of Distinction or the pinnacle, annual Leah Meyer Austin Award. Likewise, if you complete the application with a focus only on Leader College of Distinction, your college cannot be assessed for the Leah Meyer Austin Award.

Q: After applications are reviewed, is it possible to receive ATD's rubric scoring of our application for our records?

A: Achieving the Dream welcomes you to debrief about the selection committee's review of your application. To schedule a call, please reach out to network@achievingthedream.org

Q: When is the application due?

A: Applications are due Thursday, Oct. 17, 2025, at 5:00 pm ET.

Q: Who received the eligibility email for the 2025-2026 Institutional Designations?

A: The eligibility email was sent to each institution's core team leaders, core team members, finance contacts, president, and the president's cc. If your team did not receive the message, please submit this [form](#) to request updates to the contact information. If you have any additional questions regarding contact information, you can email us at network@achievingthedream.org.

Q: How do you want us to account for COVID impacts to data?

A: The impacts of COVID should be addressed in the narrative. While the metrics portion of the evaluation is based on publicly available data gathered and provided by ATD, colleges may cite additional data from other sources in their narrative responses to complement and strengthen their data story. We understand that growth is not a straight line, and the narrative is the place to explain how COVID disrupted trends, highlight recent improvements not yet reflected in the ATD Awards and Designations Data File, and provide context about your institution.

Q: Can our college contest a decision regarding an award or designation after it has been made?

A: Achieving the Dream does not reevaluate awards and recognition decisions. The college leadership designations cycle occurs annually, so your institution will have more opportunities in following years to pursue higher awards or designations.

Q: How can colleges use additional data or explain nuances not captured in the ATD Awards and Designations Data File?

A: While the metrics portion of the evaluation is based on publicly available data gathered and provided by ATD, colleges may cite additional data from other sources in their narrative responses to complement and strengthen their data story. Narrative responses allow colleges to contextualize the metrics, explain



trends, highlight recent improvements, and showcase successes that may not be fully reflected in the publicly available data. This may include workforce and professional credit outcomes or other internal evidence.

Q: What changes has ATD made to the institutional designations and awards this year?

A: ATD has made significant changes to our institutional designations and awards. These changes are designed to make the process easier, more accessible, and more rewarding for colleges.

Q: Why did ATD make these changes?

A: ATD is committed to equity in access, including institutions that may have limited staff capacity or data analytics resources. The goal is not just to recognize excellence but to equip colleges with tools they can use in their broader institutional work. ATD wants every eligible college to feel supported, empowered, and celebrated through this process.

Q: Will there be an information session?

A: Yes. ATD encourages all institutions to [register](#) to join us for an Awards and Designations Webinar on Wednesday, Sept. 10, 2025, from 2:00 to 3:00 p.m. ET, to walk through the opportunity. This webinar will be followed by two virtual office hours:

Wednesday, Sept. 24, 2:00–3:00 p.m. ET: Live Office Hours, session 1 [\[Register\]](#)

Wednesday, Oct. 8, 2:00–3:00 p.m. ET: Live Office Hours, session 2 [\[Register\]](#)

Q: What is new with the Leah Meyer Austin Award?

A: The Leah Meyer Austin Award has increased significantly. The 2026 recipient will receive \$100,000, which is four times the previous amount.

Q: How is the application process different?

A: The application has been streamlined to allow colleges to focus on telling their story and highlighting their accomplishments.

Q: What has changed with the data?

A: ATD has gathered and validated all data from publicly available sources. This year ATD is sharing a single consolidated data file in Excel that includes information for all eligible institutions.

Q: How do the designations connect with ATD's frameworks?

A: The data and the overall approach are aligned with [ATD's Community Vibrancy Framework](#), helping institutions see connections between their student success efforts and broader community impact.

Q: What is the difference between the ATD Awards and Designations Data File and the Community Vibrancy Workbook?

A: The ATD Awards and Designations Data File is aligned with the Community Vibrancy Framework but is designed specifically for the awards and designations process. It contains standardized 2019–2023 IPEDS and other publicly available data sources, such as U.S. Census Bureau, College Scorecard, and United for ALICE, that ATD has compiled and validated for all eligible colleges. This file is the basis for the metrics portion of award and designation determination.

The Community Vibrancy Workbook is a separate benefit for all ATD Network colleges. Each workbook is customized to a college's local area and comes with a user guide. Colleges can use the workbook to explore community and economic conditions and to inform institutional planning and strategy. The workbook is not used in award or designation determination, even though it is conceptually aligned with the same Community Vibrancy Framework.

Q: Where does the data come from?

A: The file only contains publicly available [data](#), from sources such as IPEDS, the U.S. Census Bureau, College Scorecard, and United for ALICE.

Q: Does the file include any private or proprietary information?

A: No. The file only contains publicly available data that is already in the public domain. No private, sensitive, or proprietary information is included.

Q: Are college names shown in the file?

A: No. The file lists only IPEDS Unit IDs, not college names.

Q: How do I find my institution's IPEDS Unit ID?

A: To find your institution's IPEDS Unit ID, you can look up the institution's Unit ID via the IPEDS [website](#). Type the college name in the search box, and click on the profile. You will see the IPEDS ID number, which is the IPEDS Unit ID number, on the right side of the screen. If you are unable to obtain the number, please send an email to network@achievingthedream.org.

Q: Why is ATD sharing all eligible colleges' data in one file?

A: This approach reflects ATD's commitment to transparency and ensures a fair, clear, and accessible process for all institutions. Sharing all eligible colleges' data in one place allows institutions to compare themselves against the bigger picture, strengthen their success stories with context, and see patterns and trends that may inform their work beyond the awards.

Q: Why is the file provided in Excel?

A: By sharing the file in Excel, colleges can manipulate, filter, and analyze the data to fit their needs.

Q: Does the file include all ATD Network colleges?

A: No. The file includes data for eligible institutions only, not for all ATD Network colleges.

Q: What years of data are included in the Awards and Designations Data File?

A: The file includes 2019–2023 IPEDS data as well as other publicly available sources.

Q: What should my college do if data is missing from the ATD Awards and Designations Data File?

A: Some colleges may notice missing data in the file. If this happens, please contact ATD at network@achievingthedream.org, and we will work with you to address the missing data.

Colleges that do not report one of these metrics to IPEDS will have the opportunity to submit the metric for consideration, along with a clear definition and a justification for why it was not reported to IPEDS. This information must be submitted by Oct. 17, 2025. The ATD Research and Assessment team will decide whether to include the metric in the data file for internal calculations.

Q: How are applications evaluated?

A: Applications are evaluated in two review rounds — a Metrics Review and a Narrative Review — each worth 50% of the total score used to make an application determination. Full details are provided in the *2025–2026 ATD Awards and Designations Application Overview* document posted as a resource on the [application landing page](#).

List of Publicly Available Data Sources

- IPEDS 12-Month Enrollment Survey for academic years 2021, 2022, and 2023
- IPEDS Completions Survey for academic years 2021, 2022, and 2023
- Median Earnings: U.S. Census Bureau, 2022 5-year estimate, American Community Survey
- U.S. Department of Education, College Scorecard
- U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics 2022 Fall Enrollment by Age, Race, Gender
- U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, Student Financial Aid; 2021-22
- U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, IPEDS Outcomes Measures data, 2019 through 2023
- U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, IPEDS Completions data, 2019 through 2024
- U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, IPEDS 2022 Fall Staff Data
- U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, IPEDS Fall to Fall Full-time Student Retention data. IPEDS 2019 through 2023
- U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, IPEDS Fall to Fall Part-time Student Retention data. IPEDS 2019 through 2023 United for ALICE, 2022