

Dundee and Angus College

THE THRIVE PROJECT: AN INSIGHT INTO DUNDEE AND ANGUS COLLEGE

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July 2023



Introduction

The Thrive project at Dundee & Angus College is an integrated approach to address the cost-of-living crisis for students and staff at the College. Having previously established breakfast clubs and meal vouchers for those with low incomes, an increase in demand for these services was seen at the start of academic year 2022-23 (from c.30 meals per week to c.80 per day) leading the College to consider a wider approach to safeguarding their students. This has led to the creation of the Thrive Group involving a wide range of people from across the College. From the outset of Thrive, a central aim has been to reduce the stigma associated with accessing support and this ethos has continued to drive many of the developments of the Thrive project as it has grown in the months since.

“ We’ve had some feedback about the lunch vouchers, which were really helpful for students in real need but obviously there was a stigma of ‘you can pay for your lunch, but I’ve got a voucher that I’m handing over’. So, what we wanted was to create things that were open to everybody, that remove the stigma.”

Steve Taylor, Vice Principal for People and Performance, Dundee and Angus College

One of the early developments of the Thrive project was free soup for everyone at lunchtime. This has been massively popular with c.900 portions a week and just over 25,000 portions being provided since inception. This ‘free for all’ approach understandably came with some critics worried about the best use of college funds, so the College opened up Payroll Giving for the project. This has included a QR code near the tills so that those who want to ‘pay’ for their soup can do so without impacting the reduction in stigma for those who cannot afford it. Around £5k has been raised through this approach. Alongside the lunch option, the Students’ Association and the catering outlets both provide free breakfast club options. Together the two providers have given out 8500 breakfasts since September, resulting in students no longer starting their classes hungry. Some staff have even taken their whole class to breakfast to ensure everyone is fed and to create a more sociable approach to the learning environment.

Support to tackle food poverty also extends beyond the close of classes. Through a network of local links, the College is able to provide food larders so that students and staff can still eat well in the evenings and at weekends. This initiative is also supported by donation boxes throughout the

campus and a team approach that sees food outlets and the hospitality department providing surplus food in take-home packages. Students have felt the impact of this support:

“ It’s amazing having the free meals at college, breakfast and lunch. As a single mother and at this time of year it’s been a huge help.”

Learner 1, Dundee and Angus College

“ Free meals, soup, breakfast, canned food, and now potatoes – many students have benefited from this, including me. It’s very helpful. Thank you.”

Learner 2, Dundee and Angus College

Those involved in the Thrive project are always on the look-out for new ways to support students. When the College received a large donation of potatoes from a local supermarket, they quickly produced recipe cards to aid those who lacked the knowledge to be able to fully benefit from the donation. This kind of creativity and openness to look beyond the initial problem has been a real strength of the project and has been seen in other aspects:



Steve Taylor



- At Christmas events the Thrive project offered free gift wrapping. This recognised that simply getting a gift for someone might not be the end of the challenge for those on low incomes.
- Thrive links with the Hair & Beauty School students to offer a free barbershop on the College’s Gardyne campus, which has just been extended to include haircuts for children so that the whole family can now get a trim.
- In late 2022, the College launched the ‘cosy coats’ initiative for donations of warm winter jackets. This proved to be very successful and led the way for full shops. There are now three on-campus shops that offer clothes, household items, toiletries, toys, and larder items. The shops are designed to be pleasant and accessible spaces and are staffed by volunteers, who can use the experience to develop their retail skills.

Establishing ‘Thrive’ as a project that supports both staff and students has been important on multiple levels. It further reduces stigma for accessing free support if students see staff using it as well. Thrive also recognises that many of the college

staff now also fall into an earnings bracket that is significantly impacted by the cost-of-living crisis. An unintended benefit has been the coming together of staff and students over a meal. Amy Monks, summed this up:

“ We see it as a college family. We are literally looking after everybody. So, I think it really knocks the stigma back even further and for me we’ll enjoy that together, whether it be breakfast or lunch.”

**Amy Monks, Student Association
Student President, Dundee and Angus College**

The Thrive project goes beyond providing direct interventions to meet challenges such as food poverty by also providing less tangible sources of support. It was recognised early that a drop in income could reduce social opportunities and create isolation for students. Thrive stepped in to help once again. The breakfast clubs are just that – ‘clubs’. They provide an opportunity for people to socialise with friends or other students/staff and give the Students’ Association the opportunity to discuss any issues with students over some toast and jam. There are also afternoon social groups that offer arts and crafts, board games, and crochet, and evening activities as an important wellbeing touchpoint for students. This informal approach to support again reduces stigma and has allowed students to access help on a range of wellbeing and financial matters. The Student Association staff and volunteers are trained to manage safeguarding and referrals and link with Student Services on common themes that arise from these student engagements.

“ We do some activities in the evening just to help single parents or students who live alone and can be quite lonely in the evenings. Just having that social touchpoint to do a quiz or sit and have a blether. There’s always one of our staff there so that creates a community when you know someone. If someone’s not there one week when they usually are then we can reach out to them and check everything is alright. Or they might share something in the group that we can take and push towards Student Services or encourage them to have a chat with their Group Tutor. I think any of these informal points of contact are really good for signposting opportunities because it is often through informal chat or off-the-cuff comments that mean we can broach a subject more gently.”

**Amy Monks, Student Association
Student President, Dundee and Angus College**

The impact of having contact points beyond the college day is shown clearly by the comments of one of the students who benefits from the evening online calls:

“ The calls have kept me going over the festive period during a challenging time for my mental health... The calls have given me purpose. They have made me laugh, cry, and smile again... The calls make such a difference to students’ lives as some people don’t have anything else apart from being on campus...the calls in the evening make a big difference”.

Learner 3, Dundee and Angus College

Extending the social support further, the College holds free cinema screenings at their Gardyne Theatre, which are open to students and their families. The theatre staff even give up their time for free. These proved particularly popular as a Christmas treat with hot chocolate included for additional festive cheer! Steve Taylor takes up the story:

“ We have a lot of single parents, and if you’re a student with two, three, four kids, it can be tough and at that point in the year there can obviously be a lot of pressure being put on finances. So just something nice like that, to be able to take the kids out to the movies.”

Steve Taylor, Vice Principal for People and Performance, Dundee and Angus College

This ‘whole family’ approach has clearly had a positive impact beyond the immediate student body and has used a college asset to extend the potential benefits.

Success Factor – Whole College Approach

The Thrive project has reached across the college campuses and departments and this has been part of a deliberate approach. Building more links to academic staff has led to developments such as the Barbershop that also provides learning for students. Updates on developments have been integrated into regular staff communications and in doing so, the project has been careful not to operate in its own silo. The information provided to both staff and students is the same, which reduces stigma as well as saving time. Thrive is coordinated by a staff group that includes the Student Association and academic staff. Craig Robb, Lecturer in Leisure Industries, who takes a coordination role in his non-teaching time reflected on this:

“ The beginning was quite important. It’s about culture. So, from my point of view... it hasn’t felt top down. It’s felt like to me it is a flat structure... it’s not felt like there’s a hierarchy. I’m not a manager, but it’s been really easy to approach managers and ask for information and engage with every single group or individual that I have needed to engage with. It’s been a really positive experience.”

Craig Robb, Lecturer in Leisure Industries, Dundee and Angus College

Vice Principal, Steve Taylor agrees and highlights the importance of the whole college approach adopted by the Thrive Project at Dundee and Angus College:

“ It’s about culture. For me, that’s the single biggest thing. It’s about people who are interested in helping and supporting it coming together. It would have been really easy for the Students’ Association, or the canteen, or the teaching staff to say ‘I’m doing my bit and I’m not interested in your bit’. But it really is that whole college approach and let’s do what we can to reduce and remove stigma, because this is everybody.”

Steve Taylor, Vice Principal for People and Performance, Dundee and Angus College

A leading role for the Students’ Association is also viewed as an important contributing factor to the success of the project.

“ Having the Student Association lead on a lot of this is critical. Just purely from the engagement side of things, they’re on the ground, they’re in amongst students on a daily basis. The vast amount of work that has gone in from those guys has just been phenomenal.”

Craig Robb, Lecturer in Leisure Industries, Dundee and Angus College



The Student Association has forged strong links across the College and these have been vital in meeting the needs of both learners and staff. These strong professional relationships across the College mean that support is delivered cohesively and holistically.

“ We’ve got a really close relationship with the Student Services Manager and the rest of that team so that if we have a concern [for a student] we can pop a message over and see what the best next steps are. The Manager came into our team meeting just this week to see if there are any common themes coming up... that [our staff] are hearing when they are hosting breakfast clubs and things like that. We’ve got that really good chain of communication.”

**Amy Monks, Student Association
Student President, Dundee and Angus College**

It is clear that without integrated work from all involved across the College, Thrive would not have been able to be as flexible and wide-reaching.



Amy Monks

Success factor – Branding

Creating brand awareness has been a key piece of work within the project and Thrive is now a recognisable brand across the College.

“ We purposefully chose that when the brand was created... It’s a positive Thrive message. It’s about thriving at the College. So as a brand what sits behind that could evolve depending on what is needed.”

Steve Taylor, Vice Principal for People and Performance, Dundee and Angus College

The Thrive brand has its own tile on the College student app and this has meant that students can go to one point for information about all services and can easily spot support on campus. The branding goes deeper though and links back into the whole-College culture.

“ The whole idea behind having the single branding was about pulling all these strings together... It’s about us all working together. No matter what role you have, you are involved. It’s cohesive, it’s not a disparate range of things that are happening. I think that has really helped to build a community around it for students and for staff. It’s something that’s known. If they see the Thrive brand, they know that there is something on offer for them.”

Steve Taylor, Vice Principal for People and Performance, Dundee and Angus College

The brand has been able to encompass more than just college-based support. For example, information on local support services available during the holidays was able to be cited within the Thrive tile on the college app. This joined up approach makes the process of accessing support much simpler for students and staff.



Impact Factor – Enhanced External Partnerships

Thrive has not been operated by the College in isolation and external links have proved vital in growing the impact of the project. The College recognises that their students largely come from four Local Authority areas (Dundee City, Angus, Fife, and Perth & Kinross) and so has taken the step to link with partners across all of these areas. One clear benefit from partnership links has been that the College can now do direct referrals to food banks in the area. This has streamlined the process for all involved, most importantly the individuals in need. Partnership working has also provided access to small pots of funding (e.g., for a free fridge for the food larder) and also supported the college to develop networks with organisations that they would not normally have linked with. In terms of funding, the size of the College prevents application to many funds, but linking with local organisations has been

able to open up local support for students. For example, Angus Council funding provided Christmas support for families in need and working with food surplus networks has also been a key link. Food surplus network 'Neighbourly' allows the College to pick up supermarket surplus items and distribute them through Thrive.

“ Supermarkets have been instrumental, but they all work slightly differently so you need perseverance to understand all the systems. It has been helpful though to be working with multiple sources as this has given flexibility when stocks have been low. Because we didn't have one set way of doing it, we were able to adapt to the needs that week.”

Craig Robb, Lecturer in Leisure Industries, Dundee and Angus College

Embedding the College within local partnerships has come with many benefits for the Thrive project. Being involved in a Cost-of-Living Summit in Dundee raised the College's profile and also raised awareness of additional challenges those on low incomes face, which the College has subsequently been able to act upon. In another example, learning about the increased risk of problem gambling led to Student Services integrating gambling awareness into their activities. Partner services are also advertised through the Thrive project, such as a local Tool Library that can be accessed to let people do small DIY tasks themselves. The College's status with local authorities was a real benefit in setting up and expanding existing partnerships.

“ We are actually really fortunate as a college where we are well connected and linked in. We were invited in right at the start of these conversations... It was really refreshing that the Council were ... not interested in who works for who or in hierarchies. It was 'what can we do to help the local population right now'.”

Steve Taylor, Vice Principal for People and Performance, Dundee and Angus College

Students have also been able to be matched with employment opportunities when the College hosted a Christmas fair with employers who they know were struggling for staff. This partnership approach has again contributed to helping the students to 'thrive'. In addition, academic teams are encouraged to be flexible to help students to do extra paid work. This can include online learning or flexible attendance and has helped to reduce withdrawals from college due to financial hardship.

Impact Factor – Sustaining Learners and Learning

While a full evaluation will be completed at the end of the academic year, the anecdotal impact of the Thrive project is clear. The project has provided a fundamental safety net, a clear demonstration of this being fewer first aid calls on a Monday morning. This is due to a dramatic reduction in students collapsing on a Monday because they hadn't eaten since they left college on a Friday.

Anecdotal feedback from student class representatives is that students are now coming to college because they know they can get fed there. Students who are spending their money feeding their children rather than themselves are able to continue their education and avoid isolation because the College is supporting them to eat.

Next Steps

The College is adamant that Thrive will be available for as long as it is needed, but also recognises that there are costs involved; the free soup alone will cost around £60k over the year. Creative approaches are all contributing to fundraising for the project. For example, those attending management meetings will find the donation QR code beside the coffee machine. The Student Association has also taken on Thrive as its fundraising focus for the year. Again, a whole-college approach is being implemented to meet the costs.

Many of the initiatives, once established, operate smoothly and it is anticipated that they are here to stay. For example, the shops, Christmas family movies, and the one-stop brand. All have seen benefits well beyond meeting financial hardship needs.

The College does not want to just build a safety net for students, they want to help them to Thrive, empowering their college family and reducing stigma. The coordinated approach at Dundee & Angus College has clearly allowed them to build a network of accessible services that allow both students and staff to thrive on their own terms.

