



Minnesota Independence College and Community (MICC), *Education Policy Impact Report 2024*

MICC Overview

Minnesota Independence College and Community (MICC), is a 501(c)3 nonprofit organization with a mission to see and honor the personhood and autonomy of autistic and neurodivergent individuals. We work every day to educate and guide MICC participants in creating and sustaining the lives they want to live.

Since 1996, MICC has provided transformative education and training for autistic and neurodivergent adults to live independently, work purposefully and thrive in community. From our home in Richfield, MN, MICC has cultivated a broad network of public and private partnerships to ensure accessibility to our programs and opportunities for MICC participants across Minnesota and nationwide.

Within MICC's innovative framework of hands-on, skills-based learning and caring guidance, MICC participants accomplish things they never imagined, from performing daily living tasks and building self-sufficiency to developing and sustaining a career, support system and lifelong relationships. Within the safety and freedom of its inclusive community, MICC participants begin to see themselves in a new light, gaining the confidence they need to build the lives they want to live.

In Minnesota, autism is one of the fastest growing disabilities within the educational system. From academic years 2009/2010 – 2019/2020, the percentage of students diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) increased by 138% (MN Department of Education Data). National data reveals that only 18% of adults with disabilities were employed, compared to 62% of adults without a disability who were employed in 2020 (Department of Labor Statistics). Further, according to the Drexel Autism Institute, "young adults on the autism spectrum have the lowest employment rate across disabilities" (Drexel).

Through the critical collaboration with the State of Minnesota Education Policy Committees, MICC can proudly say that together we served 200 individuals in 2024 with 88% reporting they feel valued and accepted for who they are and 88% reporting that

MICC creates an environment for them to learn and grow. Additionally, MICC was able to offer financial assistance to 59% of college participants who qualified during the program year. These critical funds ensure that MICC’s lifechanging programs are accessible to a greater number of Minnesotans.

Funding Period Summary

During the 2024 funding period, MICC focused on the following key areas of impact: quality programming for participants, financial accessibility for families and participants, and flexible, agile, and accessible entry points into MICC programming. With focus on these key areas of impact, MICC realized enrollment growth related to the improvements with our financial accessibility and the launch of new programing.

Also, through an expansion of entry points into MICC, through important partnerships with other state resources, MICC can now serve an older, neurodiverse demographic, those who might benefit from our vocational programming but do not need life skills and independent living instruction, for example. These funding period priorities – enrollment growth, financial accessibility, and multiple, accessible entry points – are reflected in more detail in the following sections.

Year	MICC Timeline	
2024	<p>January</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">MICC CEO Amy Gudmestad and Nurse Kelly of Friesen Holistic Services joined Neil Freeman on BOB FM to spotlight MICC’s transformative programs. Their conversation emphasized the growing need for resources that empower autistic adults to lead independent lives. <p>February</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">MICC launched the Workplace Readiness Program, providing neurodivergent adults with a new pathway to access MICC’s life-changing services.The MICC Board of Directors renewed a forward-thinking multi-year agile strategic plan with four cornerstone goals:<ul style="list-style-type: none">Deliver exceptional programs and services.Nurture employees and culture.Build a resilient financial future.Expand MICC’s impact on the community.	

2024	<p>March</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • MICC's 21st Annual Gala welcomed 650 attendees to the Minneapolis Depot, marking the largest gala since 2019 and a night of record-breaking support. • MICC participant ambassadors engaged in meaningful discussions with state and local leaders at the Richfield Disability Advocacy Partnership event. The interactive forum allowed participants to voice critical concerns to Senator Wiklund, Representative Howard, Commissioner Goettel, and Mayor May Supply. <p>April</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • MICC partnered with MAAN (Multicultural Autism Action Network) and AuSM (Autism Society of Minnesota) to raise awareness about the lack of adult programming for autistic adults. Their advocacy led to an insightful conversation on MPR News with host Angela Davis, featuring MICC graduate Dustin sharing his personal experiences. <p>May</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 75% of the class of 2024 who started in the fall of 2021 celebrated their graduation at Best Buy Headquarters. Graduates earned Century College certificates in Health Services, Hospitality, and Retail. By graduation, 62% were employed. With the support of MICC staff, 100% achieved employment by December 2024. <p>June</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • MICC Community Program enrollment reached 109 participants, with 87% of the Class of 2024 continuing their journey through the program. MICC's Summer Program hosted 30 participants for week-long sessions focused on independent living skills, self-advocacy, job exploration, and social coaching. 	
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2024	<p>July</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> MICC launched a new Digital Careers certificate, developed in response to participant feedback and accredited by Century College. This technology-focused option was chosen by 37% of second-year participants, underscoring the demand for diverse career pathways. <p>August</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> The 2024-2025 school year commenced with 20 first-year participants from 10 Minnesota counties joining MICC's College Program. This neurodiverse cohort, 15% of whom identify as racial minorities, began their journey toward an anticipated May 2027 graduation. <p>September</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> MICC unveiled its refreshed website, micc.org, featuring an enhanced design and an interactive Program Selector tool. The tool empowers neurodiverse individuals and families to explore programs tailored to their unique goals. Second-year vocational certification enrollment included: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 7 participants in Digital Careers. 6 in Health Services. 6 in Food & Hospitality. <p>October</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Over 250 attendees gathered for MICC's 7th Annual Independence 5K in Richfield, MN, supported by 40 volunteers. This community-driven event celebrated and empowered autistic and neurodivergent adults. MICC launched a public information session series with "Guardianship and Alternative Options." This inaugural session set the stage for future expert-led discussions on essential topics, including Social Security, ABLE Accounts, and employment benefits. 	
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Highlights

The following highlights reflect MICC's work over the 2024 funding period.

Growing Need for Programming

Because the prevalence of Autism is increasing, MICC expects the demand for programming to continue to grow as well, especially in Minnesota where "one in every 36 children who were eight years old were identified with autism" (State of MN, Department of Health).

MICC's enrollment trends reflect a clear demand for programming. Since 2021, MICC has seen an 18% growth in the number of individuals we serve across all programs. Because there is such a demand for programming, MICC is dedicated to finding alternative ways to serve more participants while also ensuring that programming is affordable for families. For example, in recent years, MICC began accepting waivers to pay for programming and services and in 2024, 59% of program fees were paid with 3rd party funding. Funding from the state provided a significant increase for need-based financial assistance for participants/families. It also provided tuition reductions, helping to fill the gap between the actual cost of providing the program and what participants and families pay.

To help ensure that families outside of the metro area(s) know about access to MICC, internal teams frequently present to Department of Human Services (DHS) service providers and/or social workers throughout the state of MN to share how families can use their county resources to support programming costs. Also, over the past three years, MICC hosted several virtual town halls, inviting counselors, educational advisors, and case workers to learn more about MICC and our services and expand connections within the larger community.

Enrollment Growth

One of MICC's strategic goals is to **grow our impact**, and MICC's college class of 2027 was the most diverse incoming class with 15% representing a racial minority population and 100% identifying as neurodiverse. The Class of 2027 includes 20 participants from ten different counties including Aitkin, Dakota, Hennepin, Nicollet, Olmsted, Pope, Ramsey, Scott, Steele and Washington. MICC's footprint continues to extend into rural MN as we build awareness through multiple partnerships and channels.

MICC served a diverse socioeconomic and racially diverse community through expanded outreach efforts, providing financial education and exploring alternate, affordable pathways to MICC.

Admissions

The Office of Admissions conducts comprehensive outreach annually to recruit a broad and diverse group of candidates for enrollment. The past year we have prioritized attending in-person events and meeting in-person with local schools and organizations. We also worked to connect with communities where there may be limited awareness of MICC programs and services. During the spring of 2024, MICC conducted individualized and targeted outreach to public schools, charter schools, and specialized programs. By specifically looking to connect with public schools in low-income and/or low-resource areas, MICC reached a more diverse audience.

Outreach and Recruitment Activity Highlights

- MICC sent emails to 46 Transition programs (93 total educators)
- MICC attended 12 "tabling events" and talked directly to an estimated 500+ people, in the last year
- MICC sent program information to 250 Social Workers during the Minnesota School Social Workers Association (MSSWA) conference.
- MICC hosted presentations or tours with 8 different groups of students or educators.
- MICC partnered with Autism Society of Minnesota and was a presenting sponsor during the Autistic Summit and a platinum partner during the Annual Autism Conference. Additionally, MICC partnered with MAAN (Multicultural Autism Action Network) and AuSM (Autism Society of Minnesota) to raise awareness about the lack of adult programming for autistic adults.

Summer Program

MICC's Summer Program is specifically designed for autistic and neurodivergent young adults aged 16–24. Our immersive, one-week-long day program, conducted in two sessions, is designed to cultivate job skills and boost social confidence. Participants not only engage in skill-building activities but also forge meaningful connections with peers who understand and embrace similar experiences and challenges. Beyond the immediate benefits, our Summer Program also serves as a gateway to experiencing MICC's College and Workplace Readiness programs, providing a sneak peek into additional opportunities.

Since MICC's Summer Program was restructured from an overnight to a day format, we have had the opportunity to increase the number of participants being served. In the past four summers, MICC has provided the Summer Program for over 100 participants with the goal of continuing to expand summer offerings and opportunities. In addition to serving more, we have also provided participants, their families, with program engagement summaries to support their ongoing growth and development after attending the Summer Program.

CARF Accreditation Renewal

CARF (Commission on Accreditation of Rehabilitative Facilities) is a nonprofit accreditor of health and human service programs. MICC has been CARF accredited since 2015. In October 2024 MICC received a 3-year renewal through October of 2027. CARF requires over 2,000 standards around all program services and every business function of the organization. While MICC is not required to be accredited, we do so because we are committed to providing high quality services and to continuous improvement and excellence.

Facilities Project

In 2022, MICC conducted a feasibility study with CCS Fundraising to help determine our preparedness to undertake a comprehensive campaign project. The results of that study, which engaged current leaders and board members, volunteers, and prospective donors, were overwhelmingly positive with 88% of survey results showing *very positive* or *positive* responses to the proposed plans. As a result of this feedback and in response to the increase in demand for programming, MICC started a campaign that will address the demand for programming and a capacity issue with our current rental spaces. As of December 2024, MICC has secured \$3,500,000 toward the Capital Campaign with a goal of \$7,000,000+.

This important campaign will allow MICC to increase our pathways into current and new programming by securing a permanent location in Richfield that offers the space and security to build a larger, supportive community for our participants. Over the past year MICC has secured a real-estate consultant to support the project, launched a visioning process with an architect and selected a development contractor. MICC is currently working with the City of Richfield to seek approval to build a 30,000 square foot programmatic building once funding has been secured.

Graduate Success Story, Holt

For autistic adults seeking independence, the path can be challenging, but MICC offers a supportive neurodiverse environment that helps them thrive. In a recent episode of "Today's Autistic Moment," hosted by Philip King-Lowe, Holt M., a graduating senior at MICC, shared his journey through MICC College and how MICC has shaped his transition into adulthood.

Why MICC? Holt chose MICC because it offered him a unique opportunity to build the skills necessary for independent living. When asked about his decision to attend MICC, Holt said: "I choose MICC because I have autism. To help me learn independent skills such as cooking and cleaning since I didn't know how to do that before MICC"

Exploring Career Paths: Holt chose the Hospitality certificate as part of the Careers curriculum through MICC College, and the program allowed him to gain practical experience through various internships and job site visits. He described his career exploration process: "I took this one career exploration class my (first year), where I got to learn about the four certificates before actually choosing one. After I chose my certificate program, I had to visit some places to do my practicum sites, which is also an internship."

Through his work at Ebenezer, Great Wolf, and Good Grocer, Holt developed skills ranging from stocking shelves to greeting guests to playing bingo with seniors. The hands-on approach helped him build confidence and discover his strengths.

The Support of MICC: MICC provided Holt with the resources and support he needed to manage the challenges that come with being autistic and learning to live independently. He highlighted some of the ways MICC helped him: "MICC has helped me with my autistic needs like transportation, laundry, and stress and anxiety management. Staff have been supportive, helping me focus on skill-building assignments and providing communication strategies for talking to many different types of people."

Developing Independence and Confidence: As Holt nears graduation, he reflects on the journey and the community at MICC that has made a significant impact on his life. He shared how the experience at MICC helped him embrace his autism and become more confident: "MICC taught me that my Autism is something to be proud of. My differences are also my strengths. The community at MICC is made up of people like me who are accepting and who are good friends."



Holt is a MICC Ambassador, pictured above at an MICC Admissions Preview Days event. Back row, left to right: Ryan, Holt, Nick, Taylor; Front row, left to right: Lyndsey, Ann.