

Community College Week

COMMUNITY COLLEGE TECHNOLOGY UPDATE | SPRING 2013

SPECIAL SUPPLEMENT

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Community College Week.

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Online Education Plays Important Role

In Driving Quality Learning in Today's Community Colleges

An increasing number of school leaders are rethinking the role of online education in supporting the 21st century community college learner. According to a recent global study commissioned by Cisco, most educators see technology as playing a larger role in student learning, including encouraging engagement and participation. While community colleges continue to pilot a range of alternative delivery models, many schools have robust programs in place to accelerate the use of online learning among their learners and on their campuses to improve the quality of education and create a supportive learning culture. These educators know the online revolution is infiltrating the physical classroom and the pace of developments is proving change is coming quicker than anyone imagined. Online higher education becoming mainstream is no longer a hypothetical future; the reality is that it has arrived and these changes create new and even better ways to engage students who may not fit the traditional "college student" mold.



FRANK F. BRITT

CEO
Penn Foster Career School

Consider that more than 22 million students are currently enrolled in American colleges and universities, according to the National Center for Education Statistics. However, the notable insight is not the number of students, but the changing complexion of the learner. Gone are the days of an individual going to college straight from high school, living in a dorm and earning a degree four years later. The "21st century learner" may be an adult who hasn't taken a class in decades, a full-time professional hoping to get ahead or switch careers, a single mom balancing family obligations and a full-time job, or a younger student at-risk of being undereducated. In fact, three-fourths of today's students no longer fit the traditional model, according to the National Center for Education Statistics.

The needs of students are changing simply because the lifestyles and circumstances of those pursuing higher education are changing. Students require a more customized, personalized education

to successfully engage in the learning process because they are busy with jobs, families and financial responsibilities that make each and every student situation different from the last. In response, many institutions are acknowledging the tectonic shifts in learners' needs and making changes. Today, educators are beginning to realize that in order to achieve superior results they need to build new types of relationships with students and in turn create a different kind of student-oriented culture founded in supporting students in the non-academic aspects of success through a culture of hospitality.

Hospitality, as it relates to learning, is all about the relationship between the student and the institution and how it feels to be supported as a member of a community. In this model, 21st century learners expect their unique circumstances to be embraced by the system. To do so, the educational system conforms to the right blend of flexibility and self-paced learning combined with personalized attention, which today is often difficult to find at traditional education institutions. In accepting this model, the best schools are making progress either independently or in partnership with online learning providers.

Simultaneously, and not coincidentally, traditional learning programs are becoming more digital, and online learning is becoming a viable augmentation to in-class experiences or as a stand-alone option for students. But with online learning, how can educators build strong relationships when the primary form of communication is web-based? How do educators find the right blend of the flexibility and accessibility of virtual learning, and the support and personal attention of traditional institutions? Luckily, during recent years, advanced instructional technologies have emerged. Now is the moment to merge the best of virtual and in-person education with a culture where students can learn when they want and where they want, giving them the best chance for success.

Critics of online learning may claim that students need hands-on instruction to succeed. But schools like Penn Foster have started to work with community colleges and even employers to create and implement customized hybrid education solutions, for example, online lectures with a local facilitator providing support on the ground and giving a high level of individual attention. Moreover, by taking practicums while completing online coursework, less traditional students can enjoy a combination of flexible online instruction and personalized, hands-on learning not common in today's

one-size-fits-all education system. Hybrid models also allow institutions to experiment with increasing online programming without fully turning away from the traditional classroom model.

While online students may not be in the classroom, the emergence and popularity of social media has ensured that the support network for these learners is still strong. Educational technology can now create a "surround sound" learning environment, combining instructor-help, peer-help and self-help. It is important for students to recognize that although they aren't physically surrounded by individuals, they are not alone and need not tackle their education alone. School-run online communities give students unprecedented access to their instructors 24/7 so they can get support when and how they need it. These communities, like the one at Penn Foster, also give students the opportunity to speak to their peers, so they will never feel like they're going through the process by themselves. These measures of support not only help ensure students' successes, but their happiness as well, and remove the elements of fear or embarrassment many students may feel asking questions or voicing concerns in a traditional classroom.

Finally, the variety of online tools at an educator's disposal draw on individual learning styles, and create more efficient and customized learning environments. Through online platforms, including social communities, students can access course materials and get support anytime, anywhere and as many times as they need. Also, online platforms provide faculty with learner analytics, giving instructors greater data on who is learning, what they are learning and how. This presents an opportunity for instructors to augment lesson plans as they go according to students' individual needs. These platforms can also offer ongoing learning dashboards and readiness assessments, ensuring students have the tools necessary to succeed that they may not have had access to elsewhere.

The president's next secretary of education will need to refocus on the massive transition currently happening in learning. The same applies to today's community college leaders and educators. Change is happening in higher education and the shift toward a culture of hospitality is the cornerstone of this rethinking. The best providers understand that they will need to integrate the near-revolutionary developments in higher education, including new technologies and learning methods, to meet the evolving needs of today's students. ▲

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