Collaborating to Offer Access for California Students Online

California is known for innovation in many sectors: technology born in Silicon Valley, fine wine crafted in Sonoma County, television shows and movies produced in Hollywood, and many other regional contributions. In recent years, California has also focused on innovation within and across its three systems of higher education.

In 2013, Governor Jerry Brown and the state legislature funded online learning initiatives for the California Community Colleges (CCC), the California State University (CSU), and the University of California (UC) systems, each of which is governed independently. The goal of these programs was to leverage the size and innovation of the three segments to better meet the needs of populations that—based on economic, lifestyle, or other barriers—lacked access to a traditional brick-and-mortar education.

Five years later, these initiatives are bearing fruit and are shifting the paradigm of student access to online courses in the Golden State.

Goodwill and Common Needs
With goodwill having been built among the players, leaders from Cal State Online and the CVC-OEI came together to focus on the shared interests of students from both segments by accelerating completion through summer courses. What leaders from the CSU and the CCC recognized was that there was an opportunity to use the summer term as a test-bed. Because of the tuition, funding, and enrollment complexities in each system, summer courses presented somewhat “neutral” territory to share students between the segments. In other words, many of the normal barriers were lessened during the summer term. After all, 93 percent of new undergraduate transfers to the CSU come from the CCC, and roughly half of the overall CSU student population consists of transfer students from the CCC.

This meant that a significant number of CSU students already had a prior “home” community college and that some would be physically returning to their local community during summer break. Being able to pick up an extra class or two online could help these students graduate faster, in line with the CSU Graduation Initiative 2025. Similarly, students currently enrolled at a CCC campus could gain access to online versions of courses not offered at their local institution, in line with the Chancellor’s Vision for Success, or they could test out a general education course through the CSU.

With similar mandates to multiply access to online courses across colleges and universities within the California systems, the group was able to identify common challenges that a little bit of joint effort might go a long way to solving.

The Genesis of Collaboration
In November 2017, the Brown administration organized a meeting with online learning leadership from each system, along with leaders from selected private and nonprofit colleges and universities, to discuss opportunities to build intersegmental and public-private cooperation designed to increase access to online learning for Californians. This meeting, and the conversations that followed, set the stage for unprecedented collaboration among online programs.

With similar mandates to multiply access to online courses across colleges and universities within the systems, the group was able to identify common challenges that a little bit of joint effort might go a long way to solving. Some academically oriented topics of discussion included evaluating approaches toward online course quality standards and rubrics, developing infrastructure and strategy to facilitate the sharing of open content, identifying complementary resources or strategies to support accessibility of online platforms and content, and sharing professional development resources for faculty and staff. Perhaps surprisingly to some, a major area of opportunity emerged around the coordination of purchasing and contracts. Because each segment is governed by the same or similar public contracting regulatory framework in California, opportunities to leverage each other’s contracts could avoid duplication, result in cost savings, and provide more equitable access to educational technology across institutions in each higher education segment.

One day in the spring of 2018, the topic of course search and enrollment across campuses came up in a conversation between CSU and CCC staff. At that point, both had been focused on their own system-wide, cross-enrollment initiatives surrounding general education and transfer course completion. The CSU was actively promoting cross-enrollment across its 23 campuses through Cal State Online, and the CCC was evolving the Online Education Initiative (OEI) by integrating and innovating its legacy California Virtual Campus (CVC) to create the CVC-OEI.
Implementing across Two Large Systems

Both of these systems have learned that helping students to cross-enroll between institutions is not a simple matter. In the CCC, each of the 73 districts manages its own student information system; these systems are not standardized across districts or colleges, creating significant data-automation challenges. The 23 CSU campuses are on the same enterprise student information system platform, but implementation variances between colleges provide another set of challenges. As it turned out, the significantly lower enrollment activity in summer was also a good opportunity to test some new tools and service providers. Additionally, leaders from both systems saw opportunities to improve the student experience. Gathering online class inventory, helping students navigate it, comparing the inventory against an aging course articulation database, and giving students a clear pathway to apply and enroll all posed significant challenges—ones that both the CSU and the CCC had already been working on in parallel but slightly different ways. With the two segments working together, both could leverage shared marketing, reduce the total spend, and achieve more than they would individually.

A preexisting Cal State Online summer campaign named Finish Faster was revamped and jointly adopted by the CCC. Cobranded marketing collateral and student-outreach strategies were engaged to raise awareness about the universe of online classes available through the program.

Both systems partnered with the commercial course search provider Quottly, which had already indexed the state’s ASSIST online transfer information system, to create a customized, searchable interface. Students could search by transfer area requirement or subject and could choose from classes tagged and sorted for quality review, online tutoring integration, and online readiness activities. Further integrating modern functionality, students could search via a mobile device and could refine their search by attributes such as start date, term length, and end date. Similarly branded but distinct CVC-OEI and Cal State Online entry points were created, with both containing courses from the CCC and the CSU, so no matter which entry point CCC or CSU students used, they would all have access to the same inventory.

Results and Lessons Learned

The results of the Finish Faster project—which was put together in a relatively short timeframe—were better than expected. The project resulted in just over 141,000 clicks on the digital ads delivered via Facebook, Google, Instagram, and Pandora. Surveys and application data were gathered separately from the CCC and CSU systems. Cal State Online reported that the vast majority (94%) of its students using the system did so to complete GE requirements, while about a third were taking courses to help them graduate on time. Interestingly, 28 percent reported that they were using the system to complete their final course for graduation. Both systems saw heavy usage from students working full- or part-time (over 80%), and 67 percent of Cal State Online students were from minority groups (this data was not readily available for CCC students). CCC students reported that their top three reasons for enrollment through the CVC-OEI were (1) to finish transfer requirements to the CSU or UC; (2) to find online classes not available at their home institution; and (3) to finish local degree or certificate requirements. The most-searched courses across both segments were math/quantitative reasoning, English composition, and oral communication/speech.

Since the conclusion of the project, collaboration continues between the segments. The CCC has taken the platform that was used over the summer and is evolving it to expand streamlined automation of cross-enrollment between the 56 colleges in the CVC-OEI Consortium, including functions such as live data, real-time seat counts, and automated financial aid processes. Cal State Online also continues to further its work across the CSU system and has proposed a repeat campaign in summer 2019 in partnership with the CCC.

This project demonstrates that California is creating a network approach to providing students with access to its higher education system. An additional ingredient will be its newly funded fully online community college, (http://www.ccconlinecollege.org) another catalyst for change targeted at working adults as online learning matures and transforms our institutions. In order to continue providing a high-quality, accessible online learning pathway for our shared and unique students, all segments and institutions must continue to collaborate. Doing so has opened a world of possibilities for the students we serve.