Earlier this year, colleges and universities across the globe were disrupted like never before. Literally over a weekend, faculty and staff moved instruction and support services entirely online. In many cases, institutions were well positioned to conduct remote instruction and work. In other cases, institutions had no choice but to rapidly ramp up new digital services to support a host of instructional and administrative functions. In both cases, we learned that our colleges and universities are far more agile and resilient than we may have previously believed.

The question now is, how can we sustain this agility and resilience? How do we build on both the technology innovations and the technology adoptions as higher education institutions plan for resuming normal operations sometime in the future? How can we exploit the best outcomes of our pandemic responses to create the institutions needed for the future of education, workforce development, and research?

Five colleagues from community colleges around the United States share their plans for capturing the successes realized in their pandemic response and what they plan to do to sustain those advancements.

**Kentucky Community and Technical College System**

*Jeremy Miller, Executive Director of Enterprise Architecture*

Before COVID-19, the Kentucky Community and Technical College System (KCTCS) was well positioned to deliver remote instruction and support. Even so, the sudden shift to a fully online environment offered plenty of opportunities. The KCTCS Technology Solutions team rapidly looked for ways to ensure that students, faculty, and staff were able to remain successful under the existing conditions. Some of the solutions included fast tracking a software phone option and extending guest Wi-Fi into parking lots to aid those without adequate connectivity.

One challenge, though, was that this shift landed directly in the middle of a transition from an on-premises web conferencing solution to a more modern collaboration platform in Microsoft Teams. Understanding that virtual collaboration would be even more essential now and into the future, the KCTCS team made the decision to step on the gas and drive the original yearlong project to completion in just a few short months.

During the accelerated rollout, a couple of key points were highlighted. First, people are more adaptable than we think. While the team delivered as much training as possible, faculty and staff were able to transition to the new system and started to collaborate in ways unheard-of in the past. Second, the team members showcased their dedication to delivering quality solutions that can be successfully deployed even on a condensed timeline. The new collaborative skills learned will continue to benefit the KCTCS community as the institution braves whatever the future holds.

**Tarrant County College**

*Carlos Morales, President, TCC Connect Campus*

Tarrant County College (TCC) has six campuses serving approximately 100,000 students who transitioned to remote services—including teaching, learning, and student services—on March 20, 2020. The COVID-19 crisis disrupted the normal college functions that provide support for students. Fortunately, TCC was prepared with processes, technology, and infrastructure to support the conversion to remote functioning.

Process-wise, eight months before the pandemic, the college had approved an Academic Continuity Plan that set the foundation for a seamless shift.¹ One week before the cessation of the face-to-face operations, the virtual campus created Blackboard Essentials, a basic training guide made available to more than 1,500 faculty members to aid in the transition to remote teaching.² It covered the use of the learning management system (LMS), the publication of content, and the management of the virtual
We learned that our colleges and universities are far more agile and resilient than we may have previously believed. The question now is, how can we sustain this agility and resilience?

Montgomery County Community College
Celeste Schwartz, Chief Information Officer

The response by Montgomery County Community College (MCCC) to supporting a remote workforce and remote instruction was successful as a result of both prior investments in digital transformation and an agile institutional culture. For the last several years, MCCC has focused on eliminating all paper processes. All student workflows have been converted to automated processes using the Frevvo platform, which is integrated with all major systems at MCCC and permits seamless digital experiences for students and staff. Processes such as course substitutions and change of major are remotely accessible through this platform.

Like many other higher education institutions, MCCC quickly deployed the Zoom platform not only to support academic instruction but also to facilitate campus-wide collaboration. MCCC’s president, Vicki Bastecki-Perez, utilizes this platform regularly to host morning “Coffee and Conversation” meetings across the entire organization. Additionally, MCCC quickly acquired and distributed notebook computers to staff and students who needed them. Because of prior investments in a virtual public network and virtual application/desktop technologies, MCCC staff were able to access systems and resources for remotely supporting students. To acknowledge the elevated importance of student mental health during COVID-19, MCCC was the first community college in the United States to subscribe to the Talkspace service, which provides every student with mobile access to mental health counseling.

Although this is a difficult time to complete large-scale physical upgrades, MCCC stuck with its plans to migrate its web portal to the Campus App platform in early July. This platform focuses on digital student engagement through a social-web interface and companion mobile application—features especially useful during the pandemic.

Montgomery County Community College
Celeste Schwartz, Chief Information Officer

The response by Montgomery County Community College (MCCC) to supporting a remote workforce and remote instruction was successful as a result of both prior investments in digital transformation and an agile institutional culture. For the last several years, MCCC has focused on eliminating all paper processes. All student workflows have been converted to automated processes using the Frevvo platform, which is integrated with all major systems at MCCC and permits seamless digital experiences for students and staff. Processes such as course substitutions and change of major are remotely accessible through this platform.

Like many other higher education institutions, MCCC quickly deployed the Zoom platform not only to support academic instruction but also to facilitate campus-wide collaboration. MCCC’s president, Vicki Bastecki-Perez, utilizes this platform regularly to host morning “Coffee and Conversation” meetings across the entire organization. Additionally, MCCC quickly acquired and distributed notebook computers to staff and students who needed them. Because of prior investments in a virtual public network and virtual application/desktop technologies, MCCC staff were able to access systems and resources for remotely supporting students. To acknowledge the elevated importance of student mental health during COVID-19, MCCC was the first community college in the United States to subscribe to the Talkspace service, which provides every student with mobile access to mental health counseling.

Although this is a difficult time to complete large-scale physical upgrades, MCCC stuck with its plans to migrate its web portal to the Campus App platform in early July. This platform focuses on digital student engagement through a social-web interface and companion mobile application—features especially useful during the pandemic.

Montgomery County Community College
Celeste Schwartz, Chief Information Officer

The response by Montgomery County Community College (MCCC) to supporting a remote workforce and remote instruction was successful as a result of both prior investments in digital transformation and an agile institutional culture. For the last several years, MCCC has focused on eliminating all paper processes. All student workflows have been converted to automated processes using the Frevvo platform, which is integrated with all major systems at MCCC and permits seamless digital experiences for students and staff. Processes such as course substitutions and change of major are remotely accessible through this platform.

Like many other higher education institutions, MCCC quickly deployed the Zoom platform not only to support academic instruction but also to facilitate campus-wide collaboration. MCCC’s president, Vicki Bastecki-Perez, utilizes this platform regularly to host morning “Coffee and Conversation” meetings across the entire organization. Additionally, MCCC quickly acquired and distributed notebook computers to staff and students who needed them. Because of prior investments in a virtual public network and virtual application/desktop technologies, MCCC staff were able to access systems and resources for remotely supporting students. To acknowledge the elevated importance of student mental health during COVID-19, MCCC was the first community college in the United States to subscribe to the Talkspace service, which provides every student with mobile access to mental health counseling.

Although this is a difficult time to complete large-scale physical upgrades, MCCC stuck with its plans to migrate its web portal to the Campus App platform in early July. This platform focuses on digital student engagement through a social-web interface and companion mobile application—features especially useful during the pandemic.

Montgomery County Community College
Celeste Schwartz, Chief Information Officer

The response by Montgomery County Community College (MCCC) to supporting a remote workforce and remote instruction was successful as a result of both prior investments in digital transformation and an agile institutional culture. For the last several years, MCCC has focused on eliminating all paper processes. All student workflows have been converted to automated processes using the Frevvo platform, which is integrated with all major systems at MCCC and permits seamless digital experiences for students and staff. Processes such as course substitutions and change of major are remotely accessible through this platform.

Like many other higher education institutions, MCCC quickly deployed the Zoom platform not only to support academic instruction but also to facilitate campus-wide collaboration. MCCC’s president, Vicki Bastecki-Perez, utilizes this platform regularly to host morning “Coffee and Conversation” meetings across the entire organization. Additionally, MCCC quickly acquired and distributed notebook computers to staff and students who needed them. Because of prior investments in a virtual public network and virtual application/desktop technologies, MCCC staff were able to access systems and resources for remotely supporting students. To acknowledge the elevated importance of student mental health during COVID-19, MCCC was the first community college in the United States to subscribe to the Talkspace service, which provides every student with mobile access to mental health counseling.

Although this is a difficult time to complete large-scale physical upgrades, MCCC stuck with its plans to migrate its web portal to the Campus App platform in early July. This platform focuses on digital student engagement through a social-web interface and companion mobile application—features especially useful during the pandemic.
Milwaukee Area Technical College  
Thomas Hausmann, Chief Information Officer  

Milwaukee Area Technical College (MATC) rapidly delivered enhanced services for remote instruction during the pandemic. For example, before COVID-19, most instruction was conducted face-to-face. Approximately 16 percent of courses were taught mostly online before March 2020. MATC now anticipates that 68 percent of courses will be delivered entirely online or virtually in fall 2020 via Blackboard Ultra and Collaborate.

Multiple instructional technology initiatives contributed directly to supporting learning at a distance. MATC distributed 1,300 Chromebooks to students in the Spring 2020 term and plans to distribute another 1,500–2,200 Chromebooks in the Fall 2020 term. Remote computer lab access is managed via LabStats Remote Access Dashboard. LabStats Remote enables students with any browser-capable device to remotely connect to a campus-based workstation. Remote lab access is appealing for the continued use of the thousands of workstations in our district. MATC also deployed TechSmith Knowmia for instructional media enhancement. The Remind communication platform deployment for messaging and communications enabled further faculty-student interaction. MATC expanded existing outdoor wireless internet access to district parking areas at multiple locations. In the fall of 2020, the MATC Library will offer a reserved circulation of more than 200 computers and 250 mobile hotspots for employees and students.

MATC also deployed an enhanced array of web-based and mobile-friendly services to students. Self-service student planning allows one-click registration, access to advising information, course search, unofficial transcript requests, and program completion scheduling. Our COVID-19 response accelerated the deployment of other self-service tools for financial aid, student finance, and payment processes. MATC uses G Suite, and employee-student interaction is supported by Google Chat.

MATC rapidly delivered a variety of information technologies, expanded current resources, and accelerated deployment of new services to support employees working from home. All employees have softphone capability on computers or cellphones via Cisco Jabber. Remarkably, college employees quickly and successfully pivoted to wide use of Google Meet as part of the COVID-19 response. MATC already had a substantial on-premises virtual desktop infrastructure (VDI). College IT personnel rapidly reconfigured and expanded the VDI infrastructure for increased use by employees and students. Further, when certain systems and services were not suitable for VDI access, VPN services were expanded to include additional campus groups.

New River Community and Technical College  
David Ayersman, Chief Information Officer  

New River Community and Technical College’s recent investments in technology positioned it well for the unfortunate situation caused by the pandemic. In many ways, the pandemic revealed which services and information were simply not yet available to remote users and thus shifted the focus of the college on these areas for improvement.

The small IT staff at New River, responsible for a nine-county service region, was faced with making improvements in response to the pandemic. The college admissions and course registration processes needed only minor adjustments in order to be available completely online. Some services that were not previously prioritized highly quickly became essential for remote users. The college implemented AppointmentPlus for online scheduling for advisors and student support staff, adopted Zendesk as an online chatbot and virtual agent, and expanded licenses for Zoom to cover all instructors. The college also implemented online secure file exchanges and online faxing with XMedius. We have deployed more than forty Cisco IP Communicator virtual phones for remote users so that they can continue using office phone numbers remotely. New River has two primary in-state support partners, WVNET and Alpha Technologies, who have been instrumental in enabling the college to quickly implement new services, adjust existing services, and provide the additional support needed to meet dramatically increased demand. New River is also fortunate that just prior to the pandemic, the college had implemented Zoom college-wide as well as Ellucian Banner 9 upgrades, a new portal (PortalGuard), and a new emergency-alert communication system (Regroup).

New River Community and Technical College will sustain these efforts by shifting priorities. For example, rather than continuing to invest in on-campus computing resources where 25-seat computer labs are in spaces not conducive to social distancing, the college will shift its short-term goal to investing in the expansion of online services to meet the ongoing needs of remote learners and remote workers.

Notes

Joseph Moreau is Vice Chancellor of Technology and Chief Technology Officer at Foot–Hill–De Anza Community College District. He served as Editor of the Connections: Community College Insights department of EDUCAUSE Review for both 2019 and 2020.

© 2020 David Ayersman, Thomas Hausmann, Jeremy Miller, Carlos Morales, Joseph Moreau, and Celeste Schwartz