

Mobile and Community Colleges

In “Community Colleges: Somewhat Different,” a recent *Connections: Community College Insights* column, Bret Ingerman addressed a number of issues regarding the role of information technology in community colleges and the conversations that community college IT organizations need to have to help support our students.¹ One area to discuss is how to ensure that our Internet/web-based systems can be used by our students. Our role must be to look at who our students are and at the available data on what technology our students have and how they access the Internet.

Who Are Our Students?

While each community college is based in its own community, offers programs to support that community, and has a unique student body composition based on geography, national data can help us understand who we serve overall. In looking at the general trends in community college enrollment, we find that although the individual composition of each community college differs, we share these national trends:

- The average age is 29.
- Traditional-age students (18–24) make up about 50 percent of our students.
- The majority are first-generation students.
- A significant number are single parents.
- The majority work while taking classes.
- Over half of our students are from the lower two SES (socio-economic status) quartiles.²

Data: How Students Access the Internet

A plethora of studies, white papers, and data points demonstrate how incoming traditional-age students research selective colleges, but in my mind, there is always a question of how these facts relate to community college students. Yes, some community colleges are seen as “preferred” educational institutions—if not for all classes, perhaps for certain areas, such as wind-power, nursing, or nanotechnology—but overall, the general perception about community colleges is that they aren’t usually a school of choice.³ We do what we can to combat that perception—by underscoring our value, highlighting our unique programs, and showing off our successful graduates—but I’ve found no studies that show how students research and actively select a community college.

However, there are more generalized studies about how people use the Internet, and this is where knowing our students is critical. The first time I looked at this data, my institu-

tion was moving a website to responsive design, and we were looking at both our analytics and national studies. The Pew Center for Research always has current studies on the Internet, and these three had the most recent and relevant data: *U.S. Smartphone Use in 2015*; *Technology Device Ownership: 2015*; and *Home Broadband 2015*.⁴

One of the key statistics of these reports is that low-income students, or those with lower educational attainment, are most likely to have a smartphone as their only access to the Internet. From our general data, we know that these particular groups make up a significant percentage of our student population. The *U.S. Smartphone Use in 2015* data shows that 30 percent of all smartphone users have used their smartphone to take a class or get educational content, whether or not they are smartphone-dependent.⁵

Home Broadband 2015 reaffirms that for these same groups, the cost of broadband is too expensive, and as the capability of smartphones has grown, these groups have come to increasingly rely on smartphones as their primary access to the Internet.⁶ Similarly, the *EDUCAUSE Review Connections* column “E-Learning, the Digital Divide, and Student Success at Community Colleges” also points to U.S. Department of Commerce data that reinforces that the key populations of community colleges have limited home Internet access.⁷

The studies also point out that these students may have no other technology—making it critical that we provide digital resources in a mobile format.

What Can We Do?

What does this mean for community colleges? It would appear that we need to ensure not only that our websites are mobile-friendly but also that all of our systems are mobile-capable.

These systems include our student information systems (registration, grades); course management systems; payment systems; library systems; internal portals; academic support systems (degree audits, early intervention, advisor appointments); and any internally created forms, applications, or software. In short, any system or software that a student would use to do business or learning at the college should, ideally, be mobile-ready. With limited personnel and budgets—and with the ever-growing dependence on technology—this is a tall order for any IT department.

Even though I am talking here about community college students, data shows that all students expect and rely on smartphones. For example, according to the “EDUCAUSE Almanac for Undergraduate Student and Technology Survey, 2016,”



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96 percent of students own a smartphone, and a majority say that being able to do academic activities (90%) or administrative activities (78%) on their smartphone is at least moderately important.⁸ For community college students, the statistics imply that this is vital for these activities, since they have no other way to access the Internet.

At Oakton Community College, we've started to meet this need. We've recently finished our move to a responsive website, we're in the midst of upgrading our student (and employee) portal, and we're planning the upgrades to make our student record system mobile-friendly. We've expanded our activities in social media (since that's already mobile-friendly), and we are integrating mobile-friendly videos. We are still reviewing other systems and programs, and we are working on our internal outreach to ensure that the college community understands the need to focus on, and hopefully prioritize, this issue.

Circling back: we have started our conversation, and we have taken our first steps. Hopefully, other community colleges will initiate and continue these conversations as they look at this critical data. ■

Notes

1. Bret Ingerman, "Community Colleges: Somewhat Different," *EDUCAUSE Review* 51, no. 4 (July/August 2016).
2. Anthony P. Carnevale and Stephen J. Rose, "Socioeconomic Status, Race/Ethnicity, and Selective College Admissions," A Century Foundation Paper, March 31, 2003; American Association of Community Colleges, "Fast Facts," February 2016; Christopher M. Mullin, "Why Access Matters: The Community College Student Body," AACC Policy Brief 2012-01PBL, February 2012.
3. Kate Barrington, "Why Do Community Colleges Get a Bad Rap?," *Community College Review*, November 05, 2015.
4. John B. Horrigan and Maeve Duggan, "Home Broadband 2015," Pew Research Center, December 21, 2015; Aaron Smith, "U.S. Smartphone Use in 2015," Pew Research Center, April 1, 2015; Monica Anderson, "Technology Device Ownership: 2015," Pew Research Center, October 29, 2015.
5. Smith, "U.S. Smartphone Use in 2015."
6. Horrigan and Duggan, "Home Broadband 2015."
7. Susan Kater, Robert Soza, and Lisa Young, "E-Learning, the Digital Divide, and Student Success at Community Colleges," *EDUCAUSE Review* 51, no. 5 (September/October 2016).
8. "EDUCAUSE Almanac for Undergraduate Student and Technology Survey, 2016" (June 2016).

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