Actualizing the Online Community College

Earlier this year, California Governor Jerry Brown asked the head of the state’s community college system to develop a proposal for a fully online community college by November 2017. If the proposal moves to an implementation stage, California would be the only state to offer such an institution.1 With some surveys indicating that enrollment growth is attributable more to online education than to on-campus courses,2 what if other states followed California’s lead? What would be the building blocks of such institutions, and what can a traditional brick-and-mortar community college learn from them to enhance its online learning initiatives?

Commitment to “Accessibility First”
Community colleges are open-access institutions. However, online courses are not always designed, at their inception, to include content that aligns with accessibility standards. Most higher education institutions lack the ability to determine the extent to which online learning content is accessible across instructors and the many sections they offer each semester of every year. It’s counterintuitive to think that institutions such as community colleges, which pride themselves on their commitment to access, would offer courses with content that is not fully accessible to all students, including those with disabilities. Although traditional institutions honor accommodation requests for students with disabilities, this tends to happen on a case-by-case basis instead of before the start of classes.

Another issue to highlight is the fact that colleges and universities are at risk of litigation if their courses do not align with accessibility standards. For example, in March 2017 the University of Berkley decided to remove public access to more than 20,000 audio and video files when the U.S. Department of Justice requested this content be made accessible to individuals with disabilities.3 Although some evolving tools like Blackboard Ally can help an institution determine how much of its content is accessible and can even offer original content in accessible formats, an institution still needs to undergo its own due diligence to ensure that all of its course content is accessible to all of its students. A new institution such as a fully online community college has the opportunity to ensure that each of its courses is “accessible-first” and to thus serve as a leader in this approach to course development among community colleges.

Model Course Approach
A new community college—whether or not it is fully online—could benefit from the affordances of using a model course approach to course development. This approach focuses on ensuring that the student experience is consistent across sections of the same course as well as across different courses. The consistency can include standard instructional content and organizational structure. Although the use of model courses in a traditional institution might be seen by some faculty as a threat to academic freedom, model courses can be a helpful baseplate that faculty can build on in terms of adding their own content, assignments, and assessments. This can be especially helpful for new adjunct faculty who might be hired very close to the start of courses. A model course approach would enable a fully online community college to provide a high level of consistency to its courses as it scales the number of sections it offers.

Flexible Course Scheduling
A new fully online institution will have the opportunity to rethink how often it offers online courses for certificate and degree programs. A course schedule based on online courses can be created without fear of a lack of classroom space. The institution could offer online courses in a variety of ways that include accelerated session formats, such as four or five weeks. It could also borrow from institutions such as Western Governors University and Southern New Hampshire University’s College for America, which offer competency-based education (CBE) certificates and degrees. Specifically, a new fully online community college could offer CBE courses that allow students to move faster through their programs once they demonstrate they have mastered specific course- and program-based competencies. This approach respects the fact that students learn at different paces, and it moves beyond traditional thinking that assumes all students must end courses at the same time.

Out-of-State Faculty
A fully online community college may not have anxiety about needing classroom space as it scales, but it will need to focus on developing a rich pool of talented faculty to offer its courses. But unlike traditional colleges, which often lack the interest and/or the internal capacity to manage the necessary processes and resultant paperwork required to file taxes in an out-of-state faculty member’s home state, an online learning provider can maximize the flexibility of hiring faculty regardless of their geographic location. With the potential to have many full- and part-time faculty from various states, a fully online community college will need to use a rich combination of online and face-to-face meetings and professional development opportunities to engage and support these faculty.
Zero-Textbook-Cost Degrees

Several community colleges are adopting the use of open educational resources (OER) in place of more expensive proprietary textbooks. A new fully online community college could adopt such a model across each of its courses so that it could offer degree pathways that have no textbook costs for students. Leaders of such efforts include Tidewater Community College, Northern Virginia Community College, and several community colleges working with Achieving the Dream to adopt such a model. Given the preliminary data that suggests students who take zero-textbook-cost courses are as successful as, or more successful than, students in courses with traditional textbooks, more community colleges should investigate and implement this approach.4

Use of Analytics

A new fully online community college has an opportunity to define how it will leverage the use of analytics to gather varied data in support of both students and faculty. The institution can use learning management system (LMS) data to gauge student and faculty behaviors and to see how those behaviors relate to student success. An institution can track how often students are visiting the LMS on a daily and/or weekly basis, review which content they are accessing, and determine how timely students are in the submission of their assignments and assessments. An institution can also use LMS data to find out how engaged faculty are with their courses in terms of their presence in the LMS; their daily habits of accessing the LMS; their level of participation in discussion forums; and how often they post grades.

Data from adaptive courseware can offer further insight into student learning. Adaptive courseware delivers remediation to students when needed and provides data that faculty can use to adjust their instruction to meet gaps in a student’s learning. Analytics can also be pooled from other systems, such as student success and online tutoring platforms. Services such as Tutor.com give tutors the ability to send early alerts to faculty for students who spend large amounts of time in online tutoring sessions and/or struggle with understanding course topics. Student retention systems such as Hobsons Starfish Early Alert provide institutions with tools that faculty and success coaches can use to offer helpful outreach to students.

Next Steps

Regardless of whether California develops and launches its first fully online community college, this topic should inspire all of us working in community colleges to find ways to enhance our approaches to offering online courses and programs. We should begin or continue to research and appropriately adopt good practices in accessibility, course development, course scheduling, faculty hiring and support, OER selection, and the use of analytics to help us offer online learning experiences of the highest quality. Such work is crucial to ensuring that the future of online learning at community colleges truly benefits the students and faculty we strive to serve.

Notes

1. Ashley A. Smith, “New Models for Community Colleges,” Inside Higher Ed, June 27, 2017. Although Rio Salado College offers the majority of its courses fully online and is an online learning provider at the community college level, its history began with onsite locations throughout Arizona beginning in 1978, and it continues to maintain a physical presence.


Kelvin Bentley (timelord33@gmail.com) is an e-learning consultant and former Vice President of Academic Affairs, TCC Connect Campus, Tarrant County College District.

© 2017 Kelvin Bentley. The text of this article is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License.

By KELVIN BENTLEY

EDUCAUSE is a nonprofit association and the foremost community of IT leaders and professionals committed to advancing higher education.

EDUCAUSE Board of Directors

Tracy Schroeder, Chair
Vice President of Information Services and Technology
Boston University

John (Jack) Suess, Vice Chair
Vice President of Information Technology and CIO
University of Maryland, Baltimore County

Kay Rhodes, Secretary
Associate Vice Chancellor and CIO
Texas Tech University System

Bill Hogue, Treasurer
Vice President for Information Technology and CIO
University of South Carolina

Eric Denne
Vice President and CIO
University of Maryland

Diane Graves
Assistant Vice President for Information Resources and University Librarian
Trinity University

Reginald (Reggie) Henry
Chief Information Officer
American Society of Association Executives (ASAE)

Barron Koralesky
Chief Information Officer
Williams College

Ron Kraemer
Vice President for Information Technology and Chief Information & Digital Officer
University of Notre Dame

Edward Leach
Executive Director
National Institute for Staff and Organizational Development (NISOD)

Joseph Moreau
Vice Chancellor of Technology and CTO
Foothill-De Anza Community College District

Michele Norin
Senior Vice President and Chief Information Officer
Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey

Ex Officio Member
John O’Brien
President and CEO
EDUCAUSE