Leadership, Change Management, and the Nontraditional Student

Change is constant, and it is occurring at a faster rate than ever before—Moore's Law states that processing power duplicates every 24 months, thus creating a better and more powerful computer processor. Processes, the environment, technology, knowledge, and information are taking gigantic steps forward as we change the way we access, obtain, consume, use, process, and repurpose information.

Today's learner aspires to obtain a higher education under a very different set of circumstances than the ones I experienced as an undergraduate student in the early 1980s and the 1990s. While technology improvements and certain advances along the economic ladder have occurred for some students since then, many more millions of students still face challenges related to learning, disabilities, cost and affordability of an education, transportation, family responsibilities, and developmental education—thus requiring tutoring and assistance. Since economic and social pressures continue to play a major role in how citizens better themselves to be productive and successful, it is critical that higher education institutions adapt to the new circumstances of current students.

The typical student today is the nontraditional student. As defined by the National Center for Education Statistics, the nontraditional student meets one of seven characteristics: has delayed enrollment into postsecondary education; attends college part-time; works full time; is financially independent for financial aid purposes; has dependents other than a spouse; is a single parent; or does not have a high school diploma.1

Many nontraditional students have not been able to access opportunities primarily because of the length of time required to complete a degree or credits they have accumulated are not relevant to their current career, thus perpetuating the cycle of unequipped employees. Institutions of higher education need to offer students additional ways to enroll in, progress through, and complete a college education. The nontraditional student seeks flexibility and accelerated learning options. How can the higher education community adapt to these new conditions? Does doing so require a more frequent review of academic offerings? How can colleges and universities serve nontraditional learners to help them quickly integrate to the workforce?2

In 2011 the state of Texas implemented a performance-based funding program, which included a criterion to allocate 10 percent of formula funding based on points earned from a three-year average of student success indicators. This was seen by many as the best approach to ensure that higher education institutions were creating ideal conditions for students to advance and to complete their higher education. The program follows a zero-sum approach because of limited dollars available every biennium to fund institutions that have earned the most points.3 It is predicted that many more states will continue to implement their own forms of funding for higher education because doing so “focuses on spending rather than the money spent.”4 The state of Texas has also implemented 60x30, an ambitious initiative that aims at reaching four general goals by the year 2030. The overall objective is to ensure that 60 percent of the citizens of the state will have a higher education credential. Currently, only 15 percent of the population has a higher education credential.4

While there is a long road ahead, institutions are responding to the mandates. At Tarrant County College (TCC), we are addressing these challenges and opportunities in ways that allow us to adapt quickly to the needs of nontraditional students and to aid them in their transition to the workforce. In 2012, TCC took a bold step to establish a new campus with a single focus on developing a learning environment for nontraditional students. The district leadership wanted to instill a college-going culture within the community and moved forward to approve a fully online campus. In 2014, the TCC Connect Campus opened for business, with the goal of increasing access to learning opportunities through three programs: eLearning; Dual Credit; and an accelerated Weekend College.1

It is widely known that e-learning (or online education) provides flexibility and convenience for students who want to determine their own time and place of study and/or save on commuting costs to campus. In addition, this sector of the learning community has experienced continuous growth while addressing the needs of these students for the last decade.6 In anticipation of this transformation, TCC embarked on the creation of a campus that can leverage strategies to address the growth via e-learning.7 The TCC eLearning program extends beyond the traditional classroom by offering 18 fully online programs including 5 associate degrees, 13 certificates, and more than 350 online college credit courses. Program offerings include Accounting, Business, Small Business Management, and Office Technology. The eLearning program is a great opportunity for students to learn and apply knowledge in real time while balancing life responsibilities.

The Dual Credit learning option contributed to the creation of a college-going culture that begins at the sophomore high school level. The TCC leadership moved the program from the Connect Campus to the face-to-face campuses in 2015.
Although the Connect Campus no longer oversees Dual Credit offerings, it reengineered processes, scheduling, and priorities while increasing the number of students and its reach within the program.

Finally, the Weekend College, a brand-new design concept, is tailored to allow students to join a cohort and complete a college degree or the transferable core curriculum in less than two years by attending hybrid classes on the weekends. The classes are structured in seven-week terms, and students can select their class time on Friday or Saturday. Weekend College students attend campus only one day per week, allowing them to balance family and work responsibilities with their coursework. Students can attain a degree in less than two years when they combine eLearning and Weekend College courses. This modality facilitates a highly interactive college experience among peers with common educational goals. The Weekend College program helps build learning communities, which then develop into a strong support system for the students.

All credit online courses meet the same curriculum requirements as those held face-to-face. TCC Connect Campus student services are accessible completely online and include advising, tutoring, library services, writing center, and remote proctoring of tests.

With a forecast of an increase in the number of nontraditional learners, from 3.5 million in 2016 to 5 million by year 2020, institutions of higher education will be required to cater to these students. Adapting to the needs of the population, industry, and lifelong learners must be at the forefront of institutional strategic planning. Students require not only new learning approaches that address various complexities they face in their lives but also options to retool. Higher education institutions must take action and must implement solutions through bold leadership and defined timelines that aim for long-term solutions to today’s needs.

Notes
5. TCC Vision 2015 Strategic Plan (Fort Worth, TX: Tarrant County College District, 2012); TCC Connect Concept Plan (Fort Worth, TX: Tarrant County College District, 2013).

Carlos Morales is founding President of TCC Connect Campus, the largest and fastest-growing of the six campuses that form Tarrant County College District.