



## Wired Campus

### Beating the ‘Not Invented here’ Mentality

January 6, 2011, 5:15 pm

By Josh Fischman

*Las Vegas*—Linda Thor, chancellor of the Foothill-De Anza Community College District, started a session here at the Higher Ed Tech Summit with a startling statistic: In her previous job, as president of Rio Salado College, the college improved online-course completion rates from 50 percent to upward of 80 percent.

Technology played a big role, she said. Adding 24/7 student support, detecting signals of classroom success and failure, and making things like library services available online when students needed them were aspects of this.

So if such big gains are possible, why isn't everyone doing this?

“It's the ‘not invented here’ issue,” said Ms. Thor.

“We have a boutique problem,” said Mark David Milliron, deputy director of higher education for the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, who joined Ms. Thor on the panel, which was about using technology to improve graduation rates. There are plenty of good ideas, the two said, but colleges are reluctant to adopt solutions that did not arise from their own campuses.

There is an institutional mind-set, Mr. Milliron said, that if something was not invented on a particular campus, it is not appropriate for that particular campus. Ms. Thor added that there are many “best practices” in technology but few mechanisms for disseminating them to a wider community. So things that work are not picked up or are deliberately passed over.

So how do we break down the resistance? asked Philip Regier, executive vice provost and dean of Arizona State University Online, who was also on this panel.

“We need to start having more courageous conversations about these practices,” said Mr. Milliron. “The conversation now is dominated by people who don't believe anything will work and people who believe nothing but their own solution will work.” His foundation wants to engage educators in the middle, who have been drowned out by the extreme

voices, and show them how certain practices have worked at certain institutions, and can be adapted to other institutions. And the way to do that is with good data, illuminating practices that work and some that don't, so the foundation will be emphasizing that.

“Higher education has been good at creating islands of innovation,” Mr. Milliron said. “We say that it’s OK to use technology on 50 or 100 students off on the side someplace, as long as you don’t apply it to the mainstream. It’s time to pull these different ideas together.”

This entry was posted in Teaching, Uncategorized. Bookmark the permalink.

## **6 Responses to *Beating the 'Not Invented Here' Mentality***

*arrive2\_\_net* - January 6, 2011 at 7:29 pm

Part of the 'not invented here' attitude is driven by the fact that institutions usually reward 'inventing here' differently than it rewards adopting existing ideas. Everyone wants to be in the story about how well their brilliant idea worked, not necessarily in the story about how they took someone else's idea. I think the 'not invented here' attitude softens somewhat were leaders talk more about how to adapt or adjust other ideas to their institutional setting, and less about just transferring outside ideas into the institution.

Going from a 50% to an 80% completion rate, as described in the article is quite an achievement. I think it shows what a difference improving the student's interface to the online course can make. Those variables (tech, library access, etc.) may be seen as trifles by some, but, based on what is reported in this article they made a big difference. The success of these step at Rio Salado College is especially noteworthy because another article I read recently found "Nothing Works".

([http://www.washingtonmonthly.com/college\\_guide/blog/preventing\\_online\\_dropouts\\_not.php](http://www.washingtonmonthly.com/college_guide/blog/preventing_online_dropouts_not.php))

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*sanjaykapur* - January 7, 2011 at 7:41 am

Adopting new ideas means change. Change means retraining. Retraining means people need time for it and they are not doing what is needed to keep current systems running.

Change will not happen unless institutions are willing to abandon current ways and not have anything in the interim while people come up to speed on the new way of doing things. This was easier in the two semester system when there were several months of down time to adopt new ways. Now that there are summer classes and winter classes there is no down time to adopt change.

Paradoxically, I firmly believe that it is the introduction of year-round teaching that is leading to a reduction in completion rates.

*shawnmehan* - January 7, 2011 at 9:22 am

While I applaud the increase in completion rates at this particular college, I would reject strongly the underlying thesis of the article that there is a dearth of campuses willing to adopt technology not invented there. There are scores of huge populations of deployed technologies which would argue against this, both proprietary and open source: moodle, blackboard, question mark perception, banner, etc. And there are user communities for

each of these technologies with proponents engaged in exchanging best practice, both in administration and utilisation.

Rather, what I think is lacking are structures at most campuses to promote exchange of best practice that focus on teaching methods, practices, styles, and opportunities for open reflection. This is in line with sanjayjapur's comments above, imho, where to change practice rather than simply introduce a new technology takes more energy and space than most institutions are willing to invest.

This is not to say that the not invented here syndrome doesn't exist. It demonstrably does, but it is not rampant and dominant, certainly not amongst those charged with technology implementation!

*grward* - January 7, 2011 at 9:30 am

Just wondering if anyone has a quick link (or even an old fashioned reference) to reports describing the data, study design, endpoints, etc., upon which Chancellor Thor based her claims about the gains made at Rio Salado College. A quick search of the website for the Higher Ed Tech Summit didn't turn up anything (probably because the meeting is still in progress): neither did the College's own website for their online program. If dissemination of information is so important, perhaps more effort could be made to making it easier for the rest of us to find the data necessary to adopt those programs that are supposedly so effective.

Arrive\_2, I recall that The Chronicle also did a report on the published review of methods to prevent online dropouts, but I don't have the link handy.

*gseverett1* - January 7, 2011 at 10:15 am

A sustained 80% course completion rate in online courses for a community college would be outrageously good, and outrageously newsworthy. Some quick googling suggests that Arizona in particular has a problem, with only an 18.2% three-year completion rate (again, Rio Salado claims a 45% rate; even that seems incompatible with 80% course completion) see <http://communitycollegespotlight.org/tags/completion-rate/> , which quotes a Goldwater Institute report.

If Rio Salado has really achieved (and sustained) an 80% rate, it should be front-page news. Can the Chronicle please verify?

*jxfarmer* - January 7, 2011 at 11:41 am

What Linda Thor could not say is why Rio Salado College was so successful. It is leadership, teamwork, and incentives. Dr. Thor herself had a similar record of success in the Los Angeles Community College District. She focuses on identifying and developing an exceptional team dedicated to student success. Staff meetings always focus on what can be done to improve student performance; implementation is immediate. Effective

instruction is paramount. The online library is an example (quickly followed by University of Phoenix's observant John Sperling). The unique multiple terms that permit breaks in the schedule when student exigencies arise—illness in the family, job changes and finances requiring extra work are examples. Scheduling classes in shopping malls where parking and quick food are available for time-limited students. 24/7 assistance to students so technology is never a barrier to student progress. Expert assistance when needed to continue with coursework. Course materials constantly improved based on quantitative measures.

None of these alone are sufficient to account for Rio Salado's success, but all combined are. The Maricopa Community College District is an exceptional district with well-documented statistics. And a history of decentralized responsibility and authority. Yet these data show how successful Rio Salado has been as compared to the campus-based Maricopa colleges constrained by tradition that is difficult to change.

District Chancellor Dr. Paul Elsner created Rio Salado College to meet the needs of working and less-prepared students insisting that instruction be brought to the student rather than students to campus. He recruited Linda Thor as president. Her team has created the opportunity for the student success he envisioned. And the data shows this.