

California Community Colleges Joining Forces for Online Success

By David Rathes • 02/26/14

With \$57 million in funding over several years proposed by Gov. Jerry Brown and approved by the state legislature, California is about to launch a bold experiment in creating a statewide Online Education Initiative. The mission: to dramatically increase the number of students who obtain associate degrees and transfer to four-year colleges.

California's community colleges have been offering courses online for more than 20 years. Last academic year they taught 41,000 online sections to 620,000 students. Yet over the years there has been little coordination between the state's 72 districts in terms of technology platforms or student and faculty support. And retention rates in online courses remains stubbornly low, as they do nationwide.

The hope is that bringing extra technology resources and centralization to California's community college system -- creating an Online Education Ecosystem -- will improve student success rates online.

Great Expectations

Two colleges are partnering to lead the effort: **Butte-Glenn Community College District, which has experience as a host campus for other statewide technology initiatives, will focus on the technology implementation, and the Foothill-De Anza (FHDA) Community College District in Silicon Valley will focus on program and curriculum development.** (FHDA has been a leader in online curriculum; approximately 30 percent of its enrollment is already online.)

Linda Thor, chancellor of FHDA, described two primary drivers of the Online Education Initiative: "First, there's an emphasis on completion of certification degrees and associate degrees that transfer to four-year colleges in an affordable way," she said. "Second, the steep budget cuts during the recession made us all realize that there are better ways to achieve our goals in a more collaborative way that will better use our limited resources."

Central to the ecosystem idea is a common course management system envisioned as a sophisticated, responsive, next-generation online environment, explained Joseph Moreau, acting executive director of the initiative and vice chancellor of information technology at FHDA. "Currently there are seven to 10 course management systems in production across the state. You might find a few faculty members who say they love theirs, but a much larger number would be less enthusiastic. So this is an opportunity to drive innovation and perhaps lead to the creation of a platform that has yet to be designed."

A broad-based steering committee is directing priorities, and a project launch team is in the process of hiring permanent staff, including an executive director, a professional development

officer, a director of accessibility and universal design, a chief academic officer and a director of data analytics.

The goal is to have a system ready to deploy by June 2015.

"We have begun the search for a course management system partner," Moreau added. "And that is just one piece. We are envisioning a portal environment that in one single space has planning tools, assessment tools, counseling, online tutoring. And perhaps even other pieces that may not have been invented yet." Another possibility might be to have a repository of model course content faculty members could adapt to their own use.

"When we write the request for proposal, we have a chance to imagine a dream system," said Patrick Perry, vice chancellor of technology for the California Community College System. "No one vendor may have everything we want and we may put together a best-of-breed system. It is such a large RFP that we may be able to push a vendor to integrate new features into their core product."

FHDA's Thor said one of the most exciting aspects of the effort is the potential to provide faculty with actionable analytics in visualized reports of what is happening in their classes in real time.

"We not only want to identify student behavior that predicts success or failure," Thor said, "we also want to provide actionable analytics to instructors and push them information that is not historical data. There is a lot of great work going on in that field."

Better Together

Thor pointed out that the value of a statewide initiative is the focus on retention in online courses that community colleges can't afford to address individually. She is drawing on her experience from a prior position at Arizona's Rio Salado College, where the online retention rate was a strong 85 percent (compared to 50 percent nationwide) -- thanks to the institution's systems approach to supporting online students. "We made sure we had all the services that face-to-face students have available, such as tutoring, financial aid and a 24/7 instructional help desk manned by adjunct faculty," she recalled.

The idea is for California's community colleges to provide those types of services on a statewide level. The state-level buying power and centralized funding should be attractive to colleges, Thor said. "For instance, if several colleges are using online tutoring systems, we can contract for that at the state level and offer it for free as one of many services to the 112 colleges in the state."

The fact that community colleges will use free centralized services will allow the chancellor's office to require some standard practices across the system. "If we pay for things centrally, then we can require good practices and conditions, such as staff being certified in distance education," Perry said.

Earning and retaining the buy-in of the 112 colleges will be the biggest challenge, Thor and Perry agreed. "We intend to make it so good that it is a no-brainer to participate," Thor said. The initiative will start with a small pilot group to work on policy, procedures and low-hanging fruit, such as an online tutoring service. But Perry admits widespread use is not guaranteed. "It is not a mandate that everyone use it," he said. "We appreciate there is pain in migration. Professors get acclimated to working with one system and there is pain in moving away from it."

"We see this as a transformational moment in California higher education," Moreau said. "We think this will have a profound impact in terms of access and student success. And over and above what we do online, we want to create things that are usable across the whole system by any student. For instance, if we develop a good online counseling module, there's no reason to limit it to students in online courses."

About the Author

A David Rath is a Philadelphia-based freelance writer focused on information technology. He writes regularly for several IT publications, including Healthcare Informatics and Government Technology.