

MCC struggling with pandemic-fueled enrollment dip

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A second dip at Mesa Community College enrollment could be called “the online class fade” or “Zoom burnout.”

After a sharp drop in students at the beginning of the semester likely caused by the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, Dr. Lori M. Berquam tracked another drop two months into the spring semester.

The MCC interim president forced a smile and shook her head during an interview with the Tribune – via Google Meetings, fittingly.

“Our numbers have been declining. Last semester and this semester we certainly did see a decline in enrollment,” Berquam said.

“We were already down about 14 percent from enrollment (at the beginning of the semester. We’ve dropped another 4 percent since then.”

Berquam was MCC’s executive vice president of Academic and Student Affairs when she was appointed as interim president Feb. 1, 2020. A month later, Maricopa County had its first COVID-19 case.

The virus raged through the county and state, leading Gov. Doug Ducey’s order closing all Arizona schools last spring.

MCC continued instruction online-only for months.

“Mesa Community College was about being in small classrooms connecting with students. That was our value, that is what we were built on,” Berquam said. “We had to shift quickly. And are still shifting.”

The Mesa school, the largest of the 10 community colleges in the Maricopa County Community College District, remains in mostly-online mode this semester.

“About 10 to 18 percent of classes are now face-to-face,” Berquam said.

Though emergency medical technician, welding and a few other courses meet outdoors – with no more than 10 students for each in-person class – the campus on Dobson Road just north of US 60 is quiet, if not quite a “ghost campus.”

Studying at the library, eating at the cafeteria, socializing with friends and generally “hanging out at school” remain off limits.

“It’s car to class to car. Public areas not open,” Berquam said.

The great majority of classes being taught online is directly related to that second drop in enrollment, Berquam believes.

“People are done with Zoom and video classes,” she said with an empathetic sigh. “For educators, the challenge is, ‘How do I get people engaged?’”

Two full semesters into the pandemic, a clear pattern emerged.

“We have a drop off after about 10 weeks. We keep kids virtually engaged for eight weeks nine weeks, then we lose

them,” Berquam said.

She feels students are able to self-manage for the first month or so of virtual classrooms, and then challenges start to stack up. Staring at a computer all day is too much, for some.

For others, it’s a bandwidth challenge, especially if they have kids taking their own online classes and/or spouses working from home.

“We are not meant to be a virtual college. We are designed to be face to face,” Berquam said. “We are designed to be small in nature, (providing) interactions with students in the classroom.

“What we’re seeing in the drop in enrollment is that’s what students want.”

The biggest challenge has been in trade-related courses.

“We know that students want that hands-on experience. It’s hard to do welding online or automotive repair online. How to do pottery or sculpting online?” she said. “Our faculty has been very creative with take-home lab kits.

“But there’s great interest in returning to what we love.”

The good news is that with COVID-19 cases falling in the state and county with simultaneous increases in vaccinations, more in-person classes are planned at MCC this summer.

“Our goal is to offer a few more face-to-face classes each semester,” Berquam said,

adding it’s too early to know when MCC and other community colleges can return to normal.

MCC’s current semester ends the first week of May, with a “drive-thru graduation” planned for May 14. “It’s important to honor our graduates,” Berquam said.

Though some retirements have not been filled, she said Mesa Community College did not have to do any involuntary staff cuts.

And the MCC of old, with students-in-seats and a buzzing campus, may not be far away.

“Our hope is, once there are greater levels of vaccinations, we’ll be able to welcome people back,” Berquam said.

For more information, visit mesacc.edu. ■

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