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EDUCATION

Mesa Community College iBelong Initiative nationally recognized

Receives prestigious Terry O'Banion Award



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METRO CREATIVE CONNECTION

The iBelong Student Success Initiative is a platform for teaching and learning, providing access to technology tools and resources to be successful.

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Mesa Community College has been named a silver winner of the prestigious Terry O'Banion Award by the National Council on Student Development for the transformational iBelong Student Success Initiative.

The annual award honors exceptional college programs throughout the U.S. for their innovation, impacting student outcomes based on clear data, responding to a significant need and serving as a model of student development goals, according to a release.

Patricia Herrera, MCC instructional technologist, who created, planned and implemented the initiative in collaboration with Alvin Bridges, MCC associate vice president of College Technology Services, accepted the award on behalf of the college at the 2023 NCSD National Conference held Oct. 19-21 in Houston.

“This award is for MCC in support of the faculty because they’re the ones driving it,” Bridges said in the release. “The program has exploded since it was introduced – with the support of our Center for Teaching and Learning (CTL) and College Technology Services (CTS) teams, we’re changing the educational landscape of the Maricopa County Community College District (MCCCD).”

The iBelong Student Success Initiative is a platform for teaching and learning, providing access to technology tools and resources to be successful. Students are provided with an iPad bundle consisting of an iPad, keyboard and Apple Pencil and easy access to a technical support system. Since the program was introduced two years ago, it has proven to be extremely beneficial for students and faculty while demonstrating a cost-savings for the college, the release states.

The initiative, Bridges pointed out, “levels the playing field” by providing devices to students who may not have the financial resources to purchase them. “We found that a large number of students were not prepared for college, having no access to technology. They were doing homework on cell phones or on a sibling’s elementary school Chromebook, borrowing a friend’s laptop or depending on the college computer lab. Now they can be as successful as those who have access to software and resources.”

Because iBelong eliminates the need for school supplies like notebooks, pencils, highlighters, printing toner and paper, students can save an estimated \$500-plus per semester, added Herrera.

By the end of the 2022-23 school year, 2,000 students were enrolled in the initiative. For 2023-24 that number has risen to 4,000. An MCC poll found that 73% of these students are female with 53% having first-generation status. An overwhelming majority indicated that the initiative helped improve their learning and is aiding in improved course completion and retention, the release states.

iBelong also has support from the faculty, a major component in the initiative’s success. Herrera said that today MCC is the only college in the MCCCD and the only community college or college in Arizona offering the program.

While it’s not the only school in the U.S. that has such a program, “we’re the only school in the country that can credit our success to our outstanding faculty. At other schools, the administration has pushed its faculty to participate. At MCC this is an opt-in program and the faculty is enthusiastically responding,” Herrera said.

Within the first six months of the iBelong training period, participation rapidly grew from five faculty members to 50. By the end of the 2022-23 school year, that number grew to 100. For the 2023-24 school year, faculty participation is at 110 and continues to increase semester to semester.

Driving faculty interest is the work Herrera has done to foster an environment of creativity and collaboration, building support for the initiative among instructors who had never touched an Apple device. Herrera serves as the bridge between faculty and CTS, collaborating across departments and faculty groups.

Bridges pointed out “Patricia and her team give us ideas, we figure out how to build the platform and then they’re off implementing it — training faculty and students to get the most out of the solution.”

Also, it seemed to be a fortuitous time to introduce iBelong. During and after the pandemic, Bridges and Herrera realized that faculty wasn’t prepared to teach in a digital environment. iBelong has changed that.

“We’re not going back to pre-pandemic teaching. Technology is here to stay and what better way than this initiative to prepare faculty to use technology efficiently — to teach well digitally — especially now that our K-12 schools use the iPad,” Herrera pointed out. “This is the time for community colleges to step up and implement these tools because when our students come to class, they’ll be expecting it.”

Departments using iBelong are seeing cost and time savings as well.

“As an example, faculty in the math department print out an estimated 10,000 handouts per semester costing MCC an average of \$60,000. That number has dropped to 3,000 handouts for the fall semester roughly cutting the cost by 70%,” noted Bridges. Also, instructors can use their time more efficiently in the classroom as there are fewer interruptions from students when systems crash.

“Winning the Terry O’Banion Award means we’re changing education. It means we’re impacting students and that’s what we’re here to do,” he continued. “Other schools may offer one or more aspects of iBelong but they don’t have the MCC culture that makes us successful. The coordination and communication between the CTL and CTS has been paramount.”

Herrera says student testimonials show “we are helping them feel like they do belong here at MCC. We’re giving them the affirmation that they’re doing the right thing by pursuing an education, by transforming their lives in their chosen professions. They feel that we value them.”

Herrera is the first technologist to be certified as an Apple learning specialist for the MCCC and has been invited to several Apple presentations representing the MCC leadership and its commitment to student success.

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