

Why IT Matters to Higher Education

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E-Learning, the Digital Divide, and Student Success at Community Colleges

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CONNECTIONS [Community College Insights]

The number of students who enroll in U.S. community colleges tends to be inversely related to the economy. When the economy is good and jobs are plentiful, potential (and enrolled) students may put off their education in order to work. When the economy is not strong and jobless rates are higher, students may take the opportunity to learn new skills and continue their education. So the community college enrollment decline that we are seeing across the United States is in part a result of this cyclical pattern. However, in a countertrend, community colleges have seen growth in the e-learning field. In fact, according to a 2015 national distance education survey: “eLearning enrollments have accounted for nearly all student enrollment growth at community colleges during the past eleven years.”¹

E-learning is an important option for community college students because they are more likely than four-year college/university students to be older, be working, have lower socioeconomic status, have dependents and hence more responsibilities outside of college, and require developmental education. Community colleges enroll more than 12 million students annually in credit and noncredit programs, and these students are very diverse. When we look at all undergraduate students in the United States, community college students are more likely than students at four-year institutions to be first generation, students of color, women, part-time students, and in a wider age range, from teens to senior adults.² Given the diversity of learners, community college faculty employ a wide variety of learning modalities, including e-learning, so access to electronic resources is important for the success of all of our students.

Research indicates that a “digital divide” remains in the United States despite rapid technological advances. One-third of low-income and rural K-12 students in the United States are unable to go online when at home. A national U.S. Department of Commerce study found that “only 55 percent of African American households and 56 percent of Hispanic households (compared with 74 percent of white households and 81 percent of Asian American households) and 58 percent of rural households (compared with 72 percent of urban households) had broadband Internet at home.”³ As noted, these populations are, historically, community college students. So as we contemplate the tremendous potential that technology offers, it only makes sense to do so in the context of our commitment to both access and completion.

No one can predict either the future of technology or how a new future will change the teaching and learning processes. We can, however, discern trends, and increasing connections is one of the most important opportunities — if not *the* most important opportunity — provided by digital technologies. Another opportunity is more personalized learning. In a 2013 *EDUCAUSE Review* article, Rob Abel, Malcolm Brown, and Jack Suess pointed out that faculty today “have an unprecedented number of options among ways to plan, design, and execute a course, among ways to connect with and support learners, and among ways to situate learning in a wider variety of settings.”⁴ These varied ways for learning are exactly what large numbers of community college students are looking for. Our educational architecture is changing in response.

Community college faculty need to ensure that the promise of e-learning is a reality. Almost a third of all higher education faculty in the United States are community college faculty, and they teach nearly half of all U.S. undergraduate students.⁵ Faculty work is changing in response to key influences such as the national focus on the role of

community colleges in developing an educated workforce, more students transferring to baccalaureate-degree institutions, shifting student demographics and expectations, increasing accountability and the completion agenda, fiscal pressures and state-level disinvestment in public higher education, the concept of free public community college education,⁶ and unprecedented technological change. In fact, Ray Kurzweil, former winner of the Lemelson-MIT Prize (the nation's largest invention and technological innovation award), predicted in 2008: "As prodigious and influential as information technology is already, we'll see a billionfold improvement in the next quarter century, and then we'll see it again."⁷

Faculty at the **Maricopa Community Colleges** [↗](#), in the Phoenix metropolitan area, are working on ways to leverage digital resources, lower the cost of higher education, and support student access and success. Open educational resources (OER), through the **Maricopa Millions OER Project** [↗](#), is one of these ways that electronic resources are being leveraged for student access, reduced cost of education, and integration with e-learning. The goal of the initiative is to radically decrease students' costs by offering "no cost" or "low cost" options for course materials. Courses designated as "no cost" will have no additional cost to the student beyond the fees associated with tuition. These might include, for example, OER-licensed online resources purchased by the college for student access. Courses designated as "low cost" will have required course materials that are under \$40. These costs may be associated with copyrights for textbooks, printing of required materials, and/or online homework/quizzing systems.

Through the use of OER, the Maricopa Millions project has furthered the colleges' mission and increased opportunities for student success: reducing students' educational costs; expanding access to course materials by having them available on or before the first day of classes as well as throughout the course; providing faculty with the opportunity to customize the materials; and offering students an opportunity to contribute to course materials through open pedagogy, which enhances their engagement and likelihood of success. To date, Maricopa Millions has saved students nearly \$6 million in course materials.

As the United States moves toward a "majority minority," the community college becomes more significant as an entry point for students from varied ethnic and socioeconomic backgrounds who are looking to continue their education, learn a new skill, or pursue special-interest courses. Their success is vital in supporting our communities' local and regional social and economic health. E-learning and the OER movement represent a significant opportunity for community colleges to bridge the digital divide and further student success.

Notes

1. Fred Lokken, *Trends in eLearning: Tracking the Impact of eLearning at Community Colleges* [↗](#), 2015 Distance Education Survey Results (Washington, DC: Instructional Technology Council, 2016), 5.
2. American Association of Community Colleges, *"Fast Facts,"* [↗](#) February 2016.
3. Cecilia Kang, *"Bridging a Digital Divide That Leaves Schoolchildren Behind,"* [↗](#) *New York Times*, February 22, 2016; Shanna Smith Jaggars, *"Democratization of Education for Whom? Online Learning and Educational Equity,"* [↗](#) *Diversity & Democracy* 17, no. 1 (winter 2014), citing U.S. Department of Commerce, *Exploring the Digital Nation: America's Emerging Online Experience* [↗](#) (2013).
4. Rob Abel, Malcolm Brown, and Jack Suess, *"A New Architecture for Learning,"* *EDUCAUSE Review* 48, no. 5 (September/October 2013).
5. John S. Levin, "Understandings of Community Colleges in Need of Resuscitation: The Case of Community College Faculty," in *Understanding Community Colleges*, ed. John S. Levin and Susan T. Kater (New York, NY: Routledge, 2013); Tronie Rifkin, *"Public Community College Faculty,"* [↗](#) American Association of Community Colleges website, [n.d.]; American Association of Community Colleges, *"Fast Facts,"* [↗](#) February 2016.
6. For a perspective on "free," see David Monaghan and Sara Goldrick-Rab, *"Is Community College Already Free?"* [↗](#) Wisconsin Hope Lab, Policy Brief 16-01, January 20, 2016.
7. Ray Kurzweil, "Progress Accelerates Exponentially," in *The Way We Will Be 50 Years from Today: 60 of the World's Greatest Minds Share Their Visions of the Next Half-Century*, ed. Mike Wallace (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2008), 35.

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