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Higher education in Mesa: A model for increasing accessibility

Nov 21st, 2015 · by Charles Clark, Special to the Mesa Independent · 0 Comments



The Wilkes University at Mesa lobby. (Photo by Charles Clark, special to the Mesa Independent)

Increasing access to higher education and helping students find success there has been a challenge our nation has struggled to address for decades. In recent debates we have witnessed political leaders continue to grapple with how best to address the subject.

Often times, the discussion has fallen into the trap of trying to simplify a highly complex issue, whereas the reality is there is no simple answer. However, right here in Mesa we are experiencing higher education institutions, in partnership with our city and community as a whole, making tremendous strides in the right direction and perhaps providing a model for other places to follow.

Over five years ago Mesa launched its Higher Education Initiative, and today it is very easy to see the fruits of that labor. Now in addition to [Mesa Community College](#) there are institutions such as [Wilkes University at Mesa](#), [Benedictine University at Mesa](#) and [Upper Iowa University at Mesa](#).

However, what is perhaps the biggest accomplishment of the Higher Education Initiative is not the abundance of

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choices offered, but rather the fact that Mesa has attracted institutions that are attentive to the needs of the individual student and recognize that there are many factors that contribute to making higher education more obtainable.

One of the most apparent factors is financial accessibility. Many potential students struggle with finding a way to fund their education. Addressing this aspect of the problem requires collaboration between the institutions, the government and the community itself.

"I think it takes a community; from educational institutions, to business and industry, to the nonprofit sector, to state support. MCC has done a fantastic job of garnering federal grants to support student learning," said Kathleen Perales, associate dean of community outreach and enrollment development at Mesa Community College.

"We have a strong Development Office that works with our community to secure private scholarships, we have partnerships with business and industry to secure internships and workforce training. We all have a stake in building an educated community," she said.

Benedictine University Mesa Branch Campus Executive Officer Charlie Gregory echoes a similar sentiment. However, he also emphasizes the importance of ensuring that an institution is sustainable in making higher education more financially accessible.

"If we are the sustainable than we'll become more accessible for our students and that further strengthens the partnership between the family and institution to help the child get there," he said.

Another factor that weighs heavily into increasing accessibility involves ensuring that the proper support structures are in place for a student to succeed in the school. This is especially important in helping first-generation students, and institutions go about this in many ways.

"One of our main missions is to cater toward first-generation college students. The university is based on mentorship," said Michael Gundersdorf, director of operations at Wilkes University at Mesa. "Students have a one-on-one relationship with their professors, and we take out the guesswork of the admissions process. As administrators we do all the legwork for you."

Benedictine University and MCC also both offer similar support in the line of services, such as success workshops, tutoring, and peer and faculty mentorship. MCC also lays the groundwork for the support structure prior to a student's college career.

"We start with creating early college opportunities for first-generation students," Ms. Perales said. MCC offers an Achieving a College Education Program (ACE), which gives college access opportunities to high school students their junior year of high school, allowing them to earn up to 24 credit hours through MCC tuition free.

MCC also offers a Hoop of Learning Program, which is directed toward the Native American community members. "What makes this program unique is there is a core concept embedded that speaks to the cultural experience that our Native students engage inside and outside of the program," Ms. Perales said.

Another factor that institutions need to address to help increase accessibility is making sure that campuses possess an environment that is welcoming to all students regardless of background, age, race, or religion.

It has been well televised of late that minority students do not feel entirely welcomed on college campuses. In Mesa, both private and public institutions address this by being mindful of the nature of their institutions.

"It's in a community college's nature to be inclusive of all students seeking to further their education. We welcome anyone who is willing to learn," Ms. Perales said. "This type of college draws likeminded individuals, from faculty to staff, who recognize our role and purpose in serving all students."

"It goes back to who we are, the BenU culture when it was created by St. Benedict. Because of the values we speak to, we strive to be a very warm and friendly environment no matter your faith. Everyone is accepted," Mr. Gregory said. "Anything other than that would be foreign to us."

One final thing that has greatly contributed to the success of making higher education institutes in Mesa more accessible is that almost across the board, institutions are conscious of ensuring value.

"Education isn't about just looking for a price point, it is about a return on investment. Higher education is a commodity, and you are looking for return on investment because you're putting something in," Mr. Gregory said. "We try to keep it as affordable as we can, so we think it is more about value and return on investment rather than the dollar sign."

Wilkes University has been recognized nationally by *The Economist* (it ranked the university 25th in economic value).

"We teach the whole student. When we're sending graduates out, they're prepared to step into leadership roles; they are prepared to take on high-level projects because of the practical nature of the coursework. So all of those things contribute to the value added," said Mr. Gundersdorf.

If you are interested in exploring any of the many higher education opportunities offered in Mesa, access the city of Mesa's higher education page (<http://mesaaz.gov/business/economic-development/business-environment/education/higher-education-institutions>), which links to these and the other various opportunities offered throughout Mesa.