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JACK RENDULICH

Maria Laughner

Posted: Sunday, August 30, 2015 3:30 am

Maria Laughner, contributing columnist

Budget cuts continue to stress Arizona's education system, leaving higher learning on a financial shelf too high for many students to reach. As the cost of college tuition continues to rise, two colleges in the East Valley are providing a stepstool to ease the burden for today's scholars.

Mesa Community College (MCC), the largest of the 10 community colleges in the nation's largest community college system, has partnered with The College of St. Scholastica, a 103-year-old Catholic Benedictine independent private college. The schools aim to bridge the gap between a two-year and a four-year degree for community college students wanting to further their education.

The result is convenient and innovative higher educational opportunities for students across the Valley. The recently finalized five-year agreement provides students with a new and unique opportunity for a high-caliber private education and a new pathway to baccalaureate and graduate degrees for students at MCC.

Headquartered in Duluth, Minn., St. Scholastica expanded its efforts into Arizona in early 2014. In addition to its new site at MCC, St. Scholastica operates locations across Minnesota as well as a virtual campus, with a total enrollment of more than 4,200 students. As St. Scholastica's expansion here continues, this new partnership strengthens St. Scholastica's community presence and expands its social work course offerings.



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St. Scholastica's mission builds upon its Catholic Benedictine heritage to provide intellectual and moral preparation for meaningful work. MCC's esteemed two-year social work program sets the foundation for students interested in a career of helping our most vulnerable neighbors. From there, students are now able to seamlessly transfer to St. Scholastica's bachelor's degree program in social work, which features a community learning model, individual attention and hands-on field experience. The new program offers a flexible hybrid format, splitting course time between online classes and face-to-face meetings.

This convenient and affordable approach will make the first-rate education of MCC and St. Scholastica more attainable by all deserving students.

A significant step of progress has been made, and the journey is only beginning. Watch for future announcements of innovative partnerships and educational models to benefit all of Arizona's residents.

• Maria Laughner is Arizona regional director for The College St Scholastica.

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