

## The Role of IT in Student Success at Community Colleges

A relatively new movement, shaped by a number of intersecting factors, is dramatically influencing the work of today's community college leaders, requiring us to think differently about the way we lead our IT areas in order to help our students and our colleges succeed. This new movement calls for and requires a sharper, more strategic, institution-wide focus on student success. Preserving access and extending the reach of our community colleges—from financial, geographic, and demographic perspectives—remain paramount. Yet we must also dedicate energy, resources, and administrative infrastructure to ensure that students from diverse backgrounds have equal opportunities to reach their educational goals.

This dual strategic focus—on access and success—requires obvious transformation in the academic and student affairs areas of community colleges. What is less obvious, perhaps, is the requirement for IT leaders and presidents to think and act differently about the role of information technology on community college campuses.

Within the last year, Montgomery County Community College (MCCC) has implemented a number of new initiatives oriented to student success. These include the creation of a student-success center, the launching of a call center, the move toward a case-management approach in student advising, and the development of a balanced scorecard to measure the success (course completion, semester-to-semester retention, graduation) of at-risk students in developmental studies, ESL, and first-level college courses (gatekeeper

courses). These new initiatives have put increasing pressure on the IT unit as it also works to support these activities while continuing to deploy and care for classroom and enterprise systems.

### From Transactional to Transformational

IT leaders and presidents must begin to think of information technology as transformational rather than transactional. In this new environment, with a sharp focus on student success, enterprise systems can no longer be implemented and stewarded by one department with the support of information technology or by information technology with the support of a lone department. Instead, the focus on student success requires horizontal integration of enterprise-system implementation plans across many units—administration and finance, student affairs, academic affairs, human resources, institutional research, marketing—requiring that the IT leader be a facilitator, a connector, and a convener of the parts.

These parts are not just internal, especially at community colleges—where success rests so deeply in community connections with high schools and university partners as well as with key community-based organizations.

### From Telling to Asking

In this role as facilitator and convener, the IT leader becomes the point person and catalyst for process improvement. In some cases, the CIO becomes the chief *innovation* officer. A solutions orientation that is system-wide, not project or tool-based, is also required. Deep and meaningful collaboration with users be-

comes critical, as does providing continuous opportunity for feedback. The CIO must be sure, for example, that student impact and student input are continuously measured and gathered to inform decision-making. IT leaders need to be familiar with focus-group methodologies, and they need to dig deeply into existing research on student satisfaction, student engagement, graduate follow-up studies, and community-perception surveys to look for opportunities for the proactive improvement of services.

IT leaders also need to be more aware than ever of best technology practices in student service. They must be willing to share this knowledge with colleagues, convene benchmarking trips to see these best-practice applications firsthand, seek presentations from new technology vendors to stretch the thinking of on-campus users, and encourage and support experimentation with new technologies. The CIO must be willing to seed the technological curiosity of power users so that they can find and own technology-based solutions that support student achievement. Asking users about technologies and opportunities versus telling users about technologies and opportunities becomes essential to supporting an environment focused on student success.

### From Inputs to Outputs

At MCCC, our information systems have been set up primarily to track inputs—applicants, registrants, financial-aid recipients—and we have spent much time examining the patterns of these inputs. During registration times, our enrollment reports (tracking inputs) are circulated regularly and proudly. We must do the same type of

regular reporting on outputs—on student success. I've challenged my leadership team to develop a regular "student success" report to share with the college community. We are also piloting a new balanced-scorecard tool that helps us to set targets in key student-success categories and to benchmark our progress against ourselves and against state and national cohort colleges.

This switch in focus is difficult for our IT and institutional research areas. At community colleges, both areas are leanly supported, and this new requirement places additional stresses on the

a strategic plan that set aspirational goals for the college. The president must work to align the work of information technology to strategically support the achievement of these goals. At MCCC, our past strategic plan placed most technology goals within a section entitled "Aligning the Infrastructure." Our new plan does not single out technology as a strategic issue. Instead, technology has a supporting role, assisting in the achievement of the plan's six strategic goals, one of which is the overarching goal to extend student access and improve student success.

advances (or does not advance) student success.

Presidents can also aid the success of information technology by setting up clear systems for decision-making related to IT policy. Our Information Technology All College Committee (ITACC), co-chaired by a faculty member and the CIO, advises me on IT policies that are vital to student success. In addition, I strongly believe that the CIO must be a direct report of the president and must be sitting at the leadership table when large-scale decisions (whether technology-



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infrastructures of these areas. In the IT area, data-integrity issues become larger than ever with the increased attention to metrics. In addition, a new skill set—in data warehousing—is required. In the institutional research area, the call for analysis that extends beyond frequency and demographic description requires new skills sets and also a new relationship with IT leaders in pulling the required data sets from the system and in establishing new data marts to support deeper reporting and analytical expectations.

### The President's Role

The most important role for the president is to collaboratively establish a vision and

In addition to ensuring that technology efforts are aligned with the plan, the president must continually articulate and reinforce the need for this alignment. This means using the plan's priorities to mediate tensions between key leaders who are vying for technology support. The alignment of technology with the plan's priorities also means that promising and innovative pilot applications of technologies won't lead to an uneven academic environment or an uneven learning experience, with potential uneven learning outcomes for students. In our case, I've empowered the CIO to prioritize based on how an IT-enabled initiative

dependent or not) that affect student learning are being considered.

Finally, and most important, presidents must continue to ask the hard and strategic questions (e.g., what evidence do we have that student success is improved through the adoption and use of specific technologies?) while also creating and preserving safe forums that foster these honest and essential conversations.



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