



# Radical Flexibility

## and Student Success

AN INTERVIEW WITH **HOMERO LOPEZ**

By Diana G. Oblinger



**DR. HOMERO LOPEZ** brings thirty-two years of higher education experience to his position as the founding president of Estrella Mountain Community College, one of ten colleges in the Maricopa County Community College District of Arizona. Since 1987, Lopez has served as a consultant-evaluator for the Higher Learning Commission of the North Central Association of Colleges and Schools and was recently appointed to the American Association of Community Colleges Commission on Academic, Student, and Community Development. In 2005, he began service on the National Advisory Boards for the Community College Survey of Student Engagement (CCSSE) and the National Community College Hispanic Council (NCCHC). He has been recognized locally and nationally as a visionary leader and has received such awards as the West Valley Arts Council Champion of the Arts. Lopez is a committed community member and serves on various boards and councils, including the Banner Estrella Hospital Senior Cabinet, the Southwest Valley Chamber of Commerce, and the Maricopa Community College Foundation Board. Lopez earned his Ph.D. from the Community College Leadership Program at the University of Texas at Austin.

Recently **DIANA G. OBLINGER**, EDUCAUSE Vice President responsible for the association's teaching and learning activities and for the direction of the EDUCAUSE Learning Initiative (ELI), talked with Dr. Lopez about Estrella Mountain Community College, learning space and campus design, technology, and the challenges of and requirements for ensuring the success of students today.

**Oblinger:** President Lopez, many of us were able to get to know a bit about Estrella Mountain Community College at the EDUCAUSE Learning Initiative (ELI) Focus Session last September. Studying the learning spaces on your campus was a very valuable experience. You've combined innovative classroom spaces with informal spaces in a way that encourages students to get engaged and to stay on campus. What principles have guided your development of those spaces?

**Lopez:** We tend to follow three main principles in developing campus spaces at Estrella Mountain: leverage of physical space; engagement of stakeholders; and a concept we call "radical flexibility"

First, we recognize the power an institution has in leveraging any physical space, whether it is formal or informal, to promote students' success and to advance teaching and learning. College leaders can create facility design priorities that reflect effective pedagogies for teaching and learning. Leaders must set the tone during design discussions so that teaching and learning considerations remain primary in the difficult planning stages that involve budget, space, furniture, infrastructure, and technology. Creating spaces that by their appearance, color, texture, equipment, and arrangement make students want to linger and learn is a priority for us. We need to serve as advocates for teaching and learning so that our facilities truly become "learning spaces."

Second, with the development of any new space, it is important to address the changing needs and expectations of students and faculty. With this in mind, Estrella Mountain engages all stakeholders—students, faculty, and staff—from the inception of a project. For example, in preparation for the upcoming ten-year building program, the college recently concluded a year-long process of obtaining faculty and student input on the design of learning spaces. We held meetings and demonstrations, formed focus groups, and conducted surveys to discuss instructional pedagogy and delivery strategies. From this input emerged consensus for classroom design, media/technology, flexibility, furniture, lighting, electrical access, wireless access, and other desired classroom teaching aspects.

The outcome of this process resulted in our third principle—the concept of *radical flexibility*. Plainly speaking, we want our faculty and students to be unencumbered, to the greatest degree possible, by our learning spaces and technologies. We strive to provide faculty and learners an opportunity to experiment with learning spaces that have been designed with a radical flexibility that encourages them to "please move the furniture" and that untethers them to the maximum extent possible. Radical flexibility means freeing up faculty and students to customize the learning environment to meet the teaching and learning pedagogy, delivery system, and technology needs on demand. Furniture that can be easily moved to fit the learning task and wireless networking that can give anywhere-anytime access and free students to demonstrate for the class from their desks are two examples. Now, if only we had wireless electricity!

Estrella Mountain faculty had experimented with classroom spaces in the past, and its liberal arts faculty had successfully introduced flexibility and integration of technology into two classrooms. Over the past year, however, Estrella Mountain had the opportunity to follow these three principles in partnership with two corporate entities: Herman Miller Inc. and Goodmans Interior Structures of Phoenix, Arizona. As a result, the two liberal arts classrooms were transformed into new, prototype learning spaces, now dubbed "Learning Studios."

Because of our corporate partnership, we were able to examine a wide range of business-oriented furnishings and interiors, custom-design some products, and adapt products to an educa-

tional setting. All aspects of a learning environment were addressed, with tables and chairs chosen for their flexibility, mobility, and ergonomic features. Ease of technology usage was provided along with adaptable lighting. The infrastructure to facilitate electrical, wireless, and technology elements was installed. Mobile teaching stations and preferences for wall writing areas throughout the rooms were incorporated. Because of the expertise and partnership commitment of Lori Gee, Learning Environments Strategist at Herman Miller Inc., and Adam Goodman, CEO of Goodmans Interior Structures, we were able to create informal learning spaces within formal instructional settings to support small-group dynamics, peer review, and collaborative learning. We wrapped the entire space in captivating colors, textures, and finishes. The resultant Learning Studios are now at work. Faculty and learners are actively experimenting with this radical flexibility of space, furnishings, and technology. Together, they are learning more about how innovative spatial relationships, ergonomic design, and seamless access to technology can increase student engagement and success. In September 2005, these Learning Studios and additional



Photos by Andrew Nolte, © 2005 Estrella Mountain Community College



ELI 2005 Fall Focus Session Participants

informal learning spaces around Estrella Mountain received national attention when the campus hosted the EDUCAUSE Learning Initiative (ELI) fall focus session “Design of Informal Learning Spaces.”

Since the creation of the Learning Studios and our hosting of the ELI focus session, Estrella Mountain and our corporate partners have been collecting and assessing feedback from learners and faculty for incorporation into the college’s latest building project, Ocotillo Hall. This facility will highlight the ongoing learning space initiatives by including twenty-two new Learning Studios designed directly from the feedback on and concepts of the prototypes. Scheduled to open in January 2006, Ocotillo Hall will demonstrate how the college and its partners achieved meaningful change and were able to bring forward key areas of innovation for learners.

**Oblinger:** Our notions of learning spaces are evolving. At Estrella Mountain, for example, you are developing new spaces and planning renovations for areas such as your information commons. How do you envision this evolution in learning spaces?

**Lopez:** Because of a major \$951 million bond election for the Maricopa District, our college has over \$71 million for capital expansion over the next ten years.

By following the three development principles I noted earlier, we can create new spaces and reinvent existing spaces that will promote student success and improve teaching and learning. We plan to build the next phase of the campus master plan and “reinvent” our original facilities.

An example of the latter is the Information Commons, our original open-access learning space that opened in 1992. At that time, higher education was just realizing the enormous impact of the Internet, the future of information resources, and the role of collaborative learning. Our Information Commons was a 50,000-gross-square-foot national model for the integration of information resources, open computing access, and learning support. It was wildly successful, and more than two thousand visitors toured the Information Commons during its first year of operation. That was a big deal back in 1992! Now, almost fifteen years later, we are preparing to triple the size of the original facility.

But college facilities must be very different today. For example, we know so much more about how pedagogy, environments, and technology affect teaching and learning. We have seen the emergence of numerous campus facilities that are designed to serve as model learning spaces. We have seen the impact that our technological world has on young generations of learners. Organizations like

EDUCAUSE are helping higher education amass the latest best practices for the design of effective learning spaces. I believe that today, our assumptions about change and the future are far-reaching—much more far-reaching than they were fifteen years ago.

So while Estrella Mountain is just beginning the redesign of our new Information Commons, we know that we have access to more information, models, and insight than we had back in 1992. We know that the three principles mentioned earlier will drive our redesign. The concept of radical flexibility will remain key within all our planning processes. We expect that our original integration of open access, information resources, and learning support will remain at the core of the new facility. However, we also plan to include a wide array of informal learning spaces throughout the facility. We envision specialized areas for advanced applications of technology, collaborative spaces for group work, student and faculty interaction areas, studio environments, and production and presentation spaces. Within this new Information Commons, we want to create purposeful physical adjacencies that support and encourage interdisciplinary collaboration—spaces that welcome faculty and students and that encourage them to engage together, to linger, to teach, and to learn more.

We will completely transform our Information Commons into a powerful social learning space to reflect the next decade. Can you imagine how excited we are to repeat the success of our original model and take it into the next decade?

**Oblinger:** What are your goals for Estrella Mountain and for your campus design?

**Lopez:** Estrella Mountain is master-planned to become a large comprehensive regional community college eventually

**Ocotillo Hall: Integrating the Newest Technology and Learning Studio Design**



South Elevation with Site Options

Illustration by the Orcutt/Winslow Partnership, © 2005

**“Our goal with any new project or renovation is to design spaces that not only enhance student learning but also continue to meet the needs of our region for postsecondary education.”**



serving over 40,000 students in the many communities of western metropolitan Phoenix. We are only one-third of the way there!

Since our opening in 1992, we have worked to create a “sense of place” that expresses the historical and cultural values of the surrounding communities, while providing students with creative and dynamic learning environments. As a member of the fastest-growing region in Maricopa County, we also need to remain

a central location, or “community gathering place,” that unites our communities. At Estrella, our goal with any new project or renovation is to design spaces that not only enhance student learning but also continue to meet the needs of our region for postsecondary education: academic/transfer education, workforce training, and community service.

To this end, we plan to create more prototype learning spaces to engage our faculty, staff, and students with the latest furnishings and learning technologies. These prototype spaces help our faculty and staff create new mental models of what is possible. We need to visualize, play, experiment, test, assess, share, and plan in these prototype spaces before we make significant investments in future capital projects.

**Oblinger:** Community colleges play a significant role in helping first-generation college students, adult learners, and entering college students gain an education. This isn’t always easy, of course. What are some of the challenges you encounter in

being responsible for a community college?

**Lopez:** Community colleges form one of the most challenging and least understood sectors of American higher education. Our mission is to provide full and open access to the most diverse mix of students in higher education. Nationwide, we serve a disproportionately high number of low-income, first-generation, working adult, and minority students.

My friends at the Community College Survey of Student Engagement (CCSSE) at the University of Texas at Austin have shown that community college students exhibit a significant gap between their aspirations and their outcomes, often leave college before achieving their goals, and are not certain of their future educational plans. Moreover, the CCSSE shows that student learning and retention are correlated strongly with “student engagement.” The more actively engaged students are—with college faculty and staff, with other students, with the subject matter being learned—the more likely they are to persist in their college studies and to achieve at higher levels.

Our colleges must pay attention to the components of quality educational practice: active and collaborative learning; student effort; academic challenge; student-faculty interaction; and support for learners—all key aspects of engagement. Therein lies the challenge for us: finding ways to promote student success by what the CCSSE folks call “making engagement inescapable”!

**Oblinger:** The commitment of your staff to students is evident, as is yours. What does it take to make students successful?

**Lopez:** Obviously, I believe in the principles underlying student engagement as a key to student success. We have created what the CCSSE folks call “a culture of evidence,” in which one must be “relentless and courageous” about data to assess initiatives and to make changes. We have no stronger motivation than the success of our students!

Our “culture of evidence” helps us measure our progress. We operate within an environment of measurement of stakeholder-driven directions and goals.

Our system of measurement of institutional effectiveness includes mission and goals, assessment of academic achievement, student engagement, core values, organizational climate, and student satisfaction with the college environment. Using this data, we gain insight into our college in order to make improvements to ensure that our students are successful.

A number of years ago, our employees developed a “service strategy” statement to represent our group commitment and individual commitment to success. We follow the service strategy “Your Success Is Our Success” as a guide for our daily behavior. If an employee helps a student to succeed, regardless of the type of assistance, then the employee has helped the student along the path to success. And in doing so, the employee is also successful.

At Estrella Mountain, we believe that a student will more likely succeed in a creative and dynamic learning environment that includes the integration of technology into the learning process. The research on student success in college indicates that intertwining the college setting

with meaningful experiences can affect student learning. Learning environments can be adapted for educational enrichment to enhance student engagement and learning. As I mentioned earlier, we can leverage any physical space to promote student success and to advance teaching and learning—if we have the fortitude to create the proper institutional conditions for success. Doing so requires a strong and caring faculty willing to embrace the latest and most appropriate methods for varied learning styles and a staff willing to create a culture dedicated to the success of students.

**Oblinger:** What do you want your students to achieve?

**Lopez:** What I want for our students is clearly stated as part of our college’s vision statement: “You will gain knowledge, abilities, and values essential to success in a highly complex and technological world.” We commit to meeting their needs and expanding their aspirations and will create an environment that emphasizes caring,

**“We can leverage any physical space to promote student success and to advance teaching and learning—if we have the fortitude to create the proper institutional conditions for success.”**



teamwork, and flexibility. Again, our service strategy is “Your Success Is Our Success.” Everything we do is with this in mind!

**Oblinger:** Technology is integrated into almost all the spaces we visited at Estrella Mountain. Do you consider technology to be strategic to Estrella Mountain?

**Lopez:** Absolutely! Technology is not only a strategic direction of the campus but a seamless part of the learning environment. In the beginning of every plan or project, we give careful consideration to the strategic implications of technology.

We must appreciate the embedded nature of technology in every aspect of the college, whether in the teaching and learning aspects or in the administrative infrastructure. Students expect that technology will support their college experience as they apply their newly acquired knowledge to the workplace and professional settings.

**Oblinger:** Do you think other presidents give enough attention to technology?

**Lopez:** For many CEOs in education, technology is seen as important but still as an “add-on” to the academic program. Many are still waiting for the evidence that academic IT makes a difference. At our college, faculty members are challenged to experiment and document what works and what doesn’t. If we don’t have a culture of evidence, especially when it comes to learning, we won’t convince others of how this work truly makes a difference.

Bridging the gap between IT and the academic programs has been a priority for me. We have created leadership structures to facilitate collaboration and working relations between our key people in charge of technology and learning. They are at ease when talking about difficult issues, and they quickly come to resolution so that we can move forward with innovative programs.

**Oblinger:** Technology changes rapidly, and as president, you have many responsibilities. How do you stay up-to-date on technology issues?

**Lopez:** I stay up-to-date through a few simple strategies:

- Ensure that the leaders for administrative and learning technologies and for facilities development sit at the table on all major campus initiatives
- Engage in national associations like EDUCAUSE
- Maintain an open dialogue with campus and district facilities development and IT leadership

- Ensure that my campus leadership knows that I am vitally interested in leveraging the best technology at this college to help students achieve their goals

**Oblinger:** What advice do you have for those in IT (whether instructional technology or information technology) who would like to get the president's ear on a special issue?

**Lopez:** IT professionals need to thoroughly engage in the vision, values, and strategic directions of their institutions. Speak in the "language" of the president, do your research, and demonstrate how technology can advance student learning and further the core mission of the institution. IT professionals need to investigate current best practices, anticipate problems for the institution, and discuss well-researched solutions.

**Oblinger:** What advice do you have for other college and university executives

who are interested in making sure their campuses support their students' success?

**Lopez:** I strongly recommend that they read the book *Student Success in College: Creating Conditions that Matter* (2005), by George Kuh and his associates, to learn what a diverse set of strong-performing colleges and universities are doing to enhance student learning. Through their philosophies, leaders can create the conditions that drive policies, programs, and practices. Student engagement, persistence, satisfaction, learning, and development, along with effective principles and recommended practices, can guide the work of faculty and staff to improve student success. Although there is no "silver bullet" or "one size fits all" solution, there is a set of common features for student success. Kuh's book provides some insight into this challenge. In this interview, I've also given some ideas of what has worked at Estrella Mountain. *e*