

New Opportunities for Community Colleges: Leveraging Technology to Better Serve Students

Community colleges have a unique role in serving their students and the workforce needs of their regions. In this Q&A, **Mary Schlegelmilch**, Cisco Education Advocate, and **Brad Saffer**, Global Education Lead, Cisco Industry Solutions, discuss ways that community colleges can leverage new models and technologies to help students reskill in the wake of the pandemic.



»» As the nation emerges from the pandemic, what are the opportunities for community colleges?

Schlegelmilch: We are going to need to reskill our workforce and community colleges are well poised to do this. They listen to the workforce needs in their communities and know what they need to do to build programs for specific jobs. We will also have a lot of students who will be juggling home and work responsibilities while trying to get reskilled by continuing their education, wherever and whatever that may look like.

»» Many community colleges saw enrollment decline during the pandemic. How should they think about reconfiguring programs and delivery to keep students engaged?

Saffer: The pandemic hit community college enrollment particularly hard because a lot of their students are juggling so many different things – it does not take much to derail their education dreams. Community colleges need to change the way they are delivering education to make it more flexible so students can get back in the pipeline. Wherever they can, they should shift in-person activities to an online or hybrid option for students who cannot afford to spend a lot of time on campus.

A lot of faculty members are turning to flipped classrooms. There is so much content that has been digitized over the last 10 to 15 years that they can leverage.

Schlegelmilch: Community colleges have experiential types of programs – if you are in the culinary arts, you are in the kitchen. If you are in auto mechanics, you are in the shop. But can a student use a simulation to learn how to change brakes and then come in to do a final assessment in the shop? We have seen colleges start to think differently about the curriculum.

»» Microcredentialing is seen as both an opportunity and potential competitor for community colleges. How can they begin shifting to deliver these types of learning opportunities?

Schlegelmilch: Community colleges might have programs where they can give out badges along the way – a microcredential when you have achieved a basic level or advanced to the next level. That incentivizes students to stay on the path, and stacking these credentials helps them become more of a well-rounded student, and in the end, a more well-rounded employee.

Saffer: The way to approach it is not to see it as a threat, but an opportunity.

Stackable credentials is one of the best ways to keep students engaged, because you have these manageable achievements you continue to get.

»» Given these shifts, how will colleges have to think differently about their networks and other technology priorities going forward?

Saffer: Scalability. If you assume that prior to the pandemic 90 percent of your constituents were on campus and 10 percent online, it is likely that those numbers have been reversed, which puts different strains on your network and adds security vulnerabilities. Additionally, augmented and virtual reality technologies require a network that can deliver a quality experience for students. Colleges will also have to make sure they're extending that network into the community because a lot of students don't have access to the bandwidth they need. It takes a holistic approach.

Schlegelmilch: In some communities, the access issue has become a community solution – extending networks into libraries, city and county government buildings, and within K-12 systems. Sometimes when we embrace the problem together, we see exciting things for the community overall.

