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CASE STUDY:

Improving outcomes with pathways reforms

How College of the Desert increased completion and transfers—and virtually eliminated its equity gap

While California's Coachella Valley may be best known for its chic resorts, famed tennis tournament, and wildly popular music festival, it's also home to a quieter success story: a Palm Desert community college that's making huge strides in helping students reach their academic goals.

Serving about 16,000 students, the College of the Desert (COD) is located in Riverside County, which has long sought to improve its college-going and bachelor's degree attainment rates.

Federally recognized as a Hispanic-serving institution, COD has held two Title V grants focused on Latinx, low-income, and first-generation college students. In recent years, the college has focused on addressing its community's needs—while at the same time working to increase its completion rates, improve advising, shorten wait times for services, and reduce the number of excess credits taken by transfer students.

COD has taken a multi-pronged approach to fulfilling this tall order. Several years ago, the college began implementing reforms aligned with the guided pathways model of structured academic mapping and advising. COD also

COLLEGE of the DESERT

Enrollment
16,000

Primary challenge
Streamline degree planning and implement guided pathways reforms

Solution
Ellucian Colleague® Student Planning

Results
Increased degree and certificate completion by 42% between 2012 and 2018

Increased Full-Time Equivalent (FTE) students for the past six years

Increased four-year university transfer by 41 percent

created the "plEDGE Program," which provides tuition and fees for two years for local high school graduates who enroll full time. Finally, the college implemented Ellucian Colleague Student Planning to help it improve academic planning, student self-service, and communication among students, faculty, and staff.

Guided pathways and a move to Student Planning

Though it's in the early stages of its guided pathways implementation, College of the Desert began rolling out key pathways-related reforms as part of its Title V grant several years ago.

As it redesigned its educational planning process, the college experienced first-hand how closely intertwined technology is with pathways reforms. Amanda Phillips, dean of counseling at College of the Desert, says Colleague Student Planning has been instrumental in helping COD implement some big changes.

"We're in the process of programming all our curriculum tracks, and we use Colleague Student Planning for that," says Phillips. "How do you define the pathway? How do you communicate the pathways to the students? How do you make sure that students register for the classes in their program? How do you make sure students have all the necessary information when they choose a major or program of study?"

"With all of these questions," she says, "we're talking about the capabilities of Colleague Student Planning—the curriculum tracks, the Degree Audit function that's available to students at all times, the fact that they can register straight from their plan."

Those capabilities, Phillips says, have helped the college build support among the faculty. "These are things that we're showing the faculty as they're having the discussion around guided pathways," she says, "and they're universally pleased that we have this and that it can facilitate guided pathways as we move forward."

The solution has also given COD the data it needs to create offerings aligned with student needs. By mining their student plan course-mapping data, staff are now able to identify and predict demand, then schedule courses and sections accordingly.

Reducing excess courses and student debt

As a measure of its progress, the college has increased the number of students using plans by 400 percent in just six years. Alongside that success, COD has increased its degree and certificate completion by a notable 42 percent.

In yet another achievement, students have been able to reach their goals with fewer courses taken—saving them time, money, and student debt. From 2014 to the present, the number of units that students completed to receive their degrees dropped from 84 at its highest to 78. And

for students who only received one degree at COD, it dropped from 78 to 70—a significant improvement over California's statewide goal of 78.

"Seventy is the magic number for a student who wants to transfer," Phillips explains. "It's the maximum number of units they're allowed to transfer in, so it's ideal—it's maximizing the cheap tuition at the community college, then transferring right on time. It makes room for incoming students and is just a better use of public resources. We save the students time, and we save our community resources."

Faster planning that leaves more time for advising

In keeping with another key pathways reform, COD also revamped its course-selection practices. To streamline the process and encourage students to take a more proactive role in managing their coursework, the college moved to open-lab educational planning.

"We have a designated computer lab where students can drop in, with one or more counselors present, depending on the number of students," Phillips says. Students are encouraged to select their courses beforehand using their detailed program plans, then meet briefly with advisors in the lab as a final step—a time-saving departure from traditional, lengthy, one-on-one appointments.

"We have the students do the heavy lifting, then we double-check them," Phillips says. "So we have the ability to get through many more plans with the same amount of personnel."

These efficiencies have given COD's counseling staff more time for in-depth advising and targeted program development.
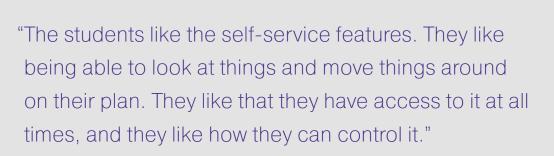
"By doing student educational plans in the lab and letting go of the mechanics of planning, advisors now have more appointments available for career counseling, for personal counseling, and for discussing specific transfer goals," says Phillips.

Convenience and transparency

In addition to gaining time, COD's counseling staff has seen other benefits from the upgraded system.

"In terms of functionality," Phillips says, "our counselors adjusted within a month—and within a month, everybody was just as good if not better at using it as they were with the old system."

"They agree that it's better for the students," she continues, "and they agree that it's better for us. Students can go between different programs, or between counselors, and we can still see the plan. It's a communication tool for us, between each other."

"The students like the self-service features. They like being able to look at things and move things around on their plan. They like that they have access to it at all times, and they like how they can control it."

AMANDA PHILLIPS
Dean of Counseling, College of the Desert

Self-service convenience for students

And what about the students?

"The students like the self-service features," Phillips says, "and they like Student Planning. They like being able to look at things and move things around on their plan. They like that they have access to it at all times, and they like how they can control it."

Previously, she says, COD's planning system was paper-based: "It was a Word document. We printed it for them and handed it to them. If they were lucky, we emailed it. It was not comparable in any way."

Now, Phillips says, there's accountability—for students and for staff.

"With this system, there are internal checks on it," she says. "Before, there was nothing that said, 'Hey, you're missing a requirement.' There was nothing that told them how many units were included. It's just so superior."

Closing the equity gap

Over the last several years, COD has closed the access gap for its Latinx students. In fact, Phillips says, the college now has a proportionally higher percentage of Latinx students than in the surrounding community.

As for retention and persistence gaps, she says, "there's basically no gap between our Latinx students and our white students anymore."

Regarding completion, she continues, "there is still a small gap, but it's closing. Completions are up enormously, and our Latinx students are completing at better rates than our white students were 10 years ago."

Words of advice

Following her experience with pathways and Colleague Student Planning, Phillips has a few tips for making the most of the solution.

Above all, she says, "have open communication with your IT and admissions and records staff. When we moved over to Colleague Student Planning, we had to have the ability to make major changes, like students deciding to change their majors. And we needed to be able to make those immediately." Working together, COD established a process enabling IT, admissions, and records to work together to make those changes.

Further she says, integration is key: "The fact that Colleague Student Planning is the heart of Colleague makes a huge difference. I know there are a lot of colleges looking at add-on programs for student planning. But going with the product that is one with your student information system has a huge benefit. No other product is going to be able to pull from Colleague the way this does. You don't know, until you start actually doing the work, how great it is that every time we just click on My Progress, it does another degree audit."

"We couldn't possibly have done these reforms without it."

Success by the numbers

782% increase
in Student Education Plan completions

70 average units
completed toward a degree, down from 77

41% increase
in university transfers

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