

AcOps

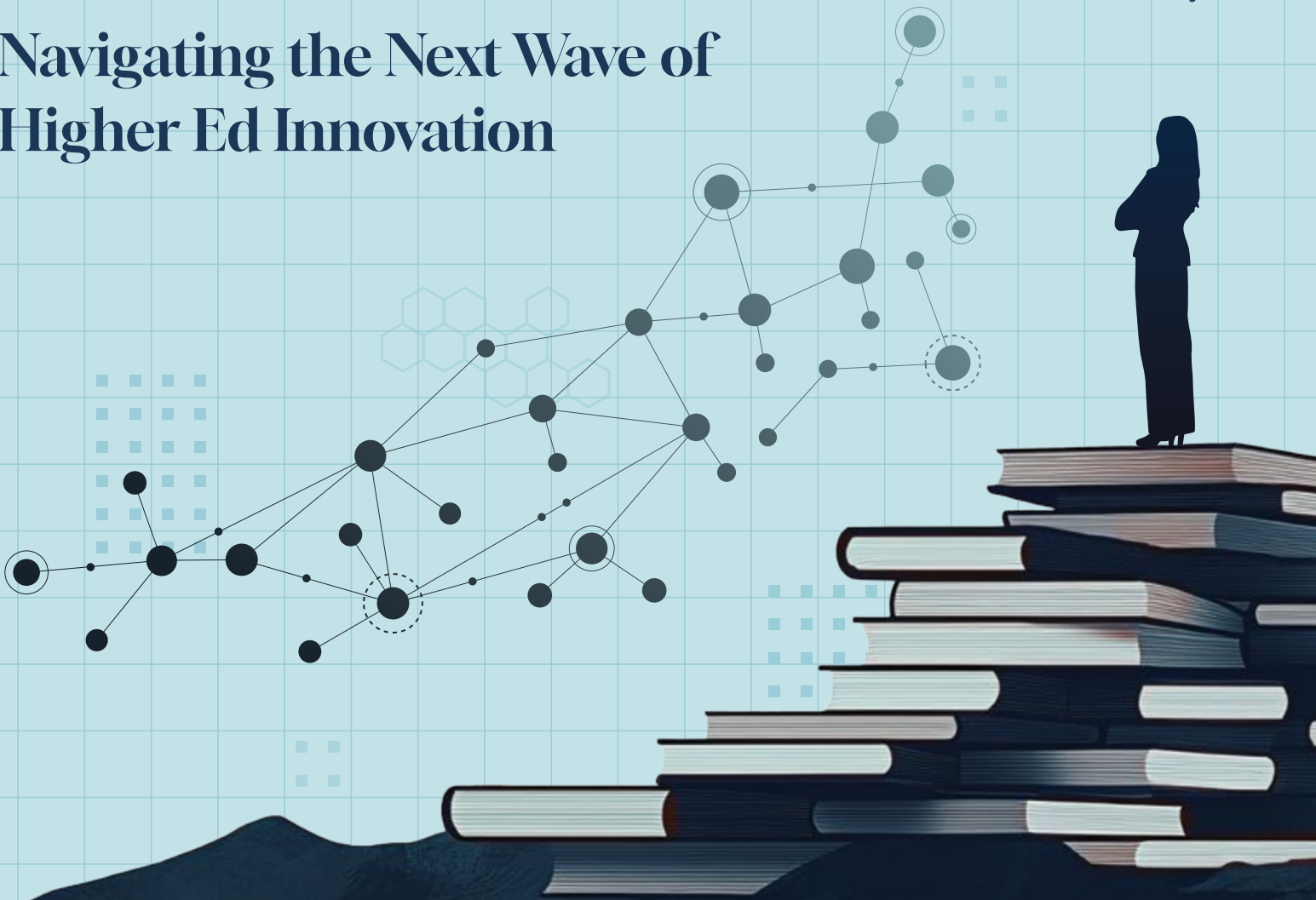
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FALL 2025

The Rise of the Academic Operator

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Let's Sit Down & Chat

Engaging as an Academic Operator in the Age of Technology

What does it mean to be an academic operator?

At the core, you'll find a leader who oversees all of the different functions that go into delivering the academic experience. That includes the critical, but sometimes behind-the-scenes, responsibilities of ensuring students can access the classes they need; creating a responsive academic portfolio; managing assessment cycles; and so much more. However, this role is anything but a monolith.

With the growing number of responsibilities that academic leaders oversee, it isn't surprising that the conversations found throughout this magazine encompass a broad range of topics. It's increasingly rare to talk with administrators who are experts in just one area. Leaders we talked with for this inaugural edition spoke passionately about a wide variety of skillsets such as conflict resolution, budgeting, and community outreach.

How do you become an expert across so many distinct skillsets though? Some of the best leaders will tell you that you inevitably need to get your hands dirty. A university registrar who takes the time to understand how their SIS works and how their data fields



map to their tools and processes. A Provost who built budgets in their early career as a department chair or program coordinator and can now do it on a larger scale.

While technology can certainly help us perform tasks more quickly and efficiently, it still isn't a 100% substitute for acquiring knowledge and knowing why and how something works. In an age where it seems everything is just one search engine or chatbot query away, there is still value in having real conversations that uncover important work and reveal the emotions of our daily triumphs and travails that you can't find through a simple internet search.

While this magazine covers the important advances in technology and AI that are certain to benefit academic operations, we also aim to explore perennial questions such as:

1. How do we support students through the delicate act of balancing academics with the many other commitments in their lives, while also helping them remain accountable for their success?
2. How do you have difficult conversations with faculty, staff, and sometimes even students? How can we truly listen to others without rushing to a decision?
3. How do we balance internal priorities with the outside noise that we must simultaneously be attuned to, but not let consume our attention?

We hope this magazine inspires you to take a moment to engage with your colleagues, counterparts sitting across from you in a committee meeting, and peers scattered across our wonderful community. Share a recent win, ask for their expertise, or relay a story about a student succeeding. Thanks for helping us build this community of academic operators as we strive to uplift our students and communities.

BRIDGET MORAN
Editor-in-Chief

Contents

6

Cultivating Faculty Buy-In for Sustainable Change at George Fox University

Dr. Rachel Winslow walks us through how to address conflict and build consensus.

21

A Conductor of Partnerships: Dr. Tom Nevill on Innovation and Apprenticeships at GateWay Community College

How a community college in a semiconductor hotspot is building strategic partnerships.



10

Architects of Change: The Role of Academic Operators in Excelsior's Strategic Pivot

The role of academic operations in Excelsior University's organizational transformation.

25

Prioritizing the Human Element: How Cape Cod Community College Holistically Supports Faculty and Students

Dr. Carlrita P. Greene shares strategies to balance wellness with ever-increasing responsibilities.

28

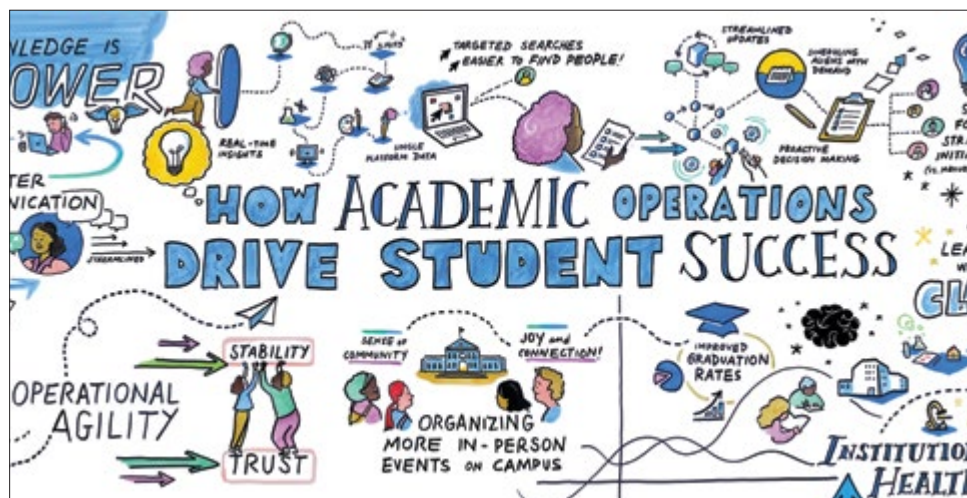
Data as a Catalyst: Empowering Faculty and Community at Coastal Bend College

An assessment peer evaluator shares her approach to successfully using data to drive results.

17

Uncovering the Link Between Student Success and Academic Operations

Do your leaders see academic operations as a student success initiative? Here's why they should.



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FALL 2025
EDITION

34

Beyond Compliance: Unpacking the Inner Workings of Academic Assessment

Recent survey findings uncover how higher ed professionals approach assessment.



40

From First-Gen to Associate Vice Chancellor: A Conversation with Dr. Jesse Mason on Leading with Community

How to be a successful system-level leader rooted in the communities you serve.

45

Beating the Odds: How One Community College Created a Successful Infrastructure for Student Transfer

How an Aspen Prize Finalist promotes high rates of student transfer.



45

50

A Provost's Perspective: Driving Enrollment & Growth in Uncertain Times

Dr. Melissa Wertz discusses the behind-the-scenes strategies that help students flourish.





Cultivating Faculty Buy-In for Sustainable Change at George Fox University

 ABOUT	INSTITUTION: George Fox University	LOCATION: Newberg, OR	STUDENTS: > 4,500
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Dr. Rachel Winslow

Director of Faculty Development and
Associate Professor of History

George Fox University

Almost any higher ed administrator will tell you that making major changes at an institution without faculty support makes the initiative substantially harder to get across the finish line. As higher ed faces greater pressures, faculty are increasingly asked to help support both institutional growth and student success. However, creating a productive and trusted relationship with faculty takes time and effort.

Dr. Rachel Winslow, Director of Faculty Development and Associate Professor of History at George Fox University, offers insight into her role working with faculty as well as lessons administrators can use to work with faculty on meaningful change.

The Advocate for Faculty Flourishing

George Fox University, a four-year private institution in Newberg, OR boasts nearly 200 full-time faculty as well as part-time instructors. To support this large group, Dr. Winslow engages faculty in a number of areas including professional development, new faculty onboarding, and serving as a dedicated resource for teaching, learning, and growth. Dr. Winslow shared what she has learned from this work and her unique approach to faculty advocacy and development.

At the heart of it, “The role was designed so that the faculty had a faculty. A person to go to who was going to be invested in their interests in promotion and tenure, onboarding for new faculty, and a resource for teaching and learning,” Dr. Winslow explains. This unique role gives her insight into what faculty value, how they can best be supported, and how academic operations professionals can partner with faculty to achieve results.

Empowering Faculty to Drive Student Retention

One of the first steps toward gaining faculty buy-in is to include them in setting the direction for major institutional initiatives. Dr. Winslow shares an example of an undergraduate faculty conference she hosted, which used “open space technology and design” to empower faculty to set the agenda. Instead of dictating the terms of the agenda, this innovative approach allowed for organic discussions that directly addressed faculty concerns and interests. “Rather than having administrators shape the agenda, and how things were talked about, and what people were going to do, faculty got to shape what the agenda was,” Dr. Winslow recounts.

What does this look like in practice? During the conference, faculty were asked to share actionable ideas on student retention. Dr. Winslow posed questions such as “Where are you already working? What do you already care about? How can we find the threads that link what you’re already doing to student retention outcomes?” The discussion led to tangible retention strategies focused on the first-year experience and peer mentorship. This collaborative spirit, she notes, resonated deeply with faculty who are

Photo: Dr. Winslow presenting on-campus



inherently invested in student well-being. “One of the things that is missionally unifying at George Fox is the fact that they really do care about students.”

The impact of this approach has already shown strong results in the past year. George Fox University saw its student retention rate improve from 78% to 82% in the last academic year. Dr. Winslow attributes this success to the power of faculty-student relationships. “All of our data from exit interviews with students suggests that a crucial relationship with a faculty member makes a difference for a student. When students feel like they belong, they stay, and they succeed,” she notes.

Balancing Data With the Nuance of Decision-Making

While any major initiative will likely consult data to help inform decision-making, Dr. Winslow offers a cautionary piece of advice to administrators: relying solely on data for decision-making can be a pitfall. She explains that research shows that human decisions are not purely rational and are influenced by other factors such as values, emotions, and relationships. Therefore,

discussions should be framed around shared values and the “wisdom of the crowd” should be embraced through group-based discussions to integrate multiple perspectives. She advises that administrators trained in facilitation skills can greatly improve trust and collaboration when working with faculty.

Dr. Winslow warns against a common misstep that she often sees—administrators asking for faculty input without a genuine intention to incorporate it. Treating feedback as just a checkbox, she warns, erodes trust. “I’ve watched administrators come into a space and say, ‘Hey, faculty, I’m really interested in what you think.’ And they listen. And then 30 minutes later, they’re like, ‘Okay, so we’re going to do this.’” This rush to efficiency, she argues, ultimately backfires, alienating faculty and leading to unsustainable decisions.

In Dr. Winslow’s experience, leaders may be drawn to the allure of efficiency over consensus. However, she cautions that, “If you haven’t brought your community alongside with you, that decision, the second that you’re out of that position or something else changes outside of your control, that decision’s lost. It’s gone.”

“

“All of our data from exit interviews with students suggests that a crucial relationship with a faculty member makes a difference for a student. When students feel like they belong, they stay, and they succeed.”

Strategies to Address Conflict and Build Consensus

Dr. Winslow is no stranger to conflict management. Aside from her work as a faculty advocate and liaison, she also works with organizations in the public sector and religious communities on conflict management and consensus building. This work continues to show Dr. Winslow time and time again the value of collaborative processes over rushing to outcomes.

So, how can academic operations leaders meaningfully collect feedback and build consensus? Dr. Winslow advocates for a three-pronged approach: engage faculty in the decision-making processes, acknowledge underlying tensions, and use conflict as an opportunity to address core issues. She personally used this approach at George Fox when they revised the faculty handbook. The eight-month, iterative process involved both faculty and the board, but ultimately culminated in near-unanimous support. This deliberate approach, she explains, allows for a deeper understanding of the “divergence that must exist in any decision we’re willing to live with.” She adds, “When I hear just con-

vergence at the beginning, I’m automatically suspicious. I don’t believe it.”

Essentially, convergence at the beginning of any hot-topic conversation often means stakeholders may not be comfortable sharing their views or one viewpoint is dominating the discussion. She reminds us that “faculty are not a homogeneous entity.” Recognizing the multitude of viewpoints and interests within the faculty community is necessary to identify points of contention, productively talk through them, and then arrive at a decision.

Dr. Winslow’s extensive experience in conflict management across various sectors underscores that fostering open dialogue, even amidst disagreement, leads to sustainable change that supports institutional progress. By actively engaging faculty in decision-making, acknowledging differing perspectives, and reframing conflict as an opportunity for deeper understanding, academic operations leaders can cultivate the buy-in necessary to address complex challenges and better support students. ■

A THREE-PRONGED APPROACH:

Collecting feedback and building consensus

1

Engage faculty in decision-making processes

2

Acknowledge underlying tensions

3

Use conflict as an opportunity to address core issues

Architects of *Change*

The Role of Academic Operators
in Excelsior's Strategic Pivot

ABOUT

INSTITUTION:

Excelsior University

LOCATION:

Albany, NY

STUDENTS:

> 14,000





Dr. Stephanie Poczos

Vice Provost of Academic Operations
and Quality

Excelsior University

As more and more is demanded of higher education, academic administrators in operations roles are increasingly the architects of institutional transformation. Far from the traditional perception of logistics managers, these leaders are strategically shaping the student experience, driving efficiency, and fostering a culture of continuous improvement. Dr. Stephanie Poczos, Vice Provost of Academic Operations and Quality at Excelsior University spoke with the AcOps Magazine about how she has seen this play out first-hand at her institution.

No one understands **shifting business models** more than leaders at universities undergoing major changes.

Excelsior University recently made a significant pivot, transitioning from its historical model of a credit-aggregating college to a more traditionally structured university focused on retention and graduation. This change placed academic operations at the forefront of their strategic initiatives.

As Dr. Poczos explains, “We’ve had to stand up the infrastructure associated with a university.” This included establishing academic departments, a robust academic governance model, new councils, and much more. Dr. Poczos walked us through what this ambitious transition looked like in practice and what role academic operations played throughout. “Academic operations are all encompassing, and it includes the whole university,” she noted when walking through Excelsior’s journey.

Building a Robust Curriculum Approval Process for Accountability

As part of setting up new structures to support their new university status, Excelsior established a curriculum council. Historically, new program development was ad hoc and lacked a consistent approval process with clear timelines. “We needed a really standard process,” Dr. Poczos explains. “And for almost all the things that we’ve worked on in the past few years, it was really about creating efficiency, creating guidelines so that we could hold people accountable.”

Now, every new program proposal undergoes rigorous evaluation by the curriculum council, focusing on ROI and market analysis. This includes scrutinizing market demand, competitor analysis, regional enrollment trends, potential partnerships, projected student enrollment, and break-even points. From a financial feasibility perspective, Dr. Poczos asks, “What’s the return on investment? What’s the market analysis? What are

all the things that need to be researched and agreed upon before we spend money to build the program?”

Implementing Continuous Scheduling to Better Serve Students

Beyond curriculum, Excelsior is also re-engineering its scheduling process. This involves creating clear program pathways by identifying every required course for a major, standardizing course descriptions, and recommending sequences for general education. Concurrently, they are implementing continuous registration. Dr. Poczos walked us through what this looks like in practice. “When a first-year gets here at the beginning, say in January, we register them for the entire year.”

This initiative, coupled with the aspiration to use AI for predictive scheduling, promises significant benefits. “It’s challenging. But the payoff is going to be amazing,” Dr. Poczos affirms. “We will be able to offer less sections and fill the sections up more. We’ll be able to tell students definitively, ‘This is what your year is going to look like. These are the classes you’re going to take.’ We’ll be able to pre-register them for an entire year. So that’s a way we’re really looking for AI to help us solve the problem of having such disparate scheduling.”

Streamlining Policies for Quality Over Quantity

Policies have a critical impact on how an institution operates; however, a ballooning number of policies can lead to inconsistent guidance and confusion. Dr. Poczos recently set out to make sure this was no longer the case at Excelsior. After a streamlining of academic policies, the institution was able to dramatically reduce them from a daunting 171 to a concise 34.

This initiative was born out of a critical need for clarity and efficiency. “We had a lot of procedures that were initially called policies,” Dr. Poczos notes. “People didn’t

know the difference between a policy and a procedure. So everything was called a policy. But really it was how you’d get something done. So we split out policies and procedures.” This overhaul has not only created formal policies but also eliminated duplicate work and confusion.

The impact extends beyond mere efficiency; it also directly impacts student success. Previously, a lack of clarity around academic honesty policies and inconsistent tracking of violations created challenges for both students and faculty. Now, a newly established academic honesty council has implemented clear policies, procedures, and comprehensive training. This is particularly crucial in the age of artificial intelligence.

Dr. Poczos emphasizes, “that has had a big impact, especially with the advent of AI... We’ve had to do a lot of work to make sure students understand what is appropriate use of AI in terms of submitting an assignment.” She adds, “Now the student knows exactly what to expect if they’ve had an academic integrity violation. In the past, it wasn’t as clear, and our faculty weren’t as clear on what to do about it.”

The Power of Project Planning & Continuous Improvement

Throughout all of these initiatives, Dr. Poczos underscored the critical role of strong project planning and communication to achieve academic and program outcomes. She believes many institutions fall short by just focusing on the next step rather than defining long-term success. “You need to be an incredible project planner,” she advises, emphasizing the importance of backward design and continuous improvement. She encourages institutions to ask: What is the goal and when do you expect to get there? What will you evaluate? What does success look like?

Accountability is also key. At Excelsior, staff managers are actively involved in monitoring student and program performance data, fostering a culture where data informs decisions and interventions. “If it isn’t

“*“We will be able to offer less sections and fill the sections up more. We’ll be able to tell students definitively, ‘this is what your year is going to look like.’”*”

measured and discussed, people aren't working on it," Dr. Poczos asserts. She also emphasizes that continuous improvement is a collective responsibility: "When you're looking at continuous improvement, you have to think of everyone that's involved in continually improving something." Additionally, the ability to pivot and reallocate resources when something isn't working is crucial. "You need to be able to say: when it's not meeting our expectations, we're going to stop investing in it. We're going to change and take our energy and our money and invest it in what we think is more predictive here."

In the near future, Dr. Poczos sees an opportunity for AI to assist with smarter project management. For example, she envisions using AI to identify common problems and duplicative efforts within their project management system. "If there are common problems seen across all projects, how can we fix that? So it's identifying areas where we're duplicating work and duplicating solutions over and over again."

Relationship Building for Effective Academic Operators

Dr. Poczos closed out our conversation by touching on what it takes to be an effective academic operator. She advocates for more conversations within higher ed about the essential qualities of an effective academic operations professional, as these strategic roles only

become more and more important. Beyond the ability to create systems that bring together processes and people to deliver the academic experience, she spoke of a critical need for strong relationship-building skills, active listening, and the ability to articulate one's skills effectively.

“It’s really important for people who serve in academic operations roles to be able to build relationships. That’s really important at the top and at the bottom.”

Ultimately, Dr. Poczos’s vision illustrates that beyond the need to build bridges and foster collaboration, true impact comes from the strategic integration of planning, data, and technology to drive measurable change. Excelsior University’s pivot serves as a powerful case study for intentional academic operations. It demonstrates how a clear dedication to thoughtful project management, accountability, and an openness to leveraging innovative tools leads to powerful results. ■



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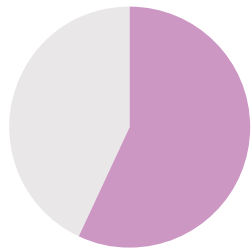


Uncovering the Link Between Student Success and Academic Operations

Behind every successful student stands a well-oiled academic operations machine. While often unseen by the students themselves, the strategic decisions and efficient execution of academic operations—from course scheduling to curriculum development and resource allocation—impacts a student’s ability to navigate their educational journey, complete their program, and ultimately achieve their aspirations. Academic operations done right are a prerequisite to student success.

At the 2024 Academic Operations Conference, attendees were asked to share how they see academic operations driving student success at their institutions. Their perspectives were incorporated into the mural (pictured in full on page 19) and in the ideas shared throughout this article.

Attendees shared that while academic functions should ideally always put students first, this can be challenging. Administrators who are already stretched thin have to navigate challenges such as data accessibility, manual and repetitive tasks, and outdated technology. Identifying where your institution may have opportunities for improvement and how your students perceive academic operations are essential first steps to creating a stronger connection between student outcomes and the operational pieces underpinning it.



55% OF STUDENTS FREQUENTLY OR SOMEWHAT FREQUENTLY STRUGGLE TO ENROLL IN REQUIRED COURSES

— College Pulse Survey



1 IN 4 INSTITUTIONS AGREE THAT THEY PRACTICE STUDENT-CENTRIC SCHEDULING

— AACRAO Survey

“Our annual survey to students who don’t return tells us class availability is a big reason why they didn’t come back.”

— Administrator, AACRAO Survey

Measure and Meet Student Course Demand

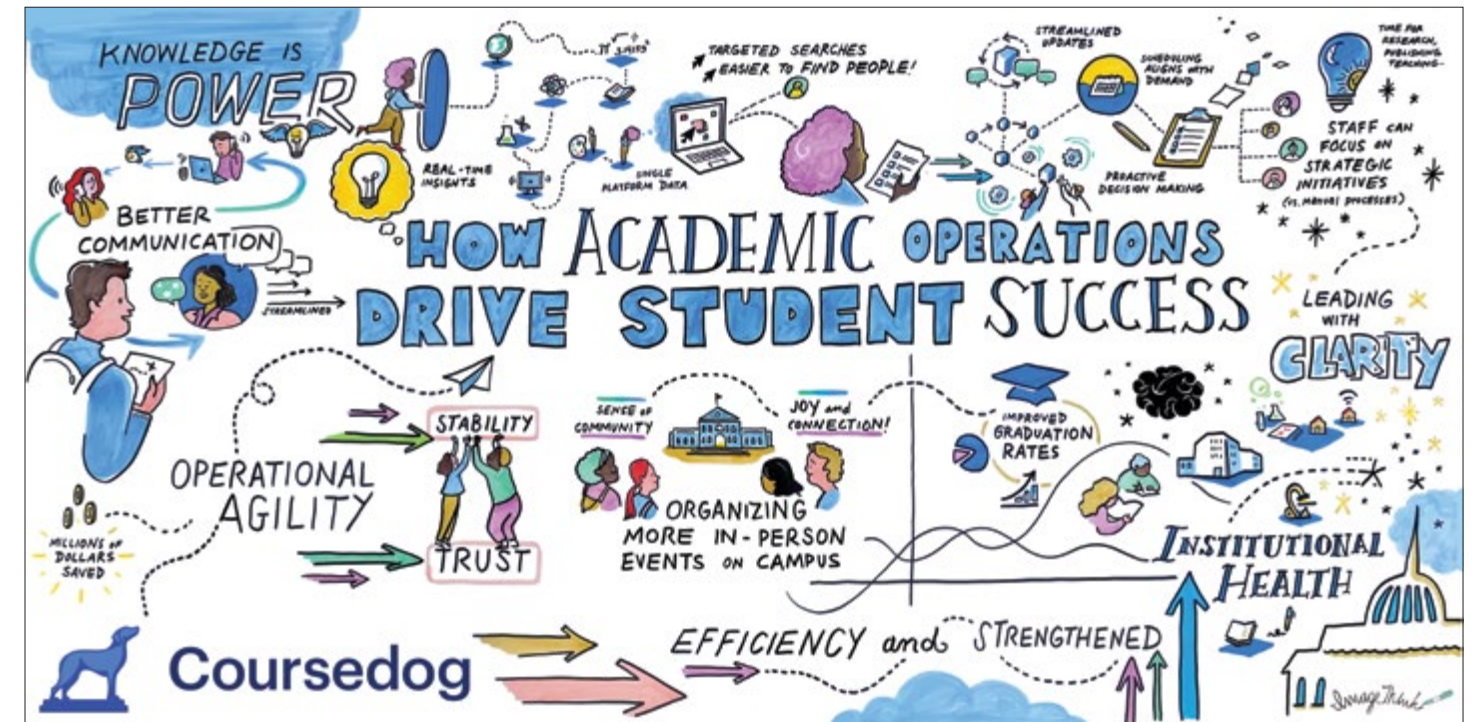
Getting into the right classes is one of the most significant challenges that students face related to academic operations. Frequently, faculty preferences and faculty availability take precedent over student needs when building the course schedule. Student survey data tells us that this takes a real toll on students’ ability to get into the classes they need. According to a survey by College Pulse and Coursedog, 55% of students frequently or somewhat frequently struggle to enroll in required courses. The most common frustrations reported include classes being full, inconvenient times, or conflicts with other necessary courses.

One community college student lamented, “The most common problem is that classes get full too quickly or don’t have enough sections. This tends to happen with the more popular classes that fulfill multiple prerequisites or are foundational to your later classes, like intro to biology.” Similarly, a student at a four-year flagship university recalled, “During my freshman semester I got into none of the classes that I attempted to register for. And the only reason I even got into my calculus class was because my advisor had to manually put me into one that was already full.”

The lack of availability can be a breaking point for students. In the same College Pulse survey, one in five students reported they would consider leaving their current institution if they can’t access the classes they need. However, this challenge is not a secret. Administrators are often well aware of the challenges that students face. One administrator in an AACRAO scheduling survey noted, “Our annual survey to students who don’t return tells us class availability is a big reason why they didn’t come back.” The same AACRAO survey found that only 1 in 4 institutions agree that they practice student-centric scheduling.

How can institutions better meet students where they are? Looking at both historical data and predictive course demand using data like degree audits can help to better meet student needs. Administrators should consider where more seats are needed in high-demand courses and how the structure of the schedule meets student needs. For example, are multiple pre-reqs offered at the same time forcing students to

Image: Academic Operations Conference Mural, drawn by Ona Rygelis from ImageThink



choose between them? Can students with jobs or caretaking responsibilities fit classes into their schedule?

Eliminate Manual Work to Allow Staff to Focus on Strategic Tasks and Student Interactions

Talk to any university staff member and they will run you through a laundry list of responsibilities, many of which include manual tasks, such as data entry, navigating disparate systems, and acting as intermediaries between departments. This inefficiency not only takes up valuable time, but can also overwhelm staff, especially during peak periods like creating the course schedule or publishing the annual catalog.

Yet, academic staff are deeply committed to their mission of helping students succeed. They possess invaluable insights into improving the student experience, but these ideas often remain unimplemented due to other daily demands. Eliminating tedious tasks frees up staff to engage in more strategic work and, crucially, to dedicate more time to interacting directly with and supporting students.

As one AACRAO survey respondent noted when asked about the role of the modern registrar, “The hardest

transition I’ve seen in the registrar’s office is the ability to adapt leadership and staff, who may have limited technology background, to evolve and be more strategic in how to leverage new systems and allow for enhanced ways to manage curriculum, scheduling and degree auditing etc. Registrars need to evolve their teams and staff skill set to keep with moving from manual-based processing to more strategic oversight and management of these tools.” Ask any member of your staff and they almost certainly have ideas about manual work they would like to eliminate and other projects waiting on the backburner.

Enable Students to Find Curriculum Information to Plan Their Academic Path

Understanding degree requirements is fundamental to a student’s academic journey, impacting both their time to completion and financial investment. Taking an incorrect course can lead to both wasted time and money. To ensure this doesn’t happen, students should be able to access clear and comprehensive program and course information. However, this is often a challenge, with information difficult to find, outdated, or even contradictory.

Students in the College Pulse study frequently expressed frustration with the accessibility and clarity

of curriculum information. One student recounted, “The only information I ever really received regarding my degree requirements that was comprehensive and comprehensible was a single PDF emailed to me at the beginning of my freshman year. It has not been updated.” Another student found that the “sheer volume of courses and requirements proved overwhelming as I sifted through pages of course listings and degree regulations.” Many students attributed these difficulties to catalogs that were hundreds of pages long, difficult to search, and didn’t always line up with other sources.

It is critical that institutions ensure their catalogs, other web pages, and student tools display accurate, consistent, and easily navigable information. Some best practices for student-friendly catalogs include SEO optimization, intuitive navigation, and accessibility for students with disabilities. Institutions should also consider how fast the catalog loads, if it is mobile-friendly, and how logical and consistent the navigation is.

Evaluate and Revise Curriculum to Meet Student and Employer Needs in Real Time

The rapidly evolving labor market demands that academic programs adapt quickly to meet the needs of both employers and students. Students increasingly indicate that a good job or career is the number one reason they choose to enroll. However, the process of updating curriculum is often painstakingly slow, taking months to years due to cumbersome submission, review, approval, and implementation procedures.

Dr. Jill Wright of Illinois Central College highlights this challenge: “By the time you create a two-year program, you’re already lagging. Because, if you go through all the systems, it’s going to take you a minimum of one year, if not two. So you started a program that you needed two years ago, and now you’re waiting two years to get it approved and then you’re going to offer it... The workforce has passed you by.”

Increasing the speed of curriculum review through streamlined, transparent, and accountable processes is essential. This allows for faster implementation of changes, ensuring students receive relevant and up-to-date programming. Similarly, feedback and

recommendations from assessment cycles should be acted upon swiftly to continually improve curriculum and the student experience.

Put Dollars Where They Matter Most to Address Student Needs

In an era of increasingly tight budgets, academic staff and administrators must scrutinize their financial allocations to maximize resources and effectively meet student needs. For example, offering a high number of underfilled course sections represents lost revenue. Where appropriate, these sections can be consolidated or eliminated so resources can be reallocated to high-demand areas. Similarly, faculty salaries often constitute a significant portion of the budget. Evaluating faculty workloads to prevent overloading and unnecessary overtime leads to smarter financial decisions and saved dollars.

Other critical academic operations financial considerations include analyzing your space utilization to inform factors such as energy efficiency and where unused space could be rented out for additional revenue. By making smart financial choices, institutions can ensure that every dollar spent contributes meaningfully to student success.

With academic operations spanning multiple functions across an institution, it can be overwhelming to consider where to start. Leaders in change management often recommend picking one area to start with and then using that momentum to build on further change. Consider which academic operations functions at your institution have the greatest opportunities and how those line up with student and institutional goals. ■



A Conductor of Partnerships:

Dr. Tom Nevill on Innovation and Apprenticeships at GateWay Community College

Located in the metropolis of Phoenix, Arizona, GateWay Community College is at the center of both growing industries and a growing population. Massive manufacturing and semiconductor facilities are coming to the state and require professionals in a wide range of critical areas. To explore how one institution navigates this dynamic landscape, we spoke with Dr. Tom Nevill, Vice President of Academic Affairs at GateWay Community College, part of the Maricopa Community Colleges System.



Dr. Tom Nevill
Vice President of Academic Affairs
GateWay Community College

Photo: Dr. Tom Nevill at GateWay Community College Event



 ABOUT	INSTITUTION: GateWay Community College	LOCATION: Phoenix, AZ	STUDENTS: > 5,000
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Staying Flexible to Meet the Semiconductor Surge

GateWay Community College’s new semiconductor workforce accelerator program is a prime example of how the college is adapting to meet workforce demand. GateWay is one of several colleges across the state that are a part of Arizona’s semiconductor initiative, the Future48 Workforce Accelerator. While the Maricopa System already has an established curriculum for the semiconductor program, GateWay is focused more specifically on the space and training aspects. This includes renovating one of GateWay’s campuses for a semiconductor incubator training space.

The goal is to create a facility “embedded into the industry of semico and really focusing on some of those

core components that these entry-level positions into that industry would look at,” such as basic circuit training and mechatronics. However, flexibility is key. Dr. Nevill explains: “We’re building a mock clean room... we can change things in and out as the technology evolves.” This adaptable learning environment allows for tailored training, whether a company needs a two-week program, credit, noncredit, clock hour, or credit for prior learning. Essentially GateWay is prepping for “whatever is needed for us to meet the needs of our community.”

Leveraging Partnerships to Propel the Digital Transformation of Higher Ed

Dr. Nevill sees colleges steadily growing in the digital space and in many ways “becoming more and more tech companies every day.” For example, he points to

the vast amount of digital content created by students and faculty through learning management systems and other avenues. However, despite this rapid adoption of technology, Dr. Nevill notes that compared to tech companies, “we don’t always operate like one.” The challenge lies in aligning internal operations with external technological advancements.

“We’re teaching all this innovative stuff, but we don’t operate with it sometimes,” largely because budgets often prioritize student-facing initiatives over digitizing back-end processes, Dr. Nevill explains. Yet, as technology becomes more affordable, Dr. Nevill sees this as a significant “area of opportunity for us in higher ed.”

To help make technological strides, leveraging external expertise can be a gamechanger. Dr. Nevill, a professionally trained musician, acknowledges that he didn’t frequently interact with computers as part of his professional education. However, daily interaction with technology is now the norm. To help bridge gaps in expertise that may exist in academia, he sees opportunities to leverage the expertise of vendor partners.

Dr. Nevill explained that “we are all in this together and we all focus on our certain components of how we make it happen.” This collaborative approach is vital for integrating new technologies like AI, which is “impacting the future of the workforce.” He believes that if software companies are driving these innovations, then colleges “need to be partners with them so we can ensure our students are successful—to be prepared for careers where that’s necessary.”

Bridging the Apprenticeship Gap

Just as outside partners can bring value to colleges and universities, institutions bring their own set of expertise to working with employers. For example, registered apprenticeships are a crucial avenue for workforce development, but their implementation can be complex, especially for employers trying to set up new ones. However, colleges are uniquely positioned to serve as an “intermediary perspective” between the employers and the student. To help bridge this gap, colleges are well situated to help “employers understand what we can do to help them provide some of that educational opportunity through apprenticeship models.”

To assist employers, GateWay offers a program called the Cooperative Apprenticeships Model where they help employers work through the regulations and administrative tasks required by the Department of Labor to sponsor a registered apprenticeship.

The other goal is to make apprenticeships more accessible and integrated into the broader higher education system. Dr. Nevill explains that traditionally colleges give credit for prior learning that comes with a journeyman’s card and then students may take a few more classes to earn an associate’s degree. However, in an ideal world these experiences and credits would be stackable into a bachelor’s degree “so you can continue on your education path if you choose to—without much burden on the student. They can just seamlessly go through that.”

Orchestrating a Seamless Student Experience in the Face of Program Complexity

Aside from apprenticeship programming, GateWay offers an array of different programs, including clock hour programming, noncredit programming, credit programming, and newly offered bachelor’s degrees. Managing such a diverse portfolio of programs, some with multiple modalities, is not without its challenges. Dr. Nevill emphasizes that the key to success lies in the back-end management to ensure a seamless student experience. “We don’t want a student that feels as though they can’t find which way they should go—from a public-facing view or from onboarding or their interest in the college,” he states.

He likens this intricate process to a “tap dance” or “juggling chainsaws that are on fire.” However, it is critical to always keep students at the center of program communication. This means constantly “figuring out the best way to solve that gap behind the scenes or improve that communication or create a workflow

or use some sort of technology to improve that process.” The goal is for all internal offices to collaborate effectively, making student pathways clear and easily accessible.

**Focus on What You Can Control:
Cultivating Continuous Curriculum
Innovation**

As a college deeply embedded in the community, maintaining a culture of innovation is essential to ensure curriculum remains relevant to workforce needs. GateWay Community College exemplifies this with its clock hour programs. Many of these programs are in the healthcare field and include emergency medical technology, medical assisting, pharmacy technician, and phlebotomy. Dr. Nevill explained that these programs undergo “curriculum changes monthly, it seems like, because they’re really innovative in terms of staying connected with industry.” This rapid adaptation is possible because these programs are owned and driven internally at GateWay, compared to some of the programs shared across the Maricopa System.

While updating credit hour programs shared across the college system can be more intricate, this makes it all the more important to focus on innovating the programs unique to GateWay that can be adjusted more quickly. For Dr. Nevill, it comes down to offering a curriculum that drives impact. One guiding question he asks is, “What can we do that’s going to be different and drive impact?”

**Looking Forward and Remaining
Grounded Amid the Noise**

As a college constantly looking to the future, Dr. Nevill stresses the importance of foresight beyond immediate concerns. “As you think about the future, it not only involves your own perspective or what’s revolving in your world, but what’s impacting that a little bit further out.” He acknowledges that current processes will evolve over the next five years, requiring institutions to be agile. “If we can build those mechanisms, infrastructures, or that way of thinking with our teams that say, ‘Hey, if we have to zig left and we have to zag right, are we ready for that?’”

On the other end of the spectrum, it can be difficult to



Photo: Dr. Nevill playing the drums with the GateWay’s New Day Band at a scholarship fundraiser

stay rooted in the day-to-day operations of an institution. To remain focused, GateWay’s executive team begins weekly meetings by sharing a “mission moment,” a personal story of how they’ve positively impacted a student. Dr. Nevill shares that even when you may not have a story of your own, “other people’s inspiration reminds you why we’re there” and helps keep the mission at the forefront.

Personally, music plays a big role helping Dr. Nevill stay grounded. A trained percussionist who plays in an employee band at GateWay, he finds that music helps him stay grounded and connected to the work. For example, in some ways the academic calendar mirrors the “cadences and the repetitive nature of music.” Playing in the band also helps build connections and is a “great way to be introduced to the campus community and become engaged with my colleagues.”

Dr. Nevill offers us a compelling example of how even amidst the chaos, institutions can lead with innovation and a student-first mindset. GateWay’s proactive engagement with industry and commitment to leveraging strategic partnerships demonstrate a forward-thinking approach that prioritizes responsiveness to student and industry needs with the ultimate goal of creating impact. ■



Prioritizing the Human Element:

How Cape Cod Community College Holistically Supports Faculty and Students

 ABOUT
INSTITUTION: Cape Cod Community College
LOCATION: West Barnstable, MA
STUDENTS: > 2,500

With academic and professional goals at the forefront of many college initiatives, it can sometimes be easy to lose sight of the individuals behind these important pursuits—students and faculty. However, the success and well-being of both faculty and students are inextricably linked. At Cape Cod Community College (4Cs), Dr. Carlнита P. Greene, Vice President of Academic Affairs, is leading the charge to embed this philosophy into every aspect of the institution. Her priorities, shaped by her own extensive experience in academia, revolve around creating a human-centric approach that emphasizes a supportive, flexible, and empathetic environment.

Nurturing Faculty and Staff Wellness in the Face of New Pressures

A thriving institution relies on a healthy and supported workforce, making faculty and staff development and well-being critical. “I think faculty and staff are key to higher educational institutions and it’s extremely important to make sure that we’re providing them with the support that they need professionally as well as personally,” Dr. Greene shares.

A significant part of this involves addressing mental health and wellness across the entire college community. Dr. Greene, working with the leadership team, is focusing on this holistically, “not just for our students but also across the college for faculty and staff.” Her approach is informed by her own journey as a faculty member, understanding the unique pressures and responsibilities educators face. “There are certainly a lot more opportunities, but also responsibilities, that faculty have in terms of serving students in ways that traditionally may not have been the case in the past,” she notes. Faculty members are no longer just teachers but also serve as mentors and advisors, building relationships with students and connecting them with resources.

Building Faculty Relationships and Preventing Burnout

Operating under the philosophy that “faculty success equals student success,” Dr. Greene believes strongly in building genuine relationships with faculty, both for-



Dr. Carlnita P. Greene

Vice President of Academic Affairs
Cape Cod Community College

mally and informally. Part of this includes creating a culture where faculty can achieve a healthy work-life balance. She encourages others to think about a balance that involves both taking care of students and taking care of self.

She acknowledges the selfless nature often expected of educators but cautions against its potential pitfalls. “I think a lot of times we’re expected to be so selfless that sometimes you can just give all of yourself to particular individuals ...

without stopping to realize that if you are not taking care of yourself, if you are not setting boundaries and holding students accountable for things in the classroom, then sometimes that can lead to burn-out.”

To combat this, Dr. Greene advocates for flexibility while also emphasizing accountability. She’s keen to hear directly from faculty about how to best support them, fostering a culture where self-care is encouraged, mental health is

“Faculty success equals student success.”

openly discussed, and taking time off is normalized.

Flexibility and Choice to Meet Students Where They Are

Like many other institutions around the country, 4Cs is focused on ensuring that students have the academic offerings and flexibility they need to succeed. This includes “looking at ways to offer the courses that they specifically need for their academic majors and their personal and professional goals,” Dr. Greene states. Some considerations include evaluating student needs when determining course offerings and format. She emphasizes the importance of “offering our students flexibility and choice in terms of those courses that we offer, what times we offer, and what modalities we offer.”

This commitment to flexibility extends to alternative learning formats, like HyFlex courses. These courses allow students to attend in person or remotely via Zoom, offering a crucial lifeline for those balancing personal commitments. “If a student has child care issues, needs to take care of a parent, or for whatever reason may not be able to travel to the 4Cs, they can opt in to join class via zoom,” Dr. Greene explains.

Flipping the Script: Unlearning Assumptions About Students

A core tenet of Dr. Greene’s philosophy is ensuring 4Cs is a “student-ready college.” This means shifting the focus from expecting students to be prepared, to ensuring that the institution is prepared to support them, regardless of their background or circumstances. “Making sure that we as a college are ready for students and that we also approach them from a strength-based perspective,” she emphasizes.

This approach challenges outdated assumptions. Dr. Greene reflects on past attitudes when she was first a faculty member 20 years ago. She used to encounter faculty who said “‘Oh, the students just aren’t prepared,’ or ‘If they don’t have this skill, then I can’t teach them.’ I think the shift that’s happened over time is to think about how we can be better prepared for our students and support them where they are, instead of making assumptions about where we think they should be.”

She highlights the importance of empathy and providing resources to support needs outside of the classroom. If students are worried about paying rent or how they

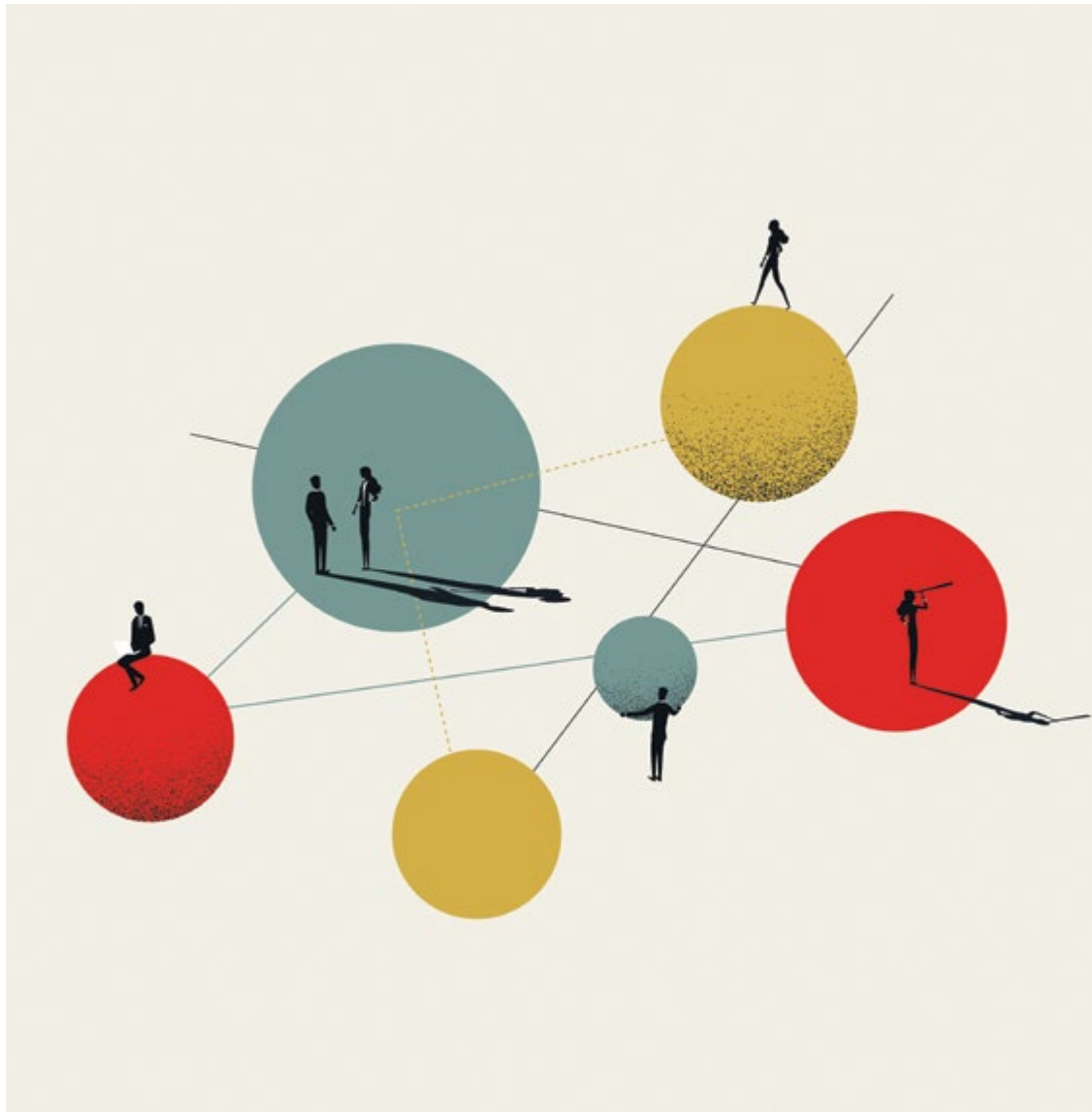
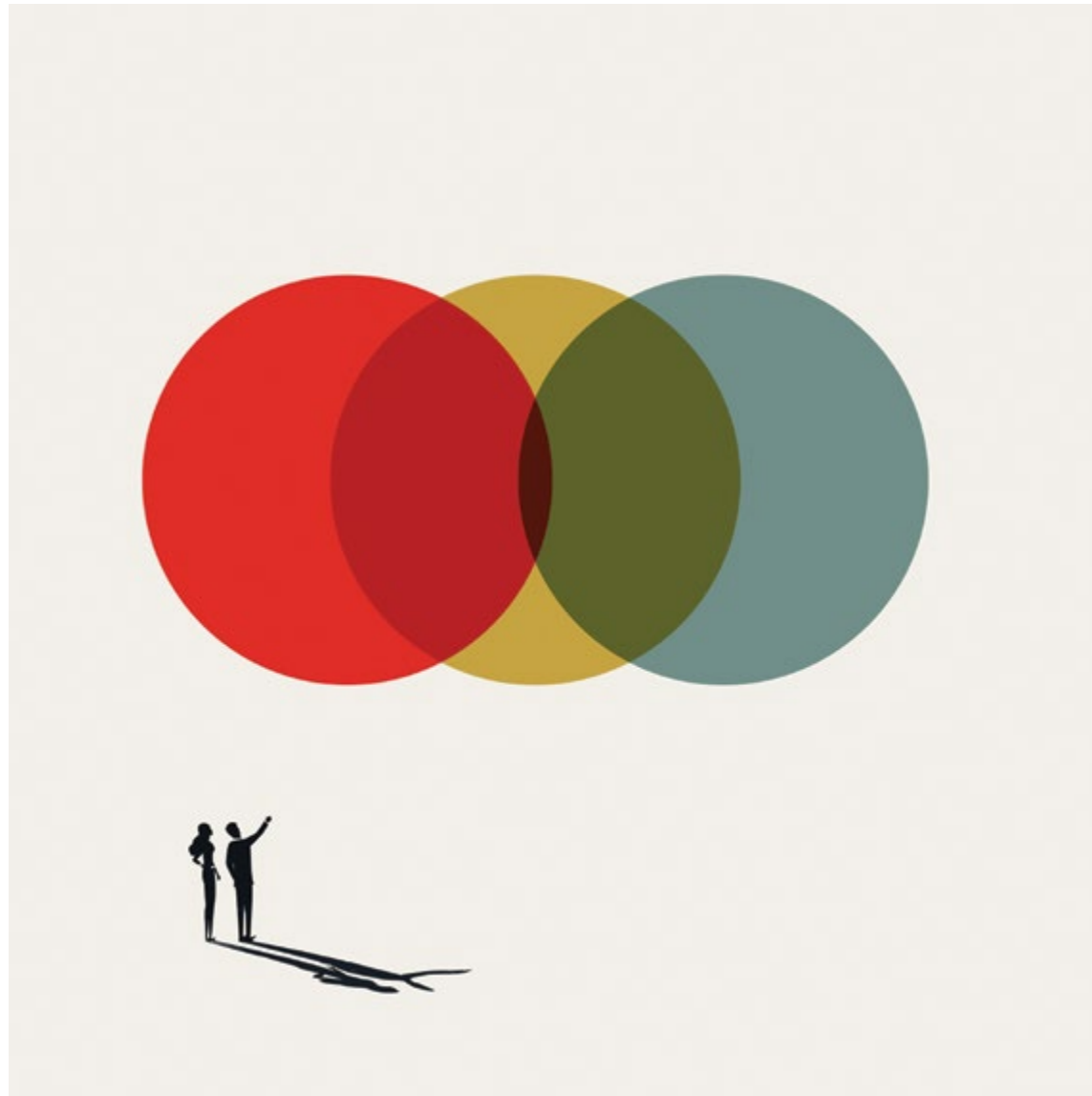
are going to eat, this can make it difficult to focus in the classroom. “When I taught, sometimes my students would just come and share things and I would go ‘Oh my gosh, all right. Let me connect you to this resource that we have at the college. Let me connect you to the food pantry. Let me connect you to mental health and counseling,’” Dr. Greene recalls. While faculty aren’t expected to solve every problem, they can be that connector and make a huge difference in students’ lives.

For first-generation students, like herself, navigating the “unwritten rules” of higher education can be daunting. Dr. Greene is committed to identifying and removing these structural barriers. This includes reviewing policies and procedures that might inadvertently create obstacles and bolstering advising services to ensure students understand how their courses align with their academic and career goals, preventing wasted time and money.

By prioritizing the human element, fostering a culture of support, and proactively addressing the multi-faceted needs of both faculty and students, Cape Cod Community College is committed to cultivating an environment that supports the whole person. ■

Data as a Catalyst:

Empowering Faculty and Community at Coastal Bend College



By all appearances, Coastal Bend College is a small institution with a student body of just under 4,000, nestled in Beeville, TX. But under the leadership of Dr. Michelle Lane, Executive Director of Institutional Effectiveness & Research, the college is making outsized strides in how it approaches assessment, student success, and institutional improvement.

We sat down with Dr. Lane to understand how her philosophy centered on empowering faculty, leveraging data for informed decision-making, and fostering deep community partnerships is driving key change in these critical areas.

Data as a Compass, Not a Dictator

At the heart of successful institutional effectiveness lies the strategic use of data. Dr. Lane emphasizes that the role of the Institutional Research (IR) office is to guide and inform, not to overwhelm. “What we are figuring out is we might have too much data given out right now without helping to focus the conversations,” she explains. The goal, she clarifies, is to empower faculty by providing targeted data that focuses assessment conversations on student learning, rather than merely crunching numbers.

With this approach, the team at Coastal Bend wants to transform data from a bureaucratic hurdle into a tool for informing improvement. “What we find is, we need to make space for our faculty and staff to have those robust discussions. Not data-driven discussions but data-informed discussions,” Dr. Lane states. She highlights the impact of this frame shift: “We find that when we focus on the students and we focus on their learning, the conversations become much more impactful.”

The IR office, in this model, acts as a “guide on the side.” Dr. Lane elaborates: “We’re not saying, ‘this is what the data is, this is what you have to do,’ but really empowering our faculty and our subject matter experts to own the student learning platform and own that arena.” This sense of ownership, she asserts, has been game-changing: “The faculty owning the work that they do and being given the ownership and the autonomy to celebrate their programs has really been a transformation for this institution.”



Dr. Michelle Lane

Executive Director of Institutional
Effectiveness & Research

Coastal Bend College

“We find that when we focus on the students and we focus on their learning, the conversations become much more impactful.”

The Imperative of Accurate Data and Continuous Education

Leveraging data in impactful ways hinges on the accuracy and accessibility of data. Dr. Lane notes that systems improvements are making it easier to share data, but cautions that it’s “only as good as how it is put in and structured in a system.” She also stresses the ongoing need for systems education, especially with staff changes. “We may have said something a year ago, but we have whole new players. So we have to come back and re-educate, reiterate, and make sure we didn’t lose anyone along the way.”

A key challenge lies in bridging the gap between data experts and the wider institutional community. “We live in the numbers. We live in the day-to-day data. Most folks do not,” Dr. Lane reminds. “And so it is finding that common language, whether it’s in data or it’s in a system for assessment... Having that common language or a way to translate ‘what we need in the system is this’ so that we can show you ‘how your students are doing here.’ I think this is a really big challenge for any institution.”

When faculty and staff witness tangible progress through data, it creates a powerful ripple effect. “They see some progress happening, and they see some impact for the students,” Dr. Lane observes. “And so when you can see that directly occurring in your classroom, and you can see that you’re making those gains. That’s where your data, I think, becomes the most impactful.”

Closing the Loop: From Assessment to Action

As a peer evaluator and coach for the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges (SACSCOC), Dr. Lane has a unique vantage point on common institutional pitfalls. She reveals that institutions are most frequently dinged not for a lack of data, but for failing to act on assessment findings. “It is not because folks are not doing planning or they’re not doing assessment. But in that continuous improvement cycle, there’s results. And then there’s the use of those results.”

The critical missing piece, she asserts, is the “closing



the loop” aspect. “It is one thing to get the data and go, ‘Okay, well, that didn’t work.’ It’s another thing to say, ‘Okay, what parts didn’t work, what parts did? And now what are we going to do about it?’”

A significant missed opportunity, Dr. Lane points out, is the failure to disseminate and scale innovative practices happening within pockets of the institution. “If I have a program and they are moving along and doing what’s absolutely some stellar work, but we have not shared that work with the other programs ... we missed the opportunity for other programs to learn.” She passionately advocates for making time and space to share these “magical” innovations, allowing them to “shine across so that everyone can learn and innovate from it.”

Mapping Processes for a Seamless Student Experience

Beyond data analysis, academic operators such as Dr. Lane are employing practical tools to improve the student journey. Process mapping, Dr. Lane explains, is a “very, very powerful activity to do in any activity or any group across campus.” By stepping into the student’s shoes and examining processes such as class registration, institutions can uncover hidden roadblocks. Particularly, how is a given process serving different student groups, such as students with jobs or students with children? “When you do the process



mapping, and you keep in mind those students: Do we really serve all students? Are we really providing that access?” Dr. Lane challenges.

Process mapping also serves as a vital diagnostic tool for long-standing processes that may have become inefficient or outdated. “Sometimes there’s nothing wrong with your process, except nobody’s looked at it in 10 years,” she states. This review can reveal opportunities for automation and greater efficiency, ultimately benefiting students. It “helps having the space to discuss: ‘Is this the most efficient way?’ or ‘This is what we actually do. Is this what our policy says we do? Does this match? Does this align?’ That’s a very impactful thing to do as well.”

Rekindling Community Connections and Holistic Support

To truly fulfill an institution’s mission, Dr. Lane passionately advocates for community colleges to reaffirm their foundational connection to their surrounding communities. Drawing inspiration from organizations like Achieving the Dream, which focuses on community vibrancy and momentum metrics, she urges institutions to move beyond perfunctory partnerships. “We need to go back to the community side of community colleges,” she emphasizes “Let’s talk about how this town is part of the college as well.”

“

“The faculty owning the work that they do and being given the ownership and the autonomy to celebrate their programs has really been a transformation for this institution.”

ABOUT

INSTITUTION: Coastal Bend College

LOCATION: Beeville, TX

STUDENTS: < 4,000

True partnerships, she stresses, go beyond a handshake and a website mention. “Let’s really look at how we partner. What is the quality of those partnerships? And then making sure that we are keeping that connection. And keeping that work alive, I think, is really, really crucial.” This involves a deeper engagement with economic development and workforce needs and ensuring that the college serves as a catalyst for both regional growth and student mobility.

Coastal Bend College has taken this commitment to heart with its new “Cougar Care” program, offering wraparound services to address students’ holistic needs. Dr. Lane understands that a student’s success can hinge on seemingly small factors: “The difference between succeeding in a semester or not, for a student is a flat tire. Sometimes it is.” By leveraging community resources for mental health, transportation, and internet access, the college aims to provide comprehensive support to students, especially for those in rural areas.

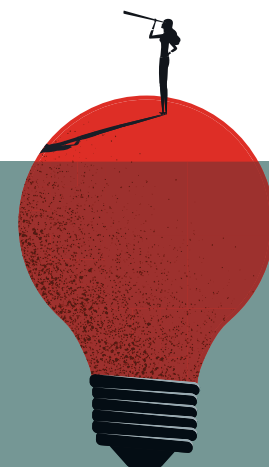
Navigating the AI Frontier with Literacy and Critical Thinking

While the advent of AI presents both exciting opportunities and critical challenges for higher education, many leaders are grappling with how it can be used most effectively. To address these questions, Coastal

Bend College proactively established an AI task force to explore its implications. “Not only are we going to be looking at things like information literacy and how students utilize it, but how do our faculty use it in detection? Also, what are the appropriate avenues for using it in the workspace?” Dr. Lane explains.

While enthusiastic about AI’s potential, particularly for workforce and labor market data, Dr. Lane emphasizes the paramount importance of AI literacy. “We want to teach our students not only the wonderful, amazing, innovative components that come with AI, but also remind them that it’s a tool.” She sees this as a natural extension of existing educational goals: “That [AI] really just then becomes something else we teach with critical thinking and information literacy.”

In this new era, educators have a crucial role to play in shaping how AI is understood and utilized. “I think now we’re just in that new phase of ‘This is a new exciting tool.’ But it’s only going to be as good as the brains that are putting things in, and the brains that are interpreting it out,” Dr. Lane concludes. “And so if we, as educators, can get on the forefront of that conversation. I think you will see it move pretty big mountains.” ■

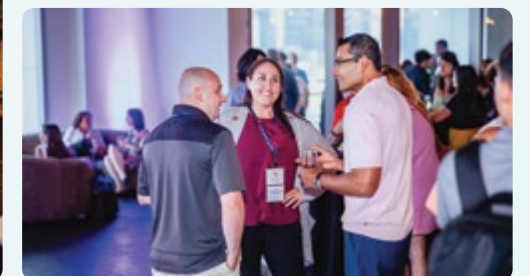


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SURVEY

Snapshot

This survey was conducted in June and July 2025 and gathered insights from 189 assessment professionals.

Beyond Compliance: Unpacking the Inner Workings of Academic Assessment

Assessment has long been a cornerstone of higher education, serving as a function to both meet compliance requirements and ensure quality. The assessment process is central to measuring student learning outcomes, identifying areas for enhancement, and ultimately improving program quality. However, despite the critical role assessment plays, many continue to view it as a bureaucratic exercise that consumes valuable faculty time.



ALMOST HALF (49%) OF RESPONDENTS INDICATE THAT THEY ONLY HAVE ONE TO TWO FULL-TIME EMPLOYEES DEDICATED TO ASSESSMENT.

To better understand how institutions approach academic assessment, current practices, and challenges, Coursedog recently conducted a survey of higher education assessment professionals across the United States and Canada. The survey, conducted from June to July 2025, heard from 189 assessment professionals.

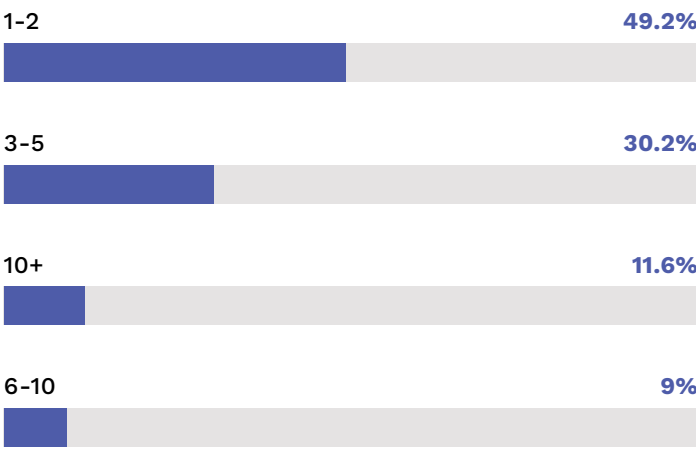
The results paint a nuanced portrait of the current state of academic assessment. Three in four institutions reported that they did not incur any violations during their last assessment cycle, yet institutions still struggle in critical areas like data analysis, faculty buy-in, and closing the loop. The results included throughout aim to broaden our collective understanding of how academic assessment is conducted and where there are opportunities for improvement.

Few Full-Time Employees Dedicated to Assessment, But Other Stakeholders Play Critical Roles

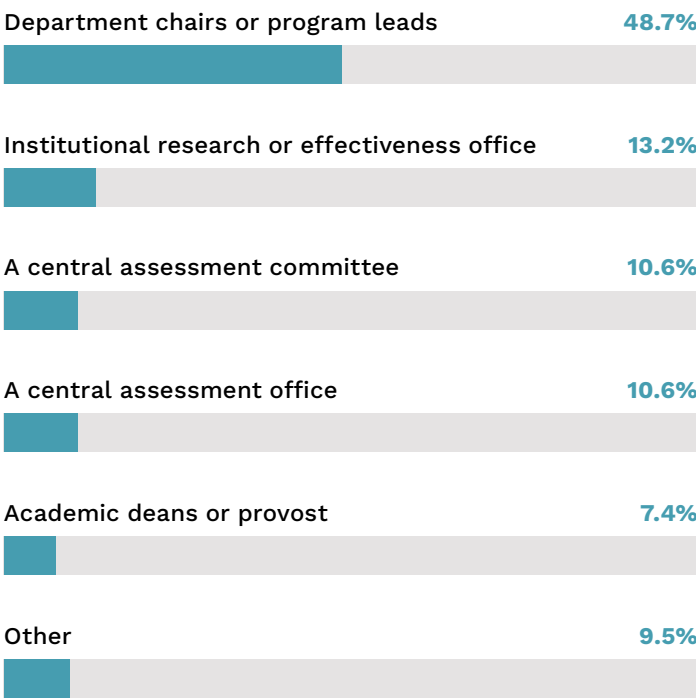
Even with the full-spectrum of responsibilities that come with running assessment across an institution, almost half (49%) of respondents indicate that they only have one to two full-time employees dedicated to assessment. An additional 30% report three to five full-time employees for assessment.

Despite a small number of staff dedicated to assessment, it's no surprise that other stakeholders play a critical role advancing the work and taking action on results. For example, department chairs or program leads most frequently own tracking and executing on action items that come out of completed assessment reports (49%). While this group most commonly takes charge of this important work, other groups such as the institutional research office, assessment committees, and assessment offices also play a critical role in driving processes forward.

How many full time employees are dedicated to managing the assessment cycle and accreditation responsibilities at your institution?



Who keeps track of and executes on action items that come out of completed assessment reports?

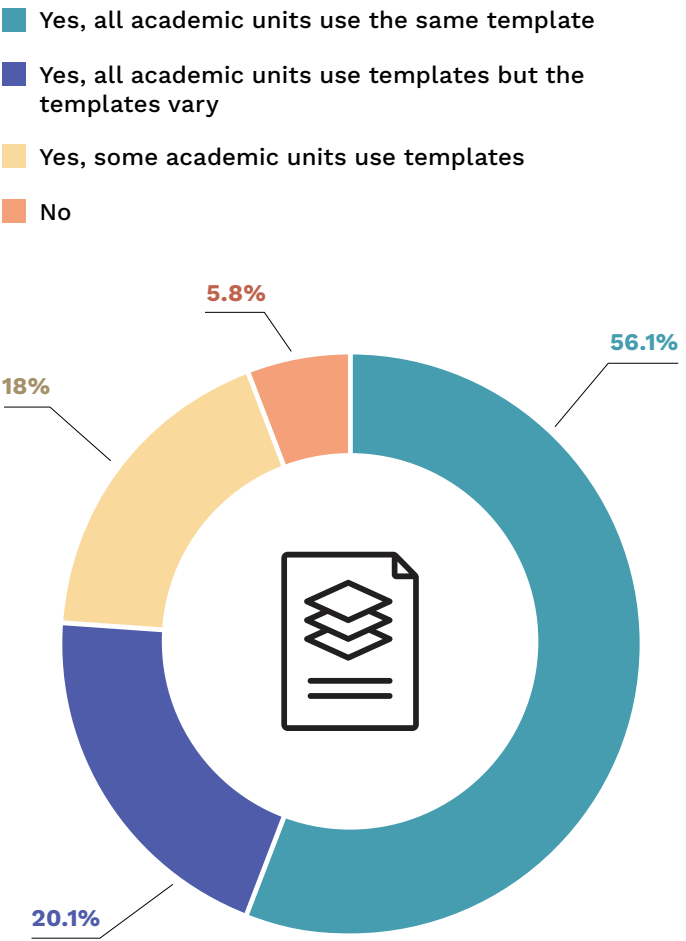


A Conflicting Story of Standardization: Timelines, Templates, and Technology

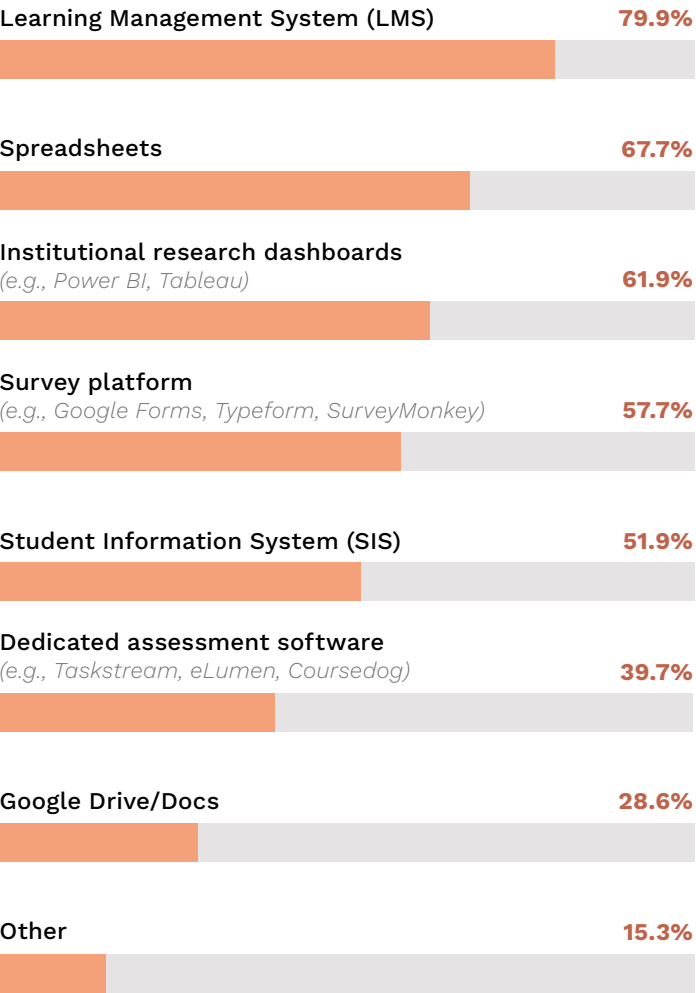
To help standardize the assessment process and make things easier for both departments and administrators, many institutions use standard processes and procedures. For example, a majority (60%) report that all academic units follow the same timeline and process for their assessment cycles, fostering a unified approach. Similarly, over half (56%) report that all academic units use the same institution-wide template for filling out assessment reports. Even among colleges and universities who don't use institution-wide templates, 20% use templates with departmental differences, and 18% report some units using them.

However, the consistency across processes and templates stands in stark contrast to the use of technology. Institutions overwhelmingly rely on multiple, often disparate, systems and platforms to manage their assessment activities. A staggering 90% of institutions use two or more solutions. Beyond just two solutions, 81% report using three or more, 64% use four or more, and 45% juggle five or more platforms. Common "other" solutions cited include Microsoft products (e.g., SharePoint, Word, Teams) and various homegrown systems. This suggests that while institutions are achieving process and template standardization, they are doing so within a highly fragmented technological environment, potentially creating inefficiencies in data aggregation and analysis.

Does your institution use templates to help guide academic units filling out assessment reports?



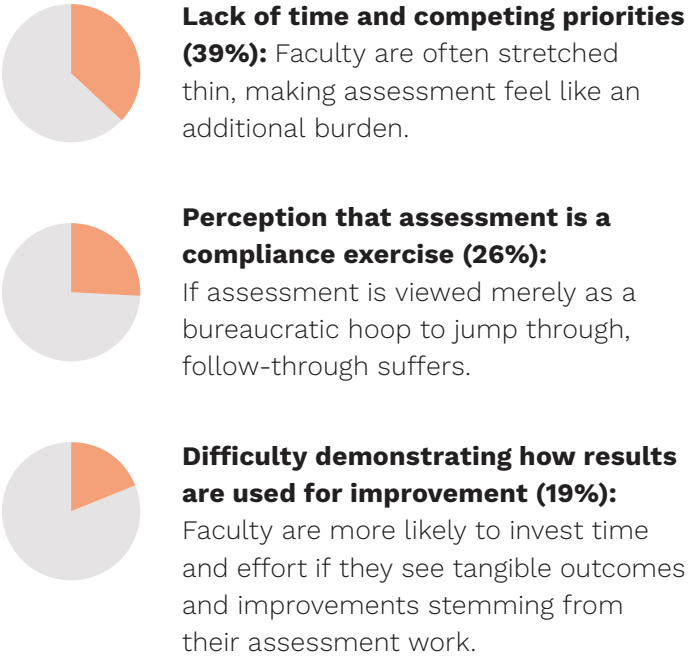
Which systems or platforms are currently used to support assessment activities at your institution?



Closing the Loop and Faculty Buy-in Present Biggest Challenges to Administrators

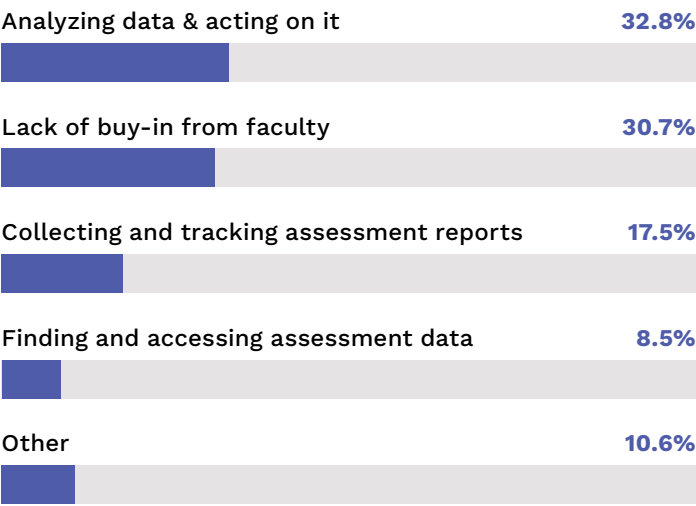
Despite the promise of assessment and its potential for transformative impact, administrators still face significant hurdles achieving their goals. Data analysis and securing faculty buy-in emerged as the top concerns for administrators when it comes to assessment. Specifically, “analyzing data and acting on it” (also known as “closing the loop”) ranked as the top concern for 33% of respondents, while “lack of buy-in from faculty” closely followed at 31%.

Engaging faculty can be particularly challenging, as faculty balance a myriad of other responsibilities including teaching, research, mentorship, and more. Respondents reported that the biggest challenges engaging faculty include:



It is not surprising that if faculty aren’t bought in, it is more difficult to close the loop. Faculty arguably have the most impact on assessment outcomes as the ones developing curriculum and delivering it in the classroom. Given this, it’s important that we ask: How can we ease the assessment burden on faculty to engage them? How can we move beyond compliance and take real action on assessment results?

What is the biggest challenge administrators at your institution face when it comes to assessment?



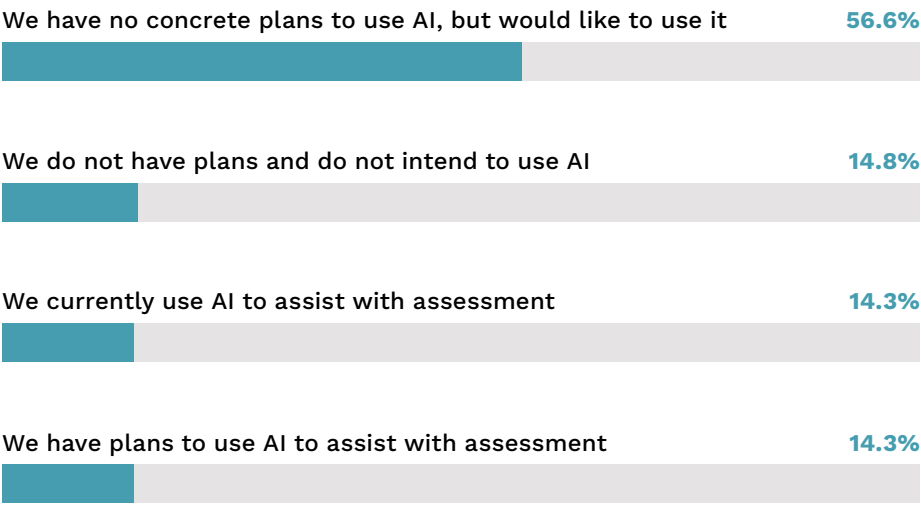
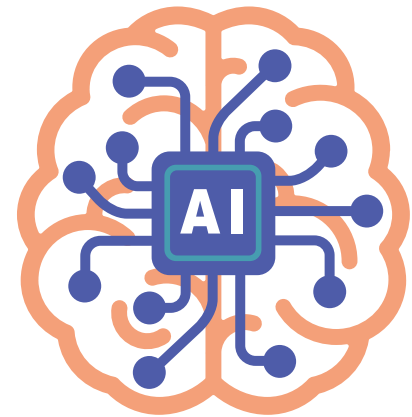
Looking to the Future of AI and Assessment

With the number of AI solutions exploding over the past couple of years, many are evaluating how AI fits into their assessment processes. While only a small percentage of institutions (14%) report currently using AI in their assessment practices, the majority of institutions report that they either have plans or would like to use AI in their assessment practices. 14% report that they have concrete plans to use AI while another 57% report that they would like to use AI, despite no concrete plans at the moment.

On the other end of the spectrum, only 15% report that they both have no plans to and don’t intend to use AI for their assessment processes. With few institutions currently using AI, but many planning or hoping to use it, it will be worth watching how tools evolve to meet institutional needs and what areas of assessment are most ripe for acceleration by AI.

Looking ahead, the burgeoning interest in AI suggests a future where technology could alleviate some of these burdens, streamlining processes and enhancing analytical capabilities. However, effective and impactful assessment will ultimately require ongoing collaboration, strategic data analysis, and a renewed focus on demonstrating how assessment directly contributes to positive student outcomes. ■

To what extent does your institution currently or plan to use AI to assist with tasks in the assessment cycle?



57% REPORT THAT THEY WOULD LIKE TO USE AI, DESPITE NO CONCRETE PLANS AT THE MOMENT.

Read the Full Survey Report

www.coursedog.com/assessment-report

From First-Gen to Associate Vice Chancellor:

A Conversation with Dr. Jesse Mason on Leading with Community

ABOUT

INSTITUTION: Minnesota State System

LOCATION: St. Paul, MN

STUDENTS: ~270,000

Dr. Jesse Mason, Associate Vice Chancellor for Academic Affairs at Minnesota State, embodies the transformative power of higher education. As the first in five generations of his family to graduate both high school and earn a college degree, his personal journey fuels a deep-seated passion for students and serving the community. His experience, combined with a career spanning faculty roles, deanships, and provost positions, now informs his leadership at the system level in Minnesota. Dr. Mason shares his insight into what it means to work in a system office, how we can center our work on the needs of our communities, and transformational initiatives in the works at Minnesota State.

The Dynamic Role of a System Office

For many on campus, the work of a system office can seem abstract. However, Dr. Mason explains that the system level Office of Academic Affairs serves as a key hub for operational leadership and coordination. The Office of Academic Affairs at Minnesota State oversees a wide variety of areas, including dual enrollment, academic program approvals, transfer agreements, career and technical program support, and collaboration with accrediting agencies.

Beyond day-to-day operations, Dr. Mason's office also supports new initiatives, staff training, and legislative work. For example, Minnesota State is focused on creating pathways for adult learners, including new



Dr. Jesse Mason

Associate Vice Chancellor for
Academic Affairs

Minnesota State System

immigrants, to help them achieve their educational and career aspirations. Additionally, Dr. Mason's team is dedicated to training administrators to better support faculty and staff. Dr. Mason also works closely with the legislature and Board of Trustees on large-scale projects such as general education redesign and developmental education reform.

While coordinating this work across 33 different colleges and universities can be challenging, Dr. Mason notes that a shared mission helps bring everyone together. "When you have 33 colleges and universities and 54 different communities, of course there are varying perspectives. But one thing that we align on is student success and the importance of not only getting them in the door, but what do we do with them when they come in the door," he shares. This shared commitment drives initiatives like their Equity 2030 plan and the academic and student affairs framework centered around guided learning pathways.

Centering Student Pathways on the Needs of the Community

When asked about advice for implementing effective pathways, Dr. Mason emphasizes that we need to focus on the communities being served. He believes higher education institutions have a responsibility to inspect how we're serving students, communities, employers, and the state ecosystem. He advises that institutions need to make sure that "what we offer truly is serving and progressing the communities that we are in. We're not just in there to take from or just to recruit from. We're giving back, and what we're giving back is a workforce that will lead to increased revenue and infrastructure for those states and the communities. This will make them much more viable for new citizens who come in or new companies who may want to come into our states, knowing that they have an educated workforce that they can choose from."

This philosophy extends to working with the collective community behind each student. Drawing from his own background, Dr. Mason states, "I come from a generation that was more collectivistic than individualistic. My success was seen as success for the whole community or for the whole family." He highlights the importance of understanding the family and community involvement in students' educational decisions,

"[Institutions need to make sure that] what we offer truly is serving and progressing the communities that we are in. We're not just in there to take from or just to recruit from. We're giving back, and what we're giving back is a workforce that will lead to increased revenue and infrastructure for those states and the communities."



Photo: Minnesota State University, Mankato



particularly for groups like Latino students or those entering from the foster system. “That’s why it’s much more than just the curriculum that we offer, but that relationship with the community. It’s also creating space within the institution where students can identify themselves culturally and identify themselves from an individualistic standpoint.”

Examining Impactful Initiatives: Prison Education and Teacher Preparation

When asked about some of the important initiatives Minnesota State is currently working on to serve communities across the state, Dr. Mason shared two different programs driving an outsized impact. While institutions across the state have been engaged in prison education for many years, it became a priority at the state level when Governor Tim Walz was elected in 2018. Dr. Mason is a champion of these efforts and notes that “we all know that in order to make sure

that the workforce needs of the state and the country are met, we have to go beyond just our traditional pathways to workforce.”

Prison education programs promote a number of positive outcomes beyond just GEDs and degrees. Dr. Mason notes that such programs “lead to reduction in recidivism and allow them to make a living wage and create new family dynamics for themselves.” Minnesota State institutions offer “the curriculum both on the liberal arts side and the career tech side to a number of our state institutions to allow students to either earn the credentials while they’re incarcerated, or plan as they transition out of those facilities to find a safe place at one of our institutions.”

Equally important, Minnesota State is focused on how we can prepare the next generation of teachers. While many students have a passion to enter into the K-12 teaching profession, it isn’t always easy to get there.

For example, students often have to quit their jobs in order to complete the required student teaching. To address this financial burden, Dr. Mason is proud that Minnesota State played a role in a stipend pilot. “If they have to quit their job, they know that they’ll be taken care of during their last semester to meet their teaching credentials.” He believes “those kinds of things have been life-changing for many of our students who want to be educators.”

Defining Non-Degree & Micro-Credentials to Promote Clarity and Career Outcomes

As workforce and community needs evolve, so too are the educational offerings at colleges and universities. However, navigating the landscape of non-degree credentials and micro-credentials can be overwhelming for students and institutions alike. To better understand this complex environment, Dr. Mason shares that Minnesota State has “a working group who will soon be bringing recommendations around micro-credentialing and badging.” He hopes this work will build off of their existing “credit for prior learning network,” which over half of Minnesota State institutions participate in. This network is designed to recognize learning acquired through military service or other training and help students get to their credential faster.

This work reinforces the idea of stackable credentials, recognizing that many students attend part-time with the goal to earn credentials that lead to living-wage jobs throughout their educational journey. In developing these new frameworks, Minnesota State is actively working with and learning from other states to avoid common pitfalls. “For us, it is trying to avoid the mistake of not having parameters early, because sometimes... we rush to implement things without really thinking about what the parameters are and what the standards are for accountability and quality,” Dr. Mason cautions. This collaborative effort also extends to

working with other state entities and private partners to ensure credentials meet employer needs and adapt to changing workforce demands.

Lessons for Future System Leaders: Curiosity, Lifelong Learning, and Humility

For academic administrators aspiring to system-level leadership, Dr. Mason offers advice rooted in his own career journey. He stresses the importance of gaining practical skills like budgeting and strategic planning. He also emphasizes the need to truly understand the experiences of those on the ground: “What I wanted to do is understand the people who I’ll be serving and what they are experiencing on the ground.”

“*“The main lesson is to learn from your peers. Do a deep dive in trying to understand and admit when you don’t understand, because that creates the opportunity for learning.”*”

This work is just as important to a faculty member as it is to a top-level administrator. For example, Dr. Mason emphasizes building relationships. “I took the first day of class when I was teaching very seriously,” he shares. “I want to know ‘What’s your interest? What’s your background? What’s your intended major?’ because I want to use those in the examples in my own pedagogy when I teach.” This micro-level engagement fosters a sense of belonging and helps students see themselves reflected in their learning.

Aside from understanding your constituents, Dr. Mason advises: “The main lesson is to learn from your peers. Do a deep dive in trying to understand and admit when you don’t understand, because that creates the opportunity for learning.” As such, he believes these positions demand a dedication to lifelong learning, openness to new experiences, and a willingness to accept critique. “These positions are not about ego. It’s about learning and doing better as you learn. I’ve learned that people are forgiving of mistakes when you’re willing to learn and admit that you’ve made a mistake.” This thoughtful approach, rooted in curiosity and continuous self-improvement, is essential for those seeking to be effective leaders, community champions, and student advocates. ■



Beating the Odds:

How One Community College Created a Successful Infrastructure for Student Transfer

ABOUT

INSTITUTION:
Moorpark College

LOCATION:
Moorpark, CA

STUDENTS:
> 14,000



Dr. John Forbes

Vice President of Academic Affairs
Moorpark College

“It’s not just getting someone across the finish line and getting that diploma, but once they go on to a four-year school, how well prepared are they for earning a bachelor’s degree—which is a big deal in today’s economy.”

If you’re a community college student who intends to transfer to a four-year university, how likely is that to actually happen?

In the United States, approximately only 1 in 3 students successfully transfer.

However, Moorpark College is one institution beating the odds. Located in Moorpark, CA, Moorpark College is recognized as a leader for their commitment to student outcomes and transfer success. They were a Top 10 Finalist for the Aspen Prize in 2025 and were recognized as a Champion of Higher Education for Excellence in Transfer by The Campaign for College Opportunity (CCO) in 2023.

Dr. John Forbes, Vice President of Academic Affairs at Moorpark College, recently shared his perspective on the operational work going on behind the scenes that contributes to the college’s success. He spoke on a variety of topics, including creating successful transfer programs, empowering your staff, and approaching conversations around AI.

Mastering the Art of Transfer

Transferring from a community college to a four-year institution has historically been fraught with complexities, often leading to wasted credits and prolonged academic journeys. Moorpark College tackled this head-on by embracing the Associate Degree for Transfer (ADT) framework, a legislative initiative designed to streamline the process for California community college students aiming to transfer to the California State University (CSU) system.

“We’re known nationwide and within the state as very good at transfer,” explains Dr. Forbes. “Our students have very clear pathways within academic disciplines and then transfer to four-year institutions.” He emphasizes that success isn’t just about getting students admitted; it’s about their preparedness post-transfer. “We’ve also been known for having high success after transfer, which is something you want to look at. It’s not just getting someone across the finish line and getting that diploma, but once they go on to a four-year school, how well prepared are they for earning

a bachelor’s degree—which is a big deal in today’s economy.”

The key to this success lies in the proactive adoption of ADTs. Over a decade ago, Moorpark College’s faculty swiftly realigned their local associate degrees to match the Transfer Model Curricula (TMCs) developed by the CSUs. “The course itself and the progression matches because then the ADT is a guarantee—that’s the legislation’s idea—that the student then enters the CSU system as a junior,” Dr. Forbes states. “They’re not repeating courses. There wasn’t some random business department at a particular CSU that said ‘Oh, we didn’t like the order you took something in.’” This alignment has significantly reduced the friction points that once plagued transfer students.

Shifting Policies from Punitive to Growth-Oriented

Part of setting up the right infrastructure for success lies in evaluating how well institutional policies serve students. Dr. Forbes believes that at the heart of it, “any system that’s creating a policy that doesn’t center the student is in the wrong.” He points to outdated policies, like the punitive language surrounding academic probation.

Moorpark ran a trial where they changed the name to “academic notice” in all of their notices, letters and emails. Just as important, it added “the type of language that was more growth mindset and helped a student understand that we want you to persist,” Dr. Forbes explained. Instead of threatening students with “probation,” the college adopted an encouraging tone. This shift aims to encourage students to access support services rather than getting the same undesirable result. “It’s like saying ‘Don’t just keep signing up for that same class and failing it over and over again.’ We have to do something different,” he concludes.

How to Make a Strong Case for New Initiatives

To continually improve student outcomes, institutions are constantly investigating new programs and initiatives that can help students succeed. However, getting the approval and budget to test a new idea is easier said than done. When it comes to securing



Photos: Recognizing Moorpark as a 2025 Aspen Prize Finalist (top); Dr. Forbes with the Moorpark’s nursing program faculty (bottom)

funding and support for new projects, Dr. Forbes is a proponent of data-driven proposals and a clear theory of action. He describes himself as a “come back with more” person,” emphasizing the need to bring the right data and information. He asks his staff: “What’s the data structure? In other words, how many students are we talking about?”

Dr. Forbes also prioritizes careful design and measurable outcomes. “Moorpark College is known for designing better on the upfront—whether we think

Photo: Dr. Forbes at Moorpark College's Biotechnology Analytical Lab ribbon-cutting ceremony



something would work, whether we can see a causal impact of the intervention,” he explains. He cites examples like their two-way texting initiative and course embedded tutors, both of which were meticulously planned to evaluate their effectiveness. “Because we carefully designed a comparison from the get-go on what variables would be different across a semester, we were then able to point back to where there was a casual relationship for our course embedded tutors,” he explained.

A compelling proposal, according to Dr. Forbes, needs a strong theory of action grounded in research. “This isn’t just something that somebody dreamed up. If we’re academics, we should stand on the shoulders of giants and we should use academic research to know whether something has worked in the past or not.” He often encourages proposers to refine their ideas. “I’m sometimes known as the ‘go back and try again’ person. But then let’s plan it, vote, and as a partnership figure out what really works.”

He illustrates this with the example of course-embedded tutoring. From the start, the program wasn’t just “Here’s a tutor, good luck,” but a thoughtful approach that included study skills workshops and two-way texting. This meticulous planning allowed for the demonstration of causal relationships and ultimately led to proven success.

Navigating the AI Frontier with Structured Conversations

Like many colleges and universities, administrators at Moorpark are investigating what role artificial intelligence plays in higher ed. However, due to the multi-faceted nature of AI, it is easy for discussions to quickly get derailed. Dr. Forbes advocates for a structured approach to conversations surrounding AI.

“Talking about AI is like saying ‘let’s talk about air.’ You can breathe it, store it, use it,” he observes. To avoid unproductive discussions, he suggests defining AI’s impact in “buckets.” These could include academic honesty, content creation, tutoring, and operational uses like scheduling and enrollment management. “Put it in a bucket so that you’re not just walking into a conversation or committee meeting and someone says ‘What about AI?’ And then suddenly we’re 40 minutes into talking about five or six different things about AI and no one’s solving anything.”

Beyond AI policies on academic integrity, institutions must consider the workforce demands. “We’re hearing overwhelmingly from a number of employers that they don’t want to hire anybody, from an English major to biotech manufacturing, who doesn’t know the relevant tools in that industry or in that sector of AI and how to use them,” Dr. Forbes emphasizes. Examples of relevant AI skills include prompt engineering, data

Photo: Welcoming students in the Biomanufacturing Bachelor’s Degree Program



interpretation, and automation. He posits that dismissing AI entirely would be a disservice to students. “If we don’t have a policy that centers on the student and just says ‘no AI’, then we’re going to miss out.”

Empowering Faculty & Staff to Pursue the “How”

Ensuring students are well-prepared for their next academic chapter goes beyond curriculum alignment. Supporting faculty and staff is also paramount. Dr. Forbes believes in empowering his team by eliminating unnecessary burdens and fostering collaboration. “Time is an important resource. Are people spending time on paperwork or a process that we could make more efficient? Let’s undo that and take that burden off,” he asserts. He highlights initiatives like focusing on mastery learning and standards-based grading in math, where he provides resources and support rather than dictating methods. “I don’t tell anyone what to do, but I resource what they want to do.” This includes important work like overseeing stipends to fund workshops and evaluating the outcomes. “Working with our dean of institutional effectiveness and looking at the data behind whether we’re actually seeing growth or not.”

Effective leadership also plays a role in fostering successful initiatives by ensuring clarity of purpose in group meetings. “When we’re working at our best,

there’s clarity around why the group is meeting. That points back to leadership,” he says. Leaders should define the goal, rather than dictate the “how.” He advocates for looking at larger targets such as completion and equity gaps among special populations.

Dr. Forbes acknowledges the perennial challenge of resource constraints but emphasizes a proactive mindset.

“We can always complain about how under-resourced we are, but we are given time, money, and people. I try to find the right recipe to keep people focused on what really matters, which is helping students learn from a wide variety of backgrounds and progress on their career paths.”

Ultimately, Dr. Forbes aims to help keep his staff focused on what matters, even in the midst of ever-changing policies, regulations, and new memos being issued. “The students who walked in your door yesterday haven’t changed today...It’s all the same: What are you doing to help students learn the content you’ve been entrusted with? It’s for all students.” ■

A Provost's Perspective:

Driving Enrollment & Growth in Uncertain Times



Dr. Melissa Wertz

Provost and Chief Academic Officer
Edison State Community College

In an age where increases in student enrollment can no longer be taken for granted, Edison State Community College offers insight into how institutions can successfully serve students, employers, and the local community while driving enrollment. Located in Piqua, OH, Edison State experienced record-breaking enrollment numbers in the fall of 2024. To learn more about their success, we sat down with Dr. Melissa Wertz, Provost and Chief Academic Officer.

Dr. Wertz oversees both academic and student affairs at Edison State, giving her a unique perspective on how to serve students holistically. She shares with the AcOps Magazine her perspectives on dual enrollment, employer partnerships, successful online programs, and the power of putting feedback into action.

Dual Enrollment with a Broader Vision Toward Student Goals

Contributing to increased enrollment at Edison State is the College Credit Plus (CCP) program, Ohio's dual enrollment initiative. With dual enrollment surging, many colleges see this as an opportunity to recruit students to come to their institution once they've finished high school. While this is certainly a goal for some students, Dr. Wertz takes a more nuanced approach. For her, the ultimate goal is student success, regardless of their post-CCP path. "I am not as

interested in making sure the students matriculate to Edison State. I'm more interested in: Are they meeting the goal that they had when they first started?"

This student-centered perspective acknowledges that many CCP students intend to transfer to a university. Dr. Wertz explains, "I would love to say we would bring all of our CCP students to Edison State to get a degree, but I want to be realistic with our teams to make sure that we are accomplishing the goal that the students set out to accomplish. So if it is matriculating into Edison State, let's make sure they get on the right pathway to accomplish that goal." If a student has a different goal, such as attending a different institution, it is equally as important to make sure that they are taking the right courses to achieve that goal.

This philosophy underscores a core belief for Dr. Wertz: "Sometimes we lose track of and don't realize—it's about the student. It's not about me. It's not about what Edison State does. It's about what our students do and how successful they are."

Cultivating True Partnerships for Workforce Development

Edison State's recent surge in enrollment is also a testament to its strategic engagement with the employer community. To achieve this, Edison State built strong employer partnerships for workforce development

"Sometimes we lose track of and don't realize—it's about the student. It's not about me. It's not about what Edison State does. It's about what our students do and how successful they are."

Photo: Dr. Wertz hard at work in her campus office



ABOUT

INSTITUTION: Edison State Community College

LOCATION: Piqua, OH

STUDENTS: > 4,500

that provide tailored training and valuable work-based learning opportunities. Dr. Wertz describes how local companies use their facilities, such as their mechanical engineering lab and manufacturing lab. She recounts, “I see the people coming in the morning after their third shift to do training with our trainers. So they work to build those relationships with employers, to bring their employees here for training on the machinery that they need. We will also send our trainers out to the companies and work at the company if we don’t have the equipment or if they have something specific we can help with.”

Beyond training, these partnerships facilitate direct student experience. “The workforce team also works with our faculty to help our students get work-based learning opportunities so that when students are at the end of their program and want to get into industry in their last semester, they have the opportunity to actually do that.” A notable example is their relationship with Honda. Students can go work at Honda while they are taking a program at Edison State and get paid as an employee. Dr. Wertz explains: “They’re paid as an employee and working while completing their degree as they go along in that cohort.”

Building these true partnerships can be challenging, but Dr. Wertz points to Edison State’s integrated approach. “I think one of the things that truly helps Edison State with keeping them aligned is the fact that

our workforce development and work-based learning department is under the academic umbrella.” This structure fosters collaboration and provides opportunities for the workforce development team to participate in academic and advisory board meetings that strengthen these ties.

The relationship between workforce development and academic affairs is also critical to evaluate how institutions can award students credit for their work experiences. Dr. Wertz walks through what this looks like in practice. “We’re looking at what they’re doing in workforce development and translating that to something that would be credit. That relationship is very important to help us have that crosswalk from workforce to academic credit.” Ultimately, she explains that success in this area hinges on being nimble, communicating effectively, and building trust between academic and workforce divisions.

Lessons from Online Learning: Standardization, Consistency, and Connection

Outside of on-the-ground training and in-person learning, Edison State offers online and mixed programming to address student needs. Dr. Wertz observes a clear student preference for flexible learning. “Students nowadays, post-pandemic, seem to really want to have that convenient, flexible option for their classroom

experience,” she explains.

Dr. Wertz has extensive experience in developing and running successful online programs, both from her work at previous institutions and her dissertation research. One of her main pieces of advice focuses on the importance of standardization. Rubrics for online learning help ensure that quality standards are being met to engage students. This is also critical when it comes to communicating with students and setting expectations. “Why do we need standardization? Well, because if I have five different faculty members and I have to go five different places in an online course, I’m confused. So looking at the student experience through the lens of this rubric that we have created, that’s helping us build our courses so that they are engaging,” she explains.

Regardless of modality, Dr. Wertz believes that essential principles of good course design still apply. For example, there are fundamentals of how a course should be organized. This includes a syllabus that students can easily find, clearly outlines the assessments, and notes when they will take place. Ultimately, a lot of it comes down to class organization and clear instructions. Her advice for faculty developing instructions? “One of the things I always used to do when training online faculty: I would tell them to have someone else read the instructions and see if they understand what you’re asking your students to do. Just one or two assignments in your class. Ask someone—your spouse, your partner, your kids. That’s really eye-opening.”

Consistency is also key for student persistence in online courses. Dr. Wertz recalls a successful strategy from one of her previous institutions—mandatory synchronous sessions each week that faculty delivered. Dr. Wertz notes that “It wasn’t required of students, but it was required of faculty. It helped the students because they could interact with them [faculty] online. But they were recorded. Students were not as thrilled about needing to be in the same place at the

same time, because it takes away their flexibility. But they were so thankful that the recorded sessions were available.”

On the flip side, disorganization and poor communication are two of the biggest pitfalls for online programs. Setting clear expectations and upholding standards are paramount. Additionally, fostering connections and relationships with students is just as important online as it is in person. “When I talk to my faculty who are teaching online courses, I say: ‘Look, here are some things students want. They want a relationship with you. They do not want a correspondence course. They don’t want to just sit out there in the abyss and do nothing.’ They want to get to know their faculty. They want to get to know their fellow students and their

peers.” Dr. Wertz regularly meets with her faculty to discuss what is and isn’t working to engage students, from discussion boards to video content.

Are You Acting on the Feedback You Collect?

While institutions collect feedback in a number of different ways, putting it into practice can be challenging. Like many leaders, Dr. Wertz is focused on how she can “close the loop” on feedback, ensuring that assessment leads to tangible

improvements. While she cautions against over-surveying students, she emphasizes the importance of using student data to make real changes. This involves not just providing feedback to students but acting on it. “When you get the data from either your students or your faculty, do something with it.” Dr. Wertz illustrates this with an example from their nursing program: “When they got feedback at the end of last semester, they actually discussed it with the cohort at the beginning of this semester. They said, ‘Look, we got your feedback. We listened. Here are some of the things we’re going to adjust moving forward.’”

The process extends to broader groups within the institution, beyond just working with faculty. Dr. Wertz explains that “It’s all about building the action plan to

“*Students nowadays, post-pandemic, seem to really want to have that convenient, flexible option for their classroom experience.*”

Photo: Celebrating participants in Edison State's Manufacturing Camp



address what comes through in the feedback. Sometimes we need to broaden our group and our scope to come up with those plans to address any issues that come up.”

The final step of closing the loop involves evaluating the actions that were taken as a result of the feedback. Dr. Wertz emphasizes accountability. During her conversations, she asks questions such as “What are we doing? What has happened? How was this received? Has this changed the perception? Has this helped our students? Has this helped our programs? Does this impact our accreditors? Our programmatic accreditors?”

Helping Students Stay and Thrive Within the Community

Aside from the academic side of the house, Dr. Wertz is passionate about student support and deep engagement with the community. The ultimate goal is to ensure that students don’t just complete their program, but they’re able to stay and flourish within the community. She tells us that “we want to serve our community. We want to be involved in our community in different events. But ultimately, we want to make

sure our students are the ones who are being successful. Because we want them to stay.”

This vision aligns with the very foundation of community colleges. Dr. Wertz shares a poignant observation from a community group’s tagline: “Live, Play, and Work in This Community.” Dr. Wertz continues “I’m on one of their committees, and every time I hear that, I think—that’s what we want. We want our students to embrace what’s going on, do what they want to do, and stay in this community. A lot of our students are still here. That’s always great to hear.”

By embracing a holistic view of student success, forging deep community ties, and continually refining their academic and operational practices, Edison State offers a compelling model for institutions seeking to not only increase enrollment but also to genuinely empower individuals in their local communities. While each student’s path is different, Dr. Wertz explains that “Helping people do something to change the status of where they’re at—from when they first meet me to when they’re done with their program—is great. Whether it’s one class, two classes, three classes, a whole certificate, a short-term certificate, a microcredential, or a degree.” ■



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