Tallahassee Community College: Responding to the Challenge of the Internet Age

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As much as anything else we must do in fulfillment of our mission, the fundamental realities relating to the empowerment, individualization, and self-determination of the individual should direct and impel the changes in what we teach, how we teach it, and how we prepare our students.

—William Law, Tallahassee Community College (FL)
Located in the Florida Big Bend region, Tallahassee Community College serves a unique three-county population that combines poor, isolated rural communities, Florida’s historically wealthy agricultural communities, and the Florida state government. President William Law understands well that the global changes of the 21st century influence Tallahasseee’s historic community.

Tallahassee Community College has adapted to the changes it faces by taking a hard look at data and increasing transparency. Using new technology, the college has created student learning portals that synthesize student data into always-accessible, always-accurate portraits of the students’ learning plans, test scores, and course and advising histories. Concurrently, student affairs programs were united, and advising was increased and improved. The result is a synthesized support system that gives students clear direction and empowerment over their own learning paths and provides the college with detailed data for analysis of college programs and student trends.

To the extent that the Internet Age is a flex point in history—as is evidenced by increased democratization, the bypassing of old structures, and the need for new knowledge and skills—the U.S. community college should be positioned ideally to respond. Community colleges are founded on almost the same principles: more access to higher education (democratization), alternatives to residential colleges (bypassing old structures), and postsecondary certifications and associate degrees (a need for new knowledge). Yet, even these basic advantages are experiencing great stress. The greatest impact of the flat world is that one of the historical strengths of the U.S. community college—its service and value to our society’s middle class—is under great duress. Our historical commitment to provide additional opportunities for citizens in a variety of areas is growing in scope and urgency:

- Extensive remediation is needed for underprepared students. Despite decades-long efforts to strengthen K-12 education, our country is able to point to only limited success in some communities. The number of students who drop out of school or who make it to graduation with inadequate basic skills continues to grow.
- Returning adults demonstrate the increasing premium on education and training as more students seek skills and certifications at ages well beyond the traditional 18- to 24-year-old range; those trends will accelerate.
- Bachelor’s degree seekers increasingly choose the community college for reasons of cost or classroom ambience and quality.
- For many, bachelor’s degrees are losing their luster as the only desirable outcomes of education; connecting students with opportunities requiring less than baccalaureate education is a growing priority of high school (and middle school) advising efforts.
- To put the challenges in perspective, we need to expand our services to those with inadequate preparation, to those previously prepared needing to upgrade their skills, and to those who previously would have sought their postsecondary education from another source.

Like every other challenge, the successful response will require a vision, a plan, and an executable strategy. Each institution will need to respond within its own context, history, resources, and abilities. The response in every quarter will demand that we do things with more focus, efficiency, and attention to results than at any time in the past. The framework for response will require that we find the means for students to bring their energies and resources (beyond tuition and fees) to assist in the solutions. There are far too few faculty and staff, and far too many
students to serve, if we do not empower students to serve themselves to fulfill their educational goals. Indeed, our approach to serving students will need to be a part of the enhanced learning process. Just as we must take responsibility for the cognitive preparation of our students, so too must we prepare students with the social, workplace, and personal skills that will be demanded of them in the Internet Age and flat world.

TALLAHASSEE COMMUNITY COLLEGE'S RESPONSE

Structuring, envisioning, and executing a plan work best when there is a consensus about the context and direction of the efforts. At Tallahassee Community College (TCC), we find ourselves returning regularly to three visions that help us adapt our many efforts to the new challenges:

- The definition of student success is that students finish what they start.
- Those of us who do not teach share a common responsibility to help students get to class in the best condition for learning.
- We must act on the realization that access to college changes students' self-perception, but degrees and certificates change students' lives.

These guidelines allow all members of the college community to see that their roles contribute to the overall success of our efforts. No one group or person is charged with fixing the problems or meeting the new challenges. The guidelines also honor the long traditions of community college education that have earned us our deserved respect but at the same time focus on directly addressing the new challenges. Lastly, these guidelines can be communicated in an appropriate form to students to invite their energy and commitment to the response.

The most troubling and often unspoken weakness of our colleges is that far too many students drop out of our institutions before they achieve their desired goals. We celebrate, of course, the many successes of our students, and we highlight the anecdotal stories of our students who have overcome the greatest hurdles. Nevertheless, the analysis of our historical record is that barely one third of the students who enter our institutions persevere to earn an associate degree. At the level of each course, we find that course dropout rates, W grades, make up 15% to 20% of all grades awarded, on the average, and the range escalates to 35% to 40% in some courses on a regular basis.

If we profile our students, we find that the pattern of course dropout is widespread. Too many students take course loads that are unrealistic, given the considerable constraints on their time, the deficiencies of their earlier preparation, or the fragility of their financial resources. As soon as one of these factors comes into play, a student feels the need to drop out of one or more courses in an attempt to bring the stresses under control. This response mechanism, however, is only one of a response. It avoids addressing the underlying weaknesses and invites continued repetition until the student loses heart (or runs out of money) and drops out of school. This dropout pattern is highly detrimental to students beyond the college experience. We do students a grave disservice in preparing them for life beyond our colleges when we adopt this dropout process. Clearly, such behaviors will prove detrimental in the workplace, where a premium is placed on reliability and follow-through. Overreaching and quitting can translate to serious consequences in personal finance, both in day-to-day living and long-term financial planning.

Within our colleges, this pattern is an undiagnosed cancer. For the most part, our systems have evolved to a no harm-no foul approach to dropping out of courses. Grades of W or I often are not counted in a student's GPA. Consequently, students can be in a seriously threatening downward spiral of course completion, while at the same time maintaining average or above-average GPAs. Only a very few colleges have moved to or expanded their academic probation systems to intercede in a student's program on the basis of course completion rates rather than on GPA.

In summary, we have given precious little attention to the actual patterns of success (or lack of success) of those we have committed to educate. Only one third of the students who enter will be awarded a degree eventually, whereas twice as many will find their way out of our college, largely without our knowledge or awareness. Pick your own favorite bromide for the situation of community colleges:

- Don't drink from a fire hose. At TCC (and I suspect most others), we have dozens of support programs for students. In fact, we have too many programs for any one person to be able to sort through or for any advisor or faculty member to know the best program for any particular student.
- If you don't know where you're going, you can end up somewhere else. The earliest engagement with students is far too unfocused to provide a solid basis on which students can build their college careers; we cause students to make choices that are too often uninformed and, indeed, often detrimental to their best interests (e.g., having underprepared students enroll for a full load to remain on their parents' insurance).
- If it ain't broke, don't fix it. The widespread lack of data and information on student success allows us to maintain the systems and practices that we have always used—changes in demographics, pedagogy, technology, or student preparation are employed sporadically, if at all.
THE STUDENT PORTAL

At TCC, we have committed proudly to student success, and we have evolved our commitment as we have developed tools and insights. We have adjusted our pace as we have gained confidence and learned from our mistakes. We have sought and gained valuable help from many quarters—Achieving the Dream (ATD), Title III, College Board, and several State of Florida initiatives. All of this assistance has energized the college and led us to a commitment that refines and distills our practices.

The college has embarked on a comprehensive effort to ensure—or rather to require—that every student create an electronic portal containing an individualized learning plan. With the portal, we can centralize our many excellent efforts to ensure student success, to assist students in getting to class in the best condition for learning, and to help students maintain demonstrable progress toward a desired goal. Our belief is that the best means for us to serve students individually and for students to get the best support for their unique needs is to establish a single repository for information, communication, and student self-determination.

The Student Portal Framework

In 2002–2003, the college launched its first efforts to provide an online advising tool, Eaglenet. The tool was home grown and provided an excellent first start to supporting student advisement and self-advisement. Students’ records and test scores were available, a learning styles self-assessment was incorporated, and multiseomester course planning was included, as well. The first efforts, as expected, were not perfect, yet they were well received by both students and faculty members. Primary concerns emerged from the faculty on their ability to advise the wide array of students. Potential university-transfer students without remedial restrictions were easiest to assist; specialized guidance for students seeking workforce degrees and certificates were the most difficult for many faculty.

In addition to Eaglenet, other online tools emerged from both the state level and the college’s individual efforts:

- Building on Florida’s sophisticated and comprehensive common course numbering system, degree audits and credit-transfer simulations for nearly all Florida university programs were developed. Students were provided the ability to simulate the impact of transferring to any university, as well as the impact of changing majors.
- Within the college, our reaccreditation Quality Enhancement Plan contained a commitment to design and develop an early warning system for students in remedial courses. This system was implemented in the 2005–2006 academic year.
- TCC is one of the community colleges to be selected in the first round of the Lumina Foundation’s ATD initiative; our college’s implementation plan focused on early student feedback and support for first-time-in-college students.
- Major expansion of Blackboard as a course management tool has taken place over the past 3 years; current delivery and course communications are the norm at the college.
- The commonality of these tools is that they allow students to be proactive in the management of their own success.

The ATD grant focused college efforts on identifying the barriers to success for students of color and transforming institutional processes to bring success rates (degree attainment) for students of color to the level of nonminority students. Fundamental to this process was the refinement and use of accurate and timely data on which to determine differences and to craft and monitor programs to transform the college.

The old saying that “good experience grows out of bad experience” best describes our efforts. Several well-conceived initiatives to address the core problems of student dropout patterns proved ineffective, hard to implement, and not feasible for large-scale implementation. Perseverance, however, led us to rethink the value of student learning plans as the most proactive means for us to help students succeed, while teaching them to channel their own best efforts. As we developed the conceptual framework for engagement and support of ATD students, we realized that the effort should include all students. After 3 or 4 years of high-priority activity focused on student success—finishing what they start—we had made little progress in course completion rates, semester-to-semester perseverance, and graduation rates.

In the fall of 2006, our college leadership team initiated the requirement that students have learning plans on file before registering for the spring 2007 semester:

- The initial requirement covered 6,700 students (of 13,500 total enrollment).
- Those required to have a plan were already within some existing support structure at the college—ATD, honors, assigned to faculty advisors, first-time-in-college support, athletics, international student support, probation, or other like.
- Faculty were responsible for advising a specific number of students, and they received comprehensive advising training.
- The plans are electronic and are the repository of all information the college has pertaining to the student (e.g., test scores, transcripts, advisement...
requirements, current enrollments, holds, finance, financial aid—scholarship information, prior notes and advice, self-assessment information).

- The plans are owned by the student and can be changed at any time by the student.
- The plans can be accessed online anywhere, at any time; this is critical for enrolling accurately, timely decisions by the student.
- The plans are intended to be the basis for communication with the student. They are tied closely to a much more robust e-mail communication system (e.g., Amazon, Fed Ex, and other online systems that continuously update the status of your order or account).

The Vision of the Student Portal

Students come to our colleges from an ever-widening variety of backgrounds, preparations, and aspirations. The first engagements with students must be sensitive to their differences and not force them into structures that work best for us. At TCC, we begin by assigning a college e-mail address to every student who submits an application. Our cost of adding each new account is miniscule; our message to the student is loud and clear—we will provide an easy means for you to give information to us, get information from us, or hear answers from us to questions you might have.

This early engagement is not just a matter of style. One issue that emerges from student progress analysis is the realization that as many as 10% of the students who go through the initial application and assessment processes fail to register for courses. Our working premise is that providing some modicum of student control and ownership at the earliest date can raise the confidence level of each student. We create a means of encouraging, responding, and supporting students in those initial, sometimes tenuous, moments.

The most important aspect of the learning plans and student portal approach is that it gives the institution a much greater ability to learn about our students' actual behaviors. The centralization of efforts through the learning plans affords an opportunity to do some valuable data analysis on the manner in which students move through the institution on a success path or a path that confounds their success:

- The plans foster multiseason multiyear course planning; we can observe plans that have unsuccessful patterns (e.g., discontinuity in math courses, excessive course loads).
- We can discern weak or nonexistent contact with advisors.
- Faculty and advisors can address a lack of response to early-warning alerts.

- Course dropout patterns that presage eventual college drop out can be anticipated and modified.
- Lack of coherence in the plan between stated goals and current and future enrollment planning becomes obvious.
- Financial aid matters, including standards of progress concerns that would end financial aid eligibility, can be predicted and avoided.
- Florida's concerns, specifically the potential for having to pay full instructional cost for the third attempt in any course, can be avoided.
- Assessing students' progress toward degree or certificate attainment and adopting proactive communication to guide and encourage students' course choices in fulfillment of requirements can be provided to students as a value-added benefit.
- Enhanced connection to the college's career center is facilitated, when appropriate, to assist students preparing to seek jobs.

The reality that we now face at TCC is that we can be predictive and intercede proactively. Not surprisingly, we find that we have not developed the systems and programs to take full advantage of the new knowledge; our many systems and interventions have been designed to function in a reactive, not proactive, mode. Financial aid standards of progress are the best examples. We can follow through on a timely basis to deny aid after the student falls below the mandated standards of progress. Yet, almost as easily, we can profile and determine in advance which students are approaching that chasm and interact with them to prevent their falling below the standards.

Progress of the Student Portal

The implementation of the requirement for a student portal did not have measurable impact on student enrollment. TCC's growth is among the fastest in the state. A great deal of energy has been devoted to stratifying the advising help inherent in the implementation of the system. Specifically, assignment of students to faculty for advisement is more purposeful. High-need, first-time-in-college students are not assigned to faculty; rather, they are the purview of our professional counselors and advisors. Efforts to pair students in certificate or science degree programs with faculty members from those programs are in progress. A great deal of additional faculty training and support has been created and put into place.

Although the responsibility for advisement was included in salary and workload consultations nearly two decades ago, there is a strong, new energy apparent from within the faculty ranks. An ongoing faculty advisory committee has been instrumental in the work necessary to make the learning portal and the learning
plan valuable to students. At key times in the implementation process, this faculty group has counseled us to maintain our commitment and focus. To the credit of the student affairs staff (now renamed success staff), the learning portal and learning plan tools have become a centerpiece in our student orientation process. Within the first hours of a student’s introduction to TCC, the student is introduced to the learning plan process and assisted in developing his or her individual plan. The knowledge that the tool will be the common factor for all students is allowing the student success staff to rethink and revue how students can and will receive information about college programs and services. Orientation to the college increasingly takes on the flavor of student self-determination—with nearly untold support readily available.

The commitment to have all students use the student portal is opening new avenues for our efforts to communicate better with our students. A comprehensive view of our many communications is under way. What do we send? When do we send it? From which office does it originate? Is it timely? Does it complement other communications? Can students keep track of all the communications? Our commitment is to make the portal valuable to the student as the repository of all interactions with the college.

Because the student portal system has as its base the sharing of information, we can better (and more easily) share information across the divisions of the college. As the student success staff refines and expands its communications to students, we find that the same information is shared easily with the faculty to assist in their advisement responsibilities. Any historical separation between student affairs and the instructional programs is dissolving rapidly. Our academic and student success teams have been proactive with our university partners to whom our students will transfer, most specifically Florida State University. If we had any second thoughts about the need for the learning plans and portals, those misgivings were swept aside when we learned that our principal university partner was implementing a similar requirement for its students. Our excellent, long-standing articulation agreements are available now to students for their own planning.

The development of the student portal has been shared with the college’s board of trustees. Nearly every month over the past several years, we shared our baseline information and student progress tracking with the board. In fact, we have created a separate portal for the board of trustees where we archive each month’s workshop presentations and share all of the data we use to guide our day-to-day decisions. The board has a complete picture of our efforts to improve student success and is aware of our progress and struggles. Everyone in the institution has access to the same data.

TCC has been fortunate to secure a federal Title III grant to fund the next stages of development for the student learning portal. The hard work of the past decade to conceptualize, design, implement, and refine an online outreach to students has delivered the faculty and staff to a sophisticated level of preparation for a breakthrough in the use of the online portal as the central place for communication and support. Student response has been favorable. Our dialogue with students has been structured in terms of success at the college and later in life—not more mindless bureaucratic requirements to make life easier for the institution. The portal and learning plan efforts have given new importance to the faculty advisement process, and we receive favorable feedback on that high-touch portion of the overall effort. We get equally valuable feedback when parts of the system—technical as well as human—do not work as advertised.

The college intends to increase the active plan requirement to cover all students eventually. Our working plan is to grow the requirement with entering students. We expect that the plan will allow students to become self-directed learners as they move through the institution. Our need to devote intensive time with students should diminish generally as they become comfortable with the comprehensiveness of the student portal. We hope to be able to provide more time and focus to students at the beginning of their TCC experience, allowing them to become more self-directed.

CONCLUSION

The changes in global society wrought by the Internet Age place new demands and stresses on community colleges’ traditional roles. These changes require students to be better prepared academically, more proactive in responding to new changes, more aware of their own growth and development, and more committed to a lifetime of continuous, purposeful self-development. To do our part in preparing students for these challenges, TCC has provided a framework that assists students to be better prepared and to learn how to stay better prepared. We have chosen to use the power of ubiquitous, online information to strengthen the means by which we advise, counsel, and support our students. We have chosen to give each student the tools to determine how best to call on our many resources, while at the same time making certain that every student is aware and consistently nurtured in calling on those resources.

Our efforts are reflective of the long-standing service of the college to our district. Failure to engage the challenges of the Internet Age will diminish what has gone before us. In the long run, our success will be determined by our own perseverance. As we so often tell our students, we need to finish what we start.