

**Institutional Readiness to Digital Education: Championing 10 years
of Student and Faculty Success**

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Abstract

Around the world, educational institutions continue to grapple with the need for change compounded by the aftereffects of the COVID-19 pandemic. It has been well forecasted that higher education institutions must change to cater to and better serve the modern learner's needs. Learners have many expectations about their educational institutions: agility, dynamism, new ways of learning, digital learning, flexibility, and new business models. At the heart of this, an institution has embraced these expectations through an online campus. This article discusses the success of the TCC Connect Campus, conceptualized as a centralized online eLearning campus in Texas, which has embraced many of these tenets. The author will communicate the strategies employed to grow and scale academic offerings, student services, quality, and rigor and develop best practices to satisfy the needs of non-traditional students in a completely online campus. The campus will be celebrating its 10th year of operation in 2024.

Keywords: online teaching, online learning, instructional technology, faculty coaching faculty training

Resumen

En todo el mundo, las instituciones educativas siguen enfrentando la necesidad de cambio, acentuada por los efectos posteriores de la pandemia de COVID-19. Se ha pronosticado acertadamente que las instituciones de educación superior necesitan cambiar para satisfacer y atender mejor las necesidades del estudiante moderno. Los estudiantes tienen muchas expectativas sobre sus instituciones educativas: agilidad, dinamismo, nuevas formas de aprendizaje, aprendizaje digital, flexibilidad y nuevos modelos de negocio.

En el centro de esto, hay una institución que ha adoptado estas expectativas a través de un campus en línea. Este artículo destaca el éxito de TCC Connect Campus, conceptualizado como un campus centralizado de aprendizaje electrónico en línea en Texas, que ha adoptado muchos de estos principios. El autor comunicará las estrategias empleadas para expandir y hacer crecer la oferta académica, los servicios estudiantiles, la calidad y rigurosidad, y el desarrollo de mejores prácticas para satisfacer las necesidades de los estudiantes no tradicionales en un campus completamente en línea. El campus celebrará su décimo año de operación en 2024.

Palabras claves: enseñanza en línea, aprendizaje en línea, tecnología educativa, formación del profesorado

Introduction

Much has been said regarding the need for higher education institutions to reengineer themselves and how borrowing a page from successful models only sometimes in the same sector can be of value (Levine & Van Pelt, 2021). For the past few years, computer-aided

or computer-mediated instruction has been the only way for millions of students to attend classes and continue their educational journey. The common way this is known is through online learning, although different from remote instruction (Hodges et al., 2020), which was the primary way instruction occurred during the COVID-19 Pandemic (Witze, 2020; World Health Organization, 2020; Morales Irizarry & Casanova Ocasio, 2020; Zhu & Liu, 2020). These activities have solidified the role, quality, and importance of online learning in all its forms. However, before the pandemic, there were institutions 100% online that existed to serve students with multiple responsibilities or to serve students with multiple responsibilities or barriers to attending via traditional means. That is the case of the TCC Connect Campus at Tarrant County College (TCC) in Texas (Morales, 2017), celebrating its 10th year in 2024.

The Role of Online Learning in Today's Education

Online learning, a variant of distance education, continues to grow in importance, quality, and reach. Students have always been exposed to online eLearning and its benefits, such as convenience, flexibility, time management, and richness in the virtual classroom. 10 years ago, Tarrant County College had a vision to use online eLearning to expand access to education. As an open-access institution, it thought a portion of the population was excluded from attaining higher education because of the limitations of time, space, distance, and cost (Torres, Morales Irizarry, & Lucumi, 2011). This is the primary reason why the TCC Connect Campus commenced operations within 14 months and began operations by August 2014. The online campus was designed as a centralized unit, representing the only campus offering online courses and programs (Morales, 2017). The

campus started serving 10,253 students enrolled through 18 online programs plus a Weekend College and offered concurrent enrollment to high school students. In the United States, colleges, universities, and campuses need to be accredited, which is a demonstration and a testament of quality to peer institutions. Currently, the campus offers 42 academic programs serving 30,000 students and boasts a higher success rate than 74%, as shown in Table 1 (Tarrant County College District, 2023). TCC Connect Campus received initial accreditation in 2015 and was reaffirmed in 2020.

Table 1. Student Success Rates

Semester	Enrollments	Passed with		Received		Retention	
		C or better		D or F		Rate	
Spring 2024	32,127	<i>In Progress</i>					
Fall 2023	29,062	21,714	74.7%	4,407	15.2%	26,132	90%
Summer 2023	22,561	19,021	84.3%	2,143	9.5%	21,168	94%
Spring 2023	27,595	21,181	76.8%	3,632	13.2%	24,817	90%
Fall 2022	27,483	20,423	74.3%	4,081	14.8%	24,528	89%
Summer 2022	20,647	17,268	83.6%	1,903	9.2%	19,175	93%
Spring 2022	28,141	21,154	75.2%	3,843	13.7%	25,008	89%
Fall 2021	24,330	18,579	76.3%	3,256	13.4%	21,845	90%

Student preferences

During the same time described above, students vocalized about how, when, and where they want to learn and attend college. Since 2021, TCC has been tracking students' preferred ways to attend college. Students were asked to rank between face-to-face, hybrid, and online (Tarrant County College, 2021; 2023), and the results show that in 2021, online was preferred by 28%, while in 2023, 19% preferred online. Those preferences have also been recorded at the TCC Connect Campus in the form of enrollments. At the same time,

the campus increased its enrollment by 10% annually, which is often visible per semester (Morales & Pearson, 2023). The college recognized this critical component of the relationship with students and started allocating resources to satisfy it. For the campus, additional resources in the category of faculty (33), academic, and student affairs staff (15) have been added. Concurrently, enrollment has grown by 15% during the same period (Morales, 2011; Seaman, Allen & Seaman, 2018).

Strategic Annual Planning

Planning is essential to ensure the campus can meet student demands and preferences. This is accomplished through the creation of an annual workplan. The campus has effectively aligned a cadence to postulate, discuss, plan, and implement initiatives for Academic and Student Affairs units, thus creating a culture that fosters and supports student success in online learning. Through effective instructional technology, academic programs and student services focus on rigor, immediacy, flexibility, and constant availability. From its inception to date, the campus has been innovating and ahead of its peers, and it has effectively influenced the academic and technological agenda of the college (Jaggars, Hodara, Cho & Xu, 2015; Tatum, 2010).

To support an educational endeavor of thousands of students, the author of this article led the development of 10 significant activities between 2014 and 2019; the tenth initiative was introduced in 2021, ranging from course development, online instructor certification, Wintermester, summer offerings, 8-week programs, Online Summer School, Monthly Starts, Online Advising, eFaculty Coaching, and instituting a virtual computer lab. These

initiatives have allowed the campus to be attentive to student needs and success and have been paramount in achieving high success rates—students receiving grades of C or better—upwards of 75% every semester.

Through an annual work plan and a strategic plan, the campus has been able to forecast student needs and new programs and explore initiatives that allow us to serve more and serve our students better. Our teams engage external consultants to expedite the creation of the plans and narratives conceptualized by the campus leadership, allowing us to focus on strategy and execution.

Faculty Support

Since its early days, the campus has focused on supporting faculty for a successful teaching endeavor. Through the past ten years, we have embarked on several initiatives that intentionally address the needs of faculty and their aspirations as they teach online, adopt instructional technology, or join the digital learning movement.

Professional development is a key component in supporting faculty. Our sessions equip faculty with the knowledge, skills, and competencies to successfully teach online, support students, and manage virtual classrooms. At TCC Connect Campus, specific professional development sessions are mandatory, including the Online Instructor Certification (OIC) (Morales, 2023). This program provides faculty with the core knowledge, skills, strategies, and techniques needed to excel in online teaching, focusing on online pedagogy, online

presence, course development, and virtual classroom management. The OIC has successfully met faculty needs and has directly impacted student success and retention rates.

To keep up with the continuous evolution of online learning, we recommended that the college implement a renewable OIC (ROIC). The recommendation was implemented in the spring of 2022, and faculty members will renew their OIC every two years. This certification, along with the support of our dedicated Instructional Designers and eFaculty Coaches (Morales & Tapia, 2018; Morales Irizarry & Casanova Ocasio, 2020), who cover many other topics, will provide a comprehensive professional development experience, supporting faculty in achieving their goals.

The eFaculty Coaches play a quality assurance and compliance role regarding the faculty's expectations and role in the eLearning enterprise. The initiative is in its fifth year and has yielded a multidimensional impact on the excellence of the teaching and learning process at the campus. The faculty has embraced the process, and it has been refined to include the application of outcomes that stemmed from the coaching activities. (Kelton, 2022).

Recently, the work of the eFaculty Coaches has informed the campus in areas of course programming, term lengths, student preferences (Morales & Pearson, 2023), and the utilization of data for the planning of academic and student initiatives.

Student Support

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The students enrolled at the online campus have access to an array of services that allow them to be focused, supported, and successful in their educational endeavors. A full set of professionals stand ready to assist students with enrollment, academic and career advising, and other accommodations. As an online campus, we understand the importance of connecting students with other students to create learning communities and social bonds. The campus hosts the first and only Phi Theta Kappa Honors program attached to a virtual campus in the southwest region of the United States.

As part of the support structure, our advising team aids students in selecting programs of study and term lengths that adjust to their life and work schedules. The various term lengths have been popular. However, students benefit even more when the advisor provides them with the expectations for accelerated or shorter terms, as time management and organization skills are useful (Lo, Reeves, Jenkins, & Parkman, 2016). The teams have been laser-focused on reducing time to a degree, which puts students on the path to joining the workforce and affords socioeconomic mobility.

Overcoming the challenges of providing comprehensive support to online students has been a journey for the TCC Connect Campus. Unlike its sister campuses, the campus initially operated without the full range of services. However, just like its counterparts, the TCC Connect Campus is bound by the same mandates and expectations to provide student services as mandated by the college and the accreditor. In the early years, the student services were delivered through the Academic Outreach and Student Success division, led

by a Vice President. This early-on structure provided some services at the campus level while the rest were offered digitally online or by the sister face-to-face campuses (Morales, 2017). In response to the exponential increase in enrollments and the need to comply with the abovementioned mandates and expectations, an online advising department was created to advise students enrolled in online courses and programs. The department was built by the reassignment of online advisors that the office of the Provost centrally supervised; TCC Connect Campus' leadership successfully negotiated the transfer of the advisors and proposed a strategy of services that allowed online students to receive services while the TCC Connect Campus supplemented the advising sessions for the face-to-face campuses through extended hours (Morales & Gantt, 2018). This strategic move proved to be a success, with the number of students receiving advising sessions through the division increasing by an impressive 30% in just two years.

Conclusions

This presentation and paper aimed to share the strategies employed to establish a fully online campus that increases the educational opportunities of students. Our location is in a metropolitan area that is vibrant and growing rapidly, which affords additional opportunities for citizens to start and complete an education completely online. We have seen tremendous growth as a centralized distance education enterprise through planning, forecasting, and data-informed initiatives; the TCC Connect Campus has been at the forefront of serving non-traditional students via eLearning and accelerated programs. It is increasing student success for populations traditionally underserved or who have found conventional academic offerings insufficient for their needs. Student preferences have been the marching orders for the faculty and staff to be innovative, customer-service oriented,

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and agile by developing new programs, certifications, and new ways of learning via short terms and credentials.

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