

New Models for Community Colleges

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Across the country, many students still lack access to a college option that fits their needs.

It's a problem that two very different states are looking to solve.

Despite having 114 campuses in California, Governor Jerry Brown wants the state's community college system to explore expanding its programs through a new online-only college. Meanwhile, Pennsylvania's education department has given its approval for the creation of a new alternative type of community college to serve the northwestern part of the state.

"Community colleges across the country are suffering from decreasing enrollments, so they're out there trying to figure out what are the options to reach students who they haven't reached in the past and retain the ones they have," said Elisabeth Barnett, senior research scientist at the Community College Research Center at Columbia University.

California's move to try to reach more students with an online-only alternative could boost enrollment statewide. The two-year system has about 2.4 million students, although about 10 years ago enrollment stood at 2.9 million, according to the chancellor's office.

Barnett said for more rural areas, like in the Upper Peninsula of Michigan or rural New York, community colleges will offer everything from satellite campuses and distance learning to hosting classes in high schools as a way of reaching as many students as possible across large geographic areas.

New College in California

"Part of this is the governor's desire to reach more students in California through a technology platform," said Eloy Ortiz Oakley, chancellor of the California Community College system. "The 114 campuses are designed in a traditional manner, so we're reaching a traditional population that is students coming out of high schools."

But a new online-only college could reach students those traditional brick-and-mortar campuses are currently missing -- adults who are unemployed or underemployed, he said.

"We've really spent some time looking at the demographics of returning veterans, displaced workers and working adults with some college and no credential to see if this gives us an opportunity to reach that demographic, which at this point we don't serve well," Oakley said.

The state's two-year system already has the [Online Education Initiative](#), which debuted last year. The OEI is a collaborative program that allows students to register and participate in online courses across multiple degrees. The initiative provides online counseling and allows students to find and take online courses that may be overbooked on their home campus.

There's also the [California Virtual Campus](#). That website, which works alongside OEI, to help students find transferable courses to California State University campuses. The system particularly makes it easier for students pursuing an associate degree for transfer.

Under an online-only college, neither the virtual campus nor OEI would go away.

"We don't want to cannibalize the system, and we wouldn't want to create a college to take enrollment from other colleges," Oakley said. "Any solution would have to complement what we do, and it has to have an opportunity to share revenue with the colleges and really enhance their ability to serve students."

The idea would be to leverage the content and capabilities of the virtual college and OEI, as well as look into the state's Open Education Resource initiative, which uses free materials and textbooks for students, as part of the online college solution.

The governor has given the chancellor's office until November to submit a proposal that would include a number of options for how the online college would be formed and how much it would cost. From there the governor will decide which option the state will invest its money into.

Oakley said the system is looking at Arizona State University, Rio Salado College and even other online universities that have recruited potential community college students away from the California public system.

"We're pushed and threatened by other online colleges throughout the country," he said, adding that the proposal would seek not only to recapture the enrollments the system is losing but to go after new students.

In Northern California, particularly the northern inland Shasta County region, about a third of adults have some college and no degree. But there are also significant equity gaps with the tribal population in that area, said Julie Ajinkya, vice president for applied research at the Institute for Higher Education Policy. That's why institutions should be mindful of the types of strategies and interventions they use to target the particular barriers rural populations face beyond access, she said.

"It's important to keep in mind that some of these solutions don't work for everyone when we look at certain opportunities for disconnected populations like those in rural areas," Ajinkya said, referring to online or distance learning solutions. "We want to make sure they're underscored by quality assessments to make sure these are programs that connect these students to high-quality learning outcomes that connect to high-quality job opportunities."

Alternative College in Pennsylvania

While California is seeking to provide more options for residents, Pennsylvania officials want to give an option to people who live north of Interstate 80.

That's because, for about nine counties in the northwestern region of the state, there isn't a single public community college. So last month Pennsylvania's Department of Education approved the creation of the [Rural Regional College of Northern Pennsylvania](#).

"It's a really unique system," said Duane Vicini, project executive for the college. "We've always had students going to four-year schools ... but we've always had that segment of the community that could not go to a four-year, but we didn't have anything to offer them in a two-year associate degree or technical training."

The new college won't be online or delivered in a traditional brick-and-mortar setting.

"It's not online and we want to make clear that this is all interactive television," Vicini said. "We have live professors who teach courses at any one of the locations where we have satellites and a hub. Students are watching them live and can interact with them -- they're just not within the same classroom."

RRC has been operating under a pilot program since 2012 through a partnership with Gannon University, a private Catholic institution in Erie. That program has grown from four locations to 15, with about 80 students. For now, until RRC is accredited on its own, Gannon provides the curriculum and employs the instructors.

Vicini said now with the department's approval to seek Middle States Commission on Higher Education accreditation, he expects about 100 students to enroll this year. Tuition at the college will cost \$180 per credit and \$60 per credit for dual-enrolled high school students.

"One of the first charges is to work through the accreditation with Middle States," Vicini said. "And it's important to

legislators that we begin to offer a technical or certificate program as soon as possible.”

Right now, RRC is offering degrees in interdisciplinary studies and business administration. They’ve already begun to hire new administrators, who have a year to develop RRC’s own curriculum and certificate offerings.