



A Santa Fe Community College student hands out free, fresh meals prepared by culinary arts program chefs and students in partnership with World Central Kitchen. The college is a partner in a shared services/enterprise resource planning initiative. (Photo: SFCC)

BY JIM PATERSON FEBRUARY 1, 2021

A collaborative project among a group of New Mexico colleges aims to tackle a broad range of thorny issues facing higher education – from outdated data management and gaps in tech staffing, to trimming inefficiencies through economies of scale.

But it is also focused on the student experience, the planners of the effort say, with sensitivity to how student habits and expectations may have changed during the last year, and with an interest to allow broader access to courses among the partnering institutions.

“About three years ago, as leadership at the colleges talked about the biggest challenges we were facing, it was clear that it was critical to address our ERP (enterprise resource management) and student information systems,” says Charles Nwankwo, president of Clovis Community College, one of five colleges in the project. “We realized we could and should explore this collaboratively and make it possible for our systems to communicate with each other.”

He noted that the pandemic reinforced the concerns and “taught us lessons about having modern updated technology rather than systems that are at different stages and have patches that make them impossible to connect.”

Syncing up

The agreement between Clovis, [Central New Mexico Community College](#) (CNM), [San Juan College](#), [Santa Fe Community College](#) and Northern New Mexico College should lead to a contract this summer for the platforms. Teams from participating colleges with

expertise in specific areas collaborated for several months to develop a request for proposals with a mid-February deadline. No specific estimates of costs were available, but officials at the colleges expect it would pay for itself quickly.

The goal is a system that will standardize student and employee records and other data along with key institutional systems across the collaborative, syncing and updating them uniformly and concurrently, according to officials. It will bring the colleges into a single, shared system for students, continuing education, workforce, financial and human resources services.

It also will streamline admissions and financial aid processes, including applications to more than one participating school, according to Rosenda Minella, CNM's executive director of student support. And it will allow students to more easily plan their college pathway with a standardized course numbering and structuring system, and it will make advising easier, freeing up counselors to provide more personal support, she says.

"We have worked hard to put the student first in New Mexico, and we are building this system with the student experience being the number one priority," Minella says. "We want to remove obstacles, streamline key processes and allow for one-to-one support that is specific to the individual student."

Shoring up tech staffing issues

CNM President Tracy Hartzler says she sees several specific benefits to the plan, including helping students to more efficiently transfer and develop their educational path or even make connections to the business community for internships or employment through the broader reach of the participating schools and through their shared data.

She also says it will help with a nagging problem of finding skilled tech workers at all levels, allowing the colleges to share expertise for a specific issue, staff time if a gap occurs in those tough-to-fill positions and also human resource data about applicants. The collaboration approach can strengthen cybersecurity, more fully staff IT support for longer hours and create "centers of expertise" to improve system-wide knowledge and avoid duplication at each college.

"I also believe that it will greatly improve a variety of non-academic offerings and services. We are going to help students focus on learning and not on bureaucracy. They will be able to avoid many of the errors, frustration and barriers to getting into and participating in a college class," she says.

Efficiencies of scale

Nwankwo also sees prospects for more bulk buying and other efficiencies of scale that will become easier with accurate, shared information and communications. He says other colleges considering a similar collaboration must recognize that it is challenging but worthwhile.

"You have to look at best practices and not old ways of doing things. However, while establishing a new ERP and SIS at a single college is daunting, to bring in five with different governance and accreditation, leaders have to be able to collaborate and have

the correct mindset,” he says. “But this is the wave of the future because colleges with dwindling resources need to find efficiencies like this.”