

Fierce Education: Colleges Collaborate Creating New Opportunities for Students

by Jacqueline Renfrow | April 7, 2021

Five public colleges in New Mexico have formed a mutual support group called the Collaborative for Higher Education Shared Services (CHESS). The idea behind the collective is to share technology, resources and staff across institutions. In addition, CHESS hopes to eliminate barriers for potential students by centralizing applications, recruitment and career services, while opening-up a wider range of class offerings.

CHESS's organizational structure will allow for individual colleges to keep their community connections but share vital resources which are stretched thin at small, public institutions. In addition, New Mexico higher education is looking to reduce obstacles for first-generation and students of color and offer more flexibility. Partner colleges will share decision-making, data and processes, resulting in more efficient and cost-effective operations.

"When the history books are written about the higher education landscape in the 21st century, the key to successful institutions will be those who were willing to collaborate," said Richard Bailey, Jr., PhD, president of Northern New Mexico College (Northern). Northern is one of five institutions in CHESS and the only four-year college.

"We are purposefully building this thing with transparency so that institutions can consider a model like this. We are happy to share lessons learned so that everyone can benefit," he added.

Ideally, CHESS will benefit students the most because they can take classes from any of the five institutions. At the same time, each school will retain its individual culture, specialties and focus areas. In addition, for a small school like Northern, CHESS will cutdown the timeline for graduation as more classes will be readily available and with a larger pool of potential students, a class will less likely be cancelled.

Although CHESS was well on its way to development before the pandemic started, Bailey says that the last 13 months have sped up the timeline for institutions to offer more education delivery options.

"At Northern, we've been fortunate over this last year to have experienced some of the benefits of the strategic initiatives that we put in place before pandemic, which helped in enrollment. But we are very sensitive to the challenge and landscape that all of higher ed has experienced during the pandemic," Bailey said.

When the school first shut down last March, 48% of homes in New Mexico did not have access to Wi-Fi, stressing the ongoing need for communities to improve broadband access.

"As the president of a college that serves traditionally under-represented populations in higher ed, and with the advent of telehealth and other online services, broadband is a social justice issue more than ever before," Bailey said.

Therefore, with collaboration like CHESS, institutions will be able to lean on each other for tech solutions. Plus, staff support will be enhanced, as currently most of Northern's offices have just one staff member handling all of the interests in that department.

"The beauty of it, I think the strongest sign of a powerful educational experience is diversity of thought, background and experience," said Bailey.

“Every institution has its own priorities, and every public independent institution has a desire to keep its identity and organizational culture and unique brand of service to students so for a project like this to work, institutions have to take a leap of faith and who we are and who we serve and innovative and collaborative solutions and when you have this will become more.”

Along with Bailey, the CHESS board of directors includes Clovis Community College President Charles Nwankwo, PhD.; Central New Mexico Community College President Tracy Hartzler, JD; San Juan College President Toni Pendergrass, PhD; and Santa Fe Community College President Becky Rowley, PhD.