

Taking the Long View

MiraCosta College leaders want to train administrators, trustees, students, faculty and staff members to think and plan for the future.

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The COVID-19 pandemic presented community colleges with immediate challenges: a rapid shift to online learning, enrollment declines, falling revenues and an increasingly pressing need for more housing, food and mental health supports for students.

But even amid the challenges that many community colleges are facing, MiraCosta College leaders are thinking ahead and preparing for the more distant future—at least a decade from now. They say other community college leaders would benefit from doing the same.

Mira Costa’s president and members of the Board of Trustees are engaging top administrators, trustees, students, faculty and staff members to take part in a series of trainings on “futurist thinking” methods, meant to help them foresee long-term trends and assess the possible implications for the institution, students and neighboring communities. The college will update some of its long-term plans this spring, including future investments in technology and facilities, using lessons learned in training sessions.

“I think for us COVID really solidified the ... volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous world we operate in,” said Sunita Cooke, president of the college. “If we don’t look further into the future, we’re constantly going to be in crisis mode. We’re always going to be one step behind responding to the crisis rather than being prepared for various scenarios in the future.”

Cooke wants the college to “empower people to be prepared for” possible transformative changes in higher education, whether that’s new uses for artificial intelligence technology or changing grading methods.

The training workshops are led by Parminder Jassal, founder of the Work + Learn Futures Lab at the Institute for the Future, a California-based organization that teaches business, government and organization leaders how to do long-term planning. She is now CEO of SocialTech.AI, an organization that offers a service called the Practical Futures Advisory, which works with high schools, universities and community colleges to build a “futures mind-set.”

MiraCosta is the first college to launch a campuswide program dedicated to teaching this style of thinking, Jassal said.

In training sessions, participants learn concepts such as the “two curves framework,” the concept that there are always ideas, technologies and services declining and new ones emerging that can converge and disrupt an institution, making it out of step with the expectations and needs of its constituents. But leaders can stave off problems and plan for futures they want by paying attention to “signals” of changes to come, Jassal said.

The college trained 19 faculty, staff, administrators and trustees at a weeklong boot camp over the summer and launched a larger program this past fall for about 58 people, including some students. The group met on Zoom twice a month for several hours to engage in exercises and learn tools to practice identifying possible long-term scenarios. The college will offer workshops to more than 250 people on campus in the spring.

Jassal believes higher ed leaders need to think about not just what current students need but what future students will need based on the technology they’ve grown up using and other factors that could shape how they learn.

“It’s a really interesting paradox that a lot of higher education institutions will jump into investigating the future, but the people who they’re talking to are already in the system,” she said. “They’re asking even current students what kind of services that they need,” but they should also be asking how today’s children, the students of the future, will “live, work and learn.”

Karen Stout, president and CEO of Achieving the Dream, an organization focused on community college student success, said MiraCosta’s approach is “very unique.”

A lot of colleges try to identify trends in areas such as local workforce needs and community demographics, “but typically that type of future thinking is episodic,” she said. “It might happen every five years with a strategic plan. And while it will get to trends, it doesn’t necessarily move to the next phase, which is around developing scenarios ... and identifying disrupters. I think the more we are grounded in possibility, the more equipped we are to make decisions of the moment.”

Luke Lara, president of MiraCosta’s Academic Senate, said faculty members were initially skeptical of the initiative. It felt like a “corporate approach,” he said. “This is not how we talk, the way we think. It was foreign to most of us. We often think about resources and lack of resources in higher ed. We’re not as nimble as a corporate entity to be able to deal with emerging issues.”

But when he participated in the fall program, he found it offered a useful framework to think through possible long-term changes in higher education, such as the future of grading.

He highlighted an example shared in one of the sessions: the emergence 10 years ago of the now-popular (<https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2020/05/19/more-colleges-accept-duolingo-english-test-scores-evidence-proficiency>), language learning app Duolingo, which gives users feedback as they master different words and skills, could have been a “signal” to higher ed leaders that students of the future might want more immediate, regular feedback from their instructors, rather than just a grade at the end of the semester.

Now education leaders are questioning traditional grading practices, he said. “What does it look like to provide more actionable feedback, feedback that would have more meaning for the student and is more immediate? How does that transform the role of the faculty member and how they work?”

Spotting these shifts before they happen and thinking through these kinds of questions “could really transform how we do education,” he said.

Cooke wants to develop a model other community colleges can follow to engage in this kind of long-term planning. She said the goal of the initiative isn’t just to prepare for possible future crises or problems but to have a better idea of what steps to take to achieve long-term goals, including more equitable academic outcomes for students.

“We seek to create futures that are just, equitable and sustainable,” she said. “We’ve decided what is the future we’d like to create, and now we’re working back to today to say, ‘OK, what are the decisions that we make today and the plans that we make today that walk us toward that future that we seek.’”

Read more by

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