Bringing the Pieces Together

There are a lot of pieces to this Florida college's plans for the future, and Dr. Gwendolyn Stephenson and her team are bringing them all together.

Like most community colleges in the US, Hillsborough Community College in Tampa, Fla. has seen significant growth in the last two years as more young people opt for less expensive higher education and more adults, especially the unemployed, seek new careers. Dr. Gwendolyn Stephenson, district president for the five-campus college, said Florida, and the Tampa area, have unemployment rates above the national average, and that Hillsborough is focused on meeting the needs of its community in these challenging times.

"In my 13 years here, many things have changed for the better at Hillsborough," she said. "We've taken steps to better reflect the diversity of our community and establish partnerships to provide the highest quality and most effective education for our students, for example."

In those 13 years, enrollment at Hillsborough has increased by 40%, since 2009, it's increased by more than 10%. Stephenson said creativity in meeting the increased demand has been critical—the school rents conference space to use as lecture halls.
and has stretched its hours in the evenings and on weekends to accommodate working adults.

She attributed much of the college's demand to the economy, but added that her team has developed new marketing techniques that are finding students who otherwise might never have attended college. Hillsborough uses enrollment coordinators who don't just go into local high schools, but also visit churches and other community settings where people gather.

"Besides getting back the basic principle of community colleges, which is to improve access to higher education to everyone, our goal with this strategy was to have our student population reflect the diversity of our community," Stephenson said, explaining that the area Hillsborough serves is roughly 20% Hispanic and 10% African-American, and now the college has about the same ratios.

In the last 10 years or so, Hillsborough also developed a mechanism for working with local businesses. Each campus has its own president who is responsible for a geographic section of the 1000-square-mile area the college serves. They visit Rotary Clubs, economic development councils, chambers of commerce, and other business groups in the area and meet regularly with Stephenson to talk about what's going on in the local economy.

All of Hillsborough's programs have advisory committees that are made up of commercial leaders in the local industry. These committees provide input in the development of a curriculum by explaining what their ideal employees need to know both in terms of technical and professional skills. They also work with each department on an annual basis to review the effectiveness of the curriculum and report on how students are performing in the field.

"We want to help our students succeed in the workplace of tomorrow and, once our students graduate, we don't want to wash our hands of them; we want to know about their successes and failures, how we can help them, and what to change.
for our next graduating class,” Stephenson said.

These advisory committees have been especially helpful in the development of Hillsborough’s new green programs, the most significant of which is its wind and solar energy technology program. The college is also, however, looking at ways to incorporate green principles into all of its programs. One example is sustainable sourcing in its construction and auto body collision repair programs.

Two years ago, Hillsborough opened its Gold LEED-certified South Shore campus, which is the first green campus among community colleges in the state of Florida. This fall, the green programs housed on that campus had enrollment 200% above the projected numbers.

In addition, the college is continuing to expand its international education program; its wind energy students travel to Denmark to study one of the most advanced wind energy markets in the world, for example. The school also has programs in Belize and Ecuador for nurses, brings students from Central America to study agriculture through a partnership with USAID, and hosts students from Pakistan and other countries come to study international business and technology. Stephenson said there are more than 100 languages spoken on Hillsborough’s campuses.

“We are focused on the future, and green energy, environmentally friendly practices, and international trade are key elements of the future economy our students will work in,” she said.

**Success for all**

These new programs and strategies for expanding the college, however, are ongoing investments in Hillsborough students, faculty, and staff that help them succeed.

In the first place, the school has continued to place an emphasis on professional development for its full-time and part-time faculty as well as its staff. Through the recession, Hillsborough continued to offer sabbaticals to professors and tuition reimbursement for any employee interested in a class at the school.

About 10 years ago, Hillsborough opened a technology-training center for faculty with the goal of helping them incorporate more technology into their teaching. Since then, however, the center has evolved into a professional development center and this year, the college bought a new building that will serve as a hub for technology and other advanced training for its employees.

“Our greatest asset is our faculty and staff; when they can perform in the classroom and our offices at the highest level, our students get a better educational experience,” Stephenson said.

Hillsborough was also one of the initial Achieving the Dream (ATD) institutions
when the program was founded by the Gates Foundation seven years ago. The program is run by MDRC, a nonprofit, nonpartisan education social policy research organization, and is designed to foster evidence-based teaching practices at community colleges. Today, Hillsborough uses cutting-edge survey tools to better understand how students are succeeding or failing and providing actionable data to faculty.

Stephenson said the school already provided tutoring and support for students, but this initiative provided the opportunity to invest more money into smarter programs, like a peer supplemental instruction program from the University of Missouri, Kansas City. In the program, a student performing well in a particular field of study is matched with a peer challenged by that field as a tutor; Stephenson said the college has seen dramatic results from this program.

"It’s not only about getting a diploma at the end of a program, but also about truly educating people and giving them tools to succeed beyond Hillsborough," she said. "We are committed to helping all our students, and our faculty and staff, find success."

—Meghan Flynn

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