

ROUNDTABLE
REPORT



Bridging the Gaps:

Views on Modernizing the Student Experience and Managing the Changes

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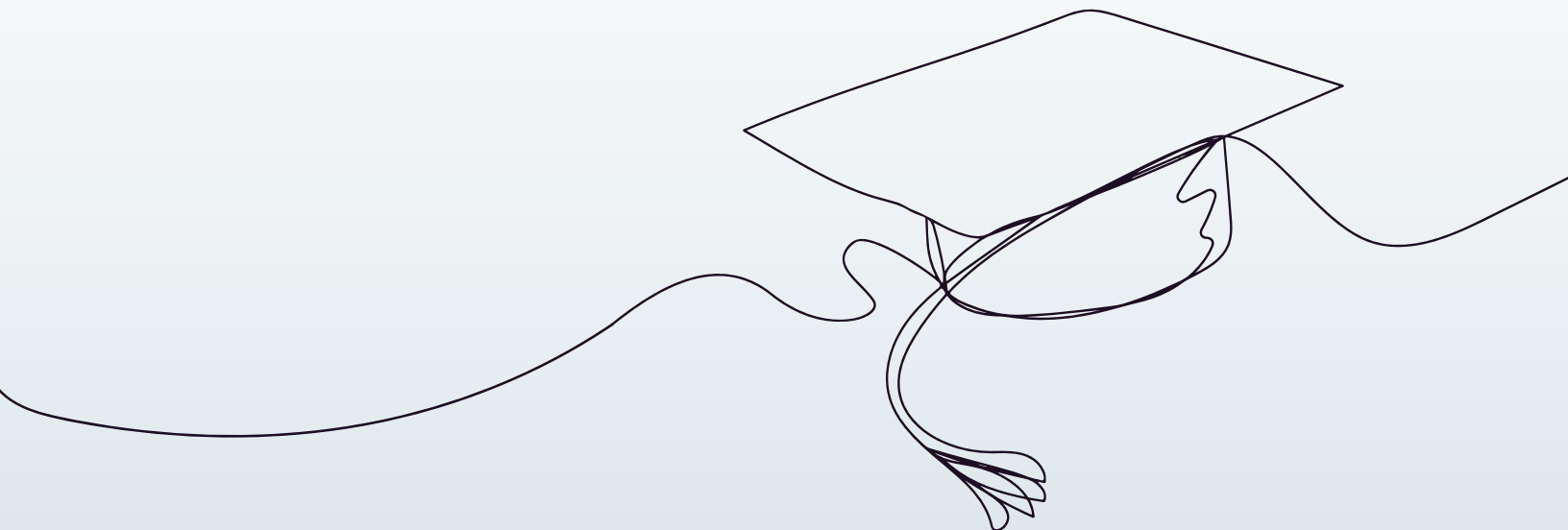
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This report is based on a virtual round-table discussion held on May 13, 2022.

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INTRODUCTION



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e have 21st-century students, 20th-century faculty, and we're using 19th-century technology.”

That's how a chief information officer during a recent *Chronicle* round table described the challenge facing colleges as they work to modernize their campuses and their classrooms.

While said somewhat tongue in cheek, that critical observation highlights the mixed situation higher education is in. On one hand, it demonstrated its ability to change — and change quickly — when in March 2020 colleges put classes online and transitioned many of their employees to remote work. But as institutions relax their pandemic safeguards and return to a more familiar environment for teaching and operating, how do leaders keep faculty and staff members experimenting with new practices?

The need for change is clear: For many colleges, enrollment is down and revenue is suffering. Students, surveys and experts say, are expecting a different level of service from campuses and greater flexibility with how they learn, whether in-person, online, or a hybrid of both.

Compounding these issues, staff shortages across higher ed are hampering efforts to upgrade the college experience and meet strategic goals.

To help understand where colleges are putting their priorities and making investments, *The Chronicle* brought together a panel of administrators from different types of institutions, located in different parts of the country.

The participants were Rafael Espinosa, associate vice president and chief information officer for California State University-Stanislaus; Laura Hubbard, vice president for finance and administration at University at Buffalo, part of the State University of New York; Brian McCloskey, vice president for finance at the Community College of Allegheny County, in Pennsylvania; and Timothy Moore, president of Indian River State College, in Fort Pierce, Fla.

In a wide-ranging conversation, they discussed how they want to better serve students, the effect of a labor shortage on those efforts, the opportunity new technologies and remote work offer to rethink the campus, and what it takes to get staff and faculty buy-in for new approaches.

The following report is a transcript of the conversation, edited for length and clarity.



Rafael Espinosa

Rafael Espinosa is an associate vice president and the chief information officer at California State University-Stanislaus. Previously he worked at the University of Chicago in a variety of roles, including as executive director of academic and administrative application in the biological-sciences division and executive director of the Center for Research Informatics. He earned his bachelor's in biology from Northwestern University.



Laura Hubbard

Laura Hubbard serves as the vice president for finance and administration at the University at Buffalo, part of the State University of New York. She has also been the associate vice president for budget and finance at the University of Oregon and the assistant vice president for administration at the University of Idaho. She has a master's in business administration from the University of Idaho.



Brian McCloskey

Brian McCloskey is the vice president for finance at the Community College of Allegheny County, in Pennsylvania. Previously he served as the executive director of finance at Mercer County Community College and as controller at LaSalle University. He earned his Ph.D. in business administration and management from the University of Maryland Global Campus.



Timothy Moore

Timothy Moore is president of Indian River State College, in Fort Pierce, Fla. Before joining the institution in 2020, Moore served in a variety of roles in and outside of higher ed, including as chief science officer at MagPlasma, a company that produces materials and systems for air and water purification; vice president for research at Florida A&M University; and associate vice president for institutional advancement and research program development at the Edward Via College of Osteopathic Medicine. He has a Ph.D. in kinesiology and exercise science from Auburn University.



MODERATOR Ian Wilhelm

Assistant Managing Editor in Chronicle intelligence, a division of *The Chronicle of Higher Education*. Previously he served as a senior editor, managing breaking and enterprise news stories, and as international editor, overseeing contributors from around the world. Before joining *The Chronicle*, Wilhelm was a reporter with *The Chronicle of Philanthropy*. He has a master's degree in journalism from Columbia University's School of Journalism.

Improving the Student Experience

In many parts of the country, the number of traditional-age college students is declining. That shift in demographics as well as the disruption of Covid-19 has led to enrollment falling at many colleges.

To better attract students and give them the educational experience they expect, institutions have to offer more services, use technology more effectively, and overcome the image of colleges as being behind the times. So said the panelists during the discussion.

Better Wi-Fi connectivity, chatbots, and blockchain transcripts were just a few of the tech tools mentioned by the speakers.

But in addition to providing modern amenities and services, the future requires a change in mind-set, the panel said. For one, seeing the students as a customer — an idea resisted in parts of higher ed — is key, according to Timothy Moore, president of Indian River State College. To be successful today, college leaders need to be “bilingual” in the language of academe and the bottom line.

Ian Wilhelm: Tim, you spoke during a [recent webinar](#) in which you said, “We as academic leaders must adopt a more corporate model. ... We’ve got to meet our customers, our students, where they are.”

I'd like you to explain what you mean by that more corporate model for higher ed and what it means for creating a better experience for students.

Timothy Moore: If you look at the growth trends before Covid, we were in a downward trajectory with regard to student enrollment. That trend was exacerbated by Covid. It is a much more competitive higher-education space than in the last 20 years. Students are clients who have multiple choices of how they're going to buy their education, at what price points, from whom, and what brands.

As we go forward, I want to build our brand. Why would somebody want to come to us? How do I break the traditional view of what a state or community college is and how do I exacerbate my value-added proposition? What do you have to do to deliver the goods and services students are signing up for?

We're not going to assume that our students are going to find us; we've got to go find them. We have to give that student a sense of belonging that they can see themselves here. And then they can see themselves succeeding here and that this launch point will take them wherever they can go with their God-given abilities.

I bring a business approach to higher education. It's not to say that I'm forgetting the big goals. I'm under-girding them so they can actually survive and thrive for the generations to come, because the models we've relied upon for 50 years to get us here are not going to get us down the road the next 50 years.

Wilhelm: Laura, from your perspective as the chief financial officer, what do you think students are looking for now, especially when it comes to the campus?

Laura Hubbard: A number of our revenue streams are constrained or flat. Thinking strategically about how you use your resources is important, and that's something that we've done, luckily, before the pandemic.

We implemented [integrated-resource planning](#) in how we think about our capital improvements and how we think about technology.

To your question about what students need, our CIO does a survey of students every year and they want more Wi-Fi access — we can never have enough. During the pandemic we added Wi-Fi to some of our parking lots.

Devices are important, too. About 10 percent of our students don't have appropriate devices for what we're asking them to do on campus. We've started a laptop-loaner program that's been very popular.

“We have to give that student a sense of belonging that they can see themselves here.”

—Timothy Moore

One thing we implemented during the pandemic was using chatbot technology for some of our student-facing services; we piloted that in student accounts and in the IT student help desk. It's interesting because we think that's a degradation of service, like, Who wants to talk to a chatbot? But students love it; they would actually prefer that to talking to a human being for routine questions.

Wilhelm: And the staff probably don't mind having some of the burden taken off them.

Hubbard: Right. It frees up staff capacity to pay more attention to the complex problems that students have. Our chatbot is called Virtual Vic, which plays off our mascot, Victor E. Bull.

“We have to put ourselves in the place of our students, listen to them, and look at the world from their perspective.”

—Laura Hubbard

It’s cute, it’s fun. But I think it shows that we have to put ourselves in the place of our students, listen to them, and look at the world from their perspective.

Rafael Espinosa: I completely agree with corporate thinking about the university. One of the challenges that we have is that we’re a liberal-arts college in the center of an agricultural area in the central valley of California.

The word corporate gets a lot of resistance from faculty when we try to do academic partnerships with AT&T, Comcast, Starbucks or what have you because they feel that we should not be a vocational school.

But parents are talking about sending their kids to college so that they can have careers; you talk to our faculty and they talk about opening up analytical minds.

Moore: One thing that Laura indicated that I want to touch on. We found that during Covid our underserved minority populations disproportionately didn’t have access to Wi-Fi and the ability to have peer-to-peer tutoring. I’m redoing the entire library into a learning center where it becomes their space to come in, interact, and study in small groups.

Another modern support piece is improving transcripts with blockchain technology. Every public-school superintendent in the four counties I work with is getting blockchain support from the college. We will upload all the student transcripts into the cloud, and the student will never pay for another transcript transaction ever in their lifetime.

Wilhelm: Brian, are you seeing the same issues at the Community College of Allegheny County?

Brian McCloskey: There’s a lot of similarities in the community-college sector. Our marginalized students suffered the most, and we invested significantly in technology.

A dwindling student demographic presents a lot of fiscal challenges. Federal stimulus funds helped with investments that we made in some of these technologies. But some of these contracts and services expire next year, so all that’s going to fall to our own operating budget.

It's funny. Prior to my arrival here, I was told that the faculty had a difficult time going online during Covid. Now they're having a difficult time wanting to come back into the classroom.

And that's a double-edged sword because our faculty have had great success teaching online and our students have had some success there. But we're struggling with an aging infrastructure and a demand for a more virtual environment.

Espinosa: I tease my president because I say, We have 21st-century students, 20th-century faculty, and we're using 19th-century technology.

What we perceive our technology needs as are completely different from what our students think. I have three kids — two older boys who have already graduated college, and my daughter is about to go to college. I think of myself as being very aware of technology and trends, and they are constantly teaching me new things.

When they're studying and going to school, they want an on-demand service, just like everything else in the world. Sometimes they'll go to lecture but often they won't go and instead view the video that was created with lecture capture and work with other students. They learn differently than the traditional didactic, Socratic method.

We're talking about finding space for our students because there is an equity issue; sometimes the students don't have a space at home to work; they don't have good broadband; they don't have good connectivity.

Students kept saying we don't have space, we need places to study, and our library was undergoing construction so it was not an option. We developed an app that listed space availability for any classroom on campus that did not have a class scheduled. A student sees a space available and goes there to get high-quality Wi-Fi, have a study group or whatever.

“Parents are talking about sending their kids to college so that they can have careers; you talk to our faculty and they talk about opening up analytical minds.”

—Rafael Espinosa

Workforce Challenges

As colleges look to reopen their campuses fully this fall, they face a changing work-force environment. Many staff members are eager to continue working remotely, requiring changes in human-resources policy and how the campus operates. What's more, with the labor market upended by the pandemic, many positions remain unfilled at institutions, especially within technology areas.

While those challenges threaten the strategic priorities of colleges, panelists also see them as opportunities. Greater remote-work options mean that unused campus offices could be repurposed to support students, leased to generate revenue, or offered as space to companies to develop or deepen academic partnerships. And the labor shortage could lead to new approaches to organizing units or teams, result in more training for current staff members, and produce new efficiencies.

Brian McCloskey: I have a question. With all the investment in technology that we've done and the needed support on the IT side, we are having such an issue attracting qualified talent. There's a war for labor going on, and if you cannot compete, you're going to have vacancies, and then the students will crucify your institution on social media.

We're in Pittsburgh, and it's a vibrant labor market, and we have difficulty all around. Rafael, have you had that challenge in IT, and how have you been able to overcome it?

Raphael Espinosa: We have had that challenge and it's very difficult because there's several tasks concerning service and day-to-day operations.

We try to cultivate local high schoolers, community-college students, and our own students to fill the void. Often they have no training, and they would love to have that certification in cyber security or desktop support.

The other thing is that IT has been doing telecommuting and remote work forever, so

when the pandemic hits we were the first responders, we were the people that everyone else turned to and said, How do we do this right? Quickly we were able to address those issues and help our campus move to online and remote work.

I looked like I was a prophet, because when I came to Stan State, I moved a lot of our commodity applications up into the cloud; I moved a lot of our email and our file sharing up to the cloud; we fought to purchase Zoom licenses. And when Covid came everybody looked at me like, How did you know?

I bring all that up because one of the recruiting tools that I use is talking life-work balance. Four out of five of my direct reports live over an hour away from our campus. I've been able to attract them and keep them engaged simply by letting them come into the office one or two times a week.

Often people are motivated to work at higher-ed institutions, not because of the salary. It's because we have great benefits and that you're making a major contribution to society. We use all of those different tools to try to attract people.

But I completely agree: It's very difficult to attract talent. If I need a senior architect, often what I'll do is hire a consultant to come in and then have knowledge transfer to people that we already have, or two people who are local so that we can group them and then that's professional development that they appreciate as well.

Ian Wilhelm: For the rest of you, how is the labor shortage affecting the goals when it comes to modernizing the campus?

Timothy Moore: It absolutely affects them. Previously you might get 15 applications for a position, now you might get one or you might not get any. It goes back to our No. 1 cost, which is people.

Where we're having our greatest challenge is in the IT sector, and everybody's got it, from the federal government on down. We're doing a combination of things; we're using [managed](#)

[services](#); we're also using technical consultants to come in and do the knowledge transfer.

So, how do you get people to do these things and how do you recruit them? I focus on my three cardinal points of true north: mission, students, and community.

What I'm struggling with right now is that we have a work force that is almost all back on campus, yet the students are choosing virtual and in-person. What becomes of a million-and-a-half square feet of space?

“Previously you might get 15 applications for a position, now you might get one or you might not get any.”

—Timothy Moore

Are we overbuilt for the future of educational delivery? Do I spend money on empty buildings to maintain facilities?

Espinosa: We don't have that problem quite as much because we had very limited space to begin with. And now that we're online it's a godsend so we can do things online and we can utilize the space on campus more efficiently.

I've started looking at partnerships with corporations. We have a sister campus where almost their entire IT group is now working remotely, and the college is now leasing the building where it was housed to a company.

They're looking at corporate sponsorship and partnership, not only to lease the space, but also to bring those companies on the campus so that they can actually help the academic mission.

Laura Hubbard: We were already bursting at the seams before Covid. We're looking to renovate spaces to be more along the lines of what our students are looking for in learning spaces.

“Are we overbuilt for the future of educational delivery? Do I spend money on empty buildings to maintain facilities?”

—Timothy Moore

We found during the pandemic that students want to be on campus. They may be doing stuff remotely but they want to be here. It reaffirmed that place matters to our institution.

We’re in the process of getting funds for a new engineering building. A lot of the spaces that are going to be in that building are really related to student clubs, student gathering spaces, maker spaces for students. So now it’s all about how we utilize the space that we have.

And how we utilize our space is tied to the work force. The current policy, which is a temporary one, allows employees with approval by their supervisor to work remotely up to two days a week. If that option continues in the future, we would look at our office spaces and think about sharing offices and freeing up some space to be used differently and increasingly introduce the idea of [hoteling](#).

The other piece on the work force — again we were already in the middle of a work-force

planning initiative going into Covid — is where we asked each of our divisions and schools to go through every single position and put them into one of three categories: strategic, core, or currently utilized. Currently utilized means if that position were to be vacated tomorrow, you would do something different with it.

I’ve been having meetings with each of the units and talking with them about those currently utilized positions and how we might reimagine those into the future. It’s also getting people to recruit differently.

McCloskey: We’ve had significant vacancies, and the fiscal year that ended June 30, 2021, we had a very healthy surplus or bottom line.

Even with a significant enrollment decline, it’s basically because our expenses are down in excess of what our revenues are because we just can’t hire. I’ve been trying to hire a budget analyst for nine months.

Creating Buy-In

As colleges look to reopen their campuses fully this fall, they face a changing work-force environment. Many staff members are eager to continue working remotely, requiring changes in human-resources policy and how the campus operates. What's more, with the labor market upended by the pandemic, many positions remain unfilled at institutions, especially within technology areas.

While the panelists emphasized the need for change, to embrace new technologies and work-force policies, and operate differently to attract more students, not everyone on campuses agrees. Some don't see the imperative to experiment or worry that vital parts of the higher-education experience will be lost.

To achieve transformation, the panelists talked about how to get buy-in, especially from faculty members. Approaches varied, but two popular ideas were emphasizing "shared responsibility" rather than shared governance and being transparent with institutional finances so that faculty and staff members can understand why decisions are being made.

Rafael Espinosa: I wanted to ask Tim, how do you address faculty who are resistant to more corporate initiatives on your campus?

Timothy Moore: Great question. Our faculty has been forward leaning in regard to what we're here to do, which is to change lives.

We have a lot of folks from across the socioeconomic spectrum; a lot of folks are coming here to achieve a launch point. Our faculty is critical to this, and I've found that my faculty are buying in to what we're doing. We have an idea of: Can we get the kid across the line to get them where they can achieve their God-given abilities?

There's a term in higher education, I just reject, and it's called shared governance. Nobody has an organization run by everybody; that doesn't work. What I tell everybody is it's shared responsibility; if you fail, I fail; if I fail, you fail; we're in this together.

And that the faculty are absolutely essential because they are the standard-bearer of the brand of the college. And they are the ones that interact with our clients most often. If that experience is a bad experience, then that reflects on the organization.

Espinosa: Tim, I want to invite you to discuss shared governance and shared responsibility with our academic senate. I will pay for you to fly here and I'll put you up in a hotel. I will also buy you some armor.

Moore: Here's the thing that I did with my faculty to get them on board. We did our budget and we were totally transparent. Before I got here, it was controlled by three or four people. It was like manna from heaven. It just showed up.

Nobody knew what the cost of business was. Nobody understood the numbers. So we've done a bunch of literacy all across this campus. Everybody has a very sober understanding of what we're into and why I'm making the decisions I'm making.

And the door to my office is literally open to anybody at any time to walk in, to have a conversation, pitch a complaint, throw a rock, whatever they want to do.

Because it's the only way I know to make leadership available to the masses. You've got to let people come in and absorb what you're telling them and then react and then navigate them toward what needs to be done.

Ian Wilhelm: We know that type of buy-in is important, but how do you do this in an environment when decisions need to be made relatively quickly?

Moore: For my team, I'm texting at 2 o'clock in the morning; I'm up at 4:30 in the morning; I'm working my fat behind off to do four things simultaneously: Engage our community stakeholders, engage our elected leaders, engage our industry-sector leaders and engage campus leaders.

“Numbers never ever lie; trends, while they do not guarantee the future, will tell a story, and people need to listen to that story.”

—Brian McCloskey

I've come in with a firm but a democratic approach to how we're going to do this, and the campus has responded magnificently

Brian McCloskey: I want to address the question about how you present your point of view. As a CFO, the numbers never lie; they always tell a story. So at my institution when I'm asked to speak, I just am very frank and straightforward. Numbers never ever lie; trends, while they do not guarantee the future, will tell a story, and people need to listen to that story.

Laura Hubbard: I agree with that, Brian. The provost and I give presentations on the budget at various times of year, including to our Faculty Senate. We actually show what the balances are in the central accounts. We talk about our financial health, our priorities, and how we are putting resources behind them.

We tend to think in higher ed we have trouble changing, but I think what we learned in the pandemic is that we actually can pivot and we can do it pretty quickly. So how do we keep developing that muscle memory going forward?

FURTHER READING

[“3 Ways to Make ‘Belonging’ More Than a Buzzword in Higher Ed,”](#) by Michelle Samura, *The Conversation*, May 6, 2022.

[“AI Chatbots Pose Ethical Risks. Here’s How One University Is Handling Those,”](#) by Taylor Swaak, *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, January 27, 2022.

[“The Unequal Costs of the Digital Divide,”](#) by Audrey Williams June, *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, October 5, 2020.

[“Today’s Mission Critical Campus Jobs,”](#) by staff writers, *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, August 2021.

[“Why Doomsday Hasn’t Happened: Most colleges averted financial disaster. But the pandemic will still have a lasting impact,”](#) by Lee Gardner, *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, May 11, 2021.



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