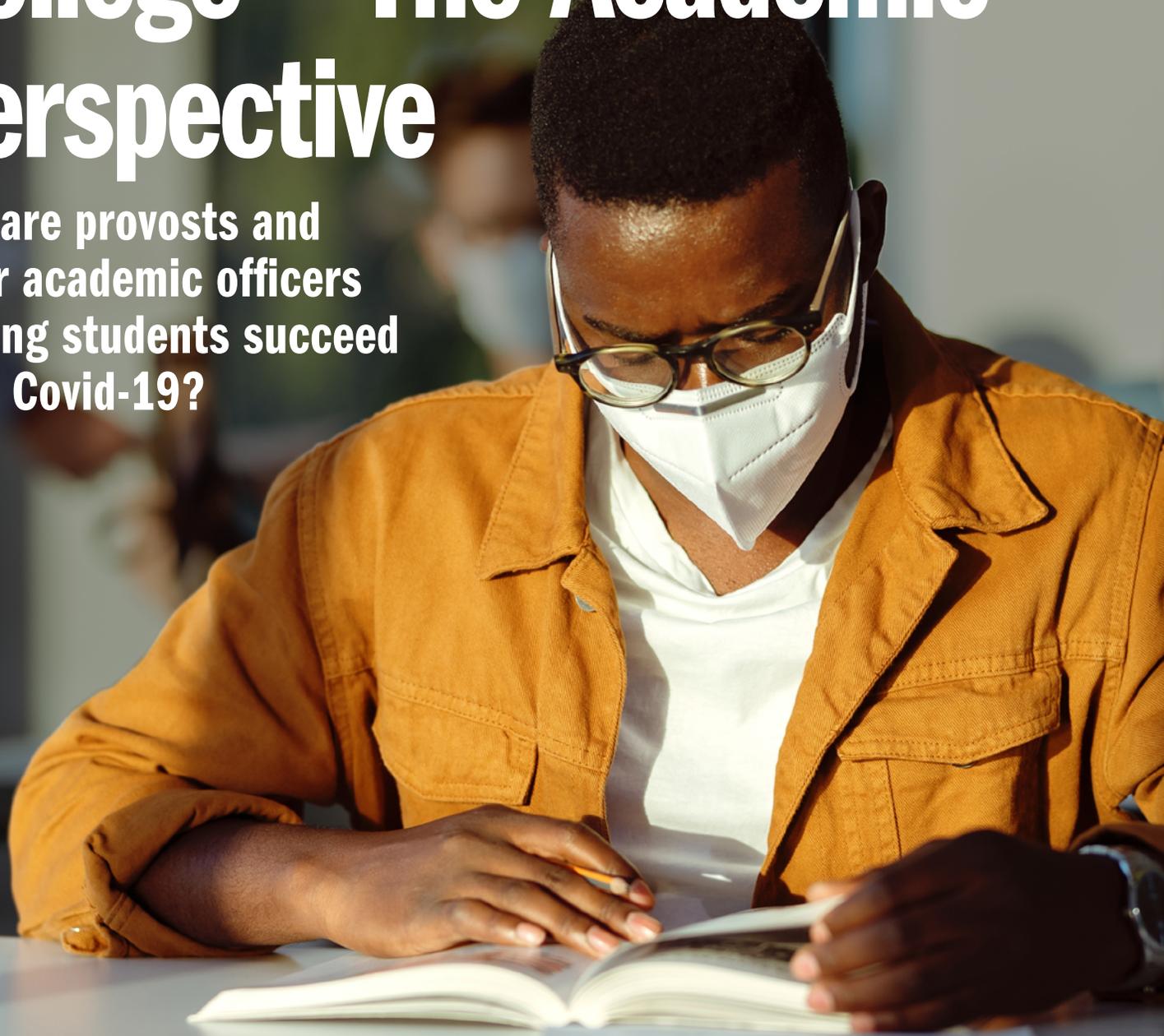# The Student-Centered College — The Academic Perspective

How are provosts and other academic officers helping students succeed amid Covid-19?

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For months now, higher ed has been grappling with the coronavirus pandemic and its financial fallout. In this fraught and difficult moment, colleges have to be more focused than ever before on the needs of students. The student-success movement — improving completion rates, equity, and access — remains an institutional priority.

How can provosts and other academic leaders coordinate among campus divisions, rejigger programs on the fly, and practice smart leadership to help their institutions become more student-centered?

To examine these issues, *The Chronicle* brought together a virtual panel of academic officers who approach this work across various sectors of higher education — from an HBCU land-grant institution, a community college, a public university, and a private college. They shared their insights on obstacles they've faced, promising collaborations they've forged or strengthened, and outcomes they're working toward, as they help lead their institutions through these unprecedented times.

This report offers key points of the discussion to help campus leaders understand effective practices and consider changes to improve students' academic experience.

The following excerpts from the roundtable have been edited for length and clarity.

MODERATOR

Maura Mahoney is an associate editor of Chronicle Intelligence, a division of *The Chronicle of Higher Education*. She produces reports and events to help campus leaders understand and solve pressing problems in higher education. She has a master's degree in literature from the College of William & Mary.

Isis Artze-Vega is vice president for academic affairs at Valencia College, a community college serving more than 70,000 students. She provides strategic leadership for curriculum, assessment, faculty development, distance learning, career and work-force education, and partnerships for educational equity. Before joining Valencia, she served as assistant vice president for teaching and learning at Florida International University and taught English composition and enrollment management at the University of Miami. She holds an Ed.D. in higher-education leadership from the University of Miami.

Mark Canada is executive vice chancellor for academic affairs and a professor of English at Indiana University at Kokomo. A longtime champion of student success, he was a leading participant in the American Association of State Colleges and Universities' "Re-Imagining the First Year" project. At Kokomo he leads the KEY, an experiential-learning initiative that provides opportunities to learn through internships, retreats, research projects, and trips.

His articles on student success and other topics have appeared in *The Chronicle of Higher Education* and other media. He has a Ph.D. in American literature from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

Jeffrey Rutenbeck has served as provost and senior vice president for academic affairs at Arcadia University since August 2019. He also oversees student affairs and the College of Global Studies. He has helped develop the university's adaptive strategic plan and leads its Covid-19 response, including Arcadia's "All-Modes Ready" planning. Previously he served as dean of the School of Communication at American University and on the faculty and administration of several other institutions. He has a doctorate in communications from the University of Washington.

Ontario S. Wooden is provost, senior vice president for academic affairs, and a professor of education and psychology at Alcorn State University. His research interests include college access and choice, higher-education policy and finance, and equity in higher education. He has secured more than $4 million in external funding to support innovation and student-success initiatives. He serves on the editorial boards of the *Journal of Access, Retention and Inclusion in Higher Education* and the *Journal for the Study of Sports and Athletes in Education*. He has a Ph.D. in higher education from Indiana University at Bloomington.

Students' Evolving Needs During the Pandemic

According to a recent [survey](#), more than 80 percent of higher-education institutions said that improving student success and completion rates was a top priority for 2020 and beyond. And then came the pandemic. Higher-ed institutions had to transform themselves last spring and plan for an unprecedented fall semester. Institutions are still online, mostly online, or, if they're back on campus, dealing with a whole new and challenging range of health and safety issues. In this new normal, how can colleges continue to improve completion rates, equity, and social mobility? What are the most effective ways to engage students virtually? How can colleges holistically support students, particularly their most vulnerable ones?

Our panelists discussed the gaps that have emerged, how colleges should be working to shore up trouble spots and serve students, the importance of relevance, and how to help students connect.

Maura Mahoney: What were the gaps for students that became apparent as Covid-19 hit? What new or pressing needs have emerged?

Mark Canada: Of course there were lots of gaps. We had to adapt, obviously, in the classroom, but when I think about the one

"We unearthed gaps
in terms of our
ability to respond to
their reality. "

— Isis Artze-Vega

that was apparent — enrollment. We were in the thick of enrollment and re-enrollment, getting students registered for their classes. That went well, but it required a lot of adjustments. Advisers had to do everything online. When I reached out to some of them, to figure out what it was like, they felt fortunate that they already had a coaching model to be able to give one-on-one attention to the students. They could respond and advise them responsibly.

Ontario S. Wooden: There were resource gaps — PPE and being able to pivot in the online space. But addressing those gaps also made us aware that there were data gaps. We didn't know as much about our students as we thought we knew.

One of the most pressing gaps was access to technology. You make arrangements to get Chromebooks to people. Then they don't have internet access. The browser you purchased doesn't work with the Chromebook. Where do these students live?

What's the technology infrastructure in that space? Are these going to be students who now have to help take care of family? Will they be able to continue in class?

Jeffrey Rutenbeck: All of the above. Also, we are a provider of study-abroad experiences for a lot of other institutions. Things started to happen for us a few weeks before the impacts on our local Glenside operation. Especially in Italy. We had about 900 students that we were trying to take care of through our College of Global Studies. There were pivots country-by-country to figure out how to get them home, and to do it at a time when a lot of the students didn't want to leave. All the logistics planning of dealing with travel agents, airlines, housing for temporary stays when they're in their departure cities. Doing that student-by-student — you couldn't do it any other way. We had to move new people onto new tasks, because the gap was so pressing — we had to mobilize and move people to that task to help get it done.

Isis Artze-Vega: Technology for students and for us. We didn't have good technology with which to collaborate. We were not a Zoom client. Skype on the phone really didn't work. We didn't have online proctoring. Most of our student services were only available face-to-face, like tutoring. We didn't have the technology or remote services for many of our enrollment processes. Capacity gaps, most notably that some of our faculty had not yet taught online.

I would say toward the middle, things like policies, our grading practices, which were not really set up to be responsive to crises.

Most recently some of our work had become routinized. We hadn't thought about our students' very real, complex lives. We paid some lip service to it, but it was different to say, "Oh, shoot. We are stuck and scared and uncertain. They are stuck and scared and uncertain." Suddenly there was a commonality with students. We unearthed gaps in terms of our ability to respond to their reality. Modalities. We don't have good data on the relative effectiveness of different modalities. We can now do most things online. Should we? We don't have good data yet on how learning differs across modalities, despite preferences.

Also, our ability to support and uphold academic integrity has become a significant gap. Faculty are really distraught by the levels of cheating they are seeing or scared of. And, certainly, just as the country has noticed a significant gap in our commitment to equity, and racial equity in particular, that has been exacerbated. We see today in a way that we didn't see as clearly as before that there are gaps in our systems and our processes with which to advance racial equity.

Mahoney: How should colleagues be working differently to serve students and help them succeed?

Wooden: We have a better understanding of what we can accomplish when we work together. Had I not been on a call every morning with the campuswide team led by

> "To that point of listening: We've made more use of focus groups than I would have ever imagined. It's been a great way to keep us tuned in to the lived experience of our students."
>
> — Jeffrey Rutenbeck

student affairs, it would have never dawned on me that these folks were working all day and all night, not only on campus but also off campus. It was an eye-opening experience for me. Moving forward, I'm mindful of gaps that may have existed between academic affairs and other operations on campus. I'll also walk away from this with a deeper appreciation for listening to people's stories. The number of stories we've all heard over the last few months have made us rethink lots of assumptions of student groups or even colleagues.

Rutenbeck: To that point of listening: We've made more use of focus groups than I would have ever imagined. It's been a great way to keep us tuned in to the lived expe-

rience of our students. I would imagine we'll all talk about the increased communication with campus stakeholders. Just knowing more about other people's work, and knowing more about what they are experiencing, gives us a chance to innovate around that and address some longstanding issues that were never rising to the surface — or if they were, they weren't detected by the right people. It's an amazing opportunity to be able to become aware of that, learn from it, and start innovating.

Artze-Vega: I think that renewed attention to what it means to teach well will stay with us. I'm a strong advocate of employing students and having them at the table when we do work. Pivoting away from our deficit-based

orientations. Even in the pandemic, we were focused on what students lacked and how underprepared they were. I think we should couple the response to the pandemic and renewed attention to justice to look and say, They were awesome. Look how resilient they were. How do we continue to build on those strengths as we move forward?

Lastly, leveraging what happens outside of the classroom for learning within the classroom. Whether it was racial unrest, the election, or the pandemic — this is grounding our work, rooting it in the relevant. It's so powerful for learning. I hope we don't go back to our stale curriculum but inject students' learning with the world around them. They perk up. Attention is a prerequisite to learning.

Mahoney: The campus plays an important role in student success — not just in classes, but also in research projects, experiential learning opportunities, and so on. How much can you do to recreate or support the lessons of those experiences in a remote setting, or a setting with masks and social distancing? Mark, your university has a big experiential-learning program. I was wondering what you've been able to do with that.

Canada: On the one hand, it was a great challenge. We were so accustomed to getting students' hands on their learning, getting them mentored projects, community projects, going on field trips and things. But the more I think about it, the more I realize it turned out to be an asset. Our faculty members are already wired to think about how they can create dynamic experiential-learning opportunities for their students. The radiography faculty are having a scavenger hunt on our campus. They wanted to provide the live experience where students are making connections, building friendships, interacting with

faculty, but also doing something educationally rich.

One of my hospitality-and-tourism faculty members is having virtual-reality experiences. Instead of taking students to the Louvre or the pyramids of Egypt, they'll do VR. One of our historians said, "I open my Zoom classes 10 minutes in advance so the students can have an informal chitchat before talking about the War of 1812, or whatever the topic is." Little things and big things can help the students connect. Our faculty were already in the mind-set, but they had to be extra creative to figure it out. And, more important, to connect with each other.

Rutenbeck: A lot of campuses do a common experience for first-year students. In our case, we decided in April that we were going to prepare a total redesign of all the classes, to be ready for whatever modality presented itself. For our first-year experience, because of the looming racial unrest, we shifted to Ibram X. Kendi's book *How to Be an Antiracist.* Normally the common read would be infused in all of our first-year seminars as a component that would be managed differently by different faculty members. But because we knew we were doing Kendi's book, we employed a high-end instructional designer to build out components that could be used across the seminars. We were able to have Kendi appear virtually a few weeks ago, and we were able to build momentum for that through the summer and into the fall.

The campus experience provides a default common experience. Without the opportunity to build something like what we worked on, I think people would have felt less connected. And, because it's highly relevant, and it's part of a much broader campuswide effort to address anti-Black racism, I think it will blossom into a completely different way of designing the first-year common experience in the future.

Navigating Campus Relationships

Technological access. Financial-aid assistance. Academic advising. Career counseling. In order for students to thrive, colleges have to consider the many touchpoints of the student journey and streamline their offerings in response. Often this requires partnering across campuswide silos.

Our panelists talked about the pandemic's impact on campus relationships, and about how the collaboration that was required could not have happened without the foundation of existing teamwork. The crisis made strong relationships stronger — a realization all the leaders said they hoped would continue to manifest itself.

Maura Mahoney: How has the pandemic changed how you interact with other departments on campus — technology, finance, business, student affairs — to create a holistic response to students' needs?

Ontario S. Wooden: You mentioned campus technology. The openness and willingness with which our IT operation has made themselves available to support students through the technology challenges, to get them online, to address issues — everyone is focused on ensuring that those students are success-ful. Being able to sit at a table with folks from across campus, or jump on a Zoom.

But it's not about what academic affairs or IT is doing. It's what are we doing to overcome this barrier, to support students being successful? That's the part I'm hoping we continue to maintain.

Mark Canada: We have a lot of collaboration on our campus. A disaster like this brings people together. We're a small campus and already had a lot of cross-sectional connections. I work closely with people in student affairs, advising, etc. When it came time for us to work on this challenge together, we had some strong relationships. It didn't feel like we were starting from scratch. That's one lesson I hope campuses learn. The stronger those relationships are, when you come into a crisis, the less preliminary work you have to do.

Jeffrey Rutenbeck: It's made such a difference for us to have those relationships and have the "all hands on deck" mind-set. I really hope we don't forget that. Let's keep it and not let systems and structures and institutional histories reassert themselves. Even though we know we can't go back and maybe don't want to, there are parts of this world, I'm worried about them snapping back in place.

"When it came time for us to work on this challenge together, we had some strong relationships. It didn't feel like we were starting from scratch. That's one lesson I hope campuses learn. The stronger those relationships are, when you come into a crisis, the less preliminary work you have to do."

— Mark Cananda

Wooden: The federal funds that we received through the Cares Act made those conversations easier. Had we gone through the pandemic without the financial support, the conversations would have been quite different. We would have been concerned about our individual purses. Having that allocation from the Cares Act made things work more quickly in the best interest of our students.

Isis Artze-Vega: Good point. Our financial stability is uncertain, so tensions could arise from that constraint. The expectation at Valencia of collaboration is built into every system — as soon as we commission a work team, the participants have to be cross-sector.

These cross-sector teams, these emergency teams can build trust and community. We had a similar talent-sharing program. We're so big. Some of our operations were discontinued. Our on-campus event planners became Covid case managers. Where do we need capacity? Where is their availability? Lots of individuals are learning about other parts of the college. Hopefully that will result in some sustained collaboration.

Mahoney: I was wondering if you've been able to engage with student affairs in more meaningful ways. What's changed?

Artze-Vega: I'm grateful to see that more of my colleagues are recognizing that our student-affairs colleagues are much more connected to students than we are. Their relationships are in many ways more authentic. When we are wondering how something will work, they have been so insightful. I'm seeing them invited into tables and rooms in conversations that they were not prior.

Wooden: The authenticity of the relationships that our student-affairs colleagues have, being able to accept those students where they are. We're leaning in with them to help them think through getting through some of the enrollment challenges that we have. Here we'll see faculty and folks on academic and enrollment-management

functions moving forward. Covid showed us it's everyone's business. We're learning a lot from each other.

Mahoney: Turning to the faculty — they're on the front lines. How do you continue to inspire them and get them to work with and support students when they, themselves, need support?

Canada: We used some funds to compensate them in advance because we knew that they would be preparing their courses for a different form of delivery. We came through with pretty substantial compensation packages. It sends the message that we know this is difficult. We're not just asking you to pivot and let us know how it goes.

A lot of support — speaking of cross-campus collaborations — our center for teaching and learning worked with our IT to make sure the faculty had the technology they needed in the classroom. They could come check it out and say what they liked and disliked. They had a voice.

We did a survey of faculty asking what they needed. I think they felt heard. It's never perfect. There's more we could have done to support them. Now they're feeling the burnout in a way nobody could prepare for. We continue to try to listen.

Rutenbeck: It's also about more than what we do as senior administrators. Faculty have a way of supporting each other. We have a faculty member who was part of a parents' resource group. These were parents mostly of young children who were at home now because the elementary schools were not functioning in person. She had the inspiration of connecting the early-childhood-education graduate students with the parents who needed some relief and support to help their children with their learning. And she figured out a way for some of that to count toward the placement requirements. It's not credit-bearing, but it was so inspiring. That was faculty and staff working together.

Wooden: We always miss something. We've been faculty members in other

> **"It's faculty on the front lines doing the innovating and creating the innovations that hopefully we'll benefit from for years to come."**
>
> — Ontario S. Wooden

roles, but not in this current environment. There are things like that that show up in a department, in a college, that you don't have to think about. It's in these moments you realize how hard the faculty are working. It's faculty on the front lines doing the innovating and creating the innovations that hopefully we'll benefit from for years to come.

Artze-Vega: We're giving them tons of grace. This is the first time we're all doing anything in a pandemic. Helping them set the bar at a reasonable place. Helping them realize, no, you don't have to do everything. Focus on what will make the biggest difference for learning. We've involved them in decision-making. They've been coming together and continuing to ask questions in terms of high-level college strategy. There's a new model for instructional-design pairing. Excusing them from

their service expectations if they need to free up some time.

Then some other things outside of our direct support for them: The design of a new grade for students. Listening to what faculty told us they needed. A new modality, proctoring online. We were moving quickly to do things that would have taken us a long time.

Rutenbeck: What was the new grade?

Artze-Vega: Students were able to unenroll from the class, had no penalty on their grade, and had a free retake. This was something that the faculty appreciated. They didn't want to be the reason that students' GPAs were forever tarnished. We also had an opt-in pass/fail. Faculty said, "That relieved me — the precision of my grade was less important. It wasn't 'Did you get a B-plus or A-minus?'"

Looking Ahead and Lessons Learned

To make good on the promise of equitable opportunity, colleges increasingly have turned to data in order to provide timely support and promote sustainable, efficient practices. They must strive to better understand their students in order to make the changes necessary to support their success. At the same time, the disruptions of the current reality underscore the need to take a nuanced approach to data. Data is important — it can provide early warning of trouble spots — but going beyond statistics to uncover deeper truths is crucial. What does that look like in a pandemic, and what does it mean for the future?

Our panelists discussed the challenges of making connections with students, concerns about enrollment and retention, whether their priorities have changed, and what those priorities are in both the short term and the long term.

Maura Mahoney: Let's turn to data, which often plays a big role in student success. What is the role of data in these pandemic times?

Mark Canada: We do a lot with data looking at retention rates, and we do a student-intake survey when students start classes in the fall, to get a sense of where their strengths and weaknesses lie. We have to be more nuanced in looking at data. Things are so fluid right now, with students feeling they're not so sure they want to do college after all. They're having trouble connecting.

We've looked at withdrawals and how they compare to last fall's. Unfortunately,

"We are partnering more with our counterparts around the country and world, to think about how we operate and do business. Just a greater sense of interdependence."

—Jeffrey Rutenbeck

we're seeing more withdrawal. It's enough of a difference that we're doing a deep dive. If you can figure out some of those canaries in a coal mine, looking at the data, the earlier you can get that, and the more outreach, you might be able to make a difference.

Isis Artze-Vega: Right now we're trying to get real-time data. One example is what we're seeing in terms of orientations, what courses they need, and what's on the schedule. Recalibrating courses to meet their needs. Identifying subsections of students during our enrollment funnel, to say they didn't move from application to this other milestone. We're deploying a new calling campaign to call them to say, "We noticed this." It's helping us to implement our strategies to be really focused and to figure out how things are working. When we highlight a strategy, looking at the data and saying, Did we see an uptake as a result of that marketing campaign?

A second thing, something we were already doing — disaggregating data. We have to check how equitable is the progress we're making. Those are two recent refinements to our data.

Learning-management-system analytics. We do know whether they're logging on to the LMS. If they're not, we might have a problem. We're starting to explore what that looks like, knowing there's a lot of sensitivities around "Big Brother" and faculty.

Ontario S. Wooden: I was thinking about who's logging in and who's not — some of the faculty are not. How do you manage that? It's taking the time to learn the story behind what a particular faculty member may be experiencing. From time to time, I have those moments that I realize, these are real people who have families who may also be affected by Covid.

There are all these problems around data. People are more open to hearing the data and finding ways to respond to the data. But there are some things the data exposed that you're left saying, "What do we do with this?"

Mahoney: Enrollment and retention are big priorities right now for colleges. What are the metrics for success? Have they changed?

Artze-Vega: Our enrollment looks like it's up. We have fewer first-time college students. That's a real risk for access. If they left our local high schools and didn't come to Valencia, they might not go to college. We're now focusing on our first-time-in college students in a way we didn't have to before. We had some strategies, but now it's a recovery plan. We also saw some shifting enrollment patterns. Our students were taking many more credits in the summer, which for us, as a largely part-time institution, was really wonderful and could get them to the finish line much more quickly.

Wooden: I don't think the bar has changed. I think everyone wanted to at least maintain what they had. We dipped slightly, and that caused us to focus more on spring and next fall as well. All hands on deck. Ensuring that deans and department chairs are involved in keeping those retention rates headed in the right direction. That's a focus of ours as a campus.

Mahoney: How has the pandemic affected your student-success priorities in the near future and longer term?

Jeffrey Rutenbeck: It may be too obvious to state, but I'll say it. We have never focused this much on health and safety. I'm sure that's true of every institution. That's a sensibility that likely will stick, but let's hope the dynamics change. I don't mean to imply that health and safety weren't priorities before, but certainly not in the same way, and not in this unifying way.

I think a lot of priorities that have emerged for us have been to continue to diversify our revenue streams. To look for new ways to partner with other institutions and entities to increase the interdependencies. We are looking outward more than I think we were before. We are part of a higher-ed consortium here. We're depending on

that group more. We are partnering more with our counterparts around the country and world, to think about how we operate and do business. Just a greater sense of interdependence.

Canada: I hesitated when you asked that question — it was hard to answer, because our priorities haven't changed. The way we go about them will change. Jeffrey's right — obviously, we have to pay attention to health and safety. We need to do a better job of diversifying our student body. Our retention numbers are up for this past fall. Our fall-to-fall retention was close to 70 percent, which is the highest it's been since I've been here. We had to work hard to get there, but the priorities haven't changed. It's the connection piece that we've been talking about that's the hardest piece to fit. We're working at that. I think if we can get that part right, we'll continue to be successful in retention.

Artze-Vega: Transfer is a major goal area. Access. Work-force preparation. The categories are the same. We had articulated equitable outcomes within our student-completion metric, but not within the other categories. That has become a prominent numerical target within our transfer and work-force goals. That has become a change. The second is longer-term. When people began losing their jobs, I thought of my many privileges and blessings. There are a lot of things I could do if I didn't have this job. I thought, Oh, how I wish this for my students. Moving forward, it's part of a learning plan we'll be devising in the spring. I want to make sure our students graduate knowing how to learn. They can believe in themselves and their ability to learn a new trade, a new role. I hope it becomes a prominent part of our student-success goals.

Wooden: In lots of ways, the priorities will remain the same. Enrollment, retention, graduation, equity gaps, being efficient in completion of degree programs. I think it's going to come down to each of us as a per-son, being mindful of the fact that whatever the end of Covid looks like is actually not the end of Covid. There are so many people and so many stories that got sidetracked, some derailed along the way for the next few years. We'll be reading stories about parents and family members who died on this journey. Students are still trying to put the pieces back together and get their lives back on track.

Things won't necessarily change from a business-process-operations standpoint, but our people will continue to work through these challenges for the foreseeable future.

Mahoney: What's the most important thing you've learned in these two semesters in terms of student success and academic programs?

Wooden: We have to care. Everyone has a story. It's our responsibility to respect those stories. Not only for our students in the classrooms with each other, but definitely as administrators, we learn more about our students, which allows us to better innovate, to address some of those concerns that we have.

You also find that sometimes things aren't as grim. There are bright spots along the way. The students' ability to reframe and offer a different perspective, even in some of the most dire periods, has been refreshing for me during this time.

Canada: It's hard to choose one thing that was the major thing we learned. I learned so many things. But we need to remind ourselves that our faculty and staff are needing our attention as well. The students have to come first, but it's the idea of putting your mask on first before helping the students. You have to make sure you're healthy.

Rutenbeck: Caring for faculty and staff. We knew we wanted to pivot to an "All-Modes Ready" initiative. In the end, it was about 1,000 classes to get ready for fall. What I learned is that the good will that we generated by making that move early

in the pandemic continues to provide us with some energy and bandwidth to continue to innovate.

Artze-Vega: The one thing I isolated as the most important thing we learned was about us. We're not slow. We can do incredible things and uphold our commitments to learning and collaboration and transparency. I hope we hold on to that. How many times did we have conversations like this and say, "If only we could…. It would take 10 years." I hope we remember what we were able to accomplish and leverage those practices.

FURTHER RESOURCES

To deepen your understanding of the student-centered college, here is a selection of articles and reports that build on ideas or programs mentioned in the discussion.

"Administrators Who Help Keep Students on Track," by Julia Piper, *The Chronicle of Higher Education,* January 19, 2020
https://www.chronicle.com/article/administrators-who-help-keep-students-on-track/

"A Cash-Strapped University Bet on Student Success — and Grew," by Kelly Field, *The Chronicle of Higher Education,* December 13, 2019
https://www.chronicle.com/article/a-cash-strapped-university-bet-on-student-success-and-grew/?cid2=gen_login_refresh&cid=gen_sign_in

"How the Provost Can Help Students Succeed," Mark Canada, *The Chronicle of Higher Education,* October 8, 2017
https://www.chronicle.com/article/how-the-provost-can-help-students-succeed/

"The Truth About Student Success: Myths, Realities, and 30 Practices That Are Working," by Sara Lipka, Kelly Field, Claire Hansen, Maura Mahoney, and Lauren Sieben, *The Chronicle of Higher Education,* 2019.
https://store.chronicle.com/products/the-truth-about-student-success-myths-realities-and-30-practices-that-are-working