

STATE BOARD OF COMMUNITY COLLEGES
Continued Exploration of New Focus Areas

Leaders in Flexible Learning

Purpose: Informational. (This information may be the basis for later action.)

Updates are being provided each month on special initiatives listed in the [Focus Areas for 2020-21](#) document from the July 2020 board package. The January 2021 committee meeting is dedicated to the focus area entitled “Leaders in Flexible Learning,” which highlights online learning and addresses additional demands for flexibility, including those placed on the Community College System by the coronavirus pandemic.

Strategic Plan References: The “Leaders in Flexible Learning” focus area corresponds in some ways to the existing strategic plan theme, “Clear and Supported Pathways for Student Progress and Success.” However, it addresses a gap in the original strategic plan related to online learning and adds emphasis to the kinds of flexible strategies that have proven critical to community colleges as they have shifted to meet student needs during the pandemic.

Reimagining Online Learning, including Expanded Content for Workforce Continuing Education

- The onset of the coronavirus pandemic in early 2020 and community colleges’ sudden shift to virtual learning in March increased the System’s focus on online learning and how best to leverage its Virtual Learning Community. The Virtual Learning Community (VLC) is a collaborative effort of the North Carolina Community College System for developing online course content and providing support services for the benefit of distance learning students, educators, and eLearning administrators.
- Using private funding, the Community College System contracted with Guild Learning Solutions to undertake six weeks of research in June and July 2020 and offer recommendations. The overall report finding is that the VLC is a critical resource for the NC Community Colleges, but has not evolved over time and would benefit from a revamping to maximize its impact. Primary recommendations of the report for the VLC are as follows:
 - Launch a series of *microcredentials* through the VLC to strengthen workers’ skillsets and aid in the economic recovery.
 - Embark on a *strategic planning* process with key stakeholders to revamp the VLC’s mission, vision, implementation model and brand identity.
 - Revitalize the *operating model* to offer a shared services model, beginning with a pilot project.

- “Go to Market” – invest in marketing, communication strategies, and feedback processes with System customers and stakeholders, developing communities of practice and consortia.
- In July, the Board approved expenditure of up to \$3M of federal CARES Act funding for systemwide improvements to online learning and delegated authority to the System president to make expenditures and allocations to colleges. Investments include:
 - \$500,000 to Gaston College for online content creation through the BioNetwork's Learning Solution Center at Gaston College. As of November, the center completed modules in Lockout/tagout, Biopharma HRD, Drug Development, BioManufacturing Overview, and BioWork.
 - \$802,080 for colleges to participate in Quality Matters to ensure that online courses meet high quality standards designed to engage and meet the needs of learners. As of November, 491 faculty were enrolled in Quality Matters and 268 courses were certified.
 - \$1.3 million for online skills labs. As of November, colleges report procuring resources for health sciences, industrial technology, biological sciences, and other areas in 35 curriculum and 8 continuing education programs.
 - \$100,000 for digital literacy training. Colleges report 350 hours of digital literacy hours and purchase of instructional software and devices as of November.
 - \$270,000 for faculty professional development through the Association of College and University Educators (ACUE). ACUE's course, *Creating an Inclusive and Supportive Online Learning Environment*, provides faculty with skills and practices to create an optimal online environment to support learning—including how to increase student engagement, embrace diversity and help students persist in meeting academic challenges. The ACUE contract is enabling 18 cohorts of about 30 faculty per cohort.

Rural Broadband Initiative

- The Rural College Broadband Access Project, funded with \$12M in federal coronavirus relief funds through the 2020 COVID-19 Recovery Act, will be completed by the end of the month. The initiative marks a major step in extending rural broadband across North Carolina's community colleges.
- The spread of COVID-19 in the spring of 2020 heightened student need at all 58 colleges to remotely connect to campus and access course materials securely. Many rural community colleges operated on outdated infrastructure or lacked systems that fully extended high-speed internet to their students.
- The 20 schools were identified based on need and a number of factors, including the regional economy, percentage of population served and the demand for technical assistance.
- The project enabled colleges to provide Wi-Fi to outdoor campus locations, install advanced cybersecurity protection, protect networks, conduct firewall checks, connect

buildings and classrooms across campus, prepare infrastructure for disaster recovery, provide security training for updated software tools and migrate applications to public clouds to ensure continuity of operations.

- To learn more about the work at each college, see this [interactive map](#).

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