Starting adventures in online learning

NETC reaches underserved students
by bringing college to their home

Northeastern Technical College (NETC) has a mission to show underserved students the value of technical education and open their eyes to the opportunities available in their local communities. For students who may be the first in their family to go to college, mentorship and support are vital. That's why NETC is using D2L Brightspace to provide students with an engaging, supportive college experience, even when they're studying at home.

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Challenge

Reaching out to underserved communities

Imagine you're growing up in a rural county in South Carolina. You aren't a straight-A student in high school, and nobody in your family went to college. Why should you believe that there's a future for you in postsecondary education?

That's a mindset that NETC is committed to changing. Dr. Kyle Wagner, president of NETC, explains: "Our number-one goal is to reach the students who never had the opportunity to go to college. We need to connect with those students to show them the importance of technical education and the opportunities available for skilled workers in their community. By exposing them to education and empowering them to get well-paid jobs, we hope to help them find their passion and accomplish their life goals."

One of the biggest challenges for first-generation students—who make up more than 80% of NETC's student population—is that they have nobody at home to help them navigate their college experience. That makes it all the more important for college faculty to actively mentor and guide them. NETC has always had a strong focus on online education, and even before the pandemic, 75% of its courses could be delivered online. When COVID-19 hit, the college knew it had to ensure not only that all its courses were online-ready, but also that it could continue to give students the support they need, even if faculty could no longer meet with students face-to-face.

> "That's where we really started broadening our thinking on remote education. What can online learning do for us beyond just teaching a course? What can we do with technology to communicate with the student and really bring the college into their home?"
> *Dr. Kyle Wagner, President*

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Solution

Harnessing data and analytics

NETC embarked on a series of initiatives to encourage enrollment and empower students from underserved communities to start their adventure with postsecondary education. To deliver these initiatives, the college targeted a more powerful and versatile learning management system (LMS) and decided to move to D2L Brightspace.

For example, NETC is using D2L's Brightspace's data and analytics capabilities to monitor student engagement and ensure that faculty stay close to each student via regular touchpoints.

Derk Riechers explains: "We've added features to our Brightspace platform that allow faculty to see everything they need in one screen. So, for example, they can identify students who aren't performing well or who aren't attending their course on a regular basis. For students who are at risk, we can bring in our student services or dean of students to do additional advising, guidance, and tutoring."

The data and analytics capabilities have also enabled NETC to implement an award-winning incentive program, which tracks six key performance indicators (KPIs) for each employee and rewards them for hitting targets that further the college's strategic goals. All the information is tracked automatically in D2L Brightspace, which makes it easy for administrators to manage performance and pay bonuses to deserving staff.

Christi Meggs, director of human resources, says: "We won the HR Innovation Award from the College and University Professional Association for Human Resources (CUPA-HR). Their feedback was that they were not aware of any other colleges that are doing anything like this, tying KPIs to bonuses."

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Bringing the college into students' homes

To ensure students have the best possible college experience, NETC places a major emphasis on the friendliness and navigability of its online learning platform, with innovative features such as enabling faculty members to create their own personalized virtual offices.

Derk Riechers says: "It's about making our students feel that they're part of the college, even if they can't visit the teacher's office in person. They don't just see a bunch of text; they get a visual impression of who their teacher is, [and] a glimpse of their personality and what's important in their lives."

Dr. Wagner adds: "We want students to feel that the college is literally right there on their computer, and their access point is D2L Brightspace."

Accessibility and empowerment

NETC has also built its learning platform to empower students who are looking to enter the workforce or find a higher-skilled job by making it quick and easy to earn entry-level certificates through stackable credentials. For most of these short courses, students can do the majority of the work from home in their own time, which is especially important in a rural community where commuting several hours to attend classes on campus can be a major disincentive for students who may already be balancing jobs and family commitments.

To make education accessible for everyone, NETC also aims to make its courses as affordable as possible. By adopting Open Educational Resources (OERs) for most of its courses, the college saves each student hundreds of dollars on textbooks every semester—and by providing the OERs directly in the D2L Brightspace user interface, students and faculty have all the resources they need to start teaching on day one of the course.

Dr. Wagner comments: "We are leading the state when it comes to OERs. We've even had some of the universities contact us about partnering with them to bring OERs to their colleges because we've been so aggressive with this. If you look at the national studies, the success of students completing the courses goes through the roof whenever the textbook is an OER."

Result

Growing through the pandemic

The results of NETC's innovative initiatives in HR, academic affairs, and OER adoption have already led to spectacular results: a 4.4% increase in enrollment and a 5.2% increase in student persistence during 2020. With just over 2,000 students, the college saw nearly half a million logins to its D2L Brightspace platform—demonstrating the huge success of its online learning strategy.

> "During the pandemic, we were the only college in South Carolina that actually grew our population for the fall and spring semesters. We're so proud of that, and we attribute much of our success to using D2L Brightspace to keep our students engaged."
>
> *Dr. Edwin Delgado, VP for academic affairs*

Christi Meggs agrees: "In that first year of using D2L Brightspace to monitor our KPIs, we hit both our target and our stretch goal for enrollment, and our retention rates."

Moreover, by driving the adoption of OERs, NETC has cut the average cost of textbooks by 77%, a savings of around $1,000 per student per semester. Ron Stafford, NETC's head librarian, has an even more ambitious goal of cutting that cost to zero by making every course adopt OERs over the coming semesters. As Derk Riechers puts it: "Our focus here is on education and providing resources, not selling expensive textbooks. Our mission is to educate our students, not make a profit from them."

Looking to the future, Dr. Wagner concludes: "Now that we're looking beyond the pandemic, students are seeing the value of having better skill sets and being able to go back to work after COVID-19. We want to help them start that learning adventure so that they can get better, higher-paid, more fulfilling jobs, and really make their mark in the world."

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