



FOUNDATION for CALIFORNIA
COMMUNITY COLLEGES

California Community College students play leading role in narrowing the digital divide

About the Foundation for California Community Colleges

The Foundation for California Community Colleges (Foundation) is the non-profit foundation of the California Community Colleges' Board of Governors and Chancellor's Office. It works to benefit, support and enhance the missions of the state community college system, the largest higher education system in the nation. The Foundation is a 501(c)(3) tax-exempt non-profit corporation and receives no direct state or public support.

Situation

The Foundation launched California Connects, an effort to improve digital literacy, to enhance education, job prospects and quality of life for people for whom computer and Internet use is still a challenge. A federal grant provided laptops to thousands of community college students who agreed to share their computer knowledge with their families and other members of their community. Since Internet access is an important aspect of digital literacy, the Foundation needed an efficient way to supply Internet connectivity for the laptops whether students were on campus or on the go.

Solution

The Foundation purchased laptops with built-in connectivity to the AT&T wireless network as well as AT&T wireless data plans, giving students the tools they need to become digitally adept and enabling them to share their knowledge with others. So far the program has distributed more than 4,000 computers; eventually there will be laptops in the hands of 5,800 community college students who will use them to improve the computer and Internet skills of tens of thousands of Californians.

Narrowing the Digital Divide

The Foundation for California Community Colleges supports students in the state's 112 community colleges with educational and training opportunities throughout the state and by raising funds to support scholarships. Community colleges attract students hoping to qualify for better jobs to improve their quality of life and that of their family, but many of them are unfamiliar with or have little access to technology when they start classes.

Technology education is an important aspect of the Foundation's mission. "Students must be able to leverage and utilize technology to advance their lives personally and professionally," said Dr. Elisa Orosco Anders, Director of the Foundation's California Connects program. "As technology has advanced, we have seen gaps in terms of who has had access to it – especially broadband Internet."

Although most colleges have computer labs, they are often in use nonstop, as are many other public computer centers. Students without computers and adequate access to wireless Internet services are at risk of falling behind in today's knowledge-based economy, Dr. Anders noted. "If we didn't make a concerted effort to reach out, there would be people that were not only left behind but almost opted out of the system," she said. Her concerns were echoed in an essay submitted by a student from Mission College, an institution supported by the Foundation: "As any student can tell you, college without a computer is like a car without tires."

Foundation for California Community Colleges Facts

- **Needs**
Technology to support college students as they learn and serve their communities
- **Networking Solution**
Mobile Internet services help keep students connected on campus and as they educate others throughout California
- **Value**
Enhanced ability for students to complete coursework and build skills; increased digital literacy and expanded broadband Internet access to underserved populations
- **Industry Focus**
Higher education
- **Size**
\$10.9 million budget



Thanks to a \$10.9 million Federal Reinvestment and Recovery Act grant, the Foundation launched the California Connects program to increase digital literacy among community college students and other underserved Californians. “The federal government recognizes that California’s community colleges and students are uniquely qualified to help close our nation’s digital divide. That’s something we can all be proud of,” said California Community Colleges Chancellor Jack Scott. “This program gives our students the necessary tools and training to provide access for underserved populations to the Internet while building the state’s foundation for economic growth and job creation.”

Internet Connectivity on Demand

California Connects supplies laptop computers to thousands of Mathematics, Engineering, Science, Achievement (MESA) program students at 34 community colleges throughout the state who intend to transfer to four-year colleges and universities.

“As a community service, the students who receive laptops must teach others how to use the Internet to complete essential tasks,” said Daniel Gilbert Valencia, California Connects Program Manager. “Without wireless connectivity, it’s very difficult to train someone on all of the possibilities that the Internet provides,” he said. “Whether they’re showing someone how to sign up for a Department of Motor Vehicles appointment and save themselves four hours or teaching another person how to enroll in classes online, they need the Internet.”

Since Web access would also give students access to all of the educational resources they can use to further their education while they’re off campus, California Connects needed an efficient way to provide it for students. The Foundation’s AT&T account team suggested equipping the laptops with high-speed connectivity to the AT&T wireless network. “We wanted the best quality resources for our students, but we’re always looking for ways to do more with less,” Dr. Anders said. “AT&T has been consistently supportive of that and their team was extremely solutions-oriented.”

Dr. Anders and her colleagues also like AT&T’s wireless coverage in the state to support all community college students, and that their account team is consistently responsive.

Keetha Mills, President and CEO of the Foundation, voiced appreciation for the efforts of AT&T and the other technology companies that support California Connects. “This project is making a significant impact on communities and students throughout our state, thanks in large part to the collaboration of so many organizations and companies coming together to provide much-needed digital literacy tools and training. The differences this project makes today will have a long-term effect on society, and will help current college students be prepared for the workforce of tomorrow.”

“Resounding Appreciation”

Student reaction to California Connects was immediate and overwhelmingly positive. Officials heard from many, including a pre-med student who was grateful to receive her first computer as part of the program. “She had a 90-minute commute each way to college via public transportation, and having that computer allowed her to study and do her homework en route,” Valencia said. “Had she not had it, she said, she would have had to drop out. For her, the program made all the difference.”

Another student was able to keep up with his studies despite the fact that his family became homeless during the school year. “The computer was the main way he kept in touch with his professors and continued to be enrolled,” Valencia added. “I don’t think a program’s impact can get more intense than that.”

Most students don’t have such dramatic experiences, but are just thrilled that they have the opportunity to share what they learn with others. “The ability to have 24x7 access and use it, for example, to enroll in classes early in the enrollment period was a really big deal to a lot of students,” Valencia said. Those who can’t register online and have to wait in registration lines are sometimes closed out of the classes they need, which can delay their graduation a year or more.

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– Jack Scott, Chancellor, California Community Colleges

“Removing that barrier is a huge blessing for these students,” Dr. Anders said. She saw “a resounding appreciation” from students better able to communicate with their faculty and those who became more engaged by participating in study groups and sharing what they’ve learned with their peers.

The California Connects Facebook page contains numerous unsolicited messages of gratitude. “Thank you, California Connects. The laptop is greatly appreciated, as are your efforts to spread computer literacy,” one student wrote. Another posted, “When I heard they had worked to get us the California Connects grant, I was amazed. There really are people out there that are willing to fight for you, if you fight for yourself!”

A Profound Effect on Communities

Surprisingly, students enjoy the community service the program requires of them as much as they like having their own computers. They are armed with digital literacy training to serve as community trainers. “Many found it made a real difference in their lives – when they trained their grandparents, uncles, aunts and other family members, they realized the big knowledge gap and fear that they were able to bridge,” Dr. Anders said. “And a lot of students report that it changed their lives that they were able to reach out and help those people to embrace technology and overcome their fear.”

One student described the feeling she gets when she sees someone experience an “AHA!” moment. “When I was able to connect my grandmother on Facebook and she could see pictures and videos of my niece and nephew in Oregon, she looked as if Bob Barker just told her she just won a new car,” the student wrote. “This grant will have a profound effect on the communities it is introduced into, and I know that because it has already had a huge effect on my life and the people that I help.”

Some community service efforts are led by MESA instructors who take students to senior centers or homeless shelters. Others are self-directed, with students assisting at their churches, local libraries or within their own families. "The technology itself became a conduit for students to take their work even further," Dr. Anders said. Instead of MESA directors sending out announcements about scholarship or internship opportunities, students are now empowered to get that information themselves on their own computers.

Joy and Accomplishment

Officials emphasize that the California Connects program isn't a giveaway. "We tell students, 'You are going to earn your computer and you're going to give more than you're getting,'" Dr. Anders said. "We're investing tax dollars in them because they're worth it; it gives them confidence that we know will make them even more successful. We're making an investment in them as individuals and an investment in the country as a whole."

Most students report that they're honored to be part of this program. They have a sense of duty and take their responsibilities seriously. "It's great to see that as an additional success of the program," she said. Being able to share their knowledge with their families and the community is another point of pride. "That's where students tell us they've found the most joy and sense of accomplishment."

Those involved in the program would like to see California Connects include more students across the state. "We have a very strong curriculum, model and design, and now we have expertise in terms of deploying it," Dr. Anders said. "We hope to expand, but it comes down to resources."

The value of the California Connects program is hard to overstate. "I think it's really inspirational on a human level," she said. "Students' gratitude, their passion and eagerness to expand their opportunities and knowledge and share that knowledge with others in their community speaks to the power of this program."

For more information contact an AT&T Representative or visit www.business.att.com/enterprise/Family/network-services/internet-connectivity/.

Important Information

Actual results may vary. Coverage not available in all areas. Two year contract may be required. Availability, security, speed, timeliness and uninterrupted use of service are not guaranteed. Additional hardware, software, services and/or network connection may be required. Additional restrictions apply. Offers subject to change.

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