

The future of education

Tim Cook on affordable housing, on-demand learning and more for CCC

STORY BY ETHAN M. ROGERS
NEWS EDITOR

Declining birth rates, an aging and diversifying student population and changing needs of employers are just a few of the challenges facing Clackamas Community College.

That's according to College President Tim Cook, who spoke at the Oregon City Business Alliance's monthly forum in September.

The COVID pandemic gave administrators at the college time to think about where CCC is headed for the next 10 years and beyond.

Cook arranged his talk into three "buckets" — a changing student population, a changing workforce and workplace needs, and how the college is adapting to meet those changes.

"Birth rates have been declining since the '80's," Cook said, "so this was happening pre-pandemic. What we're seeing now, if you talk to anybody at the public universities or the community colleges, there are just fewer and fewer students that are that traditional age coming through."

Adults over 30 That's the population that's increasing and expected to increase over the next 15 to 20 years. That also happens to be the age of CCC's primary student population, which means opportunity for CCC and other community colleges with similar student profiles.

Unfortunately, according to Cook, "Oregon really does not have what we call a college-going culture."

"That's something that we don't necessarily emphasize in this state," he said, "to the extent that we set up systems or we set up funding mechanisms or we find other ways for students to be able to easily go."

Some of those roadblocks to education include educational programs that don't meet the needs of students or employers, a lack of time or money, or insecurity in housing, food access or access to childcare.

"I see this as another opportunity for us to really think about how we can work together as businesses, as legislators, as educators, to really increase that college-going culture that we need," Cook said.



File photo of CCC President Tim Cook

Clackamas Community College is also experiencing an increase in the diversity of its student make-up.

"At Clackamas, about 33% of our students are BIPOC," Cook said. "We're seeing the biggest growth by far in our Latinx community, then people that identify as having more than one race."

Whether that means offering more programs in Spanish, as was recently done with one program by CCC's Small Business Development Center, or recognizing Juneteenth as a campus holiday as was done this year, the college is making efforts to include everyone.

"The college is growing at a faster rate with diversity," Cook said, "so that's something that we're attending to and really trying to figure out how we can adapt and make sure that we're serving a more and more diverse population here at the college and in the county."

The pandemic took students out of classrooms and into Zoom meetings and the world of online learning. Many don't want to go back.

"We built our schedules about six months ahead of time," Cook said. "Last May, we put out our fall schedule, which we started yesterday. Students ... by a two-to-one ratio, they wanted online classes. So all of these face-to-face classes we've been putting together and trying to run have no students, or have a handful of

students. We can't afford that."

What does a college do with buildings they no longer need for classes? They rethink the whole idea of education.

Cook's vision for the future scraps the old students-in-desks model and looks for new ways to provide students the tools and support they need to grow as individuals.

"Pre-pandemic we had this pretty traditional one-year credential / two-year degree that you would see in most places," Cook said, "and we're hearing over and over again, a year's too long, we can't wait, we need CNC operators, we need people now, we need them yesterday."

Employers across all sectors are hurting for employees, and employers can't wait.

"We hear this all the time: 'Can you help us find people now, and can we do some training that gets people ready to go much quicker?'" Cook said.

On-Demand learning, micro-credentials, on-site training, flex and hybrid classrooms and re-thinking the purpose of a college campus. These are some of the ways the college is trying to adapt to the current and future needs of students and the community.

"We're much more prepared now," Cook said, "where we're actually doing a better job of getting ready for what's coming. We're almost half-and-half credit and non-credit options that we offer at the college."

Non-credit courses might look like a local business that needs to offer training at night or on the weekends and wants to use campus facilities, or wants CCC instructors to train their employees on-site for a number of weeks. It could be someone looking to add a skill to their resume or a retiree who wants to learn about organic farming.

On-Demand learning would allow students or interested community members to engage in learning on their own schedule, much like many commercially available options such as Domestika, Udemy or MasterClass.

Any of the class formats could be used to provide students a micro-credential or a certification on a single type of machine or in a particular procedure, which would allow them to get a job or move up in their current position.

"I would predict as we move forward that we may get to a point in the not-so-distant future where we're offering more non-credit than we are credit classes," Cook said.

Beyond non-credit options for students, classroom options are changing as well.

Class used to mean students sitting in a room together in that old European model that Cook mentioned.

Today we use words like online learning, hybrid classroom, flex classroom, synchronous and asynchronous learning, virtual reality and simulation.

Hybrid instruction is perhaps closest to that old model; part-time in class, part-time online.

Online learning can be either synchronous, with all students meeting at the same time for the same class, or asynchronous, with students accessing course materials on their own schedule.

Flex learning is perhaps the most interesting concept. Classes run on a schedule. Students can attend class in person or online, and they can watch the class later at their leisure.

Flex classrooms offer greater student control over their learning process.

Virtual reality and simulation programs are in the pipeline for the future, with some programs already being rolled out in other locations.

Cook was near gushing over the college's new Maker's Space.

"Our programs use those spaces all the time for training and for work, but then on the weekends we're turning those into a community space," Cook said. "Whether you're a hobbyist and you want to make something, or you've got an idea for a small business and you want to prototype a product, this space is available. It's a great way for people to get up-skilled to use new technology where maybe they didn't have that opportunity before."

Beyond the students, beyond the class offerings, there is the campus.

"We spent the last six months working on a campus mass concept master plan, with the goal of really examining all of our facilities, all of our instruction, looking at the next 10 years," Cook said.

Online courses are fundamentally lonely, he said.

see COOK, page 5