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ROGUE COMMUNITY COLLEGE PRIORITIES: CHANGING FROM SCARCITY TO INNOVATIVE MINDSET

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Leadership Abstracts

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Established in 1970, Rogue Community College (RCC) serves Oregon residents in Jackson and Josephine counties at campuses in Grants Pass, Medford, and White City. A public two-year community college, RCC offers multiple transfer degrees; more than 80 career and technical

education degrees or certificates; a variety of workforce and short-term training, academic skills, and continuing and community education classes; and services to the business community.

Developing College Priorities

After experiencing the fastest enrollment decline in the state over a five-year period, RCC was faced with the difficult decision of whether it should continue to serve its two-county district with three campuses. COVID-19 and regional wildfires had left their toll on the area and enrollment dropped to the point where closing one of the college's campuses became a real consideration. While community college enrollments were declining across the country over the same period, RCC's FTE decline of 37.5 percent from 2016 to 2021 far outpaced the Oregon state average of 28.1 percent (Higher Education Coordinating Commission, 2023). The 2021-2022 academic year was spent participating in a process called prioritization, where all programs and operations were evaluated to determine what should continue. Significant reductions were made along with the additional commitment of nearly five percent more to be identified during the 2022-2023 academic year.

In summer 2022, planned retirement led to the onboarding of a new college president and an organizational restructure, providing the opportunity for reimagining the institution's direction. College executive and board retreats were focused on developing the best strategies moving forward. With urgency created by declining enrollment, and the associated budgetary impact, the determination was made to identify a path for a plan with clear expectations that all college stakeholders could get behind. This meant there would be no exhaustive process of redesigning the strategic plan, which is often a go-to effort of onboarding a new president. It also meant a number of initiatives that had begun in recent years would be revisited for the purposes of relevance and capacity. During this process, one thing became clear: In order to meet the college's mission of providing educational opportunities throughout the region, growth was going to have to be the answer instead of continued reduction. The college was not going to cut its way to success.

Collaborative discussions led to five college priorities—Stabilize Enrollment, Enhance Pathways, Deploy ERP, Community Relations, and Internal Communications—which were delivered in the president's annual fall kick-off address. The priorities were developed based on ongoing discussion and/or previous institutional commitments. With the exception of Stabilize Enrollment, due to its overall impact on college sustainability, the five were not ranked. Language was crafted around how increasing enrollment through access and student success would become RCC's top priority and how prioritization of other collegewide initiatives was developed and would be executed. Specific strategies were established to help employees with diverse work requirements understand how their institutional role contributed to the outcomes for these goals. Figure 1 demonstrates how the Stabilize Enrollment priority was delivered during the presentation.

Figure 1

Stabilize Enrollment– RCC Challenge

1. Increase student engagement strategies (i.e. clubs, student activities, and events)
2. Early intervention strategies
3. Incentivizing early registration
4. Learning students' names
5. Supporting course completion over "W" (for the masses, we know there may be exceptions for whom this is not the right strategy)

Office of the President



Weber, R. (2022, September). Fall 2022 Kick-Off PowerPoint Presentation

Employee feedback during fall term was overwhelmingly positive as a perception of hope was created. The delivery of clear expectations and priorities was appreciated. College priorities took on a life of their own and affectionately became referred to as the Big 5. More importantly, a new mindset was brewing, one where the determination was made to shift from scarcity to innovation.

Year One: Developing Commitment and Belief

Building enthusiasm is one thing; Delivering results is another. In order to help employees develop an innovative spirit around college priorities, the leadership team identified RCC entrepreneurial funds that work groups could apply for to help them engage. The most important application criterion was that the identified project needed to help the college make progress toward at least one of the five priorities. This strategy helped employees across all classifications identify how they could contribute to the college's goals. These microgrants became a popular opportunity and departments across all divisions applied. Figure 2 shows how the microgrant program was introduced.

Figure 2

Funding opportunity

**Up to \$100,000 of support from RCC Entrepreneurial funds for Microgrant opportunities*

Total Program Funding: \$100,000
Award Range: \$5,000 - \$10,000
of awards: 5-10 awards

Deadline: Monday, October 31, 2022

An image showing three large, gold-colored dollar signs standing upright on a pile of US dollar bills.

Office of the President



Weber, R. (2023, May). All-College Address PowerPoint Presentation

Early strategies to support enrollment growth proved positive, with an increase of 6.8 percent in headcount over the 2022 fall term leading to an ultimate increase of 11.1 percent in spring 2023. The proof of concept had been developed and commitment to the college priority strategy was widespread.

Because of the immediate increase in enrollment, the determination was made that additional budget cuts would not be identified and the college would, in fact, grow its way out of the struggling situation.

RCC has always been committed to implementing innovative strategies. One would have to look no further than the legacy ERP system developed decades ago to see an example of this. However, recent developments placed a strain on the mindset. Toward the end of the spring term, the League for Innovation approached RCC about candidacy for the League board. After institutional deliberation, it was determined that pursuing the opportunity was exactly what the college needed to affirm its commitment to educational innovation in its region.

Year Two: Continuing Momentum and Maturity

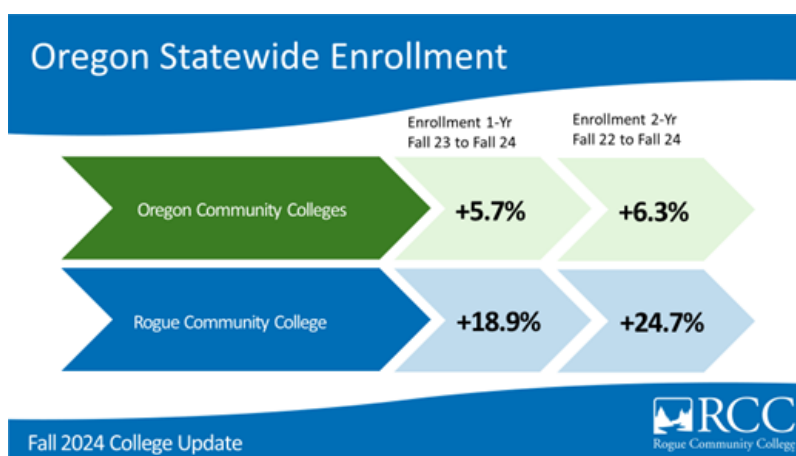
In addition to access and success opportunities provided to students resulting in increased enrollments, there was another very positive lesson learned from the efforts of academic year 2022-2023: When RCC sets a goal for itself, it will work collaboratively to achieve it. A culture focused on relationships and nimbleness was paying off, and the community was starting to take notice. For year two, it was determined that some college priorities should continue and others could be operationalized to make room for new ones, while keeping the positive spirit of the Big 5. Stabilize Enrollment, Enhance Pathways, and Community Relations were all continued, with Institutional Planning Model and Development of KPIs joining the list as replacements for Deploy ERP and Internal Communications.

Positive momentum with community relationships led to increased K-12 partnerships. Traditional high school dual credit offerings were rebounding from losses experienced during the pandemic. Early college enrollments of high school students were hitting all-time highs. Cohorts of introductory career programs (e.g., CNA, phlebotomy, and EMT) were developed to expedite entry into the workforce. Districts were finding creative ways to get students to campus so they could participate in newly formatted courses designed around their school schedules. One school district donated land to the RCC Foundation to generate scholarship opportunities valued at approximately \$1M so their students could have access to early college options. With a newfound commitment to K-12 relations, an abundance of opportunity presented itself.

Industry partnerships were showing similar momentum. After exploring new nursing degree opportunities with regional hospital systems, it was determined that prioritizing an additional RN cohort would best serve the region. Discussions led to an innovative agreement between RCC and its two regional hospital systems leveraging their resources to help meet instructional demands. Transportation sector partners made commitments to help increase the number of students earning a commercial driver's license. Community culture has shifted from RCC asking for partnership meetings to one in which the college is being invited to the table by others because it's seen as a problem solver in the region that can accomplish great things.

The momentum over the past two years has resulted in more than just enthusiasm. The targeted focus on increased enrollment to support the community's needs has resulted in RCC vastly outpacing enrollment of other institutions in the state (see Figure 3).

Figure 3



Weber, R. (2023, September). Fall 2023 Kick-Off PowerPoint Presentation

The institution's commitment to solve its enrollment struggles through college priorities and innovative practice has been rewarded in many ways. The statewide healthcare industry consortium has decided to meet at RCC in the fall to explore how strong workforce partnerships have been developed in such a short time. Additionally, efforts to join the League for Innovation's board were successful, with completion of the affirmation process in spring 2024. Now RCC has the benefit of learning from other like-minded schools while also serving as a contributor to promising practice.

Moving Forward: Focus on Continuous Improvement

For year three, it was anticipated that a transition from college priorities to a more targeted alignment with goals around the strategic plan would take place. However, after internal assessment of change management, it was determined to keep the approach of college priorities. They have become known and embraced. Figure 4 demonstrates how priorities at the college have evolved over the years.

Figure 4

College Priorities

2022-23	2023-24	2024-25
Stabilize Enrollment	Stabilize Enrollment	Stabilize Enrollment
Enhance Pathways	Enhance Pathways	Student Success
Deploy ERP	Institutional Planning Model	Employee Connectedness
Community Relations	Community Relations	Community Partnerships
Internal Communications	Development of Key Performance Indicators (KPIs)	Systems Thinking

Fall 2024 College Update



Weber, R. (2024, September). All-College Address PowerPoint Presentation

RCC's transition from a scarcity mindset to one of innovation is just the beginning of an exciting journey. The college's cultural commitment is providing hope and enthusiasm internally, while also opening doors in the region and elsewhere. Individuals at RCC, students and employees alike, have a firmer belief in their ability to control destiny. Self-advocacy and problem solving are on the rise. There are many reasons to believe in a brighter tomorrow. With all of that said, the college is still committed to a model of continuous improvement. This is evident through a focus on improving efforts around systems strategies and enhancing community partnerships.

Regardless of what future college priorities are, or when the transition away from them toward strategic plan alignment occurs, there will always be one consistent at RCC: Goals to support student access and success will be set and achieved.

Reference

Higher Education Coordinating Commission (2023). *Public institution enrollment: Fall 2023*. <https://www.oregon.gov/highered/strategy-research/Documents/Student-Data/Fall%20enrollment%20data.pdf> (<https://www.oregon.gov/highered/strategy-research/Documents/Student-Data/Fall%20enrollment%20data.pdf>).

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