



News

Trying to Take On the For-Profits

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NEW ORLEANS — An Internet search engine request for online education often directs prospective students toward for-profit institutions, which spend the most on Internet marketing and search positioning. By contrast, courses offered at a distance by community colleges are relatively invisible.

Arguing that only by collectively making themselves more visible can community colleges effectively compete against the mass marketing of for-profit institutions, officials of a new effort by the American Association of Community Colleges used the AACC annual meeting here to unveil plans to create a single portal where prospective students can search and compare online degree programs at public, two-year institutions around the country.

“We believe strongly that we ought to be players, if you will, in online education,” said Walter G. Bumphus, president of the AACC, which is behind the new web portal, to be called OnlineCommunityColleges.org. “We don’t want it to be left up to others in the field of education. I’ll just leave it at that.”

The LeCroy Center for Educational Telecommunications, part of the Dallas County Community College District, is incubating the effort. So far, including Dallas, 10 institutions from across the country -- the others are Anne Arundel Community College, Broward College, Darton College, Foothill College, Illinois Central College, Ivy Tech Community College of Indiana, Lone Star College System, Northern Virginia Community College and Rio Salado College -- have signed on to pilot the website.

“We’re not trying to take students out of anybody’s backyard here,” said Pamela Quinn, provost of the Dallas County Community College District and one of the initiative’s leaders.

Potential students using the site will be encouraged to investigate the online offerings at their local community college first. If their area institution does not offer the program they are seeking, then the site will help direct them to a “trusted affordable alternative.” Students will be able to search by college name, program, cost, demographics, geographic area, financial aid and scholarships. In addition, colleges with profiles on the website will be able to see students who are interested in their institutions.

Such an effort, however, has its costs. Community colleges interested in becoming “charter members” of the website must pay either \$24,500 or \$49,500 annually, depending on the services for which they wish to sign up. (Colleges paying more get “premier placement” of their institutions on the website.) Some college officials in the audience criticized the high cost, saying they simply could not afford to spend the money along with their traditional marketing expenses.

Officials from the website argued for the worthiness of the investment, and said that they are looking for about 30 community colleges for the test period.

“Do your own search at home on the Internet, on Google, on Bing, whatever you want, and just type down ‘online education,’” said Augusto Failde, principal at AboutEdu, a nonprofit online education consumer group working with AACC on the new website. “And with no disregard to our friends who are here from the for-profit sector, God bless, they have the money to get in there. You don’t. What happens there, again, it’s a free market and whoever has the marketing dollars to get there gets there. And you won’t get there unless you join these people.”

Some representatives of for-profit institutions in attendance seemed receptive to the idea of the website, which they did not see as threatening. Responding to a suggestion from Failde, some for-profit representatives expressed interest in linking to the new online community college website as a way of reaching new students for their institutions by noting that they accept associate degrees and online transfer credits from these community colleges.

Though officials touting the website say it will make a difference in distinguishing online community colleges from for-profit providers, they were as yet unsure what it would do to distinguish among the various community colleges that offer online programs.

Chris Bustamante, president of Rio Salado, known for its robust and innovative online offerings, told *Inside Higher Ed* after the presentation that he believed those community colleges that provide the most exhaustive student services, like his, will get a leg up when students choose among multiple institutions that offer the same degrees online.

— **David Moltz**

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