A Systems Approach: Expanding Access and Achieving Student Success through Support Services at Rio Salado College

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Editor’s Note: This report is a big story that covers a lot of ground but not the entire landscape of Rio Salado College. The SOURCE was commissioned by Rio Salado College’s Student Affairs Division to write this report. We tried to limit our scope to all of the student support services Rio Salado College provides, particularly to their online learners. As you will see, there are many departments and people that fall within that scope. It was the goal of The SOURCE and Rio Salado College to offer this free report as an information resource that will hopefully prove to be helpful to any higher education institution that offers online courses and programs.

Introduction
This report covers how Rio Salado College (RSC) in Tempe, Arizona has grown substantially into the largest public, non-profit, online 2-year college in the country. It was designed to capture the essence of a relatively large number of departments and initiatives that touch the faculty, staff, and, in particular, the online students at RSC. It also describes the historic path that has brought RSC to where it is today.

Most of the focus of this report concerns showing how RSC has created and currently provides a good number of sophisticated and well-planned support services for its online learners. In doing this, The SOURCE interviewed 24 RSC employees and reviewed the literature about RSC that has been published as far back as 1998.

It’s the Culture that Matters
When conducting the research and interviews for this report, the one key element that stood out above anything else was that RSC has a business-oriented employee and management culture that breeds continuous improvement and success. This culture has been built since RSC launched in 1978. During the early 1990s, the culture started to take off and expand in relatively quick fashion through the adoption of prominent business-oriented strategies and philosophies. In short, an innovative RSC culture makes everything work, and it stands on some solid historical legs.

RSC’s growth and development in the online learning arena can be considered a model based on learned experiences that have resulted in effective student support policies and practices and, consequently, increased student enrollments.

As RSC President Chris Bustamante explained in a recent Community College Times commentary:

In 1996, Rio Salado, one of 10 Maricopa Community Colleges, took a calculated risk and began offering courses online – 16 to start – just when the Internet was taking off. Critics at the time challenged the quality of online education and claimed that students wouldn’t adjust to such a radical change in their learning environment. But Maricopa and Rio Salado pushed ahead, determined to create an innovative, non-traditional and nimble approach that is responsive to and supportive of changing student needs.\(^1\)

Much of the momentum for constructing a unique online education system at RSC goes back to when Linda Thor became the college’s president in 1990. Thor served in that capacity for 20 years. Prior to 1990, RSC had immediately gained recognition in 1978 as a new community college in the
Maricopa County Community College system created for the county’s underserved populations. RSC offered non-traditional courses and programs through eight decentralized and internally competitive regional offices that targeted specific geographical areas. For about a decade the new RSC worked well, pioneering distance learning, developing fast-track programs for the nearby U.S. Air Force base and becoming the first Maricopa County community college to offer registration by telephone. By 1990, however, Rio’s competitor community colleges had begun to adopt many of the innovations that once had been unique to Rio. As a result, Rio faced fierce competition both externally and internally. Rio Salado College administrators and faculty soon realized that for the college to survive over the longer term, it had to make some changes.²

Thor and a small core staff worked at forming “a very intentionally built culture,” she says, adding that “we came a long way together.” That “long way” has created a community college that served 68,656 students in FY 2010-11, including 41,341 students enrolled in more than 600 online courses.

An Approach and Series of Best Practices from Outside Academia

Thor talks about “systemic innovation” and how RSC adopted a college-wide framework based firmly on collaboration and best practices from outside of academia. This framework started in the early 1990s with the adoption of the Total Quality Management (TQM) philosophy that after four years evolved into a strategic management approach based on Peter Senge’s five disciplines of a learning organization. The RSC culture that exists today has its roots in RSC employees originally getting schooled in TQM, which emphasized the creation of cross-functional, vertically integrated teams to improve processes and solve problems. Another important element of TQM emphasized service, quality and continuous improvement instead of focusing primarily on boosting enrollments as the bottom line. This resulted in employees thinking more enthusiastically about serving students better as external customers with needs, expectations and choices, as well as serving each other as internal customers, without being overly concerned about whether or not enrollments were actually increasing.³

“We built on the TQM foundation with the study of Senge’s work,” Thor explains. Senge’s book, published in 1990 and titled “The Fifth Discipline: The Art and Practice of the Learning Organization,” was all about “systems thinking and that you have to look at the organization as a whole so that when you make a change in one part of the organization, you have to consider what the impact is going to be on the other side,” Thor adds.

The RSC Development Team

The outgrowth of TQM and the Fifth Discipline exists today in the RSC Development Team, which is comprised of RSC’s residential faculty members [there are only 23 called “Faculty Chairs,” with the rest of the faculty made up of close to 1,500 adjuncts] along with administrators and staff from the college’s five primary divisions: Academic Affairs, Student Affairs & Advancement, Administrative & Employee Services, Strategic Initiatives & Information Services, and Public Service. In all, there are more than 40 employees on the Development Team. As noted in an in-depth article about RSC that was published inside the Summer 2011 issue of Lumina Foundation’s Focus magazine:

They gather once each week at a circular table for the ritual that all agree is the cornerstone of the school’s success. At an institution where collaboration is paramount, the Wednesday morning staff meeting blurs the lines that elsewhere often divide faculty, departments and administrators.⁴
By having key personnel who represent all of the college’s divisions meet on a regular basis, RSC maintains a holistic approach that governs and sustains a full slate of services focused on increased student access, academic success, and the completion agenda. Vice President of Information Services Edward Kelty, who, in 1990, was a part-time employee at RSC and the sole person in the technology department, says that “having a group like this meeting every week to make sure that, as an institution, we are all in sync, has been wonderful. I’ve seen faculty defending IT to other people and they understand what our issues are and vice versa. It is a phenomenal way for helping the institution move forward. It facilitates the systems approach of the institution” and ultimately enhances overall employee and student satisfaction.

“All of the divisions of the college have a voice,” adds Vice President of Student Affairs Kishia Brock. “A change in one system obviously impacts other systems. This is something that we live by, and it is why we have been successful in designing comprehensive student services to meet the needs of each and every one of our online learners.”

The Rio Way
RSC’s systemic innovation plans did not stop at TQM and Senge. The next philosophy adopted by RSC from outside of the Academy came from Darby Checketts, business-success consultant and author of the popular “Customer Astonishment” books. Other business-oriented bestsellers also came into play, steering RSC’s mission and values, including “Blue Ocean Strategy” by W. Chan Kim and Renee Mauborgne and “Good to Great,” by Jim Collins. In brief, customer astonishment entailed meeting the as yet unarticulated needs of students; the Blue Oceans Strategy revolved around applying everything that an organization does well and applying that to new markets and newly created enterprises; and Collin’s work pushed RSC to ask themselves what they were truly passionate about and what really worked from an economic perspective.

All of these philosophies and strategies have placed the entire college online for the convenience of students, wrote Thor in a Leadership commentary published by the EDUCAUSE Review in 2006. Below is her condensed version regarding the development and implementation of many of RSC’s student support services that are in effect today:

Through the click of a mouse, the full spectrum of student support services became available, including registration, academic advising, career counseling, tutoring, a 24/7 technical helpdesk, an instructional helpdesk, and an electronic library. But we still weren’t satisfied. So we did our own market research, which led to our innovative twenty-six start-dates a year [today classes start most Mondays]. The longest a student has to wait to begin most online courses is two weeks, and traditional semesters have been eliminated. Plus, these classes can be accelerated. And when we needed a new course-support, management and delivery system, we collaborated with Microsoft and Dell Computers to produce RioLearn. . .
Over the course of the last few years, we have really focused a lot on automation and communication in terms of improving all of our processes related to getting students in and helping them succeed. We continue to refine those.

Bustamante also touched upon RSC’s new predictive analytics technology [more on this later in this report] for supporting successful course completion rates, and the college’s faculty and staff training programs that “instill a unified commitment to helping students complete their degree programs.”

The unified commitment is fortified with employee training in which all new RSC employees, after completing a New Employee Orientation where they learn about RSC’s history and take a crash course in navigating the RioLearn LMS, also take part in a hybrid learning experience that teaches them about RSC’s Culture – all under the banner of RSC’s current vision statement: “We astonish our customers!”

Pulling It All Together for Students

Starting with the areas in which students typically make their first foray into RSC – Admissions and Records and Academic Advisement services – Brock further explains how “over the course of the last few years, we have really focused a lot on automation and communication in terms of improving all of our processes related to getting students in and helping them succeed. We continue to refine those.”

Admissions and Records

For example, Associate Dean of Student Services Ruby Miller, who oversees the Admissions and Records Department, describes how stu-
want to get admitted and enrolled quickly,” she explains. “It is up to our technicians to make sure the student has all the right information they need and who they need to contact. Do they need to talk to financial aid? Do they need to go through advisement services? Do they need library services or tutoring? Do they need to use our computer lab? It is very important that the people taking that first call have all the information students need so that first experience is positive.” That includes handing off the more in-depth requests and questions over to the Academic Advisement Department.

Academic Advisement

Associate Dean of Student Affairs Rachelle Clarke oversees the Academic Advisement Department, where about 26 well-trained employees provide an invaluable service to all RSC students. Advisement includes a program admissions team that handles all of the receiving and inputting of applications for those programs that have an application process, such as programs in the healthcare field. Advisement also includes a transcript evaluation team that does all of the in-state and out-of-state prior-credit evaluations that come through Academic Advisement.

Clarke says that that providing information to students on such a wide variety of offerings [more than 60 degree and certificates programs in all] can become a complex process. “There is so much information available, and we are always looking at ways to reorganize Academic Advisement and Students Affairs to be more efficient and effective. We are always looking for ways to improve how we serve students.”

Director of Academic Advisement David Hall says that most of RSC’s academic advisors have graduate-level degrees, and all new advisors go through a three-to-four week training period that includes one-on-one instruction as well as shadowing exercises with current advisors as they work with students face-to-face in the Academic Advisement office, as well as over the telephone. Additionally, advisors get specific training with the Admissions and Records Department on their procedures and process along with training in how to use the RSC student information system.

As noted on the Academic Advisement Department website, RSC advisors use a dynamic web-based database called the Electronic Student File (ESF) to help students create “to do” lists, view individualized check sheets, and create semester-by-semester plans. ESF helps students keep track of their academic progress and contact their assigned advisor. It is secure and available online 24/7 with a valid username and password.

Through a University Transfer Service, the Academic Advisement Department also assists students who seek a bachelor’s degree. Advisors help students with both course and degree selection to meet their transfer needs. RSC has transfer partnerships with Arizona public and private colleges as well as with a growing number of private and public colleges and universities outside of Arizona.

“Students come to us for pretty much everything,” asking, for example, how does financial aid work, or they often have questions and concerns related to their courses, Hall says. “We need to know a little bit about everything. One thing that we have is an internal knowledge base where we can look up information on various programs, procedures, and policies. So we either help students with an issue or refer them to the person who can help them. Because we
have start dates most Mondays, we stay very busy throughout all the year all the time.”

To help streamline the advisement process, in general, a new Group Advisement Service has been implemented in which prospective students can attend advising sessions that are offered through an online webinar or in person. The service provides tips on getting started at RSC. Attendees learn about advisement and other resources available to help them accomplish their educational goals as well as prepare them for a future individual advisement session.

**Advising Military**
Coordinator of Military Advisement Chantele Carr explains that advising military students is another significant part of the Academic Advising Department, providing its services to more than 200 active-duty soldiers and nearly 1,400 veterans. Carr will often help military students with converting the significant training they have experienced while serving their country into credit for earning a degree or as a means to obtain a higher professional ranking while they are still active soldiers.

“I think the biggest challenge is that they can be called to go anywhere at any point and time,” Carr adds, referring to active-duty soldiers. “We try to stress when they have to be online and when they have to submit their assignments. We are able to individualize each experience with each soldier because sometimes they may need a little more help or guidance.”

According to Hall, in 2011, the Academic Advising Department answered 90,000 phone calls, met face-to-face with 12,000 students, conducted 5,500 live chats and answered 47,000 emails.

**Financial Aid**
In addition to Admissions and Records and Academic Advisement, providing financial aid services is part and parcel of getting students enrolled at any higher education institution. However, the fact that RSC has Monday start dates throughout the year has always posed a unique and striking challenge for getting financial aid packages ready for students in a timely fashion. So, in 2011, the Financial Aid Department came up with a more effective system for processing financial aid based on traditional 16-week semesters applied to RSC priority filing dates that are aligned to future semester block term dates.

Associate Dean of Student Affairs Ryan Chase manages the Financial Aid Department. “We talk with students about starting their academic program on any given Monday start date,” Chase explains. “We try to be proactive and let them know that in order to have financial aid in place by their start date, we need to have received their FAFSA by our priority filing dates [typically a little less than two months prior to a semester block term date]. By establishing and working toward each semester block’s priority filing dates, we are better able to prioritize our internal activities in order to have a student’s financial aid processed in time so that they will not have to pay any money out of pocket and are not dropped from their courses for non-payment.” Students who want to start classes before their financial aid is processed can enroll in the college’s tuition payment plan, which will hold them in class until their financial aid award is prepared.

Like every RSC department, Financial Aid has a sophisticated automated web presence that guides students through what can be a complicated process. In August 2010, for instance, Chase and company [there are 18 full-time financial aid staff plus additional part-time staff and phone staff supporting the department] launched a special section online that they created called “Navigating Financial Aid @ Rio,” which essentially streamlined the financial aid
The number-one issue students face relates to having difficulties with academics. They may be struggling in their courses and there is some roadblock impairing their success. They may have math anxiety or test-taking anxiety. They could be sick and need an extension on their coursework.

Getting Students to Better Understand the Consequences of Their Borrowing Choices

The Financial Aid Department has also started to further develop a financial literacy program in which students are offered advice concerning the accumulation of loan debt, for instance. “We are striving to do more with increasing our students’ ability to develop their own financial capabilities, so we are focusing on helping them understand both the benefits and consequences of the choices they make when it comes to borrowing,” Chase explains.

For example, when a student fills out a Request for Additional Loan Funds form that goes to the Financial Aid Department, RSC staff will contact those students who miscalculate their unsubsidized and subsidized total loan amount and estimated repayment options. “We will crunch the numbers, and if a student is off, we will call that student and let them know what their real outstanding amount is, just so they have a clear understanding of their current standing,” Chase says. This kind of informative service is a step above the typical financial aid counseling services provided by many financial aid departments at other community colleges.

Counseling Services

Counseling is a highly important student support service offered by RSC. As noted on the Counseling Services homepage, RSC counselors “assist students to set personal, educational, and career goals. We provide high quality and accessible services to meet the needs of our diverse student population. Counseling Services at Rio Salado College are an integral part of the total educational process.”

Faculty Chair of Counseling Services Melanie Abts leads a team of 2 full-time and 4 part-time professionals who have a minimum of a master’s degree in counseling. Through email, telephone, live chat and in-person consultations, RSC counselors help students with a wide variety of issues that can range from academic struggles and career guidance to a personal crisis such as a death in the family, divorce, sudden unemployment, or physical and mental abuse.

The number-one issue students face relates to having difficulties with academics, Abts says. “They may be struggling in their courses and there is some roadblock impairing their success. They may have math anxiety or test-taking anxiety. They could be sick and need an extension on their coursework.”

Second on the list of issues that RSC counselors assist students with is related to crisis management. “Sometimes we deal with students who are facing the possibility of being evicted from their apartment or losing their home,” Abts says. “With the economy the way it is, a lot of people are unemployed. Some students have children, and they are trying to do too much.”

Career Counseling

Director of Career Services and Counselor Jacque Beale interacts with unemployed and job-seeking students on many levels, by providing advice, support and services related to career resources, career strategies and career-
related personal issues and challenges. In addition to providing career assessment interpretation services, through the administration of the popular Strong Interest Inventory and Myers Briggs Assessments, Beale talks with students about “job search strategies, resume writing and interview skills,” she explains. “We show students how to navigate the employment market and to look at the Occupational Outlook Handbook and O’Net-Occupational Information. We talk about putting their resume online and how to identify and add skills to their resumes.” She also conducts mock interviews with students by phone or in person.

Beale also works in the community to give education and career presentations at local domestic violence shelters. “I demonstrate how they [shelter residents] can obtain information online and see various options for potential careers,” Beale says. “Sometimes these people are nervous because of their personal challenges. Online learning provides them confidentiality and privacy necessary to make the impossible possible. It also gives them confidence to step outside themselves and do something better.”

**Numerous Online Services Related to Job Prep, Stress Management and Overall Academic Success**

In addition to the one-on-one career counseling provided by Beale and other counselors through the RSC Counseling and Career Services Department, RSC students can take advantage of a fairly extensive amount of online resources through an Online Career and Job Preparation Center and through credit-bearing College and Career Success Classes that cover such topics as creative job hunting and strategies for college success. Students can also take advantage of online resources related to study skills, as well as view and listen to an online Stress Management Workshop created in Adobe Presenter.

A relatively new Math Success Award has shown some positive results. In-state students who enroll in a Strategies for College Success course along with an Introductory Algebra course get the strategies course and its mandatory textbook for free. If they earn a “B” or better in both courses, the next Math 100 level course they enroll in is also made available to them for free. During a 2011 summer pilot of this award program, nine students registered and passed both courses and went on to the next level of math in the fall without having to pay the tuition. The program is currently being made available to the first 100 interested students.

**Getting the Word Out About Career and Counseling Services**

One of the challenges that Counseling Services deals with is getting the word out across the college about all of the services they provide. “Some people don’t realize that these services are available to them,” Beale reports. “A lot has to do with promoting our services and being more visible to students,” Abts says. In addition to making their services aware to RSC students through social media websites, Counseling Services frequently posts announcements to students and faculty via the college’s RioLearn LMS. “We also try to educate all of our adjuncts,” Abts says. “It is really important for us to have relationships with our adjunct faculty. We have been in the adjunct faculty newsletter. We have an adjunct faculty counseling referral guide for them to use. The department chairs educate them in faculty meetings about our counseling services.”
Outreach Services

Two important areas that are related to counseling because they contribute to providing greater access as well as enhancing retention rates are the Outreach Center and Rio Lounge.

The Outreach Center was formed in 2008 and is housed within the Institutional Advancement Department, which is part of the Student Affairs Division. The Outreach Center is responsible for both recruiting and retaining students. It helps with recruitment efforts by participating in community events and career and education fairs, and by disseminating strategic information both internally and externally about RSC’s programs and services.

Additionally, the Outreach Center staff proactively communicates with current and prospective students by telephone and email and utilizes RSC’s customer relationship management (CRM) system to keep track of and advance student progress. For example, when prospective student inquiries are generated through the RSC website, these student leads are automatically downloaded into the CRM system and then called by an Outreach Center agent. In regard to currently enrolled students, the Outreach Center contacts students who are struggling academically, providing advice and support about enrolling in an RSC one-credit CPD115 Creating College Success course, for example, which helps students establish “methods for selecting and developing effective academic strategies, increasing self-awareness and developing self-management strategies.”

Providing Help to a Student Body from Different Institutions

Brock explains how roughly half of RSC’s online learners are enrolled in degree programs at other institutions, mostly in the Maricopa Community College system or from Arizona State University, Northern Arizona University and other regional campuses. These so-called “supplemental learners” are students who typically enroll in one or a few classes at RSC. The other half of online learners is comprised of RSC degree-seeking students who take 80 percent or more of their entire program of study online at RSC.

“Students [from outside of RSC] come to us because of our flexibility and to supplement the courses they need to take in order to complete their degrees,” Brock says. “We make sure that first and foremost they have access to the courses and all the resources they need. And this really applies to any student—supplemental from another institution or entirely online at RSC—enrolled in a course or courses. We use our CRM solution and the data we have in our Student Information System (SIS) to become more sophisticated at personalizing communications with all of our online learners.”

For FY 2010-11, the Outreach Center processed 64,782 phone calls, with 44,694 being outbound calls, and attended 55 recruitment events.

Student-to-Student Collaborations and Communications through RioLounge

RioLounge was formed in 2006. This exclusive online community/virtual student union for RSC students was designed to offer online learners similar social interactions they might have at a traditional campus. RioLounge gives students the opportunity to form study groups, engage in discussions about course work, partake in informal chats, share photos and similar interests, buy
and sell items, and basically share both their personal and academic lives with each other in a safe, online, social-media environment.

As of fall 2011, over 24,500 students had registered in RioLounge. Data collected in FY 2009-10 to measure the impact of RioLounge participation on online student success showed that RioLounge students had an initial attrition rate of 34.07%, as compared with the initial attrition rate of non-RioLounge students (44.34%). Also, RioLounge students had a higher overall retention rate (89.10%), compared with the retention rate of non-RioLounge students (85.18%).

**Library Services**

Library Services is another element of student support that is obviously extremely important. Hazel Davis is Faculty Chair of Library Services. She says, rhetorically, that RSC’s Library Services have grown “around one thousand percent” over the 15 years she has been employed at the college, creating a robust set of resources and services that have been fully integrated into RSC’s online education system.

For example, an instructional coordinator – one of nine employees in the Library Services Department – is responsible for providing links to valid and authoritative online educational resources within many of RSC’s online courses, “so students do not have to come to the library to find a given article, because it is already embedded in their course,” Davis says. “It is all about getting resources to them where they are, and we always try very hard to make our interfaces as intuitive as possible.”

**Promoting and Assessing Information Literacy**

A good example can be found in the “How Do I..? Video Series” where students can easily access straight-to-the-point streaming videos [created by RSC Library Services professionals with Camtasia Studio software] showing how to find articles, eBooks, databases, the library catalogue, EBSCO, and more online. “One of the good things about these videos is that we can edit them on the fly because the electronic environment is always changing,” Davis notes. A Research Help section is another online Library Service resource.

Related to the theme of the How Do I..? Videos and Research Help sections, and one example of a four-pronged “College-wide Student Learning Outcomes Assessment” initiative [in critical thinking, information literacy, reading and writing], is a Library Services effort to improve the information literacy skills of RSC students. Two elements of that effort are the Information Literacy in the Electronic Age and Information Literacy Resources web pages.

Additionally, every other year RSC students are assessed on their information literacy skills. Last year, Davis explains that Library Services embedded an assessment instrument called the Research Readiness Self Assessment (RRSA) inside a random set of online courses. RRSA is an interactive online tool developed by Central Michigan University that measures how good students are at obtaining, evaluating and applying information. It also measures how good students think they are in relation to their information literacy capabilities and skill levels.

“We found that there was a gap of about six to ten percentage points between how good they thought they were at conducting effective online research and how good they really were,” Davis says. “So, we are doing some interventions across the board.” One of those interventions includes using more specific language in
online course syllabi to clearly identify online library links to valid and authoritative resources and proprietary subject databases that students will be required to access and cite in specific homework assignments.

Additional Library Services and Future Plans
Another student support service provided by Library Services includes an Online Writing Lab that is offered in collaboration with the English Department and aligns with a writing rubric that is tied to the College-wide Student Learning Outcomes Assessment for writing competencies. There’s also a 24/7 Ask a Librarian chat service and a relatively new Txt a Librarian service.

Overall, in FY 2010-11, the Library Services website had over 463,000 page views [fifth most-visited of the RSC website]. RSC students engaged in 1,590 Ask a Librarian chats, as well as 235 text interactions during the first eight months of the Txt a Librarian pilot. Davis adds that more mobile services are slated for the future. “As technologies come out each year, we try to keep track of them, but what we will basically continue to do is not separate the library from the rest of the college. We are very integrated with a bunch of processes and departments, so students can get the content they need when and where they need it.”

Tutoring
Tutoring can obviously be considered another “when-and-where-you-need-it” student support service. Dina Geiman is the Tutoring Services Coordinator for RSC. In addition to getting tutoring services in an online modality [through third-party provider Smarthinking], RSC students can obtain one-on-one face-to-face help through RSC’s Tutoring Center, where 23 tutors are stationed. Eighty-eight percent of RSC tutors have graduate degrees and three have doctorates. This team provides tutoring in 19 subjects.

“People who come to the Center for tutoring are those who, in addition to learning in their online courses, feel that they learn better with someone in person,” Geiman says. “About 90 percent come here because they need support that supplements their online courses.”

Algebra is the most popular subject students get tutored on, with most other math subjects following close behind. Students also frequently take advantage of a “Writing for All Subjects” service where tutors provide ideas, suggestions, and advice for improvements in structure, organization, grammar, and punctuation, but they do not proofread students’ essays and papers.

In FY 2010-2011, both in-person and online tutoring services combined assisted 2,297 students in 11,748 sessions lasting 12,536 hours. “We do provide a valuable service,” Geiman explains. “We are very customer oriented. When we hear about what students may need, we try to accommodate them. We are proud of the job we do, and we are very committed to relentless improvement.”

Testing Services
Providing Testing Services is another important area of student support. In addition to housing six testing centers located throughout Maricopa County, RSC’s Testing Services Department
houses the Academic Integrity Team, which monitors plagiarism-detection reports and provides support and research related to potential academic misconduct.

Online learners who live in Maricopa County are sometimes required to take mid-term and final exams through the local testing centers. For online learners who live outside of Arizona, Testing Services helps with arranging test locations and proctoring near or in the student’s hometown.

Director of Testing Services Linda Lukey explains that Testing Services “extends beyond our local testing centers where we offer walk-in testing, placement testing, prior learning evaluation and assessment and proctoring services for the community. Testing Services also collaborates with our distance students to coordinate their proctored exams out of state.”

Testing Services staff members are available six days a week with extended hours [until 9 pm on Monday through Thursday and also open on Saturdays]. “We work with our students to ensure that they feel connected and supported throughout their Rio experience,” Lukey adds.

In FY 2010-2011, Testing Services administered 78,010 exams.

**Disability Services**

Disability Services is another very important student support service. As noted on its website, RSC “provides information, resources, and services which promote a successful learning experience for students with disabilities. Depending upon the disability and the resources Rio Salado has available, students with documented disabilities may receive accommodations that include, but are not limited to, sign language interpreters, text in alternative format, readers/scribes, and extended test taking time.”

RSC provides appropriate accommodations in strict conformance with the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). The office tracks all student information [disability needs, accommodations, correspondence, interaction with faculty/staff, etc.] in a database that allows staff to run reports to review how many students are registered with specific disabilities.

“Each student’s needs are evaluated on an individual basis, and reasonable accommodations are provided within an appropriate timeframe,” says Therese Ferra, Manager, Disability Services. “We strive to consistently maintain a supportive environment for our students.”

Disability Services currently services approximately 500 disability-registered students.

**Instructional Helpdesk**

One would think that all the student support services described thus far have pretty much covered everything that’s possible, until you learn about the helpdesks, one being the Instructional Helpdesk and the other being the Technology Helpdesk. Associate Dean of Instruction and Support Earnestine Harrison manages the Instructional Helpdesk, which is comprised of a Coordinator of Instructional Services and six to eight part-time, experienced RSC adjunct faculty members. This team basically assists students with understanding college policies and procedures, as well as helping them work through any course-related issues that may arise during their online experiences. The team also manages the training of all adjunct faculty members, which is accomplished in collaboration with RSC’s 23 Faculty Chairs.

**Handling Student Inquiries**

Instructional Helpdesk services are provided to
students on a 24/7 basis, with the assistance of Perceptis, a third-party provider of strategic support solutions for education institutions. Perceptis, which also works with the Technology Helpdesk and Financial Aid, handles student inquiries by phone, email and live chat outside of RSC’s helpdesk normal business hours, which are 8 a.m. to 8 p.m. Monday through Thursday and 8 am to 5 p.m. on Fridays and Saturdays.

“Sometimes students will call us and we will redirect them to another department,” Harrison says. “Sometimes they call when they are trying to drop out of a course, or when they don’t understand a concept or a lesson. We have access to all of the course materials, so we can go in and look and sometimes do a mini tutoring session with them, although we are not tutors. Also, if a student needs to get in touch with an instructor, or they don’t know how to do that, they will contact us and, on behalf of the student, we will contact the instructor.”

Technology Helpdesk
The Technology Helpdesk Department is a fairly straight-forward department that provides services aimed at helping students and RSC staff solve any technological barriers that may come up while they are working online. It is managed by Director of College Technology Melvyn Price, who oversees eight helpdesk and client-support analysts. People can call in, email or live chat with analysts 24/7. During FY 2010-11, there were 17,116 Technology Helpdesk requests generated by chats and emails and another 36,098 generated via the phone.

Price explains that requests for help are really “all over the map,” ranging from disabling pop-up blockers, getting log-in assistance, and troubleshooting broken links, to providing advice on how to download, attach and open files and access online course materials in RioLearn, and much more. With permission, helpdesk analysts can share a student’s desktop, allowing an analyst to make recommendations for getting a student’s necessary online access up and running smoothly.

“I would say 95 percent of the calls we receive are resolved on the first call,” Price says. “There are exceptions when someone may have to be transferred to another department and we use a helpdesk ticketing system for that. It is certainly an important part of the services we provide.”

Computer Labs and Bookstore Services
The bookstore and computer lab services round out the mix of RSC student support services. Both are highly important in the grand scheme of ensuring that students are satisfied. Computer labs are located throughout the Phoenix area, enabling students who do not have adequate Internet access or computers in their homes to enter their online courses at no cost six days a week. Labs are staffed by experienced technicians who support students in numerous ways on a daily basis.

The RSC bookstore is managed by Follett Higher Education Group, which provides the full-range of bookstore services to students, including a “Cash for Books” program with buyback information provided online, as well as a textbook rental service that gives students the option of renting new or used textbooks for an academic term rather than purchasing them.
Other Areas of the College Related to Student Support Services and Student Satisfaction

Most of what’s remaining in this report touches on areas of the college that have a strong effect on student services and levels of student satisfaction, but are not specifically classified as student support services.

Training Faculty

Training RSC’s adjunct faculty, for instance, is not a student support service, per se, but it does definitely contribute to overall student satisfaction rates in the long run. How the Instructional Helpdesk Department trains RSC’s newly assigned adjunct faculty members was also addressed in the Lumina Foundation Focus magazine article:

Rio Salado officials insist that the school doesn’t simply send adjuncts to the front lines of learning with little more than a textbook for guidance and a slap on the back for luck. Rather, the full-timers see their mission as preparing the adjuncts for the tasks that lie ahead. And they do so assiduously, passing along tips and advice on how to keep the material fresh and engaging for students . . . The dividend for its advance work with Rio Salado’s core instructional staff is consistency. At last count 80 percent of the college’s adjuncts have been teaching for five years or more.8
**Hiring, Orientation, and Mentoring**

Prospective adjunct faculty members are first meticulously prescreened by RSC’s Faculty Services Department and then scheduled for interviews with the appropriate Faculty Chairs. Once online faculty members are hired, they do not teach a course until they go through a variety of orientation and mentoring processes.

“We make sure that someone is truly prepared for teaching online before they have students in a course,” says Faculty Chair, Languages, Angela Felix. “The orientation is patterned after what an instructor will do when they actually have students, and they will role-play both sides – faculty and student. They go through the whole student experience and then, as a faculty member, they will go through the process of grading assignments, for example, all the while getting ongoing support from an assigned Instructional Helpdesk mentor.”

Each academic department does their orientations and mentoring in different ways. For language courses, Felix says that she will include a facsimile or an assignment prepared by a seasoned adjunct in a given language that includes a typically used grading rubric.

Overall, the orientation consists of an introduction to RSC’s history and culture, along with providing new adjunct faculty hires with information about lesson content and objectives. There are also practice activities on how to facilitate content integration and retention strategies, on how to assess student learning, and how to encourage student reflection and help them prepare for future lessons. Additionally, new adjuncts must learn how to navigate around the RioLearn LMS and are required to review and understand effective teaching and communication practices.

As new adjuncts start teaching, usually beginning with one online course comprised of about 10 students, the mentoring process continues, and they are continuously tracked and evaluated by the Faculty Chair over the first semester. “We have the ability to go into our adjunct faculty members’ courses and make sure that everything they post is appropriate and that turn-around times are within departmental guidelines,” Felix says, adding that she will also check on their grading capabilities, that they are communicating effectively with students, and basically following all departmental policies and procedures.

The tracking and checking, however, does not end there. Adjuncts are evaluated by RSC Faculty Chairs and Instructional Helpdesk personnel, according to Maricopa County Community College District (MCCCD) requirements, once during each of the first three semesters they are employed, excluding the summer. This evaluation includes a student evaluation.

**A Comprehensive Support System for Adjuncts**

In addition, to promote and sustain professional development for adjuncts, RSC holds workshops geared toward improving instructor effectiveness as well as to provide a review of the college’s student learning outcomes. The workshops are held online through RioLearn. In-person meetings are also held twice a year: an “All Faculty Learning Experience” in the spring and an “All Faculty Assessment and Learning Experience” in the fall. Department meetings are held following these events. Some departments hold a variety of mini-conferences. Additionally, there is a comprehensive online community portal with valuable information made available to all adjuncts, including a quarterly newsletter and much more. Selected
adjuncts meet at least twice each year for “Faculty Forums,” where strategies for improving teaching, learning and communicating at all levels are discussed and analyzed. There’s also an adjunct faculty recognition program that awards 30 to 35 outstanding adjunct faculty members on an annual basis.

**Instructional Design and Instructional Technology & Support**

Two interrelated departments that contribute behind the scenes to overall student satisfaction and success through the so-to-speak back-end infrastructure of RSC’s teaching and learning online environments are the Instructional Design Department and the Instructional Technology & Support Department.

Associate Dean, Instructional Design, Michael Cottam manages 16 full-time regular professional employees; a team of five part-time editors; and draws from 40 to 50 subject-matter experts, mostly from the RSC adjunct faculty ranks, who are under contract under any given moment to help with the development of new course content and design. The full-timers include a team of instructional designers with a director, an editing team with a coordinator, a graphic design team with a coordinator, and an audio-visual specialist.

Faculty Chairs, for instance, will come to Cottam when they want to either create a new online course or redevelop a current online course. “We take care of the process from beginning to end,” he says.

**More Streaming Means Less Mailing**

Overall, Cottam explains how instructional design has changed in his 11 years at RSC. “The core of a well-structured lesson or educational experience pretty much remains the same,” he says, “but the technologies and capabilities – not only for our staff but also for students and their machines – have changed. For example, we used to snail-mail a lot of CDs and DVDs out to students. Now we stream all of our video and audio as much as possible.”

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**Students really appreciate it when you point them to valuable resources that they may not have found on their own. By incorporating open resources into the structure of our credit courses, we enrich them.**

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**Incorporating More OER**

In addition, Cottam and his team are increasingly adding a growing amount of Open Education Resources (OER) into RSC courses, as noted in a *Campus Technology* article:

As you are developing an online course for your institution, there’s a wealth of material already online under Creative Common licensing that you can access, link to, share, and incorporate into your class. And by leveraging what people have already done, you can offset some of the effort and certain costs of developing your class.9

“Students really appreciate it when you point them to valuable resources that they may not have found on their own,” Cottam says in relation to the increasingly rich variety of OER that are freely available online. “By incorporating open resources into the structure of our credit courses, we enrich them.”

**Putting Content and Administrative Functions Into RioLearn**

In addition to all the work coming out of the Instructional Design Department, an Instructional Technology & Support Department is an integral part of the overall enrichment of online courses. Dean of Instructional Technology & Support Dana Reid manages about 34 employees, 23 of whom comprise the course production technicians team and 11 of whom comprise a course support team. She explains how these two teams, which she jokingly refers to as “The Geek Squad,” are responsible for helping to build out and test the RioLearn LMS; publish the content that goes into RioLearn across campus; and answer questions from and provide support to Faculty Chairs, Course Developers, and Instructional Designers.
The Information Services Department

It can be said that the Information Services (IS) Department, which in most other institutions would more than likely be called the Information Technology Department, is the machine behind everything that happens at RSC. However, as Vice President of Information Services Edward Kelty says, “if we are doing our job really well, no one knows that we exist because everything just works.”

IS has more than 45 employees, which is four times more than in the 1990s. It is comprised of four primary groups: Technical Support, Programming, Networking, and Project Management.

The Technical Support team includes the Technology Helpdesk Department, which in addition to providing user support to students and staff, works on audio and video production, shooting videos and creating the video streams that are published on the RSC website and inside courses. They are also in charge of computer maintenance and software installation for all RSC employees, and they manage the college’s web conferencing bridge.

The Programming team develops all of the online applications that automate most aspects of RSC, including RioLearn, which is in the process of moving to Version 8. They also maintain the Electronic Student Filing System (ESF) and the Faculty Information System (FIS), which consolidates faculty training, evaluation, feedback, etc. Programming is the driving force for automating everything done electronically at RSC, and much more. “I can go on forever about programming,” Kelty says.

The Networking team “keeps up all the servers, security and infrastructure for the entire college – all the Internet connections coming in and the security systems for protecting us from hackers,” Kelty explains. The team is also responsible for testing and evaluating any new applications that are adopted throughout the college. “They keep things up and running,” Kelty says. “Our up-time is phenomenal – probably less than 10 hours downtime in the last five years.” In collaboration with the Programming team, Networking monitors server performance and helps to maintain and ensure optimal performance of the virtualization software that runs on the server side of the house. “Because it is all virtualized, we can add more resources on demand if necessary,” Kelty says. “It is a very streamlined process.”

The Project Management team manages all the projects that are under the domain of IS. For example, they listen to all new application and other initiative requests that come from end users, analyze their worthiness, define them, and then pass them on to the Programming team. “We make sure that the stakeholders, the sponsors, the Vice Presidents, the Faculty Chairs, whoever might be involved in the development process, all agree,” Kelty says. “We look at how it aligns with the college’s vision and mission and if it is ultimately helping students. Then we define when the resources will become available and move forward from there.”
Alert Systems Give Faculty the Means to Intervene
Building out RioLearn includes creating and managing important administrative functions that alert online course instructors as well as Faculty Chairs about students. “For example, on a course-by-course basis, we can tell the system to let adjunct faculty know when a student has been inactive. We can really get down to a granular detail within the course to alert faculty so that they can provide some intervention for the student,” Reid says. This, in turn, “really impacts student learning and retention.”

Accelerated Option Makes a Difference
A growing-in-popularity student support service that the Technology & Support Department has helped to build out and maintain is a new [about one-year old] functionality inside the RioLearn LMS that offers online students the option of registering for an accelerated 8-week calendar during the first week of an online course that was originally scheduled to be 14-weeks in length.

Enterprising students who may want to speed up a path toward course completion can select an 8-week calendar when they enter the course via RioLearn that will automatically change all of the due dates and keep them in the same section, only accelerated. Reid says this service has turned out to be “terrific and utilized by our students frequently.”

Rio PACE
Another technological area of the college that is gaining in recognition and is not exactly a student support service, per se, but can easily be correlated to student success is RSC’s Rio PACE (Progress and Course Engagement) initiative. Rio PACE is about data mining and the crunching of RSC learning system data into a “predictive analytics” model. Here’s a definition of the term predictive analytics from a report published in 2007 by The Data Warehousing Institute (TDWI):

Predictive analytics is a set of business intelligence technologies that uncovers relationships and patterns within large volumes of data that can be used to predict behavior and events. Unlike other BI technologies, predictive analytics is forward-looking, using past events to anticipate the future.

TDWI defines business intelligence as the tools, technologies and processes required to turn data into information and information into knowledge and plans that optimize actions. In short, business intelligence makes the business run more intelligently.

Rio PACE is a homegrown effort that started to develop back in 2008. It tracks student behaviors – such as logins, course engagement, and how well they are keeping up with assignments – and determines, by the eighth day of class, which students are more than likely to complete a course with a minimum grade of C.

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Rio PACE has been getting covered by the education media and looks to be gaining recognition as a national leader in an emerging field of higher education, especially at the community college level. As noted in another Campus Technology piece, Cottam was quoted about how PACE reporting works:

The reports we generate show green, yellow and red flags – yes, like a traffic light – so that instructors can easily see who is at risk. We can predict, after the first week of a course, with 70 percent accuracy, whether any given student will complete a course.
A Systems Approach: Expanding Access and Achieving Student Success through Support Services at Rio Salado College

That’s our eighth day at risk model. A second model includes weekly updates using similar predictive factors.\(^\text{13}\)

RSC is one of six institutions participating in a WCET/Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation funded initiative called the Predictive Analytics Reporting (PAR) Framework “to identify variables that influence student retention and progression and to determine the impact of various demographic data on factors influencing loss and momentum. The data will be used to explore patterns that emerge when the datasets from considerably different institutions are analyzed as a single, unified sample.” \(^\text{14}\)

For more detailed information about PACE, including segments on roles for successful predictive modeling and tips for starting a predictive analytics project, view and listen to an EDUCAUSE Learning Initiative web seminar from the fall of last year, titled “Bootstrapping Your Analytics.” \(^\text{15}\)

**Moving Closer to the Completion Agenda**

Rio PACE is one part of a more focused overall effort by RSC to increase degree completion rates. The college does have a 68 percent course completion rate [grade C or better], which is approximately 18 percent higher than the national average. It also has the highest public, two-year college graduation rate [in 3 years] in the State of Arizona, at 48 percent.\(^\text{16}\)

At the same time, like most community colleges in the country, RSC is very strongly aligned with the often repeated White House goal to dramatically increase college degree and certificate completion rates by 2020.

Brock explains that “in recent years our focus has really been shifting to degree completion. A lot of our focus right now is on what changes we need to make to our services and programs, and how can we personalize interventions to help students succeed.”

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Faculty Chair for Allied Health Angela Ambrosia, who is an active 72 years young and worked on the initial development of RioLearn and is currently a “Tri-chair” working on the development of the latest Version 8, talks proudly about how the overall RSC culture stresses personalized student service. “We have found that we cannot leave a student in isolation,” she says. “We are very personalized with our students. We call them by their first name, and we have a general concern about their well-being. We know they are busy, torn between family, their work, their personal life, and school. We are very flexible with them. But it is not only the people here who help make student success, it is also the processes that we have in place.”
Branching Out Through Incremental Growth
President Bustamante uses the term “new frontier college” when he talks about the future of RSC. “We are a mature organization and have really perfected our delivery model,” he says. “We have the ability to branch out into other areas that are very interesting.”

Plenty of branching out is already taking place, and all of it falls under an incremental growth philosophy. “In order to do anything responsibly, we have to do it incrementally and retain our quality,” Bustamante explains.

Spreading Wider Online Access
“We can help institutions regionally as well as throughout the country provide online education by offering them our 600-plus online courses that we have already developed,” Bustamante says. Through a relatively straightforward business model, RSC is starting to strategize how to partner with other community colleges to enable them to offer online degree programs that would include everything: RSC courses, RSC adjunct faculty, the year-round Monday start dates, and all the surrounding student support services.

An early phase of this business strategy is the new RSC/New York Times Knowledge Network partnership [announced in May of 2011] that currently hosts an online Post-Baccalaureate Teacher Education Program.17 “We are identifying needs to serve students in a variety of different pathways,” Bustamante says, adding that “we can customize programs to meet the needs of the local and national economy, and we can build everything within our system. We have instructional designers, support people, our systems approach, and the one-course-many-sections model. We operate very efficiently.”

RSC’s overall online education system efficiencies continue to also branch out within the areas of K-12, basic education for adults, and workforce development. “We are really working hard to bridge more technology into all of our in-person formats that we have had for years, such as our business and industry partners, our early college programs, and our adult basic education programs,” Bustamante says. “We have a huge adult basic education program.” Additionally, RSC is the largest dual enrollment provider in Arizona, educating more than 6,000 students in 44 high schools. “We have been getting inquiries from the K-12 community, especially regionally, about how we can help them come of age online, because the state, like many states across the country, has not invested in that kind of infrastructure,” Bustamante says. “So this is just another way for Rio Salado College to lend its expertise.” In the workforce development arena, RSC was recently awarded five educational grants totaling more than $3 million, including one grant in which RSC will provide logistical support for a seven-college consortium. The support includes hosting course content, creating an open source platform, and training subject-matter experts and course developers.18,19

The Affordability Agenda
Finally, Bustamante also likes to point out that RSC is affordable. RSC’s cost per credit hour is $76 for students who are in-county residents and $215 for out-of-state residents enrolled in online courses. “We are a public community college,” Bustamante says. “We have a public mission and purpose, and we are very affordably priced. One of my big priorities is that through all these pathways and partnerships we can remain focused on the whole affordability agenda,” which obviously contributes in a positive way to the whole completion agenda.
Endnotes:


3. Ibid.


7. Ibid.


Interviewees:
The SOURCE would like to thank the following RSC employees who took out the time to be interviewed for the production of this report:

Melanie Abts, Faculty Chair of Counseling Services
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Earnestine Harrison, Associate Dean of Instruction and Support
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Ruby Miller, Associate Dean of Student Services
Melvyn Price, Director of College Technology
Dana Reid, Dean of Instructional Technology & Support
Linda Thor, former RSC President, currently Chancellor, Foothill-DeAnza Community College District
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