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Steve Mullen:

Welcome to season two of Inside Virginia's Community Colleges, a podcast that gives you a behind the scenes look at Virginia community college higher education and the initiatives that are helping individuals reach their goals. I'm your host, Steve Mullen. In this season of Inside Virginia's Community Colleges, we're going to investigate how COVID-19 has impacted students and higher education institutions in Virginia. Over the next six episodes, we'll talk to administrators, advisors, and students about the changes they've made in response to the pandemic and how Virginia's Community Colleges can help Virginians recover as we hit the one year mark in the pandemic.

Steve Mullen:

In March 2020, Virginia began to get an idea of just how serious this pandemic was becoming. Large portions of the country were shutting down or dramatically changing and higher education institutions like Virginia's Community Colleges were no exception. Our first guest for this episode was at ground zero of the upheaval that resulted from this pandemic. He's the chancellor of Virginia's Community Colleges, Dr. Glenn Dubois. Chancellor Dubois, thank you so much for taking the time from your busy schedule to be with us today.

Glenn Dubois:

Well, it's good to be with you, Steve.

Steve Mullen:

So let's go back to the beginning. I was actually at a planning meeting for season one of this podcast at VCCS headquarters in mid March of 2020. And on that very day colleges around the state started shutting down due to COVID-19. Can you talk us through those early days? How chaotic was it?

Glenn Dubois:

Well, it was, it was very chaotic. I mean, we were going to shut down, but then what were, we do then we had to make some decisions really- really quick. One of course was pushing every, all of our students into, you know, remote learning. Uh, now on the teaching side of our business, we were prepared to do that. We've been, most of our faculty have been teaching online, you know, in their career and as a sector.

Glenn Dubois:

Well, we've been at the online business for- for 25 years. So we made that decision quickly, and then we quickly had to make a decision about upcoming kind of obligations like commencement, for example, and then the issue of grading, once we push students into online, uh, you know, we had to make a decision, well, was it fair to hold students who individual, you know, letter grades or put everybody into a pass fail.

Glenn Dubois:

It was very chaotic, but I think we stepped up, we made the decisions quickly that we had to. That was what was interesting is I think looking back during those times, we kind of thought we were caught up in a blizzard and like, you know, like any blizzard that, you know, they stop at some point, right? You know, in our case, you know, this is a kind of a, it's a bad blizzard, we've never seen anything like it, but will go away in weeks, maybe in months. And that certainly as time drifted on, I started to realize this- this was no blizzard.

Glenn Dubois:

This was going to be, you know, kind of potentially a mini ice stage. So my thinking started to evolve much fur- further than just, you know, the summer. And we are still dealing with this pandemic with the light of, you know, this vaccine light at the end of the- the tunnel there. But they were certainly chaotic times. And, you know, looking back, we- we learned a lot.

Steve Mullen:

And once you got through the spring of 2020, which as you said, was extremely chaotic for everyone, how were Virginia's Community Colleges able to meet the challenges of COVID-19 going into the summer and then- then the fall?

Glenn Dubois:

Well, to our surprise, our summer enrollment increased noticeably. I didn't predict that that would happen, but it- it certainly did. We were completely- completely online, about this time, we start to notice that there's a major fault line in our country over technology. So for example, our low income students did not have access to the broadband that they, that they really needed to be an online learner. And today, you know, with all the video streaming and Zooming, you need to have broadband access. You just can't do, you can't learn, you can't connect to the internet through dial up or through some kind of technology that's interrupted all the time.

Glenn Dubois:

So it became very evident that many of our students did not have really reliable access to- to broadband. So we started to do what we could in those days to, for example, we- we lit up most of our parking lots. So if you can get to our parking lot in a car, well, not [inaudible 00:04:54] a laptop, you had, you had access and we still are struggling with this broadband, uh, you know, issue. And I think, I think it's kind of shown me that we're at the point where broadband is really has to be seen as a utility, like in the 40s and the 50s where electricity was seen as something that was necessary in every household, but, you know, we're not there.

Steve Mullen:

And our hope is that things can start to revert back to normal, whatever that is right now in the 2021, '22 school year. What can you tell us about the early planning for the fall semester?

Glenn Dubois:

Well, our thinking is it's not going to be the normal as we knew it. We have just simply learned a lot. Uh, we- we learned that some of the things that we used to do, we shouldn't do anymore. Well, [inaudible 00:05:42] give you an example, prior to the pandemic if we needed students to do something with us, they have to come to campus. You know, whether it's to talk to a counselor or fill out a form or to enroll, they- they had to make a trip to a campus.

Glenn Dubois:

And what you learned since then, that many of those- those requirements can be done, you know, online or- or remotely, or even, you know, by the, by the phone. We have learned that we were even in this pandemic, we- we did very well in providing the services that we needed to provide to our colleges in a complete remote environment. So we learned that not all of our- our leaders, or our- our, uh, our staff need to come to a set place every day to do their job.

Glenn Dubois:

And I think that's gonna have an impact, um, the workplace in the future. And we actually now have a panel of some really smart people looking to what- what it's gonna look like for our staff post pandemic to fulfill their work requirements. And I don't believe it's going to require them to come to the office every day. Uh, they may be able to go through to sate, our satellite locations where we have 40 major locations around the, around the Commonwealth, or they can work from home, or- or in what instances do they have to come to, uh, the office to do their job?

Glenn Dubois:

So those are some of the things that we are thinking about as we prepare for kind of, let's say, a post pandemic, and then I think our business model with students has changed and it- it will not go back to the way it was pre pandemic, where we just have, we require students to come to a campus to do just about everything they needed to do with us. So that's, those are some of the kinds of interesting things we're pondering about the future.

Steve Mullen:

Final question, uh, obviously the pandemic brought a lot of hardship all over the world, but is there anything positive you can take away from this experience from the point of view of Virginia's Community Colleges?

Glenn Dubois:

Well, I, you know, it was a crisis that forced us to really take a look at our complete teaching and learning model and our business model. And that was probably long overdue. Uh, let me give you an example, for the longest time we have a policy that if you're going to enroll with us, the first thing you need to do is come to campus and take a math test. Well, mo, I- I don't know about you, but when I was young, math, I either hated it or I was afraid of it. And the (laughing) and the last thing I wanted to do the first time I came to a campus was to take a math test, but the pandemic made us stop that because we were no longer requiring students to come to campus and we're finding that we're directly placing students in courses without having to take these placement tests.

Glenn Dubois:

And students are, they're doing well, is if we can give them the corresponding help that they need along the way. So I think this pandemic was the certainly a crisis we're still in it, probably at the tail end of it, that has forced us to really examine how we do business, to really ex- ex- examine our relevancy. And I think it also has really opened up and shown the country the fault lines that we have in our society, not only technology, but access to good medical care. So it's, you know, there have been some benefits, um, quite frankly, I'm not sure I wanna go through it again, but we- we have certainly learned- learned a great deal from dealing with this crisis.

Steve Mullen:

We, as a communication person, I can tell you a math test is always the last thing I feel like doing.

Glenn Dubois:

Right. Right.

Steve Mullen:

Glenn Dubois, chancellor of Virginia's Community Colleges. Thank you so much for taking the time to be with us today.

Glenn Dubois:

All right, Steve. Stay safe out there. Bye now.

Steve Mullen:

Our next guest was also a key decision maker at the beginning of the pandemic and beyond. Dr. Sharon Morrissey is the senior vice chancellor for academics and workforce programs for Virginia's Community Colleges. Dr. Morrissey, welcome to the podcast.

Sharon Morrisey:

Uh, thank you so much. I'm delighted to be here today.

Steve Mullen:

So it's clear that Virginia's Community Colleges have had to pivot quite a bit over the last year like nearly every organization out there. How have the schools provided solutions for education during a global pandemic?

Sharon Morrisey:

That's a great question. Our colleges had to pivot really quickly last spring to transition all of our classes to online instruction after Governor Northam declared the state of emergency and closed colleges and universities. And even though the Virginia Community College system already offers a lot of online classes, not everything we offer is online. We do a lot of face-to-face instruction in the VCCS and particularly for our career technical education workforce type courses. So it really was a challenge.

Sharon Morrisey:

So I think that in- in, you know, just a matter of a few weeks, we actually transitioned about 10,000 courses online that were being taught face-to-face. So it was a big push. We did receive, you know, federal assistance from, uh, the CARES Act through the CARES Act. And I'm tremendously grateful for that because those funds gave our colleges the opportunity to provide financial assistance to low income students, which was very helpful to them at that time.

Sharon Morrisey:

But those funds also provided resources for the colleges to do things like- like PPE, develop safety protocols and so forth, but also to provide resources to faculty for professional development and curriculum redesign. So most of our colleges spent some of those funds during the summer helping faculty who had never taught online before learn the fundamentals about teaching online, you can't just take a face-to-face course and throw it into an online environment that doesn't work that way. So that was a great opportunity with- with the funding provided by the CARES Act so that we could then move into fall where most of our courses were online.

Steve Mullen:

Yeah. A lot of students who are taking classes for workforce development to help them get a better job are older than your typical college age. How have they handled the virtual learning environment that's happened over the last, you know, year or so?

Sharon Morrisey:

It's been a struggle. And I would say that that's been probably our biggest challenge. So the challenge is two fold. One is from the faculty members perspective is how to deliver hands-on instruction safely because we're talking about classes here where, you know, you've got programs in healthcare, manufacturing, construction trades, industrial trades, public safety, there are components of those classes that must be taught in a face-to-face hands-on setting in a laboratory.

Sharon Morrisey:

The other side of the coin is the challenges that working adults have had even when they're, uh, have lost their jobs, the struggles that they're have- having at home, because there are children in the home who are, who are learning online, parents, the adults have to monitor their children far more than they thought they were going to have to when this whole thing started, I think. So they don't have opportunity, um, as much opportunity to do their college work.

Sharon Morrisey:

Many of them have never taken an online class and it's foreign to them to think about, you know, all I wanted to do was be a welder and I don't, didn't realize I was gonna have to take online classes to learn how to be a welder, but I think our faculty have done a great job of trying to separate out the didactic instruction, put it online, and then have the students come to campus for their hands-on labs. Of course, that has to be done with great attention to safety protocols, it has to be done with smaller class sizes. So some of the faculty have- have actually had to double up and teach two sections so they can teach all- all of the students, um, where traditionally they would have had all of the students in one section.

Sharon Morrisey:

And I think one of the most significant things that we've done, uh, as a community college system in terms of helping adult learners access the programs that they need is we have broken down our workforce degree programs into stackable credentials. So what this means is this student who aspires to get a degree in a career technical education program doesn't have to finish the whole degree in order to get a job and go to work. We've put skills training first so the individual can earn a certificate or a certification, get a job, and then they can continue on- on the pathway towards completion of the degree, and the degree will lead them into a higher paying job.

Steve Mullen:

And finally, what's your biggest takeaway from this challenging year overall?

Sharon Morrisey:

So this, the pandemic completely turned our world upside down, but it also gave us, uh, what I would call or describe as a singular opportunity perhaps to examine our traditional policies and practices, rethink how we deliver our programs, how we align our programs to meet the needs of students and employers. Last spring when all of this was just- just starting to happen, you know, we, they've, I wanna remind- remind us that we- we originally thought that we were going to be closed for two weeks, right? So it's- it's just had a huge impact.

Sharon Morrisey:

Last spring the chancellor, um, appointed a task force and charged, uh, the task force to make recommendations for how the VCCS will emerge from the pandemic. I co-chaired this group. And as soon as we started meeting, we quickly realized that we would never go back to business as usual, but then another crisis also has emerged in addition to- to the pandemic, and that's- that's the crisis of systemic racism and social injustice, um, that has created barriers for so many black people in America.

Sharon Morrisey:

So after George Floyd was killed on March the 25th, the chancellor directed the task force that was working on what's our post pandemic world going to look like he said, "Now, I want you to also think about what a new equity focused Virginia Community College system would look like." And he- he charged us with developing a new strategic plan for the system that was based on, um, equity.

Sharon Morrisey:

So this task force spent six months, but we started in August and we spent six months looking at desegregated data, gathering input from stakeholders all across Virginia and developed a strategic plan that's aimed at achieving equity in student access, learning outcomes and success for all these VCCS students, regardless of race, ethnicity, gender, or socioeconomic status.

Sharon Morrisey:

This is a six-year plan. It has goals and strategies that are intended to address the impact of systemic racism on student achievement across our colleges. So our goal, our big goal was to close equity gaps and expand access to opportunity for all Virginians. So I guess that's my big takeaway, uh, is that this is a sea change moment for Virginia's Community Colleges. We have an opportunity to emerge from the pandemic with a more equity focused student-centered mindset. And I think it, I think it's possible. I think the- the system is ready for this, and I- I can tell you that in my 34 years in community colleges, this is the most important work that I have ever done.

Steve Mullen:

All right, Dr. Sharon Morrissey, senior vice chancellor for academics and workforce programs. Thanks so much for being here today.

Sharon Morrisey:

You're very welcome. Thank you.

Steve Mullen:

Thanks to both of our guests for this episode of season two of Inside Virginia's Community Colleges. Be sure to subscribe to this podcast on Apple Podcasts, Google Podcasts, and elsewhere, so you don't miss the next episode. Thanks for listening to Inside Virginia's Community Colleges. I'm Steve Mullen.