Speaker 1:

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Speaker 2:

Welcome to another episode of inside Virginia's community colleges on your host, Steve Mullen over the past several episodes of this podcast. We've talked about a lot of the changes that have happened at Virginia's community colleges and the rest of the world due to the COVID 19 pandemic. But how have the students fared during this unprecedented period in higher education? Our guests this week have some answers. Our first guest has a ground level view of students at Virginia's community colleges.

Speaker 1:

Hi, I'm Laura Clark and I have the privilege of serving as the assistant vice chancellor for student success and professional development at Virginia's community colleges.

Speaker 2:

Thank you very much for being here. Now, let me ask you my first question. How hard has it been for students to navigate this past year during all the COVID 19 restrictions?

Speaker 1:

It has been a shift for everybody. And I think in many cases, our students, sometimes they've had a really hard time with some of the adjustments that are necessary around technology. For example, internet connections across the state are not what we would like to hope. They'd be a lot of times the students are having to manage many pieces of family life and work life. In addition to their academic work. The other thing we have seen though, is many of our students have risen up and been able to be successful in ways that would have probably been unexpected. So I think it's been kind of a mixed bag.

Speaker 2:

Well, that's always the thing to remind people with community college students. They're not just 18 year, 19 year olds. There are older folks as well, going to these classes. Absolutely. And what piece of advice would you like to share with students who have struggled to navigate all the changes?

Speaker 1:

You know, I think the most important piece of advice is to always ask for help. I have the privilege of working with the coaches and advisors and navigators it all 23 of our institutions. And they are at the ready to help students. Anytime there is an issue and whether it's academic or non-academic in nature, many of our colleges are still providing support with things like a food bank with connections, to things like snap, 50, 50, and other benefits that are available. So our colleges have a lot of resources and a lot of people, sometimes people just need somebody to listen and to acknowledge that this is really hard on everybody and our colleges have the people available to help. But a lot of times people don't realize that they don't know that there's someone who's just a phone call or an email or a text away that's available. So if students would ask me what to do, always ask for the help that you need, if you're unsure of how to do something, there's someone there at the college that's, that's ready and willing to help you.

Speaker 2:

Or the problem obviously with, with navigating all this is that the community college system has had to change so many things in the way they do things. What do you think has been the most

Speaker 3:

Important change that the community college system has made to help students during the pandemic?

Speaker 1:

You know, one of the things I appreciate about working at community colleges is that students are always first here and helping students wherever they are. I mean, whatever the circumstances are, find success in their academic and career pursuits has always been so important. I think as we have moved into the pandemic and to all of the things that have come around it, I think the colleges moving things to online and doing that in a way that students can understand what's happening, providing those additional supports in remote ways. For example, the team that I lead, we do a lot with the coaches and advisors, as I've said, and working with them very closely to make sure that they are providing services and contact and connection for the students, right, where they are. I think those kinds of changes, we've looked at everything from, you know, grading policies to how classes are set up to, you know, what do we need to do to continue to provide the kinds of experiences remotely and through this distance learning and assistance education that a student would expect to get in a community college classroom, it's been impressive to work with our faculty as they have engaged in all kinds of professional development to enhance those classroom experiences, to make sure that all of the students feel a connection to make sure that the students know how to have that academic experience, whether they're working from home or working from their offices or those kinds of things.

Speaker 1:

So I think those kinds of changes that help us to address the students where they are in this remote environment. It has been a huge thing, but you know, Virginia's community colleges we've been involved in online education for a very long time. So I think this has just given us the opportunity to kind of up those skills and to better showcase what it is that we've been doing on a smaller scale for quite some time.

Speaker 3:

And the final question, you know, there's obviously been a lot of tragedy during this pandemic, but one thing that's a positive is it's allowed organizations like the community college system to take a look at how they do things and make some changes, which are the changes that have happened. Do you think might actually stick around?

Speaker 1:

You know, it's funny because I think there's a lot that we have learned in this process. It may stick around if you had told me two years ago that we would be doing the kinds of student supports that we do at a distance. If you had told me that our teams and our faculty and our student support services would be working from their homes, am I would have raised an eyebrow at you. But I think a lot of those things are going to continue. I expect that some of the things we're seeing in the hybrid classrooms, where students are working both online and in the classroom, I expect that's going to continue. The thing that I'm the most hopeful about is I do think that there has been a, a deeper understanding of how

all of us have been impacted, how students and how faculty and how staff, you know, we all have family or friends that have been impacted in this way.

Speaker 1:

We all have different struggles that we're facing. And I think that connection that we're experiencing just person to person, human, human in these difficult moments. My hope is that that's the piece that stays that we have continued to create a culture where compassion and understanding is, is kind of the pivotal piece so that people have the opportunity to build the life that they would like to build with community colleges, their first step in that, and that we're taking down any of those barriers that were there as a part of this process or policy or convenience. All of those things have been looked at very carefully. What's remaining are the things that we know help students be successful. And I am excited about what that means when we kind of open the world back up and as we take those understandings of one another and what it means to really be a community and how we piece all of that back together into what the world looks like after we're through this pandemic. And when everyone's safe to gather again, there's a lot of optimism and a lot of hope around that. And I'm looking forward to seeing where it takes us.

Speaker 2:

All right, Laura Clark, thank you so much for joining us today. Appreciate it. Thank you for having me. Our next guest works one-on-one with students on the workforce and current, we are trading side of higher education. Alyssa Holly is a fast-forward career coach for Virginia's community colleges. Alissa. Welcome to the podcast.

Speaker 1:

Thank you for having me now,

Speaker 2:

First off, tell us about fast-forward. What is it?

Speaker 1:

So how Chaz two main types of learning. When you think about college, you often think about programs for credit that lead to degrees. That would be the academic division of, of the college. But we also have a workforce division where we focused on short term hands-on training programs that lead to an industry recognized credential that we actually often call these best board programs training through these programs allows students to enter into in demand jobs that are in the job market with a specific skillset. That's often desired by employers, and they can actually finish these programs in a much shorter period of time. And it takes to earn a degree. So often the fast four programs have schedules as well, that cater to those who want or need to continue working while they're going to school programs are usually affordable with options for financial tuition assistance as well. So we call them fast forward because again, they're, they're usually quicker and they're short term and they're hands-on training. So they're actually really cool opportunities to gain skills necessary to get into the workforce.

Speaker 2:

And career training has been particularly difficult to say the least over the past year due to COVID-19 restrictions. Tell us about some of the changes made in the fast forward program.

Speaker 1:

Sure. So it certainly has with our training program being so hands-on, we were definitely presented with a challenge when COVID-19 hit, we've switched some training to be completely online to where students are using the canvas platform to view their materials for their class, as well as complete assignments. So it's kind of like their, all of their class has moved online. We've also utilized zoom, some virtual classes. So students are still able to interact with their instructor and their classmates as they would in the classroom setting. It's just over a camera. And that basically, and then of course, for some classes you just can't get around. Hands-on learning specifically those that require a lab such as well bottomy technician clinical medical assistant, and even some of our craft Bill's classes. So for these, we follow safety guidelines for each students required to wear a mask, keep a distance of six feet and sanitized, sanitized, sanitized to make sure everybody is safe. And we've also, as far as changes, we've also kind of turned into it, help a little bit with all of these changes, moving virtually, you know, students are working to navigate the new technology required for their courses. So they'll often have questions on, you know, how to do this or that, or access this or that. So I'd say that's a bit of a change as well. We've, we've kind of, I think added it to our list of, of what we can do to help our students.

Speaker 3:

So not only have the students been learning, you've been learning how to help the students.

Speaker 1:

Exactly, exactly. Which of course we had to learn ourselves as well, because this is also very new to all of us. So it's a learning process for everyone. Yeah.

Speaker 3:

What have you heard from students about the changes that have been made due to the pandemic and really, do you think any of those changes will stick around once we get back to normal?

Speaker 1:

Yes. So some students do struggle a bit with the online aspect of learning and some embrace it and actually prefer it. So there's definitely some more positive feedback, but also some feedback that says, you know what, this, this is really difficult. Actually. One of the big changes with our phlebotomy program is that students used to complete their clinical with a local health care facility, where they would have to team, you know, the required number of six to take their certification exam. But now many healthcare facilities are now not allowing visitors. So we've adapted by allowing our students to obtain their sticks, utilizing their classmates. Some are not excited about this change, knowing that they may be stuck themselves, but it was just one of those necessities of adjusting to changes so that we could still offer the program and allow students to earn that credential. So overall, as far as what might stick around, I think now that we've learned how to navigate fast forward programs and a mostly remote world where we are right now, we can now offer more opportunities to students to participate going forward, meaning we can keep the online offerings so that students who may not be able to fully commit to an in-person schedule can still take advantage of the opportunities that our fast-forward programs. I think this is a positive and will allow us to further address barriers. Students may face when deciding to pursue a program.

Speaker 2:

You mentioned some of the students prefer the online environment, the virtual learning. Do you think some of those students will continue doing it even in the fall? If things start to go, you know, more open.

Speaker 1:

Yes. So I think that virtual learning can definitely offer opportunity for students to, as I had mentioned, may face barriers to getting started with a program such as a lack of transportation, or even just limited transportation childcare issues, a changing work schedule and so on, you know, different things that they may face. So I think that while virtual learning may not be for everyone, some students prefer it and we'll continue to pursue their programs. Online. Many schools even have more resources than before to assist students with virtual learning, such as, you know, loaner laptop, wifi on campus, and then parking lots. So it makes the learning a little more accessible, which makes it easier to be able to take advantage and participate in online classes. So I think it's definitely something students will continue to participate in, especially now that I feel that it's more accessible to students where it may not have been fully accessible before, even if that may have been their preference.

Speaker 2:

And of course it should be noted. As we learned in the first season of this podcast, Virginia's community colleges have been doing remote learning for a long time, right? Fast-forward career coach, Alyssa, Holly, thanks so much for being here today. Really appreciate it.

Speaker 1:

Absolutely. Thanks so much for having me

Speaker 2:

As always. We thank our guests for this episode. And in our next episode, we will talk with the students themselves, as we hear two success stories of education in the age of COVID-19 make sure you subscribe to this podcast. So you don't miss it. Thanks for listening to inside Virginia's community colleges. I'm Steve Mullin.