

Key Stakeholder Feedback on PCCUA's ATE-DISC Program *~Year 1 Program Feedback~*

A Report To:



Phillips Community College of the University of Arkansas

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Introduction

Phillips Community College of the University of Arkansas (PCCUA) has completed its first year of the National Science Foundation ATE-supported project “The Delta Information Security and Cyber (DISC) Program.” Mullins Consulting, a research and evaluation firm external to PCCUA, has been contracted to conduct the overall program evaluation. This report summarizes the results of Key Stakeholder telephone interviews conducted in the Spring of 2020. More specifically, four key stakeholders participated in 30-minute interviews in order to obtain their feedback centered on developing and sustaining the program beyond its NSF funding. The four stakeholders were selected by project principal investigators and represent a range of program interests, including those who are deeply involved and those who experience the program tertiarily. This report presents the breadth and depth of interview results.

Positive Program Qualities

The interviews opened asking participants to describe highlights of this program. Participants each focused on differing aspects of program impact on its students – preparing them for the workforce, helping them to be attractive job applicants, and providing them with the skills and abilities needed to succeed.

- Access to Resources:
 - *“It lets us do something we would not ordinarily be able to do – access to software.... Here they have this idea, they have this need, and NSF helped them realize that need in a very real way that we have never had with a grant before.”*
 - *“I think we [PCCUA] were actually established as a testing center right after the grant. Students used to have to travel to take different kinds of tests... And that industry-recognized competencies that result in a standard that we might not normally have if we didn’t have the testing center here – it’s put a higher standard on what the expectation of what we have for our students.”*
- Opportunity for Students:
 - *“We had one of our students present at a national conference and we’ve since then hired that person. Those things [new resources] are really important to expand student opportunity but also faculty professional development.”*
 - *“The one thing I am interested in, and in fact I am hoping to benefit from this Fall, I want to take the certification testing.... It does say that you have the ability to apply yourself and to learn. In my case, it maintains employability.”*
- Access to Skilled Workers for Local Employers:
 - *“To have people qualified that can understand the language and the technology and stay on top of it is crucial right now in [my industry]. Here, in the Delta, we have so many people, we need more opportunities to learn and grow. It will help get people here with that technological knowledge, to be able to hire locally.”*
 - *“There’s just a huge demand for graduates in this region. There are so many cities and towns close by that can benefit from graduates who have this training.”*

Another participant explained how the connection between local high schools and PCCUA have been made stronger, and that this will enhance the professional development trainings offered by PCCUA for faculty and staff at both institutions.

Participants were then asked to describe what they believe to be the most important qualities of the program. Similar to the discussion of key highlights, participants point towards producing skilled and intelligent students who then enter into a career at a local business. They also point to the colleges' strength in establishing close relationships between faculty and students.

- Connection of Faculty and Students:
 - *"The engagement of students, the professional development, the connectedness from faculty to student piece. Engaging students in meaningful learning opportunities is critical to what they are doing now. Before they didn't have the understanding that it's the fuse between students and faculty and the connection that we're onboard together with this. That has really helped, in a lot of ways we are really facilitators because a lot of students come to us with stronger knowledge and skills in the area than us, but they need direction and orientation."*
 - *"It's such a bonus for our Business and Information Technology departments. There's just a huge demand for graduates in this region. Maybe not in this town, but there are so many cities and towns close by that can benefit from graduates who have this training. A lot of our students drive in, we pull from a lot of different areas around here. It's a great draw for us, it helps with enrollment to offer this program because it is so relevant."*
- Improved Employment Opportunities:
 - *"If you have the certification it says they have applied themselves in this area and they have achieved something. Employers don't want to hire someone they have to constantly look over their shoulders, especially when you have more people remote working."*

Program Sustainability

The PCCUA ATE-DISC program is one year into NSF funding. These funds have provided opportunity for the development and installation of the program. This brings participants to the question: how can the program be sustained after current NSF funding ends? Participants report they are going to rely on state funding resulting from enrollment and completion of students in the program and raised awareness about the program to encourage program growth. No participant expressed any lack of confidence in being able to achieve these growth and sustaining goals.

- State Funding Through Increased Enrollment, Retention, Completion:
 - *"We are a product-oriented state, so we have to show that we are getting graduates in this program and the pathway and the support. I was just looking the other day, we really are already seeing better completion rates. So though we think of state funding*

formulas, that's a really important thing for us because we get more money based on the number of students that complete."

- *"With any program, maintaining any salaries that are funded by the grant, we have to find a way to roll those over into the college budget and hopefully enrollment in those programs will sustain those salaries. The program will be maintaining an enrollment that will easily justify rolling those budgets over into a college-funded budget, and the program would sustain itself and maintain itself in the long term."*
- *"Success – as far as the budgeting side, when we're looking at programs, we look at completion, not just enrollment. If a program has 100% completers, we're going to keep them [the program] because they help us on our funding points."*
- **Increased Program Awareness & Successful Community Feedback:**
 - *"I think people in the community need to recognize where security is needed, and a network person is needed in the cyber community definitely."*
 - *"To have the modern up-to-date equipment, in this case computers and networks, because the industry changes so fast. If you're learning on outdated machinery, you're learning behind the curve. There is always going to be a lag. Having issues with your network sets a bad example if you're trying to recruit students."*
 - *"Right now we're dealing with some very specific things that are already showing great results for this program, but I'd like to see marriages of this program to other programs related to use of these skills. Like more use at the institutional level for applying programming support security or even coding. I think that's not always been integrated into technology management."*
 - *"That the students that graduate can go out and get a job, and those who hire them recognize that these students have the skills they need to do the job they've been hired to do."*
- **New Grants:**
 - *"One thing, there may be other opportunities for other grants. I really think the funding has helped us launch the program, but I would love to see other opportunities for grants to accommodate expansion for this so it really could become a more comprehensive program."*

Given that participants see multiple paths to extended sustainability for the DISC program, realizing these paths become key. With this in mind, participants each addressed the question: what institutional strengths does PCCUA have to support the programs sustainability? Graduate success in the field is, again, central to responses. In this context, the focus becomes how PCCUA has previously produced successful students and how local employers recognize program impact.

- **Connections Between PCCUA and Community:**
 - *"[They] always have a couple graduates on the advisory committee who are actively working in the industry. [They] share outcomes and the direction the program's going, and that's always helpful because sometimes people don't know the work that we're doing, and people can come back and talk about the kind of things that we need."*
 - *"One-hundred-percent support from the industry. Every time we're in an advisory council meeting, you focus on your industry, and you don't realize the need that others have, this program being one of them."*

- *"Every semester I am taking something [courses at PCCUA] and my company pays for my tuition, and it goes on every performance review."*
- Resources Available at PCCUA:
 - *"I think even though we're in rural Arkansas we have a really strong, and it's not fairly new, but its new to our campus, is our network, our statewide Internet hub that we belong to."*
 - *"I believe they [PCCUA] have such a mission, because we have such underprivileged people that help things get started. This part of the delta there are a lot of underprivilege people that don't have transportation for schools, that struggle to put food on their table for children, and the college is so aware and involved and helpful to those people. The flexibility of the college, they will do everything they can to help."*

Despite the range of strengths PCCUA has, there is recognition of potential barriers to successfully sustaining the DISC program. When asked to identify sustainability challenges, participants draw attention to the availability of enough students to sustain enrollment, especially given the rural nature of the area, the COVID-19 pandemic, and social factors that might hinder their success in the program.

- Enrollment – "Small Town":
 - *"There is always the challenge of getting enrollment, offering the classes, and having the instructors available. Stuttgart is a small town, so having a big enough draw for students and helping them stay and realize the tuition of PCCUA is a heck of a big deal."*
 - *"The only thing is low enrollment. Our region is a declining population area so every executive council meeting we have, it's always enrollment as one of our topics, so that's always on the front burner. State funding - so far we've been fortunate that Arkansas has kept us fairly flat, but we had a cut this past spring when the COVID hit and the economy started turning south, but they have since restored that funding so we're back to even keel right now."*
- Enrollment – COVID-19:
 - *"To be honest, COVID-19 has done a toll on all our programs here because all of these people can do what they need to do remotely if they have to, but we have students that live in areas with no access. They rely on our computers here at school. We shut down in March and we haven't opened back up."*
- Enrollment – Social Risk Factors:
 - *"We serve a very poor population, so our students enter in with barriers that most people don't typically have when coming into college. We have food pantries, and clothes closets, and tutoring, so we provide those supports so they can succeed. I don't really worry about the program, but the individuals within the program, those at risk, because of the social factors that impede their ability."*
 - *"A lot of students, they have computers, they have access and it's not a problem. But we have people that have no access, they have to drive somewhere to get access, and it's [access] got to do with our area, not financial need. But we also have students with financial need – they've relied on our computers here at the college and they use our labs."*

Having discussed PCCUA's institutional strengths and barriers to successfully sustaining the DISC program, participants were asked to provide recommendations to program coordinators that will help sustain the program. Responses center on being able to adequately address the program's budget.

Budgetary Concerns:

- *"What we did with our student with hiring them was great – to see her grow from a student to move to a teaching assistant, it's been really wonderful for us. I'd love to see more opportunities for others to have that experience. Where we could trust students as employees, but, again, we don't have funding for that kind of thing, but I wish there was a way we could create funds to have some paid internships. This program has far exceeded anything I thought it could be."*
- *"I guess, as far as sustaining the program, to be realistic in your operation costs, focus on what you really need."*

When asked to describe the ideal role for an advisory committee to have in association with DISC, participant comments reflect that an advisory committee should support the program and provide input, including voices from the areas around all PCCUA campuses.

- Providing Support and Input:
 - *"To support and provide input. I think the more voices we have, the stronger the programs will be. Our programs that have support have advisory councils; those are very valuable. What you get is more information, a broader picture, and there's never too much input."*
 - *"If it is Stuttgart campus, their needs are going to be the same in some areas, but I believe they have plans over there and needs are going to be different. Their industry may have a different perspective. Because they are serving three different areas, it's two different counties."*

Final Comments

When asked if there is anything else they want program organizers to know, participants took the time to express their excitement about the program and the hard work being done by those involved.

- "Keep Up the Good Work":
 - *"I think it's extraordinary. The work they've put into this, doing it on their own, because they love their students and they knew that the program could be so much better. I am so proud to work with them."*
 - *"I think they've done a really good job.... From what direct dealings I've had with her [PCCUA staff member] and the other personnel, it seems like they've definitely hit the ground running and I know they had our IT department jumping for a while getting things installed and ready to go. I'd say just keep up the good work!"*

Conclusion

Interview results detail how participants feel the DISC program has had strong, positive impacts on students and PCCUA. They also describe how the program will benefit the wider community by providing local employers with employees that have a skill set that is greatly needed in the current local labor market.

From the perspective of these four key stakeholders, the program should be able to sustain itself through enrollment funds and state funding, which is based on the program's completion rates. It will be important, however, that the program organizers continue to keep enrollment up in the program and demonstrate successful student outcomes, or momentum in the program can lag and ideas for sustainability can be diminished.

The general excitement displayed for the program gives reason for optimism. Participants see that the program gives students important skills that made them more hireable, while also providing skilled and capable employees to local businesses. Given the results of these interviews, this evaluation team suggests the following for consideration:

- The PCCUA ATE-DISC program prepare to continually upgrade its available technologies, such as computers, so graduates will continue to be prepared for technologies used within industries,
- Expand recruitment efforts through the Delta region, as maintaining enrollment is central to the program's success, and
- Continue to connect with community leaders, spreading awareness of the program, the success and skills of its graduates, and their growing prominence in the regions industries.

Consideration of these issues should guide the program in a manner that meets the needs of those PCCUA individuals in its student population, administration, and local industry, considered to be key in moving toward a sustainable future.