Online Programs at CUNY Kingsborough Community College:
An Academic and Strategic Overview

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ONLINE PROGRAMS AT
CUNY KINGSBOROUGH COMMUNITY COLLEGE:
AN ACADEMIC AND STRATEGIC OVERVIEW

Cathy Leaker, Ph.D.
Dean of Faculty
Kingsborough Community College

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ONLINE PROGRAMS AT CUNY KINGSBOROUGH COMMUNITY COLLEGE: AN ACADEMIC AND STRATEGIC OVERVIEW

This report outlines Kingsborough Community College's vision for developing and implementing online programs that will serve the particular needs of adult learners in Brooklyn. The document explains the college's rationale for online programing, outlines the challenges of online programs in the community college context, and articulates a set of strategies for addressing those challenges. Above all, the report emphasizes that online programs are intended to supplement, extend and reinforce the core success of our face to face programs by ensuring equitable levels of access and success to new student populations who are currently not well served by those programs.

1. GOAL

KCC will expand its online course offerings by developing a limited selection of online programs of study in targeted, strategic areas that will either:

- Support program completion for students with some college credit but no degree (Accelerated AA in Liberal Arts)
- Provide career advancement opportunities for working adults in professional fields (AS in Community Health, AS in Hospitality Management)

It should be noted here that while the goal of creating online programs is to provide specific groups of students with the *opportunity* to complete their programs entirely online, subsets of these students may choose to, and/or be advised to, combine online with face-to-face enrollments where possible.

2. RATIONALE

Fully online degree programs in support of degree completion and career advancement align with KCC's mission by providing access to a college education for those students who are unable to attend on site classes at KCC because of work, family, distance or other issues.

Data from the 2016 American Community Survey indicate that there are over 800,000 New Yorkers between the ages of 25-64 with some college but no degree, over 250, 000 of whom reside in Kings County (US Census Bureau, 2017). When contrasted with the just over 15,000 Brooklyn students who graduate high school in any given year, the population of Brooklynites with no degree but some college, represents not only a substantive enrollment opportunity for KCC, but more importantly an overlooked area of educational need.

Although further research is necessary to fully understand the educational goals and challenges of these potential students, some preliminary conclusions can be drawn based on national, CUNY and KCC data on stop out and returning adult students. Analysis of these data suggest that the students who would benefit most from KCC's proposed online programming share some or all of the following characteristics:

- Their inability to complete a degree is not necessarily or even likely a function of academic ability. In a 2010 national survey of 45,000 students conducted by Inside Track, only 7% indicated that they had dropped out for academic reasons (Erisman & Steele, 2015). KCC's institutional data aligns with that study; approximately 50% of students who don't re-enroll after their first year have a GPA above 2.0 and another almost 35% have a GPA above 3.0.

- They are likely to be disproportionately black or Hispanic and are slightly more likely to be female. According to a - recent analysis of adult stop out students within CUNY, almost 60% were black or Hispanic, while 24% were white. When compared to traditional age students, a higher percentage of adult students enrolled in CUNY in Fall 2017 were black (34% compared to 23%) and female (62% as compared to 54%) (Truelsch & Gentsch, 2018).
- They face serious barriers to higher education; primary among these are time and cost (Cited in Erisman & Steele, 2015). They are also more likely than traditional aged students to be working and to have dependent children. A recently commissioned study of adult Associates degree students in CUNY revealed that more than a third work full-time and more than ¾ have at least one dependent child (Truelsch & Gentsch, 2018).
- They are likely to be "local," but not necessarily able to travel to campus. Although the term "distance learning" continues to be used as a synonym for "online learning," the most recent national data on online learning suggest that it has become increasingly more localized, especially for students attending public institutions: of students pursuing exclusively online programs at public institutions, slightly over 84% are located in the same state as the institution (Seaman, Allen, & Seaman, 2018). Survey data from 2017 indicated that 65% of online students live within 100 miles of campus and over half live within 50 miles. In the same survey, only 25% of online students reported that they never visit their home campus, a proportion which

corresponds to the ration of students living further than 100 miles from campus (Clinefelter & Aslanain, 2017). That said, both the term *local* and the term *distance* are relative in a dense urban environment like New York City; even for students who live within a 15-25 mile radius of KCC, distance may be an unmanageable barrier; our institutional data suggest that students are less likely to complete the further they live from campus or from major transit routes (KCC IR).
- They are likely to prefer at least some online courses. In a nationally representative survey of adult students without degrees who were considering returning to college, 73% indicated that they wanted to take at least some courses online, 41% said it was "absolutely essential" that colleges offer courses online, and 25% hoped to complete all their coursework online. An important corollary to this finding is that respondents associated online courses exclusively with for-profit colleges like University of Phoenix and were unaware that they could also study online at public colleges, including community colleges. (Hagelskamp, Schneider and DiStasi, 2013).

Despite the very real needs of this population, CUNY's historic commitment to serving adult students has waned in recent years. Since 1995, the percentage of CUNY undergraduates 25 years and older has decreased by 16% even as enrollment for traditional age undergraduates experienced a 37% increase. During roughly the same period, adult enrollment at for-profit colleges in New York City increased by 90%. CUNY's Adult Learners Committee concluded that contributing to these discrepancies was the

fact that "CUNY lags far behind its peers in the scale and scope of its online courses and degree programs." As a result of this and other administrative decisions, CUNY's Adult Learners Committee declared in April 2016 that "CUNY has effectively ceded a huge swath of the higher education market to its public, non-profit and for profit competitors" ("Stepping Up," 2-3).

More than a market strategy, however, providing meaningful, responsive and innovative opportunities for these New Yorkers to earn degrees is a matter of social and economic justice. At all levels and by almost every indicator, educational attainment continues to be a driver of economic mobility, engaged citizenship and well-being (Ma, Pender and Welch, 2016). For example, according to the American Census Bureau's annual median earnings data, an Associate degree holder in Kings County earns approximately $8,000 per year more than a high school graduate. That earnings differential rises to $25,000 when comparing high school graduates to Bachelor's degree holders in Brooklyn (United States Census Bureau). Given the impact of a living wage in a large Metropolitan area like New York, it is worth noting that the Equality of Opportunity Project ranked CUNY as the 6th[th] best institution in the nation for supporting intergenerational mobility (Chetty, Friedman, Saez, Turner, & Yagan, 2017).

Despite the clear impact of college degrees and of CUNY degrees in particular, and despite increasing postsecondary enrollment across all demographic groups, higher education in the United States remains a highly stratified system; both access to degrees and rates of degree completion are differentiated by race and socioeconomic status. The Pell Institute's *2017 Indictors of Educational Equity in the United States* reflects "high inequality, widening gaps and reduced opportunity" in such areas as affordability and net cost, type of institution

attended, delayed enrollment to college and degree attainment. For example, students in the highest income quartile are five times more likely to compete a Bachelor's degree by age 24 than those in the lowest quartile (58% and 12% respectively). One explanation for this is the college cost burden for families; in 2012, the average net price of a college education (after all financial aid is subtracted) for families in the lowest quartile was 84% of family income as compared with 15% of family income for the highest quartile. According to the Institute for Higher Education Policy's *Limited Means, Limited Options,* this means that only 2% of colleges would meet the affordability threshold for adult students with incomes under $30,000. And perhaps most distressingly, the Pell report points out that students from the lowest income quartile are "substantially more likely" than students in the other quartiles to enroll in for profit institutions (Calahan, Perna, Yamashita, Ruiz, & Franklin, 2017).

In this context, CUNY and KCC must take deliberate, purposeful action to ensure that public higher education in NYC is not simply a one-time provider of opportunity along a single trajectory but a continuum for socioeconomic equity with a range of entry points. To put it simply, targeted online programing that offers an affordable and flexible pathway for nontraditional students to complete their degrees is mission-critical for Kingsborough Community College.

3. CHALLENGES

While targeted and strategic online programming is therefore a crucial element of KCC's market positioning and educational mission, numerous challenges are involved in implementing online programs that will ensure access *and* success for community college students.

Primary among these is the by now well documented "online performance gap"; comprehensive longitudinal analyses of course outcomes in community college systems in Virginia, Washington State and California have shown that community college students successfully complete online classes at a significantly lower rate than face to face students and that the performance gap is higher for males, younger students, students of color and students with low GPAs (Xu & Jaggars, 2013; Xu & Jaggars, 2014; Johnson and Mejia).

While these results are daunting, a deeper dive into these same studies offers encouraging evidence that such gaps can be addressed through strategic interventions. Among the more nuanced findings in the Virginia, Washington and California studies are the following:

- A statistically significant number of the online non-completions are a function of early attrition rather than poor academic performance, suggesting that enhanced support and strategic intervention in the first three weeks of the term might improve persistence and completion (Jaggars and Xu, 2014)
- For adult students, the performance gap was considerably smaller than for students under the age of 25. Further, adult students were not only more likely to persist in online courses than face to face counterparts, but were also slightly less likely to persist in face to face courses (Xu & Jaggars, 2014)
- Students who struggled in online classes lacked some or all of a cluster of attributes that fall under the concept of "online readiness." Online readiness comprises learner competencies like time management and self-efficacy, academic abilities (in particular reading comprehension), access to technology,

and comprehensive information about the demands of online learning. Screening for, and providing scaffolded skill development around online readiness can improve success in online courses (Xu and Jaguars, 2014; Johnson and Mejia, 2014; Travers, 2016).

- Students routinely cited a sense of isolation and lack of community as the most challenging aspect of online courses, suggesting that strategies designed to increase both social presence and instructor presence might improve student course outcomes (Sawn, 2003; Community College Research Center, 2013a; Community College Research Center, 2013a). This point is further validated by subsequent research, suggesting that the quality of faculty student interaction was the greatest predictor of student success in online course (Jaggars & Xu, 2016).

Each of the above findings qualifies the global conclusion that community college students cannot be successful in online courses.

Finally, it must be noted that the bulk of research on community college students' online success has focused primarily on success at the level of the course. Two recent national studies of the relationship between enrollment in online courses and degree attainment for community college students offers a compelling counter-narrative to this course level research. Using longitudinal data collected from over 18,000 students nationwide, this study concluded that community college students who took at least some courses online during their first year had a higher rate of degree attainment than those who did not (Shea & Bidjerano, 2014; Shea & Bidjerano, 2016). Similar findings emerged from the analyses of outcomes in California community colleges,

which found that long-term outcomes for students who took at least some courses online were better than outcomes for students who took exclusively face-to-face courses (Johnson & Mejia, 2014). The most common explanation for what has been called "the online paradox" for community college students—the discrepancy between short and long-term outcomes—is that the flexibility afforded by online classes gives even at risk students an opportunity they might not otherwise have to take courses and meet their graduation requirements (Barshay, 2015).

As a whole, the literature on online learning for community college students is complex and saturated with a series of confounding variables. While there is convincing evidence that online learning can be especially challenging for community college students, the research also makes a strong case for an institutional commitment to address those challenges rather than curtailing or eliminating online courses. For example, even after outlining a litany of barriers to successful online learning for low-income and underprepared students, Jaggars nonetheless recommended that community colleges improve access by creating more fully online programs (Jaggars S., 2011). As she and Xu acknowledged, "although many students currently perform more poorly in the online context, online coursework represents an indispensable strategy in postsecondary education as it improves flexibility…and expands opportunities" (Xu and Jaggars, 2014).

4. STRATEGIES

KCC's approach to developing and implementing online programs emerges in part from the Provost's Advisory Committee Report on Online Learning and Programming (PAC-OL) and by the *Middle States Interregional Guidelines for Evaluating Distance Education (Online Learning)*. It is also grounded in

research about community college students and online learning, specifically in what that research says about strategic interventions in support of student learning and success. While the strategies outlined below are highlighted by a variety of research studies, the recommendations of the Community College Research Center's *Creating an Effective Online Environment* (2013a) and *Creating an Effective Online Instructor Presence* (2013b) are particularly germane.

Travers (2016) grouped online success strategies into three categories: *pre-course* strategies, *in-course strategies* and *post-course* strategies. For Travers, the crucial element is that such strategies are "interconnected and cyclical" (Travers, 2016). KCC's proposed strategies for each category are outlined below:

Pre-course strategies:

- *Departmental consultation*: To date, KCeL has worked with individual faculty to migrate specific courses online. As we move toward offering online programs with greater intentionality in support of the online learner, more deliberate planning at the departmental level is necessary. Faculty expertise in both content and pedagogy will be essential if we hope to deliver an online experience equivalent to face-to-face delivery.
- *Enhanced faculty development*: As noted in the PAC-OL, robust development and support are fundamental components of an online programming strategy. Their argument is validated by a broad consensus of research into online teaching and learning: continuous and substantive faculty development and support is essential for online programs, particularly as the field of online

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learning moves away from replicating the face to face classroom and toward an instructional model that takes full advantage of the unique and affordances of the rapidly changing online environment (Swan, 2003; Community College Research Center, 2013; Hare-Bork & Rucks-Ahidiana, 2013; Johnson, Mejia, & Cook, 2015; Baiwa, 2016).

Thus, in addition to the current faculty certification process, and based on the recommendation of the PAC-OL, KCeL has begun piloting an online faculty mentoring program; we will expand the program with modifications in AY 2018-2019.Further, while KCeL's initial role in faculty development/support primarily has focused on providing technical assistance managing Blackboard, the center will shift its emphasis to fostering effective online instructional design: the purposeful organization of course elements and orchestration of educational technology to deliver online learning experiences that are equivalent to, but do not simply duplicate, the face to face classroom.

- *Flexible, strategic scheduling*: KCC's unique 12-6 semester model will provide maximum flexibility for adult students trying to complete their degree. In addition to supporting continuous enrollment which has been shown to correlate with online student success (Boston, Ice, & Burgess, 2012), the 12-6 structure might give students the necessary flexibility to take some courses face to face—particularly those that may not necessarily be as suited to online delivery as others. Here again, the data suggest that when students *can* combine online and face to face

enrollments, they are more successful than when they take only online courses (Xu & Jaggars, 2014). A more recent study of over 650,000 student records in Predictive Analytics Reporting Framework (PAR) showed that community college students taking some of their courses online and some on ground also had a higher retention rate than students taking classes only on ground (James, Swan, & Daston, 2016).

- *Targeted recruitment of New York City students most likely to benefit:* As noted above, online learning presents distinct challenges for community college students. However, some students fare better than others in the online environment. Positive predictors of higher rates of online success include age (25 or older); transcript credit; and online readiness. The proposed online Accelerated AA in Liberal Arts will be marketed specifically to this subset of students, perhaps even requiring that they bring a minimum amount of college credit into the program and/or meet an online readiness threshold.

- *Improved assessment and development of student online readiness:* The PAC-OL recommended the online readiness assessment instrument, Smarter Measure, in order to better screen prospective online students. KCC is piloting this tool in Spring 2018; students who score poorly on the instrument will be directed to a series of online orientation modules. Results from this pilot will inform online readiness strategies (including effective orientation, up-front advising, and scaffolded readiness activities within courses) for prospective students in online programs.

- *Robust, integrated online student support services:* The *Middle States Guidelines for Distance Education (Online Learning*) set an expectation that institutions offering online programs provide "effective student and academic services to support students enrolled in online learning." Services should "ongoing and continuous" and "seamlessly integrated into the spaces in which students already live and work" (Jaggars S., 2011; Travers, 2016). KCC will provide online and extended hour availability of such services as admission, financial aid, advising and academic tutoring. (Erisman & Steele, 2015). The latter two, in particular, will be essential for helping students to understand the particular demands of online learning as well as to help foster the skills and the mindset needed to be successful (Jaggars, 2011; Community College Research Center, 2013a).

In-course Strategies

As noted above, research has identified a series of in course factors that correlate with community college students' struggles in the online environment. These include difficulty navigating online courses, early attrition, and, most impactful, increased feelings of social isolation.

KCC can mitigate these risk factors using the strategies outlined below.

- *Transparent, Interactive Instructional Design:* Many new online students struggle to navigate the online environment, especially early in the term when they have to orient themselves to the course and its expectations without the nonverbal cues or familiar rituals of the face-to-face classroom. In the online environment, students need to interact with both the Learning Management System and the course interface as well as course content. Research suggests that the more time spent navigating the first two, the less time and mental resources students have available for engaging with content (Swan, 2003). Thus, the most effective course designs prioritize simple navigation, transparent structure, accessible resources, clear expectations, strategic explanations and, most importantly, interactive opportunities (Swan, 2003; Jaggars, 2011; Community College Research Center, 2013a; Community College Research Center, 2013b; Hare-Bork & Rucks-Ahidiana, 2013; Sun and Chen, 2016)

- *Online Learning Communities*: KCC's well documented success with face-to face learning communities — in regard to improved retention rates and decreased equity gaps—make us uniquely qualified to address online students' sense of social isolation. While a number of researchers and scholars recommend learning communities to support retention of online learners in community colleges, more often than not, those studies are using the term "learning community" to refer loosely to a "sense of belonging" to "a community of learners" or self-organizing social network, often within the context of a single course. (Swan, 2003; Liu, Gomez & Yen, 2009; Sun and Chen, 2016). It can be hypothesized that KCC's more structured, purposeful and robust learning community model-- combining cross-course integrated learning and student development— will enhance the retention effects of smaller, ad hoc efforts to build

community among learners within an online course. KCC's Opening Doors Learning Community model, in particular, might be especially valuable in an online context because the Student Development course component could scaffold the particular skills and behaviors that correlate with student success in the online environment. Rather than simply migrating that model online, however, KCeL and online faculty mentors will work closely with learning community faculty and advisors throughout 2018-2019 in order to design and implement learning communities for the online environment.

- *Incorporating synchronous elements—including strategic hybrid models—into online courses*: The asynchronous nature of online courses can contribute both to students' isolation and their confusion. Infusing real time interaction through synchronous tools and/or hybrid course design can aid students' understanding of how to be successful as well as enhancing their social presence within the course (Baiwa, 2016). A national survey of online students found that 86 % of online college students would be willing to log in for synchronous discussions (Clinefelter & Aslanain, 2017). In addition, there is some evidence to suggest that opportunities for synchronous engagement may be especially important for African-American students and therefore an important mechanism for closing the equity gap in online course outcomes (Salvo, Shelton, & Welch, 2017).
- *Early alert:* As indicated earlier, attrition in online courses accounts for a substantial portion of the gap between

online and face-to-face success rates. In order to reduce or mitigate attrition in online courses and programs, a broad research consensus recommends an early alert protocol that is "early, Intensive, and continuous". (Liu, Gomez, & Yen, 2009; Community College Research Center, 2013; Travers, 2016). Since online course activity is so easy to track within the LMS and since early online activity (logins, posts, downloads, reading time) is strongly predictive of success, at risk students can be easily identified and contacted by instructors, advisors and/or automated messages. A number of colleges have had documented successes with early alerts, with evidence that sending out alerts even as early as the first day of class can significantly decrease attrition (Smith, Lange, & Huston, 2012)

Post-course Strategies

Standard 5 of the *Middle States Standards for Distance Education (Online Learning)* stipulates that an institution offering online programs must:

- evaluate the effectiveness of its online learning offerings,
- assess the extent to which the online learning goals are achieved
- use the results of its evaluations to enhance the attainment of the goals (Middle States Commission on Higher Education, 2011)

Since online programming is new to KCC and since so much still needs to be learned about community college students in the online environment, it is particularly important that our assessment strategy is widely shared and reliant upon multiple measures. As Goldrick-Rab (2010) has argued "all efforts to enhance

community college success should be rigorously evaluated with frameworks that are capable of both estimating and explaining impacts." Put more succinctly, "we need to know what works and why" (Goldrick-Rab, 2010; p 458).

KCC will develop and share a plan for continuous assessment of online learning programs that incorporates the following elements:

- *Learning Analytics:* Numerous studies note that the data collected in any LMS system provides a rich source of information about student learning. Analyzing students' "clickstream" allows colleges to develop predictive models tailored to a given institutions unique population of students. Those analytics can in turn lead to targeted, often low-stakes, interventions that have been shown to positively correlate with course completion rates. KCC will develop a plan for capturing and modeling KCC student data captured in the LMS; the plan will include provisions for ensuring student privacy and addressing ethical implications.
- *Course Completion Rates*: Given the impact of attrition rates on student success in online courses, we will track disaggregated course completion rates with particular attention to patterns of student withdrawal and/or disengagement. Our goal is to use these data, in combination with qualitative assessment of course design and learning analytics, to identify factors that correlate with student attrition in order to achieve completion rates on a par with face-to-face courses.
- *Faculty Action Research*: KCC faculty, with the support of KCTL and KCeL, have historically made substantial contributions to classroom action

research and the Scholarship of Teaching and learning (SoTL). This kind of work would be especially valuable in the online environment, providing an important qualitative complement to quantitative, outcomes-driven research. Faculty at CUNY, Borough of Manhattan Community College have a published a number of articles related on online learning within their institutional context. These publications are linked to the BMCC e-learning website, which offers a model mechanism for sharing online learning research that KCC may want to emulate.

- *Partnership with Independent agent/organization to conduct longitudinal research*: KCC has previously worked with independent research entity MDRC to gather data on its learning communities and document their success. Independent research initiatives can be an important means of assessing impact and of generating trust in the integrity of the evaluative process. Because the Community College Research Center is a national leader in assessing the value of online learning for community college students, KCC will reach out to their research team to explore the possibility of a partnership.

A comprehensive and transparent assessment strategy is especially important for new online programs at KCC in order to ensure those programs effectively serve the needs of adult students in Brooklyn and contribute to reducing equity gaps. In addition, such an approach will contribute to an academic culture of inquiry, systematic improvement and shared governance.

5. CONCLUSION

Kingsborough's entry into the online market as a way of serving adult learners is not without risk. The literature shows that community college students, and students of color in particular, struggle in online courses.   Yet these same at-risk populations are disproportionately enrolling in for profit colleges (Musu-Gillette, et al., 2017; Cottom, 2017). In this context, the online *performance* gap mentioned above is better understood as an online *equity* gap, made more pronounced by the fact that the students who have the most pressing need to access to online courses, often at high cost, may have the least chance of succeeding in them

From the perspective of Kingsborough's mission, a refusal to provide targeted high quality, affordable online programs poses a different risk, one that neglects the educational needs of hundreds of thousands of Brooklynites and offers no affordable pathway for those students with some college and no degree. Without a degree and often poor, faced with multiple life obstacles and few educational and career opportunities, students who don't complete a degree have been described as "the most vulnerable of all students" (Cottom, 2017).

As a public, two-year institution with a demonstrated track record of student success, KCC is well positioned to meet the challenge of providing high quality online learning opportunities to students who may have limited ability to participate in face-to-face classes. Guided by the Middle States Guidelines for the Evaluation of Online Education and grounded in the research, the expertise of faculty, and the rich institutional history of student success across equity groups, Kingsborough Community College's proposed online programs can meet the needs of a previously overlooked subset of students. If online programs can successfully grow enrollment and improve equity of access

and outcome, they will be a worthy complement to our mainstay face-to-face classroom model.

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Online Programs Tentative Timeline

Spring 2018—Fall 2019

April/June 2018

Dean of Faculty, Director of KCeL and Director of Liberal Arts consult with departments re strategy for migrating selected courses online

Dean of Faculty and Director of KCeL consult with Director of Liberal Arts and with Liberal Arts Council re Online Liberal Arts Program Development

Perform policy inventory to identify and address any policy concerns related to the implementation of online learning

July/Sept 2018

Build website presence for online courses at KCC

Develop online readiness learning modules based on Smarter Measure data

Create faculty development modules on instructional design

Begin work on models for online learning communities (LC)

Create marketing plan for Online Programs targeting adult learners

Create staffing and training plan for ensuring fully online student support services

Identify technology tools to support online programing, course design and student support

Sept/Dec 2018

Continued departmental and Liberal Arts Council consultation

Consult with CTE and other departments interested in moving programs online

Work with faculty re online course development and instructional design

Consult with LC faculty and core team on online LC design

Develop articulation with CUNY SPS and SUNY ESC

Finalize marketing plan for Online Programs

Provide training for selected admissions staff, advisors, and academic support personnel on adult learner needs, online risk profiles and early alert strategies

Update to college

Jan-May 2019

Department chairs plan fall online schedule

Additional faculty development and instructional design support for faculty teaching courses in fully online programs

Create online LC link(s) with academic scheduling; additional faculty development support for faculty/advisors in online links

Implement marketing and recruitment strategy for online Liberal Arts Program

Pilot customized admissions protocol for adult learners

Pilot online advising/academic support services for KCC students in online courses

Update to college

June-Sept 2019

Provide early support and advising for online cohorts

Enroll first online Liberal Arts class

Sept 2019

Provide end of term update (including data on Spring 18 online courses) to college