Sandhills Community College Expands Student Impact with High-Touch IT Service

SANDHILLS COMMUNITY COLLEGE ENGAGED HURON TO HELP IMPROVE ACCESSIBILITY ACROSS AND BEYOND ITS CAMPUS.

Sandhills Community College, founded in 1963, is a member of the North Carolina Community College System. As the first community college to offer a transfer program in the state, Sandhills has a rich legacy of preparing all members of its diverse student body to meet their future goals. To improve accessibility and strategic alignment specifically with its information technology (IT) and e-learning divisions, Sandhills collaborated with Huron through Huron's social alliance program.

Guided by the core values of integrity, helpfulness, excellence, respect and opportunity, Sandhills has a mission to provide educational opportunities of the highest quality to all students, faculty and staff. This extends to all areas of access and opportunity, with a commitment to foster an inclusive environment by actively dismantling equity barriers and disparities underrepresented students face. Sandhills uplifts its community by providing comprehensive education options, including college transfer opportunities, associate degrees, certificates and continuing education opportunities, and initiatives to ensure its student body is cared for appropriately.

Seated in Moore County, with more than 60% of the student body being Pell Grant-eligible, Sandhills seeks to provide ways to support students beyond just helping them with tuition. Rebecca Roush, Ph.D., vice president of academic affairs, noted that the college has a guarantors fund , which acts as a

stopgap measure and helps students who are faced with significant financial challenges stay in school. According to Roush, the fund is a nod to the rich history of helpfulness at Sandhills that extends to each community member on campus.

Given the level of support Sandhills provides it students, the college's leaders decided to utilize the COVID-19 pandemic funding as part of the Coronavirus Aid, Relief and Economic Security (CARES) Act emergency financial aid grants for a permanent infrastructure enhancement. Elizabeth Thomas, chief financial officer at Sandhills Community College, knew that investing in IT, e-learning and other technology solutions would positively affect the wide range of students that Sandhills serves. Not only would this commitment level the playing field for students, but it would also be an investment in Sandhills' future.

The Path to Finding the Best-Fit External Partner

Sandhills identified the need for an assessment from a third party to evaluate its current-state IT and e-learning landscape and define goals to help the college evolve. It was important for Sandhills to find an organization that could become an integral member of its team and help sustain its legacy and history in advancing the college's mission.

> "One of the things that sets Sandhills apart is we are not likely to outsource projects that involve customer service," Thomas said. "To us, it's important we keep that hands-on approach we have with students. We know them, we know how they work, and we want to continue to support them in the best way possible."
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> **THOMAS**, SANDHILLS COMMUNITY COLLEGE

Sandhills also wanted to improve accessibility by leveraging its IT services, especially amid the COVID-19 pandemic. With rich generational diversity on campus — 30% of the population at Sandhills Community College consists of high school students, and it is located near a military base — it was imperative to get everyone at the same starting point with technology.

Sandhills leadership appreciated how much the Huron team listened when discussions got underway. Huron understood the scope and scale of what the college needed and articulated an approach that fits well with the expectations of the Sandhills leadership team. In addition to proposing comprehensive solutions based on the information Sandhills shared, Huron offered the opportunity for

the college to be a part of Huron's social alliance. Finally, Huron connected Sandhills with former clients who had collaborated with Huron on similar work, demonstrating that Huron's approach would be a strong fit.

The Journey and Results of Investing in Technology Infrastructure

Once Sandhills selected Huron, the two organizations began to work together to map out Sandhills' goals and how to best support students and the campus community going forward. Sandhills leadership made it clear that creating better student experiences and increasing engagement through technology were top priorities. The college also wanted to empower faculty members to enhance their work through technology, knowing how critical that was for student success.

Huron's six-week engagement began with a strategic assessment of the IT and e-learning departments, mapping IT and e-learning focus areas to the college's 2020-2024 strategic plan. The team facilitated interviews and focus groups with campus executives, administrative staff, faculty and students. Team members also conducted peer benchmarking using various sources, including publicly available data and EDUCAUSE and Computer Economics benchmarks.

From this approach, the Huron team identified several "burning platform" items to be urgently addressed regarding network infrastructure, single points of failure and succession planning. The team also developed several strategic and operational recommendations and a 24-month road map encompassing near-term, midterm and long-term priorities.

The team recommended hiring new IT talent to fill critical capability gaps and resolve network instability. It also proposed a new IT governance model with enhanced structures, new membership and working committees.

"I have nothing but positive things to say about our experience engaging with Huron," Thomas said. "The whole campus had the opportunity to participate, talk and meet, and Huron demonstrated that they were there to listen, give recommendations and help us as we continue to implement the roadmap."

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Sandhills has been able to implement many of Huron's recommendations, starting with training for all community members on the new technology. The college also implemented a walk-up desk to further

engage with students of different backgrounds and provide strong tech support in and out of the classroom. Going forward, the college will be pursuing other recommendations, such as hiring key IT talent, bringing students together regularly to discuss their IT needs and experiences, and enhancing the IT governance workgroups to bring additional focus to student concerns.

Huron's side-by-side work with Sandhills positions the college to continue to meet students where they are, set them up for success and grow the college for the future. As more college leaders seek guidance from each other within Huron's social alliance, the insights Sandhills gained from this experience will add value to this larger community.

About Huron's social alliance

Started as a social entrepreneurship project, Huron's social alliance supports higher education institutions committed to equity and access, helping them sustain their mission and attain their goals by working together to solve strategic, structural and financial challenges. This way, these institutions can keep doing what they do best: educating and empowering students.

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