

The ACCelerator Advances Student Success Through an Innovative Learning Space at Austin Community College: An Interview with Curtiss Stevens

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ABOUT CURTISS STEVENS



Curtiss Stevens is the executive dean of the ACCelerator and Strategic Initiatives at Austin Community College (ACC). In 2019, Curtiss was awarded the President's Leadership Excellence Award and the John and Suanne Roueche Excellence Award for outstanding leadership, service, and dedication to ACC.

Curtiss holds a bachelor's degree in Geography from Valparaiso University, a master's degree in Geographic Education and Research from Western Michigan University, and pursued doctoral studies in Economic Geography at Indiana State University. He has amassed over 2 decades of experience in the field of higher education, serving in various capacities such as admissions and financial aid, student affairs, international education, academic and life skills training, grants and fundraising, curriculum, and athletics. His previous employments include positions at Valparaiso University, Western Michigan University, Indiana University, and Purdue University. Apart from teaching Geography and Geosciences, he has also worked as an Executive Director of a Boys & Girls Club and as a TV personality.

The ACCelerator at Austin Community College (ACC) Highland's campus is a 32,000-square-foot space that fosters dynamic learning. The ACCelerator features classrooms, study rooms, and numerous computer pod stations that can be reserved by ACC faculty and staff for a variety of purposes. The ACC Highland campus serves over 8,000 students, with over 17,000 student visits to the Highland ACCelerator per year. The ACCelerator features innovative teaching and instruction, learning support services, student support services, and community engagement, which provides an engaged student-centric customer service vision.

J-CASP: The ACCelerator is one of the largest postsecondary state-of-the-art community college teaching and learning technology centers and has become known for promoting innovative student engagement and individualized instruction. Being such a large space of 32,000 square feet (longer than a football field), how do the center staff and faculty members teaching in the center engage students at an individual level?

Stevens: We use a philosophy we call SEDI (Student-Engagement-During-Instruction). SEDI attempts to humanize the learning experience through student-teacher engagement during instruction. It could be as simple as asking a student, "How's your mom?" and the student responds with, "Oh, yeah, she's good." Interestingly, we find SEDI especially effective

with building relationships and engagement with our male students—and especially our minority male students.

J-CASP: What motivated this approach?

Stevens: I used to work as a valet at LaQuinta Inn. And one day, a couple of years after I quit, I ended up finding my valet handbook. The manual promoted aggressive hospitality by knowing and providing information to our customers. And so, I rewrote the

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whole manual to create our ACCelerator “customer service manual.” It’s called the ACCelerator & Strategic Initiative Customer Service Training. One of the concepts comes from a guide called The Seven Processes of Student Success. The first one is that student success happens when you feel welcome, recognized as individuals and that they matter to the institution. In fact, every staff member must pass our mandatory customer service training by 90% or above every year. Our intent is to facilitate aggressive hospitality and customer service with our students. Faculty members who are teaching in the ACCelerator tend to do well if they’ve completed the training, too. It’s just amazing that regardless of whether it’s math or any subject, it makes a real difference. That’s why we are experiencing an increase in student persistence.

J-CASP: Speaking of math, the ACCelerator is credited with being the impetus for ACC’s redesign of how developmental mathematics is taught to students. How did this redesign alter your developmental mathematic program?

Stevens: In 2014, ACC staff visited Virginia Tech Math Emporium (which uses computer-driven modular self-paced instruction supported by tutors and instructors). The center is large, maybe 20,000 square feet, and it’s completely dedicated to math. After that visit, ACC decided to come up with our own technology center for math, whereby professors would facilitate student learning rather than lecturing. Now our math classes are seamless because students can walk in, turn the computer on, and boom, turn on ALEKS (Assessment and Learning in Knowledge Spaces—an online learning platform using a blend of personalized instruction and traditional homework assignments). Students begin their instruction based on an initial ALEKS pre-assessment. As students are working with ALEKS, faculty, and tutors are moving around and facilitating—answering questions and providing additional support. Sometimes a faculty member may pull up a whiteboard to break down a question. Please note that if we have three classes being offered at the same time, we will have three faculty members. Each faculty member will also have four to five tutors working collaboratively with them, too. As you can see, we give lots of support to students.

J-CASP: Has this method influenced the way other courses are facilitated?

Stevens: This space is so adaptable, which is so impactful in terms of teaching. I was sitting in the lab watching our math professors and thinking that they are fantastic at engaging students and facilitating learning. But why couldn’t this be for everybody else? And that’s when I ended up adding more subjects. I convinced a geography professor to teach in the ACCelerator and to teach the same class in the classroom. That way, we would compare the outcomes. By far, the students taking the course in the ACCelerator were more successful. One important aspect to note was that when these students took the class in the ACCelerator, they didn’t have to pay for the \$150.00 textbook, and we had no one withdraw from the course.

J-CASP: Does the ACC staff assist faculty who want to teach in this space?

Stevens: Right now, I have a website where it says, “Teach and Engage in the ACCelerator,” so faculty can go in, make an appointment, and meet with one of ACC’s instructional designers. They talk about how to break down the course and how to reserve the needed technology. We provide everything that instructors need to set up their courses. If instructors encounter any issues or problems, we are here all the time. Faculty members are completely supported with instructional design and course facilitation.

J-CASP: The ACCelerator has integrated academic coaches, tutoring services, career assistance, and Supplemental Instruction within the same space that students use to complete their coursework. Have you seen an

increase in students utilizing or requesting these resources?

Stevens: The year before the pandemic, I had 5,400 students who were not enrolled in ACC coming in to use ACCelerator. They used to be ACC students because in order to use the computers, you have to have ACC access. This indicates how valuable students feel the ACCelerator is for them. Since the ACCelerator began in 2014, we’ve already been visited by 95,200 individual students. We’re getting close to 100,000. We’ve experienced almost 1 million interactions. So, students come in whether they’re using the study room, the open computers, or getting assistance.

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J-CASP: How do you go about keeping students engaged at the ACCelerator once they arrive?

Stevens: I lived in Spain for 10 years, and one of the most amazing places to visit in Barcelona is the library. It's one of the busiest places that you can visit. And it's the same thing here; you're in the most popular and busy place at ACC. I never want students to leave this place. I don't want students to have to go out, get help, or get food and never come back. We're the only computer area that allows you to bring in food. The design is to support students because they need to be in one place where all of the resources are located.

J-CASP: How many resources have you managed to get into just the ACCelerator?

Stevens: In addition to tutoring, Supplemental Instruction, and academic coaching, we offer a variety of support specialists that help students with registration, financial aid, scholarships, and other issues. We did not offer academic coaching until we opened the ACCelerator. We're increasing the number of people that the students have connections with. We're helping to create student success. We're getting the student more resources, and they never have to leave the ACCelerator.

J-CASP: What about local resources? Tell us about some of the local partnerships that the ACCelerator has fostered.

Stevens: We have the youth camps, STEM camps, and Upward Bound. We've had Indeed (a service for job seekers) come in, and the Austin Police Department has rented office space to do testing. One of the cool ones is the Girl Scouts. The Girl Scouts come in on a Friday night and spend a night in the lab. About 400 girls bring their sleeping bags and come in and learn how to code and do robotics. This place is packed with about 200 volunteers, and it's amazing that it's here. And it's like, here's that community piece, that community outreach to bring them in.

J-CASP: ACC has 12 different campuses and reaches students across Austin and its surrounding areas. How many other campuses are expected to offer an ACCelerator lab for their students, and will these centers have similar access to tutors, academic coaches, Supplementary Instruction leaders, and career assistance in one large room like the original Highland campus ACCelerator lab?

Stevens: We currently have ACCelerators operating at three campuses. Highland was the first. Later we



Photo credit: Benji Smith

opened the Round Rock and then the San Gabriel campus ACCelerators. This summer, we'll open up ACCelerator at the Rio Grande campus, so that would be our fourth one. We are also in conversations to build five more ACCelerators, which we definitely have a need for. Pre-pandemic, we had 17,000 unique student visits at the Highland ACCelerator, 6,500 at the Round Rock ACCelerator, and almost 2,000 in San Gabriel. One of the coolest things is every time we look at the data, we say, "Okay, Highland campus has 8000 students who claimed this as their home campus, but Highland saw 17,000 unique students. Round Rock has 4,000 students who claim it as their home campus, but the ACCelerator saw 6,500 students. At San Gabriel, we had 1,000 students, but we saw 1,100." ACC students are coming from all over the district to use the ACCelerator. People are even driving all the way up from Hays County to come to use the ACCelerator. But each new ACCelerator will be customized to the size and resources that their campus needs.

J-CASP: Even with the size and resource differences, are there non-negotiables that each ACCelerator has to have?

Stevens: We need to keep the five core functions. Each ACCelerator has to have innovative teaching and instruction, learning support services, student support services, community engagement, and highly engaged student-centric customer service. The instruction has to be there because it gives faculty an alternate way of teaching, right? You want to

have wraparound services where you feel comfortable being in the space and walking in this space. The community has to be there, the services, the support, everything. It's non-negotiable because the five core functions are what make the ACCelerator a success for students.

J-CASP: I'm sure with more ACCelerators, you will be able to capture even more attention than you already have. The ACCelerator has had some high-level press coverage and visitors over the years. For example, Dr. Jill Biden visited the ACCelerator lab in 2015. What other high-profile individuals have visited the center?

Stevens: The Minister of Education from Kazakhstan came maybe 3 years ago when he was only a regional director. Since then, he's been promoted to the Minister of Education for the entire country. He just visited again as the Minister of Education because he'd been given \$20 billion from World Bank to redo the entire education system in Kazakhstan, so he brought all the presidents of all their colleges with him on this trip to see different college systems in the United States. He went to Washington DC, New York, Chicago, and then Austin. He specifically brought them here to ACC because he remembered how great the ACCelerator was when he toured it a couple of years ago as a regional director.

J-CASP: That's incredible that the ACCelerator is getting international attention like this.

Stevens: We see the number of people who come in and visit, and it makes us excited. We just would not get Dr. Biden, the US Secretary of Education, representatives from other countries, and all these people coming in to see this space if we weren't doing what we do, right? They come in because we've been getting results and giving our students the best chance at success.

J-CASP: Did any of the ACCelerator technologies and training change during the pandemic? Covid-19 hit Texas particularly hard.

Stevens: After months into COVID, students sent a message saying, "I can't take online classes because I don't have Wi-Fi." ACC made the tough decision to ask me to open the ACCelerator during the pandemic.

J-CASP: I'm sure the logistics for that must have been its own challenge, on top of all the other duties your staff were having to assist with.

Stevens: In terms of equity and accessibility, we had some students that couldn't just sit in the parking lot with a laptop. We had to design a plan where it was one student per pod. We had to take chairs and block parts of the center off. And we could guide students specifically on where to walk and go. Luckily, we have an enormous amount of computer stations to space students throughout the center. Some of them, of course, just came in to get access to the Wi-Fi. They didn't need to sit at a computer; they just used study rooms or sat outside the ACCelerator. So, it was good that we opened up in case students didn't have access to technology or Wi-Fi.

J-CASP: Speaking of accessibility, how accessible is the ACCelerator? What steps have you taken to support students with disabilities?

Stevens: At ACC, we have an accessibility team. Even during class, when we have a student with a disability, someone hearing impaired or visually impaired, for example, someone will come and actually sit in class with the student and help them throughout the class. We also bought additional equipment and technology to assist students who need it. On all of the computers, for example, students have the ability to enlarge the screen. We also have headphones for people with hearing impairments. So we're 100% accessible to anybody coming to ACC. But we have to be. If we weren't, then it would get in the

way of all the hard work we have done boosting persistence rates. The persistence of every student that comes here is important.

J-CASP: When speaking of persistence, ACC statistics reveal that seven or more visits to the ACCelerator lab increased first-time students' persistence by 4.6%+ (4.0%+ for full-time students, 5.5%+ for part-time students, and 7.6%+ for those least likely to persist). How has the ACCelerator's impact helped increase other student outcomes, such as completion rates for students seeking certificates and degrees?

Stevens: If a student comes to the ACCelerator just two times, they are automatically looking to continue next semester. When persistence starts

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to increase, we see the success rates increase, right? And then, after the success rates increase, we start seeing more A's and B's. We start seeing a reduction in withdrawals and reductions in missing classes. Because now that students are in the ACCelerator, they have a faculty member engaging with them, and they are already sitting with a team at their station.

Based on a study we did, one interesting thing we noticed from a geography class is that when we would have two or three students who didn't need support sitting with one student who did, they would all pass. Why? Because they were in this group, and the group was like, "We in this together, we ain't going let you fail." We built a space that's designed to give that type of connection, engagement, and support.

J-CASP: Are there some more affect- and motivation-based support that the ACCelerator gives to students as well?

Stevens: I try to tell staff that I hire them to be cheerleaders. Many community college students come in with so many different things on their shoulders. So how do we celebrate them more? Schools always celebrate when you sign up for some college sports team, but no one celebrates when you get into a plumbing program. So, I created a registration station that has balloons right in the middle of the ACCelerator, and we can rally behind a student and be like, "Yeah. You got it. You got the class. You signed up." It costs nothing to give students that celebration and compassion. That impacts your persistence and success rates big time.

J-CASP: We wanted to thank you again for sitting down with us today to talk about the ACCelerator lab.

Stephens: I'm really excited to just get the word out more about all the amazing things we are doing at ACC, but especially with the ACCelerator.

Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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