

# MCC leverages technology to keep students connected



Monroe Community College's downtown campus. (Ben Jacobs)

By **ANDREA DECKERT**

With the COVID-19 pandemic making it more challenging to communicate face-to-face, Monroe Community College is using artificial intelligence as one way to connect with students, keeping them engaged and part of the college community.

Christine Casalnuovo-Adams, associate vice president of enrollment management at MCC, said the college has placed an emphasis on finding new technologies to communicate with students, their families and perspective students for the last few years.

Because of that, the school had ample technologies in place when the pandemic hit earlier this year, she said.

"We were in a good place in March and have been able to stay connected and engaged with students through a variety of platforms," Casalnuovo-Adams said.

Those technology platforms range from more traditional outreach such as text messaging, calling campaigns and targeted emails to newer initiatives including the student-run Trib411 information center and the Ask Trib411 chatbot, a technology platform that can provide information around the clock.

The Trib411 center was created in 2019 and is a communication hub that

provides assistance to students who have questions about MCC.

The center is run by peer navigators, who are fellow students that are also involved in the college's orientation program.

Currently, the center provides information via phone calls, texts and emails due to COVID-19 protocols. There is also a new live chat function for further assistance.

Trib411 has been utilized since its inception, fielding more than 5,000 inquiries since opening, MCC officials said.

"It's a great resource," said Matthew Lawson, manager of orientation and first year experience at MCC, adding that since the center is run by students it can make it easier for others to reach out to their peers with questions.

The Trib411 center often eliminates shuffling students from one department to another until they find the right person, Lawson said, which cuts down on time and frustration that can often happen when trying to find the right contact and information.

Trib411's efforts have also been recognized externally. The center received the 2019-2020 Innovation of the Year award from the non-profit organization League for Innovation in the Community College.

Around the same time as Trib411 was created, MCC began utilizing

chatbot software, which allowed students to ask questions any time of the day or night. It began as a stand-alone program at the college and has since been incorporated into Trib411.

A chatbot is a virtual advising platform that allows students to ask questions and receive an answer on a range of topics instantly, including inquiries related to admissions, financial aid, registration and records.

Developed by Colorado-based Ocelot, the chatbot platform used at MCC is also being utilized by over six million students at colleges and universities nationwide. Ocelot estimates that its college chatbots will answer over 4.5 million questions in 2020, which is up from 1.5 million in 2019.

Not only do the technological platforms such as the Trib411 Center and Trib411 chatbot provide quick answers for students, they can also free up time for staff to address issues that may require additional help, Casalnuovo-Adams noted.

In addition to Trib411, MCC was able to use other technology platforms to reach out to students over the summer, she said.

That included administering an electronic intake survey to find out any potential challenges for students as they prepared to start the fall semester.

Those challenges ranged from tech-

nology issues and questions about campus housing to childcare options, Casalnuovo-Adams said.

The school was then able to use the results of the electronic survey and follow up directly with students on the phone to answer questions and resolve any issues, often before the fall term even began.

MCC also uses more traditional technology methods for outreach, such as emails, although they are often customized, she said.

For example, the school reaches out to those in their final year at school with information about graduation. Students who have expressed interest in scholarship opportunities receive emails on upcoming opportunities.

In an effort to continue to foster a sense of community at a time when social distancing is a necessity, MCC has turned to virtual events. They include virtual work-out classes, mindful meditation sessions, trivia nights and talent shows, Lawson said.

He added that a virtual murder mystery party is planned for later in the semester and the college is also looking to add e-sports to its list of activities.

Popular virtual events this semester include self "care-intine" workouts and "bougie on a budget" cooking classes.

The events have been embraced by students and faculty, further cultivating a sense of community, he said.

"The true college experience may look different, but we are still providing it," Lawson said.

Moving forward, MCC is continuing to expand its communication efforts using technology platforms, even post COVID-19, Casalnuovo-Adams said.

That includes expanding its texting platforms to not only send information to students, but also to create more opportunities for conversation.

There are also plans to enhance social media outreach, Casalnuovo-Adams said, noting that technology is always changing, and, in turn, so are students' needs.

"We want to continue to stay connected with students using platforms they are most comfortable with," Casalnuovo-Adams said.

*Andrea Deckert is a Rochester-area freelance writer.*