

# Supporting Students from a Distance

## Sierra College

### Their Approach

As Sierra College took steps to serve its students during the sudden pandemic and shelter in place orders, the innovations of the Guided Pathways (GP) redesign enabled the college to provide an immediate and more tailored communication with students. Sierra tried new approaches with responsive, low-tech virtual communications like videos, their mobile app, and live Q & A sessions to help students get the information they needed to successfully transition to remote learning.

### What They Did

Like all California community colleges, Sierra shifted instruction and service delivery online. The combination of Sierra's embedded support specialists in interest areas and robust early alert systems positioned them to respond and communicate to students in faster, more personal ways. Dedicated student support specialists and faculty are able to communicate directly through flags and referrals in Sierra's Starfish Early Alert system, Sierra Connect. Students also use Sierra Connect to schedule virtual meetings with support specialists. The dramatic increase in flags and referrals raised in Sierra Connect reveals that college faculty and staff are relying on it to build connections across the college during the campus closure.

Sierra also found communication help in their mobile app that had primarily been a virtual student space where about 3,000 of the 18,500 students answered each other's questions. As COVID-19 hit, Sierra used the app as a window into student concerns and questions. Sierra began making simple videos on topics like financial aid, library access or new bookstore policies, informed in part by the social media app activity.

### What They Learned

First and foremost, Sierra learned that things don't have to be perfect to move forward. The videos were not highly produced, especially time consuming, or costly. As a result, Sierra was able to be swift, relevant, and adaptable in their response. COVID-19 was a push to say "we can't wait any longer to move online; we've seen things accelerating that we've been trying to do for three years," Marketing Manager Cassie Donnelly said. "And the videos," she added, "why didn't we think of doing these before? It put a face to our services."

As Sierra continues to respond to the impact of the COVID-19 global pandemic, they are leveraging achievements gained in their GP implementation, applying their interest area structure, early alerts, and support service integration to support students.

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5100 Sierra College Blvd., Rocklin, California 95677  
916.624.3333, [sierracollege.edu](http://sierracollege.edu)