



## Lower Cost Options: Public Online Learning in Arizona

### Rio Salado College

To expand the number of Americans with a credential of value, states should look at innovative models of offering associate degrees. One promising model is at Rio Salado College in Tempe, Arizona.

The community college was created to provide working adults with flexible and affordable educational opportunities. Rio Salado does not maintain a traditional campus. Instead, it uses technology and forges partnerships with corporations, government agencies, and other educational institutions to deliver course offerings to nearly 63,000 students. Rio Salado offers more than 600 online classes and more than 60 certificates and degrees as well as in-person and hybrid classes at college sites and places of employment throughout Maricopa County. It has the lowest cost per full-time student enrollment among Maricopa's 10 community colleges, 27 percent less than the district average. Rio Salado is the largest online public community college in the United States and it is growing at an estimated point-in-time rate of 12 percent.

### For more information visit:

- [RioSalado.edu](http://RioSalado.edu)
- [HCMStrategists.com](http://HCMStrategists.com)
- [CollegeProductivity.org](http://CollegeProductivity.org)

### The Model: Focused on Success

*Using data to predict student success:* The college uses predictive analytics to understand drivers of student success in online learning. These include factors such as student engagement and behavioral patterns (logins, site engagement, and pace of coursework) that are behaviors associated with successful course completion. It also has data-based systems to track and flag students and initiate interventions. Faculty and staff arrange interventions with flexible advising services available online, over the phone, at night and on weekends. Rio Salado also monitors student performance on nationally normed assessments. Students' average score on the ECS, which measures critical thinking and subject knowledge, is ten percentage points higher than the national average.

*One course, many sections:* Rio Salado has full-time faculty develop and approve high-quality master courses that, in turn, are taught by adjunct faculty in more than 6,000 course sections. This model allows Rio Salado to employ only 22 full-time faculty and more than 1,300 adjunct faculty. As a result, the instructional cost is 48 percent less than at similar institutions. These master courses are housed at RioLearn, an e-learning platform designed to be scalable to over 100,000 students with no additional cost. With 48 class section starts a year, students can begin a course almost any Monday.

*Helping students succeed in their goals:* Rio Salado is engaged in many activities to help students achieve their educational goals. It created an Electronic Student File system to help them track their progress. The Communiversity @ Surprise is a higher education center hosted by Rio Salado in partnership with the city of Surprise, Arizona. It offers programs from three community colleges, three universities and a high school district, allowing students to pursue several educational pathways in one convenient location. The RioPass program is a hybrid in-person and online learning model which places students in a learning community cohort and helps students complete an associate of arts degree in less than two years. Rio Salado also provides the largest adult basic education program in Arizona, helping adults transition to higher education work.

### What Policymakers Can Do

To utilize this productive model in their states, policymakers should consider:

- *Exploring how Rio Salado can help provide back office support for expanded online learning options.* The College has provided back office support for online learning at other universities for a flat fee. They are open to replicating this model with others.
- *Discussing how Rio Salado might be able to fill gaps in your community college system by enrolling and graduating state students.* Many community college systems have more demand for classes than they can provide. To help shorten student time to degree, Rio Salado could provide classes for these additional students.
- *Thinking through how your state institutions might be able to integrate pieces of the Rio Salado model.* Pieces of the model outlined above maybe possible to integrate into your state public universities.