

Daring to be Different

Rio Salado College has won a reputation as both outcast and innovator

By Pamela Burdman

TEMPE, ARIZONA

IF THE SIX-STORY cement-and-mirrors edifice doesn't resemble the typical college campus, the interior looks even less like an ivory tower.

In the hallways, inspirational posters extol virtues like "Teamwork," "Vision," "Success" and "Excellence." Offices buzz with talk of marketing to clients, selling products and winning new accounts.

Students are few and far between—most take courses via the Internet or at nearby corporations—but FTSE (Full-Time Student Equivalent, or "footsie") is part of every conversation. Exact enrollment is a moving target, because classes begin every two weeks.

Welcome to Rio Salado College, the renegade institution that eschews the trappings of the typical college. Rio's refusal to bow to academic norms and traditions—rejecting everything from the classroom wall to the academic calendar—has won it a reputation as both outcast and innovator.

The dual roles have been with Rio since its founding as the "college without walls" for the Maricopa Community College District in 1978, well before the advent of the Internet added luster to the idea of distance learning. Envisioned to serve working adults and those who could not reach existing campuses, Rio has tried every form of delivery from radio and newspaper to correspondence and CD-ROM.

That those experiments were not always successful—

newspaper classes, for example, flopped—has not enhanced Rio's reputation locally. And Rio's habit of reducing instructional costs through accelerated programs and heavy reliance on part-time instructors has not won favor with area educators.

Still, Rio hasn't stopped growing for most of its 23-year life, and flexibility and

adaptability have been key: Not only do classes start every other week, the distance learning format means that classes are never full and are never cancelled.

Today Rio ranks third in size among the ten colleges in the Maricopa district, the second largest district in the country. In 1999–2000, the school enrolled more than 26,000 students in for-credit courses, for a total FTSE of 8,457. The average age of students is 32.

If anything, daring to be different has raised Rio's profile outside Arizona's borders—to the point that raised eyebrows only seem to encourage the folks who run the place.

"It's music to our ears when someone says, 'You can't do that,'" Linda Thor, Rio Salado's president since 1990, said with a laugh.

The laugh underscores Thor's conviction that she will prove her critics wrong. "We're always under the microscope," she said. "Our level of accuracy has to be high."

Thor then proudly ticked off examples of accomplishments that others didn't think possible:

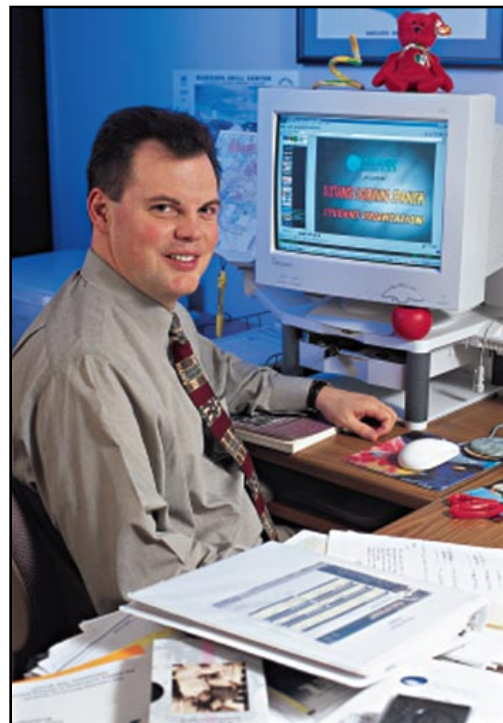
- classes that start 26 times a year;
- a "dual enrollment" program that allows high school seniors to take college classes at the high school site;
- an accelerated dental hygiene program that takes 15 months instead of the usual two years—and has only one full-time instructor;
- one of the most lopsided ratios of part-time to full-time instructors in all of academe;
- online laboratory science classes; and
- a law enforcement certificate that awards 35 units of credit for graduates of the Phoenix Police Academy's 16-week program.

That these innovations have contributed to a six-year stretch of 15 percent annual enrollment growth has helped to vindicate Rio's model.

Take dental hygiene for example: Skepticism about the quality of the accelerated program was quickly dispelled after the first class achieved a 100 percent pass rate on their board examinations. Rio was catapulted to the top ten percent of hygiene programs nationwide, despite being the only 15-month program and the only one with a single full-time faculty member, according to Jim Van Dyke, dean of applied programs at Rio.

A statewide shortage of dentists made hygiene a priority. The Arizona Dental Association and the Delta Dental

Photos by John Phillips, Black Star, for CrossTalk



Vernon Smith is president of the Rio Salado faculty, which includes 21 full-time instructors and 600 part-timers.

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insurance company pitched in \$1.2 million to renovate a clinic and classroom facility. Unlike most hygiene administrators, Rio health programs director Liz Kaz doesn't need to scrounge up used equipment.

On a recent morning, a dozen student hygienists dressed in white lab coats were leaning over patients in a state-of-the-art clinic. The students checked patients' blood pressures and performed intra-oral exams as purple-clad instructors (hygienists who teach part-time) looked on.

Down the hall, more students clustered around dental slides, studying them in preparation for their board exam.

Eryn Ramsey, 24, of Yuma, explained that she and her classmates were "stressing" about passing the exam, but pleased that the accelerated program would get them into the job market in record speed. Ramsey said she came to Rio at the recommendation of a dentist in Flagstaff, where she used to work as a dental assistant: "He thought very highly of it. The dental hygienists coming from Rio know more about what the dentists want."

Dental hygiene typifies Rio Salado's programs in that it is tailored to meet the needs of area employers. At any given time, Rio courses are being offered at some 50 to 75 government and corporate partners in the greater Phoenix area. Such partnerships account for 51 percent of the college's total students, but a greater number—64 percent—of the FTSE.

Rather than packaging courses and offering them to employers, the college's curriculum specialists assign college credit to existing training programs. "We can't do this for everyone, because it has to meet standards," said Van Dyke.

The Law Enforcement Technology program is a good example. Rio officials analyzed the Phoenix police academy's 16-week, 585-hour program and identified 17 separate courses—ranging from a one-unit search and seizure course to

a four-unit seminar on criminal investigation—for a total of 35 credit hours. Upon completion, that work earns police recruits a certificate from Rio Salado.

Though only one out of 100 police departments in the country requires a bachelor's degree, college credentials often figure in promotion decisions, a message that was delivered home to 41 new recruits one Monday afternoon this spring at the police academy.

Wearing crisp white shirts, black pants and buzz cuts (or, in two cases, buns), the recruits sat staring at a white board that removed any doubt about how to behave. "SIT DOWN. DO NOT TALK. DO NOT TOUCH ANYTHING," the board barked.

In addition to being their first day as recruits, this was to be, for some, their first day of college. Others already had some college experience.

Retired police officer Jim Hornburg, coordinator of Rio Salado's public safety programs, guided the recruits in filling out enrollment forms—and exhorted them to think about their futures. "Academic credentials translate to credibility," he said. "Patrol is a lot of fun, but you're going to want to go on to other things, into specialty details. An academic degree in law enforcement looks good in your portfolio.

"This is a service being offered to you by your agencies and Rio Salado College," Hornburg added. "Take advantage of it."

The police academy pays the recruits' tuition. Rio, in turn, pays the police academy for use of their facilities and instructors—resulting in a paper exchange. After that, the college collects another \$1,625 per FTSE from the state.

The program is important because most criminal justice programs include coursework that is redundant to the police academy curriculum, and few are tailored to the schedule of working officers, said Kelly Michelson, director of Rio Salado's law enforcement program.

With an additional 29 units at Rio Salado, graduates of the law enforcement training certificate program can earn an associate's degree. And through a partnership with Ottawa University, officers can take another 52 units online and earn a bachelor's degree.

More than 8,000 students have gone through the law enforcement program, and a new agreement with the state of Texas could enroll as many as 5,000 police academy graduates a year for credit by examination. Another eight states have asked Rio Salado to evaluate their police academies as well.

Arrangements like these—along with a low ratio of full-time faculty—help Rio Salado keep its cost per student about one-third lower than its sister colleges in the Maricopa district: Rio spends about \$3,209 per student, compared to a district average of \$4,733.

The workplace partnerships also fulfill a long-term goal of Thor's to adapt education to meet the needs of working adults and the expectations of employers. That interest dates back to Thor's days in the '70s and '80s as an administrator in the Los Angeles Community College District, where business leaders told her they needed more hands-on training at the workplace—not two-year training programs at the college campus.

In pursuing that mission, Rio Salado flips educational models on their head.

With an annual online enrollment of roughly 10,000 students and growing, Rio Salado is a national leader in online instruction, particularly among community colleges.



Graduates of the 16-week Phoenix Police Academy training program can also earn 35 credits from Rio Salado College.

"At traditional colleges, they build it and hope somebody comes. We essentially say, 'If you buy it, we'll build it,'" said Jim Van Dyke.

Rio looks for accounts of 50 FTSE and larger, said Karen Stigers, director of corporate and government programs. Otherwise, she said, "It isn't a win scenario for us, and it isn't a win scenario for them."

Van Dyke, who says he joined Rio Salado 12 years ago as the college's first "salesperson" and went on to sign up the first "client," America West Airlines, is unashamed of using sales terminology.

"It's a very noble thing," he said. "These are the people who make us grow. A student is a serf; a customer is a whole different kind of thinking."

The business lingo isn't limited to the school's external relationships, as attested to by a license plate on the wall outside Thor's office. "RIO TQM" reads the plate, alluding to Rio's focus on Total Quality Management, a business philosophy devoted to perpetual improvement of an organization.

And, while most colleges never mention customer service, Rio administrators decided two years ago that mere service wasn't enough. They hired a consultant to work on "customer astonishment."

Rio's entrepreneurial spirit and reliance on business models invite comparisons to the for-profit institution just across the freeway. In many ways, Rio has more in common with the University of Phoenix than it does with its sister community colleges.

Both are geared for working adults and have significant online enrollment. And both have national ambitions.

"They're a competitor in some respects and a partner in others," said Pam Felkins, director of operations for the Phoenix campus of the University of Phoenix. "They're an institution that's on the edge. They're willing to go out and explore things that the other community colleges either haven't been given the blessing to do or haven't wanted to."

Rio Salado's public school price tag of just \$41 a credit hour for in-state students is highly competitive at the lower-division level. As a result, many students transfer to the university for their upper-division work.

"If anybody asks me where to go to get their (lower-division) courses, I always recommend Rio Salado. It's more like the type of learning environment they will get here," said Felkins.

With an annual online enrollment of roughly 10,000 students and growing, Rio Salado is a national leader in online instruction, particularly among community colleges. More than 1,000 of the online students live outside Arizona. Of its 300 distance learning courses, 200 are available on the Internet.

While today most colleges offer Internet courses, Rio's distance learning mission meant that it jumped in earlier than most. In 1996, Thor put the college's 17 full-time faculty members through "Internet boot camp," and then asked each to develop an online course for the fall.

Once known for hundreds of classroom sites dotted around the county in shopping centers and public buildings, Rio has shrunk back to just seven locations, even as out-of-state enrollment grows.

A vehicle for growth is Anatomy and Physiology, a

course using a customized commercial CD-ROM with on-screen dissections and lab practicals. Rio officials love to use the course for demonstrations and student testimonials.

Rio certainly has not escaped criticism for having the guts to do science labs online, but John Arle, faculty chair for the sciences, has a ready retort: "Are you still using a cat?" he quipped, referring to the standard practice for lab dissections. "I've replaced a cat in a tray with a human on a screen. At least it's the right species."

That combination has worked for student Matt Zimmerman, a Florida psychotherapist. "Not only can you do dissection, but it gives you computer graphics of anatomical structures," said Zimmerman. "It can rotate them, and do all sorts of things you can't do in an actual lab."

To teach such courses, Rio relies almost exclusively on part-time faculty—another feature it shares with the new for-profit institutions. Adjuncts are particularly common at virtual universities, where instruction is labor intensive.

"It's the emerging model for online institutions," said Sally Johnstone, director of the Colorado-based Western Cooperative for Educational Telecommunications.

"If you bring in someone at an assistant professor level... you just won't generate enough money to cover that salary," noted Jerry Ice, president of the International Center for Distance Learning and provost at Thomas Edison State College, a New Jersey distance institution that employs no full-time professors.

Though the use of part-timers is rising everywhere, Rio has taken the principle further than most. This year, the school employs 600 adjunct instructors and just 21 full-time instructors. The full-timers teach very few courses, instead serving as department chairs—supervising part-timers and overseeing academic programs.

Since its founding, Rio Salado intended to have a small number of full-time faculty. That enables the college to keep costs down, and keeps it nimble.

"If you have a large group of full-time faculty, you can't move as fast," said Dean of Instruction Carol Scarafioti. "With



Jim Van Dyke, dean of applied programs at Rio Salado, believes students should be treated like "customers," not "serfs."

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a small group, the whole organization is a lot more agile.”

Faculty who choose to work at Rio seem to like the system. “We try to move forward as an entire faculty and an entire college,” said Vernon Smith, faculty president and chair of foreign languages. “At other institutions of higher education...I hear problems like, ‘My dean won’t let me do that.’ It’s not even in our mindset. It sounds so foreign.”

In keeping with TQM philosophy, Rio Salado provides many services for part-timers that other colleges do not: Couriers deliver paperwork directly to instructors’ homes, for example. “You have to view the adjunct faculty as a customer, not as a pain,” noted Linda Thor.

That has been sociology adjunct Dave Horsman’s experience. “Anything I bring up as a suggestion for improvement, generally it’s seized upon and acted upon and in place not too far in the future,” he said. It was his idea, for example, to set up a special team to help ensure that students

can track down instructors when they have to—a regular need at a distance learning institution.

Despite all these efforts, the lopsided ratio of full-time to part-time faculty has been a great source of controversy since Rio Salado’s inception. Al Shipley, a math professor in the district since Rio’s founding and current chair of Glendale Community College’s math department, is among the skeptics.

“There are good part-time teachers, and there are bad full-time teachers, but the probability of getting mostly full-time teachers with higher standards is greater,” said Shipley.

In math, for example, Shipley’s department employs 32 full-time instructors—50 percent more than Rio employs college-wide—even though Glendale is only slightly larger than Rio.

Leaders of the district’s part-time faculty association also have their complaints.

“The leadership of Rio Salado was non-cooperative in any

UPDATE **Rio Salado Is Going Strong** **July 2008**

RIO SALADO, the community college described in the spring 2001 issue of *National CrossTalk*, has continued to grow in size and scope, and remains largely online.

Offering everything from ESL classes for newly arrived immigrants to post-baccalaureate degrees in teacher education, Rio Salado has become the largest of the ten colleges in the Maricopa Community College District, which includes Phoenix and the surrounding area.

In 2006-07, enrollment in credit classes was 48,761—an 85 percent increase since 2001. Online enrollment had jumped from 10,000 to more than 28,000. Total credit and non-credit headcount exceeded 61,000, or about 25 percent of the district total.

“While other colleges in the district have lost enrollment, Rio Salado has been gaining,” said Alfredo de los Santos Jr., professor of education at Arizona State University and former vice chancellor of

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the Maricopa district. “Their institutional gains in the uses of technology have been remarkable,” he added. “The quality of service they provide has continued to improve.”

“We continue to be cost effective,” said Linda Thor, Rio Salado’s president since 1990. In 2006-07, cost per full-time equivalent student was \$5,550—36 percent less than other Maricopa district colleges. “We are a big financial contributor to the district,” Thor said.

Staff size grew from 300 in 2001 to almost 500 in 2008; to accommodate them, a second building was added at Rio Salado’s Tempe headquarters.

In 2001, new classes began every two weeks. Now they start every

week, to provide flexibility for students, many of whom work full-time or part-time and also have family responsibilities.

“Many of my students (at Arizona State) have taken online courses from Rio,” said de los Santos. “They spend a week or two on one course, and then they’re finished with it. It fits better into their schedules.”

Not all Rio Salado coursework is online. The college has partnership agreements with more than 40 corporations and government agencies in the Phoenix area, and these classes generally are taught at the places of employment.

The post-baccalaureate program in teacher education is a hybrid—basic coursework is online, but students also must do traditional classroom teaching. Arizona’s public four-year universities have fought successfully to keep community colleges from offering four-year degrees, but state law has created an exception for teacher education. Rio Salado has graduated “800 verified teachers in the last seven years,” said Janet Johnson, chair of education.

College officials said more such hybrid programs probably would be offered in the future.

“My impression is that Rio Salado is a really fine institution that is managed well,” said David A. Longanecker, executive director of the Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education. “The only question is, Will this survive after Linda Thor leaves?”

Perhaps the clearest sign of Rio Salado’s success came in January 2008, when a for-profit group sought to buy the college for \$400 million.

“After a wild 48 hours,” Linda Thor said, “the chancellor (Rufus Glasper, chancellor of the Maricopa Community College District) said no, Rio Salado was not for sale.”

—William Trombley

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effort we made to contact adjunct faculty. It seemed they went out of their way to make formal contact with those teachers difficult,” said Jack Goodman, association chair in the late 1990s. “A lot of people are glad they’re there because they’re so flexible...but the people who teach for them still have to make a living.”

Warren Mosby, current chair of the association, says the situation has improved only slightly, noting that two years ago, he had a hard time getting e-mail addresses of Rio adjuncts.

Thor, who insists Rio’s part-time instructors are treated as well as any in the district, if not better, understands the suspicion. “If this model is effective, and you project it to all of higher education, it would be very threatening to the ranks of faculty,” she observed. “We have never suggested that. We are a niche institution.”

Fairly or unfairly, the use of part-timers lends Rio Salado a certain taint in the minds of some area academics—and draws additional scrutiny to everything the college does.

Even as Rio’s national ambitions are increasing (the school recently entered a partnership with the U.S. Open University, for example), its attempts to invade new turf repeatedly draw fire locally.

Dual enrollment is a case in point. Rio was the first of the Maricopa community colleges allowed to offer programs in which high school students earn college credit for courses taken at the high school.

Those programs, now also offered by Rio’s sister colleges, have been criticized as low-quality cash cows for the district, since both colleges and high schools receive state funding for the same student.

“The notion that every student is ready to do college work before they graduate high school—it sounds ludicrous when you say it out loud,” said Gay Garesche, an economics instructor at Glendale. “There was a tremendous drive to see this everywhere because it’s so lucrative, but it’s way beyond what’s academically warranted.”

“You have a bunch of faculty who think this is a sham... that the system is open for abuse,” said Tom Trotter, Arizona State University’s vice provost for academic affairs.

But since ASU has articulation agreements with all of the community colleges, the university leaves quality control up to college officials. Thor defended the quality of the classes, and said the additional money helps pay for faculty development, lab upgrades and field trips at the high schools.

Rio Salado sent 445 transfer students to Arizona State this year, but Trotter declined to say how well the transfers were doing this year or how well they have done in the past.

While the universities may have grudgingly accepted dual enrollment, they could not tolerate another initiative of Rio Salado’s: a campaign to extend community colleges’ tentacles into the universities’ territory by letting them offer four-year degrees in selected areas.

Though the idea was approved by the legislature in 1997, then-Governor Fife Symington vetoed it under pressure from the universities—a rare case of the University of Phoenix siding with the state’s three public universities.



“It’s music to our ears when someone says ‘You can’t do that,’” says Linda Thor, Rio Salado College’s entrepreneurial president.

“The offering of degrees comes at a cost,” said Trotter. “It requires faculty and the resources. The question is whether... those resources should be duplicated on the community college level. We felt that the universities are meeting the needs of the citizens.”

Thor doesn’t agree, citing several areas, law enforcement among them, where degree completion at Arizona universities is not easy. “I believe the need for the community college baccalaureate still exists,” she said.

Still, Rio Salado has successfully expanded its role in upper-division education, through partnerships with four-year institutions that accept up to 80 units from the college, more than traditional universities.

“Rio Salado has been and still is the leader in the arena, with regard to aggressively finding new ways to serve students,” said Sally Johnstone.

The college’s commitment to using business models and breaking boundaries in order to work with private institutions raises the issue of the relevance of public institutions. On this question, Linda Thor has much to say. Educational entrepreneurship, she believes, is necessary to protect public institutions against inroads made by the likes of corporate universities and credit aggregators.

“We potentially could lose what has been a large part of the community college function,” she said. “We are trustees of the public’s dollars and the public’s faith. We will have failed if we don’t adapt the institutions to the public’s needs.” ♦

Independent consultant Pamela Burdman is a former higher education reporter for the *San Francisco Chronicle* and former program officer in education at the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation.

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