Thousands of community college students receive laptop computers, launching community service efforts to increase digital literacy in California

California Connects equips 3,000 MESA students with laptops, software and Internet access to train others in their communities

(Sacramento, Calif.—March 2, 2011) — California Connects, a federally funded program designed to increase digital literacy and broadband access among underserved communities, began distributing laptops today to 3,000 Mathematics, Engineering, Science, Achievement (MESA) students at community colleges throughout California. These students will also be provided intensive outreach and hands-on training through the Microsoft IT Academy Program, enabling them to educate others and ultimately help increase the number of broadband Internet users in California by more than 61,000 individuals by 2013.

Over the next three years, a total of 5,800 laptops will be distributed to MESA students at 33 California Community College campuses. The computers come fully equipped with state-of-the-art technology provided by many of today’s top communications and technology companies, including HP, Microsoft, AT&T and Insight, a technology solutions provider.

As community service, the MESA students will teach others who lack access to or knowledge of navigating the Internet how to utilize it for essential tasks such as securing gainful employment, exploring higher education opportunities, accessing health and finance resources, engaging with social networks and advancing their general quality of life.

“The federal government recognizes that California’s community colleges and students are uniquely qualified to help close our nation’s digital divide. That’s something we can all be proud of,” said California Community Colleges Chancellor Jack Scott. “This program will give our students the necessary tools and training to provide access for underserved populations to the Internet while building the state’s foundation for economic growth and job creation.”

The laptops are made by HP and come equipped with Microsoft operating and productivity software and connectivity to AT&T’s Mobile Broadband Network, with complete computer imaging and preparation performed by Insight. The end result is computers that will offer students the tools and training necessary to become educators themselves.

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“This collaboration involving some of our nation’s leading communications and technology firms will provide many individuals with much-needed digital literacy tools and training that will help them uncover new and meaningful opportunities, such as gaining access to education and seeking employment. We are arming the college students of today with the tools they need to contribute to the high tech society of tomorrow,” said Dr. Paul Lanning, President and CEO of the Foundation for California Community Colleges, the grant administrator for California Connects.

For Xochitl (Xochi) Rios, a student leader who is part of the MESA program at Cañada College in Redwood City, the outreach she will be able to provide through California Connects has a personal meaning; her mother, who did not complete her high school education, has never owned a computer. Rios is eager to help others who are in a similar situation.

“Just like my mother, there are thousands of people out there who don’t have the means to own or access a computer. Because of that, they don’t know how to navigate the Internet. I am very excited that this program will give students like me the opportunity to provide outreach to others that will help them learn this important skill,” said Rios.

California Connects will address a significant need and a widening digital divide that exists for many populations. An August 2010 study by the Public Policy Institute of California found that while the digital divide has narrowed significantly among some demographic groups a gap remains for Latinos, especially those from Spanish-speaking and economically disadvantaged households. The report also indicates that Internet and broadband use has increased in all regions of the state except the Central Valley, which will be an area of focus for California Connects through its partnership with the Great Valley Center of the University of California, Merced.

California Connects is funded by a $10.9 million Broadband Technology Opportunities Program grant from the U.S. Department of Commerce’s National Telecommunications and Information Administration. The project was funded as part of more than $200 million in recent American Recovery and Reinvestment Act grants specifically supporting California projects. Additional details about the program are available at www.CAconnects.org.

The Foundation for California Community Colleges is the official non-profit foundation to the California Community Colleges’ Board of Governors and Chancellor’s Office and is the grant administrator of California Connects. The Foundation’s mission is to benefit, support, and enhance the missions of the California Community College system, the largest higher education system in the nation. The Foundation is a 501(c)(3) tax-exempt non-profit corporation and receives no direct state or public support. For more information, visit www.foundationccc.org.
The California Community Colleges is the largest system of higher education in the nation composed of 72 districts and 112 colleges serving 2.89 million students per year. The system is also the largest provider of workforce training in the nation. Nearly 25 percent of all the community college students nationwide are enrolled in a California community college. The Chancellor's Office provides leadership, advocacy and support under the direction of the Board of Governors of the California Community Colleges.

Founded in 1997, the Great Valley Center is a non-profit organization that works in partnership with the University of California, Merced to support organizations and activities working to improve the economic, social and environmental well-being of California’s Great Central Valley.

California Connects Technology and Communication Partners:
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