

Interview with Geeta Brown, President/CEO of InterCoast Colleges

Born in Yuba City, Geeta Brown is the middle of five children, with two older twin sisters and two younger sisters. Her mother was an immigrant from India, and her father's side had been in California only a few generations longer. Her father was originally a farmer in Northern California, but had suffered some significant losses during Geeta's childhood. Though she and her siblings grew up fairly poor, there was never a lack of love and support from her parents and sisters, and together they saw each other through all of life's challenges. She left home at age 18 to attend nearby Yuba Community College to continue the college course she had started taking while still in high school. During her first year at Yuba Community College, she was the Director of Student Activities and did a number of events that supported nonprofits, raising money for children and other various charities. In the following year, she became the Student Body President and was active in all aspects of student government. After graduating with her associate's degree, she transferred to California State University, Sacramento, where she majored in Government and Journalism. Geeta continued being active in student government at CSU Sacramento, where she served as Chair of Associated Students and presided over meetings with State government official such as Senators as well as the executive team.

Later, Geeta went to work in the vocational college industry. While only a few years out of college and still trying to decide on a career path, Geeta found herself drawn towards education. For a short time in Sacramento, she directed a placement agency, matching employers with qualified people who were looking for employment. It was working with these individuals and assisting them in their journey of self-discovery and finding their career passions that Geeta found the most rewarding. With that experience in mind, she was drawn to the vocational school industry, where she would be able to provide dedicated, hard-working people with the means of tackling new and exciting careers. Her passion for supporting individuals in their growth and development propelled her to become a certified career coach. She earned her Master's in Leadership and Doctorate in Education, both at the University of Southern California (USC).

She brings the skills she learned in her leadership training at USC to her role as President and CEO of InterCoast Colleges, a group of five vocational colleges in California, where she leads a team of vice presidents and executives. It was in this capacity that Geeta noticed that InterCoast Colleges' ground students were graduating at a higher rate than its online students, as well as there being a substantial difference in the overall retention rate. It was these unusual facts that propelled her back to USC to explore education further, and to try and find an answer. For her dissertation, she did a qualitative study on online training programs vs. traditional classroom programs, specifically in Addiction Studies, and identified some key elements that are essential in promoting student success. Following her successful doctoral dissertation, Geeta presented her findings to the executive committee at InterCoast Colleges. It was after that meeting that InterCoast implemented the TEAM approach, which helps to provide students with the tools they need to succeed in their online program. Geeta describes each acronym of the TEAM approach as follows:

“T” for Technology – The study found that both students and faculty were having trouble with the new technology that was introduced in the online school program. To help students and faculty become more proficient and comfortable with the system, they were provided tools such as

individualized training and weekly phone calls to ensure that everyone was absorbing the new technology and were able to navigate it effectively.

“E” for Engagement – Online students, particularly in Addiction Studies, need much more personal contact with faculty and staff. The study found that online students wanted as much contact as ground students, even though they enjoy the convenience and independence of an off campus education. Online students expressed the desire for more time with faculty, more communication and more live time, and immediate feedback on their performance. More communication meant more contact with faculty and staff members. Student Liaison positions were created to provide more student support so that students who were feeling isolated knew they could just pick up the phone and call someone.

“A” for Accountability – Start holding students more accountable to themselves. The study found that faculty and staff would wait for students to submit their assignments on time; however, as it transpires, students need help with time management to ensure they don’t fall behind. This led to the faculty starting to hold students more accountable to their tasks on a weekly basis, and changing the structure of the online submission of assignments, assisting students in staying on top of their schedules and work.

“M” for Mindset – Students and faculty approach the online environment differently than they would a traditional classroom environment. If an on ground student missed class, any number of reasons could be assumed, car trouble or emergency for instance. But an online student can sometimes have a more casual attitude towards absence and merely choose not to log on. In order to combat this, student orientation became stronger and expectations more outlined. As students and faculty understood the requirements, they rose to the expectations and this resulted in higher retention rates.

After the TEAM approach was implemented, many students who graduated from the certificate program returned to InterCoast Colleges to obtain an associate degree through their online program, and as previous students of InterCoast, their transition to higher learning was a smooth one.

From successes in her education to solving problems at her school, Geeta’s life is full of passion and joy. They say home is where the heart is, and this could not be truer for Geeta. She has a son, 19, and a daughter, 21, her husband of 24 years, Chris. Together they discovered at an early age that their son Adam had a gifted mind, and over the course of his childhood, helped to direct him through an educational path even more remarkable than his mother’s. Adam went on to receive his associate’s degree at age 14, his bachelor’s at 16, and his master’s at 18! Now 19, he is a student of Pepperdine University’s prestigious School of Law. Their daughter Hayley, now 22, is a constant source of joy in their lives. Suffering from cerebral palsy at a young age, it was Geeta and Chris’ care and devotion that saw the family through the hard times and into the bright days they enjoy now. The family remains tight and together as three of Geeta’s sisters, as well as her parents, live only across the street, not to mention Chris’ oldest daughter Jill and the grandkids! Family is all around and the love and support it provides is something Geeta would never do without.

In closing, Geeta stresses the importance of kindness and love for one another: “We need to put the social and educational development of our children first so they can become the caring and loving individuals we need them to be in our society...to promote good work in what they do and to produce positive outcomes in their lives.” In her experience working with individuals who have past addictions or criminal convictions, she has learned that anyone could have a different life had they had the right people to give them a positive direction to go in. Children follow examples, and it is our responsibility to make sure that we are providing them with one worthy of emulating.