

# Perspectives

JANUARY 2020

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Leadership for the  
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## Partnerships for Prosperity: Critical Challenges and the Community College Role in Rural Communities in 2020 and Beyond

**Sherry Zylka, EdD**

*President and CEO*

*Big Sandy Community and Technical College  
Prestonburg, Kentucky*

Nationally, community colleges serve 12 million students annually by providing opportunities for associate degrees and transfer pathways, as well as training and career programs in hundreds of career fields. As a sector, community colleges are known for providing critical access to quality higher education at very low costs for students.

To do so, some community colleges face many challenges. Budgets are often determined outside of the college and may depend upon state legislatures, taxes, enrollments, or other factors external to the community. With open enrollment comes access, but it also can create a student body that is not well prepared for college-level coursework, which can then lead to retention and success rate issues. Often colleges are able to implement programs and services to address these and other barriers to success for students. But, for some colleges, the challenges can rest outside of education.

For colleges like mine, there are regional issues that significantly contribute to how the college operates. Big Sandy Community & Technical College (BSCTC) is located in rural Kentucky. We serve a region of the state that has been hard hit by the decline in coal mining. The coal industry was critical to the economic success in the local area and coal companies were the major employers for jobs that earned family-sustaining wages. Due to the significant drop in available jobs, there has been an outmigration of skilled workers. Other states have felt similar effects in their regional economies when industries have realized significant changes, including the automotive and tobacco industries.

As a result of this changing landscape, BSCTC needed to find alternative ways to meet the community's educational needs and to help create a workforce ecosystem that would keep qualified employees in the region. Attracting new businesses and industries can be a challenge given the geography of our area, which is naturally beautiful but without the draw of big companies and Fortune 500 corporations. BSCTC worked with local and state leadership to identify new areas of industrial growth and expansion. Having this information allowed us to determine the types of skills and training needed in the local job market and then develop creative and innovative ways to deliver it.

In the region, Big Sandy Community & Technical College

is not just the community college; we seek to be a part of the solution. The students in the workforce ecosystem who we educate and train will sustain the employment needs of existing businesses now and as they expand in the future.

A great example of this is in our healthcare. Knowing that our local hospitals were struggling to fill positions and BSCTC did not have the capacity to train enough nurses simultaneously to fill their needs, we had to work together to develop a way to address the shortage. It is difficult to recruit people to move to a rural area and the hospitals had resorted to working with agencies to fill positions at a cost that was not sustainable. BSCTC teamed up with our local hospital, two K-12 school districts, and the Kentucky Education and Workforce Development Cabinet to brainstorm solutions.

The outcome of this collaboration was an idea to build a talent pipeline of high school students interested in healthcare jobs and ensure they received some hands-on experience. The Commonwealth of Kentucky provided grant funding to establish an apprenticeship program, Kentucky Advanced Technical College High (K-Tech). Through this grant, BSCTC's apprenticeship director was able to establish the program for high school students in the healthcare track. The students are enrolled in a certified nurse aid program which includes CPR, phlebotomy, and actual work experience. Having these experiences in a hospital setting is invaluable to the students and helps them as they choose a pathway to higher education. Once the students graduate from high school, they can seamlessly transfer to BSCTC to complete their associate degree and already have experience working at the local hospital.

The apprenticeship program and others like it do more than feed the local workforce pipeline; they also address issues with equity. Open enrollment provides access, but it does not mean that all students have the tools and services they need to be a success in college. Particularly for rural community colleges, there are usually no other options for post-secondary education in the local area so these issues can be concentrated at the community college.

Fortunately for me, Kentucky is working collectively to address the needs of students. Recently the Kentucky Legislative Research Council requested information from the 16 colleges in the Kentucky Community and Technical College System (KCTCS) that informed both house and senate legislators of the challenges that community college students face that are barriers to success. Additionally, they wanted to know what we, as

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*Colleges will have to deal with significant changes in the coming decades — changes that can be categorized as the Great Decline, the Great Unknowing, and the Great Unbundling.*

— John D. Simon

*Community colleges of the future must determine how to successfully walk a tightrope of paradoxes and contradictory expectations.*

— Pamela Eddy

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## EMERGING LEADER PERSPECTIVES

Since the dawn of the 21st century, community colleges have faced numerous challenges, including staggering enrollment fluctuations, evolving completion goals, funding declines, accountability demands, economic swings, campus violence, changes in public perception of the value of a community college education, and more. As we enter the third decade of this century, college leaders are often unsure when – or from where – the next threat may surface. We posed the following question to emerging and national leaders. Their answers appear below.

### QUESTION OF THE MONTH:

**What do you see as the most critical challenges facing community colleges at the start of the 2020 decade?**

#### **Brandon Anderson, MFA**

English instructor and Instructional Coach  
Jackson College  
Jackson, Michigan

AACC's 21st-Century Commission on the Future of Community Colleges released its Reclaiming the American Dream report in 2012. With the American Dream in a state of peril, the commission argues that community colleges "need to reimagine their roles and the ways they do their work" (AACC, 2012, p. vii). In the nearly eight years since this report, the need for community colleges to reassess and reimagine their role (both within the higher education landscape and American society more broadly) is still the case.

This past decade saw several consistent changes across the board among community colleges—broad implementation of guided pathways, the trend of dropping "community" from institutions' names, etc. Meanwhile, the dawn of this new decade is likely to see community colleges continuing to evolve by enacting bold strategies in the face of critical challenges, particularly completion and retention.

The compressed-term course format that many colleges have adopted in recent years is a prime example of such a bold strategy. While some institutions, like Austin Community College, have a long history of offering classes in various course models, the gains in student success metrics found by Trident Technical College, Odessa College, and more during the past decade have led other colleges to follow suit.

Jackson College, for instance, has recently scaled up its utilization of a 7-week course model. By doing this, JC is able to provide students with face-to-face, online, and hybrid course options that can help fit students' specific and changing needs from one term to the next. The trend towards offering condensed format course options is likely to grow among America's community colleges during this new decade.

Workforce development is another area in which community colleges are likely to continue progressing in the coming decade. Forming and strengthening partnerships with employers in its service area can help a community college address the needs of the local professional climate, certainly, but forging such partnerships can be difficult. As a report from the Brookings Institute notes, "financial challenges as well as cultural differences between business and colleges may form barriers to developing these relationships" (Mann, 2017, p. 3).

Community colleges will continue down the path of significant change that was evident over the past decade. As they do so, colleges will find that faculty—and particularly the adjunct instructors that comprise a majority of their faculty—are essential to the success of new initiatives. Thus, it is also critical that community colleges provide ongoing training and funding to this key group. While this may be an added financial challenge, if community colleges are to continue adapting and evolving in the name of student success, it will be a necessity.



*Brandon Anderson, MFA, has worked in the field of higher education for the past 12 years and currently serves as an English instructor and Instructional Coach at Jackson College in Jackson, Michigan. He earned a Master of Fine Arts degree in Creative Writing from San Diego State University in California. Currently, Brandon is working on his doctorate degree in the Doctorate of Community College Leadership program (DCCL) at Ferris State University.*

#### **Kate Smith, MS**

Interim President  
Rio Salado College  
Tempe, Arizona

Throughout the history of community colleges, challenges are nothing new. What is new today, though, are the types, the criticality, and the rapid pace of the challenges facing colleges in the next decade. After years of sustained enrollment growth, community college enrollment has trended downward since the beginning of this past decade (Juszkiewicz, 2019). As funding models have historically been linked to enrollment, colleges across the nation have continued to face declining resources, coupled with widespread state disinvestments and changing funding models (i.e. performance-based funding models). With more funding models linked to retention and completion metrics, under-funded colleges will face even greater challenges in meeting established benchmarks to maintain or grow funding to support student success. As a result, a question facing many institutions is how to successfully diversify revenue streams. Additionally, public scrutiny regarding the value of the degree has led to increased pressure on colleges to "share their story" of community impact, which, in turn, leads to greater public support for community college funding.

Another challenge in front of community colleges today also has great promise of opportunity for meeting the education needs of future generations: How does higher education partner in new ways with industry to meet the rapidly evolving needs of the current and future workforce? Integral to this question is understanding the lightning speed with which industry continues to advance; the need for institutions of higher education to be able to respond with speed, agility, nimbleness, and flexibility; and the undeniable questions regarding the long-standing meaning and structure of conferred degrees. As technological advancements continue to accelerate, colleges face the need for continuous and rapid program development, as well as consideration of embedding the fundamental civic and soft skills that enable effective and harmonious interactions within an ecosystem that necessitates lifelong, sporadic, short-term learning experiences in higher education. How will we structure, assess, and recognize these experiences?

Responding to the needs of industry, combined with remaining true to our access mission and a liberal education that promotes critical thinking, problem solving, communication, and civic engagement, leads one to consider what the credentialing of the future embodies. How do we achieve this balance of workforce skills and an educated and civically engaged citizenry within a new model of flexible education that empowers all sectors of our population to engage successfully with learning and achieving success, and creating socially and economically equitable communities? And what are the novel ways in which institutions of higher education, specifically community colleges, will partner with one another to meet these challenges? Although these questions may harken back decades, what separates them today is the continuous acceleration of the changes and the requisite changes in the structure and delivery of higher education.



*Kate Smith, MS, is a relentless student-centered leader, currently serving as the interim president of Rio Salado College, providing leadership for 10 locations serving over 50,000 students annually, two public radio stations, and the state's largest adult basic education programming. Previously, she served as faculty, department chair, dean, and academic VP. Kate earned her MS from the University of Rochester and is currently enrolled in the Ferris State DCCL program.*

## NATIONAL LEADER PERSPECTIVE

Since the dawn of the 21st century, community colleges have faced numerous challenges, including staggering enrollment fluctuations, evolving completion goals, funding declines, accountability demands, economic swings, campus violence, changes in public perception of the value of a community college education, and more. As we enter the third decade of this century, college leaders are often unsure when – or from where – the next threat may surface. We posed the following question to emerging and national leaders. Their answers appear below.

### Another Decade of Continued State Disinvestment, Increased Accountability, and Compliance Facing Community Colleges

**Bruce Moses, EdD**

Associate Provost  
Pima County Community College District  
Tucson, Arizona

I have worked in higher education for thirty years now, the last ten years at community colleges. Over the past two decades, the mission of community colleges has focused on providing access and affordability, responding to the needs of the community, and ensuring equity for individuals to enrich their lives through education, training, and workforce development. As we embark on a new decade, community colleges will face critical challenges that threaten our institutions' ability to continue to meet that mission.

*[T]here are critical challenges community colleges will face that threaten our institutions' ability to continue to meet that mission.*

**Continuation of State Disinvestment.** State disinvestment in community colleges will remain and community colleges will continue to experience a threat that directly conflicts with our mission of access and affordability. More cost reductions and fiscal belt-tightening will permeate the core operations of community colleges. Units such as student affairs that are charged with providing high-touch services to our students will be impacted significantly by the reductions in workforce and elimination of student support service units to balance budgets. States like California have stepped up to provide funding for national initiatives such as the guided pathways model that requires high touch services, yet the majority of community colleges have resorted to "robbing Peter to pay Paul" to fund such efforts.

The Century Foundation calls for more funding for community colleges and better research to estimate their financial needs. The report, which includes new research by a group of more than 20 education experts, finds community colleges are deeply underfunded even as they are more likely to enroll socioeconomically disadvantaged students than four-year institutions (Smith, 2019).

For example, overall state funding in Arizona for public two- and four-year colleges in the 2018 school year was more than \$7 billion below its 2008 level. More importantly, the two largest community college districts, Maricopa and Pima, were defunded by the state in 2015. Arizona's disinvestment in the two largest districts resulted in tuition increases by both districts over the last four years. By 2030, the ACHIEVE60AZ alliance aims to see 60% of Arizona adults, ages 25 to 64, hold postsecondary credentials or degrees. However, the governor and other state entities supporting the defunding of two of their largest community college districts have not demonstrated backing of this lofty goal. Therefore, I would imagine that leaders in these community college districts have dedicated time and resources politically trying to get back into the funding formula.

**Accountability and Compliance.** Accountability has always been a part of the culture of the community college, but in recent years, expectations

#### QUESTION OF THE MONTH:

*What do you see as the most critical challenges facing community colleges at the start of the 2020 decade?*

for metrics and measurement have increased exponentially. The current climate is such that it is evident these expectations will only continue to increase into the future, and many new initiatives in training, programming, and staffing will be part of the accountability equation. Community colleges often struggle to meet basic expectations for accreditation, but now resources also must be

dedicated to compliance with much more prescriptive and stringent federal regulations and program performance.


Considering the dramatic increase in accountability and compliance for all higher education, the "next big thing" is likely to be yet another more performance-based reporting or compliance requirement. In a time of shrinking budgets, what is the cost to community colleges when a significant amount of thought, planning, and resources must be devoted to measuring outcomes and expectations that may or may not be closely tied to improving either student success or the student experience? Costs might include lost opportunities, budgets allocated to mandatory training and programming, and staffing decisions that focus more on risk management than improving student learning.

*The focus on results has led to increasing pressure for institutions to track, collect, and analyze data to inform decision-making for improvement.*

This emphasis on results will continue to be a theme for the education department and policy makers in Washington, D.C. The focus on new standards requiring institutions to provide results of program outcomes through the [College Scorecard](#) for certificates and degrees establishes the trend towards expecting institutions to not only have good programs, but to work towards continuously improving them. The focus on results has led to increasing pressure for institutions to track, collect, and analyze data to inform decision-making for improvement.

Community college leaders suggest that the task of evaluating outcomes is being met in principle with the current requirements set forth by our regional accreditors. However, there are still substantial issues and inconsistencies among community colleges on what truly represents institutional outcomes. Debates with the education department and legislators continue concerning how to clearly define outcomes, how to document them, and how to reconcile different student circumstances. No community college revels in government regulation, but it remains a necessary requirement in higher education to secure Title IV funding, public protection, and future institutional sustainability.

*Dr. Bruce Moses is the Associate Provost at Pima County Community College District in Arizona. He has 30 years of experience in higher education and has served in multiple roles as a Higher Learning Commission Peer Reviewer. Bruce was awarded the Peer Reviewer Outstanding Service Award in 2017 as a member of the AQIP Design Team, and also serves on the Executive Board for the Council of Accreditation for Two-Year Colleges. During his career in higher education, he has served as Associate Vice President of Planning and Institutional Effectiveness at Central Arizona College, Executive Director of Institutional Effectiveness at Northwest Arkansas Community College, and Director of Continuous Improvement and Planning at Eastern Michigan University. Bruce earned his MA in Educational Leadership from Eastern Michigan University, and his doctorate from the Ferris State University DCCL Program.*



**QUICK TAKES**  
**Highlights**  
**from the Field**

**Community College Leadership Report**

by SalesForce.org and Inside Higher Ed  
 This report examines the current community college landscape through the lens of campus leadership, faculty, and staff, with the goal of taking a close look at how community college leaders are addressing current challenges and issues connected with enrollment, retention, and completion. Key objectives include an understanding of declining enrollment rates, the top challenges of increasing completion and transfer, guided pathways, partnerships, workforce development, and the skills gap. Access this work here: <https://bit.ly/2NijILL>

**Recommendations for Providing Community Colleges with the Resources They Need**

by The Century Foundation  
 The Century Foundation examines the challenges and importance of establishing the true cost of a community college education and providing colleges with the resources they need. It reviews four key steps that K-12 costing-out studies take; outlines critical differences between pre-collegiate and community college education; and delineates eight recommendations that provide a framework for future research. Finally, it also articulates a plan for how new empirical evidence should inform future policymaking. Access this work here: <https://bit.ly/2QNXpuP>

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Published by the Alliance for Community College Excellence in Practice, Ferris State University, Doctorate in Community College Leadership Big Rapids, Michigan

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a college system, were doing to support students in attaining their academic goals.

*Understanding that the community college student is different than a traditional university student is critical to developing an understanding of the unique challenges faced by community colleges.*

Identifying academic and nonacademic barriers, assessing and measuring their impact on student completion and success, and understanding how programs and services affect retention are all necessary for college presidents to know. But, by creating this report and working to develop methods of monitoring and reporting for future state reports is a huge step toward eradicating these barriers for all students in Kentucky. Understanding that the community college student is different than a traditional university student is critical to developing an understanding of the unique challenges faced by community colleges.

The state report helped to identify some of the differences. Nonacademic barriers can significantly affect student success and are far more common at community colleges than at universities. Those identified at KCTCS include a student's inability to navigate college, financial instability, competing time constraints, personal health issues, and student disengagement.

One of the most significant findings was the acknowledgment – finally – that the population we serve is very different from that of the four-year institutions. Specifically, our students are more likely to be the first person in their family to attend college, be academically unprepared, have dependents, come from a low-income household, and be older than their university student peers.

This report confirmed what we, as community colleges, already knew. Our students face challenges that may derail their academic lives and anything that we can do to eliminate those barriers to help them succeed is a win-win for all involved. At BSCTC, we are already working to eradicate these barriers. Last fall semester we opened a hub called The Nest. It was the brainchild of two faculty members who wanted to provide nonacademic support to our students. The Nest is housed in a renovated classroom and donations of clothing, supplies, and food are available to students free of charge. It is a safe, nurturing environment and has been extremely well received by the students. A session about The Nest will be presented at the American Association of Community Colleges (AACC) Conference in March 2020.

To address the issue of underprepared students, we have gone to a co-requisite model for developmental education classes. This method has proven very successful in moving our students to college credit classes.

Recently, I participated in the AACC initiative entitled, Unfinished Business. This convening provided an opportunity for presidents to hear what best practices were being implemented across the nation. For Big Sandy Community and Technical College, one of the

examples I used was from the Kentucky Council for Postsecondary Education, which has oversight of all higher education in the commonwealth. It is mandated that each college must have a diversity plan with metrics. Consideration is given for the demographics from the region in which each college is located, but does not make excuses for the lack of diversity of the region.

This plan is unique in that it has consequences if you do not meet your metrics. If a college does not meet its diversity goals for three years in a row, it cannot offer any new academic programs. When I first heard of this I was very surprised because it didn't seem to make sense. The offering of new programs provides a way to bring new students into the college, especially by providing programs in the key high-wage, high-demand jobs located in our community.

*Our students face challenges that may derail their academic lives and anything that we can do to eliminate those barriers to help them succeed is a win-win for all involved.*

Currently, I am serving on the Diversity, Equity, & Inclusion Commission at AACC, where often we share stories about our student success initiatives, including equity. Although local decision-making is not persona-driven, BSCTC has been able to generate measurable - and valuable - outcomes regarding diversity. Without a doubt, the commitment to diversity and equity in Kentucky is real.

There are a multitude of challenges facing community colleges in this new decade and I've shared a few with you here, as well as how we, at BSCTC, are addressing them. I believe we have the capacity to tackle the issues that we face in innovative and creative ways. Clearly, reaching out to our colleagues to share best practices is the way to student success.

*Sherry Zylka, EdD, serves as the President and CEO of Big Sandy Community and Technical College in Prestonburg, Kentucky. Dr. Zylka started her lifelong career in community colleges as a student employee while earning her associate degrees. She has worked in various higher education leadership positions including dean of continuing education and professional development, dean of workforce and economic development, and dean of college centers. Dr. Zylka also worked at the American Association of Community Colleges in Washington, DC and currently is a member of their commission for Diversity, Inclusion, and Equity. Most recently she was provost of Wayne County Community College District in Detroit, Michigan. She has presented at national and international conferences and serves on numerous boards. Dr. Zylka believes strongly about the importance of the role community colleges play within the local community for workforce development, student success, and community engagement.*



*Dr. Zylka earned two associate degrees from Schoolcraft College in Livonia, Michigan, a master's degree in education administration from Eastern Michigan University, and most recently a doctorate from the University of Texas at Austin specializing in higher education administration in their community college leadership program.*