

# Perspectives

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Community College Leadership for the 21st Century

That “new normal” must not only address the challenges of this viral pandemic, but also the pandemic of racism, discrimination, and inequity that persists in our society.

- Mark H. Erickson

Unfortunately, being in crisis mode can cause even the most intentional and well-meaning leaders to fall into patterns of bias and exclusion.

- Ruchika Tulshyan

## Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion: What the Coronavirus Teaches and How We Must Respond

**Tracy Brower, PhD, MM, MCRW**

Author, *Bring Work to Life by Bringing Life to Work*  
Contributor, *Forbes.com* and *Fast Company*  
Principal, *Applied Research + Consulting, Steelcase*

Equity, diversity, and inclusion have always been important topics with critical implications for people, businesses, education, and communities, but the pandemic is shining a new light on these issues. The shift in our experience and the new perspectives we gain, provide the opportunity for learning and improvement in the ways companies, colleges, and individuals embrace diversity and ensure equity and inclusion.

### Clarity On The Issues

The pandemic has put these issues in stark relief, and there is a new level of focus based on news reports highlighting how the pandemic is disproportionately impacting disadvantaged groups. Says Michele Meyer-Shipp, Chief Diversity and Inclusion Officer for KPMG (a leading professional services firm) and National Organization on Disability board member, “Leaders are asking, ‘What should I be thinking about?’”

*The pandemic has put these issues in stark relief, and there is a new level of focus based on news reports highlighting how the pandemic is disproportionately impacting disadvantaged groups.*

New perspectives are emerging. “The pandemic has elevated disparities and pulled the covers off things occurring in marginalized communities,” says Fannie Glover, Director of Equity and Inclusion at the Early Care and Learning Council of New York. “If you’re living in a one-room apartment with five family members and you test positive for COVID-19, it’s impossible to isolate yourself. If you’re the only bread-winner and you can’t work, your entire family suffers. In addition, if you don’t have a car to go to food banks, nor money for public transportation, you are without food even if it is free.” The issues are significant, and they have a domino effect on each other—from health to income and from transportation to access and more. Glover also provides an example of a Native American community in which members carry water for miles. They are forced to weigh the recommendation to wash their hands for 20 seconds with the additional needs for water they use for cooking, bathing, and drinking. Recognition of the conditions is critical. “Those in decision-making positions must understand what’s going on in underserved communities across the nation,” says Glover.

The pandemic has also highlighted additional challenges. According to Agnes Uherezky, Executive Director of the WorkLife HUB based in Belgium, “The pandemic has shone

a light on the more subtle forms of diversity, such as whether somebody is a parent or a caregiver.” Video conferencing has given us a rare window into people’s lives and their homes. They may have their children in the background or they may have a need to flex their work hours to provide care for an aging or sick grandparent. Many leaders are expanding their empathy and compassion for employees as they face more work-life challenges themselves and see firsthand the obstacles their faculty, staff, and students face.

### Expanded Opportunities

In addition to exposing frequently-painful circumstances, the pandemic also has a positive side. With people working from home, companies, colleges, and universities have been able to tap into diversity in new ways. For those who have difficulty moving about an office or campus due to physical limitations, barriers are removed. Or for those who have difficulty hearing or seeing colleagues in a conference room setting, the ability to turn up the volume on their laptop or change the view-size on their screen has improved their ability to fully participate. The opportunity for companies to more fully leverage the talent of people like these is promising. “We can reimagine the future of work as it pertains to workforce representation by tapping into untapped and under-tapped talent pools,” says Meyer-Shipp.

### How Companies And Individuals Should Respond

The issues are complex, but individuals and organizations can embrace the pandemic’s opportunities for learning—and can improve their approaches. “Let’s not ‘get back to business as usual,’ but think about all that we have been learning these past weeks, and try to integrate our lessons going forward,” says Uherezky.

Exactly. So how do we take the most effective actions to reimagine the future of work and learning, and ensure the greatest levels of diversity, equity, and inclusion? You’ll want to find ways to bring together a diverse range of people, give them equal footing, and intentionally include their voices. Here are some ideas:

**Get educated.** Individuals and organizations should get educated and understand the issues as fully as possible. “Organizations need to expand their view of what diversity is,” says Uherezky. “The workplace is made up of hyper-diversified employees, with very different needs.” This knowledge of differences should drive college and university approaches, policies, and practices. Individuals must learn, be self-aware, and be proactive about behaving inclusively. Listen to understand differences and actively seek opportunities to expand your viewpoints. “We all need someone in our lives to tell us what we don’t know,” says Glover.

**Get comfortable with being uncomfortable.** Seek opportunities to be with those who are different than yourself. Colleges can do this by expanding approaches to (continued on page 4)

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## EMERGING LEADER PERSPECTIVES

Our community colleges, along with most other institutions and individuals throughout our country, are struggling to achieve some degree of normalcy during these challenging and uncertain times. The combination of high uncertainty and social isolation can be observed across the spectrum. Given these stressors, the work of equity and inclusion at community colleges is now more important than ever. We posed the following question to emerging and national leaders. Their answers appear below.

### QUESTION OF THE MONTH:

**How can community college leaders maintain a focus on advancing equity during such challenging times?**

#### Armando Burciaga, EdD

Director of TRIO Student Support Services  
Red Rocks Community College  
Lakewood, Colorado

The Fourth of July holiday has come and gone, yet we continue to endure the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. Like many of my colleagues, I was optimistic and only planned to work remotely for a few weeks; yet we are now counting in terms of semesters. Also, due to challenges of racial inequities, college leaders are reminded to include assurances that detail the provision of equitable education. How do we do that? Are we seeking out all possibilities and utilizing all of our resources?

I recently shared how Red Rocks Community College (RRCC) has kept equity at the forefront while navigating through COVID-19. But rather than describing operational details, instead I provide examples demonstrating how collaboration between colleges and local community organizations positively impacts students by meeting their immediate needs. Examples center around mental health, technology, food insecurity, and housing, all resulting from partnerships with external agencies.

**Mental Health:** Students who are experiencing emotional and mental health complications have access to RRCC's counseling services providing on-campus mental health counseling, made possible through a partnership between RRCC and the Jefferson County Center for Mental Health. However, due to the COVID-19 upheaval, counselors noticed an increased need, which has resulted in added video conferencing through the college's virtual platform service.

**Technology Needs:** RRCC's students rely heavily on the college's WIFI and computer lab since many student households are not equipped with a reliable computer or internet capabilities. At the onset of moving to remote learning due to COVID-19, RRCC deployed laptops on a check-out basis to those students who did not have computers to complete coursework. This support worked well as it aligned with local cable companies that provide free and/or reduced WIFI access for qualifying households.

**Food and Housing Insecurity:** To identify student challenges, RRCC surveyed students, and those who identified food challenges can have food delivered by RRCC's Student Life, a volunteer service established by a student-led partnership with local grocery stores. For students needing an immediate housing solution, the Launch Pad was created through a long-time collaboration between RRCC and the Action Center. Together, they acquired financial support to renovate the center's homeless shelter into the Launch Pad, a facility where students can live up to two semesters while finding a permanent housing solution.

As educators, we must reflect on our actions and apply lessons learned to prepare for the future of our institution. Accountability, commitment, and action are what students and community members expect from college leaders. Engage the local community, share the stories of student success, and keep the students at the forefront, especially during a crisis.



Armando Burciaga, EdD, is a graduate of DCCL Cohort 7 and currently serves as the Director of TRIO Student Support Services at Red Rocks Community College in Lakewood, Colorado. At Red Rocks, he serves on numerous committees that include the re-accreditation of the college, the institutional strategic planning committee, and enrollment management. As a first-generation student, Armando champions a welcoming and inclusive environment for students unfamiliar to higher education.

#### Michael A Couch II, EdD

Director of Financial Aid Outreach  
Ivy Tech Community College  
Indianapolis, Indiana

In a pandemic, the most important thing that college leaders must consider is access. Access is what drives how we manage to keep equity at the

forefront. COVID-19 has revealed a range of problems for our students, including transportation, internet inaccessibility, food insecurities, and more. When considering access, we have had to re-think how we communicate with our students because with those troublesome barriers for students, how can we as a community college ensure that we can keep a focus on equity?

Of the numerous initiatives that we have undertaken on my campus, foremost among them is a focus on developing a variety of ways to communicate. Our first task was to put together an emergency response team and that team was focused on gathering timely and important information. One of the first communications that went out was a COVID-19 statement, including guidance designed to drive students to our special COVID website containing essential resource information and updates. With the website, we wanted to streamline all COVID support and resources on that particular page. Secondly, we shared critical material for students on a variety of communication channels, using zoom, Microsoft teams, social media, and youtube. The overriding goal was to disseminate the information through as many channels as possible because students have various means of access and receive information in different ways.

Another action we took was to create a fishnet mentality. We followed up early and often on any outreach we did including via text, phone calls, and emails. In those emails, we shared links to youtube and offered check-in opportunities via zoom. Also, we created just a single emergency support application, allowing students to select various options of how they were affected by COVID. A serious concern related to the fact that Cares act funds were federal, leaving DOCA students not supported. We were fortunate enough to have a donor that provided a matching campaign so we as faculty and staff could donate funds to support students. Luckily, this fund allowed us to support DOCA students, which has helped tremendously.

Lastly, when looking at focusing on equity, we have to think about how clear our communication is and how students access it. Along with being flexible with our students, we aim to provide as many connection points as possible to enable students to obtain the information we are sharing. We must remain flexible and accountable and own a student by serving as the one stop shop for that student. Often in the higher education maze, we pass students off. As a college, we worked to encourage all staff to strive to function as the one-stop-shop for a student. If you must refer a student, do so. But it is better yet if you can reach out and get matters resolved to help the student. Focusing on establishing a high level of communication, remaining flexible, and being clear about processes to facilitate access to critical resources are the necessary starting points – especially during challenging times – as a college strives to provide equitable student support.



Michael A. Couch II, EdD, is a graduate of DCCL Cohort 7, is currently serving as the director of Financial Aid Outreach at Ivy Tech Community College in Indianapolis. He also is an adjunct professor at Indiana State University in the Educational Administration doctoral program. He engages in research, presentations, and critical conversations about college affordability, enrollment management, leadership assessments, leadership experiences of African American males, and minority male initiatives.

## NATIONAL LEADER PERSPECTIVE

Our community colleges, along with most other institutions and individuals throughout our country, are struggling to achieve some degree of normalcy during these challenging and uncertain times. The combination of high uncertainty and social isolation can be observed across the spectrum. Given these stressors, the work of equity and inclusion at community colleges is now more important than ever. We posed the following question to emerging and national leaders. Their answers appear below.

### QUESTION OF THE MONTH:

*How can community college leaders maintain a focus on advancing equity during such challenging times?*

## Coming Together While Torn Apart: Advancing Equity in Challenging Times

### Melissa Cervantes, EdD

Dean of Institutional Equity, Diversity & Inclusion  
Foothill College  
Los Altos Hills, California

Unprecedented times. Words we continue to hear as our campuses grapple with our current reality. First a pandemic, then a social justice uprising; challenges of global proportions as each have sparked both fear and hope in the hearts of people around the world. Some campuses were forced to have long-overdue conversations about how the way it has “always been done” is no longer acceptable. For others, it has accelerated the glacial process of equity, breathing urgency into the historical work.

We are asked to be creative in our approaches and flexible in our expectations. Balancing ever-changing health guidelines with the needs of our students is a delicate and complex process. However, three vital elements have been invaluable in my college’s efforts to advance the equity work in the midst of our current complicated circumstances.

**Communication.** In my role as Dean of Equity at Foothill College for nearly two years, I have had numerous difficult conversations. We have to get uncomfortable. If we aren’t calling out the systemic inequities, how can we actively work to dismantle them? At Foothill College, when we speak of equity, we center race. This was a conscious choice by the college as a recognition that racial disparities exist regardless of special population or measure of success, and that in working to achieve racial equity, barriers faced by other vulnerable populations are also addressed. As a college, we have the following agreed upon equity statement: “Believing a well-educated population is essential to sustaining a democratic and just society, we commit to the work of equity, which is to dismantle oppressive systems (structural, cultural, and individual) and create a college community where success is not predictable by race.”

*Balancing ever-changing health guidelines with the needs of our students is a delicate and complex process.*

The cross-campus effort of defining the scope of work becomes a collaborative purpose to advance equity as folks begin to see their role in equity. Communication is key. We listened to our students as we made the abrupt transition to a virtual campus, maintaining perspective in that their modality of learning was not the only shift in their lives caused by the pandemic. Letting students inform our decisions, we then followed with clear communication and expectations of our employees, keeping in mind their obligations also reach beyond their professional roles. Much of this was done with live daily or semi-weekly video briefings to the campus community, always with a lens of equity. As we transitioned to virtual, offering support to those unfamiliar with online learning, we kept in mind students who would be disproportionately impacted. How we communicated and marketed resources mattered. While any student who requested resources received assistance, disaggregating data by race and income to see who was not

accessing loaner computers and internet grant awards was important to note. Student feedback was critical in our efforts to meet the needs caused by the pandemic, and to recognize those that had long been overlooked. Both listening and sharing were foundational approaches in our communication.

**Community.** We are aware of the scholarship that speaks to the benefits of community. At Foothill, as was the case at many institutions, the campus united in a beautiful way to serve a common purpose. Humanity. With the pandemic, timely professional development was essential, and was a way to ensure equity was infused in our classroom practices. Faculty leaned on one another to support their students and each other. We created a Virtual Student Hub to drop-in, ask questions, and request resources. Then with the senseless murder of George Floyd and others in the Black community, a stark reminder of the deeply-rooted historical racism in our country, we saw masses come together in solidarity.

*We must hold ourselves accountable to what we have learned and to the action that must follow if we are to advance equity.*

At Foothill, we held Porch Talk gatherings and created affinity space so that folks could speak freely, ask questions, and process what they were experiencing together. It was important that these be safe, open spaces, led often by myself and other trained facilitators, with careful consideration that the labor of uplifting did not fall on those most affected. Mental health and wellness were prioritized as we messaged that compassion and empathy were crucial in the delivery of all our services. As much as possible, we encouraged students and employees alike to reach out, to ask for support, and to lean on us as a campus community.

**Leadership in Action.** Through communication and community came the desire for action. We saw leaders organically grow from these efforts. Students came forward with requests, faculty and staff created resolutions, cross-departmental partnerships flourished, all in an effort to do and be better. We have seized the opportunity and momentum, using what we have seen and heard to inform and update our Equity Strategic Plan. We must hold ourselves accountable to what we have learned and to the action that must follow if we are to advance equity. Unprecedented times call for unprecedented action.

*Melissa Cervantes, EdD, serves as the Dean of Institutional Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion at Foothill College in Los Altos Hills, CA. Her oversight of faculty and staff professional development, the Honors and learning community programs, and the Family Engagement Institute, have afforded her the opportunity to engage with students and employees alike to address equity barriers across campus. As a member of the President’s Cabinet, Dr. Cervantes has the privilege to be an advisor to the CEO, and to ensure that equity remains centered in conversations among senior leadership. Dr. Cervantes began her journey in higher education at the community college and was the first in her family to graduate with a college degree. She holds an MA from San Jose State University and her Doctorate in Educational Leadership from San Francisco State University. It is her goal to continue the work of racial equity in dismantling oppressive structures, policies, and practices together with the Foothill College community.*



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

**COVID-19 and Student Learning in the United States: The Hurt Could Last a Lifetime**

by E. Dorn, B. Hancock, J. Sarakatsannis, and E. Viruleg

The authors share new evidence indicating that the shutdowns caused by COVID-19 could exacerbate existing achievement gaps, claiming that these learning losses and higher dropout rates are likely to be long-term outcomes. They also suggest that learning loss will probably be greatest among low-income, black, and Hispanic students. As a result, colleges must act with urgency to intervene to foster equity and support vulnerable students.

Access this work here: <https://mck.co/2ZrTasY>

**COVID-19 Could Worsen Equity Gaps. Higher Ed Must Fight Back**

by David Bevevino

This post stresses that relative to higher education, it is not yet clear how the COVID-19 disruption will change attendance, persistence, and completion rates at colleges, but current data does not look promising. The author explores the ways COVID-19 could lead to a more inequitable future and highlights five ways student success leaders can fight against this trend in the immediate future and beyond.

Access this work here: <https://bit.ly/3j886EK>

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**Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion: What the Coronavirus Teaches... (continued from page 1)**

recruiting, selection, and hiring. When a business or college says, "That person is just not a fit," it may be a signal it is not embracing differences, and there is an opportunity to improve practices. For individuals, expanding diverse relationships is key. Says Glover, "We need to avoid 'just like me syndrome' in which we seek out those who are similar and avoid differences." Growth and learning are only possible when we spend time with others who are different than ourselves and listen to understand the reality of someone who may be in situations unfamiliar to us. "We must become comfortable with being uncomfortable," says Glover.

**Build trust and acceptance.** People need to feel they are welcomed and are valued as part of the community. "Employees want to feel a sense of belonging and a sense of being valued as an integral part of a team or company," says Uherczyk. Psychological safety is critical—the feeling that people can bring all of themselves to their work experience and express opinions that may be unpopular. Organizations, colleges, universities, and leaders have roles to play in building trust and acceptance. "As leaders, we must strive to create psychologically safe environments. Our responsibility as leaders is to ensure that all of the voices are acknowledged and heard," says Mita Mallick, Head of Diversity and Cross-Cultural Marketing at Unilever. Another expert agrees. Bronwen Evans, Chief Talent Officer with MedCan, a leading health management company in Canada, says, "With the vast majority of our talent working remotely through the pandemic, we've had to double down on our thinking of what it means to create an environment of inclusivity and a sense of belonging." As individuals, whether leaders or team members, our acceptance of those who are different contributes to this inclusivity and sense of community.

**As individuals, whether leaders or team members, our acceptance of those who are different contributes to this inclusivity and sense of community.**

**Provide for different approaches to work.** Organizations, institutions, and individuals can also expand how they accommodate different ways of working. This may pertain to when people work, how they work, where they work, or even what project they are tackling. According to Meyer-Shipp, KPMG has empowered employees to have a blended workday. They can take time off during the day to provide care to a family member, for example, or help a child with schoolwork. It's important to meet faculty and staff where they are and address their unique needs. Employees' needs differ. Mallick adds, "We have to remember that everyone is on their own COVID-19 journey. Our journeys are not comparable." Colleagues can collaborate and work together while also being flexible and accommodating.

**Expand the ways in which people can contribute.** Colleges, universities, and leaders have the opportunity to reinvent how people contribute in terms of their roles and their responsibilities. Evans says, "Because our business has had to adapt so quickly by offering most of our services remotely, we've had to redeploy talent to different areas of the business, providing us with the opportunity to understand and appreciate broader skill sets." The responsibilities people are being asked to fulfill are changing at a rapid pace, and along with a certain level of chaos, comes the chance to provide new ways for people to stretch their skills and apply their talents.

**Support people with tools and practices.** The ability for people to contribute is partly based on having the right tools and programs. Meyer-Shipp says KPMG provides the necessary technology, desks, keyboards, or captioning for employees working from home with no questions asked. Mental health is also critical, and KPMG has expanded employee assistance programs, offers weekly mental health webinars, and makes all kinds of support available from text-based counseling to meditation and online exercise classes. In New York, Glover's agency and its members have also stepped up by providing key information about protocols for child care services to essential businesses.

**Invite people to the table.** As leaders, educational institutions, and companies develop policies and practices, it is important to ensure people who will be served by the approaches are part of the decision-making processes to create them. "We need people who are in the trenches, not just those who have knowledge of the trenches," says Glover. Multiple points of view are must-haves in decision making. Chris Beck, Chief Operating and Financial Officer for Caldwell Partners International, a global talent recruitment firm says, "Diversity benefits us by ensuring decisions are made with input from many lenses. When it comes down to it, no one should be making leadership decisions without having a representative group guiding them along the way." Mallick agrees saying, "We need to remind ourselves that diversity of thought around the table doesn't happen without diversity of representation." Include participants from multiple perspectives and with first-hand experience of challenges, struggles, or different realities.

The pandemic provides a significant opportunity to increase our awareness about diversity, and to expand our capacity for empathy and compassion toward members of our whole community. This is important for people, but also for an organization's results. Whether you're an individual who wants to be a better ally or a college challenged with ensuring you tap into the best talent, you can get educated, include those who are different than yourself, build trust, expand the way you accommodate work, support people holistically, and ensure a seat at the table. We will get through the pandemic together and if we take the right steps, we can have a powerfully positive impact on a future which includes more diversity, equity, and inclusion.

\*A version of this article was originally published on Forbes.com on May 19, 2020.

*Dr. Tracy Brower is a PhD sociologist studying the changing nature of work, workers, and workplace. She is the author of Bring Work to Life by Bringing Life to Work: A Guide for Leaders and Organizations and a contributor to Forbes.com and Fast Company. In addition, she is a principal with Steelcase's Applied Research + Consulting group. Tracy is an award-winning speaker and has over 25 years of experience working with global clients to achieve results. Tracy is an executive advisor to Coda Societies and to the Michigan State University Master Industrial Mathematics Program. Tracy's work has been featured in TEDx, The Wall Street Journal, Work-Life Balance in the 21st Century (book), Globe and Mail (Canada), InsideHR (Australia), HR Director (UK), T3N (Germany), Real Estate Review Journal, Fortune.com, Inc. Magazine, and more. Tracy holds a PhD in Sociology from Michigan State University, a Master of Management in Organizational Culture from Aquinas College, and a Master of Corporate Real Estate with a workplace specialization. You can follow her on LinkedIn, Twitter, or at [tracybrower.com](http://tracybrower.com).*

