

# Perspectives

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Community College Leadership for the 21st Century

The most important thing for colleges to think carefully about [is] their most vulnerable student populations who are most likely to fall through the cracks.  
- Debbie Cochrane

College leaders have had to figure out how to keep solvent the institutions they have been hired to manage and keep healthy the people they have been entrusted to serve.  
- Kevin R. McClure

## Community Colleges Lead COVID-19 Recovery from the Parentheses

**Steve Robinson, PhD**

President  
Owens Community College  
Perrysburg, Ohio

As we emerge from the coronavirus pandemic and begin the vital work of restarting our regional economies, the United States is fortunate to have a network of open admissions two-year colleges. Perhaps more fortunate than it knows. Never in the history of our country has this national infrastructure been more important. During this time of unprecedented economic upheaval, our network of 1,100 community colleges places most Americans in close proximity to the career training, workforce development programming, and affordable higher education that will be key to our nation's economic recovery. Our challenge as community college leaders will be to perform two important tasks simultaneously: 1) preserve and maintain our institutional missions of social mobility and economic development during a time of severely diminishing resources; 2) loudly make the value proposition for community colleges known in a national discourse that often relegates our institutions to parenthetical afterthought.

*In short, we should not expect the damaged economy to translate into a boon for enrollments.*

**Emerging from the Parentheses.** The national press is consumed by the story of how coronavirus will impact higher education in the Fall. With most colleges and universities fully online through the Summer, all eyes seem focused on what will happen to the "traditional college experience" of undergraduates moving into residence halls at the start of the academic year. While many community colleges across the country have residence life, most of the articles focus almost exclusively on the impact COVID-19 will have on liberal arts colleges and research universities. As Matt Reed, author of the regular Inside Higher Ed column "Confessions of a Community College Dean" noted, Emily Bazelon's June 3, 2020 article "What Will College Be Like in the Fall?" in the New York Times gave a single mention of community colleges... in parentheses. Yet, as David Jenkins and John Fink of the Community College Research Center (CCRC) at Columbia University note, 46% of all American undergraduates are enrolled at community colleges ("How Will COVID-19 Affect Community College Enrollment?" April 20, 2020).

The same averted gaze has been true for lawmakers. Likewise, the Federal stimulus response provided disproportionately less funding for community colleges than other types of higher education institutions. As Ben Miller notes in an analysis published in American Progress, public two year colleges only accounted for 27% of the funding

provided in the CARES Act ("A Better Formula for Higher Education's Coronavirus Funding" May 11, 2020). In order to help our country recover from the economic impact of coronavirus—and one could argue that community colleges are best positioned to do exactly that—we must first emerge from the peripheral vision of journalists and lawmakers.

*The most effective community colleges will proactively plan for these disparities and meet their more vulnerable student populations where they are.*

**Equity Remains a Key Driver for Emergence from Crisis.**

In the early days of COVID-19, I published a set of guiding principles on Twitter that I hoped our team at Owens Community College would return to throughout the crisis. A number of colleagues from across the country engaged and added to this thread, and it became an article I published in Community College Daily ("College Culture and COVID-19 Response," March 13, 2020). The first of these principles has shaped the work of our college and of colleges across the country, not because of my small article, but because of who we are as institutions. Because so many community colleges were already deeply involved in equity work on student outcomes and experience, we knew that the public health and economic impacts of our mitigation efforts would disproportionately harm some students more than others.

In that article back in March, I urged my colleagues to apply what they knew about student equity to their responses to the public health crisis. Colleges across the country have performed amazing work to address disparity in access to technology and broadband. They have stood up extraordinary support services for student who rely upon our physical community college spaces for safety, security, and food (like many community colleges, our libraries and food pantries never closed, finding new ways to support students during the pandemic). As the hospitalization and death rates of COVID-19 began to increase, we see that the virus has caused more illness and death in communities of color. I expect that as we follow the plans to restart the economy in our various states, similar disparities will emerge as we gradually return to campus. The most effective community colleges will proactively plan for these disparities and meet their more vulnerable student populations where they are.

**Disruption of Countercyclical Enrollment Trends.** As Davis Jenkins and John Fink of CCRC noted early in this crisis, one place to look for trends as we prepare strategies for the enrollment management uncertainties to come is the Great Recession ("How Will COVID-19 Affect Community College Enrollment?" April 20, 2020). The last economic downturn is a good place to start, but as Jenkins and Fink note in their article, the impact of COVID-19 has been far more sudden than the previous crisis, and it has created (continued on page 4)

## EMERGING LEADER PERSPECTIVES

As our nation's community colleges struggle with the effects of the coronavirus pandemic on all facets of institutional operations, the impact may be felt even more keenly by members of the college community. Students, faculty, and staff have all been impacted by college closings and are struggling to deal with the stresses connected to this new normal. We posed the following question to emerging and national leaders. Their answers appear below.

### QUESTION OF THE MONTH:

**How can community college leaders help students, faculty, and staff members deal with the many challenges associated with this crisis?**

#### **Aimee Belanger-Haas, EdD**

Dean of Business and Applied Technologies  
Clark State Community College  
Springfield, Ohio

Community college leaders set the tone for an organization during any crisis, such as what is currently happening with COVID-19. Our students' lives have been turned upside down, and the same goes for our employees. Everyone is slowly trying to make sense of how to deal with obstacles that keep showing up on their path. Leaders must remain calm and create stable and caring environments for all stakeholders.

This is not the time for business as usual; we must put people first. If we cannot understand what faculty, staff, and students are experiencing, we will have a difficult time meeting their needs. While we are all experiencing the same limitations of socially distancing, we must also remember that some people are struggling with other issues such as food and housing insecurity. How can we support our faculty and staff to continue to work from home seamlessly? We need to have empathy and compassion for people's situations and be understanding of their limitations. People working from home may have children who also have needs. Supervisors need to be understanding and allow people flexibility in work schedules. A reoccurring theme that must be adapted is flexibility. Gone are times when situations and solutions were black and white. We must now embrace the various shades of gray that permeate our world.

Communication is key. Communicate early and often; likely, we will not overcommunicate. Authenticity is of primary importance during these times. Acknowledge that you do not know everything, but that you will share as you are able. It is crucial to reveal the how and why behind decision-making whenever possible. This enables our community to understand why decisions are being made instead of letting fear and uncertainty take over. Ensure that you are using numerous ways of communicating and do not overly rely on email; this experience has taught us all lessons on the possibilities of virtual communication modalities.

We must also remember that communication is a two-way street. Give people opportunities to express themselves; sometimes, all they need is someone to listen. Find a way to allow staff to ask questions and then provide the answers to the campus. Reach out to employees on a personal basis. Make sure that people know that you care about them and that you have resources to help them. Encourage people to practice self-care.

There is no doubt that a crisis will reveal a great deal about our community and their individual and collective leadership skills. Once we have survived the entirety of the crisis, do an inventory of what worked well; be mindful of making notes along the way. Be open to embracing the new practices and innovations that were discovered during this time.



*Aimée Bélanger-Haas, EdD, currently serves as the Dean of Business and Applied Technologies at Clark State Community College in Springfield, Ohio. She began her career at Clark State as an adjunct and was hired as the Geospatial Program Coordinator before moving on to the Assistant Dean role. She earned her MS in Geographic Information Systems from Penn State University, and just completed her doctorate in the Ferris State University DCCL program.*

#### **Kenneth Hawkins, MA**

Professor of English  
Hillsborough Community College  
Tampa, Florida

We are all aware a racial gap has existed in academia since the beginning of public schools. While there

have been definitive improvements, the gap is closing slowly and African American males, particularly, continue to underperform at every level of education. Thinking about the effects of coronavirus means thinking how every student will return to community colleges prepared to learn and achieve. Our mission as community college leaders, therefore, is to ensure students reach their dreams, whether we do this through online and distant learning, or by opening our buildings.

Either way, black males won't be returning in the same way. They will likely be worse off. Think of it this way: whatever happens bad to white Americans is three times as awful among us. We know, for instance, that African Americans make up 13 percent of this country and yet the CDC says for every three Americans dying of COVID-19, one of them is black. Additionally, given that the unemployment rate is at an all-time high since the Great Depression, it is unlikely that black males will elect to enroll in community colleges over hustling for a job. History informs us that when the Great Depression happened, blacks were less hired than any other group, even among the civil service and government created jobs that were intended to benefit the poorest of Americans.

As community colleges leaders, we need not look at focusing support on those students who would normally come back to school anyway; we should begin, instead,

thinking of how we will convince African American males that our institutions make a difference. I have said before that education hasn't always been the crucible to solve racial inequality, but it is a tool that, nonetheless, has made the biggest impact in our community. Through the years, black males have chosen community college as their first choice, but I'm not sure if community colleges have done the same. We know, for instance, most, if not all, two-year institutions don't represent the black student body ratio through its faculty or administration. And the reality is this dearth of representation does little to build confidence among black males who recognize consciously or subconsciously people who look like them are not educators or leaders in academia.

That said, there are indeed some of us who are presidents, provosts, deans, and teachers. But rare is the case where the proportion of black males reflects that of the staff and faculty, nor is it even closely correlated. Coming back after dealing with coronavirus, there should be an emphasis on embracing and mentoring these men, because if the status quo continues, then the mission of community colleges that boasts of diversity and inclusion will fall precipitously short of its hallowed ideals.



*Kenneth Hawkins, MA, is a professor of English at Hillsborough Community College in Tampa. He earned his master's degree from National University in La Jolla, California, and worked as a high school teacher for fourteen years before becoming a full-time college instructor. Hawkins' English thesis and other published articles rest on the relationship between race, politics, and opportunity. He currently is enrolled in the DCCL program at Ferris State University.*

## NATIONAL LEADER PERSPECTIVE

As our nation's community colleges struggle with the effects of the coronavirus pandemic on all facets of institutional operations, the impact may be felt even more keenly by members of the college community. Students, faculty, and staff have all been impacted by college closings and are struggling to deal with the stresses connected to this new normal. We posed the following question to emerging and national leaders. Their answers appear below.

### QUESTION OF THE MONTH:

**How can community college leaders help students, faculty, and staff members deal with the many challenges associated with this crisis?**

## Grace and Navigating Education in a COVID-19 World

**Mara Jevera Fulmer, EdD**

*Interim Assistant Vice President for Academic Affairs  
Mott Community College  
Flint, Michigan*

It's a word imbued with deeply spiritual meaning. Yet in the context of a global pandemic and the vastly changed work environment of COVID19, with the stay-at-home orders, social distancing, and unfamiliar teleworking and tele-learning conditions, *grace* reminds us of the importance of kindness, forgiveness, and general courtesy for those we lead and serve. It helps us find reprieve from the punishment of self-doubt, and the deep stresses we face in these new and rapidly changing times.

The unique coronavirus has impacted everything about the way we conduct the business of education at our community colleges practically, and quite literally, overnight. One day we are preparing to launch Summer registration, and the next we're closing campus and shifting Winter classes online. At Mott Community College, the transition mid-semester brought out the best in people. It was an all-hands-on-deck collaboration from every level of the institution. Full-time and part-time faculty, staff, and administrators worked together to help anxious colleagues prepare for this major shift, offering assistance with technology, and online pedagogy, using Zoom, email, chat, and phone calls.

***[[It could be easy to forget the impact that the sustained stress of working on these fast-paced changes would have at a human level.***

But just as we dealt with operationalizing new procedures and implementing revised policies, it could be easy to forget the impact that the sustained stress of working on these fast-paced changes would have at a human level. At Mott, as the weeks rolled into months, the stress could be seen and heard in the weary faces and voices of attendees in Zoom meetings that now filled our days. Leadership recognized it, and a weeklong college-wide break was planned, giving everyone across campus a space to breath and reset before coming back to deal with the business at hand.

The reality is that workloads for all college employees have shifted from "normal" to "crisis" mode. Communication patterns are upside down, changing a quick drop-in conversation into a carefully tailored email or a scheduled Zoom meeting. Committees have proliferated due to new and urgent issues constantly arising. Focused on supporting our students and the challenges they faced with access to technology, food insecurities, and isolation, our staff also juggled new challenges with technology, and balancing work and home life in a space that was no longer divided. The stress of maintaining the high level of energy and engagement demonstrated early on had become difficult to sustain. Under stress, mistakes happen, and small things become oversized. Yet we must

remind ourselves that the leadership values of flexibility, understanding, patience and support are more important than ever. It requires empathy and compassion for our employees, our students, and ourselves.

As we sit in our dens, kitchens, or bedrooms turned home office, counting the coronavirus cases and deaths outside our "office" window, the reality is that life, and death, continues to happen, with or without COVID19. At Mott, the death of a dear colleague from a long battle with a non-COVID related illness hit the college family hard. The grief from this loss was compounded by the tragic death of George Floyd, which brought to the surface the deep and painful history of injustice suffered by members of our family and our community. We are left to wonder - how do people who are already feeling overwhelmed now add grief to their emotional soup? The answer begins with thoughtful and compassionate leadership, requiring an increasingly mindful awareness of the suffering around us.

***We are left to wonder - how do people who are already feeling overwhelmed now add grief to their emotional soup?***

This grand experiment in educational shifts has not been without its bright spots, and academic leaders will study them to adapt these lessons to the post-COVID world order. At Mott, we discovered that online meetings CAN still provide some level of camaraderie, and they can be useful for collaboration. We've learned that not all meetings are formal ones with agendas, and that some can serve as regular check-ins to share stories, small wins, and allow people the opportunity to be heard.

We've learned that communication needs to be more intentional, and that isolation from face to face contact means we can never assume that others are doing well. We've celebrated the fact that faculty who have never had a syllabus posted in an LMS have now made one of the biggest technological transitions of their careers by taking their classes fully online. We've experienced a humble joy seeing that students truly appreciate our efforts to support them in continuing their education, because we will move heaven and earth to try and make it happen. We will continue to offer forgiveness to each other and our students as we all learn to navigate this rapidly changing environment. These are just the beginnings of a new normal that we can endure with humility and grace.

**Dr. Mara Jevera Fulmer** currently serves as Interim Assistant Vice President for Academic Affairs at Mott Community College, sharing the college's mission of commitment to student success through compassion and critical thinking. Prior to this role, she served as Mott's Faculty Director for the Center for Teaching & Learning for five years, expanding its programs to address cultural understanding, diversity, equity, and inclusion, and the interdisciplinary connections between General Education and CTE programs. Mara was the founding program developer for Mott's Graphic Design degree program, serving as its coordinator for 16 years. Prior to Mott, Mara served as Art Director for the University of the South Pacific, Fiji, and at the University at Albany/SUNY. Mara earned her MA from Syracuse University, an MFA from Michigan State University, and is a proud graduate of FSU's Doctorate in Community College Leadership program.



## QUICK TAKES Highlights from the Field

### COVID-19 Updates and Resources

by the American Association  
of Community Colleges

The AACCC has provided access to a wealth of timely information on the impact of the coronavirus on the nation's community colleges. Included are print materials and links to webinars, podcasts, and broadcasts. Publication and broadcast dates of resources range from March through June, and can offer guidance to community college practitioners seeking direction during these challenging times.

Access this work here:  
<https://bit.ly/2XLJhFC>

### Considerations for Institutes of Higher Education

by the Centers for Disease  
Control and Prevention  
(CDC)

As community colleges and most institutes of higher education begin to strategize their opening processes in the United States, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) offers a number of considerations for ways in which colleges can help protect students, faculty, staff, and administrators in an effort to slow the spread of COVID-19.

Access this work here:  
<https://bit.ly/2MMmX8x>

## Community Colleges Lead COVID-19 Recovery from the Parentheses (continued from page 1)

far more disruption in campus processes. One way I have been thinking about this is to draw a parallel from Thomas Friedman's famous use of the term "global weirding" to describe climate change. Friedman borrowed the term from environmentalist Hunter Lovins, who used it to explain how the impact of climate change was far more complicated than a simple rise in temperature. This is how I predict COVID-19 will impact enrollment in the future. We are likely to see overall enrollment increases in some regions of the country, but I suspect these will not follow the traditional "countercyclical" patterns we noted in the Great Recession. Instead, I predict pockets of increased demand in particular programs. Unlike the previous downturn, I doubt students will return to campus in droves and fill parking lots and available sections as they did previously. Some programs, in fact, may struggle or fail. In short, we should not expect the damaged economy to translate into a boon for enrollments.

*As we move through the crisis, he argued, the institutions that wait for things to return to the way they were before will struggle, and some may not even survive.*

**Long-Term Impact of State Budget Shortfalls.** In a June 3, 2020 webinar hosted by the Aspen Institute, Josh Wyner and Bob Templin led the 23 Ohio community college presidents through a series of strategic discussions about the impact of the coronavirus pandemic on community college missions and student success. Like all of its programming, the Aspen session was tremendously valuable. Bob Templin, an Aspen Senior Fellow and President Emeritus of Northern Virginia Community College (NOVA), was particularly direct about the budget impact we are currently experiencing. Drawing lessons from his time at NOVA during the last economic downturn, Templin encouraged the presidents to expect at least three years of declining revenues from the State. Three years. In Ohio, we have already experienced a 20% decline in state funding for the current fiscal year, and we have been told to expect an additional 20% decline in the next fiscal year. My colleagues from across the country are reporting similar developments in various states.

Templin's advice for the presidents, shaped from his many years crafting innovative funding strategies with the business community in Northern Virginia, was straightforward: partnerships. He encouraged us to partner with regional universities to grow market share together, as opposed to competing over it individually. He urged exploration of corporate partnership and shared services with similar institutions. Most importantly, he implored us not to expect things would return to normal. As we move through the crisis, he argued, the institutions that wait for things to return to the way they were before will struggle, and some may not even survive.

**Culture and Social First Responders.** Another one of the guiding principles I wrote about in CC Daily back in March related to what I call "social first responders." I don't really think that is a term (and in the two short months since I coined the phrase, it hasn't really caught on). "Pay special attention to the folks who have to deal with social media, phone calls, and responding to traditional media," I wrote. "Many are trained to not take this personally, but that only lasts so long."

Jon-Stephen Stansel, Digital and Social Media Specialist at the University of Central Arkansas, has been eloquent on this point. In a June 5, 2020 viral Tweet he posted: "If your social media manager seems stressed, it's because they've been in crisis mode for 3 months. If they seem tense, it's

because they've been reading 100s of angry comments. If they seem frustrated, it's because they care about their job & doing what's right. Listen to them." His post struck a nerve for reasons you understand if you have kept in contact with the employees at your college who manage social media accounts. I expect the stress placed on social first responders to continue through the pandemic, and perhaps even intensify as we move operations closer to what students have normally expected from our institutions.

**Conclusion.** As we continue to prepare for Fall semester, community college leaders must realize that the impact of COVID-19 will be felt within our institutions for a long time. While some states are opening up and many activities are going back to "normal," the public health and economic impact will linger, probably for years. From my perspective, the best way for community colleges to face this uncertain future is to lean in to our identity as community colleges. For the equity, economic, and competition-based reasons I outline above, I think we must intensify our efforts to highlight our unique value proposition of being close to home, focus on teaching and support services, affordable university transfer, and career-focused programming. This is not the time to pretend to be something we are not. The "community" element of our identity has never been more important.

At Owens Community College, one of the key pillars of our vision statement is to be an "indispensable partner" for businesses, education institutions, and community organizations. At this challenging moment of our history, every community college in America should seek to be indispensable. Given the needs of a post-coronavirus economy, we know that our institutions are best prepared to deliver what is truly needed to recover. In order to be effective partners in economic recovery as we emerge from the pandemic, community colleges must differentiate themselves from liberal arts colleges and research universities, amplifying the affordable transfer and career focus that makes up the community college value proposition.

**Steve Robinson, PhD**, is President of Owens Community College. He was recently selected as the 7th President of Lansing Community College in Michigan and will assume this new post in July 2020. Before joining Owens, Robinson served as Executive Dean of Planning and Research at Mott Community College in Flint, Michigan. At four-year institutions, he served as a member of the graduate faculty in English at the University of Michigan-Flint. He also served as a chair and faculty advisor in the Doctorate in Community College Leadership (DCCL) program at Ferris State University, and the Doctoral Program in Higher Education at the University of Toledo. Robinson recently joined the Advisory Board of the University of Maryland Global Campus Community College Policy and Administration doctoral program. Robinson holds a PhD in English from Michigan State University, where he also earned BA and MA degrees. Prior to becoming an administrator, he spent fifteen years as a community college faculty member, and ten years as President of the faculty union. He is a graduate of the Chair Academy for Leadership and Development, the Harvard Management Development Program (MDP), as well as the Aspen Presidential Fellowship for Community College Excellence. Through his writing in publications such as *Forbes*, *The Atlantic*, *Diverse Issues*, *Inside Higher Education*, and *Community College Daily*, Robinson has positioned himself nationally among community college presidents, and is the creator of the #EndCCStigma social media campaign and host of the *End Community College Stigma Podcast*.



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