

# Perspectives

MAY 2020

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Community College  
Leadership for the  
21st Century

The coronavirus forced campuses to shut down at a time when higher education, which employs nearly four million people across the country, was already facing major challenges.

- Anemona Hartocollis

...[T]he pandemic is projected to leave colleges strapped for cash, with demand for all kinds of services skyrocketing as endowment earnings plummet and state budgets are likely to be cut.

- Felicia Mello  
and Charlotte Wes

## Grace and Flexibility in the Face of the 2020 Pandemic Crisis

**Joianne L. Smith, PhD**

President  
Oakton Community College  
Des Plaines, Illinois

*Grace and flexibility:* That's the mantra that has guided me as I navigate through the rapidly changing circumstances brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic. It's also the message I've reiterated to the Oakton Community College (Des Plaines, IL.) campus community as we shifted our instruction and student services to a remote format.

Even under normal circumstances, grace and flexibility are critical to fostering student success and supporting our institutional mission, vision, and values. In addition to completing course work, many students — especially community college students — are juggling a myriad of other responsibilities. Some students work multiple jobs to make ends meet, while others must provide care to children and loved ones. The COVID-19 pandemic has intensified those responsibilities, adding layers of stress.

***As challenging as it was to prepare to deliver instruction and services to students remotely – it was equally challenging for many students to receive them.***

The same is true for faculty and staff members. New routines, new responsibilities, and the fear of the unknown have added challenges to delivering the services they provide with such dedication.

The availability of additional training resources has helped many faculty and staff members as they were forced outside their comfort zones. A superhuman effort by the college's Information Technology department equipped employees with the tools they needed to work remotely.

The speed at which courses shifted to flexible learning formats continues to inspire and amaze. The same is true for the reimagining of how student services are delivered. Our dedicated staff strives to provide the same level of care which has come to be expected on our campuses.

As challenging as it was to prepare to deliver instruction and services to students remotely — it was equally

challenging for many students to receive them.

The technology and resource gaps that exist for community college students are certainly not new, but have been magnified by the pandemic. In normal times, campus computer labs are the saving grace for many students who do not otherwise have access to computers or reliable internet service. Social distancing made it impossible for them to use these much-needed facilities.

***While it's fair to say we have dedicated the lion's share of our efforts to helping our students reach their academic goals, we also understand our duty to serve as a caring neighbor and resource to our community at large.***

Grace was displayed by the Oakton Education Foundation as they authorized an emergency grant to help the college procure additional Chromebook laptops and WiFi hotspots to loan to students. A coordinated effort between multiple college departments was critical in allowing us to reach out to students to identify technology needs and deliver resources in a safe manner.

We look forward to further helping students who demonstrate a financial need by distributing federal CARES Act and other emergency funding in an equitable way. Our long-established Student Success Fund has already helped a number of students who have been financially impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. We are extremely grateful to all who have contributed to this fund.

Flexibility factored more prominently as a number of dates and deadlines were extended to allow students to consider their options for continuing their education during the spring 2020 semester and beyond. As much as we wanted to help all students stay their course, some simply were not able to do so under these circumstances. The college extended the date for students to withdraw from courses without suffering academic or financial impact. We know this was a difficult decision for many students, and we look forward to helping those who paused their education to re-enter their academic paths when they are ready.

Even for students who did have the technology resources to remain enrolled, we recognize that remote learning is not the preferred method for some. With that in mind,

*(continued on page 4)*

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## EMERGING LEADER PERSPECTIVES

During the past few months, daily life as we knew it in the United States has changed drastically due to the impact of the coronavirus pandemic which has forced campuses to close down at a time when many were already dealing with difficult operational challenges. As a result, community colleges are finding themselves facing an array of complex pressures never before experienced. We posed the following question to emerging and national leaders. Their answers appear below.

### Gwenn Eldridge, MA

Assistant Vice President of  
Academic Transitions and Support  
Ivy Tech Community College System, Indiana

When campuses across the nation began to contemplate the move to remote instruction and services, it seemed unimaginable that an unseen force could completely change how we do business. To say that COVID-19 has resulted in historic changes for community colleges would be an understatement.

While the coronavirus crisis has had a negative affect on so many lives, it also has fostered an increased level of creativity and commitment to collaboration. With only a few short days' notice, our faculty mobilized and moved courses to virtual delivery. College leadership moved nimbly to address issues such as accreditation requirements for hands-on labs and practicums. Student services staff worked tirelessly to meet the needs of students from laptops to funds that helped them to survive. Faculty and staff reached out to the community, providing equipment as 3D printers hummed to produce visors and face shields, and alumni worked tirelessly in healthcare facilities.

Ivy Tech Community College, the largest, singly accredited community college in the nation, moved to reinvent itself to provide instruction and services to its more than 60,000 students. Ivy Tech Provost Kara Monroe shared in a recent Town Hall that Ivy Tech faculty and staff have united in a spirit of collaboration. From the Master Teacher Faculty Helping Faculty initiative, to the work of the educational technology and Ivy Online staff, the college was responsive to the needs of students. As the college worked to answer student need, the Ivy Cares Program, which offers vital wraparound services, met its goal of offering services virtually much earlier than anticipated. Dr. Monroe said, "The changes that we made were focused on student success first."

That student focus is the very foundation of the community college. Our response to the pandemic has prompted us to reexamine our practices, and it has spurred innovation in areas such as how students enter the college. An example of that during this time is the ability of the college to move nimbly and boldly and to push its idea of what could be. When it became apparent that students could not do placement testing remotely, Ivy Tech scaled its holistic placement efforts, and implemented its Knowledge Assessment, which utilizes web-based NROC technology, enabling students across the state to make choices about how they begin their academic experience.

This is just a snapshot of how Ivy Tech faculty and staff united in their effort to work in new ways while maintaining our focus on students. They are representative of the spirit of collaboration that exists in colleges across our nation. As we look forward to opening our campuses soon, I believe that we will do so with that spirit of innovation and of caring.



*Gwenn Eldridge, MA, serves as assistant vice president of academic transitions and support for the Ivy Tech Community College System in Indiana. Her work focuses on teaching innovations such as the co-requisite course model and placement policy. She earned a bachelor's degree in English from Indiana University and a master's in English from Butler University in Indianapolis. She currently is pursuing a doctorate in community college leadership at Ferris State University.*

### QUESTION OF THE MONTH:

**What steps are community colleges taking in response to these pandemic-related challenges?**

### Irene Elksnis Geisler, PhD

Director of Instructional Assessment  
Houston Community College  
Houston, Texas

As fighter jets fly tribute to front-line workers, we as a nation are acutely aware of the crucial role that people play in fields such as nursing, law

enforcement, fire, and emergency medical rescue. And, as many community college alumni are the heroes and heroines working on the frontlines of the pandemic, educators continue to strategize how to graduate our learners as soon as possible during these unprecedented times.

In response to COVID-19, many educational institutions have rushed to move operations remotely. According to Kate Smith, Interim President, Rio Salado College, this means providing support while keeping students at the core of decision making (2020). In addition to teaching, sustaining a remote environment includes maintaining weekly enrollment start dates, providing helpdesk, 24/7 "ask a librarian," and tutoring services. "We have reached out to students to provide internet access resources, a remote food delivery for those experiencing food insecurity, and set up processes to support students with emergency needs." While many faculty transitioned courses online in just weeks, Dr. Michael Goldin, VP of Academics at Glen Oaks Community College, explains that professional training for online teaching is customarily a semester-long process (2020). Similarly, Houston Community College (HCC) Economics Professor, Richard Gosselin (HCCTV: The Topic, 4/22/20) describes how HCC saw 95 faculty volunteering 71 hours of instruction to colleagues per week, often working 12-14 hour days.

Looking to the future, higher education professionals are changing how we instruct students. Dr. Phil Nicotera, President of HCC's Coleman College for Health Sciences, commends faculty who are creating interactive virtual simulations and hands-on clinical opportunities in the online environment (HCCTV: The Topic, 4/22/20). He predicts an increase in enrollment as healthcare professions offer stability, communities embrace telemedicine, and technology adds a significant factor to pedagogical excellence. However, the uncertainty of whether, or when, COVID-19 might come back in a "second wave" has Chief Academic Officers trying to prepare for contingencies. "At Glen Oaks, we are looking to change as many Fall 2020 classes to hybrid format as possible, both reducing contact on campus and gearing up faculty to go fully online again, if needed," (Goldin, 2020).

Kate Smith (2020) notes, "Crisis shows character, and we have seen the best of our humanity during this time." Although there are uncertainties around how the national and global economy will respond post COVID-19, Smith remains hopeful that community colleges will continue to be, "a beacon of hope and light of how we can work together to accomplish the incredible – because our students are incredible and deserve no less." Indeed, the global pandemic has significantly transformed the world we once knew. What perhaps has not changed, is the role of the community college on the foreground of education in America.

*Irene Elksnis Geisler, PhD, currently serves as Director of Instructional Assessment at Houston Community College. Her professional background includes fifteen years of administrative and teaching experience in higher education. Her earned degrees include an MA in Organizational Management from Spring Arbor University, MLS in Women's and Gender Studies from Eastern Michigan University, and PhD from Western Michigan University. Irene is currently enrolled in the DCCL program at Ferris State University.*



## NATIONAL LEADER PERSPECTIVE

During the past few months, daily life as we knew it in the United States has changed drastically due to the impact of the coronavirus pandemic which has forced campuses to close down at a time when many were already dealing with difficult operational challenges. As a result, community colleges are finding themselves facing an array of complex pressures never before experienced. We posed the following question to emerging and national leaders. Their answers appear below.

### Staying Safe Within the Pandemic

**Daniel R. Herbst, EdD**

Vice President of Student Affairs  
Henry Ford College  
Dearborn, Michigan

“Hello. I hope this finds you healthy and safe,” has become the standard greeting on most email messages I have written or received since the coronavirus pandemic hit home in Michigan. I also offer it as a welcome to you as you read this essay.

No one would have believed most Michigan community colleges would be operating from faculty and staff basements, kitchen tables, and home offices as 2020 began. I am willing to say that after barely more than a month of the great educational experiment, it is working better at Henry Ford College than anyone would have ever imagined – and at most community colleges across Michigan as well.

As the pandemic struck Michigan, the HFC administration met one to two times daily. The challenge of predicting how to maintain the safety of our campus community while providing quality education had no precedent. Decisions made during the early morning meeting were outdated by changes from government, Department of Education, or health official mandates by the afternoon. The responsibility to repeatedly make life altering decisions was exhausting.

Students, faculty, and staff began to express genuine concerns about their safety and the safety of their families. Soon, many began to stay away from the campus. On March 16, 2020, HFC halted all on campus teaching and reduced student services. Students were delayed from returning from spring break by one week in order to allow faculty to convert all classes and services to online wherever possible.

**Decisions made during the early morning meeting were outdated by changes from government, Department of Education, or health official mandates by the afternoon.**

Henry Ford College’s Winter 2020 semester began with a total of 2,374 course sections. Of these, only 368 sections, or 16%, were online at the beginning of the semester. HFC was able to convert 1771, or 88%, face-to-face classes to online in a matter of five days. The other 235 sections which required students to utilize equipment and labs on campus were postponed until further notice. The incredible work by Academic Affairs allowed many students to safely continue their education.

Student Affairs responded to this change by moving all student services to alternative formats where staff would be able to work from the safety of their homes. Registration, academic advising, counseling, financial aid services, Detroit Promise counseling, disability services, services for Veterans, and early alert were converted to online. Student Affairs staff used email, texting, telephones, and video chats in order to stay connected with students and the Microsoft Teams program to chat, conduct video calls and meetings, and to share information.

#### QUESTION OF THE MONTH:

**What steps are community colleges taking in response to these pandemic-related challenges?**

Henry Ford College soon realized that not all students or faculty were making a smooth conversion to the online format. For some, the new teaching modality was less than ideal. Faculty were given support and additional training as the semester went on. The last date for students to drop classes was extended by

several weeks. Students were encouraged to speak with the Advising and Student Success Center or the Counseling Center (both virtual at this point) to determine if they could pass the course. Many students soon realized they were able to be successful in the new online format. Students who did not want to remain in an online format were encouraged to seek an Incomplete and complete the course later. If an Incomplete was not appropriate for a student, they could apply for a “repeat voucher,” which would allow them to apply the tuition and fees from the Winter 2020 semester and retake the same course later.

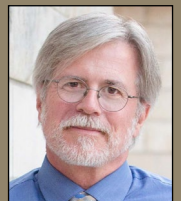
HFC’s Marketing Department used social media to inform and update students, faculty, and staff on the ever-changing landscape of the Winter 2020 semester. To date, the site has received well over 250,000 visits. The academic changes, and changes in how Student Affairs would provide services brought on by the pandemic, have meant long days and difficult decisions. It has also brought fear, economic hardship, and the sadness of loss. As of the writing of this essay, Henry Ford College has lost one faculty member, who worked in the health field, to COVID-19.

**The academic changes, and changes in how Student Affairs would provide services brought on by the pandemic, have meant long days and difficult decisions.**

Someone asked whether keeping the college safe while providing quality education in the middle of a pandemic was what we, as administrators, signed up for when we came to HFC. The response is simply, “Yes”. The measure of an administrator is the person who will synthesize inadequate information in a short period of time and provide the best answer for the moment. Compassion for our students should be the deciding factor for everything we do including providing Incompletes, vouchers, and/or the grades we give to students. Everything we expect of students must be filtered through the lens of the pandemic and not of the world of just months ago.

Stay safe.

*Daniel Herbst, EdD, has served as Vice President of Student Affairs at Henry Ford College in Dearborn, Michigan, for the past two years. He received his Doctorate in Education from Ferris State University’s DCCL Program in 2016 after defending his dissertation entitled, The Development of a Collaborative Community College One-Stop Enrollment Services Center. Herbst has over 30 years of experience in higher education, but nothing completely prepared him for what he has experienced the last several months. He does not accept the term “the new normal,” as he believes every day is a new normal; the pandemic has merely made substantive change a daily event.*



## QUICK TAKES Highlights from the Field

### How Community Colleges Are Joining Forces to Help Their Communities in Uncertain Times

by Josh Schwartz

This article takes a look at the ways in which a number of community colleges across the nation have been taking steps to provide aid and support to the communities they serve in unique ways. Examples include serving as COVID-19 testing sites, being set up to serve as possible makeshift hospitals, or donating thousands of masks, ventilators, and even food to local hospitals and food shelters.

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

### How Technology Can Support Student Success during COVID-19

by Susan Grajek and D. Christopher Brooks

As the focus of higher education shifts to remote learning in response to the COVID-19 crisis, the authors discuss ways of helping students complete courses and attain credentials, given the wide range of new applications and technologies now available to support student success. Strategies related to advising systems, degree progress tracking, and other technologies to support ongoing student success are reviewed.

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

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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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## Grace and Flexibility in the Face of the 2020 Pandemic Crisis *(continued from page 1)*

Oakton allowed students the option to receive a pass/fail grade for many courses. This allows students who demonstrate a good faith effort in completing their coursework to avoid negative impacts on their hard-earned grade point averages.

*Responding to the call for the need for trained workers to combat the spread of COVID-19, Oakton will soon launch Illinois' first Public Health Contact Tracer Paraprofessional training program.*

We counseled students to help them determine whether selecting this option was best for them, informing them of the possible implications on financial aid status, and the ability to transfer credits to four-year colleges.

These of course are just a few examples of how Oakton Community College made concerted and intentional efforts to provide clarity and comfort to students — and staff — during these incredible challenging times.

While it's fair to say we have dedicated the lion's share of our efforts to helping our students reach their academic goals, we also understand our duty to serve as a caring neighbor and resource to our community at large.

Shifting the bulk of our work to a remote format was an arduous task to be sure, but we feel fortunate to have had the option to do so. We salute the essential workers in our communities — especially health care professionals — who continue to report to work each day.

Academic departments including Nursing, Fire Science, and Automotive donated personal protective equipment — including gloves, masks, and gowns — to health care workers in our communities. We hope that this equipment plays at least a small role in helping to keep these dedicated professionals safe as they work to protect our neighbors.

I am also especially proud of the innovation shown by students and faculty members of our Manufacturing Technology Department. Using 3D printers, they designed and produced protective face shields which were also donated to health care workers in our communities.

*I take some level of comfort in knowing that as tragic and difficult as this pandemic has been, it is a shared experience that will ultimately make us stronger.*

The innovation of our academic leaders is on display in other ways as well. Responding to the call for the need for trained workers to combat the spread of COVID-19, Oakton will soon launch Illinois' first Public Health Contact Tracer Paraprofessional training program. The Continuing Education program will quickly prepare

students to monitor the contacts of infected people and notify them of their exposure. The Center for Disease Control (CDC) indicates contact tracing is key to slowing or stopping the spread of COVID-19. The practice is credited for helping to end previous pandemics including the SARS and Ebola outbreaks.

I'm confident that this training will not only provide a considerable public health resource, but also create employment opportunities for people who have experienced financial impacts from the COVID-19 pandemic.

I take some level of comfort in knowing that as tragic and difficult as this pandemic has been, it is a shared experience that will ultimately make us stronger. In these difficult times, I'm often reminded of this quote from former United States Secretary of State Madeleine Albright:

*When asked my outlook on life and world affairs, I reply that I am an optimist ... who worries a lot. These are not the best of times, but we have seen worse. It might do well for us to view these abnormal days as an opportunity to ask more of ourselves, to reflect on our relations with one another, and think critically about improving the social, economic and political structures that shape our lives.*

*We can draw inspiration from those who have surmounted high obstacles in the past, and vow to make the new normal that we aim to bring about better, more just and more secure than the old.*

Just a few months ago, very few people could have imagined the reality in which we are currently living. Yet, we continue to find ways to serve our students, our communities, and each other. We will continue to do that, if only because the uncertainty of what lies ahead will require us to. And we will do so with grace and flexibility.

President Joianne L. Smith, PhD, leads Oakton Community College with a vision rooted in equity and compassion, guided by a passion to support students along their paths to academic and personal success. Smith's presidency began July 1, 2015, following 13 years of service in leadership roles at Oakton, including as dean of students (2002-2004) and vice president for Student Affairs (2005-2015). Under Smith's leadership, Oakton adopted a new strategic plan entitled "Success Matters" and redefined the college's mission, vision, and values. These efforts shaped the college's collective vision to support students by incorporating new strategies to ensure learning, persistence, and attainment. Significant progress has been made toward improving student persistence rates, in accordance with ambitious goals set forth by Smith. Smith prioritizes an institution-wide commitment to equity, focused on reducing opportunity and attainment gaps for historically underserved student groups. Oakton joined the Illinois Equity in Attainment (ILEA) partnership in 2019, which is the signature initiative of the Partnership for College Completion (PCC). Prior to Oakton, Smith served as assistant director of University Residence Life at Northwestern University (2001-2002), dean of Brainerd Commons at Middlebury College (1999-2001), and as a licensed psychologist, a license she still maintains in the state of Illinois. She earned her MS and PhD in Counseling Psychology from Virginia Commonwealth University.

