

# Perspectives

Community College Leadership for the 21st Century

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## Creating a Vibrant Community for All to Achieve Success During the Pandemic and Beyond

**Marcia Ballinger, PhD**

President  
Lorain County Community College  
Elyria, Ohio

*Lorain County Community College's 10,000 Degrees of Impact: Vision 2025 strategic plan* articulates a bold goal for our community that has remained our guiding light throughout the pandemic as we double down on student success. When LCCC's Board of Trustees adopted the plan less than a year before COVID-19, it did so following an extensive engagement process involving more than 1,100 internal and external stakeholders. This shared vision focuses on creating a vibrant future for all, and it recognizes that every student's dream matters and that we must meet them where they are in their journey. Our commitment to students' upward economic mobility has never been more evident in the College's nearly 60-year history as it has been during the past year.

Our core values are stronger than ever with an even deeper commitment to ensure that students of color, as well as others who are disproportionately impacted, have what they need to succeed in and out of the classroom. When our campus, like others throughout the country, closed in March 2020, we changed on a dime by moving our entire curriculum online and all student services. As President, I pledged that no student would go without food or technology and began offering curbside food pick up from our Commodore Cupboard to free refurbished computers configured by our faculty.

*Our Advocacy and Resource Center*, known affectionately by students as the ARC, has truly been a lifeline for students and their families. Modeled after Amarillo College's renowned center, LCCC's ARC opened just months before the pandemic. From emergency aid, to mental health support, to food and clothing, the ARC and its team make magic happen. I have learned firsthand just how important our wrap around services are for students' survival in college. Each month I host virtual coffee chats so that I can stay connected to students, and listen with open ears to their lived experiences and challenges. Several months ago, following a chat, I received an email from Danyelle Pavilack who shared her gratitude for the ARC and said, "the ARC has helped me keep utilities on, feed us, delay eviction, and got me out of homelessness. They even helped get school supplies for my daughter to begin online schooling. I can say with confidence that the ARC is what kept me in school this time." Danyelle's grit and determination for continuing to pursue her educational dream for 15 years after leaving the foster system inspires me beyond words. I look back at our decision to create the ARC a few years ago as part of our equity agenda and commitment to reducing achievement gaps, and realize what a foundational cornerstone it has

quickly become to our student success agenda and focus on completion.

We have been on a laser-focused journey to increase completion rates since 2011 when we joined Achieving the Dream, Inc. and became one of three Ohio community colleges selected for the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation's Completion by Design. Our holistic approach to reduce equity gaps between student groups and increase student success for all has led to across the board improvements in our "what matters most metrics." We have experienced a 93% increase in the number of degrees and certificates awarded since 2011. During that same time, Hispanic and Latinx student completion rates increased 149% and our Black and African-American student completion rates increased 123%. These dramatic improvements were the result of bold institutional changes – from curriculum redesign, to policy revisions, to enhanced wrap-around supports. These sustained improvements in student outcomes were the impetus for Achieving the Dream, Inc. to award LCCC its highest distinction last year with the *Leah Meyer Austin Award*.

As a data-informed institution, we proactively identify opportunities for improvement and measure progress. To date, this has included redesigning developmental education to co-requisite model, transforming advising to a case-managed approach, to designing and implementing guided academic and career pathways. Throughout all of it has been the culture of care that intentionally guides students on a pathway to success.

***One of the most promising examples of accelerated learn and earn models launched during the Fall 2020 semester have been the 21 fast-track, short-term certificates for dislocated workers.***

Our entrepreneurial innovations have accelerated in the past months, especially in launching new offerings and services in formats and timeframes that are more flexible for learners who are balancing multiple challenges. Understanding the student experience beyond metrics has led us to launch an intentional research agenda focused on completion challenges across race, parental status, adult status, and financial wellness. This has included the administration of CAEL-360, University of Southern California's National Assessment of Collegiate Campus Climate and Trellis Foundation's Family Friendly Survey. We received a U.S. Department of Education Title III grant to bolster online orientation, accelerated programs, earn and learn programs, and a writing center. We have also secured grant funding to expand evening childcare.

*(continued on page 4)*

The toll of this pandemic is, in a word, devastating. It's eroding students' academic success, their emotional well-being and their personal finances.

- John King Jr.

Those who are at the bottom of the achievement gap are much worse off because of COVID-19 and distance learning and the achievement gap is exacerbated.

- Bobby Scott, Representative, Virginia

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## EMERGING LEADER PERSPECTIVES

*Community colleges – with open access, low tuition, and focus on workplace preparation – have long been considered a gateway to an improved standard of living. They also tend to attract a diverse student population with a broad range of learning needs. Various challenges to student success and completion have resulted in an achievement gap, or disparity between the educational performance of groups of students defined by gender, race/ethnicity, and socioeconomic status. We posed the following question to emerging and national leaders. Their answers appear below.*

### Ronald J. Gordon, MS

Dean, Enrollment Services  
Clark State Community College  
Springfield, Ohio

Determining resources and strategies a community college should implement to close the achievement gap for students of color, those socioeconomically challenged, and other at-risk populations, has taken a new direction following the global pandemic. Many institutions scrambled to implement a variety of online services in the middle of the semester to continue supporting students when access to campus became restricted. Campus leadership was faced with creating short – and long-term achievement opportunities for all students, although many are challenged with proper technology and family support necessary to meet their academic and general needs.

Students were displaced from their normal routines and were required to adapt to an even more challenging set of academic circumstances than normal. The loss of face-to-face contact with their faculty, support staff, and fellow students has displaced many from a comfort level that derailed them from pursuing their academic goals. Those populations who were already on the technological outer belt of consistent WiFi access or having a reliable device to access courses and submit assignments lost the convenience of campus computer labs due to social distancing restrictions.

Leaders of community colleges have felt the stress and anxiety exhibited by their students during this trying time. The barriers to student achievement were on display as they struggled with loss of employment, housing, technology, and the lack of campus social integration. The pandemic has created opportunities for community colleges to designate additional staff specifically for non-academic support for the purpose of directing students to external resources.

The onboarding of students and assessment of their English and Math skills was altered for those institutions that conformed to the strict process of placement testing and in-person orientation. Collaboration between faculty and staff to develop virtual academic and enrollment options that removed barriers was required to limit the achievement gap. Emergency funds were created, and access was streamlined as a way to assist students who were facing unforeseen, or continuous, economic consequences of the pandemic. Administering technological options, such as hotspots for poor WiFi locations and loaning laptops, are practices that will need to continue beyond the current pandemic barriers.

The pandemic has exposed a broader achievement gap for more populations of students that were not considered previously. Community college leaders are designing strategies to fast track many processes that were barriers to students attempting to reach their goals. As they consider new ways to generate student success, understanding the students they serve and the obstacles they face are a must. Not all students are prepared to be away from the comfort of campus and succeed in online course options. Community colleges must continue to analyze the needs of their students and remove the assumption that all can fit into any one particular model.

### QUESTION OF THE MONTH:

**What strategies and resources are colleges employing to help close the achievement gap during this pandemic and beyond?**

### Nijia' Thomas, MEd, MA

School Counselor  
Cypress Fairbanks ISD  
Houston, Texas

Across the United States, achievement and opportunity gaps persist between students of different racial, ethnic, linguistic, ability, and socioeconomic groups. Eliminating these gaps is a complex process and requires the support of multiple stakeholders, a variety of long-term interventions, and policy changes – all especially important since many community college students in the U.S. do not complete a credential or degree, thus facing dramatically reduced earning potential. However, evidence suggests that helping students navigate the college environment and connect their coursework to their lives can help solve the community college completion puzzle (Levesque, 2018).

The coronavirus sent school systems across the nation into a tailspin, many shifting to remote learning models that had never been used before. The education system was not built to deal with extended shutdowns like those imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic. Teachers and administrators have worked hard to keep learning alive; nevertheless, these efforts are not likely to provide the quality of education that is delivered in the classroom. Leaders have been working to address the needs of students by providing remote services and additional resources, while professors have been encouraged to be mindful and have intentional communication with students regarding grades. The cadre of resources includes, but is not limited to, student success coaches, tutoring services, and counseling services. All of these will allow all students, including struggling learners, to succeed.

Although further challenged by the impacts of the pandemic, college students remain more likely to complete a degree in a timely fashion if they choose a program and develop an academic plan early on, have a clear road map of the courses they need to take to complete a credential, and receive guidance and support to help them stay on the path. Guided pathways integrate these and other evidence-based reforms with the goal of ensuring that they become part of every student's college experience.

Another approach to improving outcomes for current and prospective community college students is increasing awareness of prospective labor market outcomes associated with certain fields of study and degrees. A recent survey of community college students finds that students "overestimate salaries by 13% and underestimate the probability of finding employment by almost 25% in almost all fields" (Baker et al. 2018, p. 19).

In view of the monumental impact the pandemic has had on the higher education sector as a whole, community colleges, in particular, hold enormous potential for students across the United States. Realizing this full potential is important to allow students to obtain the education and training needed to pursue career goals, obtain good-paying jobs, and contribute to a vibrant American economy. Moving forward, we must invest in innovative, evidence-based solutions, enable students to complete postsecondary credentials and degrees, and ultimately help them achieve their academic and career goals.



Ronald Gordon began his higher education career 15 years ago as a recruiter at a HBCU, Wilberforce University, and currently serves as Dean of Enrollment Services at Clark State Community College in Springfield, Ohio, following stints as a recruiter, athletic director, and director of student services. He earned his MS in Higher Education at Xavier University in Ohio and has completed all course work in the Ferris State University DCCL program.



Nijia' Thomas, MEd, MA, currently is serving as a school counselor at Cypress Fairbanks ISD (Texas) where she has been teaching for almost 15 years. She has been an interventionist and has taught English/Reading. She earned her MEd in 2006 in Curriculum and Instruction and her MA in School Counseling in 2009 from Prairie View A&M University near Houston. She is currently enrolled in the Ferris State University DCCL program.

## NATIONAL LEADER PERSPECTIVE

*Community colleges – with open access, low tuition, and focus on workplace preparation – have long been considered a gateway to an improved standard of living. They also tend to attract a diverse student population with a broad range of learning needs. Various challenges to student success and completion have resulted in an achievement gap, or disparity between the educational performance of groups of students defined by gender, race/ethnicity, and socioeconomic status. We posed the following question to emerging and national leaders. Their answers appear below.*

### Focusing on Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Despite the Pandemic

**Erica Lee Orians, PhD**

*Executive Director  
Michigan Center for Student Success,  
Michigan Community College Association  
Lansing, Michigan*

The coronavirus pandemic has had a huge impact on community colleges as colleges quickly pivoted to online instruction and student supports, adapted campus facilities to accommodate necessary safety protocols, distributed emergency aid to students, and are now preparing for a massive vaccination campaign. But despite the global pandemic and all of the attention necessary to stop the virus' spread, I have observed in the last year an even greater focus on diversity, equity, and inclusion among our colleges and an acute, deliberate focus on identifying, addressing, and closing achievement gaps.

Closing achievement gaps is not a new conversation at Michigan's community colleges. In 2011, the presidents and trustees who serve as the Board of Directors of the Michigan Community College Association partnered with the Kresge Foundation to create the Michigan Center for Student Success (MCSS), where I work with a small but dedicated staff, with the shared vision of improving equitable student outcomes, emphasizing linkages between policy, practice and research. Equity is at the core of the values of the Center. In the last ten years, our work has focused on addressing the most significant barriers to student success, including developmental education, transfer, basic needs, program design, holistic student supports, and completion. For the last six years, Michigan's community colleges have been engaged in implementing Guided Pathways reforms aimed at redesigning the community college experience for students. Fortunately, community colleges had already laid the foundation for more deliberate equity work even in the midst of the pandemic.

Community colleges recognize that we cannot address achievement gaps without identifying the gaps. The MCSS hosted a series of virtual convenings in 2020 focused on examining equity gaps using data from the Voluntary Framework of Accountability from the American Association of Community Colleges. The VFA examines long-term outcomes (completion and transfer) measured after six years along with early credit accumulation, completion of college-level English and mathematics, and course completion rates. These data are disaggregated by race and ethnicity, gender, Pell status, age, enrollment status, and college-readiness. The disaggregated data provides a comprehensive view of achievement gaps including what outcomes have the greatest gaps and among what sub-groups. In addition to examining outcomes for enrolled students, community colleges are leveraging unconventional data sources. Michigan colleges are examining data about their communities by exploring the ALICE Report published by the Michigan Association of United Ways. 23 community colleges in Michigan administered the Student Financial Wellness survey in partnership with Trellis Research to understand more about student basic needs.

Colleges are also taking meaningful actions to close those gaps by critically examining and changing institutional policies and practices that are barriers to student success. Colleges are changing placement policies and revising developmental education course sequences so that underprepared students can complete college-level English and mathematics within one year. They are also participating in statewide transfer agreements through the MiTransfer Pathways so that all community college students have equitable access to bachelor's degree programs and assurance that courses

#### QUESTION OF THE MONTH:

***What strategies and resources are colleges employing to help close the achievement gap during this pandemic and beyond?***

are transferrable and apply to bachelor's degree programs for all community college students. Colleges are training advisors and counselors to help students access public benefits and community resources such as food assistance, transportation, and childcare through Michigan's MiBridges portal.

With a significant investment from college foundations and federal stimulus funds, colleges

are dramatically expanding emergency assistance programs, and early feedback suggests that relatively small cash assistance grants have a positive impact on retention. Teaching faculty are supporting each other to ensure that course content reflects the diversity of the student body and that the classroom environment is inclusive. Partially due to the pandemic, colleges are offering student support services such as advising and tutoring virtually, more conveniently, and with expanded hours to accommodate student needs. Colleges are partnering with community organizations to integrate essential services and provide accessible mental health counseling.

***Perhaps the most significant change colleges have made to address achievement gaps in the last year is the widespread investment in personalized outreach.***

Examining data and addressing inequitable policies and practices are necessary to end achievement gaps, but they, alone, will not close achievement gaps. People will. Our students are not just students. They are also parents, healthcare workers, childcare providers, laborers, and community activists. Although we examine their data, our students are also not just gender, age, race, or ethnicity. They are all of these things. Perhaps the most significant change colleges have made to address achievement gaps in the last year is the widespread investment in personalized outreach to current, former, and future students. Faculty, counselors, librarians, administrators, support, and facilities staff are all talking with students, listening to their individual needs, hearing their challenges, researching partnerships to help solve those problems, and connecting students with the supports necessary to eliminate barriers.

Eliminating achievement gaps begins with a critical examination of our data and willingness to change policies and practices using our data and the best evidence available from research to close these gaps. Most importantly, colleges are connecting with students and meeting their needs. We continue to listen to our community colleges' needs at the MCSS and provide support to institutions focused on eliminating achievement gaps. I'm confident that colleges will continue this important work.

*Erica Lee Orians, PhD, is the Executive Director of the Michigan Center for Student Success at the Michigan Community College Association, where she has supported Michigan's 28 community colleges in their efforts to improve equitable student outcomes since 2015. The Center is focused on building state-level capacity to support campus-based innovations and creating a tighter link between practice, research, and policy to promote student success. Erica has worked in higher education for more than 20 years. She previously held positions at the Utah Education Policy Center (UEPC) at the University of Utah, The Ohio State University, Miami University-Middletown campus, and the Columbus College of Arts and Design. Erica earned her PhD in Educational Leadership and Policy from the University of Utah, where her dissertation focused on benchmarking and efficiency among rural community colleges. She earned her MA in Higher Education and Student Affairs and her BA in History from The Ohio State University.*



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

**COVID-19 and Student Learning in the U.S.: The Hurt Could Last a Lifetime**

by Emma Dorn, Bryan Hancock, Jimmy Sarakatsannis, and Ellen Viruleg

New evidence shows that shutdowns caused by COVID-19 could exacerbate existing achievement gaps since the U. S. education system was not built to deal with extended shutdowns caused by the pandemic. Statistical models were created to estimate the potential impact of school closures on learning. Models were based on studies of the effectiveness of remote learning relative to traditional classroom instruction for different kinds of students, and results were evaluated.

Access this work here: <https://mck.co/3cUKcf5>

**The Impacts of COVID-19 on the Academic Achievement Gap**

by Barnett Yang

Examining the impacts of the pandemic on the achievement gap is especially relevant now due to the disruptions in education and the transition towards remote teaching. This work focuses on the correlations between poverty and income with academic achievement, and the findings imply that the pandemic may have a profound impact on the academic achievement of students of color and poverty, widening the already pronounced racial achievement gap.

Access this work here: <https://bit.ly/3q6Ubl6>

**Creating a Vibrant Community for All** (continued from page 1)

One of the most promising examples of accelerated learn and earn models launched during the Fall 2020 semester have been the 21 fast-track, short-term certificates for dislocated workers. These free programs with embedded industry credentials can be earned in 16 weeks or less. They focus on key industries that continue to demonstrate increased talent demand in key sectors, including healthcare, information technologies, business, and advanced manufacturing. Key program features offered through the programs support student success through hands-on, applied industry experiences, access to a personal dedicated academic and career coach, and job/ employer connections. Nearly 200 new students enrolled in these fast-track certificates, with 41% students of color. This compares to our Lorain County demographics of 7.8% identifying as Black/African American and 9.8% identifying as Hispanic/Latinx. Each of these short-term certificates lead to associate degrees; however, the short-term nature and the industry credential clearly point to an immediate goal of returning to work in a job with family wages.

**A focus on upskilling our most economically challenged communities in Lorain County is at the forefront of the College’s transformational work with the city of Elyria, Ohio.**

LCCC’s enrollment experience for the short-term, fast track certificates mirrors findings from the Strada-Gallup Education Consumer Survey (Strada Education Network, 2021). The survey examines Americans’ perception about higher education pathways noting that Black Americans and Latinos intend to enroll in education and training programs at higher rates than White Americans. The survey revealed that individuals whose work was disrupted by COVID-19 were driving the interest in enrolling in an education or training program. Additionally, the survey asked Americans when they consider education options, what are their goals and preferences. Earning a certificate, certification, or license topped the list with 25% selecting these short-term options, versus 15% for a bachelor’s degree and 12% for an associate’s degree. And more, compared to 50% of student peers at 4-year institutions, community college students were more likely to feel their education will be worth the cost with 73% agreeing or strongly agreeing.

Our learn and earn models, which include apprenticeships, have also taken on greater importance during the pandemic. Employers and students alike have discovered that these programs offer a path to economic recovery. LCCC’s customized programs are developed through close partnerships with local industry, and they allow students to earn a wage and gain job experience while they complete their credentials. **Rhonda Williams’ experience this year brings to life the power of apprenticeships.** She has worked on the assembly line at Ford Motor Company for 25 years when an opportunity of a lifetime was offered to her when she earned a spot in the United Auto Workers (UAW)/ Ford Motor Company Joint Apprenticeship Program. Rhonda is one of 75 apprentices who are taking their classes in socially distanced classrooms on our campus. Her determination to become an electrician and earn her journeyman’s card by this fall drives her, and she knows her kids are proud. Like her children, I too, am proud of Rhonda for staying the course. Rhonda credits

the supportive and inclusive LCCC environment for her success, noting she’s in an industry where she’s often one of very few women.

A focus on upskilling our most economically challenged communities in Lorain County is at the forefront of the College’s transformational work with the city of Elyria, Ohio. Elyria residents experience a poverty rate at 23.1%, well above the national average of 10.5%, with only 15.5% earning a Bachelor’s degree or higher (U. S. Census Bureau, 2019). The Elyria Skill City promise – a first-of-its-kind partnership between the City of Elyria and Lorain County Community College – aims to reskill and upskill Elyria residents through short-term certificates that lead to in-demand, industry-recognized credentials that include a direct pathway to a new career. In December 2020, Elyria City Council voted unanimously to allocate \$200,000 from the Issue 6 - Economic Development budget to kick-start the program. Research demonstrates the direct correlation between a skilled workforce and economic growth and prosperity for a community. It is through progressive partnerships like this that we will accelerate our economic recovery, reduce achievement gaps, create greater employment opportunities, and build a better future for residents.

While the pandemic challenges are not behind us, I am optimistic and energized about a new, better future. My level of enthusiasm comes from the remarkable resilience I’ve witnessed from our students, campus, and community. One of the most powerful actions we can take is actively listening to those we serve. Listening not only allows us to determine how we can best fulfill our values to education, adapt, lead and inspire; it allows us to reflect upon what has enabled our students and community to persevere. Over the past year, I have listened to our students, constituents, faculty, and staff in virtual chats, forums, and surveys to help us reimagine a preferred future. Listening and responding to our community’s needs and aspirations is who we are at LCCC. Founded as Ohio’s first community college with a permanent campus in 1963, the College has delivered on its promise through the most prosperous times and the most challenging. It is my promise that LCCC will continue to listen, adapt, and act to prepare our students and community for the brightest future they can imagine.

**Marcia Ballinger, PhD**, has over 30 years in community college leadership roles advancing student success, workforce and economic development, strategic planning, and institutional advancement. She holds a PhD in Community College Leadership from Walden University and an MBA from Kent State University. She serves as Lorain County Community College’s (LCCC) fifth president and previously held positions as Provost, Vice President for Strategic Development, and Vice President of LCCC’s Foundation. Dr. Ballinger’s fundamental belief that “Every Student’s Dream Matters,” is at the core of LCCC’s Culture of Care. Her unwavering commitment to equity and student success has led to significant reductions in educational achievement gaps – especially for underserved students. She is an inaugural member of the Aspen Institute’s Presidential Fellowship. Under her leadership LCCC garnered the top two national honors for excellence in student success by the American Association of Community Colleges (AACC) as “First in the Nation for Excellence in Student Success” in 2018 and by Achieving the Dream, Inc. (ATD) as the Leah Meyer Austin Award recipient in 2020.



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