

Perspectives

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Community College Leadership for the 21st Century

COVID-19 has amplified existing problems in our community and in education, but we should be excited by the fact innovation has suddenly moved from the margins to the center of many education systems.

- Guy Smith

While unprecedented, the coronavirus pandemic has showcased the core values of the community college sector to unify college efforts to provide equity and support to students, staff, and the community...

- Norma W. Goldstein

Experiencing the Pandemic: Leadership Beliefs and Actions for a Post-Pandemic Era

Lee Ann Nutt, PhD

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Our past experiences form the beliefs we hold. Beliefs we hold drive the actions we take, and the actions we take generate results. Connors and Smith (2011) refer to the interaction of experiences, beliefs, and actions as the Results Pyramid. Personally, I envision experiences, beliefs, actions, and results as circular cycle where the achievement of outcomes creates a new experience, which informs new beliefs, and so on.

The COVID-19 pandemic certainly was a new experience that deeply impacted people in profound ways that will be studied and researched for years to come. It had incredibly devastating effects on families who lost loved ones, on business owners who lost their livelihoods, and on every institution in the United States – including healthcare, education, and corporations. The pandemic also changed America and divided us further along ideological and political lines.

And we experienced it first-hand.

Our pre-pandemic experiences and beliefs were exposed more so than ever before as we responded to the seemingly unsurmountable challenges we faced. For some, our beliefs propelled us to achieve extraordinary results. For others, their beliefs may have paralyzed them and prevented them from taking necessary action. Regardless of the ways our pre-pandemic beliefs informed our actions, now is time to reevaluate the beliefs we hold about leadership and learning.

As we approach a post-pandemic era, we need to ensure through the actions we take that our nation's community colleges will be stronger, more agile, and more relevant than ever before. Just as adversity reveals individual strengths and weaknesses, adversity also reveals organizational health and exposes vulnerabilities.

From my own leadership experience during the pandemic, listed below are five categories of beliefs that have been bolstered and will characterize my leadership in a post-pandemic era:

The Human Experience. People are people first...always. Community colleges are a people-based enterprise. Members of our colleges are human beings before they are employees or students. They all have stories, challenges, fears, hopes, and dreams. We should not separate the humanity of those we touch from the roles they fill. The human experience is critical, especially in a virtual world. We long for and need interaction to see body language, and to feel the energy in a room. Missing these connections made us realize the importance of the human experience.

Too Much Communication. There is no such thing as too much communication. Clear, precise, and frequent communication is critical, especially in a society where information flows quickly and freely, but not always accurately. When you think you have shared enough, share it again and in different modalities.

Value of Transparency. Do not underestimate the value of transparency. People can be trusted with information. People become more trusting when they have information. Human nature drives people to fill information voids with rumor and speculation, which are usually worse than the truth.

Solutions in Teams. Solutions are best formed in teams, not in isolation. No one person has the capacity to solve all problems all alone. Together, ideas and solutions emerge that are far superior to those developed by one person. Leadership capital is not reduced by not having all the answers. Engaging others in problem-solving builds leadership capital.

Connection and Visibility. Staying connected and being visible, especially in a virtual world, builds organizational confidence and security about the well-being and the future of the organization. By connecting with others (even virtually), leaders can better gauge morale and develop a sense of what the organization needs. Likewise, people want to see their leaders. Building a sense of togetherness helps instill the assurance that everything is going to be all right.

Extraordinary leaders know what they believe, and they consistently act in ways to demonstrate their beliefs. However, and perhaps most importantly, they are willing to demonstrate the mindset, resilience, and capacity to develop new beliefs based on their experiences.

Leadership actions for a post-pandemic reality, based on the beliefs stated above, are listed below:

Keep People First. With empathy as a guidepost and equity as a priority, we must keep the humanity of the community college mission in the forefront. For instance:

- ▲ Inequities were harshly revealed during the pandemic. The intersection between technology and diversity suddenly became painfully clear. Exposed was the glaring lack of access to computers and Wi-Fi, and not just for students, but for some employees as well. We must continue to work diligently to overcome systemic inequities facing so many.
- ▲ While we may soon no longer have to contend with the immediate health threats caused by COVID-19, the well-being, safety, and security of people who enter our colleges must remain a priority. Standards of cleanliness have been raised – let's not lower them now. Likewise, our institutions must be prepared keep people safe

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EMERGING LEADER PERSPECTIVES

Community colleges are facing another summer of online and hybrid learning due to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic which has taken a toll on higher education this past year. Although the end of the shutdown is in sight, the pandemic itself has forced colleges to reconsider established practices and policies, while possibly posing challenges for years to come. Yet, despite these challenges, community colleges are learning valuable lessons that could help structure a more robust future. We posed the following question to emerging and national leaders. Their answers appear below.

Brandon Anderson, MFA

English instructor and Instructional Coach
Jackson College
Jackson Michigan

Last summer, many colleges and universities began announcing their plans for the Fall 2020 semester. One such institution that announced plans to continue remote classroom instruction for that upcoming Fall semester was Harvard University. This announcement made national headlines and also garnered a bit of criticism online with some people opining that it is unfair for Harvard to expect students to pay the hefty price tag that comes with an Ivy League education is that education is being delivered remotely.

The insinuation, of course, is that online learning modalities (whether they be synchronous or asynchronous) are of a lesser quality in comparison to the in-person mode of learning which we in higher ed (and those outside of it) still tend to refer to as “traditional learning.” Yet, the idea of remote learning as being “less than” compared to in-person learning likely feels like a slap in the face to instructors who have spent countless hours revising teaching materials, creating audio and video recordings, and turning to our colleagues for support and guidance to find ways to make our class environments welcoming and engaging. As those who have been teaching online for years can certainly attest, the online learning environment is just as rigorous—and oftentimes even more rigorous—as a face-to-face course.

The misconception that the online classroom is easier and/or a “less than” version of the face-to-face classroom is a belief that can even be held by those within higher education. Some colleagues who were not accustomed to online learning severely underestimated the time and effort required to teach online. Several of my own students have acknowledged to me that they were not prepared for online college classes, thus highlighting a key lesson for community colleges to consider as we begin to see our way out of this pandemic. It is one thing to convey to faculty and students what the classroom environment will be when a semester begins. It’s another thing entirely to explain how that classroom environment functions and what online learning really looks like.

Many community colleges already provide first-year seminar courses to “teach students how to be a student.” But now is the time to prepare students not just for the guidance necessary to be successful in an online learning environment, but for the eventual return to campus as well.

Since the start of the pandemic, many colleges have begun providing needed training and resources to faculty as they prepare their online learning environments – definitely a move in the right direction and a potential blueprint for ongoing student support. If making it through this pandemic has taught us anything in a universal sense, it’s that one must be ready for change when it comes and then adapt. Community colleges have been adapting and evolving since their inception. Can there be anything more “traditional” than continuing to adapt, evolve, and reimagine?

QUESTION OF THE MONTH:

What important lessons were learned during this past year of COVID that can benefit community colleges moving forward?

Kailynn Ryan Cummings, MEd

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Ferris State University
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The financial stressors of the COVID-19 pandemic are forcing students to postpone and/or abandon their postsecondary education goals. The current state of our global economy has transformed

education from a necessity into a luxury. In 2020, undergraduate enrollment decreased by 3.6% with public two-year institutions contributing the largest portion to the decline (Sedmak, 2021). The past academic year was a disturbing wakeup call for educators, given the alarming number of students missing or disengaged.

For years, higher education professionals have repeated the caveat, “Without them, there is no us.” This past year, the higher education sector witnessed this warning come into fruition. High school students, in particular, made it clear that postsecondary education policies and practices were outdated. Essentially, their absence forced institutions to dump strategic plans and spend time restructuring for a more robust future. This experience magnified flaws in our education system that had been swept into dissertations and academic journals. If the data and research weren’t compelling enough before, the publicized technological divide and urgency of educational recovery should be.

While scrolling Instagram the other day, I noticed a Cybersecurity ad. The program required no experience, could be accomplished in less than one year, and guaranteed job placement assistance. The infrastructure of two-year colleges is built to produce job-ready, college educated, global citizens faster than its competitors. This is a value that community colleges need to use and market to their advantage since the end of the shutdown may be in sight. With this in mind, community colleges should focus on guaranteeing job placement after degree-completion. This initiative would require collaboration from community leaders and corporate partners. By delivering stronger post-secondary readiness and transition outcomes, community colleges can reassure students that COVID-19 did not decrease the value of education. Students need to know that their investment in the virtual classroom today will see a return on their investment in the future.

This valuable lesson has the potential to catapult community colleges into leading community revitalization. My hope is that community college leaders realize that vocational training and associate degrees are the new and exciting programs students desired all along. The goal forward is to rebuild our economy financially, educationally, and equitably. Student success is not one-size fits all, and innovation is not an exhaustive measure. Innovation can be used to produce replicable and equitable transitions that close the achievement gap. We are on the cusp of a paradigm shift that can alter the trajectory of higher education. Through awareness, readiness, and access, community colleges can use innovative practices to tackle systematic complexities. Never forget the caveat: *Without them (students), there is no us (your job title here) – Every higher education professional.*



Brandon Anderson, EdD, has worked in the field of higher education for the past 13 years and currently serves as an English instructor and Instructional Coach at Jackson College in Jackson, Michigan. Brandon earned a Master of Fine Arts degree in Creative Writing from San Diego State University in California, and he has recently completed his EdD in the Doctorate of Community College Leadership program (DCCL) at Ferris State University.



Kailynn Ryan Cummings, MEd, is currently a full-time student in the DCCL program at Ferris State University. She earned a master's degree in Educational Leadership from Wayne State University in 2019. Her most recent role in academia was serving as Assistant Director of Admissions and Coordinator of Diversity Recruitment for Alma College (MI). Kailynn hopes that her educational journey will inspire students to go all the way in postsecondary education.

NATIONAL LEADER PERSPECTIVE

Community colleges are facing another summer of online and hybrid learning due to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic which has taken a toll on higher education this past year. Although the end of the shutdown is in sight, the pandemic itself has forced colleges to reconsider established practices and policies, while possibly posing challenges for years to come. Yet, despite these challenges, community colleges are learning valuable lessons that could help structure a more robust future. We posed the following question to emerging and national leaders. Their answers appear below.

Key Community College Post-COVID Lesson Learned: Stay Ready, So You Don't Have to Get Ready

Jon Mandrell, EdD

Vice President of Academics and Student Services
Sauk Valley Community College
Dixon, Illinois

Since the abrupt arrival of the pandemic in 2020, community colleges have remained committed to their mission of providing access to a quality education while also responding to varied community needs. As community colleges, one of our hallmarks is "Access," which has been reinvented and even expanded along this journey. There have been numerous lessons learned throughout the pandemic, and we must seize this opportunity to embrace and carry them forward, or we will have failed in our responsibility to further serve our students, staff, and community in a post-COVID world.

One lesson learned is that there is no such thing as too much planning. As part of our future planning, we must stay agile and resilient, which we have a long history of doing. The pandemic has taught us that what may be possible today (or the next minute) may not be possible tomorrow. Planning as it relates to campus operations, safety, delivery of courses, and the deployment of resources should be a core concern – and well communicated. In response, we must remain fluid with regular updates and communications to our faculty, staff, students, and the community.

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Next, research and development is key. Staying at least one step ahead of the students is vital when managing a pandemic. If possible, be early to everything. While community colleges are not known for their research, we have adapted it into our planning and execution throughout the pandemic. With so many incredible technologies to embrace, understanding and troubleshooting them is essential. For all those faculty who had to adapt virtual labs at a moment's notice, we thank you. It was not easy, but we persisted. Going forward, focusing on research and exploration will give faculty and staff the opportunity to prepare new technologies, not only as supplemental materials, but to innovate and enrich the learning experience. As the old saying goes, "Stay ready, so you don't have to get ready." Thus, be sure to invest wisely – both in your time and your pursuit of technologies.

An additional lesson that was validated through the pandemic was that the human element matters – even when in remote and online settings. Our colleges have a rich history of providing high-touch, in-person service. The use of technology, such as computers, should continue to be leveraged and refined so that all students today feel that same personal connection with our faculty and staff, no matter where they may be located. This very connection is tied to retention and our mission, vision, and values to care for our students and their experience. This goes far beyond the classroom and extends to online tutoring, office hours, and being able to ascertain student needs in any environment. We must ensure those vital support services

QUESTION OF THE MONTH:

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are always heard, felt, and effective. Synchronous and online teaching, as well as our many support services, are here to stay. Refining and enhancing those offerings will be essential to our operations and success of students going forward.

Last and perhaps the most important: what does the new student of today and the of the future look like? Their expectation and learning style

matters. Community colleges have multiple deliveries and have added even more now, but with our mission of serving all, and given the varying learning styles of students, no one delivery system should be the focus of our teaching. The same can be said for our devices and tools, including classroom technologies. Computers, tablets, phones, apps, and many web-based technologies are essential to learning in today's new normal. Ensuring that students have access to these, including connectivity, is no longer optional. The game is the same, but the tools have changed!

As we proceed into a post-COVID world, we must continue to be effective planners, agile thinkers, and never forget that the human connection can be provided through multiple deliveries and innovations.

As part of preparing for the post-pandemic academic landscape, SVCC began building new programs to not only assist students in their studies, but to ensure connectivity. Just initiated, "Sauk Summer Launch" provides free tuition to students taking their required First-Year Experience course and also equips them with a new fully equipped laptop computer. Students who successfully complete the course may keep the computer, providing they are registered in the fall semester. This program not only keeps students engaged through the summer as part of retention efforts, but also provides them with an essential tool to help support their academic journey.

As we proceed into a post-COVID world, we must continue to be effective planners, agile thinkers, and never forget that the human connection can be provided through multiple deliveries and innovations. The sense of urgency that the pandemic created surely was one of chaos at times, but it was also a time of channeling our strengths to provide access like never before. Because of our missions to serve all, community colleges were always poised to pivot to any and all delivery modalities, if called upon. We did not disappoint, and I am proud of the work that we as professionals achieved. Here's to 2021 being a year of redemption and relaunching!

Dr. Jon Mandrell serves as the Vice President of Academics and Student Services at Sauk Valley Community College in Dixon, Illinois, where he is the Chief Academic Officer (CAO) and Chief Student Services Officer (CSSO). In this role, he provides leadership to the college's academic departments and Student Services. His previous roles include serving as the Dean of Instructional Services and also as a Criminal Justice faculty member at Sauk Valley. Prior to his community college career, he served as a police officer in Oregon, Illinois. He holds an EdD in Community College Leadership from the Ferris State University DCCL program and a Master of Arts degree in Law Enforcement and Justice Administration from Western Illinois University.



QUICK TAKES
Highlights
from the Field

Beyond the Pandemic: Lessons Learned From COVID-19: The Quarterly Review of Innovative Applications in Alternative Education
by ReportOUT

This quarterly volume of ReportOUT is dedicated to the perception that the COVID-19 crisis has stimulated innovation – everywhere – but especially within the education sector. Some of those developments are highlighted in the 13 separate articles contributed by leaders in the field and focused upon lessons learned. The consensus is the education sector – and more specifically community colleges – will reverberate from this pandemic for many decades to come. Access this work here: <https://bit.ly/3v9Ncd9>

The Impact of COVID-19 on Entering Students in Community Colleges
by the Center for Community College Student Engagement

Suddenly in early 2020, most community colleges radically shifted the ways in which they were providing instruction to students. With the impact of COVID-19 likely becoming long-lasting, this study explores the impact of COVID-19 on entering community college students. It also urges college leaders to reflect on what has been learned in the past year and to incorporate these lessons into policies, procedure, and student supports. Access this work here: <https://bit.ly/3zg1DQ8>

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Experiencing the Pandemic: Leadership Beliefs and Actions... *(continued from page 1)*

in other emergencies, including weather and human threats as well.

- ▲ While children will return to traditional classrooms, jobs will become available again, and families will reconnect, the pandemic experience revealed the degree to which people juggle competing responsibilities. Post-pandemic, students and employees will still balance demands on their time and energy. The empathy expressed to our students and employees during the pandemic should remain. Of course, academic standards and expectations should remain high – we don't want to devalue the learning experience. However, we can and should expect much through a spirit of caring and concern for students and colleagues as human beings, first.

We do not have to wait for the next adversity to hit. Knowing we can overcome and knowing how to overcome frees us to creatively address present and future challenges.

Listen. As important as frequently sharing information about the college in clear, accurate ways is to an organization's culture, communication encompasses listening as well. Leadership actions in a post-pandemic era should include the following:

- ▲ Listen to faculty. Listen to staff. Listen to students. They will tell you what you need to know. Just ask them. If you are willing, they will also tell you what you do not want to hear, which is what you should be hearing the loudest.
- ▲ Listen to your team. Make it safe for them to tell you the truth.
- ▲ Gather stories from faculty, staff, and students about their pandemic experiences. Not only will these stories provide valuable historic perspective as future students and leaders study the pandemic era, but these stories can inform our present reality.

Be Transparent. Amid the pandemic crisis, providing honest and clear guidance and information about health and safety was literally a matter of life and death. College presidents and executives who chose to hide or minimize the impact of COVID-19 on their institutions probably found themselves having to undo false information or respond to negative reactions by employees and students. Transparency involves vulnerability. Not everyone will agree with or like what you must share. However, hiding behind a wall of opaque vagueness does not qualify as leadership. In a post-pandemic era, real leaders will continue to:

- ▲ Trust employees with hard facts.
- ▲ Share information truthfully.
- ▲ Be willing to stay "I don't know," followed by "I will find out."

Learn and Act. Imagining a collective adversity worse than what we have just been through is difficult. Completely reinventing how colleges operate while keeping people safe from a deadly virus should be one for the ages. However, more adversity is on the horizon. It always is. The good news is, we have demonstrated the capacity to do hard things.

- ▲ We can reflect on and draw from the pandemic

experience to give us confidence to face on-going and future challenges, such as enrollment declines and financial hardship.

- ▲ We do not have to wait for the next adversity to hit. Knowing we can overcome and knowing how to overcome frees us to creatively address present and future challenges. We do not have to avoid hard facts or ignore harsh realities. We can deal with them effectively.
- ▲ We need to keep what worked. Going back to normal sounds like a good thing, but after this experience, normal is backwards. We need to go forward.

Celebrate. Returning to a sense of normalcy is eagerly anticipated; however, marking the end of the pandemic-era is an important step in healing and renewal.

- ▲ People deserve to be thanked for their extraordinary efforts and praised for their resilience.
- ▲ To be cliché, we need to put a stake in the ground and claim "from this day forward..."
- ▲ We also need to rejoice in how the pandemic created an opportunity to further establish community colleges as a valuable, legitimate, and affordable option. We can use this opportunity to shape the beliefs people hold about higher education and draw more students to us without any shame or feelings of not being enough.

Certainly, other leadership beliefs and actions besides the ones listed above can be identified for your own personal experience. I hope you will share those with your teams and your colleges.

Adversity embraced becomes resilience. Resilience breeds creativity. Creativity generates ingenuity. Ingenuity makes us better. On the eve of a post-pandemic era, community colleges leaders, faculty, staff, and students can look back and wonder how we did it. Future generations will marvel at how we did it and be grateful they didn't have to experience it. Yet, despite the devastation and chaos, the pandemic could be the best experience to ever happen to community colleges, if we will adjust our beliefs as needed to achieve even greater levels of success for all.

Reference: Connors, R. & Smith, T. (2011). *Change the Culture, Change the Game*. Portfolio/Penguin.

Dr. Lee Ann Nutt serves as President at Lone Star College-Tomball. Prior to assuming her current leadership position in February 2015, Dr. Nutt served as the institution's Vice President of Instruction (VPI) for over three years. For over 12 years, from 1999–2011, she served in various administrative roles at North Central Texas College, including Dean of Continuing Education, Provost, and Vice President of Instruction. Dr. Nutt is the primary author of Complete the Agenda: Challenge Beliefs About Student Success, released by Rowman & Littlefield Publishers in January 2019. The book reflects her passion for creating experiences for students that empower them to develop beliefs that lead to success. She shares her passion for helping students transform their lives through her personal webpage: www.leeannnutt.com. Additionally, Dr. Nutt serves on the HCA Healthcare Tomball hospital Board of Directors, is a member of the community advisory committee for the Tomball Emergency Assistance Ministries (TEAM), and is a prior member of the Greater Tomball Area Chamber of Commerce. Dr. Nutt has taught a doctoral course for the Ferris State University (FSU) DCCL program since 2016. In addition, she has taught courses for both Lubbock Christian University and for Texas Tech University. She earned both her MEd and her EdD from Texas Tech University.

