

Perspectives

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Community College Leadership for the 21st Century

In addition to all of the budgetary and operational challenges, higher education is facing an increasingly relevant question about the value of what they offer in the first place.

- Glenn Llopis

[F]or all the discussions about how universities and colleges should pivot during this period, the need to revisit higher education's core value and its related resources has never been more imperative.

- Scott Latham and Michael Braun

Our Changed Reality: The Value of the Post-Pandemic Community College

Daniel J. Phelan, PhD

President
Jackson College
Jackson, Michigan

It appears that there is an abiding national perception that suggests: Once the pandemic is over, we'll all go back to normal. It's certainly understandable, and even appreciated – we are fatigued from all things COVID, and we just want to get back to familiar faces and places, and our everyday routines. Embracing that view may work for some, but for community college leaders, putting your faith into a return to normalcy will most assuredly be problematic for you and your institution.

In the early 90's, I read a book called Paradigms: The Business of Discovering the Future, written by noted futurist Joel Barker. In it he spoke of paradigms as being a model, schema, or framework for almost every aspect of life, which also includes the rules for succeeding within those systems. Barker further noted that if a paradigm is disrupted, or shifts from previously defined and accepted patterns to a new model, or new way of doing things, the rules that governed within the previous paradigm also change. According to Barker, in such cases, "everyone is put back to zero" – meaning that no one has the advantage, no matter how successful they were beforehand. The new rules and methods for functioning and succeeding within the new paradigm must be sought out, clarified, defined, tested, and deployed.

What went largely unnoticed is what the rapid and mammoth change in our work did to the prevailing higher education paradigm.

It's unclear to me yet if SARS-CoV-2 caused a paradigm shift, or if we are just at a significant inflection point in our industry. Few would argue that higher education has, and is, experiencing a seismic operating shift from the way we have always done things. Furthermore, COVID-19's relative effect was cojoined with, and amplified by, other disruptive forces in play. To wit, consider (prior to the pandemic), the concerning rise in student debt nationally, increased competition from for-profit higher education organizations (and increasingly from peer institutions as well), the general decline in student enrollment, slow gains in student retention and completion rates, increased tuition discounting, rising discontent with higher education and its value proposition, rising tuition beyond inflation rates, a relative decline in federal and state aid,

new mergers, closures, and increasing expectations of transparency and accountability. Then came January 2020, and with it, the arrival of the novel coronavirus in Washington state. Not far behind came the death of George Floyd and racial unrest, an incredibly divisive presidential election and post-election procedural processes, massive job losses, and a recession. I believe that all of these aforementioned forces just accelerated what was already in process.

In late February and early March 2020, nearly all of higher education scrambled to transition ground-based instructional programs, operations, and support services to the ether. It was interesting to note how colleges and universities seemed to easily transcend many of the implacable problems that had plagued curriculum, academic, human resource, and financial committee meetings for years. All eyes were focused upon the threat and ensuring the continuation of service to others, particularly the most vulnerable among us. We were singular in thought, purpose, and action. Laptops and WIFI hotspots flew out the door, WIFI parking lots were created, colleges closed, employees set up home offices, IT employees worked 24/7 to scale systems, and huge financial sums of federal, state, foundation, and employee financial support went to the aid of students and institutions. We were solving important problems. We leaned into what we did well: adapting, educating students, supporting community and health organizations, and ensuring organizational continuity. Many months later, as we began to settle in, we started to wonder about how long this storm would last. Some have been more optimistic than others, believing that they could operate safely on a shifting landscape, only to face problems later.

It is unknown as yet, just how many students will change their enrollment behaviors, now fully aware of a different approach to getting an education.

What went largely unnoticed is what the rapid and mammoth change in our work did to the prevailing higher education paradigm. I submit that, as we were grappling with imminent danger, we unwittingly transmuted the bulk of collegiate education into a fungible, albeit intangible, product. Our courses and degree programs became largely interchangeable with courses and degree programs at other colleges and universities, both public and private, credit and non-credit. After the initial shock

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EMERGING LEADER PERSPECTIVES

Throughout their long history, community colleges have served as innovators in higher education, although their overall value in the sector has not always been well understood by the public. The pandemic has hit community colleges particularly hard, and the higher education landscape is likely to change rapidly in the coming months. As a result, colleges are facing the challenge of transforming themselves once the pandemic is under control. We posed the following question to emerging and national leaders. Their answers appear below.

Sharonda Prioleau, MEd

English facilitator
Humble ISD
Houston, Texas

Community colleges have always been in the shadows of four-year universities and colleges, but COVID-19 has allowed community colleges to show how valuable they genuinely can be. Although the pandemic has caused unimaginable trauma, community college leaders are now in a position to reconstruct the image of community colleges by acknowledging what could be the new normal and reiterate what community colleges will continue to offer post-pandemic. Leaders can demonstrate that community colleges can help students earn a quality education at a lower cost or obtain skills to enter today's workforce, all while staying close to home.

During the pandemic, community colleges adjusted to accommodate students remotely. People quickly realized that community colleges were already equipped to offer flexibility and low tuition with the same quality education as any four-year institution. Once spring 2020 ended, many college-goers wanted to know if there would be a reduction in fees or a refund since many of the costs included in tuition were not used. Many parents did not want to send their children many miles away with the virus's uncertainty, nor did they want to pay large tuition fees for their child to work remotely from home. This allowed community colleges to rise to the occasion and show the community that quality instruction does not have to break the bank.

Still, society has overlooked community colleges' importance, making them perceived as less than their higher education counterparts. This has put a strain on community college leaders for years despite increasing enrollment. In view of such a stigma, community college leaders work very hard to rebrand the community colleges' image. With many options such as flexible class schedules, class delivery styles, early alert systems, and more, community college leaders can now shine a light on the innovative programs they have to offer. Clearly, this is the time to reassure the community that we are united.

Proposing that the community reconsider community college education's value, leaders should change community colleges' narrative and perception. Community colleges offer challenging classes, quality instruction provided by stellar professors, and help bridge the gap between students who are not ready or mature enough for a four-year university or for those with undecided majors. To change the way society views community colleges is a joint effort, and leaders cannot do it alone. We must join forces in promoting and acknowledging the greatness that community colleges have to offer. During the pandemic, many students returned home and found that quality education was right there in the community for a fraction of the cost. I was always taught never to underestimate the underdog, and COVID-19 has given us another reason never to underestimate community colleges.

QUESTION OF THE MONTH:

How can community college leaders best begin to rethink and communicate the value of post-pandemic community colleges?

Valarie White, MEd

Learning and Talent Development Specialist
Alamo Colleges District
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The community college is the most transformative institution in contemporary America. Eckel and King (2004) report that during the 20th century, economic and social changes transformed higher

education into a primary gateway to the middle-class. Without a college education, many are destined to work in lower-waged jobs. Dr. Celeste Carter (2015) stated, "Community colleges do work that America needs to have done, and that work is done with populations that are under-served, under-recognized, and under-valued." The heavy lifting equips students with the education and technical training needed to earn credentials, opening the doors of opportunity to higher-waged jobs. When viewed through this lens, a community college education is key to attaining the great American dream.

While struggling to overcome existing critical issues, the 2020 pandemic pitched community colleges a high-speed fastball that colleges caught without a glove. The resulting impact demanded an immediate strategy change that continues to evolve. The pandemic forced community colleges to reorganize the business with a business-like strategy. Academia disdains a comparison of higher-education to a business. Yet, surviving the pandemic demands college leaders don the batting helmet and develop an offensive business strategy.

The value of the community college during this recent pandemic is indisputable. Now is the time for community colleges to shed the stigma that they are a step down from the university education and solidify their position as the frontrunner in successfully educating tomorrow's workforce amid a pandemic. Developing stellar workforce programs are essential to revitalizing the economy post-pandemic. These programs produce credentialed graduates who are equipped with tools to secure employment in their field of study. Community colleges must capitalize on their strong workforce, continuing education, technical, and vocational courses of study.

Community colleges should rethink their approach to learning. Archaic "stand-up and teach" methods have a new rival known as distance learning. Once taken for granted, distance learning salvaged higher education during the pandemic. In a global community, commuting to a face-to-face course is outdated. The demand is to expand the distance/digital classroom and turn on all the bells and whistles. Reaching this milestone requires a radical move to educate the educators. Despite resistance, doubt, and uncertainty, community colleges must hit a home run to increase enrollment to retain students through completion. We must identify innovative methods to improve distance/digital education and make it more palatable for post-pandemic learners since our students are ready for next-level education from anywhere, right where they stand.



Sharonda Prioleau, MEd, is currently an English facilitator at Humble ISD (Texas). She has worked in education for 18 years and during that time, she has been a Developmental English and College Success adjunct professor at Lone Star College-University Park and Eastfield College. She earned her MEd in 2009 in Curriculum and Instruction at Prairie View A&M University near Houston and is currently enrolled in the Ferris State University DCCL program.



Valarie White serves as a Learning and Talent Management Specialist at Alamo Colleges District in Texas. Additionally, she is owner and founder of FOCUS Consulting Services, helping organizations develop employee's professional/soft skills, customer service skills, and corporate team-building efforts. She earned her MEd from the University of the Incarnate Word in San Antonio and is completing a Doctorate in Community College Leadership at Ferris State University.

NATIONAL LEADER PERSPECTIVE

Throughout their long history, community colleges have served as innovators in higher education, although their overall value in the sector has not always been well understood by the public. The pandemic has hit community colleges particularly hard, and the higher education landscape is likely to change rapidly in the coming months. As a result, colleges are facing the challenge of transforming themselves once the pandemic is under control. We posed the following question to emerging and national leaders. Their answers appear below.

Repositioning Post-Pandemic Community Colleges for a Sustainable Future

Pamela Lau, EdD

Executive Vice President
Parkland College
Champaign, Illinois

Where We Are Today. Community colleges will enter the post-pandemic higher education arena with a multiplicity of challenges. Our mission of providing open-admissions post-secondary education and workforce preparation remains unchanged. Our commitment to student success is strong. But the immediate future before us is, if not bleak, at least sobering.

Since 2010, community colleges across the nation have grappled with declining enrollments with no quick turnaround in the offing. This is in part due to the overall decline in high school students. Nathan Grawe (2018) offers a more nuanced forecast. Using growth projections of different population sectors, he sees a far more significant drop in the typical college-going populations on the horizon. Starting around 2026, institutions in the Midwest and Northeast are likely to face a 15% decline – and non-selective two-year colleges will take that hit head-on.

We had hoped that the pandemic cloud and attendant unemployment would come with a silver lining – a boost in community college enrollments. That failed to materialize. If anything, COVID-19 exacerbated the drop. The National Student Clearinghouse reports that the drop was particularly acute for us with an overall decline of 13% in first-time freshman students. Low-income students and students from underrepresented minority groups in particular stayed away. Concerns about finances, health, and family responsibilities combined with hesitations about learning remotely precipitated decisions to postpone college-going plans. National attention on student loan debt plus elevated concerns about the value of a college education piled on top of these enrollment downward trends.

Strategic Repositioning for a Sustainable Future. Surviving as viable institutions demands strategic repositioning. I suggest four directions for consideration:

1) *Reaching students.* The race for students will become increasingly competitive. Coming out ahead requires that we rethink recruitment strategy. Four-year institutions will aim major marketing efforts at the typical college-going populations – the so-called traditional students. While traditional students will continue to make up a major portion of our student population, community colleges must direct energies to seek out and attract students who are otherwise not bound for college. The unemployed or under-employed. Working adults. Individuals with some college but no credential. At-risk youth. English language learners. Those typically underserved by higher education.

We need streamlined career-oriented pathways to entice a pragmatic public who want assurances that there are tangible returns on their investment of effort, time, and money, programs designed to meet modern-day skill gaps (Lorenzo, 2021). Colleges that develop flexible delivery systems with crosswalks between non-credit and credit-bearing training and stair-step pathways to competencies and credentials that incorporate on-ramps and off-ramps between

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employment and training are more likely to find a sustainable pipeline of students. Access takes on a different dimension.

2) *Keeping students.* A comprehensive review of our retention strategies is urgent. Many students enroll with limited short-term goals. A class here to meet an immediate work skill gap; a course there for personal interests. But the reality is that too

many who are given access to our institutions leave without achieving goals, long term or short term. The national average year-to-year persistence at two-year public schools is less than 50%. For every two we recruit, we lose one the following year. We must reconfigure how we onboard a diverse array of students and sustain them through the college journey. Access without the supports for success is inauthentic and inequitable.

3) *Educating students.* Philosopher Isaiah Berlin's astute observation – the fox knows many things, but the hedgehog knows one thing – is apropos to our work (Emsi, 2020). Community colleges are called upon to re-train the nation's workforce for the post-pandemic world. We are hailed as responsive, reliable, and open to re-design. Pivot fast is our calling card. But – and this is a big BUT – we must resist the urge to be no more than technical training centers. Technical training alone (the hedgehog approach) will not provide students with armor against the next – regrettably but inevitable – crisis. Community colleges are regional technical and education hubs. We must cultivate foxiness by integrating interpersonal and cultural competencies, creative problem-solving, self-management skills, and leadership qualities into technical training. The trained hedgehog gets a job in the present; the fox has skills to survive the next bump in the journey and for the long haul. In the parlance of academia, we must infuse general education outcomes into technical competencies. Grooming foxy hedgehogs is a core mission.

4) *Messaging our story.* We have an image issue. It is commonplace to say that community colleges provide value at an affordable price. We are the alternative to mounting student debt. We will not break the bank. Undoubtedly true. But this unfortunately has devolved into the message that we are higher education's basement discount center, a last resort haven for academic underachievers. We, of course, know that value cannot and should not be equated with tuition rates. Reframing our story is crucial.

Our mission is strong. With appropriate adjustments, we have every reason to be confident that community colleges will contribute in a major way in the nation's post-pandemic recovery.

Pamela Lau is the Executive Vice President at Parkland College, Champaign, Illinois, where she has served since 1995. Her past positions include Center for Academic Success director, Dean of Academic Services, and Vice President for Academic Services. In November 2019, the Parkland College Board of Trustees selected Dr. Lau as President-designee.

Dr. Lau completed her bachelor's degree in Philosophy (First Class Honors) at the University of Singapore, and she earned a master's degree in Philosophy at the University of Chicago. Through the Kellogg Institute at Appalachian University, she was credentialed as a Developmental Education Specialist. In 2015, she graduated from Ferris State University's DCCL program with a doctorate in Community College Leadership.



**QUICK TAKES
Highlights
from the Field**

Responding to the COVID-19 Crisis, Part 3: A Survey of College and University Presidents

by Inside Higher Ed and Hanover Research

During the summer of COVID, college and university presidents were surveyed to discover their concerns about student and employee health and institutional finances. The results are presented here, with key findings indicating that nearly three-quarters of presidents are either very or somewhat concerned about a "perceived decrease in the value of higher education" because of COVID-19, up sharply from 60 percent of respondents in April and 48 percent in March of 2020.

Access this work here: <https://bit.ly/3qpycp5>

It's Time to Digitally Transform Community College

by Sean Gallagher

Given ongoing conversations about the overall value of community colleges as the pandemic rages on, this article – a part of the Sustaining Higher Education in the Coronavirus Crisis guide – poses the reimagining of the sector through digital transformation. Noting concerns about community colleges' financial footing and overall capacity, the author stresses the need to re-envision college strategies and infrastructure so that they can play a powerful role in the economic recovery.

Access this work here: <https://bit.ly/2OAc3jP>

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Our Changed Reality (continued from page 1)

of being transitioned to online courses, some students began to ask why they needed to pay so much for tuition and fees when they are not coming to campus, using libraries, or participating in campus-based programming. Some wondered why they paid so much for a class since the courses are pre-recorded and/or self-paced, with little direct interaction from the teacher. The awakened student-consumer began to see the similarity among courses, regardless of institution, allowing for mutual substitution, and consequently permitting multiple enrollment selection options.

Without needing to travel to a campus, pay parking fees, live in student residences, find a baby sitter, wait in lines, or eat bad cafeteria food, would-be students can virtually seek out a well-known faculty member, find a course using a different text, or one with different outcome expectations, weighing the options on the basis of cost, benefits, hassle, and overall value. Students can select courses from a host of different institutions, even in other states, or other countries for that matter. And, if the pursuit of credit-based courses is not a priority, non-credit options are available. Some of the courses are free.

Going forward, we must be clear-eyed about how we conceptualize, create, and deliver value to the student-customer. We must act now...

Query: After students have now had the experience of being in the driver's seat (virtually), choosing courses they want, on a day they want, at a time they want, in a format they want, and at a cost they want, do you believe they will quickly return to our campuses when it is safe to do so? Perhaps. Perhaps there will be some students who are loyal to their local institution and will go, or perhaps there are some students who may want a campus-based lab experience. Perhaps others who do not have dependable technology will want to be on campus, and perhaps there are still others who desire face-to-face social interactions. It is unknown as yet, just how many students will change their enrollment behaviors, now fully aware of a different approach to getting an education.

That notwithstanding, the online course has been a great leveler of opportunity and equity for students. In online courses, particularly in asynchronous courses, the introverted student can be just as successful as the extroverted student. Many students with physical disabilities no longer face barriers to the campus and classroom. Assignments can be completed at midnight or other non-standard times, thereby allowing students to adapt to changing work schedules and/or to the demands of children, aging parents, or other life needs. Students save gas and wear and tear on their cars (assuming that they have one). And, no one need feel intimidated on an unfamiliar collegiate campus. Students are maturing to the potential of this relatively newer realm of higher education – and their choices within it. It thus stands to reason that waiting for normalcy, after this paradigmatic upheaval, is a fool's errand.

At issue is the value proposition of the community college, both during the current pandemic, and later in an endemic environment (when it comes), as well as the college's responsiveness to a changed reality. Now

some of you will read this opinion piece and think me overly dramatic. You may conclude, at some level, that this pandemic isn't a paradigm-shattering event. Perhaps you muse that a few things will be different in higher education, but largely we'll return to the way things were, based upon an assumption that students want to get together, and/or that the higher education experience is a time honored, maturational, rite of passage experience for students. And, you might possibly be right. But what if you're not?

Based upon available evidence, research, and a host of focus group findings to date, I believe that we must minimally undertake the task of clarifying for the public, current students, and non-students, a new level of distinctiveness for our institutions, so that they might be better able to choose our institution from a sea of confusing and similar-looking options. Going forward, we must be clear-eyed about how we conceptualize, create, and deliver value to the student-customer. We must act now, asking fresh questions of the near-post-pandemic students, parents, employers, employees, and communities what they need from higher education, and then deliver on it. Relatedly, we must re-consider our marketing mix, our notion of competitiveness, our business model design, employment structures, pricing strategies, delivery methodologies, and credential designs.

I encourage us all to look beyond the short-term and returning to what was, and instead focus our attention to the long-term, anticipating and preparing for a different landscape. Whether paradigm shift, or inflection point, few will doubt that our students' experiences and expectations have irrevocably changed. So, in that regard, based upon your learnings from the what we have institutionally experienced, what will your organization decide to leave behind, and what to carry forward, to better serve a discriminating public? How, as leaders, will you position your institution to enhance your distinctiveness so as to not just survive, but to thrive?

Dr. Daniel J. Phelan has been President/CEO of Jackson College (MI) since early 2001. He is the Past-Chairman of the Board of Directors for the American Association of Community Colleges (AACC) and also serves on the AACC Advocacy Advisory Group (AAG), as well as AACC's Commission on Institutional Infrastructure and Transformation. He is Chairman of the Board of the Higher Education Research and Development Institute (HERDI) and Chairman of the Board of the Jackson County Enterprise Group. Additionally, Phelan serves on the Board of Directors for the Center for Community College Student Engagement (CCCSE), the Phi Theta Kappa International Honor Society (PTK), and is a founding Board member for the international organization, US-Brasil Connect (USBC). He is a regular national presenter and author of numerous professional articles, monographs, and essays, and has authored two books: Unrelenting Change, Innovation, and Risk: Forging the Next Generation of Community Colleges, published in 2016, and is currently completing a second book on community college board governance. He holds a PhD from Iowa State University and has been honored for his work in higher education and community service by a number of organizations including the Continuous Quality Improvement Networks (CQIN), the Association of Community College Trustees (ACCT), the Phi Theta Kappa (PTK) International Honor Society, the Iowa State University Alumni Award, and the Boy Scouts of America.

