

Perspectives

Community College Leadership for the 21st Century

NOVEMBER 2021

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Many community college students have considerable demands of their time and resources and report that these present obstacles to their college success.

- Stephen R. Porter and Paul D. Umbach

To achieve equity in higher education requires institutions to identify structural barriers facing underserved students and address policy and practice that impacts the student experience.

- Achieving the Dream

Boldly (or Cautiously) Going Where We Have Never Gone Before: Meeting Students' Non-Academic Needs

Laurie Chesley, PhD

President
Central Oregon Community College
Bend, Oregon

How did I get here? When I first thought about becoming a community college president, I never imagined I would spend so much time talking about food, clothing, and shelter. I envisioned idyllic days filled with conversations about collaborating to improve teaching and learning and ensure student goal attainment. Since March 2020, my days have been, candidly, very unlike this fantasy. (And, truly, they never were.) I am embarrassed to admit that I have sometimes lamented: "This is not what I signed up for. I'm an educator. We're an educational institution!" I sounded like Scotty from the original Star Trek series when Captain Kirk wanted him to make the Enterprise do something miraculous: "Captain, I'm an engineer, not a magician!"

I had had experience with student food banks and clothing drives. I had visited Amarillo College, led by President Russell Lowery-Hart, to learn about their exemplary No Excuses Poverty Initiative. Central Oregon Community College (COCC) had participated in the #RealCollege Survey sponsored by the Hope Center, and I became more keenly aware that too many of our students were housing and food insecure. Still, I struggled with what responsibility I/my college should assume for meeting students' nonacademic needs.

Three events brought me to my current stance. The first was the simple fact of teaching – and administering – at community colleges where one cannot ignore student non-academic barriers. They are painfully, poignantly evident. Second, it sounds silly, but the meaning of the "starfish" story that we have all heard countless times at conferences and elsewhere finally sunk in. I/my college did not have to remove every single barrier for every single student on our own. We cannot save them all, but we can save some. Finally, there was COVID.

The stress of living under these circumstances was great, even for people with privilege, but exponentially more so for the underserved and the less fortunate.

The Lessons and Legacy of COVID. "COVID times" have been what the popular seventeenth-century drinking song describes as "the world turned upside down." Every person's life was impacted at some level. We witnessed the suffering of our loved ones, neighbors, colleagues, students – all global citizens. We could not predict the future. We had to become comfortable with uncertainty and frequent change. At COCC, I readily admitted to our employees that it was frustrating for me as a former professor and as their president to have to so frequently say, "I don't know" and "We'll have to wait and see." "Subject to change" became

the mantra that we all started using. The stress of living under these circumstances was great, even for people with privilege, but exponentially more so for the underserved and the less fortunate. For many, things felt hopeless.

Like you, I am profoundly grateful for the resilience and grace of my colleagues whose herculean efforts allowed students to progress towards their goals virtually. These people inspired me and kept me going. They showed selflessness and compassion, and they rose to meet the moment.

Many institutions and students depended on our state and federal governments rising to the challenge as well. At COCC, we would not have been able to finish the last fiscal year in a balanced operating position, reserves intact, and a zero percent tuition increase for 2021-22. But here's the ominous part: for many of us, enrollments continue to decline, and we cannot expect a deus ex machina ending to solve our financial problems in the future. Our students also benefited tremendously from government dollars, but they are still suffering, and many are not returning to our institutions. The most common explanation for this ongoing downward trend is that the difficulties created by the pandemic continue to negatively impact our already vulnerable students. Ongoing education becomes the aspect of life that they can most readily put on hold, while other more vital needs must be met.

Any strategy has to include helping students to meet their non-academic needs.

So what can we do to get students back on their pathways to a better future? How do we retain and re-enroll them? Any strategy has to include helping students to meet their non-academic needs. Central Oregon employed these four strategies.

Acknowledge the Past and Identify Common Ground for the Future. Just as I had come to acknowledge and develop my views about a college's responsibility to students, my College had been doing the same. Make no mistake: the faculty, staff, and Board of COCC care deeply about our students. The ever-present question, though, is how to best allocate our resources to meet students' many and varied needs.

One of the most needed services in our region is affordable childcare. Before my arrival, COCC had conducted an internal study to assess students' need for childcare and determined (very reasonably) that the resources needed to build and operate a childcare center on our campus would be better spent on initiatives that would support a larger number of students. When I arrived, I realized several Board members also had strong feelings, pro and con, about pursuing childcare. Most people thought the College either had to own and operate a childcare center, or do nothing. (continued on page 4)

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EMERGING LEADER PERSPECTIVES

During the past year, we have seen the pandemic bring into focus various underlying inequities in higher education, while also revealing a number of nonacademic barriers to student success, ranging from childcare issues to technology obstacles. It has become clear that college leaders need to rethink student access and success and take advantage of opportunities to transform the institution to address inequities. We posed the following question to emerging and national leaders. Their answers appear below.

QUESTION OF THE MONTH:

How are community colleges beginning to effect institutional changes that place equity at the forefront and support student success?

Leonor Calderon, MA

English and Humanities Professor
Lee College
Baytown, Texas

American higher education institutions have shifted towards a more inclusive, diverse, and equitable environment; however, a more concentrated effort is required to obtain social justice. Unfortunately, disregarded and underrepresented groups hold the lowest completion and retention rates. In recent years, community colleges have faced severe issues linked to underfunding at the same time that a global pandemic and economic decline forced about 55% of Americans into unemployment, impacting student enrollment, retention, and success. Minoritized and marginalized students left their educational aspirations to afford basic needs to their families— food, housing, and safety. Even more damaging, this current climate exposed the severity and disparities among minoritized groups, proving that community colleges have much work to complete to establish an environment of inclusion and diversity. Change is centered around supporting students through nonacademic issues.

Institutions are pushing to provide resources for nonacademic barriers to increase student success. It is equivocally evident that minoritized students must overcome nonacademic obstacles to focus on academic aspirations. Therefore, institutions should implement initiatives that deliberately recognize and address student needs that move beyond the classroom. Lee College currently has two methods for creating institutional change that encourages equity and inclusion. The Lee Cares Emergency Fund, which is backed primarily by the Department of Higher Education Emergency Relief Fund grant, is used to assist students who have experienced hardship that resulted from the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic. If approved, students are eligible for funding expenses like food, transportation, books, technology, medical, housing, and childcare. Furthermore, the Student Resource and Advocacy Center at Lee College is committed to providing students with basic needs. This initiative offers students textbook assistance, gas cards, food, hygiene items, baby items, childcare, and other resources. The center believes “that attending school doesn’t have to mean going without life’s necessities, and a crisis doesn’t have to mean giving up.”

Although marginalized and minoritized populations are resilient amidst social injustice and financial limitations, they require essential support and resources that eliminate invisible barriers that were antiquatedly viewed as unimportant by institution leaders, faculty, and constituents. Institutions committed to authentic and sustainable social change grasp that these underrepresented groups are treasured assets of productivity, growth, and influence. Creating a trusting, transparent, and reciprocal relationship with these populations will result in a culture of diversity, inclusion, and equity. Remembering that everyone deserves an opportunity to have a sustainable and comfortable human experience is imperative.



Leonor Calderon, MA, serves as an English and Humanities professor at Lee College. Her teaching experience ranges from secondary to the collegiate level. She has sponsored organizations focused on teaching and learning about cultural appreciation and continues to involve herself with initiatives to eliminate inequality and racism. She earned her MA at Texas A&M International University and is currently a student in the DCCL program, Texas Cohort 2.

JB Meeuwenberg, MEd

Chair, College Success Center
Muskegon Community College
Muskegon, Michigan

“Do the best you can until you know better. Then when you know better, do better.”

– Maya Angelou

Equity is a fairly simple concept, though often misunderstood. Essentially, it means that if you have something to give, make sure those who need it, get it. As long as our community colleges have existed there have been students with greater needs than others. However, we have often been so engulfed in the whirlwind of our work that many of those students and their needs were invisible. There have, of course, been academic support services available, counseling accessible, and even food pantries available. But availability does not always ensure access. Availability does not guarantee that the right student receives the right service at the time in which they need it. Only when this alignment occurs will our institutions be on the path to doing equity.

To “do equity” requires rethinking everything. It means asking if a first-generation student at your college is just as likely to persist from one semester to the next as any other student. It means asking if a student who identifies as Black, Hispanic, Native American, or any other non-majority race or ethnicity has the same sense of belonging at your institution as a white student. It means asking if your students from the bottom income quartile have the same chance of graduating and landing a well-paying job as students from the top income quartile. And if not, why not?

The colleges that are doing this work best start by listening to their students. They ask—what barriers are in your way and what supports will help you succeed? Are we serving your needs as well as we promised when you were recruited? When you graduated, were you able to seamlessly transfer to a university or use your credential in pursuit of a meaningful career? When we truly listen to our students, we uncover what it is they need, not what we think they need.

However, listening is not enough. From that listening must come action, as knowledge without action is useless. Unfortunately, this requires uncovering the root causes of inequities, which are often policies and practices firmly entrenched in our way of being. The work of dismantling these systems and transforming our institutions will be disruptive, messy, and uncomfortable—to us. Unfortunately, this is how our institutions often already feel—to many of our students.

Some of the challenges many of our students already face—food insecurity, insufficient access to quality internet, lack of childcare—were caused by the pandemic, while others were simply exacerbated. The point is that these issues have been exposed. And now that we know better, how are we going to do better?

JB Meeuwenberg, MEd, is the chair of the College Success Center at Muskegon Community College in Muskegon, Michigan. He is a developmental math instructor with 16 years of experience in higher education and is recognized on his campus as a champion of student success, equity, and completion. JB earned his MEd from Grand Valley State University and is a proud member of DCCL program’s Cohort 10 at Ferris State University.



NATIONAL LEADER PERSPECTIVE

During the past year, we have seen the pandemic bring into focus various underlying inequities in higher education, while also revealing a number of nonacademic barriers to student success, ranging from childcare issues to technology obstacles. It has become clear that college leaders need to rethink student access and success and take advantage of opportunities to transform the institution to address inequities. We posed the following question to emerging and national leaders. Their answers appear below.

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How are community colleges beginning to effect institutional changes that place equity at the forefront and support student success?

DEI Success Requires a Major Culture Shift

Mara Jevera Fulmer, EdD, MFA

Chair, The MCC Council & Professor, Art and Design
Mott Community College
Flint, Michigan

The community college student experience of the last 20 months has revealed more than various challenges involving nonacademic barriers to student success such as access to good wifi and a decent computer - both vital to an education in a deadly pandemic. It also has revealed broader inequities in systems, policies, and practices that we have in place.

DEI requires an institutional culture shift. To avoid DEI just becoming another buzzword, a more intentional and educated cultural shift needs to occur. Rather than being “another something on my plate,” DEI is the plate that frames everything else. It needs to permeate every process where decisions are being made. Decision-making isn’t always binary, either. Many experienced and intelligent people work at all levels of our institutions who we can tap to develop alternative solutions.

DEI is the plate that frames everything else. It needs to permeate every process where decisions are being made.

It was just such an initiative that led to the creation in October 2020 of The MCC Council, a campus-wide DEI Committee that brings together members from all levels and all departments across campus and includes student members as well. A multifaceted group, “*The MCC Council is charged with creating systemic inclusive strategies that drive change.*” (The MCC Council, ACCT presentation, 10/2021)

The Council’s proposals for change began during a year-long comprehensive DEI audit of the college’s policies, practices, and procedures examined through a DEI lens. Some information was also gathered in the form of a survey, looking at the different perspectives and experiences of our students and employees.

As MCC Council Chair, I’ve witnessed a shift in this diverse group of employees and student members. There has been a strong focus on listening and sharing, making marginalized voices heard. There have been many courageous conversations up and down and across silos, bringing to light challenges not uncovered in a survey or audit. We realized that the work of equity is difficult. But it is also fulfilling when we see the impact of positive change.

Lessons learned:

- 1) **Make the work count.** To keep people engaged in the important work of making systemic change through the lens of DEI, college leadership must be prepared to take the work seriously. Proposals were developed with serious thought, research, and intentionality. They should be received with that same earnestness. Letting proposals gather dust on a shelf is the fastest way to get hardworking members to disengage and conclude their work is only receiving lip service from leadership.
- 2) **Create a feedback loop.** Reconnect with the committee. Design a feedback loop into processes so members know what has happened to

their work. Recognize that many people involved in the proposal’s development could also be involved in its implementation. Follow through can help with clarification on various details of the proposals.

- 3) **Empower and engage at the grassroots level.** While leadership, including supervisors and managers, are the primary arbiters of the big decisions, it would be folly to ignore

the fact that decisions are being made at every level of employment throughout the college. These can either engage or repel students as they experience the college processes and operations. By engaging all employees and training them to frame their decisions through the lens of DEI, we are empowering our employees to help improve the student experience, retention, and success.

Recognize that each failure to communicate sends a message to a student or even an employee that “you do not belong here.”

- 4) **Recognize connections at the ground level.** All decisions, no matter how small, can have a ripple effect and we need to recognize how they’re connected. Is information shared online for how to do the most basic of processes that students need? Are they clear? Is there someone to contact for more information? Is the information easily accessible to all visitors, students, and employees alike?
- 5) **Use fresh eyes for a DEI audit.** Take a walk in a student’s shoes, clearing your mind of what you know in your professional role. See it with fresh eyes, naive to the people and processes you know. Recognize that each failure to communicate sends a message to a student or even an employee that “you do not belong here.” That’s the same as saying, “we do not want you here.” That’s not the message we want to send.

Recently I went to campus to take care of paying a simple bill, much like a student would. I was met with several barriers even before I left home. Once at the college, after going through the COVID-19 health check-in, the eco-friendly lighting for the big room I entered was dimmed. No one was there. At the far end were four windows, three with blinds pulled down. One was clear so I headed in that direction. A light above me came on as I got closer and a smiling face popped into view to assist me.

I left campus wondering though: how many students would have given up before ever getting to that window? I wondered about equity in access, the privilege I held being an employee. We need to constantly ask ourselves: who are we leaving behind? And how do we make sure they’re not? Policies, practices, and procedures, and DEI are not separate issues. DEI must be entwined in every decision we make.

Dr. Mara Jevera Fulmer serves as Chair of The MCC Council on DEI Initiatives at Mott Community College in Flint, Michigan. She is in her 25th year as a professor of art and design and was the founding program developer for Mott’s Graphic Design degree program. She has served as Interim Assistant Vice President for Academic Affairs, as well as Faculty Director for the Center for Teaching & Learning, expanding its programs to address cultural understanding, DEI, and the interdisciplinary connections between GenEd and CTE programs. Prior to Mott, she served as Art Director for the University of the South Pacific, Fiji, and at the University at Albany/SUNY. Mara earned her BA from the University at Albany/SUNY, an MA from Syracuse University, as well as an MFA from Michigan State University, and her doctorate in Community College Leadership from Ferris State University.



QUICK TAKES Highlights from the Field

Comprehensive Approaches to Increasing Student Completion in Higher Education: A Survey of the Landscape

by R. F. Dawson, M. S. Kearney, and J. X. Sullivan

This work describes the challenge of college non-completion in the U.S. and a variety of explanations for the high rate of non-completion. Also provided are an overview of the implementation of and evidence from eight specific college completion interventions designed to increase college completion rates through a comprehensive set of services, followed by a discussion of the potential to replicate these programs and deliver them at scale.

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

Knowing Our Students: Understanding & Designing for Success

by Achieving the Dream/ Advising Success Network

This guidebook serves as a resource for institutional leaders and student success teams ready to engage in a new dialogue about their students and learn practical strategies from experts and peer institutions. The data discussed throughout this guidebook, as well as the process described in how to collect and use the data, can be beneficial to both existing and new efforts to improve student success and close equity gaps.

Access this work here: <https://bit.ly/3nhaE7e>

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Boldly (or Cautiously) Going Where We Have Never Gone Before... (continued from page 1)

The situation, however, had changed in Central Oregon. The cost of living was high, and the need for childcare was even higher. Many community conversations were occurring, and I needed a direction for our College. At one of our early Retreats, the Board undertook a facilitated exercise to determine their points of agreement (and my limitations) on exploring childcare. They agreed that the College:

- ▲ Should participate in conversations to address the shortage.
- ▲ Should not own and operate a childcare center, or commit to a long-term operational subsidy.
- ▲ Might consider selling, leasing, or donating land for a childcare center.
- ▲ Should ensure a tangible benefit for our student-parents or our Early Childhood Education students.

Several useful guiding principles for future conversations about community challenges arose from the discussion: the importance of partnership, which allowed the College to stick to its core mission; of putting our students first; and of long-term financial sustainability.

The combination of on-the-job learning, coupled with required technical instruction from a recognized institute or organization, is ideal for bending the learning curve that job seekers often face.

Think Creatively, But Not Too Long. If your experience in academia is like mine, you have spent hours of your life in meetings debating the nuances and potential unintended consequences of solutions to problems. COVID required us to spend far less time in these debates. It forced us to think creatively without becoming enmeshed in “what if’s?” Some of our actions to assist students with technology and personal needs included:

- ▲ Establishing wifi spots in some parking lots.
- ▲ Offering check-out of hotspots from our library,
- ▲ Developing a student technology helpdesk.
- ▲ Making advising and counseling available remotely.
- ▲ Establishing a Clothing Connection no-cost “store.”
- ▲ Funding a THRIVE coordinator on a two-year pilot basis. (THRIVE is a local non-profit that connects individuals to housing, food, shelter, employment support, disability services, and health care.)

Students were in need. Opportunities presented themselves. We acted promptly, not perfectly. We also had discovered another guiding principle: connect students to resources.

Establish Meaningful Partnerships. Long before my arrival, a group of exceptional community partners – COCC, Oregon State University – Cascades (OSU-C), the Bend Chamber of Commerce, Neighbor Impact, and many others too numerous to mention – developed a model for high-quality childcare that it believed would be affordable, replicable, and eventually operate under the umbrella of a 501C3 organization. What this group lacked – a source of seed money – COVID provided. Leaders of this movement, including one of COCC’s outstanding Early Childhood Education professors, Amy Howell, proposed an initial center and received \$1 million in American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) funding from Oregon State Senator Tim Knopp. Next, these leaders requested and received an additional \$6.6 million of ARPA funding from the Deschutes County Commissioners to expand the number of centers, create a workforce pipeline (including apprenticeships), pay living wages and benefits to workers, and provide professional development opportunities for childcare professionals.

This center will open in January 2023. In the meantime, COCC students can access subsidized places in OSU-C’s small, existing childcare center. The initial allocation will:

- ▲ Provide 100 low- or no-cost infant to pre-k childcare openings, a portion of which will serve COCC students.
- ▲ Utilize COCC early learning students.
- ▲ Have OSU-C operating the facility.
- ▲ Create a long-term model for childcare that could be a model in our region.

COCC and OSU-C also received a \$242,700 CCAMPIS (Childcare Access Means Parents in School) Grant to support this work. It provides subsidies to cover nearly 100% of costs for Pell-eligible COCC student parents (24-48 slots over 4 years), as well as funding for a part-time coordinator to help students enroll, find additional funding, and connect them to additional resources.

These achievements, due to the exceptional collaboration and creativity of a multitude of partners, is allowing COCC to serve its students and to meet the principles established by our Board.

Shape the Narrative for Moving Forward. All of us just want to be done with the pandemic, but the lessons of COVID have to shape our narrative moving forward. The theme of that narrative at COCC is “Are we student-ready?” We are recommitting to putting students first. Our Guided Pathways initiative is one reflection of this commitment, but student readiness demands we support both students’ academic success and their non-academic needs.

As presidents, I believe we need to be comfortable with the position that we, along with our Boards, uniquely hold responsibility for not just the “whole student,” but the whole College. Sometimes, that position is unpopular and judged as insensitive. However, the health of our institutions is the foundation needed to serve our students.

Will the guiding principles for addressing student non-academic needs at my institution evolve? Surely. What is also certain is that none of us is going to be able to escape responsibility for tending, to the maximum extent possible, to the whole student by just saying, “Beam me up!”

I am dedicating this article to my late husband, Brent Chesley, a gifted English professor who taught me so much of what I know about compassion and Star Trek.

A first-generation college student from a rural, working-class family, Laurie Chesley understands the transformative power of education first-hand. Her entire career has been dedicated to helping other students have the same life-changing experience that she was fortunate to have. It has been the honor and privilege of her life to serve this mission. Prior to becoming the sixth President of Central Oregon Community College, Chesley was the provost and executive vice president for academic and student affairs at Grand Rapids (Michigan) Community College. She has 34 years of teaching and administrative experience including as interim dean of learning at Northwestern Michigan, assistant vice president for academic affairs at Ferris State (Michigan) University, dean of humanities at Montgomery County (Pennsylvania) Community College, and then associate dean and dean of arts and sciences at Grand Rapids Community College, before becoming its vice president in 2015. As the president of a community college – one of “democracy’s colleges” – that serves a diverse district spanning over 100,000 square miles, Chesley understands the importance of providing both the access and the supports needed by all learners who are seeking a better future – through enrichment courses, basic skills development, job training, certifications, degrees, or transfer to a four-year institution.

