

# Perspectives

SUMMER 2021

[www.ferris.edu/alliance](http://www.ferris.edu/alliance)

Community College Leadership for the 21st Century

Although pandemics may sap our sense of agency, the decisions leaders make and the institutions we build today can have long-term effects on the shape of higher education's future and the future of society.

- Rick Seltzer

We have a chance now to shape the future that awaits our nation's colleges and universities. Not since the Industrial Revolution has a generation been offered this opportunity.

- Arthur Levine

## Shaping a New Future for America's Community Colleges

**Roberta Teahen, PhD**

Founding Director of the Doctorate in Community College Leadership Program  
Ferris State University  
Big Rapids, Michigan

Early 2020 is sure to be looked back upon as a time when the world changed dramatically for leaders in higher education. Eighteen months later, we are turning our attention to what the future holds, as there are many reasons for us to consider whether life should return to that normal. While navigating 2020 may have been among the most challenging of efforts current leaders experienced, the way forward will also present challenges. A panoply of disrupters potentially awaits us, including new COVID variants, enrollment declines, political upheaval, culture wars, changing student expectations and demographics, financial challenges, and more.

*While navigating 2020 may have been among the most challenging of efforts current leaders experienced, the way forward will also present challenges.*

Which of these disrupters will impact each institution is not easily predictable, yet this is the time for us to prepare for inevitable needed adaptations for the future. Times of crisis, or a period of being "off balance," present an opportunity to frame a "new normal." Now we must reimagine how higher education can best serve its multiple purposes and its many and diverse stakeholders. There are models for envisioning this new future.

So, what can leaders do to lead their colleges forward? Lots of advice is being offered by a variety of enlightened writers and leaders. Let me add mine to this discourse.

Effective leadership for the next decade may not be much different from what we have described as desirable over at least the last 20 years. Nevertheless, based upon the performance of our institutions and reports from the field, what we commonly recognize as valuable in leading a college is not consistently practiced for a wide variety of reasonable justifications (or rationalizations). Leaders are incredibly busy; resources are often scarce; expectations are not clear; and unanimity of purpose is frequently elusive – and these are just a few of the reasons that may preclude great leadership success.

Parker Palmer, author of *The Courage to Teach*, writes that "Good teaching cannot be reduced to technique; good teaching comes from the identity and integrity of the teacher." We can reframe this message for leadership: "Good leadership cannot be reduced to technique but rather comes from the identity and integrity of the leader." John

Maxwell would add that "Leaders of integrity do the right thing, even when it's hard, even when it's not best for them personally" (Maxwell, 2019, p. 210).

Exemplary leaders will model most, if not all, of these attributes:

**1 - Learning.** In my long leadership career, those I have observed to be exemplary leaders are also dedicated to their own learning. This learning is reflected in many ways, including voracious reading, getting outside their silos (different disciplines, different communities, different cultures), extensive interactions with diverse others, and importantly, their willingness to be challenged and to learn from the views held by others. The learning topic could fill volumes, so I will simply introduce a couple of perspectives of seminal author, Peter Vaill. In his classic, *Learning as a Way of Being*, he refers to our state of being in permanent white water and writes:

"Learning must be a way of being – an ongoing set of attitudes and actions by individuals and groups that they employ to try to keep abreast of the surprising, novel, messy, obtrusive, recurring events thrown up by these macrosystems" (Vaill, 1996, p. 42).

Vaill's definition of learning is: "Changes a person makes in himself or herself that increase the know-why and/or the know-what and/or the know-how the person possesses with respect to a given subject" (Vaill, 1996, p. 21).

**2 - Listening.** Listening is one of the ways we learn, yet this skill is under-developed in many settings. In *Leadership Never Stops* from the Center for Creative Leadership, the authors claim that "At many organizations, the quality of conversations has evolved little in the last 25 years, even as the competitive environment has changed dramatically." They observe that the leaders-must-talk-more mindset is hard to shake.

"Listening to understand," they continue, suggests "There are multiple levels of information we must tune into during conversations. Paying attention to the facts, emotions, and values will unlock a deeper understanding of what's truly going on" (CCL, p. 36).

**3 - Communicating.** Closely linked to listening is the requirement to be effective communicators. A common reminder I offered through many years of teaching business communications was that communication was only effective when the intended receiver had received it in the intended way and that communications are the responsibility of the communicator. That has become increasingly difficult in our current polarized society, and it is thus even more important. One way to cultivate this ability is to develop expertise for having crucial conversations. Patterson and Grenny (2012) describe these as "times when the stakes are high, opinions vary, and emotions run strong."

Many communications are just more routine than crucial,

(continued on page 4)

FERRIS STATE UNIVERSITY

DOCTORATE IN COMMUNITY COLLEGE LEADERSHIP

Empowering graduates to advance community colleges towards excellence and community responsiveness through exemplary leadership.

ENROLLING NOW FOR THE NEXT COHORT

## EMERGING LEADER PERSPECTIVES

This past year of the COVID-19 pandemic – particularly its impact on higher education – has been unprecedented in modern times. Community college presidents and key leaders have had to pivot instantly and learn how to lead in uncertain times. As the pandemic ebbs and students begin to return to campus, leaders now must seize the opportunity to reshape their institutions. We posed the following question to emerging and national leaders. Their answers appear below.

### QUESTION OF THE MONTH:

***What do community college presidents and key leaders need to know to help their colleges keep pace with the societal changes taking place as the pandemic ebbs?***

#### **Lathera Addison, MSW**

Senior Manager for Student Services  
Dallas College Cedar Valley Campus  
Lancaster, Texas

Numerous events have changed society. We cannot predict how future generations will reflect on the year 2020 and the ongoing global COVID-19 pandemic. Yet this time will certainly stand out from others. Many people were forced to do nearly everything from home. We were a captive audience and witnessed, among many things, various events that renewed the fight for social justice. As an American of African ancestry, tracing my roots to the Mende and Temne of Sierra Leone, too often I am disheartened to see the impact of racism manifest itself in society. As the pandemic raged, Americans of all backgrounds were presented with a reality check regarding how much work remains on the journey to diversity, equity, and inclusiveness. Events illuminated the state of society for some, while confirming it for others.

According to the Pew Research Center, most protestors during 2020 were between 18-29 years of age (PEW, 2020). Both traditional and non-traditional college students are represented in this age range. Community college presidents and leaders cannot afford to ignore the changes to society that galvanize students. The issues faced by students from historically marginalized groups can – and too often do – impede their academic success. Leadership must not be complicit by ignoring or failing to educate themselves about emerging issues for community college students. Postsecondary education institutions have a critical role to play in society since institutions are not disconnected from the impact of societal changes. Community colleges are smaller communities within the larger society. As purveyors of formal education and with training and education being the “great equalizer,” our charge to manage societal change seems inherent. Community college presidents and key leaders must know how changes in society impact those we serve and support. Leadership must be aware of the non-academic barriers faced by students. Moreover, they must understand the importance of advocating for the resources needed to address those barriers. Leadership must also know how to engage in the development and management of services and supports.

The presidents and key leaders of community colleges are responsible for establishing the campus climate and culture. As a result, they are best positioned for leading the charge to create a campus culture of care. These leaders must promote and facilitate regular training to advance these efforts. Additionally, they must ensure that all programs be evaluated for effectiveness.

A plethora of issues were made exponentially worse by the pandemic. Among those were food and housing insecurity, adequate childcare, access to technology devices, and the lack of high-speed Internet. All of these issues disproportionately impact community college students. Since changes in society are inevitable and will have an impact on all institutions, community college presidents and key leaders must know how to support their institutions in effectively managing societal changes.



*Lathera Addison earned her MSW degree with an emphasis on Community and Administrative Practice from The University of Texas at Arlington. With 16 years of progressive experience in the field, she serves as a Senior Manager for Student Services at Dallas College, Cedar Valley campus. She is currently enrolled in the Ferris State University DCCL program and is passionate about connecting students to the resources and supports needed for academic success.*

#### **Yvonne Frear, MA**

Department Chair, Behavioral and Social Sciences  
San Jacinto College  
Pasadena, Texas

In March 2020, community college presidents across the country were met with a crisis they were markedly unfamiliar with until then. No amount of professional development or executive leadership training could

prepare leaders for the COVID-19 health crisis. Prior to March 2020, leadership retreats, symposiums, and organizational meetings focused on such issues as swift thinking regarding enrollment drops due to shifts in the economy, active shooter campus survival, and natural disasters. However, after the completion of two concurrent academic semesters, community college leadership practices dramatically shifted. Now, after 16+ months of leading through uncertain times, leaders have three focal points to keep their institutions paced with societal changes through future pandemic ebbs and flows: people, progress, and pliability.

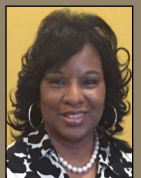
People over paper is a priority for the continued wellness of community colleges. Although remote work and learning were essential for college employees throughout initial altered operations, leading people into the third academic year means leading intentionally and authentically. Employees, students, community partners, and stakeholders associated with community colleges want to know there is an established commitment to maintaining the educational mission, and that there is a concern for the morale and mood of the people to sustain the institution through the pandemic. Community college leaders must build relationships with their people to establish continued connections during reintegration to full campus operations.

Last year, community college presidents were awakened to the severity of the digital divide in technology and its negative impact on student success, retention, and completion. Progress in technology is an immediate action item moving forward in pandemic learning. Many leaders observed that remote learning is not a single-use modality for students or instructors. Leaders need to continue supporting access to software, hardware, licensing, and infrastructure development to reduce the access gaps that contribute to declines in educational equity among student populations. Progress in technological advancements signals a commitment to the momentum to eliminate observable gaps in technology and provide more equitable and inclusive learning opportunities.

Leaders who employ pliability and think with a lens of institutional flexibility are poised to elevate student success. Presidents who demonstrate agility in education, excellence, and equity, and who can pivot on a dime, will recognize that pandemic learning will not have to paralyze the productivity of education. A liberal degree of pliability will support the societal and educational needs of the college community moving forward.

Finally, pandemic living and learning for community college institutions is not completely untenable moving into the next academic year, if it is addressed proactively by leadership and includes a focus on people, progress, and pliability.

*Yvonne Frear, MA, is a recognized civil rights and social justice thought leader who currently serves as Department Chair of Behavioral and Social Sciences, History professor, and Liberal Arts Liaison to Dual Credit at San Jacinto College Central campus, Pasadena, Texas. She earned her MA from Texas Southern University and completed doctoral coursework at both Texas A&M University and the FSU DCCL program as a member of Texas Cohort 1.*



## NATIONAL LEADER PERSPECTIVE

This past year of the COVID-19 pandemic – particularly its impact on higher education – has been unprecedented in modern times. Community college presidents and key leaders have had to pivot instantly and learn how to lead in uncertain times. As the pandemic ebbs and students begin to return to campus, leaders now must seize the opportunity to reshape their institutions. We posed the following question to emerging and national leaders. Their answers appear below.

### **Pandemic Driven Changes: Opportunity for Institutional Improvements**

#### **Alec Thomson, PhD**

Professor of Political Science and History  
 Editor of *The Community College Enterprise*  
 Schoolcraft College  
 Livonia, Michigan

The diminished, but not eliminated, COVID-19 threat means that the start of the 2021 academic year poses colleges and universities with significant challenges in creating a new collegiate experience, while simultaneously restoring the traditions and campus-culture that defined their institutions. The individual needs and responses generated by higher education institutions in response to the crisis are as varied as the student populations we serve, but broadly there are some critical points that all college leaders should use as guides to direct their efforts.

Initial efforts to address COVID’s challenges needed to be quick and reactive. The collective efforts to transition entire campus infrastructures to remote settings (learning, student services, counseling, etc.) demonstrated that higher education can be nimble, flexible, and creative. Unsurprisingly, the transformation was imperfect, but the overall outcomes were positive. However, at this point the viral threat is well-known and campus leaders must now carve out a set of policies and practices that are proactive.

*On most campuses, student-centered learning was a critical focus before the pandemic and it should remain so now.*

A great starting point is to seek feedback from campus stakeholders regarding which practices are still necessary, those that are popular, and those that need improvement. When assessing the feedback and making plans for the future, it is important to remember that the basic mission of the institution has not changed. Fundamentally, our students and their learning continue to remain at the very core of what we do. As such, it is important to ensure that the policies or procedures being adopted support and expand the learning experience of our students. On most campuses, student-centered learning was a critical focus before the pandemic and it should remain so now.

Student-centered learning means presenting a learning environment that is engaging, personal, and accessible. The move to offer instruction in remote settings has created many opportunities to expand student-centered learning opportunities, but this is certainly not universal. Positively, the pandemic has encouraged instructors to redefine their classes – not the core subject as the basic competencies are subject-driven and not modality-dependent – but rather the change involves embracing new engaging learning activities. For example, the proliferation of teleconferencing software (Zoom, Skype, etc.) has made it easier than ever to invite guest presenters to the classroom. Additionally, sharing and storing classroom presentations/lectures and student group work has taken on an added dimension too.

However, these new remote offerings have created barriers too; many students, for myriad reasons (lack of resources, disinterest in the format, etc.) did not enroll in these class offerings. It is imperative for the students and

#### QUESTION OF THE MONTH:

*What do community college presidents and key leaders need to know to help their colleges keep pace with the societal changes taking place as the pandemic ebbs?*

colleges that these individuals are brought back to the campus to continue their education. Clearly, this cannot happen by simply extending the current approach. Remote learning should have a place in the future of the academy, but its emergence represents an expansion of the collegiate experience and not a complete break with the past. Colleges must work to ensure that there are safe and productive traditional classroom offerings that incorporate some remote enhancements available to meet the demands of students who want and need to be on campus.

*Finally, the return to campus reminds us that regardless of the learning modality, the student experience is improved via the personal connections made while enrolled at the institution.*

Alongside these learning updates, colleges and universities must expand their available training and support infrastructures for faculty, staff, and students. COVID’s arrival accelerated the incorporation of new technology, but it was embraced unevenly with individual users having differing levels of experience, comfort, and ability to access and utilize the new tools. The technological changes offer new pathways for creating a campus environment that is not defined by its physical footprint, but rather its digital presence. As such, the expansion and extension of the institution demands that there be clear expectations for students, faculty, and staff as they manage this space. In addition to establishing expectations, it is important to assess our use of technology with a critical eye. Undoubtedly, technology upgrades made it possible to weather the pandemic from afar in a way that was not possible only a few years ago. However, these upgrades are best viewed as tools to help the institution be flexible and responsive to the needs of our constituents. They are not a solution in and of themselves. Success will be found in adopting technological solutions that students, faculty, and staff can employ to enrich the collegiate experience.

Finally, the return to campus reminds us that regardless of the learning modality, the student experience is improved via the personal connections made while enrolled at the institution. These connections support recruitment, retention, and success. The current challenge rests in acknowledging the need for an educational experience that is personal, flexible, and engaging, while enforcing policies that protect the public health of those on and off our campuses. Successful leaders will rely upon the achievements of the past year to reimagine a campus where innovation allows students to have a transformational collegiate experience regardless of the circumstances under which they are enrolled at their school.

*Dr. Alec Thomson is a professor of political science and history at Schoolcraft College in Livonia, Michigan. He holds graduate degrees from Wayne State University (PhD and MA) in political science along with a Master’s degree in history from Arizona State University. He is the previous recipient of the John and Suanne Roueche Teaching Excellence Award and The NEA Art of Teaching Prize for his work on dual enrollment. He is the editor of The Community College Enterprise, a peer-reviewed journal dedicated to publishing research on teaching and learning within the community college arena. He is an active leader in higher education, having served as the president of the Michigan Association for Higher Education (MAHE) and is the current vice-president of the National Council for Higher Education (NCHE).*



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

**When Nothing is Normal: Managing in Extreme Uncertainty**

by Patrick Finn, Mihir Mysore, and Ophelia Usher

Given this uniquely severe global crisis, leaders of all types of organizations need new operating models to respond quickly to the rapidly shifting environment and sustain their organizations. The authors stress that the COVID-19 operating environment requires that leaders reexamine their collective thought processes and challenge their own assumptions since the radically changed circumstances call for not only new forms of leadership, but new ways of working, and new operating models.

Access this work here:  
<https://mck.co/3s2hiWe>

**Unlearning Your Organizational Culture: A Playbook for Leading in an Unpredictable World**

by Center for Creative Leadership

Organizations today need to adapt since they are facing a deluge of urgent leadership issues, including a global pandemic and a variety of other significant crises. This playbook spotlights 3 common beliefs that are likely damaging the ability to navigate the current reality and shape future possibilities. In addition, it provides practical suggestions to help leaders unlearn those beliefs and replace them through new knowledge, practice, and effort. Access this work here:

<https://bit.ly/3Au9Vn0>

**FERRIS STATE UNIVERSITY**

FERRIS.EDU

Published by the Alliance for Community College Excellence in Practice, Ferris State University, Doctorate in Community College Leadership Big Rapids, Michigan

EDITORIAL STAFF

Jeanne Bonner, PhD, Editor  
 Mara Jevera Fulmer, EdD, MFA,  
 Design & Production Editor

To send comments or receive a copy of this publication, please contact us at: [ccalliance@fsu.edu](mailto:ccalliance@fsu.edu)

**Shaping a New Future for America’s Community Colleges** (continued from page 1)

but they are nevertheless vitally important. Often campus climate surveys reveal that stakeholders feel uninformed in key areas. If there is a place where we saw Herculean efforts at effective communication throughout the Pandemic, it was in the daily or weekly messaging from campus leaders, including extensive use of video, to keep campuses apprised of actions being taken and to reassure stakeholders that things were under control. There were many exemplary examples that likely should be continued.

**4 - Collaborating.** Recent times have also heightened the vital role that collaboration must play. Any leader who fails to collaborate both internally and externally is unlikely to maximize the college’s potential for success. Leadership is a team sport! In their article about including mid-level managers in strategic planning processes, Pressley and McPhail (2020) note that “without full engagement of midlevel leaders, the strategic plan cannot be effectively implemented throughout the organization” (p. 22). I would take their statement further: Without the meaningful involvement of all key constituencies, the possibility of great success is minimal. No leader achieves great things alone. Pressley and McPhail continue with this elaboration about collaboration:

An effective community college leader develops and maintains responsive, cooperative, mutually beneficial, and ethical internal and external relationships that nurture diversity, promote the success of the college community, and sustain the community college mission (p26).

Extensive guidance is available about improving collaboration along with Kezar and Holcomb’s work on shared leadership.

**5 - Empowering.** Kouzes and Posner refer to empowerment as “enabling others to act,” while Kotter describes “building a guiding coalition” and “enabling action by removing barriers” (Kotter, 2018, p. 8). In *The Leadership Challenge*, the authors write that effective leadership practices include “strengthening others by increasing self determination and developing competence” (p. 194). Leaders accomplish this by developing others through both internal and external professional development opportunities, by sharing information, and by enabling individuals at all levels to do meaningful work and contribute to institutional priorities.

While these are just some of the desirable attributes necessary to meet the inevitable challenges that lie ahead, they are essential if college leaders are to maximize their organizations’ potential for success.

**Strategic Focus Areas.** What are the issues likely to occupy our leaders’ time? I would posit that three areas of foci will demand attention and strategy in the coming years: Equity, Innovation, and Talent Development.

**Leadership for equity will be vital.** What we have done to date to remedy the artifacts of our history that discriminated against many has been insufficient. Given the high proportion of women and persons of color who enroll in community colleges, our leaders must be on the frontlines of this work and lead the way for the nation. The Center for Creative Leadership suggests that we must “Unlearn: The ‘Awareness is the Solution’ approach to equity, diversity, & inclusion” and substitute it with the “Bold new belief: To ensure equity, diversity, and inclusion, organizations must take targeted action” (CCL, p. 14).

**Innovation is essential.** Our colleges have learned that we can do more with technology, that we can adapt schedules, that we can produce greater learning, etc. Innovation is the way that institutions will be sustainable, as the times compel competitiveness, adaptability, creativity, and agility.

Capacity for innovation is what will distinguish winners from losers, and that innovation will come from attending to the third strategic focus.

**Talent Development will be a game-changer.** In my consulting work, since about 2000, I have used the tagline: “The organization that develops the most people wins.” My belief in this premise is equally strong today. If leaders are to be inclusive of all college players – not just the typical hierarchical roles – we need to have the best talent on the team, and this talent needs to run deep into the organization.

Some might include accountability on the list of priorities. However, if we focus on innovation, equity, and talent development, the accountability piece should take care of itself. Unleashing all of our talent to be innovative holds the greatest promise for maximizing student achievement and organizational success.

The times demand the best leaders with the greatest focus on genuinely fulfilling the promise of higher education. Our communities, our nation, and especially our students deserve no less.

**References:**

Center for Creative Leadership. (nd). *Unlearning your organizational culture: A playbook for leading in an unpredictable, virtual world.* <https://leadershipneverstops.org>

Kezar, A. & Holcomb, E. (2017). *Shared leadership in higher education: Important lessons from research and practice.* Washington, DC: American Council on Education.

Kotter, J. (2018). 8 steps to accelerate change in your organization. <https://www.kotterinc.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/8-Steps-eBook-Kotter-2018.pdf>

Kouzes, J.M. & Posner, B. Z. (2017). *The leadership challenge* (6th ed). Oakland, CA: Berrett-Koehler Publishers.

Maxwell, J. (2019). *Leadershift: The 11 essential changes every leader must embrace.* New York: Harper Collins.

Patterson, K., Grenny, J., et al. (2012) *Crucial conversations: Tools for talking when stakes are high* (2nd edition). New York: McGraw Hill.

Pressley, I., McPhail, C. (Fall 2020). *Strategic planning as a leadership development tool for midlevel leaders.* In *New Directions for Community Colleges*, No. 121.

Vaill, P. (1996). *Learning as a way of being Strategies for survival in a world of permanent white water.* San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass Publishers.

*Roberta “Robbie” Teahen’s professional experiences include secondary and postsecondary teaching and multiple leadership roles. Dr. Teahen most recently served as Associate Provost at Ferris State University where she served for 19 years. She is founding director of the Doctorate in Community College Leadership program and continues to teach and advise DCCL student dissertations. Prior to Ferris, she was a faculty member and Dean of Workforce Development at Northwestern Michigan College for 30 years. She earned her doctorate in Higher, Adult, and Lifelong Education at Michigan State University in 2000.*



*Her professional endeavors include extensive service to the Higher Learning Commission (HLC) as a team chair, assessment mentor, and member of the Institutional Actions Council. She is also a long-serving board member of the Community College Baccalaureate Association and serves on a committee of the Association for the Advancement of Learning in Higher Education. Recognitions include the Athena Grand Traverse Award in 2014, the Distinguished Woman in Higher Education recognition by the Michigan chapter of the American Council on Education (ACE) in 2015, and being selected as a Fellow of Northwestern Michigan College, the college’s highest honor, in 2020.*