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*What roles can leaders play to create, nurture, and sustain a campus culture that can ultimately lead to improving student success, to diversifying the ranks of faculty and administrators, and to facilitating meaningful engagement concerning the critical issues of diversity, equity, and inclusion? This chapter offers the candid views and suggestions of an accidental leader, who now leads one of the largest community college districts in the nation.*

## Why Diversity and Equity Matter: Reflections from a Community College President

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### Introduction

Why do the issues of diversity and equity have such resonance for me? As a first-generation immigrant, English-language learner from a working-class family, access to higher education and the opportunity that followed was the door to personal discovery and professional exploration, a door to a renewed hope that was counter to the generations of poverty and isolation that my family and my ancestors had endured, unselfishly, all for the chance that the next generation would be better off than the one before.

I am in my 30th year of service to public higher education and now find myself chancellor of the Los Angeles Community College District (LACCD), a constellation of nine accredited colleges serving over 150,000 students each semester. In coming to Los Angeles, I feel like I am coming back home to San Francisco. The noise, the smells, the sounds, the whole urban vibe speaks to me and I am very comfortable in it. I know and possess urban sensibilities and they have served me well in my transition. My principal goal is to raise the educational attainment of our students while ensuring that our colleges, spread throughout this large district, represent the communities they serve.

Like so many other urban community colleges, LACCD is riddled with challenges and opportunities. In fact, over 80% of entering students are not considered college ready by national benchmarks, requiring that they enroll in remedial coursework. If you disaggregate the data by gender,

ethnicity, neighborhoods, socioeconomic status, and zip code, this disparity and inequity are exacerbated. More than 50% of the students enrolled each semester live at or below the poverty line, 85% of them come from traditionally underserved and underrepresented communities, and most are first-generation college attendees.

Some look at this position in this district, in this city and think, “Too large, too urban, too diverse, too poor, too many low scores on the student scorecard, too this, too that. I’ll take a pass on the job.” For me, those are exactly all the reasons why I said yes.

I am drawn to working in a large, urban district that desires to raise its educational profile and leverage its size to help the working-class and low-income students get the support they need to be successful. To be a leader in such a diverse district is very attractive, as I, like so many of my community college colleagues, am committed to the common and public good. It reminds me of the horrible attacks of 9/11 in 2001 when brave, selfless first responders and firefighters were running into buildings about to collapse—what remarkable, inspiring courage and profound sense of duty. Our public education system needs people as educators running into, not out of, these districts that could stand to be improved. And I am proud to be a part of that.

Like so many of our students, my parents came to this country with little formal education, yet they held onto the dreams and aspirations of their children with a firm grip. At an early age, this became very apparent to me as I observed and listened, sometimes with dismay, but more often with amazement and joy, to the conversations that took place around the kitchen table of my childhood home in the Mission District of San Francisco. It was an ordinary kitchen table, with six chairs, but it holds a special significance to me for a variety of reasons. For this was the table where our family gathered to eat my mother’s savory dishes, to learn of local happenings and world events, and to hear the stories of struggle and of resilience that my family or my extended family was undergoing in adjusting to life in this country as “foreigners.” I often looked over to my parents and saw the vestiges of hard work and a tireless work ethic exemplified: their dark, tired eyes; my father’s thick, bronze hands compliments of the cannery where he worked for more than 30 years; my mother’s swollen ankles, a constant reminder of her 30-year post in an industrial laundry factory, where she stood all day and washed and pressed the linens of our city’s best restaurants.

The kitchen table was also the place where I learned of and became exposed to the hurtful themes and practice of bias, discrimination, and prejudice. And because there was no desk and lamp at our home, the kitchen table was also the place where we all did our homework and school projects; it is the place where I discovered my zeal for learning and my passion for public service.

As I matured and transitioned from my boyhood table to high school college-prep courses and university life, I became conscious that I was a

direct beneficiary of programs and funding designed to attract, enroll, and serve historically underrepresented populations in higher education. I felt and in many ways still feel a sense of indebtedness to those who came before me and bravely and unselfishly advocated to give people like me a chance, an opportunity—a hand up, not a handout. Yes, access and opportunity created through affirmative action, diversity, equity, and inclusion programs are the reasons that I am here today. As educators, I believe that it is our collective responsibility to purposefully serve our higher education community and, at the same time, to challenge it. We have perhaps the best opportunity to eradicate and overcome social and racial injustice and to empower the least educated and economically poorest in our communities. It is not just politically expedient or fiscally prudent to reach out and bring students in, especially those who have been historically underserved and underrepresented; it is simply and fundamentally the right thing to do.

### The Time Is Now

The American community college system is the most egalitarian system of higher education in the world. We accept the top 100% of every high school graduating class, all of them without exception and without apology. We accept learners of all ages at any point in their life. Our colleges are beacons of hope and opportunity. For some, they are the first chance to go to college, and for others, the last and only chance.

An often misunderstood and forgotten branch of higher education, community colleges are receiving unprecedented national attention. The dialogue surrounding institutional performance and student success in the 2-year system is resounding. Virtually every community college in the country is focused on ways to improve success rates of all students, with special attention toward historically underperforming students, who now make up a growing proportion of student enrollments.

There is, however, cause for concern. At a time that President Barack Obama has challenged our community colleges to graduate an additional 5 million students by 2020 through the American Graduates Initiative, academic success realized by community college students is disproportionate by race, gender, and income among those who graduate. Multiple reports over the last 10 years also point to the societal impact of changing demographics, fueled by the highest immigration rates in nearly a century, and the skills gap that exists in literacy and numeracy needed for 21st century jobs in the knowledge-based economy. Many researchers and scholars have suggested that creating the conditions for better student performance outcomes in community college contexts will require a fundamental shift in culture and expectations. Therefore, in its broadest, nonpartisan context, our nation's strength, economic health and prosperity, and democracy depend on the inclusion and success of all its participants.

The role of community college leadership is imperative in bolstering institutional graduation rates and student learning outcomes that are equitable. College presidents must lead the dialogue on the issues of diversity, equity, and inclusion and, invariably, that will require justification for our efforts. We will need to address why equity matters and be specific about what can be done to create, nurture, and sustain a campus culture that can ultimately lead to improving student success, to diversifying the ranks of faculty and administrators, and to facilitating meaningful engagement concerning the critical issues of diversity and equity.

## Why It Matters

During the civil rights era, persuasive arguments were made concerning the educational benefits of diversity and inclusion, which led to both federal and statewide legislation mandating a transparent process for folding in communities who had been historically and systematically marginalized from reaping the full benefits of our American democracy. The sanction for not complying with the law could lead to a loss of federal funding for publicly funded institutions. But perhaps the most dramatic example of my lifetime where a shift in the American consciousness occurred and the nation pivoted is Dr. Martin Luther King's iconic "I Have A Dream" speech, delivered powerfully on the steps of the Capitol Mall in 1963. Dr. King wielded his moral authority and used masterful oratory to convince a nation that equity and inclusion were necessary for our nation's democracy and societal well-being. Not long thereafter, the landmark federal Civil Rights Act and the Voting Rights Act were signed. Many of today's powerful institutions of inclusion and equity have their foundations in these laws and principles.

At the national level, contrary to popular belief, affirmative action programs still exist, notwithstanding the current state battles that question the necessity, soundness, and legality of affirmative action policies. There are legal safeguards that allow for diversity and equity efforts to continue and flourish. At the highest level, there are federal mandates and regulations, some through President Obama's Executive Orders, designed to ensure equal employment opportunity, including placement goals—not quotas—for hiring underrepresented groups.

American higher education is also speaking out. As one example, the Washington Higher Education Secretariat (WHES), formed in 1962, comprises chief executives from approximately 50 associations, each of which serves a significant sector or function in postsecondary education. In July 2013, WHES issued a statement printed in the *New York Times* that was signed by 37 higher education organizations reaffirming diversity in higher education as a national priority and underscoring the educational benefits of diversity and "the longstanding legal principle that the educational benefits of a widely student body are a compelling governmental interest" (WHES, 2013, para. 1). The statement goes on to proclaim, "We strongly

agree and we remain dedicated to the mission of discovering and disseminating knowledge, including the knowledge gained through direct experiences with diverse colleagues—a resource for achieving stronger democracy in our nation” (para. 4).

Generally less visible and public is the discussion surrounding the paucity of faculty and administrators of Color in higher education and/or the tangible benefits of diverse teaching and leadership communities. This raises important questions about institutional climate, hiring practices, and equity on campus, to name a few. When these historically prickly issues are placed in the context of institutional tension caused by a protracted environment of constricted financial resources and “zero-sum” budgetary exercises, tensions can flare and cause healthy, constructive dialogue on diversity and equity issues to be marginalized, silenced, or dormant.

### A Need for Leadership

A lack of consensus and leadership on issues of equity and diversity has affected the performance of underrepresented students, as their outcomes remain largely unchanged for 3 decades. Without another major shift in diversity, equity, and inclusion in higher education, our profession runs the risk of further bifurcation and passive perpetuation of racial inequality. This is the core finding of a study by the Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce (CEW), *Separate and Unequal: How Higher Education Reinforces the Intergenerational Reproduction of White Racial Privilege* (Carnevale & Strohl, 2013). The report contends that the higher education system is increasingly complicit as a passive agent in the systematic reproduction of White racial privilege across generations.

Jeff Strohl, one of the coauthors, states, “The American postsecondary system increasingly has become a dual system of racially separate pathways, even as overall minority access to the postsecondary system has grown dramatically” (para. 3). The authors find that White overrepresentation in the nation’s most elite and competitive colleges (top 468 colleges) is increasing even as the White share of college-age students has declined. Among the findings:

- Since 1995, more than 80% of new White enrollments have been at the top 468 colleges and more than 70% of new African-American and Latino enrollments have been at the nation’s open-access 2-year and 4-year colleges.
- Furthermore, as Whites are moving up into the top 468 colleges, they are vacating the open-access 2-year and 4-year colleges. Between 1995 and 2009 the White share of enrollments in open-access 2-year and 4-year colleges declined from 69% to 57%.

According to a 2013 report by the Campaign for College Opportunity, a California advocacy group, more African-American students in California are earning bachelor's degrees than they were a decade ago, but enrollment in the state's public universities is stagnant and many are turning to costly for-profit schools. The report asserts that the road to graduation for Black students is still pitted with obstacles, despite efforts to close achievement gaps that have persisted over the years. Among the findings of this report:

- African-American students have the lowest completion rates for freshman and transfer students at all three higher education segments: community colleges, California State University, and the University of California (UC).
- African-American students are more likely than any other group to attend college without earning a degree.
- In 2012, more African-American students were enrolled at private, for-profit colleges than at California State University and UC combined.
- The achievement gap between African-Americans and Whites earning a bachelor's degree or higher has narrowed by only a percentage point over the last decade. In 2011, about 24% of African-American adults had obtained a bachelor's compared with 41% of Whites.

A 2013 report released by the same organization found similar hurdles in higher education for Latinos/as.

## Resources Matter

I was talking to my son, Andres, about the educational achievement gap and he said, "Dad, it's not about achievement, it is about opportunity, because not everybody starts at the same place. So how can you expect the same outcomes to occur?" This is a wise observation from a young scholar. He's right—people do not all start at the same place. There is a disproportionate impact on access and outcomes for those who are poor, those who are first generation, and those who are known as linguistic minorities, among other underrepresented groups.

The lack of significant progress in diversity and equity is tied to funding because ultimately resources matter. The Georgetown University study (Carnevale & Strohl, 2013) that I previously cited indicates that the nation's selective colleges spend anywhere from two to almost five times as much on instruction per student as the open-access colleges, like community colleges. Even among equally qualified White, African-American, and Latino/a students, these pathways are not only separate but they bring unequal results:

- More than 30% of African-Americans and Hispanics with a high school grade point average (GPA) higher than 3.5 go to community colleges compared with 22% of Whites with the same GPA.
- Among students who score in the top half of test score distribution in the nation's high schools and attend college, 51% of White students get a bachelor's degree or higher compared with 34% of African-American students and 32% of Hispanic students.

One way to strengthen college pathways in the name of equity is to increase the amount of funding allocated toward supporting underrepresented and nontraditional student communities and nondominant completion pathways. In the current budget climate, this is a challenge. In California, for example, from 2009 to 2013, the public higher education budget that funds the University of California, California State University (CSU), and the California Community Colleges (CCC) was cut by \$2.5 billion. The budgets for the state's 112 community college serving 2.6 million students were slashed by 12%, or \$809 million, which translated to a loss of 485,000 students to the system during the same period. Tuition at UC and CSU nearly doubled during that time and the cost to enroll at a community college has increased by 77% in those years. Mercifully, the budget news was much better in 2014 for all segments of the state's public higher education system, fueled by a recovering economy and passage of Proposition 30 in 2012, a temporary tax initiative that funds schools and colleges.

## The Role of the College President

To be successful, presidents must understand and in many ways reflect the mission, demographics, and culture of the institutions they lead. A recent report by The Aspen Institute and *Achieving the Dream* (2014) contends that presidents need to possess certain qualities, including a deep commitment to student access and success; a willingness to take significant risks to advance student success; an ability to create lasting change within the college; a broad strategic vision for the college and its students, reflected in external partnerships; and the ability to raise and allocate resources in ways aligned with student success. I wholeheartedly agree and would add an additional insight: As it relates to sustaining diversity and equity, institutional efforts must be aligned, intentional, and supported by a cross-section of the campus community and governing board. Leadership for these efforts must have a stalwart champion—the college president.

As an educator at the University of California, California State University, and California Community Colleges, 11 years as a community college president and now chancellor, I have witnessed the multiple and tangible benefits of having diverse faculty, administrators, and students of Color on campus, both to the institution and, more important, to the learning and engagement of students. Having administrators and faculty of Color that

reflect the diversity of the students that we serve is not only beneficial to students of Color, but to the entire student body.

Several studies underscore the benefits of what I have observed. Administrators of Color serve as mentors for faculty of Color on campus and guide, said faculty who are considering the administrative pathway. Faculty of Color also serve as role models and mentors for students of Color (Gutierrez, Castañeda, & Katsinas, 2002) and provide encouragement for succeeding academically and facilitating their career aspirations (Cole & Barber, 2003). In 2001, the University of California President Richard Atkinson wrote to the nine chancellors of the system and stated that increasing faculty diversity is one of the valuable consequences of a commitment to a broad and diverse academic curriculum. “Continued academic excellence will require increased attention to issues such as multiculturalism, economic opportunity, and educational equity to ensure that they are reflected strongly in the University’s teaching, curriculum, and research,” he said (University of California, Office of the President, 2001, para. 1).

To promote institutional change on community college campuses, the “Three Cs” of Courage, Conviction, and *Coraje* (valor and boldness) are necessary. Courage refers to the courage to lead and to facilitate conversations, sometimes difficult ones, and to speak out for social justice and equity and get people to follow their convictions and to redress the disparities. This is important because leadership is not done by an individual but by a movement of change agents and by those committed to morally just causes. Conviction is the ability to stick to it for the long haul because change requires persistence. Best practices may not work right away and it may take a longer time to germinate into systems that allow for that to occur. *Coraje* is tied to the notion that things aren’t right. It’s not right that there are a disproportionate number of people who are poor and in prison and are low performing in our schools. To state it differently, it’s simply unacceptable.

The role of the college president is to facilitate these courageous and difficult conversations about departmental expectations and institutional culture surrounding diversity, equity, and inclusion, especially related to hiring. With the number of faculty and administrators who are and will be going into retirement, there will be multiple job openings to fill. However, we cannot just expect excellent candidates to show up. Our institutions have to be intentional about whom we seek to bring into our academic community and be clear about the profile characteristics of the instructors and administrators we are looking for that would serve the institution well today and in the future. If we are committed to equity, it is necessary that we seek diversity among our faculty.

At the hiring table, I have heard it said, “Oh, we just don’t have a diversified pool for a particular position.” I believe the pool is often there, but qualified candidates may not always be advanced to the next level or ultimately selected. So, we need to ask why. I have seen colleges and departments looking for a replication of younger models of those to be replaced,



perhaps those that we infer we will be more comfortable with, a profile or portrait that we recognize, instead of one that could be a stronger long-term asset. We need to look not at who the person is today, but who they can become with the support of the institution.

The college president has the responsibility of setting the tone for the organization. In my experience of recommending faculty and administrators for hire over the last 15 years, desirable candidates are also interviewing your campus and assessing whether this is a place for their professional and personal growth. Unlike other segments of higher education, community college faculty tend to retire from the institutions that first hire them. Top candidates want to know about the climate of the academic community they are potentially joining. Will I be supported and nurtured through the tenure and evaluation process? What are my departmental colleagues like? What are the opportunities for professional growth? What is the institutional commitment to diversity and inclusion issues? These are just some of the questions candidates ask, so paying attention to these questions can make the difference between attracting and hiring or losing top-flight candidates.

## Conclusion

For community college educators, it is easy to see why higher education in general and community colleges in particular are such wonderful places in which to work. It is here where we can intertwine our professional craft as educators with our personal values. At the community colleges, we are proud of and reaffirm our values as open-access institutions whose hallmarks of affordability, accessibility, and outstanding quality are wrapped around an ethos of care and commitment—a commitment, in my view, to the goals of academic excellence, public service, diversity, and equity unparalleled in any segment of higher education.

College presidents can't do this work alone. Part of our role is to create a community of like-minded individuals who support excellence in diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts. Part of this job is to create a climate of inclusion and trust and to empower and support others who are positioned to make these changes.

As educators we must cross boundaries and solve the vexing issues surrounding student success in an interdisciplinary fashion. We have to work with others and invite them into the fold as allies and advocates for change. In doing so, we change the narrative for community colleges as the nation's best investment in human capital and most powerful equalizer for the disparities that exist. Always focus on the important work of serving students and helping them achieve, irrespective of job titles or the perceived prestige associated with them, and let the importance of the work itself guide us. And I have tried—not always successfully—not to confuse *who I am* with *what I do*, no matter how significant a role I have played. Along

the way, we must learn to be resilient, to become patient with ambiguity, and to hold true to our principles and follow our moral convictions. You may discover that the more you help others achieve their goals, the more fulfillment and success you will find in achieving your own.

Diversity and equity do matter. In fact, our democratization depends on it.

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