Practical Leadership in Community Colleges:
Navigating Today’s Challenges

Interview with
George R. Boggs, Ph.D.

The following is an excerpt of an interview with George R. Boggs, Ph.D., Superintendent/President Emeritus, Palomar College.

Leadership—at all levels of the institution—makes a significant difference in how well the institution serves its students and its communities. However, leadership in community colleges has become increasingly complex. Colleges are being pushed to increase the success rates of students—including the most at-risk students in higher education—
and to close achievement gaps in an environment of declining public support, along with calls for increased accountability. In the wake of natural disasters and man-made tragedies, college leaders are dealing with increased concerns for campus safety and security and responding to an increase in government mandates and reporting requirements. For these reasons, it is important for leaders to be knowledgeable about issues and case studies such as those discussed in *Practical Leadership in Community Colleges: Navigating Today’s Challenges*. Thinking in advance about dealing with issues will pay off when faced with very real situations.

2 How, in your view, is the mission of American community colleges unique?

In our new book, Dr. McPhail and I discuss how the mission of American community colleges has evolved to become the promise to provide affordable and accessible postsecondary education and training to all who desire to learn—the most diverse student body in American higher education. The colleges provide the pathway to higher education and training that otherwise would not be available to many students.

Community colleges have traditionally responded to the educational needs of their communities, developing important educational programs, partnering with local institutions and agencies, providing contract education, offering citizenship and language courses to new immigrants, retraining displaced workers, and offering both credit and noncredit community service programs. These are aspects of the mission that need to be preserved and protected.

3 With the rising cost of tuition, increased burden of student loans for every graduate, and the challenging scenario for obtaining gainful employment in the country, what do you have to say to those who are questioning the value of a college education?

Studies show time and again that people who have a high level of education have a better quality of life. They have more career options, are less likely to be unemployed, less likely to be a burden on society, and more likely to contribute to the well being of their communities. However, students often need help to become more discerning consumers. Prospective students and their families should seek information about college choices, programs and majors, financing a college education, and how to be best prepared for college. A regionally accredited community college that is close to home often is the best choice for an affordable and high quality education. Early advising and counseling can assist students to find the programs that fit their needs. Scholarships and other forms of financial aid can provide needed finances, but students should be cautioned to borrow cautiously and responsibly.
4 As a leading expert in the field, what advice do you have to give to current and future community college leaders on diversity and multicultural pluralism?

Community college leaders need to give a high priority to equity and inclusion that goes beyond rhetoric about the value of diversity. Our colleges need to be welcoming places for all who want to learn, and we must work to close equity and achievement gaps. Our colleges already attract a very diverse student body. We need to do all we can to provide a safe environment for them to learn and to help them to be successful. In order to do this, colleges should work toward having a faculty and staff that reflect the diversity of the student body. Comments or actions that demean or are hostile to people of any race, color, religion, gender, gender expression, age, national origin, disability, marital status, sexual orientation, or military status should not be tolerated.

5 What is your opinion about the greatest obstacle in the college to career pipeline?

There are many obstacles that students face when preparing for a career. The pathways can be confusing to first-generation college students, they do not often receive the advice and counseling they need. They have other life obligations that can get in the way, many are financially challenged, and too many are academically underprepared. A 2015 national study of community college students conducted by the University of Wisconsin found that half of our students are at risk of hunger and homelessness. The greatest obstacle that the students face is trying to navigate a system that is foreign to them. They need our help to: assess their current situation; set achievable goals; refer them to agencies that can help them with basic needs; and to guide them to the best educational pathway for them.

6 This current edition of the newsletter focuses on the challenging landscape of community colleges. What advice do you have for future leaders of community colleges across the nation to survive and thrive in this changing environment?

Community college leaders and those who aspire to leadership positions in our colleges should see themselves as lifelong learners, studying the evolution of community colleges, and staying abreast of emerging issues and trends. Regularly reading higher education newspapers; attending meetings and conferences; and discussing issues with colleagues can be valuable learning opportunities. Leaders should continually hone their communication skills: speaking, writing, and especially listening. Leaders should model the behavior they expect in others by: creating an environment in which people feel safe to report problems and make recommendations; considering the recommendations of constituents and participatory governance committees carefully; and building a trusting environment and inspiring others to make the necessary changes to improve the college. They need to be able to make and explain tough—and sometimes unpopular—decisions that are data-informed. Above all, leaders always need to put student learning first.
Breaking the Silence: College Student Mental Health Revealed

Johnesa Hodge, MSW, Vice Chancellor of Institutional Effectiveness and Research, WCCCD

The face of higher education continues to change during a remarkable period of social, economic, social media, and political evolution. These factors influence college students academically, socially, personally, financially, and mentally as they pursue a college education to better their quality of life. The "new" college student is often juggling many aspects of their life while attending college and supporting themselves, children, spouses, and their extended family. With approximately 70% of undergraduate students working while attending college, it is no surprise that a college student faces many obstacles that can present challenges to their mental health in their efforts to balance education and "life." These factors are often overlooked by both the student and postsecondary institutions leading to untreated and undiagnosed mental illnesses.

49.4% of community college students self-reporting a mental health condition

According to recent research by HOPE Lab at University of Wisconsin-Madison and the Healthy Minds Network of the University of Michigan, 49.4% of community college students self-reported a mental-health condition which compromises their mental and academic health. Of these diagnoses, the two most common mental health conditions experienced by college students are anxiety and depression resulting in 35.6% of community college students self-reporting depression, which is 11% above four-year college students.

Furthermore, these two conditions become more prevalent due to environmental factors and not just biological or genetic disposition. Evidence suggests that a new college student experiences stressors in their environment due to the following:

- Making new friends in an uncontrolled environment
- Experiencing more rigorous academic expectations
- Having a significant financial burden, especially since many students have to work while attending college
- Dealing with feelings of isolation and loneliness

Many of these factors not only advance mental health conditions, but they lead to dropping out of college before completing degrees. Findings from the National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI) study reported 64% of students with mental health-related challenges are no longer attending college and 45% of them did not receive campus-based services or accommodations. Survey respondents noted, if they had received campus-based services and accommodations, it might have helped them stay in school. Consequently, it is important to understand the nature of each of these factors and how they affect students on college campuses to reduce the risk of students dropping out, low course completion rates, low student satisfaction, and disconnection. With colleges being evaluated for degree completion by

![Prevalence of Self-Reported Mental Health Conditions Among Students, 2014-15](source)
regional and national agencies, which in some cases result in funding implications, it is in the best interest of community colleges and universities to strongly consider investments in resources and innovative human service partnerships that provide services to support students with potential mental health conditions. The Wayne County Community College District (WCCCD) promotes student access and success by focusing on innovative interventions and strategies that may reduce stress for at-risk students with potential mental conditions in two major areas.

**Financial Burdens**

A hurdle that plays a significant role in college student anxiety and stress is the ability to pay for college. Nearly 70% of the WCCCD student population is receiving some form of need-based financial aid demonstrating that many students are coming from low-income families. According to a *U.S. News & World Report* study on data from the labor market, the growing consumer price index of college tuition significantly outpaced many other categories compared to areas such as medical care and housing in the past decade. Moreover, the growth of the consumer price index of textbooks is almost identical to the growth in college tuition.

Like many institutions, WCCCD commits to high-impact student success interventions and provides resources to address student financial burdens that impede their success in the classroom. Examples of these interventions and strategies include:

- **Financial Aid Marathons:** A series of one-day, on-the-spot financial aid processing for students who may have difficulty completing that process. These sessions help students navigate the process of documentation, create plans of work, and provide financial literacy. The marathons have significantly decreased the number of students who drop out during the first week of class.

- **Institutional and private scholarships and grants:** WCCCD participates with regional and private organizations to provide scholarships to include, but are not limited to, Dream Keepers, Detroit Promise Scholarship and Michigan WIN-WIN. These scholarships promote student success and completion by providing funds for medical bills, textbooks, transportation, utilities, or tuition.

**Preparedness for College**

The average age of a WCCCD student is 28 years of age, with 48% of the student population being 25 years and older. As a result, the average WCCCD student may not have attended college for many years following high school graduation resulting in increased anxiety and low self-confidence as they navigate their college experiences. Additionally, approximately 42% of the District’s students are first-generation college students compared to the reported 20% by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES). Nearly, 50% of the national first-generation students are low-income. For this reason, the District must employ strategies to proactively reach out to its students, linking them with services on and off the campus. These strategies increase student connectivity with their campuses and services that are available to them in order to minimize the burden of isolation, helplessness, and anxiety.

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Identifying and Setting Curricula – Responding to Changing Environments

Patrick J. McNally, Ed.D., Interim District Vice Chancellor, Curriculum and Distance Learning Programming, WCCCD

Community colleges have long been known for having the ability to meet the rapidly changing needs of their respective communities and employers. One such rapid need for change occurred in Michigan in the early 2000s. The economic downturn that impacted the United States hit Michigan harder than most states. Quite a large portion of Michigan’s economy was tied to the automobile industry and as a result, legislators and business owners realized that Michigan’s economy needed to diversify into multiple areas instead of relying heavily on one industry. This realization has resulted in new or changing industries across the state requiring new or modified courses and programs for colleges to meet the current and emerging employer demand.

Examples of strategies to address this include:

- **Early Alert System (EAS):** EAS is an early notification system driven by faculty to notify student services of students performing unsatisfactorily and are at-risk of failing by the midpoint of the semester. During a phone consultation, student services evaluates the reasons the student is performing poorly and recommends services to promote student success such as tutoring, financial assistance, advising, etc.

- **Smarthinking:** Smarthinking is a web-based service that allows students to seek tutoring without the fear of asking for help. As a result, it is a student-centric service that supplements on-campus tutoring labs, workshops, and other academic support systems.

Although the District implements many strategies to reduce the stress and anxiety of its students, it continues to seek innovative ways, such as partnering with local human service and public health agencies which have capacity to address advanced mental disorders and conditions. Like most institutions, WCCCD understands the importance of being knowledgeable of trends impacting community colleges and remains vigilant in providing student-centered services to meet the needs of its students and the community it serves.

Sources: College Students Speak: A Survey Report on Mental Health © 2012 by NAMI, the National Alliance on Mental Illness

Too Distressed to Learn? Mental Health Among Community College Students March 2016 (This report was made possible by a partnership between the Healthy Minds Network at University of Michigan, Wisconsin HOPE Lab at University of Wisconsin-Madison, Association of Community College Trustees, and Single Stop)
Curricula are designed to give students a balance of core program requirements and general education courses to create a “well rounded” student with capabilities and knowledge beyond just the program requirements. Sometimes, the length of time required for students to achieve these outcomes takes longer than what the local employer demand for employees can withstand. Today’s students and local employers may not have the time to complete a full degree program prior to the program requirements changing. One-year college and short-term certifications within various programs reduce the time required for skills development, and also leaves open the opportunity for eventual degree completion.

Michigan’s community colleges needed to start training students for new and expanding workforces. This change required colleges to look at emerging industries for potential new programs and courses, as well as industries which were forced to change direction to meet the new economies. Colleges also needed to review existing programs to determine their relevance within the new and changing environments. As industries changed, the workforce needed to fulfill employers needs changed as well. No longer can an employee hire into a company and not be continuously trained and updated. New technology is introduced on a regular basis, requiring that employees are updated and trained on the latest and greatest components of their jobs, resulting in the lifelong learner.

Curriculum selection and design has traditionally followed general pathways such as: creating a philosophy; having a clear purpose; creating a sound educational process; developing a rational sequence of activities; having defined outcomes; and conducting continuous assessment (The National Academy for Academic Leadership, ND). While these processes are still useful, they are generally instruction-centered, and not learner-centered. The curriculum ensures students are achieving the desired outcomes of a given course or program, but they do not specifically address student development and student success throughout the process.

The new lifelong learner, and other rapidly changing workforce needs, will require higher education institutions to adapt the delivery of instruction so students and employees have the ability to determine the best learning structure for them. Curricula decisions will need to be made regarding the time required to meet the expected outcomes; whether it be a full, half, or fast-track semester; or whether a competency-based model of instruction should be implemented. Technology in education, such as online, hybrid, and virtual classrooms expand the opportunities for students to access learning in multiple formats; however, the curriculum needs to be reviewed to ensure that it is compatible.

Creating a curriculum that can take advantage of short-term, or stackable credentials through various formats may be an option for helping the student to complete the expected program outcomes in short sequences, while keeping them on the path to completion. In this way, the employer’s needs are met with a skilled workforce while still maintaining the curriculum policies of the institution.

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Research recently reported that 4.8 million students (a quarter of the college population today) are raising dependent children. The growth in the percentage of international students is expected to continue to rise. Community colleges also have a high percentage of minorities and low income students. This is reflected by statistics published by the American Association of Community Colleges in 2014: Hispanics 22%; African-Americans 14%; Asian/Pacific Islander 6%; and Caucasians 49%. Additionally, 36 percent of these students are first-generation college students.

Multiple waves of change on different fronts – economic, social, and political - have resulted in, and are certain to continue to result in, a shift in the demographic profile of the community college student. How is today’s community college student different from the one ten years ago and what further changes can we expect a decade from now? How does this change compel leaders of these institutions to make modifications and innovations in both operations and offerings to ensure the mission remains uncompromised and excellence is sustained?

Higher Education Analyst Josh Freedman said that the typical community college student is no longer the typical student. Four out of every ten college students in the country today attend a community college, and that number is projected to increase. More than twice as many students were enrolled at two year, public colleges than at private, non-profit ones. (Forbes, September, 2013).

No longer are all freshmen young and straight out of high school. Today’s students have more work experience, are older, and are more racially diverse than ever before. The Institute for Women’s Policy

These changes in student demographics are an indicator of the increasing multiple demands placed on community colleges across the nation. As a result:

- Leaders of these institutions need to ensure that student support services are continually redefined. Older students need different kinds of assistance and advice with career choice, program selection, and course completion – and by mapping these elements with their own choices and personality increases the probability of a desired outcome.

- Program curriculum will have to evolve to make sure the student is prepared for the current and future job market. Community colleges need to continually assess and analyze employment demands, research the national and international job markets, and track growth across industries.

- Student advisors and faculty will need to be more synchronized to ensure student success.
Financial aid systems may have to be revamped to perpetuate the accessibility of a good quality education.

Language programs and specialized assimilation services will be needed for international students.

Investment in new technologies must be a priority, since instructional delivery and student services - two critical areas - are profoundly impacted by developing technology.

Community college leaders will also have to respond to the changing psychology of the student, their mental dynamics, and their personal challenges in a vastly changed ecosystem. A higher emotional quotient will be a pre-requisite for the new community college leader – to be sensitive to the student’s actions, opinions and behaviors.

Community college leaders must develop new business and finance models in the face of rapidly changing demographic, economic, technological, and cultural trends. Community colleges must adapt to the “new normal,” a combination of reduced revenues from local, state, and national sources and the pressure to respond effectively to a more diverse and underprepared student population. These colleges are dealing with issues such as increased legacy costs, aging infrastructure, insufficient funds for investment in high-demand career programs, and demands for greater accountability. In order to navigate these turbulent times, community colleges are becoming more productive, efficient, creative, and focused. Leaders of these colleges are infusing an entrepreneurial spirit, seeking new and innovative ways to increase student success and completion, assure student affordability and advance the social and economic purpose of a quality education.

What is certain is that this sea of change is unstoppable and student success is a goal that cannot be compromised. Every operational area will doubtlessly be impacted by these changing demographics, and our unified mission implores us to understand, analyze, react and adapt in order for community colleges to continue to educate those who need it the most.

### Demographics of Students Enrolled for Credit

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<tr>
<th>Ethnicity</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>49%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>22%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Black</td>
<td>14%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Asian/Pacific Islander</td>
<td>6%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Native American</td>
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<tr>
<td>Two or more races</td>
<td>3%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Other/Unknown</td>
<td>4%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Non-resident Alien</td>
<td>1%</td>
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**Other Student Demographics**

- First generation to attend college - **36%**
- Single parents - **17%**
- Non-U.S. citizens - **7%**
- Veterans - **4%**
- Students with disabilities - **12%**

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<thead>
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<th>Gender</th>
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<tr>
<td>Woman</td>
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<td>Men</td>
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Source: American Association of Community Colleges - http://www.aacc.nche.edu/AboutCC/Documents/FastfactsR2.pdf

Sources: Barbara Gault, Ph.D., Lindsey Reichlin, M.A., Elizabeth Reynolds, Meghan Froehner (November 2014)

4.8 Million College Students are Raising Children
Reinventing Democracy’s College

Gunder Myran, Ph.D., Senior Consultant to the Chancellor, WCCCD

It is the purpose of this article to propose that the community college is entering a new phase of its role in democratizing our society and American higher education. Community colleges have historically served a vital role in the democratization of our society—an ongoing process of weakening hereditary and arbitrary social and class distinctions and strengthening human equality with respect to social, political, and economic rights and privileges.

As the community college student profile becomes more diverse and a higher percentage of the students come from underprepared, underserved, and disenfranchised populations, community colleges must be reinvented to serve as primary gatekeepers for social equity and as guardians of our democratic and egalitarian ideals.

The community college is often referred to as “democracy’s college.” Other terms used include the open door college, the people’s college, and the community’s college. All of these terms capture the spirit of the community college—a spirit rooted in the democratic ideals of freedom, equality and social justice, equal opportunity, and civic responsibility. In Reinventing the Open Door (Community College Press, 2009, page 2), I outlined the following democratic and egalitarian principles on which community colleges are founded: the hope for a better tomorrow for all who seek it; the belief that talent and ambition are widely distributed in our society and not the province only of the elite and privileged few; the faith that people from all walks of life can achieve great things; the devotion to an inclusive campus climate of acceptance, understanding, and caring; and the commitment to serving as a community educational resource to address problems that create barriers to student success such as poverty, unemployment, and racism.

American higher education has been in the process of democratization nearly since the birth of our nation. The earliest private and church-related colleges served a small aristocracy, but since then several egalitarian milestones have been achieved: Thomas Jefferson’s creation of the first public university, the land grant college movement, federal vocational education programs, the G.I. Bill after WWII, the Truman Commission on Higher Education for American Democracy (calling for a national network of low-cost comprehensive community colleges to serve the educational needs of local communities), the civil rights movement, and federal financial aid programs. At every stage since the establishment of the first community colleges in the early 1900s, these institutions have contributed to this democratization process by becoming a grassroots collegiate form that has moved from the academic ivory tower to the neighborhoods, factories, schools, homes, and streetcorners of the communities being served.

The next stage of the reinvention of “democracy’s college” will focus on the college and career success of those disenfranchised and impoverished groups who live in the shadows of our inner cities, suburbs, and rural areas and continue to be systematically excluded from educational opportunity and access to the economic mainstream. The civil rights and social justice movements have transformed America since the 1960s, but left behind are those for whom our society has not yet been able to loosen the chains of persistent and entrenched inequity. Although many have had the door of educational and economic opportunity opened to them, the “invisible poor” who live in areas of concentrated poverty and racial isolation still bear disproportionately the burden of disparities in income, wealth, employment, mobility, incarceration, housing, education, and economic opportunity. For the invisible poor who live in the shadows, the community college is the primary, and often the only, pathway to educational success, economic opportunity, and social justice. If the community college of the future fails to provide the local, state, and national leadership required to reinvent “democracy’s college” so as to fully serve these groups, it will have forfeited its vital and irreplaceable value to our society.
Beyond Vision: College CEOs as Transformative Leaders in an Evolving Higher Education Landscape

CharMaine Hines, Ed.S.,
Vice Chancellor, Academic Accountability & Policy, WCCCD

The college landscape is rapidly changing and is driven by a combination of factors including a shrinking CEO leadership, senior administrators and faculty. Competing values and missions, driven by new learning opportunities for a more diverse, equitable and inclusive administration and student body, are factors in what is being coined the ‘new normal’. For community colleges to achieve excellence in the 21st century it requires transformative leadership to move an institutional agenda.

Institutional transformation first begins with an experienced, sustained and informed leadership. Leaders that are flexible can balance educational quality on one side, while responding to budgetary, staffing and structural deficiencies with a paucity of resources on the other. The ranks of leadership should also be diverse and reflective of the increasingly diverse student body that comprises the “new normal”. A new normal that requires a more supportive institutional climate for these students, proactively engages them in active learning and provides student activities that enculturates them into the college community.

Expectations for these leaders are higher as changing priorities in the higher education landscape are different from the first fifty (50) years and command a more urgent need for institutional alignment. In a survey of current community college leaders, a majority are over the age of 60 with 75% of CEOs approaching retirement and 10% of new hires as first-time presidents. (AACC, Competencies for CC Leaders, 2013). Today’s leaders require the ability to craft a vision for the institution that will ably allow them to navigate competing priorities. Priorities that include increased accountability standards, vying for constrained government resources, an emphasis on technology and the development of learner centric models that educate citizens for a global, technology-centric workforce.

Today’s families and students employ a more consumer oriented approach to education and include an expanding non-traditional student learner. There are also externally driven demands including a national agenda to increase the number of graduates in the U.S. attaining post-secondary degree’s over a decade, training and/or retooling an aging American workforce for “middle-skill” jobs and educating the socially and technology shrewd millennial generation on critical thinking and soft skills needed in the workplace. This requires reimaging general education, developmental education and redesigning student educational experiences.

Today’s community college CEOs are charged with the ability to craft a vision for their respective institutions to be viable for the next 50 years and articulate their mission in an evolving landscape of higher education. It requires rebalancing the mission, maintaining open access for all, advancing completion goals, transfer pathways, and the continuance of educating the local citizenry and community.

Today’s transformative leaders must define and reinvent institutional roles and align curricular programs to meet present workforce needs in a changing global society.

Sources:
Competencies for CC Leaders, American Association of Community Colleges, 2013.
Great Leadership Invites Guest Authors

Do you have an article you’ve written, the description of a successful work process, or the details of a leadership program that you want read by a broad audience of colleagues? The Great Leadership newsletter seeks to publish well-written, informative, forward-thinking articles and ideas. The topics we publish deal with leadership and leadership development. We also consider book reviews, reviews of videos and any other relevant leadership content. Articles submitted should be 200-500 words in length.

Mission Statement
WCCCD’s mission is to empower individuals, businesses and communities to achieve their goals through excellent and accessible services, culturally diverse experiences, and globally competitive higher education and career advancement programs.

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