Leading Into The Unknown:
Critical Leadership in Challenging Times

Dale K. Nesbary, Ph.D., President of Muskegon Community College (Michigan)

Thirty years ago, as a Law, Policy, and Society doctoral student at Northeastern University, my classmates and I were fortunate to study critical theory as it emerged from a purely theoretical approach to the multifaceted practice we know today. As a result, we were well prepared to respond to controversies around critical gender theory, critical race theory, critical legal studies, critical leadership theory and the many other related concepts that exist today. In this context, I share my views of critical leadership in challenging times and lessons learned during the COVID-19 pandemic in my work as president of Muskegon Community College (MCC).

Twin Crises Drive Change
When historians reflect on 2020 and 2021, two transformative events will come to mind: the killing of George Floyd and the COVID-19 pandemic.

George Floyd: Thanks to decades of work around civil rights issues, MCC was well-positioned for the local impact of Black Lives Matter movement that erupted from the police murder of George Floyd. As early as 1980, MCC had an affirmative action officer at a time when few public- or private-sector organizations had such a position. MCC has historically maintained staffing and programmatic activities designed to help all students succeed. More recently (2009) the college examined the “over policing” of communities of color, created the And Justice for All speaker series (2014) in the aftermath of the Michael Brown killing, and continued these efforts through the George Floyd killing. In 2021, in collaboration with the Community Foundation for Muskegon County, MCC fundraised to staff an office of diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI). The chief diversity officer, reporting to the president, is fully funded by the college with additional funds raised and designated for professional DEI training of business and community groups expressing a need for such training.

continued on page 2
Leading Into The Unknown: Critical Leadership in Challenging Times

continued from cover

**The COVID-19 pandemic:** In 1980, Michael Lipsky famously coined the phrase “street level bureaucrat.” Lipsky knew frontline employees (nurses, police, mail deliverers for example) were not necessarily the highest-ranking employees, but they were critical in communicating where the institution was headed and what was needed to get there. Today, the COVID-19 pandemic forces leaders to empower those who deliver services, in our case educational services, with the ability and flexibility to do so in creative and time-tested ways.

On Friday, March 13, 2020, MCC closed our bricks and mortar operations in preparation for the devastating impact of COVID-19. Division level, weekly “all-staff” virtual meetings were scaled up to a newly formed all-campus meeting sequence. The all-campus meetings provided regular communication for our five hundred full- and part-time employees, allowing them to maintain a sense of community while working remotely. They shared with each other in an open forum and receive information from the administration. As Lipsky advised, our frontline employees were empowered in their work.

Students are welcome to attend all-campus meetings and other forums throughout the semester, including participation in our most recent integrated strategic plan. Multiple research methods are used to understand the student perspective including survey research, focus groups, and gathering data from national organizations such as Achieving the Dream and the Community College Center for Student Engagement. For the fall semester 2021, MCC reopened for in-person classes with protective safety protocols in place; 33 percent of our students choose in-person classes and the remainder picked hybrid, hyflex, or fully remote options.

**Lessons Learned**

**Integrated strategic planning is crucial.** Have a plan, work the plan and evaluate outcomes. The Society for College and University Planning (SCUP) defines integrated planning as a sustainable approach to planning that builds relationships, aligns the organization, and emphasizes preparedness for change. Dr. Nicholas Santilli, SCUP senior director of learning strategy, shares that successful integrated planning requires institutional commitment and the concentrated, orchestrated effort of multiple individuals working in concert over time. MCC created an integrated strategic planning process with all relevant parties playing a meaningful role in its development, and this process was very helpful in moving MCC through the pandemic and social disruption in a disciplined and empathetic manner. Communication is an ongoing, key part of this approach. The all-campus meetings, courageous conversations involving community stakeholders, along with other media methods allowed us to learn from our community and insert what we learned into our strategic plans.

**Embrace formal and informal power:** Use your formal and informal power, know the difference between them, and lead with compassion. Just because your title is that of the boss (formal power) does not mean that you are. Those without title (with power achieved in an informal manner) are often more effective organizational difference-makers than those with title. For example, a long-time custodial maintenance staff member at MCC helped to channel information to and from college leaders to his colleagues in a very productive way; this helped MCC in navigating the COVID-19 challenges in a more effective way and ultimately improved the college.

**Leave a legacy:** MCC improved the quality of education as recognized by bestcolleges.com (2017) and intelligent.com (2021) using standard
college ranking metrics. This made the case to our students and the public that MCC deserved public and private funding to improve infrastructure, including a successful $21 million capital campaign. Combined with $9 million in reserves and public bonding support, $55 million was raised to meet infrastructure goals. Result: a legacy of significant upgrading of the quality of education, advances in student success, and major infrastructure improvements.

Make your own table: MCC sought to participate in new public and private funding sources. After taking a seat on the board of our regional economic development agency, the West Michigan Regional Shoreline Development Commission, a federal grant of $2.5 million was secured. Outreach to the Michigan Economic Development Corporation resulted in a $4.1 million infrastructure/equipment grant. Infrastructure funding from state sources was aggressively sought, leading to two grants totaling $10.2 million. Leveraging this support won MCC voter approval for $24.7 million in bonding authority, which prompted additional grant and private funding.

Summary
The framework of responding to controversies using critical leadership theory and the multifaceted practice that exists today allows for a broad approach in dealing with issues of the day and not simply leading within constructs presented.

Lessons Community College Leaders Are Learning During COVID-19
By Gunder Myran, Ed.D., Senior Consultant to the Chancellor, WCCCD

Community college leaders are applying the lessons learned from the COVID-19 pandemic and the national racial reckoning of the past two years as they guide their institutions through a process of radically redesigning for the post-COVID-19 era. As those lessons transform the contours of community colleges, one era is ending and a new one is beginning. At WCCCD, this next era is called the “New Day, New Way.”

FIVE LESSONS LEARNED
Community college leaders are applying what is being discovered during the pandemic by bringing about strategic changes in five “lessons learned” categories:

1. Lesson Learned One: Protecting the health and safety of students and employees by adapting to the changing trajectory of COVID-19 as Delta, Omicron, and other variants emerge.

2. Lesson Learned Two: Redesigning programs, services, and structures based on the ways students, faculty, and staff members responded to the massive disruption of college operations at the outset of the pandemic. In the face of unprecedented challenges and uncertainties, community college faculty and staff members sacrificed to reach out to students in special ways and assure the continuity of programs and services. In the process, leaders discovered that students were even more vulnerable than anticipated, and responded by addressing basic needs such as computer and internet access, finances, food, housing, and transportation. Many students struggled with childcare and caregiving for elderly or sick family members; as a result, advocacy and resource centers emerged on community college campuses.

Leaders also discovered how resilient and creative faculty members were as they made an abrupt transition from in-person to online teaching and learning modalities and navigated the virtual learning landscape. The result is that a new balance of in-person, online, and hybrid teaching and learning
will become the pattern in the post-COVID-19 era. To achieve this result, community colleges are investing in virtual and digital learning centers, teaching and learning centers, and faculty professional development programs.

As well, community colleges are transforming through institutional development in areas such as diversity, equity, and inclusion; student success and completion; developmental education; college and career readiness; student support services; and career and workforce education. In all these areas, community colleges have increased the pace of innovation and entrepreneurship. A new model for community college education is emerging as these institutions undertake major innovations in competency-based learning, the curriculum, learning sciences, learning technologies, and student support services.

**Lesson Learned Three:** The response to national educational, technological, and societal changes that were previously underway accelerated during the pandemic. Prior to COVID, community colleges were already evolving as digital enterprises, but this evolution was dramatically advanced by the needs of students and faculty as they adapted rapidly to online instruction at the outset of the pandemic. Similarly, social and racial justice progress was being made before the pandemic, but the George Floyd murder and resulting Black Lives Matter movement quickened the pace of reform at national and local levels.

**Lesson Learned Four:** Developing college-wide initiatives based on the lessons learned about the inequities experienced disproportionately by African Americans and other students of color during the pandemic. These inequities included non-academic issues such as food and housing insecurities, lack of access to computers and the internet (techno-racism), lack of study space at home, and the demands of work and childcare. As well, some diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives were sparked by the national racial reckoning that arose after the murder of George Floyd.

**Lesson Learned Five:** Creating or strengthening partnerships with other community organizations to respond to urgent pandemic-driven community needs such as vaccination centers and food distribution sites. COVID underscored how interdependent the sectors of the community ecosystem are and how vital interagency cooperation is in a period of crisis. During the pandemic, community colleges accelerated their engagement as “systems within systems” by sharing outreach services with other sectors of the community ecosystem such as the economy, government, health, religion, philanthropy, nonprofits, and other educational institutions. Through these shared outreach services, community college leaders also found common cause to intensify antiracism advocacy. They expanded their roles as activists for racial, gender, and economic justice including student debt reduction, criminal justice reform, health care reform, racial reparations, and health care equity.

**New era pushes colleges forward**

Community college leaders are applying the lessons learned from COVID-19 and the national racial reckoning to create the community colleges of the future that those being served so richly deserve. During the pandemic, community colleges proved to be one of democracy’s most powerful and impactful centers of diversity, equity, inclusion, and economic opportunity. As these colleges transition to the post-COVID-19 era, one can hardly imagine another period in the history of community colleges when their open-door mission and related equity-driven commitments will be more vital to the success of the students, businesses, and communities served.
Leading Beyond the Pandemic

By Sherry Zylka, Ph.D., President of Big Sandy Community and Technical College (Kentucky)

As the pandemic continues to impact operations at Big Sandy Community and Technical College (BSCTC) in Prestonsburg, KY, conversations have shifted from what we are doing to keep everyone safe while keeping the college open to where we do go from here.

Creating sustainability
BSCTC was fortunate to receive federal COVID-19 “rescue funds” to help address tuition revenue shortages, purchase additional equipment to ensure social distancing, and address technology gaps required to transition to remote. However, we knew these funds represented a one-time opportunity, so we needed to create a longer-range strategy for a sustainable future. According to Jenkins and Belfield (2020) at the Community College Research Center (CCRC) of Columbia University, “college leaders and others across the nation believe that, in the face of an increasingly challenging and competitive higher education environment, investing in whole-college reforms is increasingly necessary for community colleges to continue to achieve their educational missions and survive as businesses.” This is especially true in a post-COVID environment.

After reviewing best practices of other community colleges to implement institution-wide change, three complementary strands were identified to guide the future of BSCTC. The first strand was to create a five-year strategic plan involving the community, faculty, staff, and students. Participants were asked to dream big about what our future could look like in service to the next generation of students. The second strand was to implement Franklin Covey’s process outlined in his Four Disciplines of Execution (4DX) book. By selecting and focusing on one “wildly important goal,” one can achieve that goal while still attending to the day-to-day operations. The third strand consisted of implementing guided pathways, which will be the focus of this article.

Taking the guided pathway
Faculty and staff from Big Sandy Community and Technical College had written into the quality enhancement plan a strong focus on revising its advising model to incorporate career assessment and support for students as they identified long-range plans. Our faculty and staff members learned that “putting the end goal in mind” was the critical thrust of the guided pathways model and proposed that the college engage in this institutional reform for the good of our students. As a result, BSCTC applied for and was selected by CCRC to participate in the Summer 2021 Institute for Guided Pathways at Rural Colleges: Using Data to Launch Large-Scale Reform. This institute helped lay the foundation to build the skills and knowledge needed to help students choose, enter, and complete programs aligned for their career objectives or further educational goals. This information would then be used to create an effective organizational framework that focuses on student engagement and completion.

continued on page 6
Guided pathways seeks to simplify a student’s educational journey by following four pillars:

1. clarify the paths, 2. help students choose and enter pathways, 3. help students stay on their path, and 4. ensure students are learning (2021, CCRC guided pathways). How each college designs and executes the four pillars is distinctive to its individual culture.

Since June 2021, a BSCTC faculty and staff team has been learning about the guided pathways model. The book Redesigning America’s Community Colleges: A Clearer Path to Student Success by Thomas Bailey, Shanna Smith Jaggars & Davis Jenkins, was a must-read to understand how transformative these changes can be for increasing student success. To kick off the initiative, team members were assigned specific chapters of the book to read. They then led a discussion on how their chosen topic could have an impact on student success if practiced at the college. Chapters in the book include redesigning college programs, helping underprepared students, and the economics of college redesign. There was robust discussion and a few “ah-ha” moments as team members saw the bigger picture and how all the pieces came together to ensure student success.

Outcomes evaluated and expanded
Currently, BSCTC is expanding the original guided pathways team as we involve all faculty and staff in considering the elements of the guided pathways model, strengthening the essential practices we already have in place, and exploring opportunities for the adoption of new and more effective practices. While the implementation timeline can be lengthy, all indications show that it has been beneficial for the colleges that have successfully adopted guided pathways (2020, Hanover Research). If students have a clear pathway of the courses they need to attain the desired credentials, they have a better chance of persisting to achieve their educational and career goals. The intent is not to limit students’ educational options but to help them navigate the sometimes complex experience of higher education, especially for first-generation college students. In other words, this initiative helps to simplify decision-making for students.

Making the kind of college-wide change we are embarking on is challenging and requires committed leaders at all levels. Implementation will take time, but research has documented the long-term positive effects these changes will have on the success of our students and the effectiveness of BSCTC in years to come. Intertwining the guided pathways framework with the strategic plan and the 4DX process is an ambitious but necessary strategy to keep the forward momentum going at BSCTC.

References


The diversity and equity imperatives: leakage in the presidential pipeline

By CharMaine Hines, Ed.D., Vice Chancellor, Academic Accountability and Policy, WCCCD

There is an underrepresentation of racial, ethnic and gender diversity among community college presidents and chancellors (CEOs). The result is that CEO demographics fail to mirror that of community college students or the population at large (nearly half of community college students are non-White). Historically, the majority of presidents in American community colleges have been older White males. Despite the large number of CEO retirements in recent years, scant progress has been made of the opportunity to replace them with persons of color who are more reflective of the diversity and equity imperatives in higher education today.

“Given the changing face of America—and more particularly, the demographics of current and future community college students—there could hardly be a need more pressing than the development of leaders who embrace diversity as strength; who insist that diversity be reflected in college culture, curriculum and personnel; who demonstrate forthrightness and skill in addressing diversity issues; and who are themselves diverse” (McClenney, 2001, pp. 25–26).

The archetype of the community college CEO is a White male about age 60, approaching retirement, and averaging up to 15 years of experience in office. A 2019 status report on Race and Ethnicity in American Higher Education by the American Council on Education (ACE) found that in 2016, 83 percent of all college and university presidents were White, compared to 92 percent in 1986. Community colleges more recently posted the largest growth and highest percentage of presidents who were racial or ethnic minorities—slightly more than 20 percent in 2016, up from 12.7 percent in 2011, according to ACE’s five-year report in 2017 (Seltzer, 2017). This upward trend is encouraging, but clearly more progress needs to be made.

Perspectives from CEOs of color

I recently interviewed thirty-four community college CEOs of color across the country to understand leakage points in the pipeline relevant to understanding the underrepresentation of minority leaders. They described their perceptions of the disparity in leadership, their ascension to the top, and the preparation necessary for attaining the presidency in community colleges (Hines, 2021).

My analysis indicates that these leaders tend to be more equity-centered due to their own racial identity and life experiences, characterizing the latest two generations of community college presidents as “transformers” and “equity achievers” primarily focused on student success. What emerged were rich counter-stories and voices from Gen X and Gen X II/Millennials I leaders providing a unique view from this newest and little-explored generation of CEOs. Significant themes illustrate their perceptions of challenges, barriers, and biases that contribute to the underrepresentation of minorities in presidential roles. Those factors include structural barriers within institutional culture, biased perceptions of race and gender, and systemic racism.

My 2021 study indicated that the leadership development system of the 20th century may be insufficient for addressing ongoing underrepresentation of persons of color in the community college CEO ranks in the 21st century. Reasons for underrepresentation include the lack of a clear pathway to the presidency; evidence of a leaky pipeline; a flawed hiring process and gatekeepers along the continuum; and inadequate opportunity, access, support, mentors, and intentional leadership development. Systemic biases and structural racism contribute to a glass ceiling for men and women of color, and socio-political forms of oppression such as microaggressions, tokenism, stress, and invisibility account for the loss of potential executive talent referred to as the ‘leaky CEO pipeline’.
The study provides insight into the myriad of factors identified, giving voice to the newest generation of leaders while discussing implications for future research and practice. It also offers sixteen recommendations for improvement by focusing on the role of university-based leadership preparation programs; calling for action by regional, state, and national associations and affiliate councils; and examining the role of governing boards in leading the charge for diverse leadership.

Cultural wealth lowers structural bias
The roles and leadership acumen of community college presidents have changed significantly with changes in community colleges occurring faster in the latter portion of the 20th century. “The first two decades of the 21st century have placed significantly more pressure on the nation’s 1,103 community colleges—to enhance their role across multiple platforms” (AACC & ACCT, 2018, p. 4). Community colleges have had to keep pace with a changing economy and workforce to educate a growing and exponentially diverse student population. Community college CEOs today face unprecedented multiple challenges including the coronavirus pandemic, social unrest manifested by the Black Lives Matter movement, and political and civil polarization with increased forms of racism and intolerance that have spotlighted issues permeating higher education.

The diverse perspectives and leadership skills expressed by each of the leaders in the study reflect a wealth of knowledge and experiences honed and forged over time. The amount of cultural wealth they bring to the community college presidency is immeasurable—and invaluable to purging the last vestiges of structural racism still prevalent in too many American institutions including higher education.

References


I recently completed a study to determine the essential roles of community college CEOs in leading the strategic development of their institutions’ diversity, equity and inclusion agendas. In my study I interviewed seven CEOs seeking to discover what they do to establish a campus culture that embraces proactive and effective DEI strategies and how they address the challenges they face.

**The historical context of DEI in the community college**

Today’s emphasis on DEI in the community college has its roots in the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.’s 1963 “I have a Dream” speech in Washington D.C. inspired landmark federal legislation including the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965. As a result, new community colleges were created and enrollments grew dramatically as African Americans and other marginalized groups demanded access to higher education and the economic mainstream. By the late 1990s, however, it became apparent that “although access had increased significantly over time, completion was not keeping pace, especially among low-income and minority populations” (Bragg & Durham, 2012, p. 112). In response, organizations such as the American Association of Community Colleges (AACC), Achieving the Dream, the Community College Research Center of the Teachers College at Columbia University, and The Center for Community College Student Engagement of the University of Texas at Austin provided national leadership for a new student success and completion initiative.
The diversity, equality and inclusion roles of community college CEOs

continued from page 9

Today, a major dimension of this movement is an emphasis on equity in educational opportunity and achievement.

The lasting impact of COVID-19 and other national events

My interviews with community college presidents and chancellors occurred during the COVID-19 pandemic and in the aftermath of the national racial reckoning ignited by the police murder of George Floyd. The CEOs indicated that COVID heightened awareness of inequities experienced by African Americans and other minority groups in terms of finances, food, housing, transportation and technology. Responses included creation of positions for chief diversity officers, DEI offices and staff, and college-wide DEI committees.

Integrating DEI strategies at the top of the organization

While various elements of the community college leadership structure have specific responsibilities for advancing the institution’s DEI agenda, at the CEO level these elements should be integrated and viewed holistically. Diversity, equity, and inclusion programs have distinctive but interlocking purposes: diversity is a commitment to a diverse educational community that reflects the demography of the general population served with respect and appreciation for everyone’s differences; equity is a commitment to closing the opportunity and achievement gap by assuring that each student has fair access to the resources needed to succeed and thrive; and inclusion is a commitment to creating a welcoming, accepting, belonging, and open campus environment where the ideas, viewpoints, and experiences of all are valued and taken into account.

If one were to articulate a single defining DEI role of the CEO and her/his executive team, it would be to provide enterprise-level leadership in modeling and advancing an integrated and holistic DEI agenda. “The institution takes on the personality of its leader. If I’m espousing and supporting diversity, then others will automatically assume it’s important and will embrace it,” said Wayne County Community College District Chancellor Dr. Curtis L. Ivery.

Specific DEI leadership roles of the CEO

Within the context of the enterprise-level leadership described above, the CEO’s I found that using the framework of AACC’s Competencies for Community College Leaders (2018) was helpful in articulating the specific DEI leadership roles that they played:

• Serving as an advocate and spokesperson in articulating the college’s equity-driven mission, values, vision, and strategic goals within the college and in the communities served.
• Being transparent in their personal commitment and leadership of advancing the DEI strategy, including taking bold and courageous antiracist positions.
• Allocating resources to support DEI initiatives.
• Enlisting the board of trustees as partners and advocates for the DEI strategy.
• Building and maintaining community partnerships that provide support for students in areas such as finances, food, transportation, housing, and mental health care; and joining other community leaders to advance DEI initiatives in areas such as poverty, racial isolation, inadequate public education, unemployment and illiteracy.
• Using metrics to measure and assess progress being made in advancing the college’s DEI strategy.

At the 2018 student success summit of the Michigan Student Success Center, Dr. Christine Johnson McPhail outlined a set of DEI leadership roles that reinforced many of those listed above, in addition to, urging the involvement of the CEO and executive team to identify the cause of equity gaps for
students and taking responsibility for closing these gaps through the redesign of policies and practices.

**Addressing the challenges of DEI leadership**

Institutional transformation is quite rare because it can be so complex and challenging. But, DEI offers a generational opportunity to have lasting impact on the future.

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