Embracing Diversity to Build Community

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"We all should know that diversity makes for a rich tapestry, and we must understand that all the threads of the tapestry are equal in value no matter what their color," said poet Maya Angelou (https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/67256-we-all-should-know-that-diversity-makes- for-a-rich). In the post-pandemic landscape of higher education, this statement rings truer than ever. Across the United States, institutions of higher education must now reinvent the ways that they conduct business after the COVID-19 pandemic.

Today, it is more crucial than ever to celebrate the diversity on college campuses and use this celebration of diversity to build campus community. Bridging campus culture is a paramount step in creating a positive learning environment for all college students. This involves constructing a new paradigm where both sides, academic and student support, of the academic house work together for a common goal. An architectural approach invites consideration of initiatives for building campus community in relation to the systems within which they operate, the structures that shape their actions, the design that creates the structures, and the spaces within which they work (Sturm, 2006, 2007, 2011b).

Higher Education Moving Forward

As higher education institutions rebound from the pandemic at different rates, it is vital that institution administrators look at ways to use the lessons learned from the immediate onset of COVID-19 protocols in building a more strategic and systematic method for supporting student success, retention, and persistence. At both the four-year and community college levels, administrators must deal with a deficit in funding, both from federal and state sources, while also embracing new educational technology to support student success. To celebrate the diversity on campus, faculty and staff need to embrace the composition of the student population.

This raises another aspect of the architectural metaphor, that of design. Architecture connotes intentional design choices. Some practices or ways of interacting, which are taken as given, are the result of choices that carry consequences, such as what counts for tenure and promotion or who participates in setting research agendas. The architectural metaphor makes those choices visible and thus amenable to change. An architectural approach is essential for constructing the conditions and practices enabling institutional mindfulness—careful attention to decisions that accumulate to determine whether women and men of all races, identities, and backgrounds will have the opportunity to succeed and advance (Strum et. al., 2011).

Building Community

Building campus community is key to helping all students, regardless of their background, to be successful in attaining a college degree or certificate. Though the employment goals of the Obama administration were not met by 2020, institutions of higher education can learn from this short fall by embracing the new trend in micro-credentialing and supporting vocational certificate programs. Campus leaders may need to redeploy human, financial, and physical capital in alignment with their new operating models (TIAA, 2020). Other ways to build campus community are

to provide for the basic needs of students through food banks, clothing banks, emergency fund reserves, and offices, such as TRIO programs, which connect students with financial and other local resources. Research and experience suggest that public engagement encourages and enables full participation of diverse groups and communities. Full participation of various communities is a critical attribute of successful and legitimate public engagement. The systems that take account of these synergies are likely to enable the successful pursuit of both public engagement and full participation/diversity, and to enhance the legitimacy, levels of engagement, and robustness of higher education institutions.

Anticipate Change

Change is one aspect of campus life that continues year in and year out. With the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic and the resulting changes to campus culture and funding measures, college administrators have had to adapt to constant changes to the ways in which business is conducted at universities and community colleges. The move to more synchronous and asynchronous online education has been embraced across the higher education landscape with various levels of success.

With the advent of more artificial intelligence (AI) in supplemental educational software, a major change that has been developing since March of 2020 is the use of more advanced technology to support student success. This can be seen at all educational levels from K-12 to the community college to four-year universities. This change was inevitable, but some colleges were resistant to allow this level of control over student learning. Other institutions have embraced this fully and have used AI to expand the institution's online offerings.

Consider Social Trends

The growth of social media has been exponential over the past decade. Almost all students have a smartphone and actively social media platforms such as Instagram, Twitter, Snap Chat, Facebook Messenger to communicate with their peers. Social media platforms are being used to support student success in many college classrooms. By using social media

responsibly, college faculty and staff can help students to find their niche on campus. Extracurricular activities and campus programs, such as First-Year Experience (FYE) programs and learning communities, can support new student transition by using social media posts with program schedules and showing positive social media posts with program schedules and to show positive aspects of campus culture through pictures, videos, and live postings. Sturm (2006) explained that participation in the academy requires a process of institutional attentiveness across the spectrum of campus divisions. This also effects decisions that ultimately determine whether women and men of all races will have the opportunity to thrive, succeed, and advance (p. 251).

Administrators, Faculty and Staff Can All Support Change

Currently, institutions such as Greenville Technical College are embracing Steven Covey's concept of Wildly Important Goals (WIG). acknowledging the benefit of "focusing on the wildly important requires you to go against your basic wiring as a leader to do more, and instead, focus on less so that your team can achieve more." Covey is the co-author of *The 4 Disciplines of Execution*. Covey discussed how by focusing on academic, professional, and personal WIGS leadership teams give others an opportunity to expand mindsets, encourage self- expression and promote new educational endeavors. Since the pandemic, individuals view higher education in a different light; this can be seen in the financial constraints, changes in curriculum, and addition of technology. This concept is catching on by asking faculty, staff, and administration to share their "Wildly Important Goals." Goals take institutions to new horizons and foster opportunities that may have not been possible before. The four major points of discussion from *The 4 Disciplines of Execution* are (see also Table 1 next page):

Discipline 1 emphasizes the importance of achieving the most important goals. The authors conclude that the more a person tries to do, the less he or she will actually accomplish. In today's competitive society, instructors and administrators are expected to multi-task and accomplish many goals on a daily

basis. This explains why job performance levels and organizational commitment levels have declined over the years. Teachers across the board feel a need to add one more paper, one more assignment, and the content will all be covered; when in reality it should be the quality of work valued. It is better to have a student with a skills deficit successfully complete three solid essays and outside assignments in a given term, rather than four or five essays. "The fundamental principle at work is that human beings are genetically hardwired to do one thing at a time with excellence" (McChesney, et. al., 2012, p. 25). Steve Jobs of Apple had a big company to run; he could have brought many more products to market than he did, but he chose to focus on a handful of "wildly important" products. His focus and results were legendary (McChesney, et. al., 2012, p. 25).

Discipline 2 focuses on leverage. This one is based on the simple principle that all actions are not created equal. Some actions have more impact than others when obtaining a goal. The principles that are easily identified represent the ones to act on in reaching that specific goal.

One practical example listed is that one cannot control how often a car breaks down on the road (a lag measure), but can certainly control how often a car receives routine maintenance (a lead measure). The more one acts on the lead measure, the more likely one is to avoid that roadside breakdown (McChesney, et. al., 2012, p. 45). Therefore, if an instructor focuses on material that can be learned, instead of formulating on more, the educational goal can be attained.

Classroom learning, whether virtual or traditional, needs to conform to the environment of the students.

This is the same with administration; if an administrator wants to positively lead and initiate buy- in from staff and faculty for the benefit of students, they need to facilitate opportunities for discipline and college wide specific goals to be shared.

Discipline 3 involves keeping score. Great teams know at every moment whether or not they are winning. They know what they have to do to win the game. A compelling scoreboard tells information that is essential to team problem solving and decision making (McChesney, et.al., 2012, p. 66). Instructors know if a lesson is working by student interactions and assessment. Conversely, administrators know if a program or goal is effective by staff and faculty feedback and analytic data.

Discipline 4 is based on the principle of accountability; unless one consistently holds others accountable, the goal naturally goes by the wayside. Accountability is important in organizations and starts from the top. By creating a culture of accountability, organizations thrive and employees embrace this change in the organizational dynamic. It is critical to hold oneself accountable before expecting others to be accountable.

Administrators need to be working alongside staff and faculty by taking on and delegating tasks. It is amazing what one can accomplish by the simple discipline of striving for a goal on a weekly basis over an extended period. Therefore, how can an institution address the broad spectrum of social media, and

Table 1. *The 4 Disciplines of Execution*

	Focus	Action Step	Impact On Campus Community
Discipline 1	Focus on wildly important goal		Decreases the burden to arbitrarily assign work
Discipline 2	Act on lead measures		Builds buy-in from campus community.
Discipline 3	Keep a compelling scoreboard		Builds morale
Discipline 4	Create a cadence of accountability		Organization and employees thrive

Note: This table informs about *The 4 Disciplines of Execution.*

student usage, while empowering teams of individuals to develop wildly important goals towards overall success? Questions to consider when implementing wildly important goals may be as follows:

- Is this the right thing for the institution? The key to this is breaking down the problem and allowing time to effectively address the issues. Solutions cannot come from one individual alone, but must be based on input from others with varying perspectives. The synergy gained from a team effort offers a positive advantage in determining which course of action is right for any higher educational institution. Once adequately addressed it should be full speed ahead.

- If the institution is successful in implementing change, what will the end result look like? Begin with the end in mind. There must be a shared vision within an institution for the overall theme of success to happen. In simple terms, if institutions do the right thing, should it anticipate will happen? This is where regular meetings and team work on all levels are critical with showing the level of commitment an institution has towards change.

- Will an institution be successful? Once a decision has been made to do what is best for the institution (the decision making step) and a solid understanding of how this will best benefit the institution (the decision step), leadership needs to instill in everyone a high level of confidence towards successful completion, before even beginning. In order for any of this to be attainable, the team needs to determine and communicate what must be done (the planning and delegating process). There has to be "buy in" from all participants to achieve success.

Social Justice for Social Responsibility

With more diverse student populations than ever before, today's college administrators must find new methods for supporting social justice while also keeping social responsibility a common campus goal. By supporting Social Justice through socially responsible programs, college staff members can build campus community where students from many different cultural backgrounds can feel a part of the college. This

can be the difference in success or failure for many students.

At Augusta Technical College, one way the institution explored the balance between social justice and social responsibility is through pioneering teaching and learning series.

Utilizing CARES funding, the college offered a year-long series on Hosting Inclusive Virtual Environments (HIVE). The series is part of an institutional commitment to value inclusiveness and focused on providing "[building] a more diverse and equitable workforce." The HIVE Series focuses on providing instructor support for implementing techniques in the classroom. Participation in the HIVE Series was voluntary for instructors. Part of the application process asked instructors to identify to what degree they felt their online and hybrid courses meet the needs of a diverse student population. One a scale of 0-10 with 0 indicating a poor performance and 10 a near perfect score, the mean score was 8 followed by 5. Using a standard academic grading scale, this essentially equates to participants assigning themselves poor or good preparation scores, with very participants indicating their course was average at assessing the needs of diverse students.

Table 2 (next page) identifies the participants by gender and academic schools. Also of note, when asked about their expectations from the teaching series most were interested in improving upon course design followed by understanding the needs of a more diverse student body. This indicates that a commitment to social justice and responsibility already exists within the campus community and that the next steps include a systemic analysis of how to support these goals.

Funding and Administrative Support

While the rapid transition to virtual education resulted in many advancements in how colleges and universities approach technology in education, diversity is an avenue where there is still an enormous need for improvement. Unfortunately, diversity advancements as they relate to technology are treading a difficult path between the budgetary constraints faced throughout higher education and evolving social and

cultural standards. Prior to the pandemic, there were limited opportunities for higher education institutions to acquire technology outside of federal Perkins grant money. Even non-federal grants and partnerships provided little opportunity for higher education institutions to acquire technology. The disparity of technology funding allocated specifically to higher education institutions was prevalent even in technology driven fields. Conway et. al. (2018) noted, tech companies concentrate sixty-six percent of their philanthropic funding on K–12 programs, compared to three percent on college-level programs. Although many invest in recruiting efforts to support specific programs, few invest philanthropically earlier in higher education to build the cohort from which they will ultimately recruit (para. 15).

In many ways, CARES Funding has helped to close this gap providing the opportunity for institutions to upgrade outdated technology infrastructure, supply broadband access to the internet in rural communities, and acquire software licenses and subscriptions to support new technology and instructional delivery models. Addressing these needs is important to close the achievement and access gap which has created performance gaps for many economically and racially diverse groups and impeded their participation in higher education. Franklin-Davis and Gosha (2021) explained donations are useless if faculty members lack the basic essentials...to learn to use the product and integrate it into a curriculum. What might make more sense are investments like endowed professorships. Then an institution could hire a faculty member who will have the time to make the most of product donations (para. 11).

This training is vital in the post-COVID world, where professors are juggling the challenges of new schedules, new technologies, and new instructional delivery formats. They must master these technologies in order to continue creating a highly competitive graduate population. It is incumbent upon administration to find the funding to acquire technologies and of equal importance to make space for instructors to properly learn to integrate these technologies into the curriculum through professional development. This may require reduced teaching loads to prepare courses, non-traditional schedules, and outside trainers.

This training is vital to develop instructional support skills. Valverde-Berroscoso et. al. (2021) encouraged the training of teachers in information and communication technologies because the discovery of educational reality (initial diagnosis and definition of challenges) and the interpretation of the context (identification of teaching practices and feasibility analysis) in a proactive manner by teachers (results in the implementation of) experimentation and where appropriate, reformulation, within a cyclical, iterative and continuous improvement process (p.18). This continuous process of improvement must be implemented by faculty and supported by administration to support the diverse needs of students. A major strength of meeting social justice goals is to foster classrooms which enable students to not only attend, but where students feel validated and valued. Developmental classrooms often serve as the "gateway" to attending college at institutions. This assignment is often a result of Placement testing or English as a second language. Those students who achieve successful passing rates in these assigned sections have the ability to progress, as long as the instructor/s are highly motivating, patient and compassionate about subject matter. This represents social equality and justice for students across the board, regardless of economic background, culture, gender or age.

Earlier Interventions

One of the ways in which technology can help recruit and retain a more diverse student population is through early intervention systems. An abundance of research has indicated that poor men from BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, People of Color) communities are less likely to graduate. Trends also indicate that first generation students struggle with persisting in college more than the children of degree holders, and that a rise in mental health struggles such as anxiety and depression negatively impact persistence rates (Princiotta et. al., 2014; NCES, 2019). Early alert systems (EAS) have the potential to support a more diverse student population, but they are dependent upon the participation of an already thinly stretched faculty as well as the accurate interpretation of data by administrators and the institutional capacity to provide support services to students. These systems

cannot meet the challenge of students who leave due to a lack of support, the small number of visible role models, the absence of a sense of belonging, and other factors, such as workplace cultures that do not match their own backgrounds and experiences (Franklin-Davis and Gosha, 2021, para. 13).

Technology must be used for its true purpose to make addressing challenges easier not as a catch all solution. EAS technology must still supplement a holistic approach to student support that encourages students to develop soft skills. As Franklin-Davis and Gosha (2021) addressed, the solution must include investing in programs that provide soft skills that help students cope with the non-technical challenges of being underrepresented members. The development of soft skills can present unexpected barriers to people trying to succeed in the workforce, especially when these behaviors are rarely formally taught but learned through exposure (para. 14).

A New Financial Reality

If the goal is to create diverse communities at institutions of higher learning, then the issues involved with financing an education need to be examined. There are several different areas where the financial realities of a college or technical education are different for various racial and ethnic groups and different in the recovery from the pandemic. Students when generally grouped by race experience a different financial burden while attending college and a different income outcome achieved from attending college. While one would hope that by now there would be a level playing field for students of all races, that goal has yet to be achieved.

The cost of a college education has only been going up, but how to pay for that education can be affected by where one lives, socioeconomic status, family values, and prior knowledge.

Where a person lives makes a difference in the cost of tuition in a community college or a state university. It can also make a difference in community support, such as employment or community service that allows for payback of student loans. Because communities have different views about the need for an institution of higher education, they may make larger or smaller investments into their schools. The ability levels of students coming out of the public schools may cause students to take more developmental courses, increasing their total cost of education.

"Scientists, economists, and sociologists agree that racial and ethnic variations in student loan debt and repayment are the result of socioeconomic factors, rather than physical or inborn characteristics" (Hansen, 2021, p.1). Family attitudes and perceptions during the pandemic increased the educational disparities between different races. While the world pivoted to virtual education, many poorer families and families living in rural areas suffered the most. Internet access was not available or affordable for some students. Because of racial differences in the comorbidities and severity of COVID-19, families had differences in their desire to send students to school and in their attitudes towards mitigation strategies (Gilbert et.al., 2020).

The cost and the need to borrow money to achieve a college education varies by the institution attended, the degree attained, ability level when starting at an institute of higher education and family or community support. In most cases, the most cost-effective education starts at the community college. Many students can live at home, eat at home, and hold down a part-time or fulltime job. Campus housing increases the cost of an education; according to CollegeBoard, average room and board fees total $13,889 for the 2021-22 school year ([https://professionals.college-board.org/higher-ed/financial-aid/independent-col-lege](https://professionals.college-board.org/higher-ed/financial-aid/independent-college)). A rough breakdown of costs: Housing: 54%; Transportation: 11%; Miscellaneous: 36% (https://professionals.collegeboard.org/higher-ed/financial-aid/living-expense-budget-2021).

When the students enrolling in college are first generation college students, financial problems can become enhanced as they have no family knowledge of applying for grants, scholarships, and loans. Secondary schools in areas where few students have attended college may not have the professionals available to assist in finding financial aid for the students, so it becomes paramount that these school employ professionals who receive the training needed to best assist their students. Financial literacy education should be provided at all schools to assist these

students in understanding ways to manage their money and the differences in private,

public, subsidized and unsubsidized loans when they do need to borrow to attend classes. Scouring the community resources to find untapped money that is available but not always advertised provided by organizations both government and private can assist in defraying costs.

In a report from September 2021 in USA Today, there are seventeen four-year institutions offering free college, many in exchange for working on campus or providing service upon graduation (Hopkins, 2021). States around the country are offering free community college for residents who qualify, by grades and/or income. Currently there is a bill in congress,

America's College Promise, that would provide tuition free community college to low-income students. This bill still has issues to resolve before it can be passed, but it is a way to allow all students an affordable path to an education and would go a long way to providing an equitable route to a college degree (Startz, 2021).

Summing It Up

In summary, the pandemic not only caused higher educational institutions to grasp for solutions in regard to student recruitment and retention, but to seek innovative ways to provide greater financial and coaching support for the changing student population. This changing population is representative of a greater percentage of minority students being served, as well as more first -generation college students. The open-door policy of technical and community colleges is building bridges between academic faculty, administration, and student services in order to retain enrollments and raise persistence rates. Four-year institutions, both private and public, are seeking innovative partnerships within local communities, and with state and federal monies to enhance enrollments and provide quality education for all students, regardless of socioeconomic status, culture, gender or background. Higher education is seen as the way to higher standards of living, for not only local communities and individuals, but as an economic driving force to prosperity, knowledge, and lifestyle.

The answers to these deficits require a multi-pronged approach to meet the needs of a variety of learners. Economic deficits for institutions must be considered; the expansion of AI and other software, as well a growth in online education, is a partial answer. Embracing diversity through campus programs for various groups and building campus community through these innovations is key to engaging all students and helping them to be successful in persisting to graduation.

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