

## **From my Perspective**

### **Featuring Reflections from the Field**

In the ever-evolving landscape of education, it's crucial to create spaces where educators can exchange ideas, share experiences, and engage in meaningful discussions on current issues that shape our professional learning environment. "From My Perspective," serves as such a platform that aligns with the purpose of IFOTS.

It invites educators from across the globe to contribute brief essays that reflect on the hot topics, challenges, trends, and innovations defining the field of teaching today. This section not only enriches our journal with a diversity of viewpoints but also fosters a sense of community among educators who are passionate about shaping the future of teaching and theory in learning. Through these personal essays, we aim to encourage a reflective and forward-thinking dialogue that contributes to the advancement of teaching and learning worldwide.

## Mentoring to Increase Community Colleges Leadership of Color

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### Introduction

The purpose of this reflection is to share my journey in higher education, specifically to look at my attempt to be part of leadership in higher education and the need for change to increase the diversity in leadership in higher education. The journey has been challenging, yet important to me to accomplish to support the next generation of leaders and the opportunity for everyone to achieve their personal academic goals. The success in the journey would not have been possible without the opportunity for me to receive valuable mentorship that provided the knowledge, skills, insight, and understanding in navigating a system that can be exclusionary for people of color. In sharing this journey, I focus on the importance of inclusive mentoring and the inclusive mentoring literature as a way I found myself navigating the system to support our students. I have included some inspirational quotes given to me from my mentors that have motivated me to continue my journey. I hope in sharing my journey identifies the critical need to have a more intentional support system for leadership in higher education; a support for leadership and leadership development that is truly inclusive of everyone who looks like our students in community colleges.

### Community College Goals to Support Students of Color

#### *Inclusive Learning Environment*

From the beginning of the expansion of community colleges in the US, there was a concern for diversity in providing access to community college to all students. Over time, the community colleges were developed to align with the Illinois Community College Board (ICCB) requirement to identify all individuals as equal (2023). Although the locations change, there are still inequities of inclusivity within these community colleges. Community Colleges have existed for over 120 years (ICCB, 2023). The initial goal of community colleges was to provide an opportunity for individuals to pursue an education after high school, particularly focusing on those who might not have an opportunity to attend a four-year college due to financial ability, relocation requirements, political obstructions, and other life obstacles. Hence, historically, community college faculty and staff have taken on the challenge to create an inclusive learning environment for the largely diverse student population enrolled in community colleges. However, significant challenges in the current community college environment remain.

#### *From My Perspective:*

**“Education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world.”**

**--Nelson Mandela**

*I learned the importance of education at a very young age. My mother reminded me of the many challenges in life and stressed the importance of owning something, like “An Education” that could not be taken away from me like many things that were taken away from my ancestors. However, there has always been a challenge for people of color, especially black men to succeed*

*in academics let alone have a career in higher education. Community college is supposed to be another option that supports the education gap for people of color.*

*Inclusion did not exist in the early days of community colleges, similar to the current conditions of the country at that time. I am aware that education was not always inclusive; however, I would think over 100 years later further progress would have been achieved in community colleges to understand the importance of diversity. Sadly, that is not the reality in the levels of division as I observe much of the ethnicity for the faculty in roles of clerical and support staff were people of color unlike those in leadership positions with few people of color. Without the ongoing mentoring I have experienced in my journey, I would not have achieved a doctorate and accomplished a successful academic career. This is what I wish to provide the current students who seek out a successful academic career, especially in community colleges.*

### **Community College Demographics**

Community colleges continue to have the highest number of students of color compared to other higher education institutions. Community colleges maintain their original focus on open enrollment and accessible education for all students. In the 2020 academic year, the demographics of students in community college showed an increasingly significant level of students of color, which included 26% Hispanic, 13% Black, 6 % Asian/Pacific, 1% Native American, and 4% of two or more races (aacc.nche.edu)

Community colleges have historically been supported by the federal government that included the *American Graduation Initiative* that provided direct financial assistance to community colleges (Office of the Press Secretary, 2023). This initiative intends to meet the long-term needs of students of color who seek an affordable education. Creating this opportunity for students of color is promising; however, there is more that needs to be considered in making sure students of color have a positive experience in learning to accomplish their personal goals. Continuing concern include the lack of students seeing themselves in leadership positions to successfully support their study in community college. Intentional support for a diversity of students in community college has not received the same level to assure inclusion of diversity in diversity of leadership in community colleges.

### **From My Perspective:**

**“The function of education is to teach one to think intensively and to think critically. Intelligence plus character – that is the goal of true education.”**

**--Martin Luther King, Jr.**

*Although the opportunity for students of color to succeed in community college is receiving more support, there is still a significant low level graduation rate for students of color. I have often observed that students do not feel supported or have the comfort level to get the support they need to succeed and free for them to use tutoring, mentoring, and other academic resources. I have been told by students that they do not identify with anyone who is providing this support. This lack of comfort contributes to a high level of failure with students of color failing the most. If students are to learn and build character, they need the support and comfort level to work with individuals to achieve a true education that is inclusive of supporting the whole student and not just the providing content of a course. As a student, I often found this in individuals who were caring*

*mentors to guide me along the unknown paths and many obstacles that were intentionally put in place to block my academic success. These obstacles include and are not limited to racial discrimination, prejudice, discrimination against sexual orientation, and false claims against my character. If I did not have the caring mentors during those different moments in my journey, I would have definitely ended up in a different institution similar to others that look like me and incorrectly put in a correctional system that only exacerbates a system of oppression and devoid true character.*

### ***Access to Higher Education***

The stated goal of higher education is to support the success of individuals in achieving their personal goals by means of education. Community colleges specifically value the importance of supporting students' academic success with access to affordable education for everyone by providing open enrollment. The demographics of students in community college are centered on people of color compared to other higher education institutions. Its educators and leaders are committed to support students in overcoming obstacles to educational success; especially for students who might not have any other opportunity to obtain a degree to achieve their academic goals and live an equitable life, achieving their long-term career goals.

### ***From My Perspective:***

**Hold on to dreams, for if dreams die, life is a broken-winged bird that cannot fly.**

**--Langston Hughes**

*My personal commitment to work in community college is similar to these individuals who have the same dream to seek out leadership roles in community colleges. I intentionally transitioned from a four year college to community college to support a more diverse demographic of students who seek out an affordable and accessible education that might have been their only option. I have often heard from our students about their challenges to pay tuition to go to a four-year college and lack of funds to support themselves to go to four-year colleges. In addition, students have often had life obligations as primary caregivers and other challenges that prevent them from leaving home to go to a four-year college. The majority of these students that encounter these challenges are students of color. Currently, the leadership in community colleges does not represent the demographics of the students that attend the community colleges which can be a problem for students of color who do not see leaders in community college who look like them. Students of color who are facing the different challenges have expressed the need to have someone that looks like them to be present in their learning space. I thought my presence would provide students an opportunity to see themselves and motivation to achieve their own personal goals and dreams.*

### ***Community College Lack of Support for Leadership of Color***

Although the community colleges student population is significantly diverse, the leadership is not. The majority of leadership currently in community colleges are white while there is an increase in students of color enrollment in community colleges (Faculty and Staff Diversity - American Association of Community Colleges). The demographics of leadership in US community colleges in 2016 were the following:

Category by Race	Percentage
Asian	2%
Black	8%
Hispanic	4%
White	83%
Multiple Races	1%

(<https://www.aceacps.org/summary-profile/>)

The current hiring practices and social network in higher education limit access for people of color to obtain leadership positions in higher education. Research by leading professional community college organizations have identified an alarming gap in diversity that limits students to connect to seeing themselves in community college and seeing themselves as potential leaders (American Council on Education).

***From My Perspective:***

**When things go wrong as they sometimes will...It's when things seem worst that you must not quit.**

--Author Unknown - Don't Quit

*I have encountered this challenge on numerous occasions as I have tried to navigate the hiring and promotion process in community colleges. My attempts have often resulted in failure of being hired or promoted. Oftentimes, the reason is lacking support of why the opportunity was not granted. This part of my journey has often left me drained with feelings of doubt. At other times, it has led to frustration where I have wanted to quit. Fortunately for me, I had peer mentors and professional mentors to support me through these challenges each and every time. Not only was I able to overcome the challenges, but reflecting and learning from each encounter made me learn more about a systemic structure that was not going to make this journey easy for me. This actually increased my resilience in continuing to move forward with the support of my mentors.*

**Current Solutions' Failure to Increase Leadership of Color**

The professional organizations, associations, and community college institutions are concerned about the difference in the appearance of leadership and the students of color who attend community colleges. I have attended many conferences and participated in professional organizations that have identified this concern and attempted to implement solutions. There has been some movement in addressing this concern, but not enough to impact the historical trend. One of the solutions is to provide potential leaders with the opportunity to attend professional development events; however, these events are usually located in different cities, expensive, and require an extended amount of time for the participant to miss work. Another solution implemented by community college is the creation of Chief Diversity Officers. This solution has

recently been implemented and it is too early to determine the impact to increase the diversity of leadership in community college.

*From My Perspective:*

**The paradox of education is precisely this - that as one begins to become conscious one begins to examine the society in which he is being educated.**

**--James Baldwin**

*All of these combinations make it challenging for anyone to participate who works in community colleges with limited resources and minimum budget allocated to professional development for leadership. I have had the opportunity to attend one event for which I had to pay some portion of the cost from my personal funds. The opportunity was only given to me after a couple of years requesting the professional development opportunities, and even in the end it was almost denied. When I had the opportunity to attend the leadership event, I observed that the individuals in the room for the most part did not look like me, meaning very few people of color. I find this concerning as we continue to see an increase in students of color who enroll in community colleges. I especially see this as a concern as I observe a slow trend in making any changes to a more inclusive community to support students of color.*

*Although there is an intentional effort to increase diversity, sexuality is not always considered when trying to increase the diversity in community college leadership. I have a personal concern that one office might not integrate the need for change and result in prioritizing which issue is more important when challenged with limited resources to address a historical systemic issue. Intersectionality is important when seeking diverse leadership in community college.*

**Mentoring: Suggested Solution to Increase Leadership of Color**

Recently, there has been an intentional effort to increase the diversity of leadership in community colleges. However, it has been a challenge to provide access and inclusion to advance people of color. A change in the exclusion trend can be made by addressing historical issues and implementing future solutions that have proven to resolve similar issues of discrimination and exclusion in other industries.

Development of leadership training that includes understanding inclusiveness and mentorship supported by professional organizations in education is one such solution to change the current lack of diversity in community college leadership.

Mentoring programs are one of the major professional development resources that continue to assist in the success of individuals achieving long term goals. Mentoring programs have successfully been implemented in informal and formal environments. One of the important aspects of mentoring programs is that the use of mentoring in a formal environment often occurs in educational systems. The traditional mentoring model is often found in a relationship between a professional and a student with the intent to provide a mentee with a mentor that can assist as a resource for the mentee to successfully navigate through the institutionalized discriminatory system that sustains exclusionary practices. In colleges, mentoring programs enlist mentors such as experienced college personnel to partner with mentees such as students. Some of the mentoring program goals in colleges is to provide acculturation to academic life, improve the campus climate, enhance the college experience, and increase the academic success (O'Brien, 1993, p. 3).

Professional Mentoring continues to develop as the need continues to increase to provide more

diversity in community college leadership. Currently, professional mentoring is not deliberately done and does not have a formalized structure or support system for leadership in community colleges that are readily accessible for people of color. Two types of leadership mentoring models that should be formalized to support leadership in community colleges includes co-mentoring and group mentoring.

Co-mentoring has been successful in providing professional development for individuals who seek to be leaders. Kathleen Cowin and Sarah Newcomer (2018) state that co-mentoring circles provide a trusting and supportive relationship among colleagues to get insight from individuals in their industry to advance their academic career. Belle Ragins (2012) describes co-mentoring as an opportunity to provide individuals to create a reciprocal relationship in a mentoring relationship that reveals true feelings, trust, and confidentiality to grow. Similar to co-mentoring, group mentoring provides a safe space to develop the skills and networking opportunity to succeed in leadership in higher education. Dawn Chandler and Rebecca Ellis (2011) identified the new movement in mentoring to support professional development by focusing on high quality group mentoring. Group mentoring allows leaders to shape positive group spaces that result in peak development and performance of the individuals in the group mentoring.

In order to make a significant change toward more diversity in leadership, mentoring opportunities must be more intentional and structured that must be inclusive of people of color. The structured approach must provide an opportunity for individuals to form groups that are safe and trusting to allow for the professional development to lead to the desired leadership in community colleges. The current trend in mentoring to support professional development includes the co-mentor and group mentoring models.

When looking at changing concerns in diversity and providing intentional mentoring, intersectionality is important to understand the need in creating a true inclusive community. Intersectionality is “the complex, cumulative way in which the effects of multiple forms of discrimination (such as racism, sexism, and classism) combine, overlap, or intersect especially in the experiences of marginalized individuals or groups” (Merriam-Webster Dictionary). Taking this approach will ensure the differences are identified and reduce the negative impact of marginalized individuals such as students of color who attend community colleges.

***From My Perspective:***

**If you want to lift yourself up, lift up someone else.**

**--Booker T. Washington**

*I have benefited greatly from having mentors. Mentoring has also supported my success in other industries prior to seeking opportunities in community colleges. It has not only provided me the opportunity to develop my skills, but also understand the unspoken rules in navigating the systems of exclusion.*

*However, having mentors and mentoring opportunities was not an easy partnership to accomplish. Oftentimes, it required me being in the right place at the right time and even that has ended up without having the success of finding the appropriate mentor. The development of mentoring models must be part of the community college plan for development of leadership and for other organizations to intentionally support the mentoring opportunities. I have been fortunate to participate in the Mentoring Institute at the University of New Mexico. This opportunity has*

*provided creative ways for individuals to connect and form professional mentoring groups. This parallel approach creates the opportunity for individuals to have more opportunity to seek out professional mentoring opportunities while also placing more accountability on community colleges to provide more opportunity for people of color to receive professional development and obtain a leadership role in higher education.*

*As previously, there is a lack of support for those individuals who are interested in the leadership roles. In order to make the changes to have more diversity in leadership, it is important that more intentional professional development is provided to individuals already working in community college and individuals interested in a career in higher education. The professional development opportunities should not be limited to the traditional structure but also include intentional mentoring opportunities specifically designed for diverse applicants. In addition, taking the lens of intersectionality to providing mentoring opportunities creates more awareness of what kind of support is needed to support mentees from a professional mentoring opportunity and provides opportunities for mentors and mentees to form relationships that might have been the obvious partnership.*

### **Conclusion - Call to Action**

**High-quality early childhood programs and health coverage have expanded, and the number of mentoring relationships for at-risk youth has risen dramatically. The progress is encouraging, but it's not evenly distributed.**

**--Colin Powell**

It is more important than ever for us to seek out a better approach to support people of color in leadership roles in community colleges. The climate of our country has taken a significant shift in undoing the previous accomplishments toward equity that must be countered. As the trend continues to exclude people of color in leadership, opportunities must be afforded to these individuals to have the network, resources, and understanding on how to navigate a complex system in gaining access to leadership roles in community colleges to best support our students of color striving to achieve academic success.

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