

THE NISOD PAPERS

An occasional publication dedicated to topics of interest to community and technical college educators.

Leading With Equity: Transforming Community Colleges for the Future

Foreword by Dr. Edward J Leach

Community colleges stand at a critical juncture in American higher education. As engines of social mobility and workforce development, these institutions play a vital role in shaping the future of our communities and economy. However, they also face unprecedented challenges, from evolving student demographics to shifting workforce needs and broader societal changes. This The NISOD Papers brings together the insights of three distinguished community college presidents, each offering a unique perspective on how these institutions can adapt, innovate, and lead with an unwavering commitment to equity.

Dr. Tina M. King of San Diego College of Continuing Education highlights the often-overlooked impact of noncredit education in empowering communities of color. She demonstrates how shorter, more affordable pathways directly linked to job opportunities are meeting the needs of diverse learners and contributing significantly to the local economy. Dr. King's essay showcases innovative programs like the Noncredit to Credit Alignment Lab Project, which is breaking down barriers between noncredit and credit education, fostering a more inclusive and equitable educational landscape.

Dr. Clyne G. H. Namuo of Joliet Junior College reflects on the challenges and opportunities facing diverse leadership in higher education. Drawing from his experiences as a Native Hawaiian leader of the nation's first community college, Dr. Namuo emphasizes the importance of supporting presidents from underrepresented backgrounds. He argues that truly exceptional leadership requires not only diversity in appointments, but also creating environments where leaders can thrive, apply an equity lens, and effect lasting change.

Dr. Nicholas C. Neupauer of Butler County Community College shares his journey of leading institutional change in diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) initiatives at a rural community college. His strategic approach of "raising the dialogue" on DEI demonstrates how thoughtful, context-sensitive leadership can drive meaningful progress even in challenging environments. Dr. Neupauer's experiences underscore the importance of addressing students' basic needs as a fundamental aspect of equity work.

Throughout these three essays, several common themes emerge:

- The critical role of community colleges in advancing equity and social mobility.
- The need for innovative approaches to meet diverse student needs and workforce demands.

- The importance of strong, equity-minded leadership in driving institutional change.
- The value of building partnerships with industry, community organizations, and other educational institutions.
- The imperative to address students' holistic needs, from basic necessities to academic support.

As community colleges navigate an increasingly complex landscape, the insights shared in this The NISOD Papers offer a roadmap for transformative leadership. By centering equity, embracing innovation, and responding nimbly to community needs, these institutions can continue to fulfill their vital mission of opening doors of opportunity for all learners.

The following essays provide in-depth explorations of these themes, offering concrete strategies and inspiring examples of how community colleges are rising to meet the challenges of our time. As we delve into these presidential perspectives, we gain a deeper understanding of the pivotal role community colleges play in shaping a more equitable and prosperous future for all.

Dr. Edward J Leach served as executive director of the National Institute for Staff and Organizational Development (NISOD) from 2013 until his retirement in August 2024.

Empowering Communities Through Noncredit Education: The Impact of San Diego College of Continuing Education

Dr. Tina M. King, President, San Diego College of Continuing Education

Far too often, noncredit education finds itself as an afterthought when the discussion turns to the impact community colleges are having in dismantling barriers that communities of color deal with daily.

Yet, according to a recently released Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation report (Edge Research, & HCM Strategies, 2024), high school students and adults who are not in college prefer educational pathways that are shorter, cheaper, and more directly linked to specific job opportunities – precisely the type of pathways that are at the heart of San Diego College of Continuing Education (SDCCE), which is among the leading public, noncredit institutions in California.

The numbers don't lie. Nationally, enrollment in vocational-focused community colleges grew by 16 percent last fall to the highest level since the nonprofit National Clearinghouse began tracking such data some six years ago (National Student Clearinghouse Center, 2024). Enrollment in programs focusing on the construction trades shot up by more than 26 percent, and the number of students opting for mechanic and repair

technologies increased more than eight percent. The same trend can be seen at SDCCE, where 16,462 students attended our campuses in spring 2024, a nearly 48 percent increase from spring 2021. At the statewide level, the number of students earning a vocational certificate or degree, or who attained apprenticeship journey status, rose to a record 80,082 in the 2021-22 academic year, which is 26 percent higher than just five years earlier (Cal-PASS Plus – SWP, 2023).

Reasons for the trend are many and include the rising costs of a traditional college degree (the average federal student loan debt is now at \$37,338) (Hanson, 2024); a desire for a more hands-on, practical training that leads directly to a stable career; changing perceptions about working in the trades; and good pay (industrial machinery mechanics are earning an average of more than \$71,000 annually (US Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2024), construction laborers in California are earning an average of nearly \$62,000 (US Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2024) annually, and welders are earning an average wage of more than \$59,000 annually (US Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2024).

When you talk about noncredit, you talk about the students who we serve: immigrants, refugees, individuals seeking asylum, students who have stopped out or never stopped in. We are meeting our students where they are. We are here to help them enroll in a course that will lead them to the workforce and high-paying jobs that can transform their lives and the lives of those in their family as well.

What makes SDCCE especially unique, however, is that we offer not just first-class workforce training, but we also provide a starting point on a pathway that leads our students from our free, noncredit, vocational options to our for-credit sister colleges in the San Diego Community College District. SDCCE was founded 110 years ago on a mission to eliminate poverty, and buoyed by the college's award-winning Noncredit to Credit Alignment Lab (NCAL) Project, also known as SD Advance, students interested in transferring are supported with academic counseling and help with educational planning in transitioning to San Diego City, Mesa, or Miramar colleges.

Indeed, SD Advance's primary goal is to foster a culture shift that recognizes noncredit students as valuable contributors to the educational system and that eliminates any institutional roadblocks that impede their progression to credit-bearing colleges. This initiative tackles head on the systemic inequities that have historically marginalized noncredit students.

Mission accomplished. We began the initial project by focusing on healthcare and child development pathways, and nearly one-third of 183 healthcare students earning a certificate of completion subsequently transitioned to City College. The nonprofit RP Group recognized SDCCE's NCAL project with a 2024 Honorable Mention Award (The RP Group, 2024) for "making significant strides in promoting equity, diversity, and inclusion by treating noncredit students as integral and valuable parts of the educational community. The project's success lies in its comprehensive, collaborative, and data-informed approach, leading to tangible improvements in support services and pathways for noncredit

students." The RP Group extended particular praise for the initiative's early outreach, onboarding assistance, and myriad support services.

The College of Continuing Education continues to focus on the core principles of the framework: treating all students as students; building pathways between noncredit and credit credentials; aligning departments and governance; making programs credit worthy or credit based; and removing barriers to transition.

Our business, labor, and community partners understand the impact we're having. That's why California is providing the College of Continuing Education a \$1-million grant to work with our regional adult education partners to expand pathways for English-language learners to embark on in-demand healthcare careers (City News Service, 2024). That's why Hyundai and Kia dealerships housed at the Mile of Cars in National City recently donated six pallets of car parts valued at several hundred thousand dollars to support students in our automotive program. That's why a Texas-based nonprofit last fall awarded us \$1.175 million to double the size of our welding program and expand program facilities as part of a comprehensive effort addressing a shortage of skilled workers. And that's why SDCCE is part of a team of community colleges working on a University of Pittsburgh School of Education-led project to bolster programs offering industry-recognized, workforce-oriented credentials, and certificates for underserved populations (University of Pittsburgh, 2023).

Our impact certainly is not lost on San Diego Community College District leadership. Our new Chancellor, Gregory Smith, recently informed us that San Diego College of Continuing Education will see an increase in our campus funding to put us on par with our for-credit sister colleges. The anticipated rise in the 2024-2025 Campus Allocation Model is expected to be an additional \$1,583,547, an increase stemming from our college's share of generated revenue, which will be implemented gradually. In the initial year, we anticipate receiving an additional \$1.58 million in revenue to support the reorganization, with surplus funding available to address other essential priorities for SDCCE. As we move forward, there will be a step-up plan for SDCCE to equalize our funding percentage to be equivalent to the credit colleges. It is a sound investment: SDCCE is responsible for contributing approximately \$250 million into the regional economy annually and our annual alumni impact has surpassed \$209 million (King, 2023).

This is only the start, as we continue to elevate and advocate for the needs of noncredit education. This is equity in action and would not be possible without each and every one of our campus community members and the hard work we put in daily to serve our most deserving students.

Dr. Tina M. King is a transformative educational leader whose vision is guided by the core values of inclusive excellence, equity-mindedness, and institutional responsibility for student success. Currently, Dr. King serves as the President of San Diego College of Continuing Education where she oversees and advocates for 30,000 students.

Supporting Diverse Presidents: Leadership Through an Equity Lens

Dr. Clyne G. H. Namuo, President, Joliet Junior College

On April 20, 2024, I had the honor of sharing the stage with Dr. Tina M. King, President of San Diego College of Continuing Education, and Dr. Nicholas C. Neupauer, President of Butler County Community College. We were invited to share our wisdom (no pressure!) at the annual Council for the Study of Community Colleges (CSCC) conference, participating in a plenary panel of presidents. This opportunity was made possible by the tireless advocate for equity, Dr. Eboni Zamani-Gallaher, with the support of incoming CSCC President Dr. Xueli Wang, and facilitated by the prominent higher education scholar and current President of California State University, Sacramento (Sac State) Dr. J. Luke Wood.

What began as a structured discussion on equity-centered strategies and practices quickly evolved into an authentic and courageous conversation about leadership in higher education and how institutions can support those leaders. We explored the profound ways in which exceptional leaders can inspire meaningful change and create sustainable momentum toward more equitable outcomes for our students. Ultimately, it became clear that leadership in higher education requires a steadfast dedication to advancing equity for all. I'd like to share some of those thoughts with you.

I carry the immense responsibility of leading the nation's very first community college. You see, Joliet Junior College (JJC) started it all. Today, over 1,000 institutions nationally educate over 10 million students every year in communities large and small. It's a movement that spawned a phenomenon that is the modern American community college, and it started at Joliet Junior College in 1901.

While we take great pride in our history, we recognize that the systems, structures, and value of higher education are under intense scrutiny and must adapt to align with a society that expects community colleges to be engines for social mobility. I've come to realize for that change to occur, for that realignment to happen, and if we are to reach the lofty vision that we set for our institutions, we must be propelled by extraordinary leaders, leaders who understand that diverse environments lead to exceptional outcomes, leaders who are committed to holistic supports that lead to equitable outcomes, leaders who are committed to creating and maintaining inclusive spaces. Truly extraordinary leadership is rare for it requires nuance and sophistication that comes with successfully navigating a wide range of challenges with strength, compassion, vision, empathy, courage, and kindness. I've come to realize that the courage it takes to become a college president is a fraction of the courage it takes to remain a college president.

Higher education historians might look back on these post-pandemic times as the rise of the minority president. Each year, the new cohort of college presidents seems to be more diverse, with institutions proudly celebrating leaders whose

identities and compelling stories inspire our increasingly diverse student populations. While many minority presidents are assuming these roles, we are also witnessing a significant number of them leaving their positions sooner than expected, whether by choice or otherwise.

It is crucial to provide robust support for these presidents after they are appointed to ensure that their courage and commitment to uplifting all students are rewarded and protected. A quick glance at these new cohorts reveals a group of talented, experienced, and exceptional leaders who have options and are increasingly mobile. They often move to institutions that are more accepting and supportive of the diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) paradigm. Unfortunately, this movement means that the institutions most in need of their leadership—those that cling to outdated ways of thinking—continue to languish. To foster a truly inclusive academic environment, we must do more than just hire diverse leaders; we must also create conditions that encourage them to stay and thrive.

Native Hawaiians transmit our culture through one of four ways: hula (dance), mele (song), oli (chanting), and mo'olelo (storytelling). Notably, none of these indigenous forms of communication include email. Yet, the modern world heavily relies on it for formal messages, structuring professional interactions, outlining workplace expectations, and documenting deviations from social norms through progressive discipline processes. To honor the rich traditions of cultures like that of Native Hawaiians, institutions can integrate diverse communication practices, blending modern technology with traditional methods, to create a more inclusive and respectful environment. The University of Hawai'i system and many tribal colleges across the country serve as excellent models.

I have spent nearly half my life away from my ancestral homeland. My career has taken me from Hawai'i to California, Arizona, and Illinois, but my culture still shapes who I am, how I communicate, and how I lead. I possess a strong sense of identity, rooted in the Native Hawaiian culture, and the values my parents instilled in me. I carry with me the sacrifices of generations before me who struggled to survive so that I might thrive. Thankfully, I discovered all of this before becoming a college president. My core values have anchored me, and great leaders take time to discover theirs. Without them, we'd all be adrift. Trying to figure out who you are and what you stand for while grappling with the sheer volume of work and the breadth and depth of presidential responsibilities just won't work. It is critically important for institutions to honor all aspects of a president's identity to ensure they have a suite of support to flourish. Otherwise, mediocrity (or worse) could be its destiny.

Of course, the exceptional leaders of today must be able to apply an equity lens to their leadership. However, the truly extraordinary leaders of tomorrow will have a deep understanding of their identity, fight courageously for justice, face resistance with bravery, and recognize that the depth of our differences can also serve to strengthen our shared sense of solidarity. These are the leaders we need in higher education.

Clyne G. H. Nāmu‘o, Ph.D. was born and raised in Honolulu, Hawai‘i and embraces his kuleana as a Native Hawaiian leader and scholar. He proudly serves as the tenth president of Joliet Junior College, the nation’s very first community college founded in Joliet, Illinois in 1901.

Raising the Dialogue: Leading Change in Higher Education

Dr. Nicholas C. Neupauer, President, Butler County Community College

2020. COVID-19 terrorized the world. Already reeling from COVID, the United States faced civil unrest amplified by the murder of George Floyd in Minneapolis.

At Butler County Community College (BC3), a rural two-year public institution with a main campus and several additional campus locations in northwestern Pennsylvania, I was in my 13th year as president. Perhaps no year before nor after 2020 compares in the challenges we faced. The safety of our students, faculty, and staff. The continuation of coursework with a rapid change to remote offerings. Declining revenues from a shrinking credit enrollment. Isolation and mental health concerns for some and political fervor for others.

Since graduate school, I’ve always embraced John Dewey’s belief in “the educational system must instill a deep-seated appreciation for the values of democracy such as justice, equality and freedom.” But as a former sports reporter, I also recall Charles Barkley’s emphatic 1993 statement, “I’m not paid to be a role model.” Role model or not, as a community leader, it was necessary that my presidential voice be heard during such a complicated time.

I studied various college and university presidents who made statements shortly following the death of Mr. Floyd. I admired the intense language and specific charges issued by nationwide colleagues. However, I knew that approach would not work in our northwestern Pennsylvania setting. My presidential call-to-action in an initial campuswide email followed up in greater detail at our August 2020 Convocation was simple: “to raise the dialogue” on diversity, equity, and inclusion. That’s it. A simple, yet strategic and intentional way to move the needle on DEI at BC3 and in the communities we serve.

A DEI task force was created with appropriate leadership from two executive team members and two deans at the college. I reinforced that simple directive for the newly formed committee. I had multiple side bar conversations in which colleagues presented honest concerns and questioned their ability to serve on this new task force. In each conversation, I kept falling back to the most fundamental of statements: “to raise the dialogue” on DEI. I responded to colleagues who questioned their belonging in this group by requesting they give it a chance. And at any time, I stated, feel free to remove yourself from the task force. No questions asked. What resulted at our rural institution of higher learning has been quite spectacular.

“To raise the dialogue” took many forms. The college community heard from our students, faculty, and staff. We

hosted guest speakers. Our library continues to hold monthly DEI events. Job descriptions have been changed, including the president’s. Curriculum has been examined. Operating dollars budgeted.

Each of the aforementioned continued the momentum of raising the dialogue. Each achievement was celebrated as a small win that ultimately led to a larger paradigm shift with specific college initiatives that otherwise may not exist. So much so, in fact, that DEI is embedded throughout BC3’s 2022-2027 Strategic Plan. Previously, it was merely mentioned in our mission statement and in a single portion of the Plan.

Throughout the last four years, Niccolo Machiavelli’s “the end justifies the means” paraphrase kept popping into my head. As a strategic communications scholar, I certainly know language matters. It is my belief that the language used when it comes to DEI is what in the eyes of some creates such angst and hostility (remember earlier when I discussed “political fervor”?). What might work well in a particular institution, in a particular geographical location, doesn’t mean it will work in another. One thing I knew for certain, language and description were important in BC3’s landscape.

Equity, by my own definition, is the quality of being fair and impartial. It’s acknowledging we do not all start from the same place. These inequities must be addressed and imbalances adjusted. Furthermore, I cannot separate the word equity from justice. Justice can only be achieved when truth is upheld and acted upon. Thanks, Mr. Dewey.

When we heard from our students at Butler County Community College, we learned about their struggles with food security, technology, internet connectivity, shelter, living expenses, and sometimes even a bed to sleep in or a roof over their heads. No matter how difficult COVID-19 work-from-home conditions may have been, we were working and had a home in which to do it. Some had no such luxuries. The most basic of Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs—physiological and safety—were not being met for our most important stakeholder group—our students. We understood the role of BC3’s faculty and staff in providing a sense of belonging, self-esteem, and confidence for our students—two more levels of Maslow’s hierarchy. Not even COVID-19 could stop such important efforts.

These are important equity initiatives. Never once has our college received challenges in our efforts to address these basic needs. After all, we are a “student-centered” institution—as is embedded in our mission—and BC3 is targeting strategies to help our students. Those students are the very fabric of the communities in which we serve.

When I shared the truth about the food insecurities of our students with a since deceased donor, he questioned the legitimacy of the Wisconsin Hope Study survey. That survey indicated over 40 percent of our student body deals with this issue. Later, I introduced this friend of the college to a couple of our students who shared their stories. Shortly after, our friend donated to what is now known as the Pioneer Pantry. The Pantry, thanks to donors and community partners, provides healthy food options at our main campus and all BC3 locations.

It was Winston Churchill who stated “never let a good crisis go to waste.” I don’t reference that quote loosely or flippantly. People died during COVID-19 and the civil unrest of 2020. But that backdrop allowed for an opportunity that led to everlasting change at Butler County Community College.

All from four powerful words.

To.

Raise.

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Dr. Nicholas Neupauer has served as president of Butler County Community College since 2007. Currently, he is on sabbatical and will retire from the position at the end of 2024. Dr. Neupauer will begin a stint as a Visiting Assistant Professor of Practice with a focus on Community College Leadership in the School of Education at the University of Pittsburgh in the fall of 2024.