

CHANGE LEADERSHIP: HELPING NAVIGATE THE PANDEMIC

THREE COMMUNITY COLLEGE PRESIDENTS DISCUSS WHY FLEXIBILITY, ADAPTABILITY, AND UNITY ARE THE NEW NORMAL.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

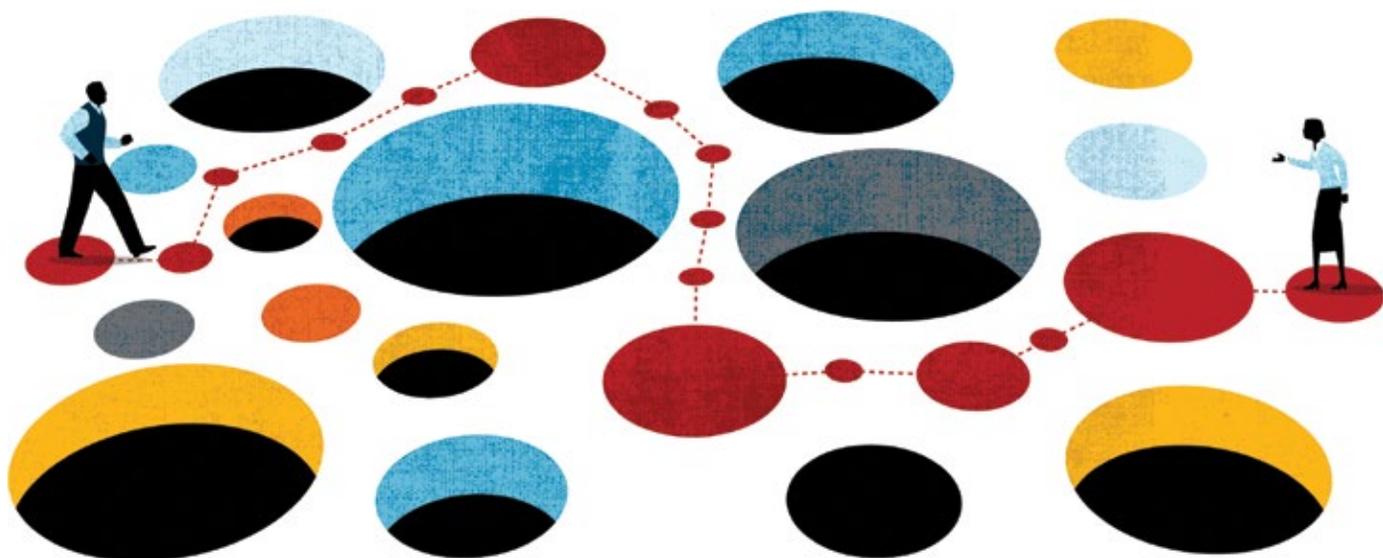
- The nature of leadership is changing as a result of the pandemic.
- Real change requires the will to do something different.
- Effective change leaders stay on target, take risks, and unite their communities.

ELLUCIAN IS A GLOBAL HIGHER-EDUCATION SOLUTIONS company with over 2,700 customers in more than 50 countries. We recently hosted a virtual event, bringing together three community college presidents for a panel discussion about the issues impacting their communities — in particular, the impact of the coronavirus pandemic on their institutions. All three panelists expressed how change leadership is helping them navigate the pandemic. Here are some key takeaways.

Change leadership is the way forward

From temperature checks and screening questions to detailed safety and social distancing guidelines, community colleges are preparing for the fall semester in many of the same ways as their four-year counterparts. As they discussed their plans for the fall, the panelists each emphasized the importance of change leadership.

Dr. Devin Stephenson, president of Northwest Florida State



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College, sees change leadership as the way forward. “Effective change leaders cannot rely on our modalities of being a transactional leader or a transformational leader. We must lead as change leaders,” Stephenson said. “We must create teams around us that think flexibility, that think adaptability all the time because this is now a new world of change. This is a change era that we live in.”

Stephenson advised “eliminating the unnecessary and unhealthy competition within our organizations to bring people together.

“That's really what we've seen the coronavirus crisis do,” he said. “It's brought our people together to try to synergize and innovate different ways of approaching the work that we do.”

Dr. Michael Redmond, former president of Bergen Community College in New Jersey, agreed, saying that “the nature of leadership is going to change.”

“Institutions will have to be nimble, more innovative,” he added. “Those disaster recovery plans that we used to think about only in terms of losing our IT center on campus, now we'll have to think about in a broader context. Those plans are going to be dusted off and revised. We're being forced very quickly, and not on our own terms, to rethink and reimagine how we go about doing our business, performing admissions, and educating students. If we can lift up our eyes and look down the road a bit, we might find that because of this, higher education comes out better and more effective than it was before.”

From crisis comes the will to do something different

As the conversation pivoted to CARES Act funding, Dr. Betty Young, president of Hocking College in Ohio, shared a story about a fiscal crisis her institution faced in 2014 and related that experience to the current crisis caused by the pandemic.

“I think the virus has given us a crisis, and a crisis often gives us the will to do something different,” she said. In 2014, Young continued, “we had to make some major changes, really revamp and look strategically at operational models that we used. We took two years and really dug deep into this institution and made significant changes.”

Drawing from that experience, Young has taken a cautious approach to CARES Act funds. “We really strategically thought

about what we could do in the long term. We looked at this as a two-year project because we believe that we're going to be dealing with this for the next two years,” she said. “Then we're going to have another two to three years of recovery after that before we're anywhere back to where we were before.”

How to lead through challenges

While what happens this fall semester and beyond remains to be seen, the panelists offered advice to their peers for the road ahead. Stephenson challenges himself and other leaders to examine their values and stay on target every day.

“Look every day at what your values are,” said Stephenson. “What drives you to get up every morning and be the president or vice president or higher ed leader that you are? What makes you get up to make a difference in somebody's life? What do you value the most?”

“At our institution, it's about doing things excellently,” he continued. “It's about diversity and inclusion. It's about being a person of integrity. It's about being innovative and being a person that is committed to stewardship. That is the message that keeps me going through these dark days.”

Young emphasized risk-taking in her advice to leaders. “We have to be, as leaders, willing to take the risk and be directive and make quick decisions, sometimes without a lot of committees and the things that we normally like to work through because of the situation that we're in,” she said.

She also emphasized giving positive feedback and coming together as a community. “Anybody who is in this position knows we need a little encouragement once in a while, too,” Young said. “There are a lot of folks that can give kudos to what we're doing and the direction we're going in. “I think it's important for our communities to come together and say, ‘Our college is here. Our people are doing the right thing.’ Not just from the president's seat, but from all of the seats across the campus.”

Young concluded with a reminder that while we're all in this together, “we're not all in it equally. Our students aren't all in it equally. Some are under much greater hardship, particularly financially in this situation. Let's not forget it.”

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