

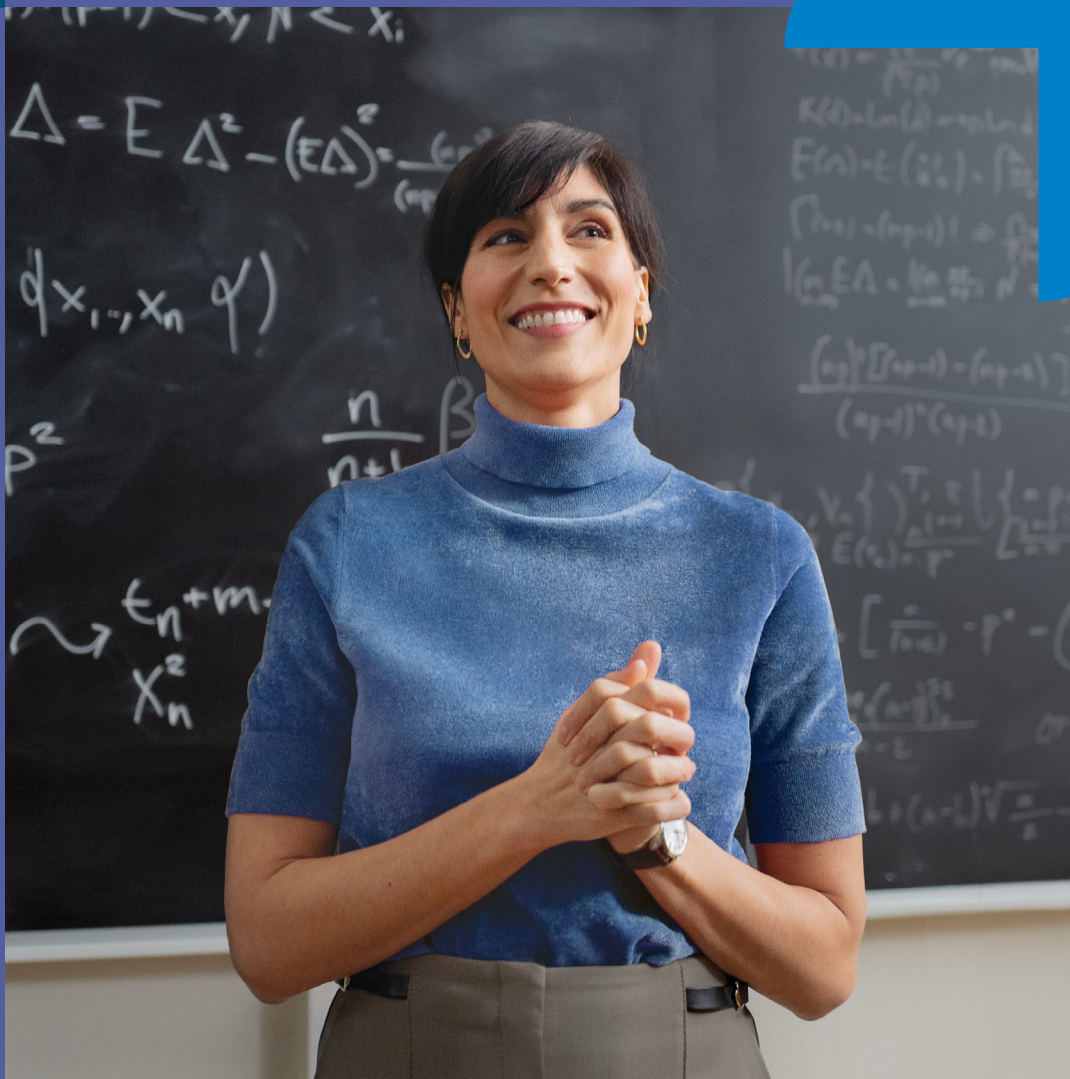
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GOING FORWARD: Building a New Higher-Ed Experience for a Post-Pandemic World
A virtual forum series with The Chronicle of Higher Education

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Community colleges must figure out how to move forward in a time of upheaval. As they face enrollment declines, students' greater needs, and pandemic-era learning loss, among other challenges, the mission of social mobility is more important than ever. How are community colleges remaking the paths to a postsecondary credential?

The Chronicle recently presented a virtual forum, “The Community Colleges Students Need Now,” to examine how community colleges are expanding outreach and prioritizing equity to serve today’s students. With support by TIAA and co-hosted by Michael J. Sorrell, president of Paul Quinn College, and Scott Carlson, a senior writer at *The Chronicle*, the forum was the third in a four-part series on different sectors in higher education.

Panelists included Latricia D. Brand, chief diversity officer for Portland Community College; Shauna Davis, strategy director for participation at community colleges for the Lumina Foundation; Barbara Gooch, a student at Volunteer State Community College, in Tennessee; and Niesha Ziehmke, associate dean for academic affairs at Guttman Community College, part of the City University of New York.

The following comments, which have been edited for clarity and length, represent key takeaways from the forum. To hear the full, hour-long discussion, access the archived version [here](#).

Michael J. Sorrell: What are you seeing now compared to what you saw pre-Covid in terms of what students need?

Barbara Gooch: I don’t think colleges did a good job of reaching out to the online students. Then everything went online, and the advising appointment — now you can do it through Zoom. Financial aid — OK, let’s go to Zoom. The most important thing that didn’t happen before that is happening now is to have that availability to keep that online presence. And actually, even if you’re on campus, you might have to rush home for some reason. Do you have something available to me that I can meet you online?



Michael J. Sorrell
President,
Paul Quinn College



Barbara Gooch
Student,
Volunteer State
Community College

Shauna Davis: Colleges were forced to scale student services overnight. They got it done. But there's a difference between making something functionally available versus good design. That's where institutions are right now. Are we just talking to students online or are we actually creating services and supports that not only have extended hours — do the modalities make sense? Are we making people click through five things and turn four pages in order to get an advising appointment? There has to be a better way. Are we able to track what we're doing? Do we need to put in place some sort of a system so that we can at least evaluate whether or not we're actually reaching the population that we think we're reaching?

I want to applaud colleges for what they were able to do very quickly. Now what we need to do is focus on, are we doing it well?

Latricia D. Brand: For many of our students who have been close to completing their degree or their credential, the convenience of being able to finish online has been tremendous. Especially for many of our students who are navigating a variety of other issues, whether it's child care, whether it's their jobs — just being able to log in five minutes before your class has to get started versus trying to accommodate all of these other things to get to your class has been significantly impactful, and those students are completing. They're even completing at higher percentage rates than they were when we were pretty much all face to face.

The issue now is, Where are the students we can't connect with? How do we get them engaged, and how are we supporting what they need in order for them to be successful, whether it be on site, online, or some combination of the two.

Sorrell: Wouldn't those be the same types of questions that you would ask pre-Covid?

Brand: It should have been. But the challenge has been that we didn't ask that kind of question. We basically said, here's our model. This is our value proposition, and this is how we deliver. Now we actually are asking our students, What's working for you? In some instances, we're learning that what our students



Shauna Davis

*Strategy Director for Participation
at Community Colleges,
Lumina Foundation*



Latricia D. Brand

*Chief Diversity Officer,
Portland Community
College*

are saying is working for them is going to require a radical shift in how we deliver.

We've got to figure out how to get to what it is that they need, and we desperately need them in our community colleges, not just for enrollment, but, frankly, for all the ways in which it benefits them and their families. The ways in which we can support their own health and wellness and social and economic mobility is a critical part, and we don't know exactly what is the barrier. So if we've lost them, we've lost them, and we haven't figured out how to re-engage.

Niesha Ziehmke: We definitely have students who are like, "I can't go back. I learned that I can function in a different way." So many of us feel that. You've adjusted into this new world. Your commute is not necessary anymore. We also have a lot of students who are craving being back in person. We just have to navigate offering the right kinds of things to each of our students, thinking about all of their needs. That means looking to offer more online, much more than we would have considered pre-pandemic. Also some fully online degree programs.

In terms of not reaching students, there's this broader crisis. They've experienced extreme loss, sometimes their own health, their own family members, job loss, lack of access to housing and consistent food sources. This loss is so heavy that we can't just solve it by building the right online program. These are broader issues. We need bigger solutions. We need much bigger approaches than, can you tweak the curriculum a little bit? Can you pay attention to the data of outcomes? It just seems bigger than that.

Scott Carlson: How do we maximize the use of Covid funds now for sustainable endeavors that include good design for online support in the future when that funding disappears, especially when community colleges are seeing declining enrollment?

Brand: A tremendous amount of our dollars went to continuing to support infrastructure for students to be able to log on and engage and also infrastructure for a lot of our staff and faculty to do their jobs well.



Niesha Ziehmke

*Associate Dean for Academic Affairs,
Guttman Community College*



Scott Carlson

*Senior Writer,
The Chronicle*

But many of us across the country did a lot of surveying at different points of time, both student needs as well as staff and faculty needs. Those needs are still the same. We should be leveraging a lot of the data we collected over the last year and a half to begin to figure out how we build that into some strategic priorities.

Gooch: For me as a student, good design might mean something different than it does for instructors. I would rather just say, Can we just have basic design? All I need is really just organization and working links. Make it easy. Make it just work. Sometimes online professors are thinking, Well, they're not traveling, they're not sitting in the classroom, they're not there. So let's make them do more. And it seems like a lot of students are like, We're doing gobs more online than what we would have in a classroom.

Look, I'm a proponent of hybrid. I want challenges. I want rigor. I don't want it to be easy, but I don't want it to be so overwhelming that you can't even do it. And I think we're forgetting that those online people are a lot of working adults or have other responsibilities.

Good design is that balance of remembering who are your online students, and what are you designing for?

Sorrell: Can't we be reasonable, realistic, and still have rigor? Do we have to overwhelm people as the only indicator that we did a good enough job preparing them?

Ziehmke: The data at CUNY is that transfer students do just as well or better than so-called native students. If you look at the community-college population, it's a greater number of students of color, low-income students, first-generation students. A barrier is being put up to their completion and their advancement. And I think there need to be broader and more-systemic solutions to these issues.

Carlson: We're facing this demographic cliff, and a number of four-year institutions are going to be desperate for students. Do you think these questions around transfer will remain given the other pressures?

Brand: It's an ethos and a culture issue. How do we really have the discussion around the idea of worthiness when it relates to college?

But I agree it will change. In some instances, especially for our public college and university landscape, it may change sooner rather than later. In the state of Oregon, legislation is one of the ways in which we are being asked to talk about how all of our public institutions are going to come together and create much more seamless transfer opportunities. If we don't figure it out, it will potentially have to get figured out because of legislation.

Gooch: Tennessee started the Tennessee Promise and then started Tennessee Reconnect because the governor decided he wanted to have "the Drive to 55," which was just to get 55 percent of the population as graduates of some kind of college. And so that idea of letting them have free community college came about. We have the Tennessee Transfer Pathway, where what you're taking at community college must transfer to a public college. So they work really hand in hand.

This "Key Takeaways" was produced by Chronicle Intelligence. Please contact CI@chronicle.com with questions or comments.

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