



DR. KEITH CURRY: ‘UNAPOLOGETIC SUCCESS’ FOR BLACK LEARNERS

The chair of the Level Up and Get Real initiative discusses the role trustees must play in ensuring Black student success.

By Mark Toner

THIS SPRING, A PARTNERSHIP OF LEADING HIGHER EDUCATION ORGANIZATIONS INCLUDING Achieving the Dream, Lumina Foundation, Education Counsel and HCM Strategists, released *Level Up: Leveraging Explicit Value for Every Black Learner, Unapologetically*, a call to action charging higher education leaders with ensuring that their institutions “are accessible and welcoming to all, regardless of a student’s race or background.”

Ahead of a 2023 ACCT Leadership Congress symposium on the initiative, Compton College President and National Panel Chair Keith Curry, Ed.D., spoke with *Trustee Quarterly* about the report and its findings, the role of community colleges and their trustees, and what unapologetic leadership looks like.

Q. How did you get involved in the Level Up initiative?

My call for Black student success started when I was 19 years old at UC Santa Cruz, where I created a program for admitted African American students called Destination Higher Education. At California's community colleges, we started Black Student Success Week, which takes place at the end of April every year. And at Compton College, we've worked to support Black students and student success in general. We support students' basic needs and created guided pathways. These serve all students, but they're serving Black students because they serve everybody. Every student on campus — and employees — can eat for free. We provide emergency aid and a guaranteed income program, where students receive \$500 per month. And we hired a Director of Black and Males of Color Success whose work is connected to our guided pathways and supporting students into majors.

We disaggregated all our data by race, and it's publicly available. When we talk about student success, we're talking about it at a program level and a course level. We're not apologetic about it or hiding it — we're putting our data out front.

The Level Up initiative is a continuation of what I've been doing my entire career and taking it to a broader audience. Now I'm able to be involved in this work on a national scale. I've come full circle.

Q: The *Level Up* report highlighted sobering statistics about the decline of Black learners at community colleges — 300,000 have disappeared over the past 20 years, and enrollments are down by as much as 44 percent since 2011. Were you surprised by these findings?

The numbers don't surprise me, because I saw the decline in Los Angeles County and at my own institution. I didn't know the national statistics, but I also knew it wasn't siloed in my community.

When COVID hit, it put [the decline] right in the forefront again. The report reminded me that the numbers were declining as early as 2011, and while most people say we're losing Black learners to the pandemic, COVID isn't the reason. The barriers to college access and opportunity are systemic, and their solutions must be as well.

Q: The report outlines four commitment areas called Get REAL — Real transparency and true affordability, Ensured success through shared ownership, Academic and social supports, and Learner-centered teaching practices. What do they mean for colleges and their leaders?

They provide a framework for colleges to be able to organize themselves around serving Black learners. They also provide political cover, because this is not a siloed problem, but a national one.

The commitment areas are a blueprint for what colleges and institutions should be able to do, and they give them cover to have unapologetic conversations about Black success and opportunities to learn from each other. The goal is to create a national conversation among institutions and leaders towards the same goal, which is to Level Up, Unapologetically.

Q: What is the role of community colleges and their leaders in this work?

Community colleges are in the call to action. They need to get behind and support the movement, and at the same time get unapologetic about implementing.

Boards should adopt the Level Up recommendations and then work with their CEO on developing action plans to implement them. Start by looking at what you're doing on your campus — places where you have gaps and where you can step up and create services to support Black learners.

Ask for your data around student success and disaggregate it. Talk about lagging indicators. Be unapologetic in your conversations. And let your CEOs be unapologetic. Allow them to do the work and hold them accountable. That's a clear action for board members.

Boards can also do more advocacy work with local, state, and federal officials to get more resources. Budgets are statements of values. In the report, we share data on the economic impact of Black learners. Share it with the community. If you want to transform communities, you need to have the resources, and the resources are supported through education.

Q. Why is the Congress symposium important to this work?

It's important to have a conversation about Level Up and talk about what trustees can do around the initiative. The goal is to start with trustees, because they are the policymakers. We want to get them in the conversation.

We need to give leaders time and space to talk about it, and to be unapologetic — to say that their data doesn't [currently] support it, but here's what we're trying to do.

Q. You — and the Level Up report — use the term “unapologetic” to describe leadership. What does that mean to you?

Talk is cheap in this business. Unapologetic leaders are ones who are able to be intentional and not have remorse about introducing this work. People will tell you that you can't do this for certain reasons, but you can — it's okay to have conversations about Black learner success and to push initiatives about Black learner success.

You're going to be a leader in helping students, or you're going to sit on the sidelines. We need people to do this work.

Learn more at www.community4blacklearnerexcellence.com.



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