

# ‘UNAPOLOGETIC LEADERSHIP’

The Realizing Black Learner Excellence at Community Colleges Symposium provided a call to action – and a roadmap.

By Mark Toner



**M**ORE THAN 100 COMMUNITY COLLEGE LEADERS and advocates gathered for the Leveling Up: Realizing Black Learner Excellence at Community Colleges Symposium during the 2023 ACCT Leadership Congress in Las Vegas. Despite the sobering realities that drove the creation of the Level Up and Get Real initiative — including the disappearance of nearly 300,000 Black learners from the community college sector over the past two decades — speakers found cause for optimism.

“I love that we’re in a packed room talking about Black students,” said Dr. DeRionne Pollard, president of Nevada State University. “Unfortunately, we don’t do enough of that in higher education... Black learners need you to lead the way for all of us.”

The symposium focused on assessing the conditions leading to disproportionate outcomes for Black learners and urging attendees to put new frameworks into place to “fix systems, not people,” as Pollard put it. But above all, it called on community college trustees and presidents to display what Dr. Keith Curry, the initiative’s national chair, called “unapologetic leadership.”

“It’s about being intentional with the work and understanding its importance to the students you are about to serve,” he said.

## Meeting the Needs

The share of Black students on community college campuses has declined by more than 44 percent since 2010 — a trend that can’t be explained away by demographic shifts, the pandemic, or other external factors, symposium speakers stressed.

“The sharp decline represents a stark reality for Black learners, and Black college students are not being served,” said ACCT President and CEO Jee Hang Lee, calling the findings “an alarm for all of higher education.”

Dr. Frank Harris, co-director of the Community College Equity Assessment Lab at San Diego State University (CCEAL), noted that community colleges enroll disproportionate numbers of Black students, making the need to address inequities in enrollment and outcomes all the more important.

“The community college context is an incredibly important space,” he said. “If we don’t get it right in our community colleges, we have no chance to address the disproportionate impacts on Black learners.”

Harris stressed the importance of an equity-minded approach to addressing issues facing Black learners. “We cannot see students’ racial identities as liabilities. What we really need to do is see their lived



experiences as assets that can be leveraged to facilitate success,” he said. “Ask what’s wrong with our institutions, not Black learners.”

### Strategies for Success

Curry and other speakers pointed to the Level Up and Get REAL framework, released earlier in 2023, as a roadmap for community college leaders built around the principles of transparency and affordability, shared ownership, academic and social supports, and learner-centered teaching practices.

Harris also stressed the importance of holding institutional leaders accountable and ensuring every educator has the capacity to teach Black learners, as well as investments in dual enrollment, data systems to disaggregate and track outcomes, supports that address financial barriers and meet basic needs, and short-term career training and industry partnerships, among other strategies. But beginning this work requires shifting the lens, symposium participants said.

“Equity work, and especially racial equity work, requires us to see Black learners as human beings who are capable and deserving of excellence,” said Francesa I. Carpenter, director of equity initiatives for Achieving the Dream.

A panel of community college leaders agreed, describing efforts to create appropriate support systems and policies at their institutions. “I cannot address success at my institution without addressing the success of students of color and Black students,” said Dr. Felicia Williams, president of Prince George’s Community College in Maryland. In similar fashion, trustees at Anne Arundel Community College last year participated in diversity training and examined institutional policies through an anti-racism lens, said trustee A. Joyce Price-Jones. “We try to walk the walk,” she said.

It’s also important to recognize that when done intentionally, academic and financial supports can elevate all students, speakers said. “It’s not a zero-sum game,” said Dr. Sunny Cooke, president of MiraCosta Community College. “We can elevate all our students of color and those who come to us in financial distress.”

### Building a Coalition

Symposium speakers announced the launch of the Alliance for Black Learner Excellence at Community Colleges, a voluntary cohort that will focus on building institutional capacity to better serve Black learners. With a planning grant in place, the Alliance will develop tools and resources for participating institutions, help bring together their leaders for collective action, and work with the CCEAL to develop baseline metrics by which institutions can measure progress, according to Carpenter.

But moving forward will require commitment from institutions and their leaders. “Community colleges have stood in the gap for multiple communities time and time again,” Pollard said. “You can’t stop now. This is essential work... [and] the community college space has to lead the movement.”

2022-23 ACCT Chair Rose Benavidez, a trustee at South Texas College, issued a public call to action, asking trustees to take this work back to their institutions. “I stand before you asking who’s in?” she said. “We are.”

Dr. Monica Parrish Trent, ATD’s chief program and network officer, echoed James Baldwin’s famous statement from the 1960s. “We are indeed living in very dangerous times,” she said. “What’s at stake for Black learners if we don’t take action is... that they will know we have failed them. We must do better, and we will.”

“This is just the beginning,” Curry added. “We’re very intentional, and we’re very unapologetic, and we’re going to continue what we’re going to do. But we have to do it together.”

*Learn more about the Level Up and GET Real Initiative at <https://blacklearnersuccess.com>.*



Mark Toner is an editor for Trustee Quarterly.