

## Staying Focused on the Agenda: The Greatest Challenge in a Complex Environment

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As change accelerates at a seemingly unmanageable rate, organizational leaders frequently find themselves criticized for not being willing to implement enough change fast enough to satisfy critics. Although effective leaders are not overly worried by their critics, the actual ability to foster renewal and change in an organization can be inhibited by these forces that are always quick to want to “help.”

In American higher education, specifically here in California’s large and diverse system of 112 community colleges serving nearly 2.4 million students, there is no shortage of helpers. These generally well-meaning foundations, organizations, policy staff members and media representatives all have what they believe to be solutions to the problems of a chronically underfunded and overburdened set of colleges. Although in many instances they actually do have tremendous ideas that can and often do work, there are so many of them – pulling the system in so many directions – that remaining focused on an agenda is a daily battle. One system leader recently stated, “We are a system overburdened with helpers, if there were a thousand different directions in which to go – we would be expected to go in all thousand at once.”

### A Clear Agenda

Many individuals facing a new leadership challenge are confronted with the added task of charting a new agenda. In my case of assuming the role of Chancellor of the California Community College System in November, 2012, the agenda was clear on day one. The Board of Governors had spent the past two years charting a course for improving student success through their Student Success Task Force, and the system had sustained tremendous damage to open access by turning away more than 500,000 students during the past four years of budget cuts. Restoring open

access to California community colleges and helping students succeed at higher rates are clearly the dual challenges facing not only the California community colleges, but in many ways American higher education in general.

Policy makers and experts from President Obama to the media have pointed out the dramatic decline in American competitiveness due to an increasing decline in the percentage of Americans with college degrees. Restoring the leadership of the United States in this area will require both increased numbers of students completing colleges and universities, and an enhanced percentage of citizens enrolling in higher education. Additionally, it will not be enough to simply see the overall student success numbers improve without also closing the terrible gaps in performance by race, ethnicity, gender and age. Student success cannot be for only part of the population. Everyone must have the same opportunity to succeed. To some extent we will – and should – be judged by how well we do in restoring access and improving success for our most educationally and economically disadvantaged students. If we enhance access and success by simply turning away our most challenged students then we have failed. For California to truly succeed everyone must participate and succeed regardless of their zip code, social economic status, race, ethnicity, age, gender, or level of previous educational preparation. American community colleges are historically the most integrative and welcoming public institutions in the country. California community colleges must reaffirm not refute that promise.

I feel strongly that over the next few years it is my responsibility to keep our system clearly focused on access and success. There will be many other issues we must face, but to allow our colleges to be drawn away from focusing the vast majority of our resources

and energy on restoring student access and ensuring increased student success for all students would result in failure.

### **Unique Environment**

Leading the California Community Colleges as the system Chancellor requires a clear understanding of both a complex system of colleges and of the governance structure, which is more a “confederation” than a system. Unlike both the University of California and the California State University, which have a single Board leading all the campuses of each system, California’s community colleges have a state-level Board of Governors as well as 72 locally elected boards that oversee the local colleges and districts. This system is actually highly effective and, I believe, the best way to ensure that local communities have colleges that meet their local needs. This unique structure may actually be the only way to deliver community college education that fulfills local needs in such a large and diverse state. However, leading with little line authority requires a more collaborative approach than one sees in the more centralized institutions. Although there have been numerous reports that have recommended a much more centralized system, I am convinced that any organizational efficiency achieved by that approach would be negated by the loss of local responsiveness to local educational needs.

### **Existing challenges**

Assuming the leadership challenge of the California Community Colleges also requires an understanding of the current state of the system. After more than four years of significant budget reductions due to the prolonged fiscal challenges of the State of California, in November the State’s voters approved temporary tax increases that will provide modest funding increases for the system over the next few years. Although this certainly heads the system in the right direction, the funding will mainly stop the terrible cutting that has been a necessity over the past four years and allow the colleges to begin modestly restoring access. The system has other significant needs including the resources necessary for the full implementation of the Student Success Task Force recommendations, which the Board of Governors approved in January of 2012;

restoration of the operating budgets of the colleges whose expenses have continued to climb during the recession; and the restoration of valuable categorical programs for disadvantaged and disabled students that were cut more than 40 percent when the State began experiencing financial difficulties.

In addition to the financial challenges facing the system, a number of policy-related issues constantly being put into play have the potential to compliment or confuse the system agenda. Currently those include legislation to allow for differential tuition, unit limits for student enrollment, on-line education proposals, outcomes-based funding models and a recommended shift of adult education from K-12 to community colleges. The argument can be made that each of these has a direct impact on either student success or access. The challenge for our system of colleges is to respond to each of the various proposals in a manner that respects the intention of those pushing a given proposal while also ensuring that any resulting policy change actually furthers the agenda of student access and success.

To make matters even more complicated, of the more than 2,000 bills recently introduced prior to the deadline in the California legislature for the current session, more than 200 of them would impact community colleges. Each of these proposals has behind it individuals and groups genuinely trying to improve our system. Creating a problem as a result of this tremendous outpouring of assistance is not the intention of those attempting to help, but the sheer magnitude of different and often competing solutions presents a layer of challenges completely apart from the challenge of implementing any particular solution. Sometimes too much support can be as big a challenge as too little.

### **Staying Focused**

Promoting an agenda and keeping any organization focused is difficult, but when that organization spans more than 100 autonomous units, in multiple media markets, across thousands of miles in the state of California, it seems even more daunting. These individual colleges have their own cultures, and what works in suburban San Diego may not work in downtown San Francisco or in rural Yuba County.

The California Community College system has been

called “unmanageable.” I believe there is a great deal of truth to that statement if by “management” we mean control. In my view, no individual or team can, or should, control this vast system from a central office. However, the Chancellor’s Office of the California Community Colleges, overseen by the Board of Governors, should determine the direction of the system based on state policy set by the Governor and Legislature. That direction should serve as the guideposts or navigational buoys within which the colleges fulfill their local and regional educational needs.

I believe it is my job, working under the direction of the Board of Governors, to articulate that direction and move the system accordingly. Although the Chancellor’s Office will occasionally function in an oversight capacity as required by policy and law, more often our work will involve seeking resources for our colleges, creating regulation and policy that allow colleges to fulfill the state agenda, and constantly monitoring developments so that we do not lose sight of our two most important goals – restoring student access and increasing student success for all of California’s diverse student population.

### **My Personal Leadership Challenge**

Before assuming this office, I served for more than four decades in community colleges first as a faculty member, administrator and vice chancellor in the Kansas City, Missouri, community college system; then as President of Fresno City College; and, for the past sixteen years, as Chancellor of the Los Rios system here in Sacramento. With each of those progressively responsible positions came increasing complexity as the institutions grew in size and the jobs in scope. All the valuable leadership lessons I learned came from the people I worked for and with, as well as the good decisions and mistakes I made along the way. I believe in the concept of time-in-grade and feel as if my pathway to this position prepared me well for the challenges I am now facing.

As I considered applying for this opportunity, I spoke with six of the men and women who have held the job prior to me. I know and am friends with all of them. There was a great deal of consistency in what each of them said about being Chancellor of the California Community Colleges; so I took the post with my eyes wide open. Now only four months into this new role, there is a risk in stating with any certainty how this job will impact me or what will be the

result of my tenure as Chancellor. However, I have formed these early personal conclusions about this post:

- As Chancellor, I will not have the luxury of focusing only on the system agenda, and yet I will try daily to do just that.
- Balancing the demands of being in the field and doing the work needed in Sacramento will be impossible, and so I will simply do the best I can.
- My dual roles of oversight and leadership will often be in conflict and result in individuals and groups that are less willing to pursue the agenda because they are unhappy with a decision I have made on a single issue, and so I will lead with the utmost in integrity and shoulder the words of my critics as well as my supporters.
- I simply will not have the human stamina to do everything that needs to be done, and so I will focus most of my energy on the agenda and not spend a lot of time worrying about the rest.
- I will, and should, be judged as Chancellor by how successful the system is in serving all Californians who want and need an education.
- This could well end up being the greatest opportunity of my professional life, and so I plan to enjoy every moment.

The California community college system represents one in every five community college students in the country, and one in ten in American public higher education. Succeeding in California at restoring access and improving success will give America a fighting chance to regain our global leadership. This leadership opportunity is important. After more than four decades in community college education, I am still energized by this work and excited by a new leadership challenge.

*BRICE HARRIS is the Chancellor for the California Community Colleges. Prior to being selected as the leader of the largest system of higher education in the nation, Harris served 16 years as chancellor of the Los Rios Community College District in the Sacramento region, president of Fresno City College and a faculty member and vice chancellor in the Kansas City, Mo., community college system. Harris is also a recognized leader on national education issues and recently completed a term as a board member of the American Council on Education (ACE) in Washington, D.C.*

The Journal of Transformative Leadership and Policy Studies - JTLPS

# Call for Papers

**Article Themes**

Science,  
Technology,  
Engineering, and Math  
(STEM);  
Educational Leadership  
and Policy Studies

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A comprehensive set of submission guidelines are available online to help you prepare your manuscript.

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## Submit Now

Sponsored by the California State University's Chancellor's Office and the system's thirteen Education Doctorate programs, the Journal of Transformative Leadership and Policy Studies (JTLPS) publishes peer-reviewed studies for the educational leadership and policy community in California and beyond. The focus is to advance our understanding of solutions to the many problems faced by the nation's schools and colleges.

### Themes

One particularly serious problem, in terms of student access and outcomes, lies in STEM Education. We know that competence in STEM disciplines is becoming increasingly important not only for students seeking full participation in our economy and our society, but for our collective well-being and productivity. We also know that students in the United States continue to lag behind students in several East Asian countries and European nations in math and science disciplines.

As the journal representing education leadership doctorates in one of the largest state university systems in the country, we want to provide an ongoing place for scholars, practitioners and policy-makers to communicate deeply with one another about cutting-edge education research, innovative education policies, and effective STEM-related strategies and initiatives. To that end, we put out the following CALL FOR SUBMISSIONS OF SCHOLARLY ARTICLES:

### Call For Papers

With this call, JTLPS invites scholars to submit papers on a range of topics pertinent to STEM Education, Educational Leadership and Policy Studies in Education. We are interested in manuscripts on promising STEM Education and Educational Leadership Policy initiatives and projects that are in place in California, and in other states along with their results. We encourage articles that deal with the integration of technology and engineering within math and science as well as the leadership focused practices that are the driving force across disciplines. For example, approaches that incorporate literacy with STEM, such as STEAM, that combine the arts and STEM education. We also have a special interest in programs and topics that address the foundations for STEM success in the elementary grades.

In line with our Journal's mission, we seek submissions that address the preparation and development of P-20 educational leaders. We encourage papers that focus on strategies for increasing the number of students who pursue and succeed in STEM majors and courses. Finally, we invite articles on methods to increase the number and quality of elementary and secondary school teachers prepared in STEM disciplines, and beyond.

JTLPS aims to publish two issues per year, Fall and Spring. Manuscripts will be accepted on an ongoing basis.

### For more information

www.csus.edu/coe/academics/edd/jtlps

## Submission Guidelines

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*JTLPS* primarily publishes peer-reviewed empirical studies of interest to the educational leadership and policy community that advance our shared understanding of possible solutions to the many inequities present in America's schools and colleges. Our offerings are meant to help focus our distributed, collective actions to transform schools and colleges from places with uneven opportunities to learn from to institutions that provide an abundance of opportunities for all learners. We believe that leadership and policy are twin levers in the struggle for social justice. We are particularly interested in research into leadership in STEM education and plan to publish 1-3 articles per issue on this topic as a regular part of the journal.

We invite submissions in the following genres:

- Empirical studies;
- concept papers grounded in empirical and scholarly literature;
- policy briefs; and
- reflective essays on professional experience.

General guidelines regarding format must be applied to all submissions. Particular guidelines for empirical studies and for policy briefs are applied as appropriate. Independent of the genre selected for publication submission, all submissions will follow a strict peer review process. At the same time, every effort will be made to match topics with the expertise area of respective reviewers.

### General Guidelines

Please read the general guidelines thoroughly. Articles will be accepted in the following format:

1. The submission file is in Microsoft Word.
2. Use 12-point Times New Roman or similar font.
3. Margins should be 1.0 inches on the top, bottom, and sides.
4. Include a title page with each author's name and contact information. (Please indicate the institutions and/or grant numbers of any financial support you have received for your research. Also indicate whether the research reported in the paper was the result of a for-pay consulting relationship.) If your submission is derived from a paper you have published elsewhere, please make that evident on your title page as well.
5. Include an abstract of 175 or fewer words. The abstract should reflect the content and findings of the article and emphasize new and important aspects of or observations related to the study. In general, it should include information on the background or context of the study as well as the purpose(s), methods, results, conclusions, and policy and/or leadership recommendations.
6. Using the APA Style Manual, 6th edition, fully reference all prior work on the same subject and compare your paper to that work. In addition to referencing the work of other scholars, you should be certain to cite your own work when applicable.
7. Figures and Tables
  - Please state the number of figures, tables, and illustrations accompanying your submission so that editorial staff and reviewers can verify their receipt.
  - Where possible, supply figures in a format that can be edited so that we can regularize and edit spelling, the font and size of labels and legends, and the content and presentation of captions.
  - Illustrations need to be of publishable quality as we do not have a dedicated graphics department.
  - If you are submitting a figure as an image file (e.g., PNG or JPG), do not include the caption as part of the figure; instead, provide the captions with the main text of your article.

## Submission Guidelines

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8. We recommend short, effective titles that contain necessary and relevant information required for accurate electronic retrieval of the work. The title should be comprehensible to readers outside your field. Avoid specialist abbreviations if possible.
9. We publish a picture on the journal home page with each article. We encourage authors to submit their own digital photographs.
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11. Where available, URLs for the references are provided.
12. Upon acceptance of the manuscript, all revisions must be made in 'Track Change Mode' when resubmitted

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**Submissions are accepted on an ongoing basis.**