

Inquiry: The Journal of the Virginia Community Colleges

Volume 25
Number 2 *A Lasting Legacy Pt. 2*

Article 19

12-14-2022

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Recommended Citation

DuBois, G. (2022). Remarks at the Nevada System of Higher Education Diversity Summit. *Inquiry: The Journal of the Virginia Community Colleges*, 25 (2). Retrieved from <https://commons.vccs.edu/inquiry/vol25/iss2/19>

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Remarks at the Nevada System of Higher Education Diversity Summit

These remarks were delivered at Truckee Meadows Community College in Reno, Nevada on October 11, 2013.

Ladies and gentlemen: good morning. It is a pleasure to be with you. I was invited to join you today to talk about the issues of diversity and student success, and to share with you some of the best practices that we have in Virginia.

No pressure, right? That's such an easy task, I thought, that with my remaining time this morning I can also tell you how we have cured cancer, achieved time travel and mastered the practice of cold fusion.

As everyone here knows, these are weighty and complex topics, resistant to simple sound bite solutions. In fact, they might just be two expressions of the same challenge, considering how connected diversity and student success is in the 21st century.

After all, what may have once been considered and discussed in an "us and them" framework no longer fits – if it ever did. The community we live in, the community that we are building on our campuses, the nation as a whole, are all too complex, too multidimensional for that.

Virginia

In Virginia, we like to say that we are the place the American story begins. Plymouth Rock has gotten much better PR over the years, but Virginia is the place where English-speaking settlers first encountered Native Americans and established a permanent colony in 1607. Africans joined that mix 12 years later. Much of the modern America we know sprang from that tiny melting pot on the banks of the James River.

Many of the chapters of that Virginia story however are told in an "us and them" framework:

- It begins with bloody clashes between the native tribes and the settlers.
- American slavery began in Virginia.
- The commonwealth remains scared from both Revolutionary War and Civil War, battlefields.
- The shadows of Reconstruction and the Jim Crow Era linger over Virginia today. While this may soon end, the Voting Rights Act determines Virginia's redistricting process.
- Patrick Henry, famous for his "Give me liberty or give me death!" speech was the first of the 71 governors Virginia has elected to date. All have been men. All but one have been white.
- A racist state government bureaucrat led a successful campaign to erase Virginia's Indian tribes on paper a century ago, which is why they lack federal recognition today.
- Massive Resistance shuttered Virginia's public schools for years.
- Mildred Loving, a white woman, and Richard Loving, an African-American man, were sentenced to a year of prison for the crime of getting married in Virginia. That was until

the U.S. Supreme Court intervened in 1967 to invalidate a 43-year-old state law banning interracial marriage.

- And Virginia was among a list of states that forcefully sterilized people, as late as the 1970s – well into my lifetime – in compliance with the principles of the Eugenics movement.

When it comes to the issue of diversity, Virginia has some baggage. Not all of it is in the past. Just in the last few weeks, Virginia made national headlines again when a Confederate Heritage group decided to fly a massive Confederate flag on a pole near Interstate 95, which is probably the East Coast's most heavily traveled highway, and a gateway into the city of Richmond.

So that's a brief sketch of some Virginia's history. But don't get the wrong idea: the state has grown too big, too dynamic and too diverse to be held hostage by that past. And that's the story I want to share with you throughout my remarks.

VCCS founding

There were many people and many motivations responsible for the creation of Virginia's Community Colleges. I would suggest to you, however, that addressing that cultural baggage was among those motivations.

Beginning in 1966, over the next six years, policy makers established a network of 23 community colleges, operating a total of 40 campuses. In terms of land mass, Virginia's is the country's 12th largest state. The campuses were placed in such a way that practically every Virginian lives within a 30-minute drive of one of our campuses.

The first year we opened for business, we served 7,500 people. Today, we serve more than 400,000 people. And we are far and away the leading provider of higher education to minority Virginians. Our Community Colleges were created to address the state's unmet needs in higher education and workforce training. In other words, we were created to do what no one else would.

Since the founding of Virginia's Community Colleges – and I would like to think in part because of it – Virginia has changed dramatically. Technology has replaced tobacco as the state's leading export. Virginia is home to the world's largest naval base and the only shipyard on the globe capable of building nuclear aircraft carriers. We have an international airport that connects with every continent and some of our largest, most populated localities sit just across the Potomac River from Washington, D.C.

Those first English settlers who came in 1607 were part of a business venture, called the Virginia Company, lured by the hope of finding gold and riches. That optimism remains today, attracting people from every corner of the world who are chasing opportunity and boosting our population as a result.

In 1960, Virginia's population was less than 4 million people. It has more than doubled today to more than 8.2 million. That growth includes families from literally everywhere. In fact, students at just one of our institutions, Northern Virginia Community Colleges speak more than 100 languages other than English. That college, NVCC, is our largest. In fact, it's the country's second largest community college. And it is a majority minority institution, one of several we have in Virginia.

The region the college serves, Northern Virginia, is rapidly growing and growing more dynamic and changing Virginia along the way. To give you a sense of that, consider this: Virginia's changing population has turned the state from being reliably red to the swing state color of purple. Barack Obama won Virginia's electoral votes in each of the last two presidential elections. No democrat has done that since Lyndon Johnson in 1964.

Similarly, Virginia voters ratified a state constitutional amendment banning same sex marriage in 2006. This year, four different statewide polls have reported that a majority of Virginians favor same sex marriage. As those two snapshots suggest, Virginia is evolving. If its community colleges are going to live up to their promise, we must evolve as well.

VCCS mission

The people we serve drive the need for Virginia's Community Colleges to embrace diversity and foster inclusivity. Virginia's outgoing governor achieved a rare feat in his four-year term. He advanced a bill through the state legislature that earned unanimous support. That wouldn't be a big surprise if I told you the bill was ceremonial in nature, perhaps commemorating some famous Virginian or declaring the official state lettuce.

No, this was a major policy and will likely shape the governor's legacy and the state's priorities for years to come. You see, the measure was named the Top Jobs for the 21st Century and it includes a call for an additional 100,000 Virginia college graduates by the year 2025. Again, that measure passed without a single nay vote in either the State Senate nor the House of Delegates.

It is no surprise that our community colleges will be doing the heavy lifting when it comes to turning that ambition into reality. Already today, we serve more than half of all the state's undergraduate students; and one out of three people who graduate from Virginia's public universities have community college experience.

The big challenge in this for us is changing the hearts and minds of people who don't believe in themselves, don't believe in the promise of higher education, or don't believe in either. In fact, I am framing this challenge as a need for our colleges to place a college graduate in every Virginia home by the year 2025. And when I say graduate, I'm talking about someone who has earned a postsecondary credential, including a professionally recognized credential, a certificate, a diploma, an associate's degree or higher.

This is neither a dream nor a fantasy. It is a necessity. Two out of every three jobs available in Virginia, and throughout the nation, will require more than a high school education before this decade is finished. We face some pretty harsh realities in that effort, however. Minority students do not pursue college at the same rate of their white counterparts. And when they do, they often struggle. African-American and Latino students significantly trail Asian and white students when it comes to student success.

Race is not the only dimension to this challenge. Rural Virginia badly lags the rest of the state in terms of high school graduation rates and college attainment. Much of the area I'm talking about lies along our southern border with North Carolina, and the western border we share with Tennessee, Kentucky and West Virginia. The decline of tobacco, the decimation of furniture making and manufacturing jobs and the long running struggles of coal communities have drained those places of opportunity and, all too often, drained them of hope.

There, we have to convince families, who are often white, and who never before needed an education to get a good job, to send their children to college. Even the parents who understand it are conflicted, knowing that sending their child to college often means sending them away for good.

Three guiding principles

Serving Virginia's 21st century students, helping them succeed requires Virginia's Community Colleges to construct a faculty and staff that embraces the diversity of our communities and fosters a spirit and practice of inclusivity. In our efforts to achieve that, we have discovered and affirmed three guiding principles.

First, our business case determines our faculty and staff diversity. You see, it's not enough to talk about diversity as simply doing the right thing. It's not enough to generate warm and fuzzy feelings when the calendar tells us September begins National Hispanic Heritage Month; October is LGBT History Month, February is Black History Month and March is Women's History Month. This priority must be articulated and prioritized in a consistent way that supports our business case.

Second, we must focus not just on diversity, but also on inclusion. It's not enough just to have a diverse looking collection of people in the room. They must also be in the conversation and in the decision making process.

And third, finding and fostering inclusion is a leadership competency that must permeate our organization. It's not enough for the guy at the top to embrace, no matter how hard he tries. It must be broader.



“Culture eats strategy for breakfast.” That quote from Peter Drucker was made popular by Peter Fields, the CEO of Ford in 2005. Fields lived by the quote as he worked to change the car company's culture toward creativity and innovation. I think it applies even more broadly than that and certainly for placing a priority on finding and fostering inclusion.

I want to take a few moments and talk about each of those truths. Then we get to the fun part and open up the conversation. Let's begin with that first one. It's all about your business case.

An evolving mission

For as long as I can remember, we have described our community colleges as America's democracy colleges. We were built to be, and remain, a place where anyone can come to realize their American Dream and begin their climb to our nation's middle class and beyond. It strikes me that our higher

education partners, our friends in four-year institutions, define themselves by how many applicants they reject. Community colleges, on the other hand, brag about how many people they can attract and serve. Our mantra could be reduced to a single word: access.

Our focus is growing, however. And I see two reasons for that. One, state policymakers are expecting more while at the same time funding less. Over time, our per-student funding has dropped significantly. Virginia students, today, are paying more of the cost of their college education than state government is. Despite that, there is a renewed focus on accountability. Policymakers want to see metrics explaining what it is that taxpayers are getting for their investment.

The other reason for the change is that evolving population I told you about. I mentioned a few moments ago how Virginia's population has more than doubled over the last fifty years. Families who have little to no college experience are largely fueling that growth. I'm talking about people who typically are described as URP's in education-speak or under-represented populations. In Virginia, URP's include certain minority and ethnic groups, certain geographic locations as well as those who are the first in their family to attend college.

The truth is that many of those URP students – even if you can get them in the door in the first place – don't feel like they belong in college. As educators, part of our job is to convince them that they belong. We can't do that if we can't connect with them. In fact, when I first attended a community college I was a URP. I was the first in my family to pursue higher education.

I know how important this is to our students. Our new reality finds us with fewer public resources coupled with greater accountability as well as more people who need what community colleges provide but probably don't know that because no one in the family has ever gone to school. That requires us to expand our focus from just college access to include student success. It's no longer about how many people can you let in. It's about how many people can let in and help move out with a credential that is worth something in the marketplace?

Policy makers want to see us turn public investments into credentialed talent. Families want us to turn their time, tuition and fees into career opportunities. Our mission is different today. We must help URP students succeed at least at the same rates other students do.

Beyond a moral imperative

All too often, organizational diversity initiatives are expressed as moral imperatives. Being an Equal Opportunity employer is considered a matter of doing what's right. And while many of us agree that, sure, that is the right thing to do, do you know what else is the right thing to do?

- Obey the speed limit;
- Don't smoke;
- Avoid fried, fatty and sugary foods;
- Drink alcohol in only reasonable amounts;
- Wash your hands before leaving the bathroom; and
- Call your mother.

Those are all considered the right thing to do. We share a spotty record, however, when it comes to following through. Individually, I do all those things, right? How about across the office? Do all of

your colleagues do all of those things? How about across your community? How about across our country?

- Excessive speeding is the second leading cause of fatal car wrecks in America.
- It's been more than 50 years since the Surgeon General of the United States warned us all to stop smoking yet 300 billion cigarettes were sold in America last year.
- So much for watching what we eat: America has the highest rate of obesity of any developed nation in the world.
- Our nation's bar tab in 2011 was \$162 billion, enough to buy every American nearly 26 gallons of alcohol.
- The cold and flu season often highlights our challenges with basic hygiene, like hand washing.
- And I've never, ever, met a mother who complained about her children calling too often.

Inclusion, not just diversity

That brings me back to the workplace. The right thing to do is just simply not enough to compel us to do everything right. If diversity is a priority, it must be institutionalized and tied to your mission. If inclusion is a priority, it must be institutionalized and tied to your mission.

I began my career as a community college instructor. That's where I learned a valuable lesson: students don't do optional. It took me the rest of my career to understand that nobody else does either.

I learned this in recent years with an effort we called the Chancellor's Faculty Diversity Initiative. We launched this a few years ago to address something that bothered us. Taken on the whole, the demographics of our teaching pool were not aligned with the demographics of our student body. This was true especially with our adjunct ranks, the part-time instructors that we rely on to carry so much of our teaching load.

In an effort to remedy that, we made a concerted effort to diversify the adjunct pool. We launched and publicized two programs to find some teaching talent that we were otherwise missing. One program is called the Minority Professional Teaching Fellows. It's built to attract working professionals who hold graduate degrees into the adjunct pool and provide them an experienced teaching mentor should they be hired to teach a class.

The other program is called the Graduate Student Teaching Fellows. It's a similar setup for those who are working their way through graduate school and want to teach. Since we announced that effort five years ago, we have added 500 candidates to our adjunct pool – 60 percent of whom are minorities.

As the face of Virginia changes, as the need to produce more graduates becomes greater, we must adapt. We need to hire faculty and staff members who look like our students. Doing our job means that we make what we offer known and attractive to people who have never considered us before. That's an urgent need. Dropping out of high school or refusing to attend college can doom generations of a family to a cycle of failure. We must break that cycle.

We have to break that cycle in the coalfields and the tobacco fields, where no one in the family ever needed a college degree before. We need to break that cycle in the urban areas where children grow up not seeing a single college graduate living in their neighborhood. And we need to break that cycle for our newest Virginians who came here to pursue a dream and need our help overcoming the language and culture differences that can intimidate.

Doing our job means having the faculty and staff who can do that across the state. People who share experiences with, and speak the common language of, the people we want to serve – and have the academic and workforce bona fides to help them excel.

A few years ago, Virginia's Community Colleges adopted a new mission statement. The old one, as it was, was fine though it was too long and wordy to be useful. Our new mission statement, while not as catchy as "Just do it!" is both understandable and functional. It says that we give everyone the opportunity to learn and develop the right skills so lives and communities are strengthened. The keyword there, I believe, is everyone.

Leadership competency

So, how do we do that? How do we recruit, hire, manage and develop that throughout our organization? The answer isn't easy but it is simple. We must build inclusion into a leadership competency. After all, it's simply another form of talent management. The same way that we have to articulate a clear and convincing connection between inclusivity and our central mission, we must make the case to managers at every level that inclusiveness is essential to student success.

I feel the need to say very clearly that I am not talking about quotas here. History is full of quota efforts that have failed miserably. One could argue that they are among the right things to do that never could seem to be done right. Besides, what I am talking about goes beyond counting noses and checking race and ethnicity boxes on a staffing HR form.

Inclusion, of course, means that we are building a community of faculty and staff that is capable of reaching people from various races and ethnicities and helping them succeed. But it goes further than that. It means building a community of faculty and staff that is capable of doing that with:

- People across the economic spectrum;
- People from different regions;
- People of different ages;
- People with disabilities;
- People who were born elsewhere;
- People from across the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender community;
- People who come from different faith traditions and those who have no faith tradition; and
- This may be the most controversial thing I say today given the climate these days: people who come from all over the political spectrum.

That's a tall order. Each of us, after all, is a victim of our own experience. But that's all the more reason to ensure that we are not just doing things the same way we always have with the same people we've always done them with. It's a challenge to recognize the talent and perspective comes before us in countless variations – and it makes us better.

One pet peeve of mine, that I am not afraid to share with you, is this: How many times have you seen a collection of people – maybe it’s a conference, maybe it’s simply a department at your college – and a significant number of the people, perhaps even the majority of them, all come from the same alma mater?

For Pete’s sake, there are more than 4,100 public and private two- and four- year colleges and universities in the United States. And there are even more abroad. I understand someone having pride in their school and a willingness to speak with fellow graduates? But should any single one of those schools hold a lock on, well, anything that we do? That’s not even practicing what we preach, is it? I mean, how many times you seen a student assigned to write a paper or do a project that required only one source of information?

Everyone nodded when President-elect John F. Kennedy said that he wanted to fill out his administration with the best and the brightest. But those nods became head scratches when we learned that the best and the brightest resided only in Boston, Massachusetts. Candidly, we failed to make that case to our managers when we created the Chancellor’s Faculty Diversity Initiative. You see, it feels great to tell you about the hundreds of candidates it added to our hiring pool. It feels terrible, however, to tell you about the mere handful of those candidates who have ever been hired to teach a class.

People don’t do optional, remember? We failed to require our deans and hiring managers to turn to that pool when it came time to hire more adjuncts. We failed to hold them accountable or even teach them a process to foster inclusiveness in this instance. And these hard lessons are helping us get it right the next time around.

Insider-outsider dynamic

By next time, of course, I mean right now. We have assembled a blue ribbon group to tackle this issue across our colleges and to articulate our educational case for diversity. The Chancellor’s Task Force on Diversity consist of people from across all of our colleges and from across the functional business units within those colleges.

That includes the hiring managers we missed last time out. We are counting on that group to grasp the clear changes happening throughout Virginia and translate that for us into a practical, functional response for our colleges. As we seek tangible ways to embrace diversity and foster inclusivity, we must find ways to overcome the insider-outsider dynamic.

Really, if we can’t find reliable and consistent ways to attract diverse talent into our faculty and staff ranks we are failing the people we serve. If we can’t find reliable and consistent ways to develop that talent and ensure their perspective is honored at our colleges, we are failing ourselves.

The bottom line is that in a growing and dynamic Virginia, if the people we hire don’t resemble and relate to the people we serve, if they don’t feel included and empowered to help us serve them better – and I’m talking about the folks on the payroll here – then we can’t say that we truly serve all the people of Virginia. And we cannot say that we are living up to our mission of giving everyone the knowledge and skills they need.

The march was right

Before I open things up here for questions and answers, I would just like to make one final point. 2013 marks the golden anniversary of the 1963 March on Washington – which occurred of course at the Lincoln Memorial, just across the Potomac River from Virginia. In a way, Martin Luther King, Jr. stole the show. His iconic “I Have a Dream Speech” was later described as the great aria of the civil rights movement. That happens, I suppose, when a man just happens to give one of the finest speeches in his country’s history.

What gets lost, however, is the true purpose behind the demonstration. It was called “The March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom.” Notice the word “jobs” is even listed before ‘freedom.’ The march was to support a ten point economic plan focused on job and career opportunities that included a call for a higher minimum wage, the end of school desegregation as well as the end of discrimination in hiring and housing. The organizers of that demonstration focused on the right things. I’m not sure, however, what it means that so much of that work remains unfinished.

A study released earlier this year by the federal government carried with it some grim statistics: By age 25, African Americans and Hispanics were twice as likely as white students to be high school dropouts; By age 25, white students were more than twice as likely to have earned a bachelor's degree; While 30 percent of whites had graduated from college by their mid-20's, only 14 percent of blacks and 12 percent of Hispanics had done so; and subsequently, it confirmed that those with less education spent more time unemployed during and after the recession. Those are national statistics, mind you. But we own some of that in Virginia, just as you do in Nevada.

I don’t know about you but that’s not the legacy I want to leave behind. We know higher education works. We know that some people, and some groups, simply aren’t engaging with it yet. And we know that we have the ability to build the talented faculty and staff to turn that around. Virginia has a history, a legacy if you will, of being the birthplace to so many American ideals.

Now is the time to begin the next chapter of that Virginia story, being the place where every person, regardless of where their parents come from, has access to the American Dream: a good education, meaningful employment and the chance to contribute to their community. Community colleges have a big role to play – perhaps the leading role – in capturing the spirit of America and ensuring that everyone who wants to has ownership of it! Join us in that, won’t you?

Ladies and gentlemen, you’ve been very gracious and patient through my remarks. Now it’s your turn. I’d really like to hear from you and take some questions...