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Latinx and the Community College: Promoting Pathways to Postsecondary Degrees

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Latinx and the Community College: Promoting Pathways to Postsecondary Degrees

Chancellor Eloy Ortiz Oakley¹
at the Latino Education and Advocacy Days, LEAD Summit VIII

Chancellor Ortiz Oakley: I'm just going to take a few minutes to talk about what's on your mind and what's on my mind and that is Latino education, Latino student success, and then I welcome the opportunity to hear from our panelist and to answer any questions that they might have. You all understand the statistics, there's no point in me sitting here telling you and walking you through all the depressing statistics that we already know clearly exist, but as was mentioned, the California Community College system is the largest system of public higher education in the nation and in being so, opens the door to the majority of Latinos into higher education and that is a privilege that we have, and it's also a responsibility that our community colleges have and it's a responsibility that we're going to be talking a lot about over the next several years.

My good friend Sarita Brown who oversees an organization called *Excelencia* in Education, we talk a lot about this issue of Latino student success. You have institutions like the one I previously had the opportunity to lead, Long Beach City College or Cal State San Bernardino or hundreds of colleges and universities throughout the county which are now designated Hispanic-Serving Institutions (HSI) by the federal government through the Department of Education. And you become a Hispanic-Serving Institution by serving a large majority of Latinos. But that's really the only qualifications a Hispanic-Serving Institution has in order to be designated one. So we've been talking a lot about changing that dynamic and this is a roundabout to getting to my point, we need to become a Hispanic Graduating Institutions, not just Hispanic-Serving Institutions.

We need to give our young people credentials. So, certainly in our 113² colleges many of which are Hispanic-Serving Institutions, we want to ensure that the responsibility lies within each and every one of our colleges to become Hispanic Graduating Institutions or African

¹ Reflects Q&A portion with Chancellor Oakley only. For video and complete panel presentation visit LEAD website.

² Number has since increased to 114 community colleges.

American Graduating Institutions, or Pacific Islander Graduating Institutions. We need to ensure that more young people, more working class adults, more people, more Californians have access to not just a quality education, but leave with a quality credential in their hand because what we know today, clearly week after week we can pick up the paper and read another study that says, clearly the gap between those with the high school education and those with a college credential continues to increase and as such we see a widening gap. This last presidential election showed us a lot, and in some cases showed us too much, but it did show us a lot. But what I want to focus on is the issue of more and more Californians, more and more Americans becoming disconnected from the economy, because at the end of the day it's all about the economy and the opportunity to engage in the economy in a meaningful way. And a high school diploma just doesn't get our kids there, our working age adults there any longer. So we have an imperative, you already know we have a crisis and we've tried the moral argument for years and years and years and years and we still are treading water using the moral argument, this is an economic argument.

In order for states like California to succeed, in order for our nation to succeed, we need to embrace every single asset in our community and it's evident that most of those assets are becoming brown, are becoming Black, are becoming Asian and Pacific Islander, we need to embrace all those assets and make sure that we provide them the opportunity for a quality credential. So I appreciate the work that you all are doing in continuing to lead the effort—to focus attention on Latino students. Our state depends on us being successful, our state will not continue as it was or as it should be if we are not successful at putting more quality credentials in the hands of Latino students and I am proud and privileged to have the opportunity to lead our 113 colleges on that journey and it's a journey that cannot take 5-15 years, it's a journey that has to take 1, 2, 3 years, we need to make progress today. We need to embrace the urgency of now; we cannot wait and continue to wait until tomorrow. So I hope that you join me in that journey and support our California Community College system, support the California State University system, which between the two are the workhorse for our economy in California. And our economy in California cannot do the work it needs to do without more Latinos meaningfully participating in the workforce. So we have a lot in front of us, I know you've heard about all of the data, were going to be putting a clear focus on that data and being very intentional about what's going on and very intentional about holding ourselves accountable

for what we need to do. So again I thank you for coming out here and continuing to support this effort and support the effort in all of your communities. We need to do this day in and day out, this can't be about coming to the LEAD conference once a year, it has to be about living the LEAD conference everyday in every single one of our communities and pushing and pushing all of our leaders until we see the results that will give us what we have been looking for and allow California to continue to be the leader that it has been.

Dr. Nancy Acevedo-Gil: Latino students have these aspirations to transfer, unfortunately we know that at least 85% of students who are coming into the community college system will be testing into developmental or remedial math and after four years of course work out of 100 students who actually enroll in developmental math, only 17 will complete a transfer level math course. At the institutional level the developmental education system is broken, the basic skills, remedial education whatever terminology you want to use.

Can you share with us your plan for transformative policies to promote equity and justice within the developmental education? While we have these great much needed programs beginning like, multiple measures and acceleration, systematically what measurements or credentials can you propose to address these deficit ideologies of instructors and administrators that, no matter how amazing the policy once it gets to the institutional implementation level it is going to create a barrier for our students and for other amazing leaders within these systems.

Chancellor Ortiz Oakley: Well that's the million-dollar question. I will try to give you as succinct an answer as possible because I can probably literally spend all day talking to you about just this question. Because it has many many tentacles, many many reasons, and the conspiracy theorist in me would say that it has been complicated on purpose.

Let me begin with saying clearly that you used a phrase in your question that thousands and thousands of students test in the developmental level and let me focus on the word *test*. It has certainly been my experience when I worked at Long Beach City College and the work I've seen happen across the nation that standardize placement exams are some of the *worst* predictors of college success that exist in our system throughout the country and we need to end the use of standardized placement exams, period. I can tell you that the California

Community Colleges will move in that direction at an accelerating pace. We are looking at ways to create a multiple measures platform that allows every college to use multiple measures whether that be high school transcripts, other information that gives us better information about whether or not a student can be successful in a college level course.

There are a lot of things we need to do to get there. We need to have better data, we need to have greater access to high school transcripts in a real time basis, but the importance of this is tremendous. One because my experience at Long Beach was that, the semester after we implemented a multiple measures framework for all Long Beach Unified students coming to Long Beach City College, we saw a three hundred percent increase in the number of students of color that placed in a college level math. Think about that. No student is transferring without successfully navigating college level or transfer level math, that's just a period, you can put a period at the end of that.

So, when I got to Long Beach City College we literally had success rates of Latino students in college level math, in the single digits. So it's no surprise what's happening on the other end of that funnel, very few students are getting through to the other end. And you can say the same thing about African American students, you can say the same thing about Southeast Asian students, Pacific Islander students, any student who is socio-economically disadvantaged, it's the same story. And you can play this tune across the entire nation. There has been a lot of great work that has been done at the Community College Research Center of Columbia Teachers College, that clearly shows that we need to move away from these standardized placement exams and we are going to do that.

As I'm sure you've heard, there is a bill in the legislature that would allow us to do that even faster, but regardless of bills, we know what needs to be done and we are going to set to work on getting it done. It will take a little bit of time because we have 113 colleges and believe it or not I can't just tell 113 colleges what to do. I have to *slowly* convince them what to do but we're going to speed that up. The other thing that needs to happen is, I mean, if you take a step back, why do we have standardized placement exams? Why? Because faculty don't trust faculty. Community college faculty don't trust high school faculty, Cal State faculty don't trust Community College faculty and the UC faculty doesn't trust anyone, so that is a fundamental problem.

How do we get consistency across all segments of public education to ensure that if somebody graduates from Garfield High or Pacific Palisades or anywhere in the state of California those grades are consistently applied to wherever class they need to be placed in. That's the way it should work, but then we've created all these complicated structures to try and weed out students from this high school or that high school because we don't trust their curriculum at their high school or we don't trust the graduation rates at that high school and the students coming from this high school are much better quality than that high school. That's craziness. Again, that plays the notion that the zip code you're born into will dictate your path in life and we need to end that.

So, things like common core implementation, you know we can beat ourselves over the head a lot about whether we're doing it right, whether we're doing it wrong, whether Local Control Funding Formula is going to get us there, but we need to get behind initiatives that level the playing field and it's going to take time but we've got to get it done. So that's a long term solution, in the short term I know that the Cal State system is also, I heard from Chancellor White that they're looking at their placement exams. I think you're going to see this across the country, more and better ways to assess students ability to succeed and then once we do that, yes we still have a problem with remediation, so we're investing a lot of resources right now to improve our ability to continue to move students forward regardless of where their gaps might exist. We've seen a lot of great practices across the country and we're going to try and accelerate the adoption of those practices right now and hopefully move those students that still need some remedial support an opportunity to do that in a timely manner without having to sit through three semesters before they get to a college level class.

Dr. Edna Martinez: Chancellor Oakley, we've talked a little bit about developmental education and a little bit about transfer education. I'm hoping you can talk to us a little bit about the California Community Colleges Baccalaureate Degree Pilot Program. The discourse surrounding the pilot program is very much centered on "meeting state and local workforce needs," but the question being, what does it mean for our students?

Twelve of the 15 pilot sites are Hispanic-Serving Institutions (HSIs), and 2 are designated as emerging HSIs, so again what does the pilot program mean for our students? Is it a potential opportunity to increase baccalaureate degree attainment for Latino students?

Chancellor Ortiz Oakley: So, the short answer is yes, it is an opportunity to increase baccalaureate attainment; there are some challenges with that construct though. First, the real answer to the challenge is increase capacity at the California State University system. That is the ultimate solution. We are now trying to find ways around the lack of capacity at the Cal State University system and so we are looking at ways to get the Community Colleges to provide access to workforce needs, and that runs contrary to the way that we set up our system in California. We have asked the community colleges to serve many, many missions and now we are asking them to serve another.

My concern is that California Community Colleges are already underfunded, per student funding is some of the worst in the country, and now we are asking them to offer quality, and they will, quality baccalaureate degrees, and I'm sure the legislature is going to think, and no offense to my friends in the legislature, but they are going to think we can do it cheaper in the California community colleges. We don't want cheaper for our students, we want the highest quality for our students, so we have to be careful, we have to be careful if we go down this road that we are not bifurcating paths for, you know the Latino or Black students who can't afford, or can't get access to the Cal State system, they can go get a cheaper bachelors degree. That's not what we want. So I am all for doing everything possible to support the existing pilots, but not without the conversation about what kind of access we need for our students at the CSU and why aren't we funding it and that we will not be the release valve for the legislature when they don't feel that they want to fund the Cal State System anymore and that they believe that we can do it cheaper in the community college system.

So, this is going to be a delicate balance, at the end of the day, yes there are communities in the state that don't have easy access to a Cal State campus, and in those situation, yes, we should be allowing a community college to provide whatever access that community needs, but not because it is a cheaper way of doing it or not because we don't want to fund the Cal State system.