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Bridges

When my wife, Melanie and I moved to Portland, Oregon from Washington DC, one of the first things we noticed about Portland is that it has a lot of bridges. Over the last few years we have come to think of Portland Community College as one of them. PCC is a bridge to a better life, a bridge to greater opportunity through education and training.

Like many communities, the greater Portland metropolitan region is at an important crossing. On one side, we have robust economic growth and low unemployment and on the other we have escalating housing costs, gentrification of once diverse neighborhoods and inequitable gains in median household income.

At Portland Community College, community is our middle name, and the concerns of our community are ours as well. That is why we are doubling down on widening the bridge to opportunity by focusing on equitable student success.

For us, that means improving success rates for all students while eliminating outcome disparities between student populations.

PCC is the largest higher education institution in Oregon with 67,000 credit and non-credit students served at our four comprehensive campuses and six centers.

Like many community colleges, our approach has evolved from helping the student to become college-ready, to making the college student-ready. This meant that we needed to go beyond helping our students navigate our systems, practices and structures to actually taking a hard look at these important factors and be willing to change them.

Our initial step was to join Achieving the Dream (ATD), a national network of community colleges dedicated to equity and student success. We then completed the ATD Institutional Capacity Assessment Tool or iCAT. The iCAT helped us determine our institutional readiness for systemic change. That knowledge then helped establish our strategic priorities.

We also disaggregated our data. Like the majority of our peers across the nation we found racial disparities in our student success data. These data challenged us to reflect on the story the numbers were telling and what to do in response to it.

A big part of the story has to do with food and housing insecurity. We participated in the Real College survey on food and housing insecurity and discovered that 20% of respondents reported experiencing homelessness while over two thirds reported either food or housing insecurity. Of course, these are major barriers to equitable student success.

This data collection informed the development of college-wide teams to plan and implement several initiatives.

These included:

- new outreach and enrollment management strategies and technology (Enrollment RX)
- multiple measures placement practices that replaced a single, high stakes test
- a new student admissions and registration process
- a redesign of our advising practices and support technology (EAB Navigate)
- a new initiative called Pathways to Opportunity to improve student access to public benefits and other basic needs and supports
- a redesign of developmental education courses and pathways
- professional development for faculty on culturally responsive and culturally sustaining instruction
- Establishing Guided Pathways (PCC's Academic Pathways)
- PCC was awarded a \$2.2 million Title III grant to help build our capacity to sustain this work.

And of course, we have a name for all of this mutually-reinforcing work. We are calling this strategic initiative, "Yes to Equitable Student Success." YESS is co-led by PCC's VP of Academic Affairs, Dr. Katy Ho and the Interim VP of Student Affairs, Dr. Heather Lang.

The YESS initiative-builds upon the successes of many outstanding PCC programs such as: Future Connect (a project that doubles graduation rates for first generation students); Career Pathways (short term training with holistic supports and a 94% graduation rate); Men of Color Center for Educational Excellence; Gateway to College; DREAMers' Resource Center for undocumented students; STEP (education and training for SNAP recipients) and many other programs and services.

And yet, even with all of these amazing programs, we have room for improvement at scale and across the college.

Which is why, after extensive analysis and cross-college deliberations, I recently announced a major reorganization of our school in order to optimize the institutional framework for making the systemic changes necessary to improve equitable student success at scale.

YESS and other initiatives such as strategic planning, accreditation, and budget development are moving forward in an articulated and aligned manner as we strive to keep *our commitment to equity and inclusion at the center of all of our efforts.*

To that end I am particularly heartened by the new NWCCU standards, particularly Standard One, with its emphasis on equity and student success. This development helps institutions such as PCC frame our work within a necessarily broader context.

The collective hope behind this work is that more students than ever will be able to cross this bridge called PCC, to a better future for themselves, their families, and their communities.