California Community Colleges

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FOUNDATION for CALIFORNIA COMMUNITY COLLEGES

How Boards and Trustees Can Advance Student Success and Equity

Lessons from California

A Statement from Chancellor Oakley

Dear Colleagues,

The California Community Colleges have never been more important to our students and the state, and we are rising to meet the moment. In 2017, we created the *Vision for Success: Strengthening the California Community Colleges to Meet California's Needs,* our strategic plan to close equity gaps, and we were clear about the goals and commitments our system must meet to better serve our students. We must increase completion of degrees and transfer, reduce unnecessary unit accumulation, increase employment, and close equity gaps. We've since made tremendous strides, though transformational change takes time — and we acknowledge how much more work remains to be done, especially for our students of color who were hard hit by the pandemic and racial reckoning of 2020.

From the start, we identified the vital role college presidents, district CEOs, and their boards of trustees would play in achievement of this Vision. I'm grateful to those who stepped up and participated in our fellowship, which asked leaders to critically evaluate current student success initiatives on their campuses and identify where greater improvements were required. Participants impressively embraced the call to confront some hard truths about existing efforts, or lack thereof, and to lean into their roles as leaders in driving a student- and equity-centered agenda. And our funders, the California College Futures Foundation and the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, understood the critical role that our system's leaders must play to enact transformational change and provided the support needed to bring the Aspen Institute's expertise to our work.

Learnings and recommendations included in the following report lay the groundwork to continue these efforts and scale them across and beyond our California community colleges. We hope others will see this as a model of what it means to act boldly, in alignment, and in partnership, to implement long-term solutions to address long-standing inequities.

I hope you will see opportunities for your institution in this report. This work will be uncomfortable, but we owe it to the students and communities our colleges serve to ensure each and every individual receives the support they need to reach their educational and career goals.

In partnership,

Eloy Ortiz Oakley
Chancellor, California Community Colleges
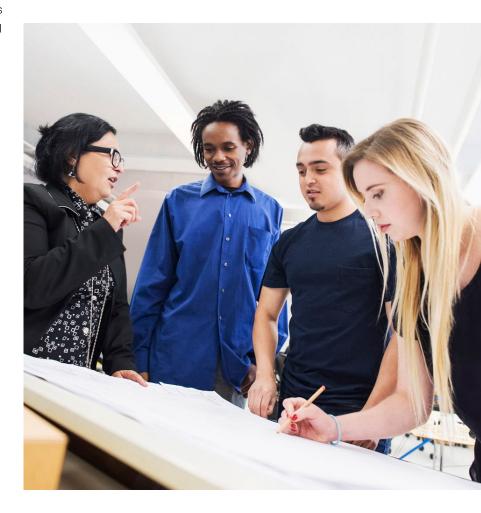
Introduction

In recent years, many community colleges across the country have doubled down on their commitment to advance equitable student success. College presidents and CEOs have built urgency for change and, within their teams, have set concrete improvement targets, established and strengthened partnerships outside the college, and introduced a host of new initiatives to better serve students and communities.

However, in many cases, these student success efforts have weakened over time or even been abandoned. This can be caused by a number of things standing in the way of sustained, substantial change, such as initiative fatigue, inadequately-scaled reforms, and the turnover of leadership positions. Additionally, institutions often fail to sustain attention to the institutional changes in culture and policy needed to fundamentally improve the student experience. However, when bold reform does hold and impressive results follow, a college doesn't just have strong leaders in the presidency and cabinet; its board of trustees has also engaged meaningfully in the student success work, and that commitment drives continuous improvement no matter what leadership, financial, or other challenges the institution faces.

Take the case of California. The state's community colleges have worked diligently for years to advance student success, equity, and social justice. This work is today guided by its strategic plan — *Vision for Success: Strengthening the California Community Colleges to Meet California's Needs* — which established systemwide student success and equity goals and core commitments grounded in the guided pathways framework, and by the chancellor's *Call to Action,* which focuses the system on addressing structural racism in its programs and policies. Many CEOs and their cabinets led strategic planning processes that set forth local goals aligned with state goals to improve completion rates and eliminate racial and regional equity gaps.[1]

Cover:
Santa Monica College

Below:
Los Angeles Trade and Technical College

How Boards and Trustees Can Advance Student Success and Equity

To meet these goals, college teams have worked hard to implement change and improve the student experience: overhauling developmental education, devising clear program maps aligned with strong transfer opportunities, revamping advising structures so that students stay on a path to graduation, establishing dual enrollment partnerships with local schools, strengthening transfer degree pathways with universities, and more.

The results have been encouraging: Data show significant improvement in the graduation and transfer rates for California community colleges every year from 2016 through 2020.

Beneath these averages, however, lie troubling disruptions rooted in the lack of alignment with boards of trustees. Some college leaders have struggled to gain board approval for budgetary and policy changes essential to enacting holistic, collegewide reforms. Internal board dissention and interference with core operational decisions have also led to disruptive leadership changes, even at colleges where outcomes were improving.

For community colleges to achieve sustained gains in student success and equity, partnerships between CEOs and their boards must be strengthened. Trustees and CEOs should spend more time building and deepening a shared understanding of goals and strategies and then aligning board actions with those goals. This is especially important in times of crisis, when it can be a struggle for college leaders to remain focused on long-term student success reforms while simultaneously responding to more urgent campus needs.[2]

Recognizing this challenge, the chancellor of the California Community Colleges sought collaborative professional development for board members and CEOs. Aspen Institute partnered with the Success Center at the Foundation for California Community Colleges and Kay and Byron McClenney, former college CEOs and national leaders in community college reform, to craft a board-CEO fellowship. Over 12 months in 2020 and 2021, two trustees and the CEO from 34 California community college districts comprising 68 colleges, participated in four workshops to recognize concrete steps which would engage their full boards to take actions aligned with student success priorities. Twenty-one of the teams also spent three months on a project, facilitated by field experts, to apply learning from the fellowship to a specific reform strategy at their college.

This report lays out an action framework for boards seeking to play an instrumental role in student success and equity reforms. It highlights this framework with learning from the California workshops, including how districts worked to strengthen their board operations and relationships with the CEO. It closes with recommended next steps that systems — in California and nationwide — can take to better align boards of trustees' actions with institution-wide transformational reform aimed at advancing equitable student success.

How Boards and Trustees Can Advance Student Success and Equity

A framework for effective board engagement

Over the past 10 years, the Aspen Institute College Excellence Program has researched what enables certain community colleges to achieve higher, faster-improving, and more equitable levels of student success than others. Through research for the Aspen Prize for Community College Excellence, participation in national and state-level guided pathways workshops, and other projects, Aspen has seen that colleges only achieve sustained collegewide change and improved outcomes for students, including underrepresented minority (URM) students and students from low-income backgrounds when they have highly effective CEOs and senior teams.[3]

Mt. San Antonio College

Strong governing boards are essential as well, for several reasons.[4]

- First, sustained institution-wide reform requires board action, including the adoption of substantial changes to institutional priorities, policies, and budgets. Trustees who understand the urgency for reform will adopt policies and budgets to advance the work, even when they face some opposition.

- Second, as political divisions in our country have sharpened, increasing numbers of college boards have disagreed about issues that have little to do with advancing student success and equity. Only by engaging more deeply in the why and how of institutional reform strategies — and setting and monitoring associated goals — can boards remain united in ways that prevent political differences from diverting substantial attention from essential student success and equity goals.

- Third, it takes several years, often spanning the tenure of multiple CEOs, to improve equitable student success outcomes. When boards adopt clear goals and own the reform strategy, there's a greater chance they'll hire successor CEOs who will continue the progress made by their predecessor — or chart a new course toward those goals if necessary.

To support college CEOs and trustees in their common pursuit of student success, Aspen has translated its research into an eight-part framework for effective board engagement in transformational change. The framework details the mindset, priorities, and practices that make boards more effective in driving and supporting sustained improvement efforts.

Framework for Effective Board Engagement

Understand, Commit, and Set Goals

1. Understand why institutional change is important for the community, students, and for equity	2. Understand the reform strategy in broad terms	3. Set internal student success and equity goals, including leading and lagging indicators	4. Set goals for success after graduation, at transfer institutions, or in the workforce

Align Board Actions to Goals

5. As a board, monitor what matters: progress towards student success and equity goals	6. Focus board committees, review, and retreat on student success and equity goals	7. Align vision, policies, and budget to student success and equity goals	8. Conduct presidential hiring, transitions, and evaluations with student success and equity goals at forefront

Effective trustees commit themselves and their colleges to a set of clear student success and equity goals, understand the collegewide strategies designed to achieve them, select the right metrics to monitor progress, and align their time and actions accordingly. This includes everything from how boards allocate their meeting time, what they prioritize when adopting budgets, and how they hold the CEO accountable for results.

The California fellowship was rooted in the Aspen framework and its design flowed from several principles:

- **Professional development for boards is best delivered in partnership with the college or district CEO.** This is much more likely to yield collaborative future actions than if trustees learn and plan without CEOs present.

- **It's important to engage multiple board members.** Including at least two board members increases the likelihood that college teams execute plans to take next steps with the entire board.

- **Learning and planning can happen in small groups, but decision-making requires the full board.** The fellowship was designed to help trustees and CEOs learn about how to improve board actions and collaboration, and then take next steps to ensure that the full board decides what to change. Board decisions — even preliminary ones — should not be made by a small number of trustees during a fellowship.

By explaining the Aspen trustee framework in depth and sharing lessons from the fellowship, this report aims to demonstrate how concrete, concerted effort for CEOs and trustees — and perhaps structured, collaborative professional development — can lead community colleges in California and throughout the country toward more cohesive, sustained student success reform.

Understanding, committing to, and setting goals for student success and equity

At times, individual community college trustees aren't the strongest collaborators in student success and equity reforms. Some might not believe that low graduation rates or equity gaps are a problem; perhaps they shrug off poor outcomes because they think many students don't care if they earn a credential. They might argue that the data doesn't tell the true story or they focus on things that distract CEOs from essential reforms, interfering with personnel decisions, or peppering college leaders and researchers with so many data requests that they aren't seeing the information that matters most. It could be that trustees may align themselves more with special interests than with students.

To establish clarity and common purpose among trustees in ways that will advance student success and equity work, CEOs must work with boards to help them understand why change matters, clarify collegewide goals, align board actions with institutional strategies, and monitor consistent, easily understood measures of progress.

Priority 1: Understand why change is important

The starting point for this work — as it was for the California fellowship — is to develop a shared understanding about why collegewide reform matters, given the college's context. What does the surrounding community need that the college is not delivering? Are those who would benefit the most from a college education enrolling? Do certain populations have a decreased opportunity at accessing the college or succeeding there?

Among the data for CEOs and trustees to consider:

- Income levels and educational attainment rates in the service area, including disparities for those frequently left behind, such as Black/African American, Latinx, and American Indian/Alaskan Native people.

- Student population, disaggregated by race, ethnicity, gender, and other characteristics, as compared to the population in the service area.

- Student success outcomes, also disaggregated, as measured by course completion, credential attainment, transfer rates, workforce outcomes, and related metrics.

When trustees examine such data in collaboration with the CEO, a story unfolds about which groups in the community are more likely to live in poverty, which lack higher education, or which are not earning a credential after enrolling. Digging into data during the Aspen fellowship, California teams could see whether their colleges were promoting equitable economic mobility for their students through education that ultimately leads to high-value jobs and careers — a crucial function of community colleges.

Some teams concluded that their college had to close completion gaps in order to address high poverty and low educational attainment in the region. Others drew more granular conclusions, such as the importance of focusing on students with some college credits but no degree. Every team left with a better understanding of why change was needed.

Priority 2: Understand the reform strategy

It is not the job of boards to independently craft the detailed strategies necessary to advance student success and equity, such as those involving the mix of programs to offer, the structure of student advising, or the approach to faculty hiring. Nor do they have the expertise to do so. However, having hopefully developed an understanding of the issues and inequities that must be addressed, boards do have an obligation to make sure the college establishes reform strategies, at a scale equal to the challenge.

This is especially important when reforms fundamentally change the way a college operates. In California, all 116 community colleges are in various stages of implementing guided pathways — establishing clear program maps, completely revamping advising and English and math placement and support practices, and modifying other systems and policies to improve the student experience from enrollment through graduation. Trustees must understand why guided pathways reforms matter if trustees are to fully support the CEO and their team in making sweeping changes.

Santa Monica College

Consider, for example, a college that has set a goal of increasing the share of students who follow clear program pathways. In the short term, putting more students on pathways may result in a decline in course enrollment because students who follow program pathways typically don't continue to enroll in unnecessary courses. Trustees who don't understand the bigger picture — that program pathways are better overall for students, as it saves them time and money, and aligned to the important goal of improving degree completion — may concern themselves only with the tuition dollars lost in the short term and oppose changes needed for implementation. By building an understanding of how strategy aligns to goals, trustees may be more likely to see how short-term repercussions are beneficial as the college pursues its long-term student success goals, which in time can increase enrollment and completion and, in some states, increase funding too as a result.

Priority 3: Set student success and equity goals

A fundamental way community college boards reflect their priorities and commitment to student success and equity is by adopting concrete, public goals. Goals provide a north star for all of the trustees' activities — what they consider important when approving budgets, how they think about the efficacy of policies and needed changes, when they should push for different strategies aligned to goals, and how they hold the CEO accountable for progress.

Highly effective boards focus on a limited number of goals, around five. Their institutions will likely develop a greater number of key performance indicators to guide the actions of faculty, staff, and administrators, but the trustees understand that they should focus primarily on the higher-level goals and progress toward them.

To be effective, board-adopted goals should include both leading and lagging indicators.

Leading and Lagging Indicators Boards Should Consider

Leading Indicators

Shorter-term metrics that can be assessed frequently and signal progress. Examples include:

- Average credits completed per semester

- Average credits completed within program paths

- Number of students completing transfer-level math and English courses in a student's first year

- Course completion rates

- First to second year retention

Lagging Indicators

Metrics measured over a longer time horizon. Examples include:

- Completion of degrees

- Time to degree

- Number of students transferring to a four-year institution

- Number of students who complete a bachelor's degree

- Rate at which students are employed in family-sustaining wage jobs after graduating

It is crucial that boards trust the data they receive. Data must be clear, presentations should be consistent from meeting to meeting, and staff must be able to answer clarifying questions from trustees. When data integrity and trust are established, trustees and CEOs can be confident that they are receiving the information they need and can be reminded, if necessary, that they don't need to monitor many additional measures to keep focused on monitoring progress in the ways that matter most.

American River College

Priority 4: Set post-graduation student success goals, including transfer and workforce

As noted above, boards that work to understand why collegewide reform is necessary often examine conditions in their community: high and inequitable poverty rates, inadequate levels of college attainment for people of color, and a disconnect between good jobs available in the region and related programs offered at the college. Do students from low-income backgrounds earn workforce credentials, and do those credentials enable graduates to earn jobs with good wages? Do Black/African American, Latinx, and American Indian/Alaskan Native students earn associate degrees at high and equitable rates and go on to earn bachelor's degrees as well? Addressing disparities in these areas requires colleges to adopt goals and craft reform strategies that aim for impact beyond the time students are enrolled in college.

To guide the evaluation and development of goals — both while students are at the college and after they graduate — here are some questions useful for boards to consider:

- What are your district's current goals for student success and equity?

- Have they been formally adopted by the board?

- Are they adequate to challenges that present a need for reform?

- Do they include specific goals for all students, as well as for student groups including Black/African American and Latinx students and students from low-income backgrounds?

- Do they include leading indicators?

- Do they include lagging indicators?

- Do they include post-graduation indicators, such as completion of a bachelor's degree after transfer and employment in a job with good wages?

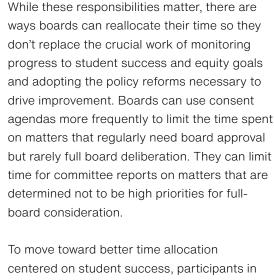- Based on this deliberation, what changes should the board consider?

California workshop participants considered these questions in reviewing their boards' student success goals. They reflected on examples of goals adopted by trustees of community colleges that have significantly advanced student success and equity, and the ways in which sustained commitment to those goals set the conditions for substantial improvements. They then identified goals to bring to their own boards for consideration.

During the fellowship, colleges that were deeply engaged in increasing completion rates through guided pathways often identified a goal of helping all students complete the college-level English composition and math courses on their program maps in their first year. For example, several trustees whose districts are working to increase success of Black/African American and Latinx students recommended their full board goals for aligning the racial makeup of the faculty with the makeup of the student population, auditing policies that might stand in the way of such hiring, and delivering professional development on hiring and retaining diverse faculty.[5] Boards that examined data showing that most good jobs in their service area require a bachelor's degree set goals for equitable attainment of both associate and bachelor's degrees.

Taking action to align board actions to goals

Priority 5: Monitor what matters

Ideally, community college boards play an important role not just in establishing a direction but ensuring the ship is always steered toward achievement of their end goal or goals. To do so, they must monitor progress toward the goals and carve out the time necessary to do so. It is easy for board meeting time to get consumed with lengthy presentations — some that have already previously been presented in committee — about tactical issues, such as faculty tenure decisions, program adoption, and facilities plans.

While these responsibilities matter, there are ways boards can reallocate their time so they don't replace the crucial work of monitoring progress to student success and equity goals and adopting the policy reforms necessary to drive improvement. Boards can use consent agendas more frequently to limit the time spent on matters that regularly need board approval but rarely full board deliberation. They can limit time for committee reports on matters that are determined not to be high priorities for full-board consideration.

To move toward better time allocation centered on student success, participants in the California fellowship considered these questions:

- Who within the board should review each data report? What is appropriate for committees, and what should be elevated to the board as a whole?

- How frequently should data be monitored at regular board and committee meetings? How could that rhythm be aligned to the timing of annual board responsibilities (for example, budget adoption and CEO evaluation)?

- How could the board periodically assess its own practices to determine how to improve its capacity to monitor what matters?

Cuyamaca College

How Boards and Trustees Can Advance Student Success and Equity

For colleges to close equity gaps, they must always examine outcomes for different groups of students. This means disaggregating all data by race and ethnicity, income (typically as indicated by whether a student receives federal Pell Grants), and any other characteristics important to the college, such as veteran or parenting status. First, trustees must come to understand why equitable student success matters and what the current equity gaps in student success look like. Then, they need to identify and implement tools to keep equity at the center of the conversation: data presentation, from paper charts to digital dashboards, that always incorporates disaggregated metrics.

Priority 6: Focus committees, reviews, and retreats on student success and equity goals

Even boards that have worked to align their meetings with student success goals and strategies understand that there is a limit to how much time they can spend on any one topic. To address this, they build parts of their board-facing work into committee agendas and schedule regular work sessions and retreats to enable deeper reflection.

At annual board retreats, trustees remind themselves of why reform is important and what it looks like, and dive deeply into progress toward their goals. Monthly or quarterly work sessions create time and space for boards to consider the implications of new state policies, review longer-term trendlines on a key student success measure and what might explain progress (or the lack thereof), evaluate changing conditions in the community that might implicate future goals and strategies, or develop priorities for an announced CEO transition. Over time, this helps trustees come to the understanding that this extra time is not just a reasonable expectation, but the most rewarding and important work they do all year.

Priority 7: Align vision, policies, and budgets with goals

Among a board's most important responsibilities is the enactment of policies and adoption of budgets that advance student success and equity. For example, trustees at colleges that have achieved substantial student success and equity goals have adopted policies mandating that students see advisors to ensure that the courses they choose align to their degree goals, revamped the manner in which students get placed into credit-bearing versus developmental courses, or stated as a goal that all students have in place a clear program map by the end of their first year.[6] Many of these policy changes have significant financial implications, requiring that boards align budget adoption with the college's strategic reform goals.

During the fellowship, California trustees created plans to suggest to their boards that they consider policies in those and other areas. For example, some considered policies aimed at advancing faculty diversity as a long-term means to achieving equity in student success. Others examined supporting the work of new student success teams (to ensure that students complete comprehensive educational plans in their first term) or enacting a new auto-enrollment process (which pushes first-time students to take a full-time schedule of courses along their transfer pathway).

Across multiple issues, one theme emerged several times: the risk that new policy and budget proposals could lead some trustees to try to dictate details that are within the purview of CEOs and of faculty, administrators, and staff. Not only are such details not the job of trustees, but this interference also can prevent the CEO from leading coherent reform strategies and prevent the board from fulfilling its critical reform-focused role. Trustees should set goals and monitor progress, but not dictate the means to those ends.

However, while boards ideally cede to CEOs the authority to define operational steps to achieve the goals they've set, that does not mean trustees abdicate all responsibility for strategy development. Trustees should regularly ask their CEO whether strategies adopted by the college are likely to achieve the student success and equity goals adopted by the board and, specifically, by when. If trustees are satisfied with the answer, their job is to rigorously monitor progress and, where progress is made, to support college leaders through policy adoption and budget allocation. When the college fails to meet the goals, boards should insist on course correction.

Priority 8: Align CEO hiring and evaluation to goals

There is no board decision more likely to make or break a community college's student success and equity agenda than who is hired as CEO. Boards committed to progress must center goals for equitable student success in the hiring process, onboarding and transition, evaluation, and retention decisions.

Aspen has created research-based tools that are useful for boards that want to hire excellent CEOs committed to equitable student success and capable of leading institutional transformation. Aspen also offers model transition plans for new CEOs that are centered around student success and equity.

College of the Canyons

Because they were not typically in hiring mode, participants in the California fellowship focused on aligning their CEO evaluations with college goals. While some CEOs had already put this into practice, others were just beginning to consider it. Recognizing the upheaval in enrollment and persistence caused by COVID-19, and subsequent factors outside of their control, this concerned some CEOs. Most teams, however, understood that placing student success and equity goals in the CEO evaluation — no matter what — gave them an opportunity to gain shared clarity about goals and metrics that mattered most and to express that clearly to the entire campus community. Such alignment provides focus for not just accountability in the annual evaluation process, but also in regular board-CEO conversations about the efficacy of needed reforms and how to course-correct, including during times of crisis.

How Boards and Trustees Can Advance Student Success and Equity

Effective Boards Set the Direction: A Self-Assessment

State systems should consider offering professional development opportunities like those offered in California. For trustees who do not have such opportunities for structured learning, here is a set of questions to use to assess a board's practices.

Set the strategic direction for student success

- Do you have a collective vision of how the college needs to improve?
- Does that vision address the needs of your service area, including its diverse populations and largest employment sectors?
- In what ways do you make student success with equity a central priority? How can you increase its importance in your work?
- Do you conduct regular reviews of policies to support student success and equity? Have you considered whether those policies ensure student participation (through, for example, mandatory practices in student orientation, advising, and planning)?
- Do you hold retreats and study sessions to review results and focus on future priorities?

Create the culture for change and transformation

- How clearly do you communicate to the CEO the expectation that reform strategies at the college should be bold enough to match the board's vision?
- How do you model and communicate an expectation that data about student success and equity will be used to inform and evaluate reform strategies?
- Are you aware of the major transformative developments in community colleges in the state and across the country? Examples include developmental education reform, guided pathways mapping and advising reforms, and expansion of dual enrollment and transfer pathways.
- When you consider budgets, how do you prioritize student success and equity goals in your deliberations and allocation decisions? Is there more you could do?
- Do you have strategic alliances with K-12 districts? With universities? With employers?
- Is the board ready to support mandatory practices and student experiences (such as in student orientation, advising, and planning) to improve outcomes?
- Do you meet regularly with the CEO to reinforce your expectations and provide support for them to lead courageous work?

Monitor what matters

- Have you adopted a limited set of metrics to monitor what matters?
- Do you take time to understand the student experience, including for students who have not been successful (for example, through demographic analyses, surveys, and focus groups)?
- Do you periodically discuss results on leading indicators of equitable student success (such as credit accumulation, gateway course completion, and proportion of students in programs that lead to high-paying careers, disaggregated by student group)?
- Do you periodically discuss results on lagging indicators of equitable student success (such as completion of credentials at the community college, transfer, and completion of bachelor's degrees, and employment and average wages, disaggregated by student group)?
- Have you embedded student success and equity goals in the CEO's evaluation?
- Do you meet with the CEO multiple times per year to discuss progress toward these goals?

A path forward: How systems can help strengthen board-CEO actions and relationships

During the California fellowship, teams made progress in advancing board practices to advance student success with equity. The process also revealed challenges that require additional work — and where a state community college system can provide support through policies, professional development, and other means. The following suggestions enumerate how systems can collaborate with boards toward progress, in California and throughout the country.

1. **Advance boards' commitment to keeping the college focused on a holistic student success and equity strategy.** Effective boards focus on adopting and monitoring goals that address large-scale, collegewide challenges in student success and equity, and consistently ask the CEO whether strategies being adopted are adequate to meet those goals. It can be difficult to remain focused on that level of inquiry, especially if the strategies adopted by the college are not at a scale needed to bring about the level of change that boards and CEOs aim to achieve. Professional development can be useful in introducing trustees to models of holistic collegewide goals and examples of appropriate, probing questions they should ask about the alignment of reform strategies with adopted goals.

2. **Support boards' increased sense of responsibility for student success and equity after graduation, in further education and in careers providing good wages.** Often, community college trustees set goals for student success that culminate in completion of an associate degree or other credential. To achieve economic and social mobility for its students, community colleges must not just produce graduates, but also ensure their success after graduation. More work is needed to help trustees understand why post-graduation outcomes are paramount. Specifically, trustees and CEOs should have repeated opportunities to review and discuss service-area data about the availability of good, living-wage jobs and about educational attainment levels and poverty (by gender, race, and ethnicity), to make clear the imperative to ensure that students have strong pathways that extend beyond the community college.

Los Angeles
Southwest College

How Boards and Trustees Can Advance Student Success and Equity

3. Help trustees and CEOs craft agreements on what actions are appropriate for boards. Trustees don't always understand what level of board engagement in operational detail is appropriate. When they overstep appropriate boundaries, it's often because trustees are eager to help solve problems without fully understanding how it could both compromise the CEO's authority and divert administrators, faculty, and staff at the college from pursuing other important priorities. California Community Colleges and other systems could provide time and space for CEOs and boards to craft agreements that establish guardrails around appropriate board actions, including specific examples of matters in which the board will and will not be engaged. Agreements established elsewhere could serve as models.

4. Provide boards an opportunity to review and reform how they spend their time. A recurrent impediment to change is the frequency and length of board meetings. Multiple California teams recounted board meetings regularly lasting six or eight hours, but which still left little to no time to adopt and monitor goals, understand big-picture strategies, and enact policies oriented around student success and equity. Teams would benefit from a process through which they can assess how they spend their time and identify time-consuming items that could be moved to consent agendas or off the board agenda altogether. It would be helpful for boards and CEOs to have a way to share effective practices on how to best focus on strategic priorities and develop a plan for changing how they spend their time in regular board meetings, retreats, and work sessions.

5. Support the alignment of CEO hiring with student success and equity goals. Some of the California teams faced with CEO vacancies had not yet adopted a focused set of holistic student success goals. Boards could use training to help them understand the critical link between hiring the CEO and adopting student success goals (and, more generally, sharing responsibility for student success reform). With this understanding, boards can issue a clear charge to the search committee and (if being used) search consultant that will be more likely to yield a slate of CEO candidates capable of enacting and sustaining collegewide reforms aimed at accomplishing the board's goals. Given the high turnover rate in community college presidencies, modest training for all board members would be helpful, with opportunities to go deeper for boards that are currently hiring or will soon hire a CEO.

Los Angeles Trade and Technical College

How Boards and Trustees Can Advance Student Success and Equity

6. **Encourage trustees and CEOs to develop the willingness and ability to make tough policy and budget decisions aligned to holistic collegewide reforms.** Large-scale, collegewide reform is difficult, as evidenced by the work being done by many community colleges and districts in California pursuing guided pathways reforms, designed to fundamentally change the student experience from matriculation through completion. Boards of community colleges conducting similar work across the country have been instrumental in making what are often tough decisions to set policies and adopt budgets necessary for sustainable guided pathways reforms. State systems in California and elsewhere can support boards in examining models of policy and budget adoption and considering changes. In addition, teams could spend time considering what reforms they anticipate making over the coming few years and what implications those changes could have for future policy and budget adoption. Through this process, boards and CEOs could develop both immediate priorities for policy and budget changes as well as plans to communicate to the college about anticipated future changes.

7. **Facilitate the design of effective data reports and conversations.** Colleges and boards could use system-level support, such as training or technical assistance, in designing effective data reports and inquiry guides aligned to a limited number of collegewide goals, including leading and lagging indicators. Drawing from effective examples elsewhere, boards and CEOs could be provided model data reports and questions for consideration from which they could plan future board meetings, work sessions, and retreats. Building on materials used in the fellowship, the California Community Colleges Chancellor's office provided a toolkit of these resources for participants on the system's professional development website.[7]

8. **Encourage boards to engage in thoughtful policy conversations, within and across districts.** Policies at the state or system level can have major implications for college efforts to advance student success and equity. One example in California is AB 705, enacted in 2017, which requires community colleges to use multiple measures rather than testing to place most first-year students into transfer-level math and English. Such large-scale change can significantly affect a board's goals, the college's reform strategies, and resource allocation. By discussing such policies as they are enacted, boards can better understand the goals of the legislation and begin to anticipate and plan for their important future decision-making and communications role as the policies are implemented on their campuses.

9. **Provide a student success-focused primer for new board members.** Trustees cycle on and off boards frequently — and all of the learnings discussed in this report take time to understand and enact. Community college systems can help make sure new members are acculturated to the priorities of equitable student success, as detailed in the Aspen trustee framework, by providing an annual training opportunity, at existing meetings or online. The California Community Colleges Chancellor's Office adapted content from fellowship convenings into a set of online learning modules available to all trustees.

Conclusion

In California and elsewhere, fulfilling a vision for equitable student success — at the system level and at individual colleges — depends on trustees working with CEOs to understand the need for reform, focusing on what matters most, and avoiding distractions and disruptions. Over the past 18 months, with guided pathways, developmental education, and other equity-focused reforms scaling up, the California Community Colleges system made a substantial investment in collaborative professional development for trustees and CEOs. As a result, multiple teams have developed concrete plans to improve their board practices, and the strength of their plans to move forward suggests that more positive reforms are on the way.

The time is right for community college systems nationwide to consider how trustees can play a more effective role as leaders and supporters as their colleges work to expand access, advance completion, close persistent equity gaps, and ensure the delivery of valuable credentials to diverse populations. At excellent colleges, boards play an essential role in achieving those goals, from setting policies to adopting budgets to hiring the right CEOs and keeping them on track. This work is not always intuitive, and it is never easy-- but with the right training, tools, and supports, it certainly is possible, in California and across the country.

Acknowledgment

Chaffey College

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How Boards and Trustees Can Advance Student Success and Equity

Endnotes

1. California, the source of much of the work discussed here, uses the title CEO—rather than chancellor—for the leaders of its community college districts. This brief uses the term "CEO" throughout to refer to both heads of districts and to presidents in single-college districts.

2. This memo was written during the COVID pandemic, when campus health and safety, student enrollment fluctuations, and fiscal uncertainty required the attention of college leaders. Even in more stable times, distractions from long-term reform are almost always present, whether from state regulatory and funding uncertainty, collective bargaining disputes, senior leadership team transitions, or other matters.

3. Identification of a particular group as an underrepresented minority may vary by discipline and region. In California, underrepresented minority students generally are American Indian/Alaskan Native, Black/African American (not of Hispanic origin), Latinx (including persons of Mexican, Puerto Rican, Cuban, and Central or South American origin), and Pacific Islander.

4. Many researchers and organizations share Aspen's conviction that trustees matter deeply to sustained college transformation. Two major national associations, the Association of Community College Trustees and the Association of Governing Boards, have long dedicated themselves to strengthening board operations. In the community college context, Kay McClenney and Byron McClenney have been important catalysts for change, helping craft state-based and national governance institutes and coaching boards and CEOs to advance student success and equity. For more research on the subject, see Richard P. Chait, William P. Ryan, and Barbara E. Taylor,

Governance as Leadership: Reframing the Work of Nonprofit Boards (Hoboken, N.J.: John Wiley & Sons, 2004), and Adrianna Kezar, "Rethinking Public Higher Education Governing Boards Performance: Results of a National Study of Governing Boards in United States," *The Journal of Higher Education* 77, no. 6 (Nov.-Dec. 2006): 968-1008.

5. As trustees in the fellowship identified goals to propose to the full board, they considered goals that overlapped with those in the Vision for Success:

   - Increase credential attainment by 20 percent

   - Increase transfer by 35 percent to University of California and California State University

   - Decrease the number of credits accumulated on the way to a degree

   - Increase number of career and technical education students employed in their field of study

   - Close equity gaps for underrepresented student groups

   - Reduce regional gaps in the above measures

6. In the guided pathways context, the board of trustees for the Alamo Colleges District in San Antonio, Texas, has done exemplary work in this regard, consistently passing policies and budgets that have contributed to steady and significant student success gains.

7. As part of the fellowship, the California Community Colleges Chancellors Office created an online community for trustees to foster peer-to-peer learning and sharing of challenges and successes, including in areas of policy.