Editorial

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Community colleges are essential in the U.S. higher education system. In 2015-2016, 49% of students completing a baccalaureate degree had enrolled at a community college sometime during their educational path in the past 10 years (National Student Clearinghouse, 2017). According to data from the American Association of Community Colleges (AACC), public community college enrollments accounted for 46% of all undergraduate enrollments, and 41% of all first-time freshmen began the college year at a two-year institution (AACC, 2020). Increasingly, community college is the intentional first choice for First-Time-In-College students intending to complete a bachelor's degree. In the 2017-18 academic year, 21.2% bachelor's degree earners had previously earned an associate's degree, an increase from 19.5% in the 2012-13 academic year (National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, 2019). Increased partnerships with secondary education, such as early college high schools and dual credit programs with high schools, further expanded community colleges' scope of impact.

As an integral part of the educational pipeline, community colleges are known to support workforce development and serve underserved populations. Many community colleges were founded to provide education in technical and applied fields. Even today, most community colleges continue to be leaders in providing Career and Technical Education opportunities (Jacobs & Cormier, 2020). Many returning adults attend community colleges to upskill for employment, complete their previously started certificates of degrees, or completely retool and begin new degree programs during this period of dramatic change. Furthermore, community colleges are designed to serve those who desire to change their lives and those of their children, those who may be forced into new roles by circumstance, those who continue to build on life-long experiences and pursuits, and those who wish to augment long-held credentials and develop newly found interests and skills. Based on the recent AACC report, community college students represented 39% of first-time freshmen, 57% native Americans, 52% Hispanics, 42% Blacks, 39% Asian/Pacific Islanders, and 33% Pell Grant receivers (AACC, 2020). As we enter the second decade of this millennium and emerge from the COVID-19 pandemic, the need to provide relevant, affordable, and accessible education to learners from a variety of backgrounds has exacerbated. Community colleges are well positioned to strategically and clearly articulate their strengths to support the growing educational needs of all students.

To leverage the strengths and assets of students from a wide range of backgrounds, community college educators have applied strengths-based approaches in their educational settings. One such approach, Appreciative Education, is an intentional, strengths-based, institutional-wide approach for leading, teaching, and providing services to support learners' growth and maximize their individual potentials. The application of such a strengths-based approach empowered community colleges to lead changes to meet the shifting needs of the communities they serve.

In this special issue, authors highlighted the promise and potential of taking an Appreciative approach in a variety of community college contexts in the United States. The articles reflected research and innovative practices in teaching, advising, and institutional development.

Amundsen et al. described an online adult degree completion program designed to support adult learners with college-level academic credits, but no college degrees. Based on survey responses from four instructors involved in the program, the authors reported how online instructors employed Appreciative instructional techniques in their teaching practices and proposed an Appreciative instruction model within adult degree completion programs. Although the study focused on a small group of instructors working in one particular online program, findings offered Implications regarding instructional methods and curriculum development that support the design and delivery of online adult degree completion programs.

Next, three articles highlight the application of the Appreciative Advising (AA) framework in varied settings to support different student populations. Bigard shared specific AA practices that advisors at Olney Community College utilized to enhance their advising services. Cassidy shared how the framework has been integrated into the First Year Seminar (FYS) program at Quincy College. All FYS instructors were trained to adopt the AA model in their classes. Effectiveness of the AA-infused FYS program on new students was reported. Landaw et al. described the innovative practice and partnership between Ivy Tech Community College, Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis's Department of Psychology, and the IUPUI-Ivy Tech Coordinated Programs Passport Office. This program illustrates how the AA theory-to-practice framework has been effectively integrated into all aspects of this advising program to support the unique needs of community college students who will transfer to a four-year institution.

Beri et al. shared the process of establishing a faculty-driven, college-wide Appreciative Education committee at the institutional level in a metropolitan community college. The establishment of the committee reflected existing appreciative education practices at the institution and amplified voices from all stakeholders.

As we explore evidence-based innovative educational practices during this unprecedented time, the strengths-based practices these authors shared are inspiring. In their articles, authors also shared students' needs they identified, institutional challenges they faced, and implications they drew based on their experiences. By modeling the iterative process of research and practice, these community college educators showcased the potential for leveraging the Appreciative Education framework as a mechanism for providing high quality educational experiences for all students. Their collective experiences also illustrated the need for more educational practitioners to share their research-based innovations and engage in collaborative dialogues.

References

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