Good afternoon.

Welcome to all of our attendees, our Gateway to College colleges, and many of our ATD colleges who are not currently hosting Gateway to College programs, but are looking to learn from the Gateway model to either bring it to your community or build a GtC-like program that helps to expand and connect your student access and success efforts to the most vulnerable learners in your communities.

A special call out this afternoon to many of my former colleagues at Montgomery County Community College who are participating in this convening and whose work with Gateway to College students while I was president helped to inspire this partnership between ATD and Gateway to College—a partnership that has led to a wonderful blending of the two organizations over the past 18 months.

What most inspires me about the Gateway to College program is the promise it offers for us as community colleges, in this moment, to embrace a new access agenda that reaches deeper into the communities we serve to open new pathways into and through our colleges for our most vulnerable citizen learners.

If we are truly America’s “institutions of the moment” as author James Fallows articulated in his keynote address at our annual convening DREAM in February, right before COVID-19 started to ravage our communities, the time for us to step up and respond in new ways and with new models is now.

I have often said that the best community colleges—while focusing on equitable student success outcomes—take the form of our communities AND they drive the future shape of the
communities they serve, specifically in playing a leadership role in building equitable communities.

The dual pandemics of COVID-19 and racism are attacking our communities, but they are not attacking what we do best as community colleges, a strength that we must leverage now, more than ever, our localness.

This means our colleges may take different forms as we leverage our localness and navigate our way forward to thrive, not just survive, into and through the “next normal.”

Marcus

One of the central tenants of the “ATD way” is to put the student voice in the middle of the room through quantitative and qualitative data and through storytelling.

Meet Marcus.

Marcus relocated to Pottstown, PA, from another state in the south. He had been in a fight at his previous high school. Coming to the defense of another boy, he suffered multiple stab wounds and was expelled for his involvement in the violence.

In addition to his injuries and expulsion, Marcus was not able to re-enroll in the local schools and ultimately his family ended up in Pottstown.

When he arrived in Pottstown, his school record made it difficult for him to enroll. That, along with a very difficult home life, led Marcus to give up on school and to give up on himself.

However, Marcus was referred to the Gateway to College program at Montgomery County Community College. In the orientation session, the program director made a commitment to the potential students. She said, “I can’t change what happens when you are away from campus and I can’t take away the pain, but if you show up here every day, we will create a different reality for you.”

Ultimately, Marcus trusted this message and although he lived a long way from the campus, he could be seen on the side of the highway on bicycle or on foot, on his way to school every day. He still faced some terrible circumstances at home, but he became successful at school. He even became an ambassador for the program. I was honored to shake Marcus’ hand on the day he crossed the stage and earned his high school diploma through the Gateway program.

There are millions of Marcus’ in our country and thousands in your communities whose already narrow path to success rests on the care, design, and responsiveness of their local community college. For nearly 20 years, Gateway to College programs across the country have offered students like Marcus a chance for a restart.

COVID-19 is expected to increase these numbers. A June 2020 piece by McKinsey and Company (COVID-19 and Student Learning in the United States) predicts, based on loss after other disasters—Hurricanes Katrina and Maria where 14 to 20 percent of students never returned to school—an increase in high school drop-out rates of 2 to 9 percent nationally as the virus disrupts many of the supports that keep the most vulnerable students in school. Last month, Measure of America (A Decade Undone: Youth Disconnection in the Age of Coronavirus) released a report that predicted that the COVID-19 pandemic will cause youth disconnection rates to spike dramatically, easily reaching 6 million and could swell to almost 25
percent of all young people aged 16 to 24. If this is true, unless we act, we risk losing an entire generation of young people. The damage in learning, credential attainment and future economic potential will be greatest for low-income, Black, Hispanic, and Native Americans.

This is a moment—and a challenge—that calls for urgency and energy.

As community college leaders, urgency and energy are part of our DNA. James Fallows reminded us of that at DREAM, when he said based on his travels to hundreds of communities across the country in writing the book, Our Towns:

“the people working hardest toward solutions, at least among those I’ve met, are disproportionately at community colleges.”

Leveraging our localness and working hard toward solutions is at the heart of our response to these dual pandemics and it will be at the heart of our recovery.

Lessons from Gateway to College for Community Recovery

There are lessons from the design of our Gateway to College programs that offer us a way forward to the “next normal” and community recovery.

First, the Gateway to College model provides an example of the imperative for and social justice potential of our equity work. By deliberately seeking out disengaged, disenfranchised students, left behind by a system designed to keep them out, Gateway to College programs break down traditional structures and address equity gaps in the community by creating postsecondary opportunity for students who would not arrive at our colleges on their own.

We already know that Black, Indigenous, and Hispanic communities are disproportionately impacted by COVID-19. A growing body of research shows that dual enrollment and early college have the biggest impact for students of color and low-income students as well as for students whose achievement might fall short of college readiness measures. However, data continue to indicate that access to these programs is inequitably skewed towards more privileged students, continuing to underserve Black, Hispanic, Native American, and first-generation college students. In the same way that Gateway to College intentionally addresses the needs of out-of-school youth, we need to be more deliberate in our design of dual enrollment and early college programs, with intentional outreach to students of color and with culturally specific program design. As colleges, we must not only serve the students who knock on our front door. We must go out into the community and play a leadership role in building more equitable communities.

Second, Gateway to College programs deepen partnerships with both school districts, employers, and community-based organizations by keeping vulnerable students at the center. By signaling to our partners our interest in reengaging out-of-school students and students who are behind in credits, we change community expectations about who is a candidate for college and we lean into our responsibility of making college truly accessible. We also create an authentic student-centered approach to education that can serve as a model for the rest of the college and the community. This is a moment to expand our outreach through partnerships with K-12 agencies and other organizations that serve the most vulnerable populations in our community. This is a moment to evolve current partnerships to direct the full breadth of our collective resources (i.e., shared funding) to ensure that all students can achieve success.
Third, our work to support the holistic needs of Gateway to College students offers a model to be replicated at scale inside our colleges for all students. Gateway to College students face tremendous barriers and they are and will continue to be disproportionately impacted by the consequences of the COVID pandemic. We can learn from our successful supports for Gateway to College students. Our supports for Gateway to College students are the same basic needs supports many of the “traditional” students in our colleges need: regular check-ins from advisors, food, laptops, and affordable internet access being among those needs.

**Opportunities and Lessons for Institutional Transformation**

Despite these lessons and the learnings from Gateway to College programs that are so essential for community colleges to fully support their communities, too many of our Gateway to College programs—and I would suggest our dual enrollment and other early college programs, even at Achieving the Dream colleges—are isolated and disconnected from the core student success work, often operating in vertical silos and treated as boutique programs. Leaders of our Gateway to College programs often struggle to get a seat and a voice at the table. Thus, we lose opportunities to scale and integrate the programs, secure sustainable funding, and most importantly, we lose a chance to ensure that students have a seamless pathway through the program into a credential, an associate’s degree, or a bachelor’s degree that supports the student in meeting their potential and that leads to a living wage and economic and social mobility.

By using Achieving the Dream’s Institutional Capacity Assessment framework, colleges can integrate Gateway to College programs into their student success cultures. After all, Gateway to College programs touch all seven fundamentals.

![Diagram](image)

Let’s go through a few of the fundamentals. We already spoke about equity.

Let’s move to data. Gateway to College’s use of data—to follow student progress and deploy interventions that keep students on track to success—is an exemplar for other programs on campus. Gateway programs track students’ credit accrual and progress toward high school diplomas, sharing individual student progress across an interdisciplinary team, real-time, ensuring that students are supported before they fall behind and that they finish on schedule. Gateway staff can project expected graduation rates and identify which students will push those rates up or down with staff able to proactively support students through to success. This focus on data and accountability has increased the collective graduation rate for Gateway to College programs by 25 percentage points over the past five years.

Let’s move to teaching and learning. The personalized relationships at the center of the Gateway model are relevant for a much wider audience. In Gateway to College, every student feels a sense of belonging to the college because they know someone on campus knows them and is looking out for them. The commitment that Gateway program staff and faculty to make to ensure that every student is successful demonstrates that the power of personalized relationships does not just benefit students, it also benefits organizational culture.
Now let’s move to engagement and building strong external partnerships. Yes, accountability to our K-12 partners supports the success of Gateway programs. It also does more. The deepening relationships that form through the Gateway program can be expanded and extended to all sorts of supports for improving the K-16 pipeline in our communities. It can connect us in new ways to our Workforce Investment Boards. It can also bring new external funders to your college. Local employers are attracted to supporting programs like this one.

Now let’s move to strategy and planning. Colleges clearly focused on student success have found ways to integrate Gateway programs into their strategic plans and their access and success plans. Leading colleges are ensuring that Gateway programs are woven into their strategic enrollment management planning as well.

Gateway to College programs also hold characteristics of resiliency and adaptability that ATD’s new model around adaptive capacity suggests is essential for the future design of our colleges.

- Using all components of the model, an adaptive Gateway to College programs works to:
  - Get a seat at the student success table
  - Strategically share student success stories to build greater awareness
  - Gain faculty ambassadors for the program and the students
  - Connect the program data with larger college data sets on enrollment and retention
  - Know the disconnected learner data from the service area to give them voice
  - Get the college foundation connected to the program to build the resource base
  - Bring the program to the local WIB for funding especially as the program begins to connect work-based learning into the curriculum
  - Use learning from the program to design new models to engage disconnected youth in their communities including working in new ways with high schools, especially in COVID, to help address issues of learning loss and learning continuity.

Conclusion

To me, Gateway to College programs, though designed nearly 20 years ago, are exactly the kind of programs community colleges must offer, scale and integrate into their core missions to meet this moment.
A recent paper by the JFF Policy Leadership Trust offers five commitments for colleges to adopt to guide the work ahead, work that will require us to once again reimagine our institutions, something community colleges have been doing since our founding with the Truman Commission.

Those five commitments are explicitly embodied by our Gateway to College programs.

They include:

1. A commitment to care.
2. A commitment to serve the whole community with a focus on social justice.
3. A commitment to building a culture of equity.
4. A commitment to identify and dismantle campus structures that breed disparities and then redesign them for equity.
5. A commitment to fund what matters most.

Holyoke Community College Gateway to College student, Mayerlies Diaz, has benefited from her college’s commitments to this moment.

She says:

"I have been angry as long as I can remember ... behind from Day One, kept inside during recess to learn English, never being in school long enough to learn math ... no one wanting to help, putting in no effort. I was the bum buried in the hoodie, smoking a lot of weed, trying to disappear."

She grew up poor, the daughter of a Spanish-speaking single mother who was often sick and in and out of hospitals while raising two children. Her family moved a lot, sometimes living in shelters, and there were trips to court in pursuit of protection orders against a family member.

"I am from the sorrow and confusion that comes from that kind of hurt. That’s how I felt for a long time. I assumed I would live in rage and depression and be behind, forever."

"But somehow, miraculously, I am now from hope. I'm from the miracle that happens when just a few key people actually see you, believe in you, push you and love you."

“High school wasn’t for me,” said Mayerlies, “but college is for me.”

Let’s make another commitment today. Let’s be sure that every Marcus and Mayerlies in your community knows college is for them. That’s the power of Gateway to College.

References


