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Leaders Who Disturb the Universe Terry O'Banion, President Emeritus, League for Innovation in the Community College

In our 110-year history, the community college has evolved through many stages, and each stage has required a different kind of leader — leaders who build, leaders who consolidate, leaders who negotiate, leaders who partner. At this stage in the continuing evolution of the community college, national leaders from the White House to the State House and from major foundations are calling on the community college to play a key role in doubling the number of students in the next decade who complete a certificate, associate degree or transfer to the university. The Completion Agenda has become the overarching mission of the community college, and if we are to achieve even a modicum of success in reaching the goals of the Completion Agenda we need leaders who will, in the words of poet T. S. Eliot, “disturb the universe.”

As we gear up to transform our colleges to meet this overarching goal doing more of the same will just get us more of the same. Simply tweaking a program or grafting on a prosthetic technology is trimming the branches of a dying tree. Margaret Wheatley has advised that “we need the courage to let go of the old world, to relinquish most of what we have cherished, to abandon our interpretations of what does and doesn't work.” We need leaders who will “disturb the universe.”

There are indications the transformation is under way. One example of the change is reflected in the assertive language we are beginning to use to address the challenges of the Completion Agenda: “intrusive” advising, “mandatory” placement, “disruptive” innovations, “accelerated” instruction, early “alert,” data “driven,” “deeper” engagement, scalable “interventions,” etc. The old passivity associated with change is giving way to something more robust and energetic; colleges are picking up momentum because the charge is clear and the timeline short. Never in our history have so many stakeholders galvanized behind a common goal. Never in our history have so many foundations provided so many funds to support our efforts. It is our Andy Warhol 15-minutes-of-fame on the national stage, and failure is not an option. We cannot succeed without leaders who are willing to “disturb the universe.”

We have always been champions of the student success agenda, which is the same as the completion agenda, with a more targeted goal. But in this stage of our history we have many more resources and many more challenges than in previous decades. Whereas 50 years ago the only research we had included a few studies by Medsker and Knoell on transfer success, today we have a rapidly growing body of research on what works to help students succeed. The Community College Research Center at Teachers College, Columbia University alone has produced over 300 research reports in the last decade. Fifty years ago, our technology consisted of rolling tub files, color-coded folders, the McBee Sort System and eventually IBM punched cards. Today, through the application of data analytics, we can mine data to predict student behavior and to intervene in the first week of class to help get students back on track. And we can manage and orchestrate huge systems of data related to learning outcomes, educational plans, course schedules, and assessments. Fifty years ago most foundations did not fund community colleges, or purposely excluded them from their agenda; Dwight Eisenhower and John Kennedy did not call on the community college to play a major role in the nation's work. Today we are the darlings of the foundations and of the White House.

We have more resources than we have ever had to make good on our promise of student success. And we have more challenges than ever before: declining financial resources, retiring faculty and leaders, reliance on adjunct faculty, crumbling facilities, complex accountability metrics from accrediting agencies and state and federal agencies, internal conflicts among faculty and other groups, cumbersome educational codes and regulations, and a hostile national political climate. We are caught in a Dickensian nightmare of the best of times and the worst of times. If we are to navigate our way through this jungle we will require leaders who will not settle for business as usual but who will “disturb the universe.”

If we are to transform the community college to meet the goals of the completion agenda we must heed the advice of the 21st Century Commission on the Future of the Community College: “The American dream is at risk. Because a highly educated population is fundamental to economic growth and a vibrant democracy, community colleges can help reclaim that dream. But stepping up to this challenge will require dramatic redesign of these institutions, their mission, and, most critically, their students' educational experiences.”

The commission report concluded that “Change cannot be achieved without committed and courageous leaders....Community colleges have been developing leaders to maintain the inherited design. They need now to develop leaders to transform the design.” That is to say, we now need leaders who will “disturb the universe.”

Many of the new leaders needed to “transform the design” and “disturb the universe” will come from community college leadership programs, including one now under development at National American University. John Roueche, who has been “disturbing the universe” of community colleges for five decades as the most gifted leader in the history of the community college, is working with NAU to create a substantive leadership program. His vision and experience will provide the foundation for the new program which he is developing in collaboration with a vast network of community college colleagues, including me. The program is in early stages of development and is expected to welcome its charter class in the fall of 2013.

Terry O'Banion is a senior advisor to National American University and chair of its Community College Advisory Board. National American University is a private, proprietary, regionally-accredited institution. This article is the first in a series to be authored by principals involved in NAU's Roueche Graduate Center and other national experts identified by the center. John E. Roueche and Margaretta B. Mathis will serve as editors of the monthly column, a partnership between the Roueche Graduate Center and Community College Week editorial staff. Send comments to mbmathis@national.edu, and Paul Bradley, editor@ccweek.com.