

# Transcription

## California Community Colleges Podcast Episode 12 – Josh Wyner

Laura: Hello. I'm Laura Hope, Executive Vice Chancellor for Educational Services of the California Community Colleges. And welcome to another episode of the California Community Colleges Chancellor's Office Podcast. Today's topic is Guided Pathways. And joining us is the founder and executive director of the College Excellence Program and Vice President of the Aspen Institute, Josh Wyner.

The College Excellence Program aims to advance colleges and university practices, policies, and leadership to significantly improve student outcomes, with a focus on students historically underserved in higher education. Josh has spent the last two decades, designing and building organizations that promote talent development and social mobility. He has authored numerous publications about education, including his book, "What Excellent Community Colleges Do: Preparing All Students for Success." Welcome to the podcast, Josh. It's great to have you with us.

Josh: Good morning, Laura. I'm glad to be here.

Laura: So you have written and studied reform efforts across the country. And this morning, we'd like to talk a little bit about the special role that trustees play in that particular effort. Could you tell us why it's essential that trustees at the college and local level are engaged in student success and achievement work?

Josh: Sure. So in addition, Laura, to having studied this, I am on a couple of prior education boards and I've served on boards for a few decades, in the nonprofit sector. And I think it's important for trustees of public colleges and community colleges to be involved in reform for a few reasons. One, is they are conduit to the community and I think it's easy for people at the college to be thinking about working with the students that they have by connecting to what the rates of poverty are? What the demands of employers are in the community, is really important. And so I think that's one of the important goals that boards uniquely play. Is, they can connect the college to the community and

make sure that what is being delivered by the college actually meets the needs of social mobility and talent development.

Internally, for reform to take hold, now, reform is hard and it takes time. And so I think that if you're really about make the kinds of changes that are needed, what we've seen in the country? Is, people can, at times, get upset by that and they'll look to the board for answers. They may complain to the board or they may assume that they can wait out a president. And I think if the board understands why reform is important, student success-oriented reform, and what the general strategy is, I think people realize that this is going to be happening over the long-term. This is not something that will be there for the duration of a single president.

And then the final point I think is that we've seen there are a lot of presidential transitions. We're at a moment of retirements for community colleges presidents that's unprecedented. And if boards don't fully understand the student success imperative, as well as the general strategies being pursued by the college, they may not hire the right president, who, in turn, will continue what is working and change what isn't. So I think, understanding that change takes time. If they rely on the president and the senior team to do that alone and don't understand it and endorse it, the changes that are being made? Then the chances that they'll be ready to hire the next president to continue those student success initiatives goes way down.

Laura: So you've written extensively and obviously studied the community colleges across the nation and I'm wondering if you could give us some examples of what that kind of involvement with the board would look like?

Josh: Yeah, I think it's very important for presidents to understand how important the board is. And both, good and presidents of colleges that are achieving great levels of students success and improving and those that aren't, I have seen presidents, at times, and senior teams, sort of keep boards at arms length. And I think part of what needs to be done is, senior teams need to understand, for the same reasons I just mentioned, how important boards are. So what gets done is your question?

I think one is, goals get set for student success. They're both, the sort of summative goals about graduation rates, and transfer, and bachelor attainment rates, and job placement rates. But there are also interim

goals, things like changing the advisor-to-student ratio may be an interim goal, or building Guided Pathways maps for all degree programs. Those are the interim goals or the leading edge indicators that might lead to better numbers of success. The number of students who complete math and English, credit-bearing math and English in the first year, I know that's something you all have really focused on and I think a hugely important measure. Those are not summative goals but they don't get you all the way to the end but they are important interim goals.

So one of the things that I think leadership teams do with presidents is, they give them a few of those kind of high-level metrics and they create the time and space to have conversations with the board about what the strategies are to achieve improvements in those metrics at scale? They show the metrics over time, how well did we do last year versus this year? What are our goals for next year? And they're inviting the board, both to hold everybody at the college accountable, not in a top-down way but in a partnership kind of way. But, also, helping the board, then, understand what the three or four key strategies are for getting there.

I think creating that kind of clarity can be hard for practitioners because they're in it every day. I so admire the work that VPs for Student Services, and provost, and faculty, and department shares are doing. But I think removing themselves from that and being able to focus on a few key things to help boards understand what the strategies are for achieving goals in ways that, you know, these busy board members can understand in the time they can give to this is really essential. I think that really stands at the core of a really good partnership. Is, good data reports rooted in goals both, for long-term students success and shorter-term action.

Laura: So I know you've done a lot of thinking about the trustees' role in the hiring process of a new president. And with so much turnover, especially in California, how do you recommend that trustees think about the hiring process, in order to more fully engage the work around student success and completion?

Josh: Yeah, this is hugely important. I think first of all, the more boards know what the goals of the college are, they understand what the baseline data are, and what the college's strategy is moving forward, the better positioned they'll be to start a search.

We did some research on high-performing colleges and what boards tend to look for in presidents? And one of the things that really

distinguishes high-performing boards that are able to handle that transition well? Are ones that are aligning their presidential hiring with a firm understanding of what the goals of the college are, the student success goals, the strengths and weaknesses of the college. And then, what they need in a president to achieve their goals, by capitalizing on the strengths and overcoming the challenges or weakness of the college. I think, very often, we start with the question, what do we want in our next president? And if that's not rooted in what the college needs, at the moment, you may aim wrong. You may get a very good candidate but they may not have the particular skills that you need at the right moment. So let me give you an example.

We're working with a college, now, and we do a lot work on searches. We don't do the searches but we do pre-search work. And this college has done terrific students success work and it's been really steady. All the data are clearly in place and there have been real steady gains but they've been incremental. And I think the board wants to create a greater amount of urgency and realizes that the faculty need to be brought more into the center of reforms if those are the two central goals? By the way, the community relationships are terrific. This is a terrific college.

If those are two goals, I think urgency with faculty? That's a very different kind of person for the next stage of work. In addition, to maintaining and accelerating what's been done in the past? That's a different kind of person than would be somebody who's just getting the work started, who needs to get the data systems in place, or somebody who's doing a huge amount of hiring of faculty or the senior team. So I think understanding the context of the college, rooted in the goals and the trajectory of student success reforms will help boards do a much better job.

So what we recommend is, at the very beginning, before you start the search, before you appoint a committee, before you hire a firm, ask five questions: What are the goals of the colleges? What are the strengths of the college that give you great confidence that in the next five to 10 years you will reach those goals? What are the challenges of the college that you need to overcome? And then, what are we looking for in a president that can do that work? And where might we find them? If we had that kind of set of questions, I think we're much more likely as boards, and I say we because I serve on a board that just hired a couple of different presidents, a community college president and a four-year president. I think we're much more likely to align what we're looking for

with what the college really needs.

Laura: So you know that in California, we are moving toward the implementation of Guided Pathways, systemwide, all 114 community colleges. What would you recommend to trustees, in their role about how they can amplify those efforts to implement Guided Pathways?

Josh: I think understanding why it's so important. And I think we sometimes start with completion or gaps in completion but I would suggest that every trustee learn a little bit more about the data and really know the data in their community and understand why, personally, this moves them? I'll tell you why I do the work, as a trustee.

I do the work because I know that in Washington D.C., that over 30% of African American children under the age of five live in poverty. I do the work because I know that poverty rates in our city are persistent and we had inequities. And I know that we also have inequities in who has a colleges degree and I know that employers are looking for more talent. And for me, connecting people to help them move out of poverty through higher education so they can take advantage of the robust economy we have? That's what motivates me. That's a, why?

So one thing I would say is, understand why student success improvements for you are so important and speak to that as much as you can. Speak to that in your community, speak to that with the senior team, speak to that with faculty, anybody you come in contact with. I think understanding the student voice, understanding what students experience today and how they may be different from what the college is designed to do is also a really important way to connect to the why. Because there are these individuals who are working hard, who have so much promise that we can do better by.

So I think one, would be connecting to the why. And then I think, the why, surely, should be making good on the promise of higher ed and getting more students degrees that have value after they leave. Understanding the data at the college, that's number two. So connecting to the big why? Understanding the data at the college, some of the data we were talking about earlier. And then, finally, understanding in broad brushstrokes what Guided Pathways means.

We know, for instance, that the cafeteria approach, where students take random courses don't lead to completion and so Guided Pathways is partly about clearer course sequences. Second, we know that when

students don't enter a program of study relatively early and they're not advised well through programs? They're less likely to complete. So Guided Pathways is about stronger advising structures to get students onto the program and through the program. It doesn't have to be any deeper than that but those bid ideas, understanding why Guided Pathways is important, and how that looks at the college that they're looking at because there are many flavors of Guided Pathways but understanding those core principles, I think, would be third thing that I'd recommend. I think if boards can latch onto the why, understand their students success data on their campuses, and understand in broad brushstrokes what the core reforms taking place are? They can do great things to partner with the president, the senior team, with faculty, with advisors, with everybody who's working on this. And I think we'll help everybody feel better about their work because the board understands what they're doing. Change is hard and if the board is part of the team, I think it's much more likely to take hold.

Laura: Josh, thank you for taking the time to join us today. It's been a pleasure talking to you.

Josh: And it's been great to be here. I really appreciate all the hard work happening in California, to advance student success.

Laura: You've been listening to Josh Wyner, founder and executive director of the College Excellence Program and Vice President of the Aspen Institute on the California Community Colleges Podcast. I'm Laura Hope, Executive Vice Chancellor for Educational Services of the California Community Colleges, inviting you to join us, again, soon.

Man: Be sure to join us for the next California Community Colleges Podcast. This has been a California Community Colleges presentation.