

Transcription

California Community Colleges Podcast Episode 15 – Lande Ajose

Eloy: Hello, everyone. This is Eloy Ortiz Oakley, Chancellor of the California Community Colleges and you're listening to another episode of the California Community Colleges Chancellor's Office Podcast. Today, I'm trilled to be joined by Lande Ajose. She's the executive director of California Competes. Welcome, Lande.

Lande: Thank you so much.

Eloy: So I wanted to talk a little bit about not only your experience with California Competes but also get a sense from you as to where higher education is going.

Just taking a step back for our listeners, we've talked a lot about California economy lately and the economic future, in many respects, and certainly I believe, is in jeopardy if we don't do a much better job of producing more Californians with a college credential. And while I think many people feel and believe that the economy is strong in California, particularly post-great recession, I think we're also seeing a lot of income inequality. And it seems to be continuing to rise as well as the credential attainment gap and we're seeing a lot of inequities in those outcomes.

So looking at the California landscape and looking at this degree gap, we're looking at what does it mean to us by the time we get to 2025 when there's more than, as least PPIC predicts, there'll be more than 2 million Californians that are not gonna be prepared to meet workforce demands and filling this gap is gonna be crucial for us to feel the economy and to create the opportunities that we want for some of our most under-resource communities. Of course, those resource communities are made up of Latinos or blacks, low-income whites living in rural regions of the state where I think that this has got to be front and center for the next governor, for the next legislature.

So given everything that's going on, Lande, given the work that you've seen going on in the California Community Colleges around the Vision for Success, how do you see California Competes supporting the way forward for Californian and what do you see that this degree gap means for California and what's at stake?

Lande: Yeah. You know, I really appreciate your framing of the problem, because I think oftentimes, we don't have a sharp enough understanding of what the problem is. And when you think about California's higher education system, it's fundamentally a system that's built on a set of paradoxes. On the one hand, we're the largest higher education system in the world, 10 major universities with the crown jewels of Berkley and UCLA, this comprehensive 23-campus state system, and the most extensive community college system in the nation. So we have all of that. And yet what we don't have is a system that is as equitable as we would like it to be.

So fundamentally, we lack in coordination across those systems. We lack in making sure that our access is equitable. We lack in sufficient transparency to be able to understand what is happening to students and what is happening kind of behind the veil. And we lack in ensuring that there's an adequate match between the outcomes of our higher education system and the demands of our very quickly evolving workforce and highly robust industry sectors.

And so really, for California Competes, we're focused on what does that mean in terms of the numbers of individuals who will have a degree or credential by 2025 and what we know is that higher education in California is not keeping pace with the number of degrees that we need or the range and type of degrees that we need for students to be able to contribute to the state's economic growth.

One of the critical things that we are aware of is that California is facing a gap of more than 2 million degrees and credentials, and that includes sub-baccalaureate as well as baccalaureate degrees will be needed by 2025 in order for California to keep pace. For us to get to that point from today means that we would need to increase degree production by 19% year after year, which is almost impossible. It's impossible because we face capacity constraints. It's impossible because it's very difficult for students to get the kind of financing we need. It's difficult because students don't always have the skill sets that they need to hit the ground running when they enter college.

So we have a lot of barriers and California Competes is really trying to peel back the onion, if you will, to understand how can we really address those barriers in some systematic ways that will serve the needs of California's very diverse student population as it tends to the very clear demands that are placed at the forefront of our institutions, because our institutions are trying to respond to just enormous amounts of need.

So that's what we think of as being the problem. It's about the degree gap. It's about the range of degrees. It's about who's getting those degrees and who's not getting those degrees.

Eloy: Right. Well, thank you for that. So let's take a step back. California Competes, obviously, the name of your organization says something about what you're trying to accomplish. But tell us a little bit about California Competes. Who is California Competes and what is your vision and goal for the state of California?

Lande: Yeah, so California Competes was established in 2010 as an effort to ensure that we had essentially the demand side of economy having some kind of voice in what was happening with our higher education system. What we know is that the institutions are fundamentally responsible for their own governance and for meeting the needs of students, but that once students complete college, that they need to ensure that they have a space to work in the economy and that having those educated residents of California is not just important of workforce purposes, though that is a primary reason, but it also matters a great deal in terms of the kinds of communities we wanna live in, the kinds of civic participation, and all of the various positive outcomes that accrue with having a college degree.

So we were established to really try to think about what does it mean and what would it mean for California to close its degree attainment gap. That was during the recession and so there wasn't a great deal of resources at that time, so we really started looking at what are the revenue-neutral, if you will, policies and strategies that could be adopted in California that could help start to close that degree attainment gap, and so we've always been very, very disciplined about trying to come up with pragmatic, especially financially pragmatic solutions to addressing the degree achievement gap.

We're guided by a leadership council of business and civic leaders, city mayors, former electeds, business individuals who really care very

deeply about the higher education outcomes of this state. And that leadership council, which is bipartisan in nature, really helps us to devise the kinds of policies and strategies that help to advance California's higher education system.

So that's who we are. We are very fortunate to exist in an ecosystem of education, higher education organizations who care very much about what happens inside the institutions, who join us in a deep commitment to equity for our students, and who are partners with us in terms of trying to identify the kinds of policies that the state needs to adopt.

Eloy: Sounds great. So as California Competes looks at everything you just described, looks at the situation here in California, have you had specific recommendations on how the state should recalibrate its higher education system?

Lande: We do. We have a policy platform, if you will, and one that we've been very vocal about this year in particular, because we think it matters a great deal in terms of who the next governor is and who the next lieutenant governor becomes. For us, we are very, very committed to ensuring that California thinks much more deeply about coordination across its institutional segments. Oftentimes, that gets manifest in the issue of transfer policies. And transfer policies are certainly a lynchpin of how California's higher education system was designed. But we'd like to see much greater coordination to try and smooth the pathways for students in order to accelerate and promote degree completion. So that's a big focus for us.

We're also very committed to thinking about ensuring that we have sufficient re-entry points for the millions of adult students who have started college in California but have not completed. We know that that number exceeds 4 million students and that that is an investment that the state has already begun to make in those students and we think that it's important to help those students complete their degrees not only because it would benefit the state, but because of the personal benefits for those individuals.

We believe very strongly that the state needs better and more comprehensive information to help us answer questions about what's working and what's not. And right now, we don't actually have the kinds of data systems that exist across segments to be able to answer questions about how California students are doing and how we, as a state, are doing in ensuring that we meet the promise of educating all of

our students.

So those are three very specific policy priorities that we have for California Competes. There are others related to higher education finance and tuition and affordability but we are, right now, really focused on trying to shine a spotlight on those three as they relate to this degree attainment gap, so that we can try to promote more students completing college.

Eloy: Sounds like you've been busy.

Lande: Little bit.

Eloy: So there was a recent article in "The New York Times" about the California higher ed, and specifically, it cited that roughly 53% of the University of California, Merced's undergraduates are Latino and I have to take credit for contributing one of those students. My son just graduated from UC Merced. But as we look at the demographics of UC Merced, they closely mirror the demographics of California. And at the California Community Colleges, we're also tracking Latino student success. But could you talk a little bit about your recent work and research that you titled "Opportunity Imbalance" and the findings around Latino completion rates for our state?

Lande: Absolutely. But first of all, congratulations to your son on his graduation. That's fantastic.

Eloy: Yes.

Lande: You know, we undertook this research, "Opportunity Imbalance" because we thought that we didn't actually have a good basis for understanding, relatively speaking, how California students were doing with that education-to-employment pipeline. And so "Opportunity Imbalance" is really an effort to better document what is happening in terms of all students moving from high school into and through college and then entering the workforce. And what we found, because we just aggregated all of our data by race and ethnicity, is that rates of college success vary widely by student demographics, and the state is making pretty marginal progress at closing these degree inequities by race.

And so overall, trends in high school graduations, college completion and employment hide stark differences by race. Forty-seven percent of Latino students in the state are in an Associate's Degree within three

years, or a Bachelor's within six years, compared to our state average of 55%. Improvements in Latino high school completion and enrollment haven't translated into the proportional gains in terms of what we wanna see in college outcomes. And Latinos in California earn the lowest median wages of all racial and ethnic groups in the state, even as they show the largest improvements in high school completion and in college enrollment.

So we just have, again, it's a story of a paradox, and that story is important not just in terms of the outcomes of those individual students but it's especially important in this election season. We were able to undertake a survey with Univision earlier this year, and that survey found that 74% of registered Latino voters reported that their choice for governor will be influenced by how the candidates plan to address issues related to higher education. So the fortunes, the plight, the prospects for Latino students in the state is very much tied to what they are able to gain from a higher education system. And right now, there is a story of increasing access, particularly if you look at it generationally. We know that those 25 to 34 are doing much better than their parents and their grandparents, but they're still not keeping pace with state averages and we're really committed to ensuring that we reduce those racial inequities that are persistent.

Eloy: Well, it's certainly great to hear that those registered Latino voters really continue to value a higher education. I also hope that this is not only on the radar of the next governor, but we make it a priority.

So let's talk about another piece of work that you did. You've talked a little bit about a comprehensive data system, but you recently published a report called "Out of the Dark" talking about creating a blueprint for how the state could create a comprehensive data system. Why do you think this is so important to improving higher education outcomes here in the state?

Lande: Well, transparency in higher education is critical to making sound investments. And it's critical to serving students who are on a path from K-12 into college and then into the workforce. As it turns out, California is one of six states in the nation without an integrated, comprehensive data system, one of six, which is ironic given the fact that we are the state that everyone often looks to because of the masterplan for higher education and because we were able to setup such a high performing, highly...by design, an equitable higher education system.

But what we know is because we don't have this integrated data system, we don't know the answer to so many important questions about what is happening with our students. We can't tell you how many California high school graduates from this May or June will be able to enroll in two and four-year colleges in the fall because we don't have systems that connect those two data sets. We can't tell you how many students who start at a college will necessarily go on to complete a degree or a certificate at the same college or whether or not they've transferred. That's not centralized data. That's data that you might be able to get at the institutional level, but it's not data that we can answer for the entire state, and so it is very difficult then to design the kinds of policies and interventions that we would need to address what is happening in terms of student pathways.

And so we are very committed to trying to figure out how to ensure that we have integrated and comprehensive data systems that can help us to both design policies and interventions that help get students across the finish line.

Eloy: So speaking about getting students across the finish line, one of the other pieces of work that you've done is really highlighting the number of individuals who have some college but no credential or higher education degree. Tell us a little bit about those findings and why is putting the spotlight on this group so important in today's economy?

Lande: Yeah, what is true is that we can't fill our degree attainment gap that we have of more than 2 million just by paying attention to those people who will be recent college graduates and recent high school graduates, that we need to go deeper and we know we have a significant portion of Californians, as I mentioned earlier, who started college but have not been successful in completing. We have one in five adults between ages of 25 and 64 who've attempted college courses but have left college before completing a degree. You know, those, in terms of race and ethnicity, 47% of those are white, 30% are Latino, and 10% are Asian, 8% are black, which is interesting because when you look at those numbers and those demographics, in some ways, they are reflective of the population. In other ways, the Latino numbers are not reflective as many Latinos as they are in the state of California, there are fewer who are completing and have some college because there are fewer who are matriculating to college at all.

So those are the kinds of inequities that we are seeing that exist and it goes back to the question on data and where we don't have good, easy,

accessible data to be able to answer some of those questions. And so for us, we're really trying to shine a spotlight on the fact that we don't have enough high school graduates in the state to close that degree attainment gap, but it's very meaningful for those with some college to be able to complete both for their own personal wellbeing as well as for the state's overall economy. And we'll be coming out with a report on this particular population in about a month that really gets underneath the hood to really understand who these individuals are and what are the kinds of policies and strategies the state could adopt if it wanted to help those adults with some college and no degree really be able to obtain their degree or credential.

Eloy: Well, I agree. This is such an important group of individuals and certainly aligns with a lot of the work that we're doing in the community colleges right now.

And so speaking of the community colleges, as we begin to wrap up, you're very familiar with the California Community Colleges. You're familiar with the Vision for Success that really is our anchor document in our system. You've seen the implementation of many initiatives that have come out of that Vision for Success, Guided Pathways, the work around establishing the fully online college focus on adult learners. And we've been fortunate to be able to partner with you and others on many of these initiatives. But as you think about the direction that we're going in the California Community Colleges, what are some of the things that you think are going very well, and what are some of the areas that you still have concerns that our colleges still aren't either paying enough attention to or having success at?

Lande: Well, I'll tell you one thing. I was very excited about the Vision for Success. And one of the elements of the Vision for Success that I think was particularly compelling is the focus on Guided Pathways. Again, for us, we are very committed to ensuring that we get more students not just into college but through college. And there're lots of pieces of that. It means paying attention to how long students are staying in college. It means paying attention to the real capacity issues that our institutions face. But Guided Pathways actually are set up to be a solution to multiple problems that we're facing.

So the idea that we could reduce the amount of churn that students experience helps them to move through more quickly. If more students are moving through more quickly, it opens the doors for other students to be able to come in. It helps to promote the transfer function that we so

value in the state of California, that's our cornerstone of how our higher education system is designed, and it certainly promotes completion, and it does that while reducing some of the challenges we found with students taking multiple credits year over year. And sometimes that means a loss in financial aid, because they don't have sufficient financial aid to carry them through their entire academic journey.

So reducing those excessive credits, improving time to degree, building their knowledge and skills, all of those things are addressed by the Guided Pathways strategy. So for us, as a curricular intervention, that has been kind of a critical piece of what we think the community colleges are modeling, not just for all the state's community colleges, but modeling for, frankly, our four-year institutions in terms of what it means to, you know, I know the "cafeteria model of education" is often associated with learning and academic freedom. But the truth is, that cafeteria model was designed in a time where the cost of college was sufficiently lower than what it is now.

And we have to ensure that as we open up access for students to attend college, that we're doing it in a way that makes good economic sense for them as well, and so they need to be able to move into and through college in a timely fashion. And I think the ways in which the community colleges are modeling for our other institutions around what does it mean and what does it take to help students move through quickly while preserving quality, while preserving access, is essential. I'm really, really excited about that work.

I'm excited about, frankly, the 115th community college, I think it's an essential of a broader ecosystem of educational options and choices that the state not only needs to have but that the state's residents deserve to have. And so I think that is a critical component that the community college system is adding to the many ways that it does outreach and engages students and residents in their educational journey. So that's a critical piece for me.

And then the final piece that I'll mention is the new funding formula. Several years ago, California Competes was involved in proposing that we look at growth funding models in a very, very different way, in ways that really started to account for educational need, right? The needs of students who need the highest amount of education, and that we actually reward those institutions who were doing that kind of outreach to ensure that those residents in California with the greatest higher education need were getting more access.

And so the idea that we now have, in statute, a policy that is going to actually help incentivize and reward colleges for reaching out to the Californians who have the greatest need for education is a very deep demonstration of our commitment to equity. It is at the heart and at the core of our commitment to equity in the state. So I'm really excited about the forward thinking, the reform-oriented perspective that the community colleges are offering as a beacon not just for this state's students, but as a beacon for the higher education systems in the state and across this nation.

Eloy: Well, we really appreciate the tireless advocacy of California Competes and the partnership that we have enjoyed working with you and the council. You and your organization have been a part and part of a lot of these changes, so we look forward to continuing to work with you. And I'd love to check back with you at some point in time in the future and see how you think we're doing, and invite you back. So I really appreciate you spending some time with us, Lande.

Lande: Thank you so much for the opportunity and thank you for your leadership. We're so grateful here in the state.

Eloy: So you have been listening to California Community Colleges Podcast. I'm Eloy Ortiz Oakley and I've had the pleasure of talking with Lande Ajose, the executive director of California Competes. It's been a pleasure talking to her and we look forward to our next guest in the near future, so check back again for another episode of the California Community Colleges Chancellor's Office Podcast. See you soon.

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