January 8 Podcast Transcript

Eloy: Hi, 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 have the great pleasure of being joined by Gregg Irish, executive director of the Los Angeles Workforce Investment Board as well as Dr. J Luke Wood, Associate Vice-President for Faculty Diversity and Inclusion and Distinguished Professor of Education at San Diego State University. Dr. Wood also serves as the co-director of the Community College Equity Assessment Lab at San Diego state. Welcome to both of you.

Dr. Luke: Thank you for having us.

Gregg: Good to be here.

Eloy: Well, it's great to have you both here. For our listeners, we're going to be talking about the state of higher education for black and African-American students in California. This is an important topic, not only for the California Community Colleges but for the state of California in general. California population of black and African-Americans is at around 6.5%, but we have communities such as Los Angeles that are nearly 10%. The California Community Colleges itself serves around 6% black and African-American students.

So, for our state and for our nation, improving outcomes for black and African-American students is critical to our future. So, it's great to have my two guests here today who have a lot to say and who've done a great amount of work in this area. So, why don't we get started in the discussions? I'll begin with you, Luke. Your work as the associate vice president for Faculty Diversity and Inclusion, and more importantly the work that you're doing as co-director of the Community College Equity Assessment Lab at San Diego State, you've done a lot of research and looked at a lot of practice around improving outcomes for black and African-American students. So, let's begin with you. Can you give us your thoughts and your overview on the state of higher education for black and African-American students in California, with a focus on our community colleges?

Dr. Luke: Absolutely. And thank you for the question. I think it's important to mention first that community colleges serve as the primary pathway into postsecondary education for black and African-American students. That's a number that we see, or a percentage that we see both nationally and in the state. Nationally, about 64% of those who are in postsecondary education begin their academic careers in community colleges. In California, it's above 80%. So, we're talking about the primary way in which these students are able to attain a

degree and improve their livelihoods through education. Unfortunately, access doesn't always equal success. And while we see high levels of representation in our community college system, we've also seen challenges in terms of outcome disparities, particularly around issues of completion, developmental education, and persistence. And I think that that's been some of the greatest work that you've done, Chancellor, is really trying to address that by having structural interventions that address those disparities that we're seeing.

I think that largely, the challenge is associated with educators' perceptions of these students. Oftentimes when we see outcome disparities and we're working with a college, one of the things that we'll hear people say, you know, is, "What is going wrong with these students? Why aren't they doing what it takes for them to be successful here?" And that's that deficit framing that unfortunately influences a lot of the ways that educators engage these students. And our center, CCEAL lab, that I operate with Frank Harris III, what we've tried to do is have educators think about it from a different perspective, which is to say from an equity-minded perspective, what are we doing or not doing as a district, as a college, as a department, that's resulting in our students not having the outcomes that we would like to see. And oftentimes, when we start the conversation from there, we realize that there are significant structural impediments as well as on-the-ground issues that deal directly with the institutions themselves and the educators who are serving the students.

And so, we think that that's very important to keep in mind. The other thing that I think we have to be thoughtful of is that our community colleges are doing a much better job now, under your leadership, in producing students who are now completing their degrees and they're transferring because of, you know, efforts such as Guided Pathways, integrated planning, online learning initiatives. There's just so many different things that are taking place, your vision for success, the new funding formula. And so, the other side of this is, is now that the community college is being more successful, where do those students go? And that's another thing that we have to be thoughtful of. I know there was a report that came out from the campaign for college opportunity, and they found that 15% of our community college students were transferring to for-profit institutions because there was a lack of access.

And so, I think that that's a pretty significant issue because when we're thinking about students who are going in there and trying to create a better life for themselves and their families, but they're seeing that there's not opportunity on the other end, that that also influences and affects their success. Now, kind of just backing out more broadly, and I'll kind of close here, we also have to recognize that while educators oftentimes will want to see data that deals with, you know, issues such as food and housing, insecurity, which is certainly

relevant issues such as environmental pressures and all these things that basically allow us to focus on the students, their families, and their communities. In reality, what we have seen with the campuses that we've worked with that have been successful in changing outcomes for students is that it's again more so that focus on what are we doing or not doing as an institution, in particular, professional learning around implicit bias, microaggressions, inclusive teaching and learning practices, counseling and advising practices, and really trying to re-orient the institution to serve students first as the primary mode of operation.

Eloy: I think those are great points, Luke. You know, you've been doing this work for some time now. And certainly, in our system of higher education as well as all systems of higher education, the issues that surround the success, or in many cases the lack of success for black and African-American students, have a lot of their roots in our own biases as societies and, to a greater extent, structural racism in our policies. How do you suggest that we unwind these conversations? How do we have productive conversations about getting to the root of why our higher education systems have, by and large, failed students of color, particularly black and African-American students? And how do we begin to look in the mirror and move forward? What are some of the suggestions you have for college leaders?

Dr. Luke: That's a fantastic question. I mean, that is one of the biggest challenges that we see in our work. And what it really deals with is three primary stereotypes that we see that affect black and African-American students the most. The first is an assumption of criminality where they're assumed to be dangerous, deviant, up to no good, to be troublemakers. The second deals with ascription of intelligence where they're assumed to be academically inferior. And the third deals with pathologizing culture where we make these kind of broad-stroke statements about the communities, like "They're not really here to learn. They don't really care. They're only here for the financial aid. They come from bad communities." And so, we see that...we call that the D3 effect, distress, disdain, and disregard. And how that influences the ways that educators engage the students is absolutely apparent in the work that we do.

And it's probably, unfortunately, the strongest factor influencing success. So, I mean, there's a lot that colleges can do around it. There's training on implicit bias. And that can't just be with, okay, how do I engage students differently? But also, how do I engage my colleagues? How does that influence our RTP, retention and tenure processes? How does that influence the hiring that we do in terms of the educators who are around the table? How does that influence the ways that we engage student services? So, it has to be holistic in the way that it happens. But, and I've said this many times before, a one-time training on

implicit bias or microaggressions is a waste of time. Because oftentimes, all you do is arm people with information that doesn't allow them to fully engage in a deep way so they can basically be more fluent in talking about it, but it doesn't actually change outcomes.

And so, what we've done, with the campuses that we've had the most success with, is intensive, ongoing training, professional learning on these topics, monthly sessions where we're coming in and we're talking about what this looks like, voices from their own students. And that's what we see that really leads to differential outcomes. The other thing that I would say, and this refers to what we call our pyramid of success. And at the top of the pyramid, we think that in a pyramid of success, and it should be success, our students completing, persisting, attaining their degrees. The step below that is the teaching and learning practices that we apply in the classroom. The step below that is relational practices where we build relationships with students. And then the step below that is really perceptions. And the truth is that you can talk about practices and that can actually only arm people to do more damage than good.

Let me give you one quick example of this. We were doing a training with a college, and my colleague, Frank, had done a discussion on college men and masculinities and sometimes talking about how some men of color may be apprehensive to seek out help. And so, how you have to develop systems that basically create an embedded a system of support. Then a faculty member, this was part of a flex day, then went to a session on building relationships with students outside the classroom. And they were told, "You see a student, go engage them, build a relationship with them. This is important." And we all know that's important, right? So, this person, well-meaning, well-intended, walks out of this flex day and says, "You know what, I'm going to be the change, right? I'm going to help improve outcomes." And so, the first student that they see that they were going to basically go up and engage them. And it just so happened that the first student that they saw walking out of their flex day was a black male.

So, they walked up to this black male student and they said to them, "Hi, I'm so and so. I teach here. I hear that you guys have problems asking for help. So, what I'd like to do is to build a relationship with you. So, what sport do you play?" And it's a series of different microaggressions. Now, we have to hear a separate intent from impact. The person had a good intent, but their impact was bad because they didn't deal with the base level. So, we can have structural changes, right, but unless we're also changing the hearts and minds of educators who are working with our students, that structural change will only serve to create new systems that perpetuate the systemic inequities that you talked about.

Eloy: Yeah. You're absolutely right. Let me pull in Gregg here on this topic as well. So, Gregg, you [inaudible 00:11:14] in the City of Los Angeles Workforce Development Board so obviously you're very attuned to the workforce needs of the greater Los Angeles area. But you're also the co-chair of the California Community Colleges, Black and African-American Advisory Panel. So, in your experiences, both as a workforce professional and community member, but more recently as a leader of this advisory panel, what are some of the things that you're seeing, that you're hearing, about the California Community Colleges and how can we better serve black and African-American students? And then finally, why is this important? Why is this important to the City of Los Angeles?

Gregg: Well, Mr. chancellor, first I want to commend you for forming that African-American advisory panel. It's with a number of folks who...stakeholders who have an interest in ensuring that African-Americans can benefit from community college. You've sort of made me... I was prior to this, a workforce development evangelist, but you've added to that where I'm now becoming a community college evangelist. When we look, and you can appreciate this as an academic, when we're making decisions... I'm a staff member to the mayor. I also provide the professional staff to the workforce development board that oversees an $80 million workforce development budget. It's our job to ensure that our residents have access to educational opportunities, employment opportunities, so they can become productive citizens in our communities and successful participants in the labor market. We realize though that one major stakeholder, that we have to have connections to, is the community colleges. And quite frankly, I say this throughout the state that we don't have the benefit of HBCUs.

We do have those connections between those who complete community college and are able to transfer to HBCUs. But the initial benefit of the first two years of college are community colleges should be the HBCUs of California. And I don't say that lightly. When you look at... When I told you you should appreciate this as an academic, when I make decisions or recommend decisions to the mayor and the board, I base them on numerous studies and as much information that I can garner. And there was a study recently by a nonprofit, The Campaign for College Opportunity, that did a study called The State of Higher Education for Blacks in California. And when we look at the demographics of California, African-Americans comprise 6% of the population between the ages of 18 and 24. So when we also take a closer look, we're looking at enrollments while they're improving and they're on the rise, African-Americans aren't finishing college at the same rates as others.

So, let's just look at the comparison between African-American students who go to college. When you look at it and where we are represented, for example, we comprise maybe 2% of the UC system, maybe 4% of the CSU system, 7% of the community college system, which I think is wonderful compared to 6% of our population, and of private colleges 6%. But the challenge is not the enrollment, but the completion rates, and we lag in terms of completion rates. And yet, community colleges are the best way for us to make a connection in terms of getting an education, getting the initial exposure to the courses that I might say, and from experience, relate directly to what's happening in the labor market. And then either continue on a path to a four-year degree or complete a two-year degree and enter the labor market or continuing education.

Where do you have that opportunity at an expense that's less than anywhere else in terms of getting a college education? I speak from experience because I have two kids who have college debt from going to four-year universities and are trying to find themselves now. You can at least, for the cost that's reasonable, without college debt, like we have for some of our young people experience college in a community college, get the kind of coursework you need to enter the labor market and continue to progress through education as the workforce requires you to, in terms of ongoing and continuous learning. That's critical.

Eloy: You mentioned that it's not enough for black and African-American students to go to college, to go to our community colleges. You see what's happening in Southern California workforce, why is it so important that they finish?

Gregg: Well, when you look at the unemployment rates in California, when you look at all the demographics about who is overly represented among the poor, among the uneducated, it's African-Americans. So, of course, it's people of color. There are also...Latinos are involved as well. When you look at who's completing college, there are disparities in terms of gender as well. If we expect, and then when we talk about it purely from an economic standpoint, let's forget about a moral standpoint. I mean, we already know that, but purely from an economic standpoint, my house is not worth anything when I want to sell it unless other people can buy it. So, we've got to make sure that people are able to participate in this society and do well in this society, for all of us. And that's why when you look at African-Americans in the demographics, they lag in just about every case, even healthcare, even housing, all of these things. The important thing is education is a game-changer for African-Americans just like for Latinos and everybody else, in terms of having a better chance to succeed in society if you have an education.

Eloy: Thank you. Gregg. Luke, you've been following some of the changes that we're trying to make in the California Community Colleges and most recently through assembly bill 705, we've made significant changes to remedial education and the way we place students in transfer-level math and English. Based on what you see so far, how do you see this impacting the success of black and African-American students, particularly since those two courses seem to be, for lack of a better term, the killing fields for students of color trying to achieve success in higher education?

Dr. Luke: Yeah. I am very excited about 705 and the implementation of it. I think that it is one of the most important interventions that is taking place across our state. I have to think about my days in working in a community college in California, and... I was doing outreach and advising for community college, and one of the things that I would know is if I had a student who came in and would oftentimes, you know, place at a certain level on the different assessments that we have, that have been shown now to not be very effective, that they would be in developmental math and English for three years before they'd ever see a college-level course. And then, of course, the success rates when a student was placing four and five levels below, at some point we just had to ask ourselves, "What are we really doing as a system?"

So, 705 has been a breath of fresh air because it's provided us with an opportunity to ensure these students will have access to transfer-level courses. Now, I do think that there's one thing that we have to keep in mind in the implementation of 705 and that's this. If I'm a faculty member in a community college and I have been teaching transfer-level courses, right? And I am now going to have a much larger number of students of color, particularly black and Latin X students, who are coming into my classes now, do I have the right disposition to be serving those students? Do I expect them to fail? Do I perceive that, well, they don't really belong here, it's only because of this structural intervention that's taking place at the state level, it's only because of a legislative mandate? So therefore, they don't belong here and now it's going to be a self-fulfilling prophecy where I'm going to look for things to basically make it so they don't pass.

Now, I think for many community colleges, well, not many, but at least some community colleges that are really equity-minded, I don't think that that's going to be a problem because they have led some of these efforts. They're already doing remarkable things with acceleration and supplemental instruction. The places that I worry about are the places where they are being brought into this, for lack of a better way of saying it, they're being dragged into it kicking and screaming, when they don't realize that this is about the very students who they say that they serve. And so, if we want to ensure that our students are

successful, we have to better prepare these educators to teach students who many of them never thought that they would be teaching. In fact, if we just think about this in general, most community college faculty and...I'm in a university, most university faculty as well are subject matter experts, they're not pedagogues, right?

So, they're great in math, they're great in English, they're great in cultural anthropology or biology, right? They're great in their subject matter. But many of them were not trained how to teach. So, what we find is that they teach how they were taught, and typically how they are taught is not how our students learn in general but in particular, our students of color, because they have never really thought and been prepared to engage people who look different from them. And so, it's one of the most important interventions that we have, yet at the same time, we need to make sure that we are ensuring that the faculty members and staff members who are going to be engaging those students believe that they have the ability to be able to do the work.

Eloy: Exactly. So, let me begin to wrap up on that topic, Luke, and, you know, I'd love to hear from you and then from Gregg. One set of recommendations that the board of governors is looking at is around diversity, equity and inclusion, and in particular our workforce in the California Community Colleges and why it's so important to diversify our workforce to better...not just understand the needs of our students, but to better support the needs of our students. There's been a lot of research done that suggests that having a diverse faculty improves outcomes for all types of students. So, for us, this is an important part of student success. It's an area that we need to begin to make progress on for all the reasons you just cited. So, let me begin with you, Luke. Why is it important that the California Community Colleges diversify its workforce? Why's it important to black and African-American students?

Dr. Luke: Well, it's essential because at some point you have to see someone who looks like you. I mean, if we think about most of our students of color, they went through elementary school, middle school, high school, without ever engaging many educators, if any, who looked like them. They get to our community colleges and we find that the highest distribution of those who are teaching those basic and gateway level courses are also much more likely to be white. And so, we know that the patterns that they see in K-12 are the same patterns that they experience, especially in their first year of community college. So, you do have to be able to see people who look like you. And I think there's a lot of things that can be done around that. I think, for example, one of the challenges we have is just simply how we hire people.

Let's just look at the typical interview for a faculty position. You come in and you're going to do a 50-minute interview and a 10-minute teaching demonstration when the vast majority of what you're going to be doing with our students or to our students is teaching them, right? So, are we really using the right approaches to pick those who are going to be working with our students? The other thing is that when they do the teaching demonstration, how are we actually scoring that? Do we have a rubric that looks at factors such as validating practices or creating a sense of belonging in the classroom or building personal relationships with students or culturally relevant teaching? Are we looking at the things that are most important for minority students or are we just checking off the box and basing everything on the interview? So, I think that there's a lot of practices that actually serve to create the challenges that we see.

Eloy: All right. So, Gregg, from your perspective, from someone who is trying to serve the needs of employers, the workforce in the greater LA area, why is it important for the community colleges and their workforce to reflect the diversity of the types of communities that you serve?

Gregg: Well, again, I think for the sake of role models, I think Luke said it well, but I also want to comment on the fact that you formed this African-American advisory panel, and it shows a commitment. It's never been done by a chancellor before. So, I want to commend you for that. And what I think you know, and the charge you've given this panel, was to go out and approach the community and ask them what they think the community needs, what African-Americans need to complete community college or to go on to four-year institutions. Go right to the source and ask. And you've been convening these hearings, these town halls throughout the state to ask for input from the community. What better way, what do you think African-American students need to enroll in community college and to complete community college?

And again, Luke is right. You need to get as much input from the community and then the community needs to believe that we take their input seriously, that we'll actually recommend their suggestions and that we're going to put that together for you, Mr. Chancellor. And it is going to include folks who look like them, but it's going to include a lot of other things in terms of financial aid, etc. But you're the first chancellor to go to the committee and ask them and you've been appearing in all these hearings.

We've had one in Fresno, LA, San Diego, we're planning some more. No other chancellor's ever done that. And sometimes to solve the problems you need to go to the community itself and ask for input on how to solve.

Eloy: Well, I certainly appreciate the leadership that you've brought to the advisory panel, Gregg. And I very much appreciate the work, Luke, that you've been doing to highlight practices, to highlight research, particularly for black and African-American men in higher education. So, I feel very good having leaders like you in the state to help support our community colleges. I agree with both of you that our colleges are the gateway to students of color throughout the state. And that is a point of pride for us. So, I want to thank you both for your leadership and for being on the show. We have been talking with Gregg Irish as well as Dr. Luke Wood about black and African-American students in California. So again, thank you to both of you for being on the show, and I look forward to continuing to work with you.

Dr. Luke: Thank you for having us.

Gregg: [inaudible 00:25:55].

Eloy: You've been listening to another episode of the "California Community Colleges Chancellor's Office" podcast. This is Eloy Ortiz Oakley, chancellor of the California Community Colleges. And I want to thank all of our listeners for tuning in again. And we will be back to you soon.

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