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RACE, CLASS, AND EDUCATION

What Equity and Student Support Mean at Colleges That Have Been at It for Generations

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Coronavirus robbed graduates of the ritual of commencement this past spring.

At a time when the nation is in the throes of both a movement for racial justice and a raging pandemic that is disproportionately affecting people of color, what can leaders across higher education learn from minority-serving institutions, especially in terms of supporting students and becoming more inclusive?

Last week *The Chronicle* brought together presidents who hailed from historically black institutions, a tribal college, and community colleges serving Hispanic and Asian American and Native American Pacific Islander students. The [discussion](#) — co-hosted by Michael J. Sorrell, president of Paul Quinn College, and Sarah Brown, a senior reporter at *The Chronicle* — included Twyla Baker, president of Nueta Hidatsa Sahnish College; William Serrata, president of the El Paso County Community College District; Walter M. Kimbrough, president of Dillard University; and Rowena M. Tomaneng, president of San José City College. The event was underwritten by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation.

The leaders discussed how they're prioritizing the academic success, basic needs, and activism of students of color. They also offered advice for other leaders, particularly those from predominantly white institutions, on moving ahead with goals on diversity, equity, and inclusion after the killing of George Floyd and a social and political reckoning over systemic racism. And they described what the past several months have been like for them on a personal level. The following excerpts have been edited for length and clarity. This was the third event in a continuing series on race, class, and education.

Meeting Students' Needs

William Serrata: Our students are missing rites of passage. Being the first in their families to walk across the stage. Their whole family graduates when they cross that

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Rowena M. Tomaneng: We sent personalized commencement kits to all of our students. Nevertheless, it was heartbreaking. When I was doing videos for the various virtual ceremonies, I found myself almost tearing up reading my remarks. I was just thinking about how the families were not going to have that opportunity to celebrate.

Serrata: I've had students reach out directly to me. One said, I'm borrowing someone's laptop so I can finish my course, and your safety and security protocol is too difficult. I replied to the student and said, Have you checked this and this? He was like, No, I haven't. The only reason I'm reaching out to you is because I get updates from you on a regular basis of what's happening on campus. When you're a first-generation college student — over 70 percent of our students are — you don't know the system of higher ed. And when you're trying to navigate that virtually, it's even more difficult. We've implemented a calling campaign to reach out to every single one of our 29,000 students and check on them. How are you doing? Is there anything else that we can do for you? Have you taken advantage of the CARES Act — have you applied for that so we can get you resources? Do you need a laptop? One of the basic needs that we're seeing more and more is broadband Internet access — both devices and reliable internet. We used a significant amount of our CARES Act dollars to purchase technology to distribute to students, to lend out hotspots and laptops. We've partnered in many communities with AT&T and with Spectrum. They were offering internet free through June. Now they've reduced their costs to about \$10 a month, which is very affordable.

Tomaneng: We don't need to argue for more resources to care for our students. That is something that doesn't cost any money.

Taking a Stand Against Racism

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going on, I'm getting out in the streets. This is a way to channel the energy and the frustration of how everything closed, dealing with Covid, the fear of it. It gave them a renewed sense of, I have purpose, and I know why I'm here. Particularly as we're in an election season, how can we keep doing that? Whether you're in person or virtual, there is an opportunity to help channel that.

Tomaneng: Within the broader Asian American community, there has been a lot of solidarity around Black lives. There are also conversations happening about voice and visibility, because when Covid hit, there were already civil-rights organizations tracking xenophobia and anti-Asian sentiment. One of the policy institutes at San Francisco State recorded about 1,500 hate crimes and discrimination actions directed towards Asians within two months.

Serrata: We're institutions of higher learning. These are the kinds of robust topics and rich topics that we take on. This is how our students learn how to be active. We haven't been able to hold those dialogues in person, but we've seen our students take part in protests and hold events virtually. They're also encouraging their fellow students to register to vote. In El Paso, August 3 will mark one year since someone from the Dallas area drove 550 miles, picked what is deemed the Mexican Walmart, and ended up killing 23 individuals from our community. It certainly still stings to see where our country is and where we still need to go. But I am heartened to see this sustained effort of raising consciousness.

Tomaneng: This is an opportunity for collaboration and working with other institutions locally. Right when Covid hit, my district was already engaged in a collaborative around the 2020 census and having our students learn organizing skills and interface with the community. The more opportunities we can give for students to be engaged, that will contribute to sustained action to tackle systemic inequalities.

Kimbrough: The president has to view themselves as the chief diversity officer. Not somebody that you hire, you give them a nice title, a little money, no staff, and then say, OK, I've done my job. It happens far too often. It's got to be modeled from the top — that person is engaged with a diversity of students and showing that.

Michael Sorrell: You have to be comfortable with the issues to be the chief diversity officer as a person. But you also have to acknowledge that it's the right thing to do. And you're going to have to step on some toes to do it.

Twyla Baker: We observed Juneteenth here on Fort Berthold Indian Reservation — the middle of North Dakota, where there's not a whole lot of presence of Black people. I had a student reach out to me and say, Can we as the college do something to mark Juneteenth? It was as simple as me saying yes. We did it in a very particular tribal fashion. We had a Juneteenth justice ride — we rode 15-20 miles on horseback. In doing so, we raise awareness amongst our own people. We're broadening their understanding of our connections to the larger world and that, Hey, this needs to be important to you, too. It builds that coalition, and it helps them to understand that there's so much more out there than just the reservation.

Tomaneng: I have an expectation that my management team will also be at the next level in terms of doing this work. I told them, If you are not comfortable facilitating dialogues internally within your areas, then I will support you in acquiring those tools. Then secondly, showing up — especially when your students invite you — just for even a few minutes. It makes a difference.

Sorrell: I went to a predominantly white institution for college. Everyone had their own stuff. There was African Heritage House. There was Hebrew House. There was Asia House. As I became a college leader, I said: The greatest compliment that I can make to anyone is to fully embrace their cultures. While it's great to have

we share in common. I've gotten criticized about that. Twenty percent of our student population happens to be Hispanic. I've had some segment of individuals say you're trying to turn this into a Hispanic institution. First of all, we live in Texas. If you don't have at least a 20-percent Hispanic population, it's because you're trying not to have Hispanic population in your school — and then we're just behaving as the majority culture does. And that's despicable. For us, it's finding ways to champion others just by genuinely and authentically caring — by saying, Look, I don't know everything, but I am absolutely willing to sit here and learn. If we can't be those leaders, who else will be? I look at a lot of predominantly white institutions, and they make this so much harder than it has to be. It just isn't that hard if you genuinely care.

Baker: There's this sense of pushing the myth of scarcity in driving those divisions between the different groups. That's how you keep people in line, so to speak. I feel like we need to be actively pushing back. We need to be building community constantly. What are we here for if we're not trying to help educate each other about each other?

Personal Impact

Kimbrough: Initially, after we made the conversion to go online, I realized within a couple of weeks that my energy level was off. I was trying to figure out, Dude, what's going on? What's wrong with you? I'm in my 16th year as a president. My normal end of the school year is that, after spring break, we have Honors Day, and we have our big Research Week, then we start getting to all our awards ceremonies, and then we have baccalaureate and commencement. That's the day that makes everything special. It took me a while to realize, Man, I'm not going to have that moment.

Baker: The pandemic is impacting indigenous people in multiple ways, due to

long time. We don't have a hospital out here. Tribes are trying to respond as best they can to protect their own people. Being from a tribal community, I'm not necessarily a tribal member who is a president. I'm a community member who happens to be a president. My tribe actually has tapped me and my grant-writing capabilities to help the tribe itself respond. We have all been supporting each other at a distance, trying to keep each other safe, reaching out to each other, checking on elders. We've been trying to keep our spirits up and trying to find refuge. I'm trying to be gentle with myself and with other people.

Sorrell: I talk often about how students will be dealing with mental-health issues. But we as a community of leaders will be dealing with mental-health issues. It's tough.

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