

KEY
TAKEAWAYS



What It Takes to Be a Student-Centered Institution Now

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THE CHRONICLE
OF HIGHER EDUCATION.

Increasing graduation rates and improving social mobility is difficult for colleges during the best of times. During a crisis, those goals can seem almost unattainable. How do colleges ensure student success while contending with the double blow of a pandemic and a recession? What changes in structures, policies, and practices do they need to make?

To help colleges in their effort to serve the evolving needs of students, *The Chronicle of Higher Education* on September 10 hosted a virtual forum, with support from the Ascendium Education Group, called “What It Takes to Be a Student-Centered Institution Now.” The forum, moderated by Sara Lipka, an assistant managing editor at *The Chronicle*, included Allison Calhoun-Brown, vice president for student engagement and programs at Georgia State University; Pam Eddinger, president of Bunker Hill Community College; Sukhwant Jhaj, vice provost for academic innovation and student achievement at Arizona State University; and Ajay Nair, president of Arcadia University

The following comments, which have been edited for clarity and length, represent key takeaways from the forum. To hear the full discussion, access the archived version [here](#).

Sara Lipka: How are you trying to help incoming students feel a sense of community when they can’t be on your campus?

Ajay Nair: It’s one of the great challenges, especially for our first-year students. We’re experimenting with all sorts of virtual communities. One of the programs that we’ve launched is a civic-scholars program. We have developed a cohort of students who are exploring what civic engagement means but also doing virtual events and programs to seek positive transformation in their community. And so we have brought together different cohorts of students based on affinity, based on interest, and then we find key opportunities to bring all of those students together to build campus identity.

Allison Calhoun-Brown: We are identifying on students’ applications the kinds of extracurricular things that they’re interested in. And then, instead of passively waiting for them to go find a student organization that aligns with that, we’re pushing that information to them. We’re doing that in a proactive manner to try to lessen the distance between the things that they’re interested in and the things that we offer. Often we rely on students to make those connections, but we’re going to try to make it easier for them.

Lipka: How do you make sure that in your work serving students, you are engaging different constituencies on campus, making them feel like this is their work too?

Pam Eddinger: Twice a week we do a staff meeting of 20 people — all of our key supervisors and managers. They are at different levels, including advanced managers, senior managers, and



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Assistant Managing Editor,
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Ajay Nair
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middle managers. Our communications to the students are much fuller and more appropriate and in good rhythm because our managers are all hearing the same story all the time in the same spaces. So the leadership dialog is not just me and my three other cabinet members. The leadership dialog moves from me to multiple layers twice a week. Being able to communicate in this way brings everyone to the same page because we come away with solutions that everybody then takes into their own area. And you're telling the same story of caring. You're telling the same story of kindness, of equity. That's powerful.

Sara Lipka: The national conversation about higher education has been focused recently on issues of trust and risk and blame. Not all constituencies think institutions have their best interests at heart. How do you create a campus community where people trust one another and feel like they're moving forward together with these decisions?

Nair: For one, with shared governance, we have to build things together. And so a top down sort of leadership is not going to work in a Covid world. Two, we have to do more outreach to our community members and socialize ideas that have come as a result of conversations. And three, we have to make values-based decisions, to be clear about what our community principles are and to ground our decisions and those principles in order to communicate and articulate them. The values that we have on our website have to be lived values. We have to remind our committee members of those values and live up to them.

Calhoun-Brown: At Georgia State, the No. 1 priority is student success. But what does that mean? How do we apply that? And how do we consistently make decisions that will support that strategic value? A lot of what we've done in this Covid period is to integrate the kinds of supports that are necessary for our students. I think that the Covid time really put a fine point on it. But these are things that in some ways and in some areas we should have been doing long ago, pivots that we should have made, adjustments that really benefited the student body. We were insisting that they come and ask questions in person. We won't be doing that anymore. I think that's a longlasting change. But it will be positive in the end for student support and for student success. It has made us do things differently, and certainly at a much more accelerated pace than we would have otherwise. We wouldn't want it again. But I think on the other side of this, we will be better off as a sector and as institutions.

Lipka: What is one shift that you think your colleagues could make, whether it's a shift in mind-set or a shift in practice, something new to try that would help them serve students better this semester?

Sukhwant Jhaj: There is no going back to the world that existed pre-Covid, and we ought not to go back to that. This is our moment to fundamentally change how learning is delivered in America. The



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speed at which we are acting, the collaborative ways in which we are working, the ways in which we are rethinking how technology is deployed, the ways in which we are thinking about questions of equity and inclusions and redesigns of our organizations to address the critical needs there. All of those should energize us to rethink a learning system that fundamentally changes the outcomes in America. We do not deliver on our promise in so many ways. Students who come from the richest families in America do quite well in higher education, and those who come from the poorest families do not. And those outcomes have not changed for decades. This is our time to rethink our system. Reimagine something that allows us to deliver better and more meaningful results. There's no going back where things were before. You're only moving forward and toward the good.

Eddinger: An exercise that might be interesting to do as we all go through the next semester or so, is that if you were to rebuild the system all over again without the current history that we have, would you build it the same way? So Covid has cleared the deck for us in so many ways and has encouraged trust and exploration and risk. Come together and build a college and a university as an ideal. And see how much of that you can do into the next semester.

Calhoun-Brown: Keep students at the center of the process. It's so easy as faculty members and administrators sometimes to be prescriptive in what should happen next or what's needed, what's necessary. We need to keep students at the center, get their input, get their feedback, pay attention to what the data is showing us. We can't be bound to what we always did or the way that we thought that it should have worked, because it doesn't work like that. Truth be told, it hasn't probably worked that well for quite some time. Covid broke it, but it was already hurting. And I think the equity gaps that we've consistently seen demonstrate that it was hurting.

Nair: In this unprecedented time, we have to grow from disruption. We have to adopt a more entrepreneurial spirit, collaborate across boundaries, and think about our work in more interdisciplinary ways. But at the very core of all of that is to listen to and engage our students in more thoughtful ways to center them in our work.



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