



Our Relentless Network and the Next Big Climb

Opening Remarks at DREAM 2023

Dr. Karen A. Stout, President and CEO of Achieving the Dream



Good afternoon and welcome to DREAM 2023! I cannot tell you how glad I am to see this sea of faces with so many friends, colleagues, students, and partners. And how great to gather in the fabulous city of Chicago.

I was thinking about just how long it has been since we've been together in person for DREAM. 1,092 days.

Can you believe it? 1,092 days! It feels even longer — like a lifetime ago, really. It made me want to go back as if to some forgotten time and see what the world was like. What was the Best Picture and Best Song of the Year 2020? Who won the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction? (Spoiler Alert: it was the Korean movie *Parasite* and Billie Eilish's "Bad Guy" and Colson Whitehead's *Nickel Boys*.)

1,092 days. Many of which have been filled with institutional uncertainty and change. It has been a time when we continued to move the rock uphill, sometimes finding ourselves arriving at the summit. But just as often we've had to start over as the rock obeyed the rules of gravity or laws of organizational change and began to roll downhill. But through it all, we've collectively continued to do our core work of educating the next generation of leaders, workers, and citizens, creating more

equity-centered institutions and supporting the communities we serve.

You see the signs of progress in your colleges and that progress is showing up for the country. For example:

- A recent study conducted by HCM Strategists indicates that completion rates for Black students at public community colleges increased from 2011 to 2019, demonstrating that the heightened focus on equity-centered student success is paying off.¹
- Another study by Lumina Foundation found that the share of adults who have graduated from college has reached 53.7 percent nationwide — the highest percentage over the last ten years — and every state saw gains in attainment.²

While there is plenty more to do, it is important to pause and recognize the steps toward progress. Progress led by you, campus by campus and community by community. In the most challenging times, you have kept your focus — sometimes at great personal cost. You have taken on the biggest challenges and changes in higher education.

¹ HCM Strategists. *A National Imperative: Addressing Black Student Enrollment*. <https://www.community4blacklearnerexcellence.com/>

² Lumina Foundation. *A Stronger Nation*. <https://www.luminafoundation.org/stronger-nation/report/#/progress>

We will hear on Thursday when we announce the Leah Meyer Austin Award winner and our Leader Colleges and Leaders Colleges of Distinction how our Network colleges have found new ways to accelerate scaled institutional transformation despite the headwinds we faced during the pandemic, headwinds we are still facing as our students, faculty and staff, and communities recover.

ATD has been on the ground with you through this transformation. We see:

- **Admissions and recruitment teams** who are showing us how to turn the enrollment problem upside down by addressing access with new community-centered outreach.
- **Faculty members** who are showing us how to teach in new ways that value each student and what they know to engage and inspire them.
- **Student support teams** who are continually finding ways to turn scarcity into abundance, showing us how we can feed and house and transport and counsel students to access our colleges and remove barriers to success.

- **Information technology specialists and course designers** who are using technology to lower costs and enliven learning, to provide just-in-time supports, and to open the gates of gateway courses for students to progress for degrees.

- **Data teams** who are providing insights to help us see our students and our communities in new ways so we can design our colleges to transform lives and contribute to the vitality of our communities.

- **Leaders** — boards of trustees and college presidents — who are showing us that community colleges are THE force of excellence in higher education. Because we know — in the words of U.S. Secretary of Education Miguel Cardona — that we can no longer conflate selectivity with excellence, or prestige with privilege.

- **Funders and partners** who continue to trust us to take on new challenges and help us innovate and prepare for the future.

You show all of higher education that our privilege is to educate all students who come through our doors.



Shaping Our Future

In a book that many of our ATD Network campuses are reading right now, higher education scholar Arthur Levine argues that higher education is facing a “great upheaval.” This is driven by changes in technology, increased student choice and access points, new credentialing models (along with a healthy dose of skepticism about the value proposition of higher education), and alternative providers.³ COVID, as Levine argues and as we know firsthand, was not a temporary interruption we endured and moved on from. It was an accelerator of trends we were facing before the pandemic that require us to think differently about the future.

The question is, how do we shape that future?

How do we build relevancy and influence to demonstrate that we really are America’s “institutions of the moment,” as James Fallows reminded us the last time we were together in person? How do we ensure that successive generations of students recognize that our colleges, as researchers at Harvard’s CLIMB initiative found, are responsible for the largest share of upward mobility success stories in American higher education?⁴ How do we ensure that college transformation activates community transformation, knowing that community prosperity rests on our shoulders as we are, perhaps more than any institution, hubs of equitable social and economic mobility?

Levine suggests that to thrive in the future our colleges need to be “inextricably connected to our communities.” This is what I call “leveraging our localness.” The best community colleges take the shape of their communities while building a new future for their communities through their support of students. Or as 2022 DREAM Scholar Adrian Bell put

it so succinctly at last year’s conference: “If you aren’t in the community, you can’t be a community college.”

I suggest that the themes of this year’s DREAM conference, the basis of ATD’s strategic vision, are our roadmap to that answer. Our DREAM themes of access, momentum, mobility, and community challenge us to shift our focus away from an institutional perspective and instead design our work through the lens of students and communities. This means we must center equity in our design.

As a sector, we must take responsibility for remedying our design flaws rather than placing the burden on the very students who are marginalized. I take this idea from a 2015 piece by Keith Whitham, Lindsey Malcom-Piqueux, Alicia Dowd, and Estela Bensimon. They write:

“Being equity minded [thus] involves being conscious of the way that higher education — through its practices, policies, expectations and unspoken rules — places responsibility for student success on the very groups that have experienced marginalization, rather than on the individuals and institutions whose responsibility it is to remedy that marginalization.”⁵

It means that, as Amarillo College President Russell Lowry-Hart reminds us, we need to love and care about the students we serve. We need to design our colleges so all students, no matter their backgrounds, feel a sense of worth and belonging. Eve Miclaus, one of this year’s DREAM Scholars from Roane State Community College in Tennessee, brought this together for me when she said: “Human connections and empowering one another are two of the most important things us humans need. It makes us all more likely to succeed. We are stronger together.”

3 Arthur Levine and Scott Van Pelt. *The Great Upheaval: Higher Education's Past, Present, and Uncertain Future*. <https://www.thegreatupheaval.com/>

4 Harvard University: The Project on the Workforce. *How Community Colleges Can Drive Shared Prosperity*. <https://www.pw.hks.harvard.edu/post/community-college-convening>

5 Keith Whitham, Lindsey Malcom-Piqueux, Alicia C. Dowd, and Estela Mara Bensimon. *America's Unmet Promise: The Imperative for Equity in Higher Education*. <https://www.aacu.org/publication/americas-unmet-promise-the-imperative-for-equity-in-higher-education>

Designing for More Equitable Access

Our work begins with the presupposition that we in higher education do not have an enrollment problem, we have an access challenge.

Postsecondary opportunity is seen as monolithic by students and parents, as a privilege rather than as multiple pathways to prosperity. As a result, too many would-be students decide college is not an option, or don't have the supports to navigate what can seem like a daunting process, or they see certain pathways and programs as not for them.

For example, we know that there are tens of millions of adult learners who have some credits but no credential and that we have still to unlock the best strategies to reconnect.⁶ And of particular concern is what is happening for Black learners at community colleges. As I noted before, Black student completion has improved, but enrollment has plummeted, dropping 26 percent at community colleges between 2011 and 2019 (twice the decline of the total student enrollment decline during that period).⁷

The problem of design requires us to implement strategies that make postsecondary education and training a relevant, viable, realistic option for those who may not have considered it in the past and to remove the financial, cultural, and demographic barriers that stand in the way.

According to recent research by the Community College Research Center, high schoolers in dual enrollment programs now make up nearly one in five community college students. Some of the biggest growth in community college enrollment came from these students. We must think about the design of these programs so that they benefit

the students who would otherwise not have a pathway into postsecondary education.

Dr. Marcia Ballinger, president of Lorain County Community College, says about their program, "Dual enrollment is the launch pad that gets high school students engaged who did not have a college-going culture in their households." The college is reinventing access by working with under-resourced schools in two K-12 districts that serve large percentages of Title I students.

Our efforts need to be early and often.

Odessa College's strategy includes reaching students early and sharing resources with local schools through elementary and middle school "invasions." Odessa brings all parts of their college — faculty leaders, the band and cheerleaders, carpenters and painters — to support a local school. According to Dr. Greg Williams, president of Odessa College and incoming ATD board chair, the goal of sharing resources is simple: "To leave the school better than we found it."

To increase exposure to college, Fond du Lac Tribal and Community College coordinates year-long student visits to area colleges, a summer academy open to students statewide, and a weeklong student orientation for students staying in dorms on college campuses.

Our access agenda must also address adult learners. Florida SouthWestern College examined a decade's worth of data on stopped out students and identified what a cohort of learners needed to complete a degree or credential. Their vigorous outreach facilitated the return of nearly 1,000 students.

⁶ Brookings Institution. *Why aren't more adults finishing community college?* <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/brown-center-chalkboard/2022/01/24/why-arent-more-adults-finishing-community-college/>

⁷ HCM Strategists. *A National Imperative: Addressing Black Student Enrollment.* <https://www.community4blacklearnerexcellence.com/>

Increasing Momentum

Creating better access only matters if students can progress on a pathway. And here we move our focus from the traditional, institutional metric of persistence to the suite of CCRC's evidence-based early momentum metrics, and take a newer look at program momentum. Influencing movement on these metrics means redesigning institutional structures and practices that have historically sorted out rather than welcomed in students. It includes introducing new pathways such as shortened academic terms and programs that allow students to learn and earn simultaneously.

It means integrating new technologies, particularly as an increasing number of our students are engaging with our colleges online. It means creating a culture of teaching excellence that is evidence-based, infuses culturally responsive teaching practices, and supports collaboration between academic and student affairs.

Well-supported Centers of Teaching and Learning can help ensure that professional learning opportunities reach deep into our institutions and lead to greater student momentum and equity as outlined in the recent ATD and Online Learning Consortium report, "Teaching, Learning, Equity and Change" for the Every Learner Everywhere initiative.

Increasing momentum for completion requires working with community partners to create holistic student supports to eliminate barriers — many outside of our classrooms and institutions — to student progress. There are so many examples, but let me draw your attention to Columbus State Community College. CSCC is working with community partners to provide students with insecure housing with rental assistance, support services, career development, and employment counseling so that they can finish their programs.

Driving Mobility and Community Prosperity

We need to shed the traditional notion that completion is an end in itself and view completion as one of many progression or momentum metrics. At a time when many question the value of college and the return on investment for what has become an increasingly expensive decision, we must reconsider the relationship between work and learning. We can no longer think of the education-workforce relationship as linear where students move from one station to the next — high school to college to employment — because too many students don't have the luxury of that model.

There are hundreds of examples of what is possible, and you will hear from leaders engaged in innovative work to build partnerships — big and small — that meet the needs of students and employers in numerous fields.

San Jacinto College, for example, works with partners in a diverse set of industries in the

Houston area — from maritime transportation to the petrochemical and aerospace industries — to ensure that students are gaining needed skills while working toward upwardly mobile career pathways.

These partnerships are equally important for rural colleges. Patrick & Henry partnered with the local Chamber of Commerce to create a small business development "boot camp" program which has graduated 231 individuals, invested in local businesses, and created new jobs — more than half of these businesses are minority-owned.

Little Priest Tribal College sought to address the ongoing decline in male enrollment as well as respond to the need for skilled workers on the reservation. They created three workforce-training programs in plumbing, HVAC, and electrical — tackling an access issue, creating pathways to sustainable careers, and supporting their community.

Making Equity the Heart of Our Work

Anchoring all of this is equity. Equity is not the only work, but it is central to advancing our access, momentum, and mobility goals and responding to the diversity and lived experiences of our students. How is it possible to achieve our missions if we abandon placing our students, their rich backgrounds, and their unique needs at the center of our work?

At ATD, we have never been unserious about equity, yet we've never been so bold. Last year at DREAM we released our new equity statement and we have moved its intentions into action.

To improve access, momentum, and mobility for more students, tomorrow we will announce the Accelerating Equitable Outcomes Cohort of new Network colleges that serve a significant number of Black, Latinx, Indigenous, and students of color, as well as poverty-impacted students.

To create more equitable mobility and respond to workforce challenges, we just announced the Accelerating and Diversifying Nursing Pathways at Community Colleges effort. This initiative seeks to

address the pervasive, systemic inequities for BIPOC representation in nursing pathways today, particularly among higher-paid positions and occupations.

And our initial cohort of 10 colleges in the Racial Equity Leadership Academy is finishing foundational work and yesterday we kicked off a second cohort of nine more Network colleges.

These efforts advance ATD's mission but also represent a regenerative giving strategy to directly support the expansion of our reach as a Network and to strengthen our research and development work in co-creation with our Leader Colleges and Leader Colleges of Distinction.

The nursing pathways effort is supported by the Brave of Heart Fund with each of the colleges receiving \$300,000 in direct support for the work. Guided in part by MacKenzie Scott's philosophy that "generosity is generative," we are using funds from her generous gift to ATD to support the Racial Equity Leadership Academy and the 10 new colleges joining the Accelerating Equitable Outcomes Cohort.



Our Relentless Network

As you can see, the ATD Network has already embarked on our next big climb. We have introduced new thinking around access, a stronger focus on momentum, an early understanding of how our work connects to economic and social mobility, and a new understanding that through our own transformation we are activating transformation in our communities, driving more equitable community prosperity.

If we are to design our colleges backward, with equitable mobility for students and strong, vibrant communities as our end goal, rather than completion, we will need to rethink the organizational capacities required to support our next climb. That means the seven capacity areas in our Institutional Capacity Assessment Tool we've leaned on since 2015 will need to evolve. You can expect to see ATD's thinking on the shifting capacities when we launch ICAT 2.0 later this year.

We are here at DREAM to commit ourselves to reinvention, to take on our biggest challenges, the "upheavals," to transform our institutions and our communities. We see only opportunities. Today's enrollment problem is tomorrow's opportunity to break down barriers with our communities and find the students we have overlooked. Today's problem of relevance is tomorrow's opportunity to strengthen our local labor markets and help our communities thrive. Today's problem of community renewal begins with an opportunity to renew ourselves and our Network.

We are attached to each other — knotted and secured where we cross. If you, if we, are going to persevere with perspective and purpose toward a more equitable vision of prosperity, we too need to be partners. That is the power of our Network.

In his book *Change: How Organizations Achieve Hard-to-Imagine Results in Uncertain and Volatile Times*, John Kotter cites the growing gap between the rate, amount, and complexity of change outside our organizations and our capacity as humans to keep up. The gap presents a danger, and an opportunity, if we are agile and can adapt.

Adaptation will require that we balance our orientation toward survival with an orientation toward thriving. This, he suggests, requires filling our organizations with a lot more thinking and discussion of opportunities rather than dwelling on problems. To activate our thrive orientation, Kotter suggests, we have to be relentless in our pursuit of opportunities.

DREAM offers you and your teams time to relentlessly find opportunities, time to better understand the landscape, and time to activate your thrive rather than survive orientation. DREAM can also offer you some quiet time for playful and personal musings on disconnected ideas that can inform the work on your campus and fill our work together during the next year with new reflections and new ideas. Because from all our musings and all our challenges, and the work at your colleges, we will continue to find new breakthroughs to some of our sector's biggest challenges.

That is what makes our Network relentless.

Thank you.





LEARN MORE ABOUT ACHIEVING THE DREAM, INC.

Visit www.AchievingtheDream.org
or contact us at info@AchievingtheDream.org or call (240) 450-0075
Follow us on Twitter @AchieveTheDream