Priorities From the Field: A National Study of Community College Conference Programs

By Terry O'Banion

Each year in spring, almost all community college associations and organizations hold their annual conferences. From February through May, these conferences attract thousands of community college administrators, faculty, sponsors, and assorted representatives from various organizations interested in the community college. The conferences are always an exciting time, where old friends meet, new friends are made, and creative ideas are shared in hundreds of sessions and forums.

As President and CEO of the League for Innovation in the Community College (League) for 23 years, and having worked in the community college field for over six decades, I have attended and participated in well over 100 of these conferences. At the League alone, I helped design and orchestrate, with my colleagues, at least 50 national conferences sponsored by the organization.

With this background and continuing interest in these annual gatherings of community college educators, I decided to review and analyze the conference programs of the five major community college organizations. The spring 2023 conference programs of the League, Achieving the Dream (ATD), American Association of Community Colleges (AACC), and National Institute for Staff and Organizational Development (NISOD) as well as the fall 2022 conference program of the Association of Community College Trustees (ACCT) were selected for this study.

The study focused on the programs distributed to those attending the conferences, including the sessions and forums from proposals to the sponsoring organizations. The study assumed that the proposals represented most of the current priorities of practitioners working in the field.

Purpose of This Study

The primary purpose of this study was to determine the extent to which the entire conference program included any references to the concepts of workforce; general education and liberal education; homelessness; diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI); LGBTQ[i]; artificial intelligence; and other themes I deemed relevant to the community college. In addition, observations were made about the conferences and the responsibilities of organizing staff.

Methodology

Google word count was used to count the selected terms that appeared in the programs of the five conferences. Google word count is based on 40 million books in five different languages in a partnership with Google and libraries around the world. I did not attempt to report the word count for the terms used by individual organizations. The word count for the terms selected are reported as totals of the extent to which the terms appeared in all five of the conference programs.

One of the limitations of this study is that counting specific words may not provide a full picture of the context of ideas. For example, while the term food insecurity appeared only six times, there were more than six sessions that were clearly about food insecurity. A careful reading of all 724 sessions in the five programs would be required to determine the context of a number of sessions, which was beyond the scope of this study.

Some may question the value of tallying words in a document to determine any kind of meaning from such tallies. However, in an Operational Excellence Society article (Baldridge, 2018), the author noted,

> Words are containers of power. . . . Words motivate or deflate thoughts, hopes, dreams, and actions. Words have the power to excite, inspire, elate, sadden, frighten, anger or give hope. Language is behavior. What you say matters. It shapes your environment, your work and your life. (para. 2)

As the judicial philosopher Learned Hand said, "Words are chameleons, which reflect the color of their environment." In this study, the environment is the community college to the extent that its priorities, as identified by the field, are reflected in conference programs. As summarized by Agarwal (n.d.),

> The words we choose and the language we use have the power to affect the people and the world around us. Our words represent our beliefs, morals, prejudices, and principles—sometimes in ways we may not mean—and can shape an audience's perceptions of us as well as the issues about which we speak and write. And our failure or refusal to speak or write certain words—intentional or not—sends similar messages. (para. 1)

Scope of Breakout Sessions/Forums

While the original purpose of the study was to focus on the breakout sessions/forums, it was challenging to separate these sessions from the entire program for the purposes of counting the terms such as workforce or general education. However, the sessions and forums comprised the greatest number of words included in the programs as the most important source of priorities from the field. Additionally, each of the organizations designed sessions, workshops, plenary sessions, special events, etc., in different ways, so a limitation of this study could be the challenge of comparability. I counted the featured sessions as forums in which practitioners from the field had submitted proposals of the topics to conference organizers.

AACC featured 231 sessions organized into six tracks, including Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Initiatives; Developing a Work-Ready Workforce; The Community College of the Future; AI, AR, VR and Emerging Technologies; Enrollment Declines; and Teaching and Learning for Student Success. NISOD featured 124 sessions organized into six tracks, including Equity, Diversity, Inclusion, and Justice; Student Services, Support, and Success; Workforce Preparation and Development; Emerging Issues and Trends at Community and Technical Colleges; Online, Face-to-Face, and Hybrid Teaching and Learning; and Using

Technology to Improve Student and Organizational Outcomes. The League featured 141 sessions in four tracks, including Leadership and Organization; Learning and Teaching; Student Support and Development; and Workforce Preparation and Development. ACCT featured 132 sessions, but did not use a tracking system to organize the sessions. Achieving the Dream featured 96 sessions that addressed five tracks: Building Stronger Pathways To and Through Postsecondary Education; Adopting a Holistic, Equity-Focused Approach to Community Vitality; Eliminating Systemic Barriers to Student Success; Fostering a Sense of Belonging Through Teaching and Learning Excellence; and Leveraging Data and Analytics for Institutional and Community Well-Being.

The conference programs of these five national organizations reflect current priorities from the field and represent only a small part of the overall agenda of the organizations and of the community colleges that participate in the organizations. For example, ATD's conference program is much more comprehensive than the program content reviewed for this article. In the ATD program, there are many smaller conferences and convenings, including a day-long Equity Institute; a Dream Scholars program that features student perspectives; and special convenings for tribal colleges, universities, and international colleges. The principles of equity course through every session, as they do for most of the organizations in this study. Similarly, the League offers invitation-only presidents, vice presidents, and Executive Leadership Institute tracks for focused conversations at various levels of leadership.

Karen Stout and Pam Eddinger (2023), in a recent article in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, keep us focused on the core business reflected in these conference programs:

> As community college leaders . . . our work and messages are rightly focused on improving lives within the local community, developing institutions that recognize community needs, and helping these institutions see into the future. In an ever-changing political and economic environment, our colleges strive to be engines of opportunity for first-generation, racially minoritized students, people affected by poverty, and working adults. We help them to gain a strong foothold in our society and economy. (para. 4).

There were many other conference themes in these rich and diverse sessions reflecting the many issues and programs that make up the culture of the contemporary community college, including institutional culture, partnerships, retention, innovation, curriculum, organizational structures, planning strategies, online teaching, and grants.

Key Findings

General Observations

Excellent Conference Programs: The five organizations offered 724 sessions for conference participants in addition to a variety of keynotes, special meetings, featured sessions, workshops, roundtables, sponsor displays, etc. These conferences are a rich and creative reflection of the vibrancy and creativity of community colleges. In 2023, the organizations presented to their constituencies one of the most exciting opportunities for professional development in the history of the community college. If one were to give a State of the Union address about community colleges in 2023, the key point would be that community colleges are at the top of their game.

Conference Tracks: Four of the organizations placed the sessions into tracks representing general themes pertinent to community colleges. The process for doing so is very challenging, given the diversity and scope of the proposals. For example, many of the

proposals included the words "diversity" and "equality," which reflect the current emphasis of most community colleges, but the core content of the proposal was not necessarily focused on those issues.

These organizations have begun to pay more attention to the identification of tracks and the assignment of proposals to those tracks. Some have recently begun to organize volunteer reviewers from the field to review proposals and place them in the tracking themes. One of the organizations listed the 22 members of their proposal review committee in the program.

Top Priorities: The top priorities from the field in these conference programs are clearly the core business of education (see Table 1). Learning and student success are the primary goals of all educational institutions. Leaders frame the culture of the college, and faculty—through their teaching in that culture—strive to achieve the broad goals of learning and student success. Diversity, equity, and inclusion are key characteristics of the culture of these five organizations, and workforce and career are the primary programs through which the goals are achieved.

Table 1: Highest Priorities From The Field

Terms	Number of Times Terms Appeared
Faculty	662
Learning	568
Equity	433
Student Success	337
Workforce	310
Teaching	263
Career	256
Leadership	244
Diversity	184
Inclusion	166

Low Priorities: The lowest priorities from the field reflected in these conference programs are what I call the Neglected Minority (see Table 2). Students who are LGBTQ, food and housing insecure, and homeless were barely mentioned. And what is most shocking is the lack of attention to the foundations of all educational institutions—liberal education and general education.

Table 2: Lowest Priorities From the Field

Terms	Number of Times Terms Appeared
LGBTQ	0
Liberal Education	0
Staff Development	0
Housing Insecurity	3
General Education	4*
Food Insecurity	6
Homeless	9
College Culture	11
Artificial Intelligence	19
Guided Pathways	23
DEI	23

*Three of these mentions were part of the titles of the presenters

Selected Findings

Learning: In 1988, the Commission on the Future of Community Colleges, established by the American Association of Community and Junior Colleges, now AACC, issued the landmark report, *Building Communities: A Vision for a New Century*. The report emphasized teaching as the heart of the community college:

- "At the center of building communities there is teaching. Teaching is the heartbeat of the educational enterprise." (pp. 7-8).
- "Building communities through dedicated teaching is the vision and inspiration of this report." (p. 8).
- "The community college should be the nation's premier teaching institution. Quality instruction should be the hallmark of the movement." (p. 25).

This report, more than any document in community college history, helped to confirm teaching as the central value and commitment of these institutions.

A decade later, the culture of the community college began to shift toward teaching *and* learning, and then segued quickly into an emphasis on learning. Robert Barr, John Tagg, and George Boggs from Palomar College in California ushered in a new era that suggested the purpose of education was learning, not teaching. In 1995, Barr and Tagg's seminal article, "From Teaching to Learning: A New Paradigm for Undergraduate Education," became the most widely read article in the history of *Change* magazine. In the article, the authors said, "In the Learning Paradigm, the mission of the college is to produce learning" (p. 1).

This early work promoted an emerging learning revolution in higher education that would find its most ardent champions in the community college. In 1996, the first national conference on the Learning Paradigm was held in San Diego, California. The next year, ACCT released a special issue of *Trustee Quarterly* devoted entirely to the Learning Revolution (O'Banion, 1997a) and the American Council on Education and AACC jointly published *A Learning College for the 21st Century* (O'Banion, 1997b), which provided a framework for creating learning-centered institutions. In 1997 and 1998, the League and PBS held three national teleconferences on the Learning College. The League launched *Learning Abstracts* in 1998, and also sponsored a major national initiative, the Learning College Project, beginning in the year 2000. The League continues to sponsor an annual Learning Summit as a working retreat for college teams to focus on improving and expanding learning at their institutions.

Twenty-eight years after the ground-breaking work of Barr and Tagg launched the Learning Revolution, learning is clearly a major priority of the community college as reflected in the conference programs represented in this study that place learning as the second highest priority, with 568 mentions. Faculty, the personnel charged with engaging students in learning, was the highest priority, with 662 mentions (see Table 1).

A paper I wrote for the 21st Century Commission on the Future of Community Colleges (O'Banion, 2011) made the following recommendation for a new synthesis of the teaching/learning dynamic:

> Community colleges should embrace a new *synthesis* that recognizes the symbiotic relationship between teaching and learning and realign their policies, programs, and practices to reflect this synthesis: **The purpose of teaching is improved and**

expanded learning. Improved and expanded learning is the outcome of effective teaching. (p. 68)

This synthesis is now widely recognized and adopted as one of the overarching values of the contemporary community college.

General/Liberal Education: One of the things I found most disappointing in this study was almost no interest in general/liberal education, long the foundation for all of higher education. The term liberal education did not appear in any of the programs of the five organizations. The term general education was mentioned only four times—three times in the titles of a presenter, such as Dean of General Education, Academic, and Career Pathways, and in another instance in an introductory statement to a session: "College and university students across the U. S. have difficulty articulating the valuable, marketable skills gained in general education courses." Although there are some differences between the two terms, in the community college general education is viewed as fairly synonymous with liberal education.

Every community college in the U.S. has some form of general education, which is required by all the regional accrediting commissions. In a recent study on general education in the community college, my colleague, Cindy Miles, and I found the state of general education to be dismal. The most disturbing finding was that the 30 colleges in our sample required students to take, on average, 12 general education courses from a haystack of 162 courses. Course options ranged from 49 to 491 in large colleges, from 68 to 372 in medium colleges, and from 58 to 223 in small colleges. (O'Banion & Miles, 2021).

As I noted in my 2022 article in *Diverse: Issues in Higher Education*,

> **In a California community college,** the catalog includes four different sets of requirements for general education degrees—already confusing for students. In the college's general education requirements of 6 courses students must choose from among 217 different courses (one course from 46 in natural sciences, one from 47 in social and behavioral sciences, one from 79 in art, humanities, and culture, etc.). **In an Ohio community college,** students must choose from 46 different courses in the arts and humanities to meet a three-course general education requirement, from 36 courses in the social sciences, and from 48 in math and science. **In a Texas community college,** students are required to select five courses from among 78 courses in 3 different categories to meet general education requirements. (p. 26).

Dismal is the right word for the state of general education in the contemporary community college.

Workforce: In contrast to general/liberal education, which received some of the lowest tallies in word count (0 for liberal and 4 for general), the term workforce was cited 310 times and the term career 256 times. From these word counts alone, it can be concluded that general and/or liberal education are no longer priorities from the field of community college educators and that programs and projects focused on workforce and careers now take precedence. It appears that community colleges have come to place workforce development as the primary mission of the contemporary community college. As James Jacobs (2009) said, "If there is one common mission identified with community colleges, it is workforce education" (para. 1). That is not surprising, given the importance community colleges have come to play in the nation's economy and the millions of dollars funded by state and federal agencies and corporations that have been awarded to community colleges to prepare the workforce.

As I wrote in *Bread and Roses: Helping Students Make a Good Living and Live a Good Life* (O'Banion, 2016),

> It is difficult to locate the total allocation of funds for workforce education since the first Morrill Act in 1862, but the U.S. Government Accountability Office (2011) reported federal funding of employment and training activities at $17.6 billion in fiscal year 2009. More recently, Carnevale, Strohl, and Gulish (2015) reported federal job training support at $18 billion and "certifications, apprenticeships, and other workforce training" support at $47 billion. Carnevale et al. also pointed out that, "The United States spends $1.1 trillion on formal and informal postsecondary workforce education and training annually" (p. 3), with much of that funding coming from employers, states, and colleges. In the report, two-year colleges were cited as spending $60 billion a year on workforce education. (p. 19)

In comparison, I noted that,

> The support for liberal arts education through the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) and the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) has been miniscule. As one example of the difference in priorities of the federal government, in July of 2014 Congress approved an update of the Workforce Innovation and Opportunities Act, which governs more than $3 billion in programs, many of them aimed at community colleges. Also in July of 2014, President Obama asked Congress to maintain the current level of funds for the NEH at $146 million, while Republicans proposed a reduction of 5 percent. A budget plan released by U. S. Representative Paul Ryan (R-Wisconsin) earlier in 2014 proposed ending all federal funding for NEH, a continuing goal for Republicans (O'Banion, 2016, p. 19).

Ironically, it is corporate leaders who see the value of general/liberal education in preparing the workforce of the future rather than national community college leaders and the 1,200 plus presidents of the nation's community colleges. As I reported in *Bread and Roses* (2016), surveys and interviews by the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U),

> Strongly indicate the value employers appropriate to liberal education in preparing a competent workforce. In 2013, Hart Research Associates conducted for AAC&U an online survey of 318 employers whose organizations had at least 25 employees. Respondents included owners, presidents, and vice presidents from the private sector and nonprofit organizations. Nearly all those surveyed (93 percent) agreed that "a candidate's demonstrated capacity to think critically, communicate clearly, and solve complex problems is *more important* than their undergraduate major" (p. 1). More than nine in ten of those surveyed said it is important that those they hire demonstrate ethical judgment and integrity, intercultural skills, and the capacity for continued new learning. More than three in four employers indicated they want colleges to place more emphasis on helping students develop key learning outcomes, including critical thinking, complex problem solving, written and oral communication, and applied knowledge in real-world settings. These results are a ringing endorsement of the soft skills that are usually visibly included in liberal education programs and increasingly in workforce education programs.

> When asked directly about the importance of liberal education in preparing today's workforce, 94 percent of the employers indicated that such an education was very or fairly important. In response to the question, "If you were advising your child or a young person you know about the type of college education he or she should seek in

order to achieve professional and career success in today's global economy, would you recommend he or she pursue a liberal education?" Eighty-nine percent indicated they would advise students to do so. It is quite clear that the business leaders who participated in this survey view liberal education as a key component for a successful career. (p. 12)

Not too long ago, there were a number of leaders advocating for an integration of general/liberal education and workforce education to better serve students and the nation. In 1964, the National Advisory Committee on the Junior College, established by the American Association of Junior Colleges, concluded that "the two-year college offers unparalleled promise for expanding educational opportunity through the provision of comprehensive programs embracing job training as well as traditional liberal arts and general education" (p. 14). In 1985, Dale Parnell wrote,

> Students must see connectedness between what they do and the larger whole—between education and the rest of the real world. It is time to review the concept of career education. Such a review may provide the connecting link between the liberal arts and vocational education as well as a new definition of excellence in education. The walls must come down between vocational education and the liberal arts. Students preparing to meet the demands of the information age need both. (pp. 173-174)

A few years later, AACC (1988) asserted that,

> The aim of a community college education must be not only to prepare students for productive careers, but also to take them beyond their narrow interests, broaden their perspectives, and enable them to live lives of dignity and purpose. . . . The community college, more than any other higher education institution, should overcome departmental narrowness by integrating technical and career studies with the liberal arts. (pp. 17-18)

Similarly, the Association of American Colleges and Universities (2010) noted,

> A great democracy cannot be content to provide a horizon-expanding education for some and work skills, taught in isolation from the larger societal context, for everyone else . . . It should not be liberal education for some and narrow or illiberal education for others. (p. 3)

If we are to prepare students to be responsible citizens, productive workers, and fully functioning individuals, then serious attention needs to be given to the task of integrating our workforce and general education programs into the community college to ensure the future of our students. What is needed is a new Essential Education for all students. As defined in *Bread and Roses* (O'Banion, 2016), Essential Education is:

> An integrated core of learning that includes and connects the key components from liberal education and workforce education to ensure that a student is equipped to earn a good living and live a good life. It is a quality education essential to all students. (p. 26)

Staff Development: Staff development was not listed as a track by any of the five organizations, but it could have been because many of the proposals focused on this theme. It is interesting to note that staff development was a major concern of these organizations in earlier years. In the 1970s, AACC convened a national meeting of many staff

development leaders to address the need. My book, *Teachers for Tomorrow: Staff Development in the Community Junior College,* published by the University of Arizona Press in 1972, based on my national study commissioned by the National Advisory Council for Education Professions Development created by President Richard Nixon, was used as a foundation for the meeting. My keynote address was titled, "The People Who Staff the People's College."

NISOD, established in 1978 by John Roueche, launched numerous projects related to staff development, which remains a central theme of the organization today. Many of the League's early projects focused on staff development for faculty and administrators in its member colleges; a FIPSE grant supported an early TV series featuring staff development programs and activities. Since those early days, the interest in and support of staff development programs in community colleges waned a bit, but the 2023 conference programs indicate a major interest in staff development that has been emerging over the past few years. This movement is likely motivated by Achieving the Dream, guided pathways, the Learning College, and other efforts that require more from faculty as the key to student success and completion.

The term staff development, however, is no longer in vogue. In the conference programs of the five organizations in this study, staff development was not mentioned at all, but faculty development was listed 36 times (26 times by one organization) and leadership development was listed seven times. The term professional development was favored by all five organizations; it was included in the programs a total of 94 times. Professional development is now the preferred term for programs focused on updating and developing the skills of community college educators.

Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion: DEI is a hot issue in the community college world. Although the term DEI appeared only 23 times (13 times by one organization), the term diversity appeared 184 times, the term equity appeared 433 times, and the term inclusion appeared 166 times. Taken together, these three terms appeared 783 times, more than any other terms searched in this study. Three of the organizations created tracks for DEI sessions, which may account for some of these numbers, since the track names were listed many times throughout the programs.

These terms, however, were not always linked to programs and projects. For example, the term equity was used in many different ways, including, but not limited to, equity-centered, access and equity, equity lens, equity work, equity-mindedness, equity gaps, equity talk, equity reforms, and equity-focused. In any case, these terms are now commonly used in community college communications and appear to have been adopted as expressions of value by the contemporary community college.

Interest in DEI is likely to increase in coming years because governors and state legislators have started passing legislation to curtail and defund some associated programs on college campuses. There are such movements in Ohio, Tennessee, and Texas, but the eye of this hurricane is in Florida. On May 24, 2023, the American Association of University Professors released a preliminary report (Quinn, 2023) on what is going on in Florida under the leadership of Governor Ron DeSantis and the Florida legislature. Authors of the report said,

> It is imperative that we pay attention to the dire situation in Florida now. What is happening in Florida will not stay in Florida. We call on all professional organizations, unions, faculty, staff, and administrators across the country to fight such 'reforms' tooth and nail and to offer support to our colleagues in Florida however they can. We are in this together. (para. 2)

There has been little or no leadership in Florida to combat this situation. Community college presidents and their colleagues in the state university system have been reluctant to engage the Governor for fear of his well-founded tactics to destroy anyone who opposes his ideas, including the Walt Disney Company. As this national issue plays out, it will be interesting to note how community college leaders react and whether or not it will be addressed in future community college conference programs.

Steve Robinson, President of Lansing Community College in Michigan, has been brave enough to speak in the public square about the reasons leaders cannot ignore this debacle. In *Defending Community Colleges Against Attacks on DEI* (Robinson, 2023), he wrote,

> From my perspective, there are three nonpartisan reasons community college leaders cannot sit this one out when it comes to the attacks we see on higher education across the country. First, these attempts to limit or chill efforts in DEI challenge our core mission and purpose as community colleges. Second, much of the anti-DEI legislation and rhetoric constitute an infringement on local control. Third, these culture war attacks on diversity are completely out of step with the business objectives of our partners in the private sector. (para. 3)

Perhaps other community college leaders will follow Robinson's example and speak out at community college conferences in 2024.

LGBQT Students: Community colleges have taken great pride over many decades in being open-door institutions, welcoming students who had no other place to go. They have created special programs for students who are underserved, at-risk, first-generation, Black males, women, migrants, and prisoners. The open door leads to safe houses for these students, but all minority groups have not been welcomed with open arms, or perhaps colleges do not know how to deal with the Neglected Minority.

There is now growing interest in and literature about neglected minorities, especially LGBTQ students. In a survey of 180,000 college students by the Association of American Universities (2019), 17 percent identified as gay, lesbian, bisexual, asexual, queer, or questioning. It is not known how many of these students are enrolled in community colleges, but it is likely these students are represented equally, if not more so, to those in universities.

The Trevor Project is the world's largest suicide prevention and mental health organization for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and questioning young people. The project has been conducting surveys of LGBTQ students for a number of years. In its 2022 survey of 34,000 LGBTQ youth between the ages of 13 and 24, the following results answer the question of why it is important for community colleges to be concerned about these students.

- 82 percent wanted mental health care.
- 73 percent experienced discrimination.
- 73 percent experienced symptoms of anxiety.
- 60 percent of those wanting mental health care could not get it.
- 58 percent experienced symptoms of depression.
- 45 percent seriously considered attempting suicide in the past year.
- 36 percent reported they had been physically threatened or physically harmed.
- 14 percent attempted suicide in the past year. (The Trevor Project, 2022)

While the issues and challenges related to LGBTQ students in higher education have become a national concern, in this study of the five community college conference programs, the term LGBTQ did not appear one time. The term LGBTQIA+ did appear in a session titled "Supporting LGBTQIA+ Students in STEM Textbooks Via IBooks and E-books." However, the term mental health appeared 59 times and the term basic needs appeared 29 times, which may reflect some of the interest of community college educators in LGBTQ and homeless students.

Homeless Students: According to the National Center for Homeless Education (2015),

> Homeless youth face a number of barriers to academic success and degree completion in the post-secondary environment. The experience of homelessness itself can be highly destabilizing, even traumatic, with effects on a student's physical, mental, financial, and academic wellbeing. The overall context of poverty in which homelessness usually occurs brings with it a steady barrage of stress, including lack of access to adequate nutrition and healthcare and unsafe and often overcrowded living conditions. Further, many college-bound students in homeless situations have not had anyone in their lives to serve as an educational role model, providing valuable support and information along the student's path to college. These students often arrive at college feeling out of place, questioning whether they belong in college or if they have what it takes to be successful. (para. 1)

California is a microcosm of homelessness for community college students. The California Community Colleges #RealCollege Survey conducted by The Hope Center for College, Community, and Justice at Temple University (Goldrick-Rab et al., 2019) revealed that, of the 40,000 students from 57 California community colleges that responded,

- A combined 52 percent of students said they either couldn't afford to eat balanced meals or worried whether their food would run out before having money to buy more.
- Forty-one percent of respondents reported that they skipped meals or ate smaller portions for financial reasons, and 12 percent said they had not eaten for an entire day during the previous month because they did not have enough money.
- Sixty percent of survey respondents said that in the previous year they had experienced housing insecurity, which includes an array of challenges that include an inability to pay rent or utilities, not having a place to stay or needing to move frequently.
- Homelessness, defined as not having a stable place to live, affected 19 percent of survey respondents. The majority temporarily stayed with a relative or friend or couch surfed.
- Thirty-two percent of students said they experienced a rent or mortgage increase that was difficult to meet, 28 percent could not pay the full cost of utilities, and 28 percent could not meet their full rent or mortgage obligations.
- Overall, seven in 10 students responding to the survey experienced food insecurity or housing insecurity or homelessness during the previous year. (pp. 7-10)

Homeless college students have access to a variety of resources, including the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act that distributed over $91 million in 2019 through state agencies. In 2019, the California Community Colleges Homeless Housing Insecurity Pilot Program was established with $9 million of ongoing investment funds to build critical infrastructure to provide prevention and rapid rehousing services to community college students in the state experiencing homelessness and/or housing insecurity. The funds were allocated to 14 community colleges to pilot the program. Beyond these two examples, there

are dozens of national and state funded programs to assist the homeless throughout the U.S.

Since homelessness is a national problem, and since there has been considerable research on homelessness among college students, with reports of significant resources to address homelessness, one would think that the 2023 community college conference programs would have included a number of sessions on the issue. Unfortunately, that was not the case. In this study, the term homeless appeared only nine times in the five programs. The term food insecurity appeared six times and housing insecurity appeared three times; of these nine instances, seven were in one organization's program.

Student Success: Community college educators have a great deal of interest in student success. That is not at all surprising given the attention to this issue and related issues such as completion and retention in the last decade or two. In this study, the term student success appeared 337 times, with completion appearing 90 times and retention 130 times. Furthermore, the term learning appeared 568 times, the term teaching 263 times, and the term faculty 662 times. These terms reflect the core priorities of most educational institutions, and it is a compliment to the leaders and participants in these five conferences that they are addressing these priorities. Student success and the terms related to it are clearly priorities in the field.

Leadership: The term leadership appeared 244 times in these conference programs. It is likely that leadership was a key theme of many previous conferences and will likely continue to appear in conference programs to come, as leadership at all levels has become embedded as crucial to community college culture.

The advent of dozens of university doctoral community college leadership programs and the creation of grow-your-own in-house leadership institutes and academies are testaments to the importance of this subject. AACC sponsors the John E. Roueche Future Leaders Institute, Future Presidents Institute, and the Presidents Academy Summer Institute. The League has sponsored the Executive Leadership Institute since 1987.

Pathways: Creating pathways for student success is as popular today in the community college as creating integrated general education programs was in the 1950s-1970s. Tom Bailey popularized the term guided pathways in his and his colleague's book, *Redesigning America's Community Colleges*, published in 2015. In 2023, almost every community college in the nation works on some form of guided pathways.

The term guided pathways, however, seems to be losing popularity, as reflected in this study. Guided pathways appeared only 23 times in these conference programs while the term pathways appeared 160 times. It is challenging for faculty in the community college to create and embed pathways that increase retention and completion, which are major reform efforts of this decade. It will be interesting to see if the idea of pathways achieves success and survives into the future. One way to assess that is to track the use of the appropriate terms in future conference programs.

Artificial Intelligence: Hodges and Ocak (2023) asserted that, "Integrating AI into higher education is not a futuristic vision but an inevitability. Colleges and universities must adapt and prepare students, faculty, and staff for their AI-infused futures" (para. 1). In *Examining the Media Psychology of Artificial Intelligence*, Bernie Luskin (2023), former CEO of eight institutions of higher education, including founding President of Coastline Community College, wrote,

The American Psychological Association's Media Psychology Division 46 has identified artificial intelligence as a priority focus. In addition, the media psychology, computer science, and communications programs at major universities in the U.S. and elsewhere are now tracking and researching the many variations and types of artificial intelligence.

AI is increasingly capturing worldwide attention, sparking major investment and waves of creativity. More research and entrepreneurship are needed, and the future trend is clear. Media psychology will help explain the profound nature and extraordinary power of the AI evolution. (para. 13-14)

AI is one of the hottest topics in the technology and education worlds, and community colleges are beginning to take notice. Salt Lake Community College has created a resource page for faculty, staff, and students as a starting place to learn responsible use of AI. The College of Marin offers a series of workshops on AI for faculty. Tacoma Community College has created a resource page for faculty as an introduction to AI. Although there were only 19 mentions of artificial intelligence in the five conference programs analyzed in this study, there is very likely to be a great deal more in conference programs to come.

Final Thoughts

The five organizations in this study—League, AACC, ATD, NISOD, and ACCT—have developed outstanding programs focused on issues deeply important to the community college. Thousands of community college educators who attended these conferences were rewarded with opportunities to present their own ideas, hear from their colleagues, and connect with each other for continuing engagement about many of these ideas. The conferences are rich and substantive resources for the community college world.

However, the ideas addressed in these conferences were the safe ideas confronting the community college: faculty, learning, equity, student success, workforce, etc. Even when the programs and presenters addressed challenging issues, such as underserved, at-risk, and incarcerated students, the discussions were conducted in the safe language of academe and within the confines of traditional best practices. There was not much risk-taking exhibited in these conference programs (see Table 1).

Based on this word-count study, it was clear that the priorities from the field did not include programs and practices related to LGBQT students and students facing food and housing insecurity or homelessness. And yet, these are the very students who need a safe house in the community college (see Table 2). Community colleges need to say the words out loud in written statements, in classrooms, in open forums on the campus, and during their national conferences. Unless educators and students can say and write the words that represent the Neglected Minority, the culture of the community college will avoid creating programs and practices that will fully address the needs of these student groups. In addition to a scarcity of sessions focused on meeting the needs of students who are LGBTQ, food and housing insecure, and homeless, general/liberal education was also conspicuously absent (see Table 2). The most disturbing finding in the O'Banion and Miles study on general education (2021) was that the 30 colleges in their sample, on average, required students to take 12 general education courses from a haystack of 162 courses. This issue is the elephant in the room for community colleges that is almost completely ignored in reform efforts and in national conferences. Yet, it affects every student, every advisor, and every faculty member at community colleges. Until this issue is seriously addressed by community college leaders, students will continue to struggle getting through these cafeteria curricula.

While this study focused on topics that were priorities from the field submitted by practitioners, conference organizers do not need to be passive funnels for proposals received. For future community college conferences, the leaders in charge of organizing these programs should consider taking a more active position by featuring some of the neglected topics noted in Table 2 above. To make this happen, conference program organizers could:

- Invite speakers to present keynotes on general education and on students who are LGBTQ, homeless, and food and housing insecure.
- Create featured panels and sessions on these topics.
- Add a track, such as The Neglected Minority: Students Who Are LGBTQ, Homeless, or Food and Housing Insecure, to see if practitioners from the field will submit proposals on these issues.

This is likely to happen for a less charged topic such as AI, but it needs to happen for these important, but neglected, topics that need a safe space in the open-door college. As Baldridge (2018) noted, "Language is behavior. What you say matters" (para. 2). Community college educators need to say these words out loud in public so these topics will no longer lurk in the shadows of our colleges. What is said in conference programs matters.

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[i] For the purposes of this study, LGBTQ was used for program searches. However, the author acknowledges that the initialism LGBTQ is often expanded to LGBTQ+, LGBTQIA, LGBTQIA+, LGBTQIA2S, etc.