

 VIEW FROM THE TOP

# Leading through Change to Increase Success and Completion

By Karen Miller

My personal journey at Cuyahoga Community College (Tri-C) over a 20-plus-year period has been quite unexpected. From working as the director of student affairs at one Tri-C campus to assuming the role of provost and executive vice president, I have accomplished goals and attained positions I never dreamed of. I learned from and led through challenges I couldn't have imagined and didn't realize I had the skills to navigate. I worked hard and have been recognized for my efforts. But that story does not end the same for everyone. I think back to those supervisors, colleagues, and mentors who encouraged and even pushed me out of my comfort zone—leaders who had confidence in my skills and abilities and saw my potential to become a leader when I could not yet see it in myself.

Early in my career, I often focused on the immediate projects and priorities I was asked to lead. I gave much less thought to what my next leadership opportunity might be. While experts may advise against this lack of intentionality, my journey was built on a strong work ethic, the accomplishments of my teams, my professional reputation both inside and outside of the college, and the personal connections I made over my several decades in higher education. I believe that experience is critical for any emerging leader, but having a collaborative style, possessing a steady temperament, and having the political savvy to negotiate in tough times goes a long way toward being an effective leader. (A good sense

of humor doesn't hurt either.) I have also found that being the best listener in the room is often more valuable than being the "expert."

I have been extremely fortunate to work alongside true professionals and mentors at an institution that recognizes women and men equally. I served for fifteen years under Dr. Jerry Sue Thornton, a true community college champion and leader in higher education. I currently lead a college executive team comprising four campus presidents and two vice presidents, all but one of whom are women. I serve alongside two male executive vice presidents who respect me as a peer and, often, as the expert on the team. I look with great appreciation to all those—particularly Dr. Alex Johnson, president of Tri-C since 2013—who invite me to lead projects and take on college-wide responsibilities as they ensure that I am supported and respected. With an obvious love for this work and valuing the people who make it all happen, Johnson provides me with the discretion to see beyond the obvious and to lead in my own unique style. Together, we have made great progress on behalf of the institution.

Tri-C has long been focused on providing high-quality, accessible, and affordable education opportunities to the residents of northeast Ohio. With four campuses, two corporate college locations, a university center, and a district office located in and around Cuyahoga County, Tri-C serves more than 55,000 credit and non-credit

students annually. We are proud to serve as one of the oldest and largest community colleges in the state of Ohio and are a proud member of the League for Innovation in the Community College.

Over the past several years, Tri-C sharpened its focus on student success and completion while retaining the traditional community college core mission of open access to education. Propelled by a political shift in how higher education is funded at the state level (with funding dependent on student outcomes rather than enrollment), Ohio was one of the first states in the nation to adopt a fully performance-based funding model for higher education. In fiscal year 2013, Ohio convened a group of higher education leaders who crafted a new method of funding colleges and universities based on course completion rates and success metrics, defined as benchmarks students meet along their academic journey (*e.g.*, completion of twelve credit hours, developmental coursework, etc.). This model took effect in 2015, and by 2016, funding for higher education in Ohio was fully based on performance outcomes. In addition, the state has added “access” categories to its formula, providing additional funding for adult learners, low-income students, and minority students who attain the established benchmarks.

The change in the funding model began to shift the conversation at Tri-C to one of success and completion, requiring the college to carefully consider the number of degrees and certificates granted as well as the controversial IPEDS graduation rate. However, internal processes and infrastructure were not yet in place to support the work that was needed to improve these outcomes and to increase Tri-C’s share of state funding.

During this period I transitioned into new roles within the college. When I joined the college more than 20 years ago as director of student activities, my aspirations were only to be the best director of student activities I could be. The then dean of student affairs, however, recognized a drive and passion I had for students and my potential for greater leadership (even when I was not aware of it myself) and encouraged me to apply for her assistant dean position. Subsequently, with the guidance and encouragement of colleagues and mentors

both inside Tri-C and in the community college community, I moved into the position of dean of student affairs at the Metropolitan Campus, where I learned a great deal about my leadership style and honed my skills and expertise relative to student engagement and strategic enrollment. In 2012, with the encouragement of former Tri-C president and nationally respected community college innovator Dr. Thornton, I was fortunate to be the college’s choice to serve as vice president of enrollment management and student affairs, with college-wide responsibility for recruitment, enrollment, student services, and retention.

It was shortly after I accepted this vice presidency that Dr. Johnson joined the college and began to implement his vision for increasing student success. He brought faculty and administration together and changed the college leadership culture to one of true shared decision making. The president’s council (college administrative leadership and the officers of the Joint Faculty Senate Committee) was revitalized, so that all proposed student-focused initiatives were presented and discussed at these monthly meetings. Dr. Johnson insisted that faculty co-lead project teams charged with creating or updating student success initiatives. Faculty senate and faculty union leaders were now included as college decision makers, administrative counterparts, and co-leaders in many of the initiatives at the college that make up our student success and completion portfolio. This model changed the culture of the college. It brought faculty and administrators together to collaboratively solve problems, improve systems, and shift the conversation and direction of the college.

Seeing firsthand the importance and benefits of true shared dialogue and decision making has been a tremendous learning experience and a great influence on my own leadership style. I have eagerly engaged and collaborated with faculty to lead college-wide projects at a time of refocusing our efforts, defining new and measurable outcomes, and creating a new strategic plan and direction for Tri-C’s future. This has been one of the most valuable lessons I have learned as a leader and one that I try to pass along to future leaders I have the honor of mentoring.

As we began to focus the college's work in a more direct way, transparency in leadership became paramount to increasing student success. For the first time, our leadership team openly and frequently discussed graduation and success rates, including retention rates, number of credentials granted, and the somewhat confusing and controversial IPEDS graduation rate. We developed a collegewide "dashboard" with significant metrics for the college and each campus; this was updated and shared with the college community on a regular basis. To ensure that staff, faculty, and students were aware and a part of this important work, the executive team began to hold a series of town hall meetings each semester on each of the four campuses. In addition, we began to send regular email communications to the college community to not only highlight exciting new projects and accomplishments but also to keep staff, students, and faculty informed of important issues for students and the college. This focus on transparency has provided clarity about where we are as an institution and has galvanized the college community around a vision and a set of singular goals. I continue to lead with transparency as I work with faculty leaders across the divisions of the college and with staff. I have learned that transparency leads to trust, trust leads to collaboration, and collaboration leads to student success.

In my role as vice president of enrollment management and student affairs, and in building upon a foundation of shared decision making and transparency, Dr. Johnson charged me to change the conversation about success and to build an infrastructure to increase student success and improve completion rates. One major innovation I implemented was a case management approach to support student cohorts initially focused on IPEDS students. This involved repurposing dollars and personnel, including creating a new completion project manager role at the district level, while identifying key staff at each campus (including counselors, success specialists, staff from our registrar's office, and others) as "success team" members. These teams work collectively to monitor student progress, audit student records after each term, and build a nine-semester, three-year communication and outreach plan to help support students

to and along the shortest path to completion. This coordinated and intentional case management approach made a significant impact on Tri-C's IPEDS graduation rate, which increased from 4 percent in 2013 to 19 percent for the most recent cohort (finishing in 2018); we fully expect that rate to continue to increase.

I also led the creation of the college's first strategic enrollment management (SEM) plan, designed to be our intentional roadmap to improve student success and completion rates with a focus on access, retention, and completion. The resulting plan not only outlined our goals and efforts related to recruitment and retention but also memorialized Tri-C's new completion infrastructure, collaboration with faculty around student success, and integration with the workforce division. Along with attaining a number of milestones along the way, these efforts have resulted in the award of ever-increasing numbers of degrees and certificates. For example, in 2017–18, Tri-C awarded 4,992 certificates and degrees—2,260 more than in 2010–11—for an increase of 21 percent since 2013.

Even as these initiatives have become embedded in the way Tri-C does business, we challenge ourselves to do more to support students through completion. Tri-C's focus on completion has increased graduation rates and numbers of credentials granted, but inequity in outcomes for some of our students remains top of mind as we attend to issues of equity and inclusiveness. I am leading this important college-wide conversation, which includes the creation of a faculty and staff equity task force, a tactical plan focused on equity issues (not only relative to student outcomes but also to college practices and policies), college-wide equity summits to encourage dialogue, and, of course, a plan to close the achievement gap.

Most recently, as the college approached the end of a three-year strategic plan, I co-led the development and creation of a new strategic plan with my executive vice president counterparts. Dr. Johnson challenged our leadership team to create an inclusive plan firmly grounded in the guiding principles of access, equity, and student success. This was no small task (in fact, it was one that on many previous occasions had been led by external consultants given the time and breadth of

the project). After eight months of appreciative inquiry exercises, conversation, and evaluation, the board approved the 2019–2022 Strategic Plan, which is reflective of the participation and input of more than 1,800 students, faculty, staff, and community members. This constitutes the broadest engagement and participation ever in a strategic planning process at the college. I am proud to have helped lead this process.

During my tenure at Tri-C, I have come to appreciate working at an institution where one's work speaks for itself, and *how* results are obtained is as important as the outcomes themselves. Tri-C provides opportunities for professional development—including attendance and presentations at conferences and involvement in the local community on behalf of the college—as well as support to attain advanced degrees. A culture of mentorship at Tri-C supports all who demonstrate a desire

and willingness to work hard and grow as professionals. None of this would exist without the strong and supportive foundation established under Dr. Thornton's and Dr. Johnson's leadership. It is because of their examples as leaders and mentors that Tri-C provides opportunities to leaders like me to grow and serve. We are fortunate at Cuyahoga Community College to have all the elements necessary for institutional and student success. We still have much work to do on behalf of the students we serve each day, but I am eager for the challenge and grateful for those leaders and mentors who continue to support me and guide me beyond my comfort zone, over and over again. I thank each of them who has given me and others the opportunity to serve in the exciting and ever-changing world of higher education. I hope to provide that same opportunity for those who come alongside and after me.

## About the Author



**Karen Miller, Ph.D.**

Karen Miller, Ph.D., is the Executive Vice President/Provost of the Access, Learning & Success Division at Cuyahoga Community College (Tri-C). She previously served as the Vice President of Institutional Research and Enrollment Management, overseeing recruitment, enrollment, retention, and completion initiatives for the college. She also managed the evidence and inquiry department, leading initiatives such as the Community College Survey of Student Engagement, IPEDS relationship and research, and data requests from throughout the college. Dr. Miller serves on several college-wide administrative leadership teams, and has contributed to the development and implementation of the college's strategic plan, the enrollment plan, and all of Tri-C's student policies and procedures to enhance student success. She has led numerous college-wide initiatives, including the cross-functional team that developed the Strategic Enrollment Plan, College Credit Plus, and veteran's initiatives. Additionally, Dr. Miller and her

team were instrumental in the 400% increase in Tri-C's IPEDS graduation rate over the past several years, and she worked closely with administration and faculty to implement the new Degree-Works software that will help students create academic plans.

Dr. Miller has been with the college since 1998, and has served in a number of positions that have made a positive impact on our students and their academic experiences. She joined Tri-C as the Director of Student Affairs, becoming the Assistant Dean of Student Affairs, and eventually serving as Dean of Student Affairs at our Metro Campus for more than five years. As dean, Dr. Miller managed the campus division of student affairs, including recruitment, admissions, registration, counseling services, student life and athletics, and career services.

Dr. Miller is also a statewide and nationally recognized leader in higher education, and has presented at numerous conferences and conventions, including the American Association of Community Colleges Annual Convention,

the Institute for Higher Education Policy & Lumina Foundation, the American Association of Collegiate Registrars and Admissions Officers (AACRAO) Strategic Enrollment Management Conference, and the National Noel Levitz Retention Conference. As a chancellor-appointed position, Dr. Miller served on the Ohio Transfer & Articulation Network (as well as the OTAN Oversight Board and she also serves on the National Enrollment Management Advisory Board for AACRAO. Dr. Miller is also a graduate of the League for Innovation in the Community College's Executive Leadership Institute.

Prior to Dr. Miller's arrival at Cuyahoga Community College, she worked at both Case Western Reserve University in Cleveland, Ohio and DeVry Institute of Technology in Columbus, Ohio in various roles within student affairs. Miller has a Ph.D. from The University of Toledo in higher education, and also holds a B.S. in Technical Education and an M.S. in Technical Education with a specialization in Guidance & Counseling from The University of Akron.