

 SEM AND COMMUNITY COLLEGES

Avanza, The Good Road, and LEAD: College Access Programs the SEM Connection

By Alicia Moore and Christy Walker

This article explores the intersection of diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging (DEIB) work and strategic enrollment management (SEM), provides an overview of Central Oregon Community College's college preparation programs and data on their success, and offers guidance for those wanting to engage in this critical work.

Diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging (DEIB) work is not new to institutions of higher education. In fact, many colleges and universities have had a long-standing and deep commitment to ensuring their students enjoy a respectful, inclusive, and welcoming learning environment, from recruitment and beyond. This work has been elevated in recent years as national and international educators, policy makers, and researchers recognize the growing importance of creating greater access and success opportunities, especially for traditionally-underserved populations. With this, institutions of higher education (IHES) increasingly are developing programs that support underserved students with the goal of increasing the college access and success rates for these populations.

It is important to recognize that while the concepts of “access” and “success” are key tenets of such programs, they are also foundational elements of effective and comprehensive strategic enrollment management

(SEM) work. It is from this SEM foundation, and a commitment to DEIB work, that Central Oregon Community College (COCC) built its college access and success programs for area high school students. These programs enjoy unprecedented high school graduation and college-going rates.

SEM and DEIB

SEM has been part of the higher education landscape for more than 40 years. Since its inception, it has grown across all institution types. In recent years, SEM has more fully embraced strategies that go beyond recruitment to include an equal emphasis on student success. Current models of comprehensive SEM planning include setting goals and key performance indicators and developing strategies and tactics from recruitment through graduation. This article introduces the idea that SEM work can start even earlier, dipping into students' high school years as a means of bolstering their postsec-

ondary attendance and success. With this, the authors propose a new SEM definition, one that builds upon the work of Bontrager (2004) and Hossler (2011):

SEM is a framework that fosters student access and success for all learners, from college preparation to completion and beyond, through strategically-designed activities and organizational structures grounded in the institution's mission, vision, values, and strategic plan.

This combined focus on access *and* success is one that closely aligns with the mission of today's community college and recognizes that equity is at the core of community college values (Baber, *et al.* 2019). As a result, there is a tight nexus between SEM and DEIB. To illustrate, *diversity* is the representation of varied identities and differences, collectively and as individuals, within the institution (Ford Foundation 2024). Applying a SEM lens to this definition, it is about how IHE's ensure that its students, faculty and staff represent and support the communities it serves.

In essence, diversity is most akin to the SEM ideals regarding access. However, true SEM work encourages holistic thinking about how to support students. Embedding equity in an institutional SEM model means going beyond providing equal resources, but instead, working to "address and eliminate the systemic disparities and barriers that might hinder some students' educational success" (Connell and Smith 2023, 4). In SEM parlance, this means ensuring the right services are offered in the right place, at the right time, based on individual student needs.

Adopting a diversity and equity mindset within the SEM planning falls short if IHEs do not also focus on how their SEM goals and strategies work to create an *inclusive*, respectful, and welcoming campus culture, one that ensure every person's voice matters, is listened to, and is celebrated. In the end, this approach creates a

culture in which all students *belong*, something that is critical to student success (Hausmann, Schofield and Woods 2007; Maestas, *et al.* 2007; Rhee 2008).

COCC's College Preparation Programs

Guiding Principles

Approximately eight years ago, COCC's Student Affairs Division inherited the college preparation program, with the goal of increasing the number of students who complete the program, graduate from high school, and attend a postsecondary education. Before diving into the logistics, the college paused to develop program goals and student outcomes, along with identifying the principles

needed to guide curriculum and program redesign.

Developing the goals and specific key performance indicators was relatively straightforward. At the time, approximately 18 percent of students completed the program, with even fewer attending a postsecondary IHE. Based on information gleaned

from other college preparation programs across the United States, COCC set an ambitious goal of 80 percent graduating from high school and 80 percent pursuing a college or university education.

Given the ambitious nature of these goals, the college knew it had to redesign the program, taking a holistic view of recruiting, supporting, and retaining students. To do this effectively, it looked to Egalite, Kisida, and Winters' (2015) work on the concept of representation and LaCelle-Peterson and Rivera's (1994) seminal text on the importance of equity in education. Drawing from their research, COCC's curriculum includes elements such as identifying local organizations that are owned or managed by people within the specific identity groups who can serve as guest speakers or provide workplace learning opportunities. Partnerships such as these

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TABLE 1 ► College Preparation Programs

Component	Content	Latinx Program Name	Native American Program Name	Afro-Centric Program Name
Course 1	Leadership, college preparation and culturally-relevant topics that focus on developing individual identify	Avanza I	The Good Road I	LEAD I: Legacy Education Afrocentric Development
Course 2	Leadership, college preparation and culturally-relevant topics that focus on developing community identify	Avanza II	The Good Road II	LEAD II: Legacy Education Afrocentric Development
Summer Leadership Symposium	Capstone leadership and cultural development intensive seminar	Ganas	STRIVE: Summer Training to Revive Indigenous Vision and Empowerment	Ubuntu

showcase how students can be thriving and contributing members of their communities, despite all too often messaging to the contrary.

In their research, LaCelle-Peterson and Rivera (1994) demonstrated the importance of offering multiple, specialized opportunities for underrepresented populations to develop the social capital needed for success. This is supported by more recent studies demonstrating that inclusive and culturally-relevant curriculum has a direct correlation to student success, especially in regards to closing opportunity gaps (Vue, Haselrig and Allen 2017; Gorski 2018). The development of specialized college preparation programs, infused with culturally-relevant curriculum, forms the underpinnings of COCC's programs. One of many examples is how the program for Afro-Centric youth includes a group project to research and present on Black inventors or leaders and their contributions to society. This work afforded students an opportunity to learn about their history and culture, all while developing communication, collaboration, and public speaking skills.

Developing student leadership skills has long been a hallmark of college student affairs programs. Drawing on the work of a multitude of student leadership development approaches, COCC intentionally designed its programs to develop parallel leadership skills at the high school level. Much of the curriculum focuses on engaging students in topics related to equity in education,

learning how to address disparities they identify through research and lived experiences. Moreover, students research local, national, and global issues relevant to their communities. One example of this work includes a field trip in which students meet with local civic and public sector leaders to discuss community issues, meeting both individually and within the context of public hearings. These activities helps students make sense of their role in improving their communities and at the same time, creates spaces where students feel heard.

The Programs

COCC's first college preparation program (CPP) was originally part of a statewide initiative focused on increasing the postsecondary attainment rates of Latinx youth. However, as the demographic makeup of the college's service district changed, the college recognized the need to expand programs to serve Native American and Afro-Centric youth, noting that all programs are open to any student actively engaged with these communities.

Each of COCC's CPP programs contain three components, with each having titles¹ specific to the communities it serves:

¹ Reflecting the college's commitment to centering these programs on equity, COCC chose culturally relevant names for each of the courses. *Avanza* and *Ganas* loosely translate to 'moving forward.' *The Good Road* is a concept in many Native American cultures that represents a healthy and safe journey or taking the right path in life. *Ubuntu* is an African word that translates to either 'I am because we are' or 'humanity towards others.'

Each of the courses result in students earning one college credit. Course One learning outcomes focus on building student self-efficacy to navigate higher education and recognize the importance of their cultural heritage; understanding of leadership styles, including personal leadership, personal responsibility, diffusing conflict, and communication; and academic writing skills. Course Two outcomes dive deeper into many of the concepts in course one and adds career exploration, developing and articulating personal and group goals, building cultural pride, and identifying issues specific to their local community and strategies for addressing those. The in-class activities vary widely for each course, but include having each student group develop a community project. Examples include:

■ *Reflections of Life: Voices of Our Youth* film project: This short film project was created in part-

nership with filmmakers who are members of the nearby Confederated Tribes of Warm Springs, an international organization focused on positive change, and the COCC College Preparation Program Coordinator. The four-minute film featured The Good Road students expressing their relationship to, and the importance of, water in their communities.

■ City of Bend Climate Friendly Areas (CFA) project: Avanza I and II students worked in collaboration with local organizations to study, identify, and design CFAs, presenting their findings to the local City Council.

Courses One and Two are delivered in the high schools during the academic year. Students who complete either course are invited to participate in Course Three, which features an on-campus, multi-day, overnight and intensive leadership symposium. The outcomes for the symposium focus on exploring career options with COCC faculty and community partners, cultivating awareness of contemporary and historical

issues in multicultural communities, gaining a familiarity with a college campus, and fostering self-care. Former symposium and current COCC students serve as mentors to the high school students, participating in classes taught by COCC faculty during the day and organizing cultural and social events in the evening. In their role, the mentors model what it is like to be a college student and help break down any imposter syndrome² concerns. The symposium culminates in a closing dinner in which

This program has helped become a better person. For example, it has helped me be more open, have higher expectations for myself, and made me a better presenter and speaker. People have always labeled me as an immigrant that will not make it to college, and I would always let people put me down, but with the help of the program I started to believe in myself. Thanks to this program, I got to find out more about COCC, got the opportunity to experience how college classes are and how it is living in a college dorm. It is not all about working but it is also about having fun, laughing and making new friends.

2024 SUMMER SYMPOSIUM PARTICIPANT

families, college leadership, and community partners are invited to attend, while student groups present their final project developed during their time on campus. The ultimate goal is to alleviate any fears of the concept of college often experienced by first-generation or historically-underrepresented students. As a result of their engagement with the symposium, students often express that their first term in college is not their first time engaging with the college experience. Initially, Ganas, STRIVE, and Ubuntu were individual events. In

² *Imposter Syndrome* is defined as people believing that they are undeserving of their achievement or do not belong in a specific societal setting. It includes deep and regular feelings of self-doubt and being a fraud, despite one's education and accomplishments (Duncan, et al. 2023).

2024, however, COCC integrated the events so groups had both individual and combined experiences. The goal of this approach was to foster greater cross-cultural appreciation and communication, as well as build team skills across different populations.

It is important to note the strong support from local high school districts, who include this course as a regular part of their school class schedule, provide the time and space to recruit students and host the class, and pay the tuition, eliminating any financial barriers that may exist.

The Results

According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2023), Oregon's 2020–21 high school graduation rate was 81 percent overall, and for students who identify as American Indian or Alaska Native, Hispanic, or Black, the graduation rates drop to 67 percent, 79 percent, and 74 percent respectively. At the same time, 100 percent of students who in any one of COCC's college preparation program courses graduate from high school.

Together, the courses build skills fundamental to personal and student success, including the ability to explore and articulate cultural identity, establish personal and team goals, develop effective teamwork skills, and explore aspects of leadership including varying styles, qualities, and cultural implications. Moreover, they build student confidence in their abilities to not only graduate from high school but also be successful in college.

COCC's goal for the college preparation program was to have 80 percent of participants attend postsecondary education. While there is some variance between the three programs, an average of 86 percent of students who complete one or more of the courses attend an IHE, with the majority of those enrolling at COCC. Comparatively, 56 percent of Oregon high school graduates attend a postsecondary institution—a stark difference compared to COCC's college access program graduates (Edge 2024).

A Comprehensive Approach

An important element of COCC's college preparation programs is the support students receive once they at-

tend COCC. That is, all students have access to parallel programs at the college level through COCC's Native American, Latinx, and Afro-Centric programs. Similar to programs offered at other IHE's, COCC college-level cultural programs guide and coach college students on the transition to college, accessing college support services, and building connections through social and educational activities, as well as student clubs. The partnership between the high school and college programs ensures that students have a smooth transition from high school to COCC, further cementing the foundation for students' academic success. Together, the college access and college-level programs are part of a larger, systematic approach to student success, one that spans the student's lifecycle—a key tent of comprehensive SEM planning.

Parting Thoughts

Kerlin (2008) indicated SEM is a “comprehensive and coordinated process” (11), while Hossler (2011) talked about SEM including a “systematic set of activities” (70). With these considered, the nature of comprehensive SEM planning is to develop a series of intentional and strategically designed activities to help an institution achieve its access *and* success goals.

The programs highlighted here are just that—part of a larger series of initiatives designed to increase the college-going and college success rates of underrepresented students within COCC's service district. They are grounded in the institution's missions, goals, values, strategic plan, and SEM work, all of which embed diversity, equity, inclusion and belonging principles at their core. COCC's cumulative efforts include an extensive series of student and employee trainings, social engagement activities, and educational events; partnerships with local organizations, K–12 districts, and on-campus champions; and the active engagement and support of other student support colleagues, just to name a few. Together, this work not only helps the institution achieve its enrollment goals, but may make a positive impact for students and communities.

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