



Higher Ed Rewired

Season 2, Episode 8

Beyond the Pandemic: System Leaders on Driving Student Success

Guests: Joseph I. Castro, Harrison Keller and Kim Hunter Reed

Host: Annet Rangel

The complexity and challenges of the pandemic have posed extraordinary shifts to education as we have known it. Unique opportunities have risen out of the stay-at-home orders and the shift to remote learning, presenting a transformative time for postsecondary leaders. A number of these changes would have never been envisioned pre-pandemic, but rapidly are becoming welcomed additions to our institutions. Higher Ed Rewired meets with three system leaders, California State University **Chancellor Joseph I. Castro**, Commissioner of Higher Education for the state of Texas **Harrison Keller** and Commissioner of Higher Education for the state of Louisiana **Kim Hunter Reed**, and asks what have they gleaned from the pandemic and what they envision for the future of higher education.

Student #1: Environment changes are really helpful to my mental health, you know I'm being just on my desk or in my room now, I often feel less motivated do things, but when I'm at school, even though I'm not always interacting with my fellow students. Just being in a school environment really pushes me to do a lot better.

<Music comes up softly>

Student #2: There is kind of that missing the the social aspect and the social cues that you can get just being in a room full of people and kind of knowing when someone's going to talk or not or kind of where the conversation is going, but online people kind of start all at once people freeze.

Annet Rangel: You're hearing from two students at a California State University hosted panel about technology and the pandemic.

Last year, students, staff, and faculty were forced to adapt to an unprecedented situation...which magnified long standing issues within higher education, including equity, technology, sense of belonging and community.

But we've learned that after a year of global crisis, comes opportunity.

Student #1: In the workforce, wherever I go it's more than likely going to be a lot more group work than it is just listening to one person talk. So being able to experience that and utilizing new technology to be able to be in those meetings I think will be definitely beneficial in the long run.

Student #2: Keeping some of the things, not only from the kind of construction of the class but also this kind of empathy and flexibility that we've been talking about keeping that moving forward. I think having that kind of empathy and flexibility and understanding moving forward can be really good for the whole culture of a classroom and having that trust and good feelings in between teacher and student or professor and students and between students as well.

Annet Rangel: We've experienced big change as evidenced across higher ed nationwide... Homes were turned into classrooms, office hours were online and students interacted with peers exclusively through screens.

Today, we're taking a look at how instead of shying away from the challenge, colleges and universities embraced the new status quo to recognize shortcomings and adapt policies to re-strategize student success.

Inspired by the students they serve, higher education leaders have stepped up to tackle the needs and obstacles brought forth by the global crisis.

<THEME MUSIC FADES UP SLOWLY>

Higher Ed Rewired is a production of the California State University. The largest, most diverse four-year public university system in the country and an engine of social and economic mobility. Each episode examines groundbreaking research and exciting innovations taking place across the nation that are transforming the pathways for student success.

<THEME MUSIC COMES UP, RINGS OUT>

Annet Rangel: Welcome to Higher Ed Rewired, I'm your host Annet Rangel.

We've gathered some of the most influential systemwide leaders to talk about how a tumultuous year has... in actuality... led to reflection, innovation and opportunity.

PART ONE

Annet Rangel: While the COVID-19 pandemic forced colleges and universities to contend with many unexpected challenges, the California State University system underwent a change in leadership.

After eight years serving as the system's Chancellor, Dr. Timothy White handed over the baton to Dr. Joseph Castro.

Dr. Castro is the grandson of Mexican immigrants, son of a single mother and the first in his family to graduate from a university.

Chancellor Castro: Students are a lot like I was not too long ago, first generation, many of them, many students of color. That's deeply meaningful for me. And I want to figure out how I can remove barriers so that all of our students from all backgrounds can succeed. And I want to empower our faculty and staff and administrators to do everything we can to support that success, because we're all about preparing a new generation of bold leaders.

He's the eighth Chancellor to serve the CSU System, but the first to pick up in the middle of a pandemic...however, that didn't stop Chancellor Castro from taking on the unprecedented challenge.

Chancellor Castro: There is no rule book for leadership during a global pandemic. And I think it then becomes all about values and mission. And I love our mission is to support students from all backgrounds.

I feel like we've done quite well. I mean, we were the first large university system in the country last May to say we're going to be almost completely virtual in the fall. And I was not chancellor, but I helped to make that decision as a president. And I felt like that was exactly the right decision, even though it came before everybody else did it. I felt that way again in December when Chancellor White and I during the transition, we decided to announce to the CSU is going to come back predominantly in person this fall during the heat of the pandemic in December. And when I started in January, it was even worse. And so there were a lot of people saying to me, you know, you need to change that view because you're crazy. There is no way. I mean, everybody was so focused on the kind of real-time experience.

<MUSIC STARTS UP SOFTLY>

Annet Rangel: Chancellor Castro is focused on addressing issues of equity and the *additional* pressures brought on by the health crisis that have made it hard for some students to finish school.

Chancellor Castro: I think we're putting the foot harder on the gas pedal right now because I've asked us to redouble our efforts around eliminating the equity gap. It appears to me that we will achieve our graduation rate goals given the work that we've already done and that we plan to do. So, that's the challenge that the president and I have together is how do we eliminate those equity gaps once and for all at every one of the twenty three campuses?

Annet Rangel: Looking ahead, Chancellor Castro wants to make sure that every student has the resources and support they need to graduate.

Chancellor Castro: We're going to allocate a pot of funding that we received from the state and we're going to dedicate it to seniors, Pell Grant recipients, seniors at each of the CSU campuses. So every campus is going to get a special allocation. And the goal is to help those seniors cross the line for graduation by next summer. And they can come up with whatever strategies they think are right. But we're going to give them the funds to do it. And so it might be more advisers, it might be some way of covering costs to go to school in the summer to take that last class. There are all sorts of different strategies that could be used.

And, and then we've recommended some specific strategies based on best practices that would help our campuses to eliminate those equity gaps. So again, some of them relate to advising, others are. One is that we've looked at is degree mapping so that for every student in the CSU, there would be a map. To get the degree that they want and it would help to show them what courses at what sequence they need to do that, and as you know, a first-generation college student, I was as well. A lot of that is not obvious at the beginning. And you have to figure it out along the way somehow, some way. Well I want to do everything I can with my colleagues so that that becomes much more obvious to everybody and the support is there to make it happen.

Annet Rangel: I'm actually curious how you think higher education has grown and how it will come out different and better than when we started.

Chancellor Castro: We have learned a lot during this last year, and I think many people in higher education, especially many faculty, didn't think it'd be possible to have virtual education at this scale.

<MUSIC STARTS UP SOFTLY>

Chancellor Castro: And then we announced a new requirement that everybody will need to be vaccinated for fall 2021. And I think that's also going to give some of our students and faculty and staff a little bit more confidence to go back. And that was what we're trying to provide, is maximize the health and safety for everybody this fall.

Annet Rangel: Throughout the pandemic, the CSU has actually been able to increase their retention... which has led to higher graduation rates.

This is a direct result of the system's dedication to communication, transparency and flexibility that has guided schools throughout this difficult time.

And it's those core values that Chancellor Castro will carry with him into the future as he builds upon these new opportunities.

Chancellor Castro: I think for me the overriding lesson is to stay focused on mission and values and to be flexible around the strategies and tactics. Because what I found repeatedly through the pandemic is something that might have seemed completely unreasonable on the one day,

could be reasonable, you know, a few days later. And I think if I hope I don't have to lead through another pandemic, but I think that would be a powerful lesson for next time, is to remember to not try to buy into any specific tactics too soon, I think, for me is probably the overriding lesson.

<MUSIC COMES UP, RINGS OUT>

PART TWO

Harrison Keller: Everyone looks really tired and beat down at this point. And we still know we have a lot of a lot of challenges ahead of us.

Annet Rangel: This is Dr. Harrison Keller...Commissioner of Higher Education for the State of Texas.

Harrison Keller: I think what we've seen at our colleges and universities has really been heroic, both on behalf of students, faculty and staff. But but also what hasn't been remarked on as much is how involved they've been in community public health efforts.

Annet Rangel: Dr. Keller is a 6th generation Texan and comes from a family of educators.

Like the other systemwide leaders we've spoken with, Dr. Keller recalled how students and faculty responded to the looming pandemic.

Many saw it as a call to action, to rise up and help.

Harrison Keller: What's happened is as that creative energy of faculty and students themselves was suddenly forced in this new direction, there's innovations coming out of that. So I think that's the silver lining in all this, is that the changes are happening in our economy, but also in higher education, much faster than we ever would have anticipated.

Annet Rangel: Even as schools adapted to overcome short-term issues, the health crisis revealed lasting challenges the higher education system would need to address.

Harrison Keller: The pandemic's been devastating for students who were in general, but especially students who are already our most vulnerable students. So we had a lot of students who were poor, who are already having trouble making ends meet. We have a lot of first-generation college students.

So I think it's important to emphasize that this isn't a temporary crisis. So not only now, but especially over the next few years, it's imperative that we've got to focus on places that students are going to need additional education, educational services are going to need additional support. We have so many people who've lost jobs whose same jobs are not coming back, where they're not coming back quickly or as they come back, they look different.

Annet Rangel: Like Chancellor Castro...Commissioner Keller is committed towards taking the necessary steps towards closing equity gaps between students brought on by the pandemic...

Harrison Keller: With the CARES Act funds, Texas was one of a handful of states that allocated funding primarily to higher education from those discretionary funds. So the first allocation of your funds was one hundred and seventy five million dollars for higher education, the first 57 million of that kept our need based aid programs intact. We had tens of thousands of students in the fall that were having trouble paying their bills and they were at risk of dropping out or being even being disenrolled from their institution. So within a few days, we were able to get that funding distributed across our institutions and to help keep students on track. So that ended up assisting more than 60000 students across the state with that kind of rapid reaction.

Annet Rangel: The theme of this specific episode, is “Driving Student Success During a Pandemic” and I'm wondering, you know how the pandemic has challenged strategizing the support to increase the completion for student success and particularly how that relates to the 60 by 30 Texas plan?

Harrison Keller: The reason the plan is called 60 by 30 Texas is because the focus is primarily about increasing educational attainment for young Texans so that by 2030 we have 60 percent of Texans age 25 to 34 have some kind of postsecondary credential. I think that what we've experienced over the last year has forced us to rethink some of these goals, not to back off of them, but we have to realize first there are a whole lot of people older than 34 that we're going to need to be able to serve. So we need to be more sensitive to the needs of adult learners as well as more traditional learners. So we've actually launched a project in Texas, even with everything else going on between our board and our higher education foundation to review and refine our higher education goals. And so we've had listening tours in eight different regions of the state, engage one 400 leaders across the state so far. And there's more to come around these questions.

<MUSIC STARTS UP>

Annet Rangel: As the world slowly returns to some sense of normalcy, the higher education system will never be the same.

And Commissioner Keller acknowledges that . . .

Harrison Keller: I think we'll definitely come out different. I think whether we come out better or not is, I think, still an open question. I think there's a lot of hard work for us still to do. I'm inspired by the the work that we've already launched.

<Music beat>

But I think it's important for us to acknowledge the scale of the work that needs to be done. And it's going to take a focused, coordinated effort this is going to be over several years to make sure that we will look back at this moment as a moment that we came together and really did make that commitment to each other, that we're going to build a better Texas, the kind of Texas where we can realize the idea that that are our role, our responsibility, and especially in our public institutions of higher education is to make sure that folks can take that talent as far as they possibly can.

<MUSIC COMES UP, RINGS OUT>

PART THREE

Commissioner Hunter Reed: We proved that the battleship can turn into weeks, right?

Annet Rangel: Commissioner Kim Hunter Reed is Louisiana's Commissioner of Higher Education.

Commissioner Hunter Reed: So if someone asked me, could we go one hundred percent online, all of Louisiana in two weeks, the answer would have been no. Now the answer is yes.

Annet Rangel: She is the only woman in the country currently serving as a state higher education lead who has led in more than one state.

Commissioner Hunter Reed: Any time you see a disaster and, you know, we we do disasters in Louisiana, hurricanes, et cetera, those who have the least education and training are the individuals who are most likely to be displaced, most likely to be financially impacted. They're the least likely to be able to afford to work from home. They're the least likely to have health insurance. And so all of those things, I think, give us a sense of urgency in the work. We have to continue to promote education and training, make sure it's affordable, accessible, equitable in order to improve lives in our state, in order for our state to prosper.

So, we know that the pandemic has caused a lot of disruption, a lot of uncertainty, but now is not the time for us to say it's an excuse to not do more. It's an opportunity to do more. It's a responsibility to do more. And so we are working on that. We have emergency grants, we have food scholarships, just trying to meet people where they are, recognizing how much trauma and how much uncertainty is now a part of our everyday lives.

Annet Rangel: Commissioner Hunter Reed and her peers, Chancellor Castro and Commissioner Keller, were forced to address one huge issue brought on by COVID-19:

How could colleges and universities bridge the gap and support these already vulnerable students? What resources and educational tools could they provide to help them succeed?

Commissioner Hunter Reed: I do think that recognizing that our responsibility is not just a robust curriculum that is relevant to today's market, but recognizing that our students need all kinds of supports, which we would consider life happening in order for them to get there. And that that, too, is our responsibility. SNAP eligibility for students who are food insecure, all of those blending of resources, public benefits as a tool to leverage towards completion. That, too, is our work.

And so we talked about how to really rethink the role of our colleges and universities is really a one stop to support the students in totality so that they can really focus their energy on the education and training. And so we're working on that. We're working on improving teaching and learning and professional development for faculty. So we're landscaping what were the barriers,

what were the solutions and trying to identify how do we think about system change? So the solution is not a one off, but is actually integrated into who we are and what we do in Louisiana.

Annet Rangel: The pandemic hasn't gotten in the way of Louisiana's original goals to increase college completion rates. If anything, the crisis jumpstarted programs aimed to work towards those initiatives.

Commissioner Hunter Reed: We have two year and four year private colleges, as well as public colleges at the table for the Student Success Council. We have faculty members. We have diversity equity officers, we have financial aid directors. We have recruiters, researchers all at the table, K-12, workforce and economic development. Because our goal is to make sure that everyone owns student success and that you understand your piece of the student success work, regardless of where you sit in a college or university in Louisiana.

So high impact practices, interventions that support students where they are, meeting them, where they are in terms of life supports, all of these things are important for a student success council to understand and navigate. So, I do think that in many ways we've tried to make sure that the pandemic has been an accelerant for our work, not an excuse to not do good work. And the student success council that we have in Louisiana, I think has great promise.

Annet Rangel: This isn't the first time Commissioner Hunter Reed has had to navigate through a crisis.

Dealing with the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina in 2005 shaped her perspective on how the higher education system *should* serve their students, and the greater community.

Annet Rangel: If you had an opportunity to go back and speak to the past commissioner Hunter Reed, about everything that's gone on this past year, what would you tell her that you wish that you could have done differently or that your state could have done differently?

Commissioner Hunter Reed: So I think my conversation with my younger self would not be in this role because I've only been here three years, it would be with myself in the Hurricane Katrina aftermath. And I would say to her, you have to work harder to address poverty, because if you do not, not in two thousand five under Hurricane Katrina and Rita, but in twenty twenty one, you will find that the same individuals who don't have credentials, who sit in poverty are still suffering. Because it's not just about recovery from one storm, from one disaster, it's understanding the foundational challenges that poor people have in America and Louisiana.

<MUSIC BEAT>

Commissioner Hunter Reed: Focus there, being intentional, don't let up. And I would also say the challenges that you see in these hurricanes are nothing compared to what you're going to see. So seat belt buckled and believe that you can do it because you're going to be tested. And here we are.

<MUSIC COMES UP, FADES DOWN>

CONCLUSION

Annet Rangel: It's been a trying year. For everyone.

Professors had to learn how to create an online curriculum, students couldn't physically be present with their peers, and administrators had to figure out how to support their school community...which may now span hundreds of miles.

It's been a humble reminder for the higher education system that progress isn't a straight line and sometimes it takes a crisis, like a global pandemic, to put things into perspective.

As we reflect on this past year, one of the biggest lessons we've learned is that crisis can be an opportunity to better serve all students.

[THEME MUSIC COMES UP]

Chancellor Castro: One of my lessons during this pandemic is, is to try to be focused on our mission and values and not so much on the specific tactics and and to be open to pivot if necessary. So we've stayed the course because it was based on health experts' advice. And I think we, I'm hoping we've called it right. We'll see in the fall. But it seems like we have and in so many ways, what I've learned is we've got to skate - in hockey. They talk about skating to the puck where the puck is going to be as opposed to where it is right now. And that's how it's felt during planning with the pandemic, trying to think, look out on the horizon and figure out the best way to operate.

[CREDITS - OUTRO PROMO]

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[THEME MUSIC RINGS OUT]