Community colleges across the country are making heroic efforts to remake themselves in order to achieve their potential to promote social and economic mobility through education in a country where higher education too often is reinforced stratification.

Community colleges were essential parts of the efforts in this country in the 1960s and ’70s to dramatically expand access to higher education to a level that until recently was unrivaled by any country in the world., But in the late 1990s and early 2000s, community college leaders recognized that while they were good at getting students in the door, too many students were leaving without achieving their goals, without earning credentials of value. And so they embarked across the country in a national but grassroots effort called the Completion Agenda in which faculty, others, and colleges were working together to try to improve student outcomes.

About a decade into the Completion Agenda there was another realization by colleges, by researchers like myself that despite these extensive efforts, while we were seeing some improvements in small groups of students, overall these efforts were too scattered across colleges and too fragmented to really move the needle on student success.

And so there was a realization despite all this effort that in order to improve student outcomes, colleges really needed to fundamentally redesign how they teach, how they support students, with a key focus on helping the student become a college student, learn how to become a college student, and just as importantly, explore options for careers in college, get on a path, start to meet people, and start to develop experiences that will enable them to advance in the workplace and pursue further education.

And I’ve had the good fortune of leading teams of researchers that are looking at hundreds of colleges across the country undertaking these whole-college guided pathways reforms. And one thing we’ve noticed, while the difference in the details, colleges are taking very similar approaches to this at least in the broad brush. In every case, college leaders have brought together people who in the past never ‑‑ even though they were working on the same campus -- never talked to one another, much less talked about students and their experience. I mean everyone, certainly faculty and advisors but also people in the library, the tutoring center, the frontline clerks in the admissions office -- to talk about how the college is serving students and recognizing that while the student has to deliver and apply themselves in order to succeed, there’s a lot that the college does to create barriers to success. And to get across the message that while there’s a lot the college does, we have to take collective responsibility for this. We can’t blame one another. That’s counterproductive. And we have to work together.

And so another thing colleges have done is put together cross-functional teams to map out programs, to review programs to make sure that they lead to good jobs and further education, to look at the student experience and make sure that every student is helped to explore their interests and options, to learn how to become a college student, to get on a plan to become motivated and to become confident as learners, which is really what is going to carry them throughout their lives.

This is a huge lift. It takes a number of years and even just a couple years even to lay the groundwork. And in this environment colleges don’t have any extra money so they’ve had to reallocate resources and spread out responsibility for educating students to everyone in the college, not just a faculty member teaching at the college.

And while in every case this has required leadership from the top, courageous leadership, it doesn’t succeed unless you build broad leadership throughout the institution. And so in this era in our society when there’s so much conflict and so much partisanship and vilification, it’s been very heartening to me and a source of great optimism to see that in large, urban unionized colleges ... in small rural colleges ... in colleges in states across all areas of the country ... that people are coming together in community colleges to realize the dream and to realize their potential and make their communities better places to live.

I want to thank my colleagues in community colleges nationally and thank you for listening.

**[END OF FILE]**