



LEADERSHIP  
INSTITUTE  
FOR  
TOMORROW

# YOUR VOICE

ISSUE #3 • NOVEMBER 2023



**ERIK SHEARER**

*Professor, Napa Valley College  
VP of Instruction, Butte College*

OIL AND ENCAUSTIC ON PANEL  
The Snowflake Atlas: Case 52



**DR. DING-JO H CURRIE**  
Director – LIFT

# INTRODUCTION

*Dr. Ding-Jo H Currie is the distinguished faculty of higher education leadership and founding director of Leadership Institute for Tomorrow. She is former chancellor of Coast Community College District.*

Welcome to the vibrant and insightful fall edition of LIFT Your Voice. In this issue, we are honored to showcase the voices of leaders who are shaping the landscape of education and fostering a sense of belonging and success for all.

**Eric Shearer's** artistic portrayal of Snowflakes captivates readers, providing a metaphorical lens through which to view the emergence of leadership. The symbolism of trees, standing tall with roots firmly entrenched, mirrors the leaders' commitment to upholding integrity, values, and their mission.

**Dr. Cheryl Aschenbach**, a respected faculty leader, courageously opens up about her own vulnerabilities and inner doubts, forging a connection with students who navigate similar challenges. Her candid exploration of marginalized feelings of belonging resonates with the diverse struggles faced by students in their intersecting identities.

**Chancellor Sonya Christian**, drawing on her early Eastern influences and immigrant experiences in the West, offers a unique perspective on leadership. Her commitment to universal belonging, embodied in Vision 2030, underscores her dedication to supporting student success and shaping a more inclusive educational environment.

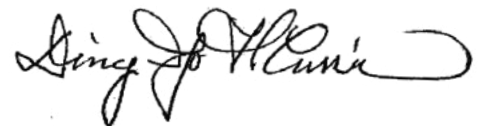
The powerful voice of **Cassandra Flandre-Nguyen**, representing California community college students, echoes the sentiment that students are more than mere headcounts – they are the lifeblood of our institutions. Cassandra's call for tangible actions, not just theoretical promises, challenges us to prioritize students in our decision-making processes.

**Trustee Andra Hoffman's** inspiring journey from a single parent navigating the challenges of earning a degree through community colleges to becoming a top leader is akin to a fairy tale. Her story of tenacity and success serves as a beacon for countless community college students, emphasizing the importance of paying it forward.

**Ms. Deborah Knowles**, a fearless leader for classified professionals, sheds light on the undervalued voices within our system. Her rise to leadership is a testament to the wealth of knowledge and experience that classified professionals bring to the table. Deborah's story emphasizes the need for intentional efforts to recognize and elevate such talents.

In our best practice column, **Dr. Chi-Chong Keung** shares valuable insights derived from his study of community college presidents. The recommendations for best practice leadership, distilled from their experiences leading change during their initial five years of tenure, offer practical guidance applicable to leaders across diverse contexts.

As you delve into the pages of this issue, may you find inspiration in the stories and perspectives of these leaders, each contributing to the rich tapestry of educational leadership and advocacy.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "King J. Albin", with a large, sweeping flourish at the end.

# TABLE OF CONTENTS

---

**DR. SONYA CHRISTIAN** ..... 5  
*Chancellor, California Community Colleges*

**CASSANDRA FLANDRE-NGUYEN** ..... 6  
*President, Student Senate for California Community Colleges*

**DEBORAH KNOWLES** ..... 7  
*Student Leadership Advisor, Sacramento City College*  
*President, California Community Colleges Classified Senate*

**CHERYL ASCHENBACH** ..... 8  
*President, Academic Senate for California Community Colleges*  
*Professor, Lassen Community College*

**ANDRA HOFFMAN** ..... 9  
*President of the Community College League of California Trustees*  
*Los Angeles Community College District Trustee*

**CHI-CHUNG KEUNG, ED.D.** ..... 10  
*Chief Communications Officer, Rancho Santiago Community College District*



**DR. SONYA CHRISTIAN**

*Chancellor,  
California Community Colleges*

As I reflect on my life's experiences, I am aware of the profound impact of both Eastern and Western values on my professional journey. My story is one of cultural fusion, where the values and lessons from my upbringing in India integrate with the opportunities and experiences I've encountered in the United States.

I grew up in the town of Kollam in the southern Indian state of Kerala. My paternal grandmother Guilia was Italian, and my grandpa Salvadore was Indian. On my mom's side, Nana Hilda was Anglo-Indian and Grandpa Arthur was Portuguese, Dutch and Indian. I attended a Catholic all-girls high school and remember the nuns being extremely strict about everything we did – academic performance, and proper behaviors such as showing respect for each other and not chewing gum.

They insisted on living up to high moral and ethical standards; it is what you do when no one is watching. I was very close to my parents, Paul and Pam, whose personalities were polar opposites, and yet who created a loving and fun-filled environment for the four children; I am the youngest.

I remember feeling loved, with a sense of belonging everywhere in the community, and I have great memories of high school despite the ruler landing on my knuckles for poor writing. These early experiences taught me that our differences were not a problem. We were committed to each other, and we were committed to our community.

This formative emphasis on community later formed the basis of my work and relationships. Looking back, I see this influence in all of my efforts as a faculty member, and even now as chancellor of the California Community Colleges. I believe that every student, and for that matter every faculty and staff member, must feel that they belong on our campuses and that they are part of the community.

I agonize when that sense of belonging is lacking.

Recently, we unveiled Vision 2030, a planning framework for bold and thoughtful action. It focuses on student success, and action for policy reform, fiscal sustainability, and systems development – a call to reaffirm support for our students, our communities and our planet. This plan is anchored in the importance of unity and partnership, recognizing that a vision of a more equitable and inclusive educational landscape can only be realized when everyone comes together, drawing from their unique backgrounds and lived experiences.

Growing up in Kerala, I was fortunate to witness the high value placed on equity and education, particularly the belief in the transformative power of investing in women. This was also a place where diverse religions coexisted harmoniously, fostering tolerance and acceptance among my childhood friends from a wide spectrum of backgrounds.

When I came to California as a foreign graduate student, I became aware of the stark contrasts in cultural distinctions. I came to appreciate a social emphasis on creativity, individuality, exploration, and the pursuit of excellence. I enjoyed watching my daughter and her classmates have the freedom to explore their passions and express themselves in various ways including the performing arts, and athletics.

This cultural fusion of discipline and creativity has for me become a defining feature of how I do my work, a blend of the importance of community structure and support, with individual innovation at the California Community Colleges. As I reflect on my professional journey, I see both Eastern and Western values. I see both Paul and Pam. I see both the discipline of the Carmelite nuns, and the joys of individual expressions of creativity.

And I see that creating a sense of belonging has been a constant and defining aspect of my life and my work, a gift of my upbringing that I see as fundamental to the work of community colleges.



## CASSANDRA FLANDRE-NGUYEN

*President, Student Senate for  
California Community Colleges*

I've always loved introductions. Ever since I was young, I've felt that introductions were a sure-fire way to understand how people view themselves and what they think is important enough for complete strangers to know about them. This sentiment, the art of introducing oneself and revealing one's essence, is not too dissimilar from the work we do here. Thanks to the collective efforts of everyone in this publication, the essence of the student is intricately woven into every facet of the California Community College system.

But of course, there remains room for improvement. Students are not mere headcounts; we are the lifeblood of our institution. The work you do is fundamentally for the students, and when our voice is absent, our efforts lose their student-centric core.

The mission and vision of the California Community Colleges is simple: Put students first. It's up to all of us to keep the student's voice front and center. It's essential for each college to think about what they can do better. We need to make our campuses more student focused. That could mean giving students more say in decisions, setting up ways for students to share their thoughts regularly, and creating an inclusive atmosphere.

Talking about student success is impossible without talking about student obstacles. We cannot allow for the concealment of extraneous factors that naturally inhibit a student's success. Being made aware of student accessibility and understanding the role of diversity in a learning institution is at the forefront of our priorities. Factors such as not being able to afford \$200 textbooks for all five classes, generational trauma from our culture, and learning disabilities are topics we all explore. But we need to remember that these are not just the typical higher education topics, but real-life factors that apply to nearly every student.

So with this in mind, allow me to reintroduce myself:

I'm Cassandra Flandre-Nguyen, 19, a second-year student at Orange Coast College in Costa Mesa. I'm taking 15 units, with physical anthropology currently kicking my butt. I take

pride in being a first-generation eldest daughter, born to a father who immigrated after the Vietnam War and a mother who embarked on her journey from France.

As a financially disadvantaged student, I benefit from critical financial aid initiatives such as Pell Grants and CalFresh. Additionally, I shoulder the responsibilities of caring for my two younger siblings, whom I tutor and consistently nag to do their homework – all while working a demanding 30-hours-a-week job and representing my fellow students as president of Student Senate for California Community Colleges.

My story is just one among many. Not all students come from my background: some are mothers, some are veterans, some are even grandparents. Nevertheless, it's our job to give every one of our 1.8 million constituents the best path towards success. And for that, the student voice is not just an option – it's a necessity.

This brings me to the role intersectionality holds in enshrining the student voice, and how it has deep personal significance to me as a student leader. It's not just a theoretical framework; it's the lived experience of every student we represent. As leaders, we must recognize that our students come from diverse backgrounds, each with unique challenges and triumphs. Understanding this intersectionality is crucial because it allows us to connect with students on a deeper level, empathizing with their struggles, and advocating effectively for their needs.

In embracing this diversity, we find the strength to lead authentically, acknowledging that our own backgrounds and experiences contribute to the mosaic of perspectives that shape our institutions.

In leadership, conveying a distinctive message in one's authentic voice is paramount. Our stories, like mine as a first-generation student juggling academics, work, and family responsibilities, are what make our leadership authentic. By sharing our personal narratives and connecting them to the broader theme of intersectionality, we not only humanize our roles but also inspire others to do the same.

Through these diverse and authentic voices, we foster a sense of community and inclusivity, reminding everyone that we are united by our commitment to student success.

Let us continue to lead with empathy, embrace intersectionality, and amplify the voices of our students in all that we do.



## DEBORAH KNOWLES

*Student Leadership Advisor,  
Sacramento City College*

*President, California Community  
Colleges Classified Senate*

What is a former non-profit CEO doing working 15 years as a classified professional at a California Community College?

My personal mission is to help people overcome barriers to education and employment. The non-profit work focused on this mission. Strategic planning and leadership were the vision for approaching the task. I had hopes of including this in all work I did. I had been a point-person on major organizational development and strategic planning for two organizations.

Community college is a place where people may find their way out of poverty. I wanted to see what students were experiencing. I wanted to find answers. I wanted to make sure my mission was valid, with a wider scope than my own story of escape from poverty. I stepped away from the CEO “title” for what I believed to be a couple of years at most. I shifted from non-profit to higher education. I was drawn to work at a community college.

I was naive, to say the least. At my previous positions, I was the quick riser, and expected I would find my path of working my mission via a leadership position in the community college system. My superiors were encouraging me into administration positions. I served as an interim dean twice, and worked as adjunct faculty both at the community college and a local California State University. Also, I participated in an administrator of a development and mentor program through the Association of California Community College Administrators. However, while I often was a finalist, after many attempts I was surprised others were selected for those coveted titles of leadership.

I realized that I was chasing a role and title that I had been taught was the way to lead in a community college. I never thought I wanted to be a dean or vice president, yet my energies were spent pursuing administrative positions.

As this awareness came into being, I saw that classified professionals are incredibly diverse in many ways, and are furiously working toward student success. Many hold graduate degrees and have rich work experiences. Yet many are unheard, and others keep quiet – perhaps feeling powerless in their attempt to have a voice. I began to use my own voice to plan and lead without a title, with both students and peers. This took courage. I was publicly chastised and told to stay in my place too many times.

My leadership without title includes volunteering long hours, spending countless sessions of personal time with students and colleagues seeking my advice, and looking for ways to enhance the underheard voice of leaders without titles. I have seen former students whom I still mentor pass me on the hierarchical scale.

I joined the California Community Colleges Classified Senate, known as 4CS, and participated in its annual conference, the Classified Leadership Institute. Hearing that professional development was a primary request, I completed a grant application, led the effort to design a program, and delivered a California Community Colleges Leadership Academy throughout the state. Fifty classified professionals started and successfully completed the academy. They received intensive foundational training, and led a team that also included an administrator and a faculty member.

The 4CS is the classified professional voice at the state level. Many entities and titled leaders recognize this, and invite 4CS into their conversations. Kudos to these insightful leaders who understand the value of including colleagues who are equally and sometimes more in touch with students matters.

The Classified Senate has one primary objective: To be the representative voice for classified professionals, who are half of the employees of the statewide community college system.

I am excited to start my newly titled leadership as president of 4CS, an organization that showcases the value of classified leadership impacting student success. It is important for all community college colleagues to tap into the deep resources of those thousands of us without a “leadership” title.



## CHERYL ASCHENBACH

*President, Academic Senate for  
California Community Colleges*

*Professor, Lassen Community College*

As a fledgling collegiate athletics coach and middle school educator, and later as a community college teacher and leader, I functioned in the professional academic environment with an inferiority complex – a feeling of otherness, and a perception I was an outsider who didn't quite belong.

I didn't feel worthy of the privileges and responsibilities granted to me as an educator and influence on the students I served, or on the colleagues I worked with.

It took me many years before I realized some very important things about intersectionality that, at face value, seem obvious but are often overlooked in teachers and leaders.

For one, everyone on our college campuses, no matter their role, is an educator. We share that identity, although it can look very different from one to another.

Together, we provide information and services and facilitate experiences that can make a meaningful difference to the students we serve. Some roles are more typically associated with the role of educator, such as classroom instructors, librarians, and counselors. But everyone who has contact with students has something to offer, something to teach, and is supporting student educational journeys in some way. We are all educators.

We also all have opportunities to lead within our educational spaces, often daily through unassuming actions. As an educator and leader, I've learned that I'm in a position to make a difference; and I have a responsibility to do so.

Secondly, I now realize that I am not the only person who questions my own worth or belonging; I often hear the same from students and colleagues, based on their own perception of the worth of our intersecting identities. Expressing confidence in the abilities of others while setting high expectations and structuring support helps others gain the confidence and sense of belonging they need to accomplish new, sometimes hard, things.

The student who didn't think she could deliver a presentation in class? With encouragement and scaffolded skills practice, she did it. Her classmates celebrated her.

The multi-lingual student who said he couldn't write an introductory essay in English? I told him he could, he did, and it was beautiful.

The faculty member who questioned her ability to contribute to a campus committee? Armed with some helpful resources to help develop background knowledge, she became a committee leader.

I've seen incredible accomplishments of students and colleagues when I have expressed my belief in their abilities, and I have experienced many of my own successes because others have believed in me. To be encouraging, to express confidence in someone, and to create a space where they belong can make an incredible difference to that person.

Third – and crucial to my development as a leader – is that authenticity matters. This seems simple, and in those early teaching years I thought I was being authentic in my working environment, except that I very carefully kept my personal life shrouded from others, I feared being judged by others because of who I loved.

By separating my personal and professional identities, and by carefully presenting only selected aspects of who I was to those I worked with, I was creating a barrier to true authenticity that hindered the quality of the relationships upon which my work depended. As I grew to realize that I could engage more meaningfully with others and serve as a role model by sharing myself and my stories rather than fearfully hiding them, I could encourage others to do the same.

The shy student questioning her worth may need to know that I did too. The queer student fearfully living in a conservative community needs to know that there are others like him, including me, in that same community.

The student questioning his presence on a college campus might stay engaged a bit longer once we've connected through our shared love of the outdoors. He might flourish given the right combination of encouragement and support.

We talk about humanizing education in recognition that we are nuanced, complicated individuals with a myriad of identities and lived experiences that intersect to impact us in everything we do. To advance student access and success, whether as educators, leaders, or in any other role, we must express belief that everyone can achieve what they set out to do, no matter their stories, identities, or experiences.

We must cultivate belonging and holistically support them in their journeys, which includes acknowledging their humanity and the ways in which their identities and experiences shape their needs and aspirations.

We must acknowledge the ways our systems must continue to evolve to better serve each student, and accept the responsibility we all have to make those changes happen. And, finally, to acknowledge the humanity in the complex individuals we work with and create meaningful connections, we must recognize our own humanity, share our stories, and be authentic.





## ANDRA HOFFMAN

*President of the Community College League of California Trustees*

*Los Angeles Community College District Trustee*

It took me nearly 23 years to earn my bachelor's degree.

My journey towards earning a degree, embracing single motherhood and eventually finding my place and life's work in the California Community College system, was anything but conventional. Over 23 years, I faced numerous challenges, made sacrifices, and celebrated victories that have shaped the person I am today.

I grew up in Van Nuys, a neighborhood in Los Angeles. The year was 1980 and I had just graduated from Ulysses S. Grant High School, across the street from Los Angeles Valley College. Almost 18 years old as high school graduation approached, I hadn't even thought about college. My accomplishments included being the best big sister/babysitter to my brother and three step-siblings. Upon graduation, my father gave me the choice of taking the metro bus to California State University, Northridge, or walking to Valley College. I chose Valley College because I was familiar with the campus, took community services classes (ping-pong and photography), schlepped my siblings to swimming lessons there and used the bookstore to buy Cliff's Notes as a high school senior. I felt like I knew the college well. I began my undergraduate educational journey in 1980 and by some miracle and a lot of detours, earned a liberal arts degree in 2003.

Like many of the students whom I personally work with at our community colleges, I enrolled at L.A. Valley College without having any real goal. I worked part-time for a hardware supply distribution center as a secretary, which my father always took credit for because he forced me to take typing in high school, and found that I enjoyed my minimum-wage job more than I enjoyed school, so I dropped out. I would re-enroll when I felt stagnant but again, had no real goal in mind so I'd drop out and then re-enroll. This continued for a several years. Then I met a guy. I got married and felt that my life was set. Six years later I found myself with two babies, a divorce, no job and no degree.

The turning point in my journey came when I landed a job running the Welfare-to-Work Americorps Program at Glendale Community College. As an employee of the California Community College system, I had the privilege of supporting students with their own journeys to success. I was able to understand the challenges they faced because I was facing the same challenges.

There was one problem that haunted me: I still did not have a college degree.

With the encouragement of my mentors, I returned to college and learned to juggle working full time, raising two kids and attending classes at night. It took several years, but with my bachelor's degree in hand I felt like I had achieved a full-circle moment and I was eager to continue to contribute to the educational success for the thousands of students who come through our doors.

My journey to earning my degree while working at Glendale Community College and raising two little ones by myself was a testament to the power of perseverance. I learned that success is not defined by how quickly one reaches a goal, but by the strength and resilience to continue and push through against what seemed like insurmountable barriers. I went on to get a master's degree in public administration from Cal State Northridge, and I've spent the last 26 years working at Glendale Community College.

Eight years ago, I ran for the board of the Los Angeles Community College District, where I'm able to have an even greater impact through an amazing chancellor and nine very capable college presidents on policies that help to improve the lives of students. This year I was elected to serve as the trustee board president of the Community College League of California, where I'm able to advocate at the state and national level on behalf of the 1.8 million California community college students.

Through empathy, innovation and collaboration, I aspire to help create a brighter future where all Californians, regardless of their circumstances, can lead a productive life with opportunity and fulfillment.



## **BEST PRACTICE COLUMN**

**CHI-CHUNG KEUNG, Ed.D.**  
**CHIEF COMMUNICATIONS OFFICER,**  
**RANCHO SANTIAGO COMMUNITY COLLEGE DISTRICT**

### **10 RECOMMENDATIONS FOR NEW PRESIDENTS**

Today's community college president are strategic thinkers, fundraisers, academicians, financial analysts, entrepreneurs, marketers, public relations experts, and student recruiters. They are tirelessly active in the community and on campus, attending cultural activities, athletic events, and social gatherings.

A new president's ability to navigate changes, especially in the first five years, will likely determine their tenure at the college. To meet this challenge, I conducted a study under the guidance of three current and former California Community College chancellors to uncover 10 recommendations for new presidents to lead and sustain change:

#### **MANAGE TIME AND EXPECTATIONS**

College presidents agreed that managing their time and expectations includes balancing expectations from home and at the college.

#### **CARE FOR EMOTIONAL, PHYSICAL, AND MENTAL WELL-BEING**

Resting, reading, and reflecting were common responses to the reality of caring for \ physical, emotional, and mental well-being.

#### **LEAD WITH PURPOSE**

The needs of students were foundational to leadership, especially in assisting those from under-represented and marginalized populations.

#### **CAST A VISION**

The success of a new president often rests in their ability to bring collaborative change. Change is initiated by developing and casting a vision for the college.

## **BUILD RELATIONSHIPS**

Spending time and developing relationships with leaders on- and off-campus was a priority for success, especially during the first year.

## **EMBRACE CAMPUS CULTURE**

Assessing the need for change begins by understanding the culture of the institution. Culture is unique for each campus and involves ingrained and long-held traditions and beliefs impacting the current group of students, staff, and faculty. Without consideration of the college culture, change often fails.

## **COMMUNICATE VISION**

Involving the leadership team in the communications process provides greater buy-in and improved messaging of the president's vision. The leadership team can often provide presidential communications opportunities that work within the college's culture and traditions.

## **STRIVE TOWARD SELFLESSNESS**

Presidents who realize their limitations and exemplified humility and authenticity are more likely to succeed. The ability to be self-aware was the lubricant to serve students and the community with authenticity and humility.

## **EMPOWER OTHERS**

The selfless leader seeks the support of others to achieve the goals of the college. They believed in collaboration and realized that empowering others allowed for greater buy-in and satisfaction.

## **DEFEND MORAL ETHICS AND VALUES**

Presidents agreed that leadership involves the willingness to forfeit their jobs if it compromised their morals and values.

What do you think of these 10 recommendations? Do you agree or disagree? Are there others you would add to the list? Send me your thoughts and feedback:

***keung\_chi-chung@rscsd.edu*** or ***linkedin.com/in/chi-chung-keung/***

# P U B L I C A T I O N

## Walter Baranger – Editor

Walter Baranger is a retired lecturer and former Daily Titan faculty adviser at Cal State Fullerton, and retired senior editor for news operations at The New York Times.

## Brian Anton – Publication Designer

Brian Anton is a freelance graphic designer and Cal State Fullerton alumnus. [brian@antoncreative.com](mailto:brian@antoncreative.com)

*LIFT Your Voice* is a publication of Leadership Institute for Tomorrow @ California State University Fullerton.  
<https://ed.fullerton.edu/lift/about-lift/>

For information and to make submissions, contact Ding-Jo H. Currie, [dcurrie@fullerton.edu](mailto:dcurrie@fullerton.edu),  
2600 Nutwood Avenue, Suite 520, Fullerton, CA 92831.

This issue of LIFT Your Voice is made possible by the support of the California Community College Chancellor's Office.

©2023 California State University, Fullerton. All rights reserved by the respective authors.

# O N T H E C O V E R



**ARTIST Erik Shearer**

*Professor, Napa Valley College  
VP of Instruction, Butte College*

Erik Shearer was born in Loma Linda, California, the son of a university reference librarian and a registered nurse. Erik earned his master of fine arts with a concentration in painting and drawing from the University of Oregon in 2000. Erik has taught visual arts in higher education for over two decades, and served in administrative and executive leadership roles at Napa Valley College. He is currently the vice president for instruction at Butte College in Chico. Erik resides in both Napa and Chico with his wife, three boys, dogs, and cats, and maintains an active studio practice.

"The snowflake atlas: case 52" is part of a large, ongoing series populated by shadowy silhouettes of figures roaming partially submerged, primordial western landscapes from hazily-remembered childhood journeys merging with Zen Buddhist stories of time and being. The silhouetted figure emerging from the watery ground is set against the earthy landscape of silent Ponderosas standing sentinel over the vibrant complexity of life on the forest floor. Effective leaders are adaptable and attuned to their environment, responsive to changing conditions and people, like the central figure.



**The Snowflake Atlas: Case 52**