

Democracy's College Podcast

Racial justice, Educational Philanthropy, and the Needs and Roles of Community Colleges in the Postsecondary Landscape

Heather McCambly:

The COVID-19 pandemic has upset daily routines and impacted communities across the country and throughout the world. Both the virus and the economic shut down that followed have intensified longstanding inequities, widening existing economic gaps, reproducing and creating new barriers to schooling, and increasing health disparities.

In the midst of this pandemic that has disproportionately infected and killed Black, Latinx, and indigenous communities, the murder of George Floyd has led to renewed attention to the movement for Black lives.

Parallel to these crises, we are also in a moment in which many education-focused, philanthropic organizations like WT Grant, Gates, ECMC, and so many more are working to undermine historical racial inequities in their own grant-making practices. The convergence of these phenomena, the current magnification of existing inequities, and a growing interest in equity among education-focused philanthropies creates a need for some deeper thinking and understanding about the intersection of educational grant-makers' efforts with equity movements.

In today's podcast, we'll talk about the intersections of racial justice, educational philanthropy, and the needs and roles of community colleges in the postsecondary landscape. My name is Heather McCambly, and I am a Ph.D. candidate at Northwestern University studying the intersections of racial justice and educational philanthropy. I'm joined today by Dr. Lorenzo Baber, associate professor of higher education and program chair of higher education, at Loyola University.

Dr. Baber's work focuses on issues of racial equity in STEM education and postsecondary settings and community colleges, more broadly. Thanks so much for joining me, Lorenzo.

Lorenzo Baber:

Thanks for having me, Heather. It's a pleasure to talk to you today and I know this has been a crazy time, crazy week for all of us as we deal with both the beginning of a new semester, for many of us, as well as another example of violence against Black people. And, on top of that, the continuing issues with Covid and dealing with the pandemic and all the consequences there. But I know that you have an ongoing study in the midst of Covid, specifically, so why don't we start by you sharing a little bit about your current study and what you found.

Heather McCambly:

Yeah, definitely. So, as Covid hit and all of our research and our labs kind of took a pause, and my colleagues and I were reflecting on how we could contribute or maybe be helpful as researchers in the current moment. We realized that there's a lot of work going on in the philanthropic community right now, including among grant makers who tend to put a lot of money towards educational issues. And a lot of that work was about being highly responsive to the Covid-19 crisis and what it meant for college students, colleges, and other educational entities. And also as they shifted to be responsive to the national protests affiliated with the movement for Black lives.

So we decided it was appropriate, it might be helpful to the field, and in fact we've delivered some of the results back to these philanthropies to do a series of interviews across seven foundations, with significant investments in educational issues to try to find out more about what they're learning and what they're thinking, specifically about racial equity as we go through this crisis as a nation and across the globe. And when we started this study, we expected and we found that across all of these foundations, there's some really common short-term responses.

So anybody who is a grantee right now and has a grant from a foundation probably has experienced outreach from foundations as they offer flexibility extensions, payment advances. And others who are

working more locally in communities have probably seen a lot of foundations create these immediate response funds or pool response of dollars together. So, for example, in Chicago there's an education-specific fund that a collaborative kind of group of funders put together several million dollars for immediate release into communities to help alleviate crises in the moment. And I and I should go ahead and name my colleagues: Krystal Villanosa and Claire Mackevicius.

My colleagues and I began to see some additional themes that really have a lot of hope and promise in them. As educational grant makers started to wonder if maybe they'll never return to normal. And that theme came up in the sense of maybe there are some new avenues, new pathways towards equity that educational grant makers are really starting to learn about as a result of the Covid-19 crisis. So I want to just share a few of those, and then we can talk a little bit about what these might mean for community colleges.

So while *all* of the grant makers we talked to expressed a commitment to equity that predated Covid, what evolved was ways that this commitment is starting to change as a result of the types of emergencies and the types of inequities that Covid is shedding extra light on for some. So I want to first recognize that for many communities, none of the current inequities that we were experiencing or seeing are a surprise or are new or needed light shed on them.

But but for some, and including many educational grant makers, this *is* a moment of realization. So, for example, a majority of grant makers that we talked to reported this Covid-19 crisis has led to renewed efforts to learn from and relate really directly to the communities that they aim to support. So for the foundations who identify primarily as working on issues of policy to affect education change, the sudden onset of the Covid crisis created an urgent demand to strengthen connections with communities directly to facilitate rapid and community-informed responses. And in particular, many grant makers reported efforts to reconnect with Black-, indigenous-, and Latinx-led community-based or student-led organizations, in an attempt to bring these organizations

directly into funding meetings and conversations about responses and ways to be more meaningfully helpful during the crisis.

Taking this a bit further, about half of the grant makers we spoke to are really starting to challenge what this sense of surfacing urgency looks like for their equity work, and what this means about the right balance between philanthropy in terms of long-term investing and the need to address immediate community-based needs like food, housing, stipends, transportation for students who normally rely on public transportation to get to campus when public transportation is no longer safe.

So this left some of the folks we spoke to with questions about whose existence really matters enough to create a sense of urgency and philanthropy and how these issues of food, housing, cash, transportation have only really been surfaced under Covid circumstances where, again, the same issues existed for many communities long before this moment. So this is creating something one of our interviewees referred to as “losing the privilege of patience” in philanthropy and losing the sense that we can only focus on high-level, long-term change when there are communities in crisis. And crises that are caused structurally *all* of the time, whether or not Covid is in play.

Moreover, funders also reported really thinking in new ways about the composition of their own networks. As they were strategizing around how to address Covid in a way that was equitable considering the greater infection and death rates among bipop communities, they really began to notice just how white-dominated their networks of advisors and grantees are. So grant makers who are more directly rooted in Black, indigenous, and Latinx networks expressed the hope that this crisis would reveal the need for breaking up these networks a bit, in particular as the movement for Black lives really showed the *power* of community-driven social movements.

Some of the nuts and bolts concerns that higher education grant makers brought up in these conversations included worries that they had about institutions like community colleges that are really at the whim of the state and rely on state budgets, but state budgets are going to be facing, and already facing, significant pressure, significant declines in revenue, and how these declines are going to hit community colleges and regional comprehensive universities disproportionately, and especially those that serve a lot of students of color.

They also spoke about the rapid adoption of broad distance learning options. So whereas many colleges and universities for *years* have been very either resistant or struggled with introducing massive distance learning platforms, suddenly, everybody's doing it. And on one hand that's exciting; and on the other hand, these funders are really worried about what it means to have or to deliver meaningful pedagogy in online formats, and especially for students of color.

And finally, some grant makers also spoke in particular about the role of community colleges, first as potential hubs for delivering care and services in the midst of both Covid and community uprising in support of the movement for Black lives. And second as critical but underfunded institutions, if or when the college access problem is reified as a result of the current national crisis.

So with that, I want to kind of pause as I just kind of gave the overview and turn back to you, Lorenzo, and kind of ask a bit about your thinking and initial reactions to these emerging ideas coming out of philanthropy.

Lorenzo Baber:

Yeah, thank you. And sounds like great work that you and your colleagues are doing. So look forward to seeing more work as you continue to collect data and do your analysis. One thing that struck me in listening to you is that term “the privilege of patience,” because I think we need to think about that a little bit more deeply in terms of patience itself as a go-to term to rebut those who think about things from a radical re-imagination, and so I appreciate the philanthropists

who brought that term up and understanding that patience is a privilege, and that patience is *not* a precursor for progress. In fact, you could argue that is an antidote for progress.

And we can think all the way back to Brown versus Board and that famous term “with all deliberate speed” and understanding that that term deliberate, who was that centered for? Who was that centered around? Deliberate for whom? That patience. So, I appreciate that recognition of that, and I think that's going to be very important moving forward.

I think the other thing that I would highlight is that, again, Covid has not necessarily created the tensions that we've seen but has exacerbated. Certainly this is a pandemic that no one could have ever have imagined, but we were already dealing, particularly communities of color, with the tension between democracy and neoliberal framing of education.

So when we think about the economic rationality and the idea that the value of institutions, even public institutions, around their efficiency, effectiveness, and contributions to the workforce as opposed to the messiness of citizenship building and producing individuals who are engaged in a democratic process. Now, I don't subscribe to the notion that that's an either or. I think you have to have a mixture of both. But, as you know, rationale feeds processes, processes support practices, and practices shape outcome. So if the rationale is very driven by one dominant ideology, say neoliberalism, then that's going to affect particular processes. That's going to support particular practices and that's going to shape particular outcomes.

One of the things that I see is, and particularly at community colleges who have *always*, going back to its foundations, been at the center of the tension of democracy and capitalism and forms of capitalism, which we now see as neoliberalism, but former forms of capitalism as well as the site where these things are contestant, amplified and have a significant impact on the outcomes for community colleges. So that's, kind of in a nutshell, my initial reaction to your analysis. I'm not

particularly surprised. I am encouraged by the suggestion that there is a deeper process for understanding the role of education and the role of community colleges, and particularly in context with the unique experiences of communities of color and other marginalized communities in our nation.

Heather McCambly:

So while I was conducting these interviews, you know, I also spent my fair share of time kind of out in the streets seeing what the type of organization going on looks like. And the thing that, here in Chicago at least, is so striking every time is that the folks *leading* so much of this movement right now, they're 18, they're 16, they're 19, mostly black women and some young black men and other folks of color. But I was also thinking about, right now, very few of these folks were on a college campus—none of us are, really. But I was also thinking about that some of these folks, at some point, are returning to college in the next year. And some of them might be here in our local community colleges, if our community colleges are lucky enough to have them.

And thinking about this issue of where is our change coming from and what are the community colleges' potential assets, as they maybe join in to conversations with foundations about what they need in this particular moment, knowing that on their campuses are students who are just an integral part of the current movement. So I'm curious, with that reflection, or maybe other reflections, can you tell me what you're thinking about how community colleges might actually be an agent in pushing the narrative, either about their needs or about communities' needs with funders.

Lorenzo Baber:

Yeah, you know, I think that community college leaders, including student leaders, understand more than probably other postsecondary sectors the egalitarian function of education. When you think about the community college campus, and I know you've been on community college campuses—we both have—and, hopefully, post pandemic, some of the people listening who haven't experienced just the *beauty* of a community college campus and seeing the diversity of people among the students and seeing them take classes together, break bread

together, study together, and come to this space where nobody is turned away. That there isn't this function of our value is based on who we reject, like at some four-year institutions.

Community college function is that regardless of your background, your age, your geographical location, you have a chance to learn, whether you're there to take university transfer credit as a returning adult or late-blooming adolescent; whether you're there as a small-acreage farmer learning more about the advanced agricultural innovations; whether you're there as someone who's been displaced because of the economy, laid off and needing a retraining; whether you're there as a new immigrant learning English as a second language. All those are part of the fabric of a community college. There is no place better to see the ideals of our democracy than a community college.

So having said that, I think that's the space that we need to go to, and leaders need to go to, in postsecondary education to say, what do we need because those people are the people who have radically dreamed of something new. And so they aren't chained by the terrains of the current, but they're looking at the possibilities of something new, and so why not utilize that talent and skills as we think through what the new possibilities for postsecondary education *can* be. We know what they are. And we know that we can do things very well, but we do things that are not very good.

And so, as we think forward, I think the community college space is the space where that radical re-imagination happens every day—it's normative. And so why not go there and go to the leaders there, from students to administrators, and say, "How can we change, from the ground up?" And, you know, from a philanthropy standpoint, I know that that's not the most efficient space; that sometimes outcomes can be messy. But then messiness is progress. I mean, we've talked about this in other conversations, you know, what is it to invest in something where you're already kind of expecting to know what the outcomes will be, and those outcomes will be successful versus investing in something

where you have no idea what the outcomes are. It could be bad, it could be good, but at least we know something new.

And so that's what I would argue. The space of a community college brings in value to philanthropic organizations. I hope I wasn't, like, too pie in the sky with that.

Heather McCambly:

No, not at all. And actually, just yesterday I discovered an organization called the Evaluation Roundtable. It's located in Washington, D.C., and it's soon to be led by Chera Reid. And I was just learning more about the organization yesterday. And one of the main kind of strategies and frameworks that they're bringing to the field of philanthropy is how do you more deeply engage directly with the communities you're saying you want to serve to build strategies from the ground up, where they have agency and a say in what should happen with these dollars. And I think that's really exciting and something that, without a doubt, could be applied to community college initiatives.

Another thing that came out of the interview, so I'll lead into kind of a final question or thought from you, Lorenzo, was there was this really powerful, emergent concern among a couple of the grant makers I talked to about how we have a lot of Black-, brown-, indigenous-led nonprofit organizations in the area of education. And when we talk about actual institutions of education, like community colleges, we're going to see a lot more Black, brown, and indigenous leadership in those spaces than we do right now, for example, in research one institutions. But these are also the same organizations that are really in dire need of operating funds.

So again, this is true for nonprofits and for community colleges compared to their counterparts. So a lot of the grants made in our current world are really project based, campaign based, but a few of the grant makers I was talking to, while they see the wisdom in that—there is a theory of change there—were arguing that *another* theory of change might be the type of autonomy we offer to Black- or brown-led nonprofits or to community colleges. The kind of autonomy we can

offer by actually making grants back into operating funds like we used to, in a different world.

And kind of the different path towards equitable change that could come from really contributing back into the operating funds of grassroots or community-led organizations or community-based colleges. So, I've just been reflecting a lot about where we're at right now with how we rely on funders to invest in things specific to creating a specific change like you were mentioning.

But what does it mean to invest in organizations that predominantly serve Black, brown, indigenous communities and what could a new vision for that look like? So, in that spirit, I'm curious to close this out what you would tell philanthropy about the unmet needs or kind of potential in community colleges that you'd want them to remember or think about again in this historical moment.

Lorenzo Baber:

Well, I think that investment for scalability and sustainability is very important. You know, the first part of your comment reminds me of that training aspect and how higher education programs have to be more mindful in the ways that we deliver opportunities for training around data collection, analysis, skills around evaluation and assessment that are that are driven by culture, and not necessarily kind of cookie-cutter. So culturally responsive assessment, culturally responsive evaluation and how we can deliver that in a way that can connect to those who are leading these organizations.

You know, I think about some of the federal programs that we've had like Trio, McNair that have done that kind of infused kind of training within the process of grants. And I think that could be replicated in this aspect as well. And specifically in the context of community colleges because, as you are well aware, community colleges are always on the forefront of budget cuts whenever there's an economic crisis, despite the fact that every politician has a community college in their district and love the community colleges and love the aspects of what they bring, they tend to be the first things kind of on the cutting ground. And

you can look at any state in the last few years to see the number of cuts that have been made to community colleges. First, primarily because many community colleges don't have the resources to support lobbyists and other influential systems that might help buffer those cuts, like four-year institutions may have, particularly elite four-year institutions, public or private.

So, this is an investment, and it is an investment in a space that hasn't been invested very well for a long period of time, but has still somehow, somehow held themselves together to produce amazing outcomes. And I know when we compare outcomes to other institutions they don't look as prominent. But when you think about the inputs of the students, the communities, again, the lack of infrastructure, there are miracles happening every day at community colleges, not only because of the administrators—because of the students and their persistence and their thoughts about elevating themselves. And most importantly, as I've interviewed community college students, their success isn't just about them. It's about their community.

And so when we think about scalability, and thinking about broadening that out, I would argue that the community colleges and individuals who go to community colleges are the best investment we can make because at their core, they're thinking about ways in which they can go back to their communities and move their communities forward, whether that's networking, bringing other students to the community college, or being in service-focused industries to help, and then that of course relates to Covid in terms of that disparate impact that this pandemic has had on those in the health field who are predominantly people of color.

Heather McCambly:

I'm going to thank Portland Community College, where I graduated with my first postsecondary credential; got my associate's there for setting off on the career that has led me here to talk to you, which has been lovely.

Lorenzo Baber:

Yeah, I want to give a shout-out to my grandmother Alice Baber Banks. She's a community college grad, single mother with five children who found a new life at a community college and has been thankful ever since. And certainly that was a multi-generational effect on our family, so shout-out to Grandma for your success from that point.

Heather McCambly:

Thanks so much, Lorenzo, for joining me today on Democracy's College.

Lorenzo Baber:

All right, take care.