



LEADERSHIP
INSTITUTE
FOR
TOMORROW

YOUR VOICE

ISSUE #5 • DECEMBER 2024



THE TRANSFORMATION
OF SAN DIEGO CCD'S
PETER MAHARAJ



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.

I have always believed that community colleges are catalysts for life-transforming work – work that is not only profoundly inspiring but also richly rewarding. In this issue, we amplify the voices behind remarkable stories of transformation that serve as a powerful reminder that each of us carries a story of change within us.

These stories invite us to look deeply into our own journeys, reflect on the paths we have traveled, and remember the moments that transcend our individual experiences to touch something greater.

Anthony Blacksher's poem *Sanctuary* is a heartfelt ode to a campus that serves as a sanctuary of hope and transformation, a place where the city meets the sea and lives are reborn. It celebrates the beauty of shared spaces where memories take root and resilience blooms. Through stories of students reflecting identity and strength, he reminds us of the power of education to nurture bold, beautiful scholars and

to change lives in ways that echo beyond the walls of the campus.

David Crockett gives us his journey through resilience, discovery, and transformation. Set against the rugged backdrop of Matewan in southern West Virginia, he paints a vivid portrait of a life shaped by coal mines, a bustling household of thirteen siblings, and the pursuit of education as a means of escape and empowerment. There is a lot more, so prepare to be inspired by a tale of perseverance, community, and the indomitable will to rise all the way to a community college trusteeship.

You will be moved by a student, **Cody Jarvis**, with his reflections that transform hardship into hope, and struggle into success. Navigating a turbulent childhood marked by poverty, foster care, and frequent upheaval was only the prelude to more chaos. Embracing the opportunities at Cabrillo College in Santa Cruz County, his journey is a testament to the transformative power of a

community college education. Cody reminds us once again that strength is born from adversity, and community colleges can be a launching pad for dreams.

Annette Letcher was my doctoral student some years ago. But her story of transformation shows me that we certainly are all capable of becoming more than meets the eye. It is a story of profound growth and the impact of mentorship and community. As a faculty member, the intersections of teaching, learning, and relationship resonate with me. Anette not only gave us a story of personal change, but is also a celebration of the rippling effect we have on one another as we teach and are taught – and as we mentor and are mentored.

Prepare to embark on a narrative that invites you to reflect on the transformative power of perseverance, passion, and purpose. **Peter Maharaj's** story began in Trinidad and Tobago, then the United States, and most recently to Nepal. What unfolds is a testament to adaptability and resilience, from a humble start as a student worker at Long Beach City College to leadership roles that revolutionized technology. The community colleges he highlights stand as beacons of opportunity for countless transformations.

Menglu Xiao's story is the personification of the immigrant experience that mirrors the dreams and trials of countless others who leave behind one life to build another. Born into survival mode in China and labeled a “bad student,” Menglu fought against a tide of adversity. From learning a new language to finding her voice, from overcoming low self-esteem to confronting health challenges, her paths traveled reflect the universal immigrant narrative; the relentless pursuit of a better future, not just for oneself but for others.

Lastly, in our Best Practice Column, **George Parker** tackles one of the most urgent and overlooked challenges in higher education: the systemic burdens placed on student affairs professionals of color. Based on his own study conducted, and as a student affairs professional of color himself, Dr. Parker's recommendations go beyond addressing burnout; they confront the deeper issue of “burn through” – a term that shifts the focus from individual self-care to institution responsibility. This piece is a must-read for anyone dedicated to building a more inclusive, supportive, and sustainable future in the community colleges.



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Sanctuary

BY PROF. ANTHONY BLACKSHER, PH.D.

Department Chair for Sociology and Ethnic Studies
San Bernardino Valley College

*This is not paradise
Never was it supposed to be
Was always supposed to be, and still is, the
First place out of exodus
Less oasis and more refuge
Use this campus as a sanctuary between the city and the sea
See how the skylight reflects off the student union
Wavy apparitions dancing in the summer underneath the library's windows
Gardens in the park
Theater after dark
Fields
Quads
Offices
Classrooms
See how we transform these spaces into congregations*

*When we aren't home
This is where our heart is
Where memories live like roots
Growing themselves deep into the land
We story-tell these flowers
Blooming our scholars beautiful and bold
I know a student named Patrice
Three daughters
Cal-Works
Domestic abuse
Divorce
Her first social media update in four years was a picture of her graduation
Devlon is an Ethnic Studies major
Was never comfortable in his voice
Until his professor asked him to read DuBois
and Royce
Started in a trade
Turned bachelors
Turned doctorate
Now gives away more money than he makes*

*How many social workers have come through this place
How many nurses saved lives because of this place
How many people walked out of a prison cell and into a classroom at this place
A community college in the middle of the valley
Is an entire institution making the world a better place, but
This work ain't for the fearful*

*This ain't for the people who live in contentment
This place is for the fighters
For those who love furiously and those who study mercilessly
Laborers and the wanderers
Students sitting in class
Trying to connect course objectives to their ancestors' dreams*

*Sometimes...
I think I don't belong in this space
When frustration
Hurt
Anxiety
And sadness leave the last of me broken
How do I hold on to the hope
In the midst of the no's
To know the sorrow of an undocumented student who can't apply for scholarships
1.8 GPA who needs to submit a paper just a day late to get off academic probation
Disproportionate statistics of Black student success rates
Young women who are one meal away from a passing grade or walking the blades
Constant stress
Never ending email threads
Exhaustion of excessive regulation
Frustration of red-tape that magically fades when we see the commencement smiles*

*This place ain't for conforming
It is a place for sharing stories of past journeys
For speaking dreams into reality
Never forgetting our past
Never losing hope in the future*

*This is the most beautiful place in the world
But this is not paradise
Never was it supposed to be
This campus
An oasis between the desert and the sea
Was always supposed to be, and still is,*

Sanctuary



Anthony Blacksher, is a poet, professor, and vinyl record collector while serving as the department chair for sociology and ethnic studies at San Bernardino Valley College. He holds a doctorate in cultural studies from Claremont Graduate University and a master's in sociological practices from California State University, San Marcos.

Dr. Blacksher has co-authored articles on spoken word poetry, hip hop, and racial justice, and serves on the statewide training team for the [Puente Program](#). He is a publisher of the [San Diego Poetry Annual](#), sits on the board of the [San Diego Entertainment + Artists Guild](#), and has led the [San Diego Poetry Slam](#) team in five national tournaments. He is a member of the performance collective [bkSoul](#), exploring themes of social justice and liberation, and enjoys collecting soulful vinyl records with big bass lines.

My Journey from W.Va. to Public Service



DAVID CROCKETT

*Trustee, Rancho Santiago
Community College District
Santa Ana*

In November, David Crockett was reelected as trustee for Rancho Santiago Community College District Area 5 in central Orange County.

My story begins in the coal-laden hills of Matewan, West Virginia, a small town steeped in history as the home of the Hatfield-McCoy feud.

Growing up in a family of 13 children, with a coal miner father and a homemaker mother, life was challenging yet rich in lessons about hard work, sacrifice, and community. Education was the cornerstone of our household. While my father endured grueling days underground, my mother managed the bustling household with discipline and determination.

I attended Matewan High School, where my graduating class numbered only about 40 students. Alongside studies, I was also dually enrolled at the local community college, building a foundation for my future. It was during my 11th- and 12th-grade years, I participated in the Close-Up Washington, D.C., program. That's when my passion for public service took root. The experience of traveling from Matewan to the nation's capital awakened a love for politics and civic engagement that would shape the rest of my life.

After a summer session at West Virginia State College, my academic journey led me to West Virginia University. I finally escaped, and it was an adventure full of friendships that expanded my view of the world, connecting me with peers from urban centers. Most vivid memories were studying, cheering on the Mountaineers, epic house parties and pledging Alpha Phi Alpha introduced lifelong bonds and memorable events, such as Greek picnic in Philadelphia and annual Labor Day trips to Virginia Beach.

One trip to Virginia Beach in 1989, however, became a pivotal moment. The Greekfest riots on Labor Day left me stranded with no cell phone.

(The riots and aftermath resulted in 650 arrests, including many Black students and other visitors who were later released, and more than \$1 million in damage. The Virginia National Guard responded, and the governor declared a state of emergency.)

With the help of my cousin at Hampton University in Virginia, I finally made it home after five days of being stranded, but the experience opened my eyes to questions of belonging and acceptance in America. For years afterward, I avoided certain areas, not feeling welcome.

After graduating from WVU with a degree in English, I began my professional career at American Express, climbing the ranks from customer service representative to a training department role. I think the management team recognized natural leadership skills and commitment to helping others navigate challenges which became the foundation of my career in healthcare and education. Over the years, I developed expertise in provider relations, compliance, and staff development, excelling in roles across multiple organizations.

In 2020, amid a global pandemic and national reckoning with inequality, I decided to stop talking and start walking, raising my passion for service to the next level. After careful deliberations about where my efforts would most benefit the community, I chose to run for Rancho Santiago Community College District trustee.

I have a deep appreciation for the outstanding work and community support provided by California's college districts. Our colleges are partnering with high schools, plus business and industry, reducing debt for students and building pathways to the middle class. This commitment inspired me to run for my local board. By focusing my campaign on strengthening vocational training and ensuring affordable, high-quality education, I was elected.

Back then, I was one of only five elected Black officials in Orange County, and the sole representative in higher education. Today, after winning reelection, I see myself and this role as a continuation of my family's legacy of service as I look forward to my next term. Connecting with people and using my "superpower"—has been key to success. Whether engaging with constituents or collaborating with colleagues, I lead with empathy and an inclusive spirit.

Continued on page 13...

Drifting Student Becomes Campus Leader



CODY JARVIS

*Sophomore,
Cabrillo College
Aptos*

Throughout my life I have faced adversity, but each time I've overcome it.

I grew up in Santa Cruz, in a socioeconomically challenged household with parents who struggled with alcoholism. There were times when we didn't know if there would be food on the table, and I often had to care for my mother when my father was in the hospital.

Without a sense of community during those difficult times, I entered the foster care system at 12. I lived in a group home where, at times, I was left alone for hours after school.

After a few months, I moved in with relatives in Scotts Valley, about 30 miles from San José. It was a part of my family I had never met, and I later lived in the home of a sheriff's deputy. This period also brought my fourth school in four years. But during these changes, I discovered a community in the form of family, friends, and mentors who supported me through every challenge.

I learned to advocate for myself, and after nearly two years in the system, I was able to reunite with my parents.

High school came with its own struggles. At the start of my senior year, I was informed that to graduate I needed to complete credit recovery for two classes, and apply to four-year universities. I tackled this head-on, finishing the work in less than two months. But another reality set in when my parents told me they couldn't afford to send me to a four-year school, so I enrolled at Cabrillo College in Aptos instead.

Initially, I felt the stigma associated with attending a community college. To overcome this, I decided to get involved and make a difference. I became a senator with the Cabrillo College Student Senate, and I was appointed as a delegate to Region IV of the Student Senate for California Community Colleges, known as SSSCC.

I became a vocal advocate for accountability and lobbied for Cal Grant reform in five lawmakers' offices in less than two months. Now in my second year of college, I serve as the student trustee of Cabrillo College and the treasurer for SSSCC Region IV.

I have also found a community and a strong support system among student leaders and staff who genuinely care about one another. This support helped me thrive both academically and professionally.

I am a second-year student majoring in political science, with a career aspiration of continuing to serve my community through policymaking. I plan to transfer to a four-year university by the start of fall 2025, to the University of Nevada, Las Vegas; or to Fort Lewis College in Colorado, where I have already been accepted; or potentially to Northern Arizona University in Flagstaff.

Research shows that 97% of former foster youth do not pursue higher education, so I have already beaten those odds. My experiences have shaped me into a person who refuses to be defined by circumstances. They have transformed me into a leader who approaches each challenge with determination and optimism.

I've learned that true growth comes from embracing every struggle as an opportunity to become stronger, both in politics and in life. This made me more committed than ever toward working for a more equitable California community college system that supports all students in achieving their dreams and educational goals.

Transformation Takes Professor Higher



ANNETTE LETCHER, Ed.D.

*English Department
Cypress College*

When I think about my transformative journey, I am reminded of a children's toy I purchased for my oldest son many years ago.

The transformers were robots able to morph into everyday vehicles or mechanical items. "The Transformers: More than meets the eye" was the catch phrase, and this in a way chronicles my own transformative journey.

As I have journeyed through my academic career, I have had the pleasure of transformation at every juncture, from interactions with students, professors, colleagues, and mentors – all of whom have changed the way I teach, think, and interact in the world.

My journey began some 14 years ago with the start of my teaching career as adjunct faculty in the community college system. Armed only with a syllabus, textbook, and a key to the classroom, I set about to transform the lives of students.

I was fortunate enough to have a department coordinator who greatly impacted my teaching and learning. She saw in me what I did not see in myself and was able to identify and nurture the innate talent and abilities that I possessed. I flourished, and as a result I was given many opportunities to teach at several community colleges, developing my skills as an instructor.

In the interim of changing student lives I embarked on the next leg of my journey. I was introduced to an Ed.D. program at California State University, Fullerton. Little did I know that enrollment in this program would be a

catalyst for change and would transform me from a reserved, quiet, and unassuming individual to a confident, self-assured, and competent educational professional.

The knowledge acquired in this program contributed to my growth as an individual and to the development of my leadership skills.

Cal State Fullerton professors and colleagues in the program were instrumental in providing support and mentorship during challenging times, and they frequently admonished me to "trust the process."

Today, I am in my eighth year as full-time professor of English at Cypress College in Orange County. I mentor and teach for the Cypress College Legacy program, a learning community that provides a strong academic program, instructional resources, and motivational support to prepare African American students for transfer to four-year institutions.

Additionally, I have served for the past six years as a diversity and inclusion faculty fellow for the North Orange County Community College District in the Office of Diversity, Culture, and Inclusion.

In this position I help to facilitate the Future Instructor Training Program, designed to train future faculty to teach in fields that have traditionally been under-represented as well as to increase the pool of candidates from diverse backgrounds. I also design workshops for the Pluralism, Equity, and Inclusion Series, and the Curriculum Transformation Seminar.

Indeed, teaching in a community college has transformed me beyond what I could ever have imagined. With the aid of students, professors, colleagues, and mentors, this transformation is truly more than meets the eye.

Trinidad to San Diego, via Mount Everest



PETER MAHARAJ, Ed.D.

*Associate Vice Chancellor,
Information Technology Services
San Diego Community College
District*

Peter recently returned from a visit to the Mount Everest area in Nepal. Portions of this article were written from the base camp at 17,500 feet above sea level.

My journey at age 20 from Trinidad and Tobago to the United States in 1997 has been one of transformation, resilience, and growth. I emigrated to study chemical engineering, but life had other plans.

I soon discovered my passion for information technology, web, and database development, and this new path has led me on an extraordinary journey across California's educational landscape.

It all began when I took my first job as a Long Beach City College student worker. With minimal technical experience, I had to quickly learn how to support faculty with their hardware and software needs.

That early role taught me adaptability, perseverance, and the value of hard work. The skills I acquired led to my first full-time position as technical manager at Long Beach City College, where I helped introduce the college's first student email system, expand wireless services, and enhance the network infrastructure. These experiences helped me realize how technology could empower not only institutions but students as well.

I pursued my information systems undergraduate degree with a computer science minor at Cal State Long Beach. Shortly after, I moved to Cal State Los Angeles as a security analyst, overseeing security governance and technology forensics.

Throughout my career I have been fortunate to work alongside some incredible mentors who shaped my understanding of leadership and education's power to transform lives. They and others profoundly impacted my professional journey, teaching me the importance of educational equity and technological innovation.

One of the most significant milestones in my life came when I fulfilled my long-held dream of earning an MBA from the University of California, Irvine, and in 2020 a doctoral degree from the University of Southern California, studying technology leadership with an emphasis on data and predication models. These achievements resulted from years of persistence,

determination, and the unwavering support of my family.

I vividly recall my first visit to UC Irvine in 1997, where I felt an immediate sense of belonging. Every footstep I took while walking there felt like I was breathing in new knowledge, inspired to change the world I live in.

I was fortunate to attend UCI in 2014 and proudly graduated in 2016.

At USC, I had the privilege of learning under exceptional faculty members. Their guidance pushed me to develop a growth mindset, continuously learn, and strive to support others in their transformative journeys — Fight On.

Today, as I help lead technology initiatives at the San Diego Community College District, I am more committed than ever to the mission of community colleges.

The rewards are immense for those who choose to work within the community college system. You can directly shape the future of higher education, influence policy, and improve the world by making education accessible to all.

Each day brings the chance to positively impact students' lives, whether by helping them navigate their academic journey, introducing new technologies, or supporting programs that promote equity and inclusion. Our work is deeply fulfilling because it goes beyond the classroom — it extends into our communities, shaping the future of society itself.

At San Diego, we are at the forefront of this transformation. We are proud to be the first community college district in the nation connected to the National Research Platform, opening new opportunities for artificial intelligence, educational equity, and innovation. In collaboration with UC San Diego, San Diego State University, and Riverside Community College District, we are pioneering a future where technology empowers all students, ensuring California remains a leader in educational excellence.

Beyond my professional life, my experience as cycling manager and coach representing Trinidad and Tobago in track cycling at the 2012 London Olympics has taught me the value of discipline, perseverance, and focus. These traits have guided me as an athlete and a higher-education leader.

Through all these experiences, I have learned that success is not a straight path but a series of turns that, when navigated with resilience, passion, and the support of others, can lead to extraordinary transformations.

I hope my journey serves as a reminder that no matter where you begin, with perseverance, you can achieve incredible things and positively change the world.

Her B.A. Lies at End of Road Less Traveled



MENGLU XIAO

*Junior
Cal State Long Beach*

Before moving to Minnesota from China in 2019, I was living in survival mode for 25 years.

During elementary and middle school in China, I struggled to balance school and life due to my mother's abandonment, which resulted in poor grades in school. I was also being labeled as a bad student.

After graduating from middle school, I was sent to a vocational high school to study hotel room service. While all my friends pored through schoolbooks for hours to pursue something bigger, I was learning how to fold sheets and pour wine without spilling.

I eventually dropped out of that school when I was 17. My life felt like it was on pause from that point on. I worked many jobs to sustain my life, but in reality I wasn't living – I was simply surviving. However, the dream of becoming a therapist burned inside me, and I was waiting for a chance to be reborn.

I wanted to break free from my chaotic upbringing and become a therapist to help people who had experiences similar to mine. I wanted to do something for others, as I wished someone had done for me.

Eventually, I met and married an American from Minnesota. I spoke only Mandarin at the time.

After a few months in Minnesota, my husband and I moved to California. I decided to restart my life, and he was the only person who believed in me.

Together, we made a seven-year plan to get my bachelor's degree in social work. I spent the first two and

a half years taking ESL classes to learn English, the next two and a half years completing GE classes in community college with a focus on psychology, and the final two years at Cal State Long Beach to study social work.

When I applied to universities in 2023, one of the essay questions at UC Irvine asked me to describe my biggest challenge in community college. I realized that my biggest challenge wasn't a specific event; rather, I struggled with low self-esteem and my lack of self-confidence.

One day after class, my ESL professor told me that she appreciated my writing. She offered me the opportunity to skip ESL 80 go directly to ESL 90. I remember I almost cried, and I bowed to her many times because it was the first time someone had recognized my potential. I became even more determined.

While I was taking abnormal psychology in summer 2022, I found out that I had abnormal cells in my cervix. The cells were growing so quickly that I was on the verge of developing cervical cancer. However, after my procedure, I didn't dare take a break from school because this was a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. Nothing could prevent me from fighting for myself, and I refused to take for granted the opportunity to get an education. (Today my cell tests are normal.)

Last year, I applied to three universities, and in the spring of 2024, I was accepted by all three. I graduated from Irvine Valley College summa cum laude and I am now a junior at Cal State Long Beach, hoping for graduation in June 2026.

Today, I can finally introduce myself as a social work student, aiming for a master's degree, a state license and perhaps private practice.

Education has truly given me a second chance at life, and I believe in the power of a second chance.



BEST PRACTICE COLUMN

Burning Through Oppression

GEORGE PARKER, Ed.D.

*Coordinator, Black Legacy Achievement Center of Knowledge
Santiago Canyon College
Orange*

The demands on student affairs professionals, especially those from marginalized communities, have evolved rapidly, making it increasingly difficult to support students effectively.

Professionals of color bear a heavier burden, often expected to play multiple roles for students, including life coach, academic advisor, and financial aid provider. This expectation to be all things to all students without sufficient institutional support leads to what had been described as being “burned through” rather than merely “burned out.”

“Burned through” refers to systemic emotional and institutional burdens placed on professionals of color, where they are expected to take on more responsibilities without the capacity to effect positive change. Unlike burnout, which implies the individual should engage in self-care, burn through shifts the responsibility to the institution, highlighting leadership’s role in perpetuating these challenges.

The notion of burn through forces a recognition that the problem lies with the institution, not the individual. However, professionals of color are frequently exploited with excessive workloads, impossible expectations, and minimal compensation. The issue is not merely individual endurance, but systemic exploitation. Higher education must address this by creating environments where professionals of color can thrive.

While some argue that higher education has already made strides in this area, much of it is performative rather than substantial. In “Pedagogy Of The Oppressed,” (Continuum, 1968) the Brazilian educator Paulo Freire emphasizes the need for both the oppressed and oppressors to reflect on systemic issues, such as the burn-out versus burn-through dichotomy, to effect real change.

Three recommendations are proposed to address these issues. First, institutions should allow employees at least one remote day per week, providing space to balance work with personal well-being.

Second, institutions should create a distinct professional development track that offers real opportunities for advancement, particularly for professionals of color, empowering them to impact campus-wide change.

Finally, the concept of self-care should be abolished in favor of holding institutional leadership accountable for the working conditions and morale of student affairs staff. By implementing these recommendations, higher education can begin to correct the imbalance and support professionals of color more effectively, enabling them to excel in their roles without exploitation.

David Crockett's Recommendations:

...Continued from page 7

As a trustee, I remain grounded by the support of my wife, family, and friends while reflecting on my father's advice to "Do Something – Be Great."

For those considering public office, I recommend:

- **Plan your campaign carefully:** Build a strategy that connects with diverse audiences.
- **Understand your community:** Tailor your approach to the unique attitudes and values of your constituency.

• **Cultivate inclusivity:** Make people feel welcome and valued, which builds trust and support.

• **Demonstrate your value:** Show how you can contribute meaningfully and then take the leap.

My journey, over 4,500 miles, from Matewan to Orange County exemplifies the power of resilience, education, and commitment to service.

Regardless of where you begin, you can rise to make a difference.

P U B L I C A T I O N

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

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

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