

# ‘Everyone Will Shine’ — Unapologetic Rules of the Road for Higher-Ed Partnerships

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# 'Everyone Will Shine'

*Keith Curry is the president of Compton College and CEO of the Compton Community College District in California. He co-founded and chaired Black Student Success Week. He currently serves as chair of both the National Panel on Black Student Enrollment and the Black Student Enrollment Expert Advisory Committee.*



Keith Curry, president of Compton College, speaks at his college's commencement.  
Photo credit: Compton College

In my career in higher education, I have found that developing and maintaining relationships and partnerships to improve student outcomes at Compton College is difficult. And, at the same time, it is the most rewarding work of my career. It is important to know and understand that “everyone will shine.” Not one person or organization is bigger than the other.

I’m about to share with you my Rules of the Road, a roadmap to [Unapologetic Leadership](#) as it relates to partnerships. I believe institutions of higher education should establish and maintain robust cross-sectoral partnerships with K-12 schools, work-force development boards, and public-housing, criminal-justice, and public-health agencies to help all students access college however and whenever they need it.

All higher-education leaders understand serving our communities, but we have the chance to think bigger and bolder now than ever before. This is an exciting time for us to push the boundaries, think outside the box, and dare to “freedom dream” -- historian Robin D.G. Kelley’s invitation to imagine an educational space grounded in racial equity, social justice, and collective liberation.

Let me explain what I mean.

At Compton College, we have forged groundbreaking partnerships that have set us apart. These include agreements with the Los Angeles County Department of Public Social Services regarding CalFresh/SNAP and with our local K-12 districts and neighboring four-year colleges and

universities. We’re also part of the Compton Community Health Professions Partnership, which includes Compton Unified School District, neighboring colleges, the County of Los Angeles, and two health-care community organizations. These partnerships are a reimagining of how we can serve our communities. In a time when many are questioning the value of higher education, we can become so much more than the college or university in town — we can become a part of the very fabric of our communities.

The history of Compton College provides an apt example of the power of building bridges within your community. Compton was the first community college in California that saw its accreditation revoked. Ours is a [story of redemption](#) — we achieved accreditation again on June 7, 2017. But it took years to get there. We had to rebuild relations carefully and thoughtfully with our local partners. To do this, we had to go back to the basics: simple introductions with different agencies in our area.

In some cases, the leaders of those agencies would not meet with me, and I had to swallow my pride. When no one is dialoguing, no one is shining.

For those who were open to talking, it was still an uphill battle. I had to rebuild the relationship, follow through on what I said I was going to do, keep the lines of communication open, and, most importantly, get to know my partners.

Getting your foot in the door is just the first step, because, honestly, there are

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Curry greets students before they graduate from Compton College.  
Photo credit: Compton College

many ways relationships can go south. I think back to when others were trying to establish relationships with me or Compton College, and I realize that those early days meant a lot. When I am starting a new partnership, I put in more effort than ever. I study the organization to understand who is responsible for what and make sure I build a genuine relationship with the point of contact. Once the relationship is established and we trust each other, I make sure to introduce the partner to key individuals within our organization. I am very protective of this, because I want to

make sure our institution has the right decision-makers in meetings. The worst feeling in partnership meetings is when the people at the table can't make a key decision at that moment. That could push back an important initiative in that partnership.

Once you have the right individuals involved, you have to figure out how to sustain the work and the relationship. When I think of sustainability, I think about how the partnership will continue through transitions. I am a firm believer that partnership — meeting agendas and minutes should be kept from the beginning

of the partnership. A Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) should be developed to outline the roles and responsibilities of each organization. When individuals transition from the organization, they provide status reports on the partnership and important dates and deadlines.

The MOU should also have a built-in evaluation plan and a list of people responsible for evaluating the intended outcomes of the partnership. I know some might shy away from assessing and the time that is associated with it, but it must be done. I have been involved in a partnership that was not meeting certain goals and objectives, and individuals weren't committed to participating in meetings; we quietly ended the partnership. Frankly, if a partnership is not working, it is OK to go in a different direction, as long as the decision is mutual and communicated to all partners.

It is also important to celebrate the accomplishments of the shared work; once the partnership has been established, a joint press release should be sent out to celebrate the coming together of organizations for the greater good. This is an easy way to generate good will and hold everyone accountable for their work. If you receive funding through this partnership, share that information. If the partnership has outcomes that will be achieved over a certain amount of time, share that as well. Partners

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must be celebrated because the shine of all that you can collaboratively accomplish will keep you engaged. There may be difficult times, and then you will need to draw on the camaraderie that you built.

I want to share some of my recommendations for partnerships.

- **Understand Our Own Experience:** Educational and professional backgrounds influence our decisions. It is important in partnerships to have a clear understanding of partners' experiences.
- **Seek Knowledge:** All the partners need to understand the data and research, read important reports and documents prior to the meetings, ask the right questions during the meetings, and, if they don't know the answer, ask for clarification.
- **Have a Clear Vision:** Develop a vision for the partnership's future collectively and assess that vision.
- **Build Support:** Identify individuals to work with you who will be involved in the development and maintain their involvement in the work.
- **Stay Focused:** Make sure the partnership remains focused on its intended outcomes.
- **Use Data to Support Decision-Making:** Ensure the partnership doesn't make decisions on the fly that affect student success.
- **Build Capacity:** Ensure everyone is aware of what is going on with the partnership. Most importantly, ensure someone owns all files and that responsibilities are clearly understood.
- **Seize Opportunity:** Seize the moment and recognize the opportunities that will transform our communities through coming together in partnership.
- **Never Give Up:** Once you start something, don't give it up (unless the data doesn't support the work).

- **Know When to Hold Back:** Know when not to implement projects so that the partnership remains focused on the vision.
- **Respond to Criticism:** It is always okay to take a step back and breathe before responding. I never let this work stress me out too much.
- **Be Kind:** Say “please and thank you” to everyone and show genuine appreciation for the partnership work.

Compton College is a redemption story built on partnerships. For example, this past year, over 120 high-school students participated in our commencement ceremony through our dual-enrollment partnerships. Now, we can proudly say that Compton College has achieved a historical accomplishment, as 30 percent of our total

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enrollment is dual enrollment high-school students. We will continue to nurture these relationships with our high schools to educate our community with care, kindness, and unapologetic leadership.

Partnerships should be seen as a journey. They take a lot of work and time, but the reward of coming together for the greater good in service to our communities is what matters the most. Compton College has been through hell and back. But we did it — and it is truly thanks to our dedication to our partners in finding mutually beneficial strategies and outcomes that we were able to make this happen.

*‘Everyone Will Shine’ — Unapologetic Rules of the Road for Higher-Ed Partnerships*  
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1255 23<sup>rd</sup> Street, N.W.  
Washington, D.C. 20037  
202 466 1000 | [Chronicle.com](https://www.chronicle.com)