



KEY TAKEAWAYS

Unapologetically Working for Change: Moving Forward to the Future



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Unapologetically Working for Change: Moving Forward to the Future

Key Takeaways From a Virtual Forum
Presented by *The Chronicle* and Ascendium

HOST



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SPEAKERS



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It's been a whirlwind start to 2025 in higher education. President Donald Trump issued a series of executive orders after his inauguration that could affect colleges and universities. Institutions' long-term enrollment and financial concerns persist, and Americans of all political persuasions have lost confidence in higher ed.

Despite these challenges, Compton College president Keith Curry says academe has “the chance to think bigger and bolder now than ever before.” Curry has led his California-based public community college since 2017. He helped it regain the accreditation it lost in 2006, beleaguered by financial issues and administrative controversies.

Ian Wilhelm, a *Chronicle* deputy managing editor, sat down with Curry on January 23 for a virtual forum, “Unapologetically Working for Change: Moving Forward to the Future,” to discuss the issues facing campus leaders and how colleges can focus on their social-mobility mission. The conversation also included Sophie Nguyen, a senior policy manager with the higher-education team at New America, who leads the think tank’s annual surveys on how Americans perceive colleges’ value, funding, and accountability. The following comments, edited for clarity and length, represent key takeaways from the forum. To hear the full discussion, watch the recorded webinar [here](#).

IAN WILHELM: Keith, what do you mean when you talk about being an “[unapologetic leader](#)” at this time?

KEITH CURRY: It’s not that I don’t listen to other people. It’s important to listen to all perspectives but also express no regret about making the right decisions to support student success. Sometimes you might make people upset with decisions you make.

WILHELM: Give us a sense of Compton College, for those unfamiliar with it, and the strategic planning you’ve been doing for 2035.

CURRY: Compton College is the 114th California community college. In 2006, it became the first community college in the history of the state to have its accreditation revoked. We had to enter a partnership with another community-college district. We became accredited in 2017. In 2018, we had our first commencement ceremony. In 2019, our partnership with that other community college ended.

We’ve seen what it looks like to have people questioning whether a degree or certificate from our institution actually matters. I know what it feels like to rebuild an institution in the community I’m from. When I think about our Compton 2035 strategic plan, it’s about what type of academic programs and services we’ll provide. It’s about being focused on one singular goal — to accelerate student completion while advancing success and equity.

One of my concerns about higher education is that everybody wants us to do everything, but we can’t do it all well. In 2017, we redid our educational master plan, which includes our facilities plan, and we included student housing. People questioned whether it would happen.

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On January 17th, we had a groundbreaking ceremony for an \$80.3-million student-housing facility with 251 beds. For 2035, we're focused on health care. Use your strategic plan as a guide, to be focused, but also to realize you can't do it all.

WILHELM: We're hearing more and more about "prioritization" in higher ed, given financial and enrollment pressures. It's not always easy, but it seems like a watchword for all of academe.

CURRY: Yes. "Sustainability," too. Are we able to sustain grants, look to future grants, and ensure that — when grant funds are no longer available — we're able to institutionalize services? Compton College students receive at least one free meal per day from our cafeteria. That started with Covid-era funding from the federal government, but we've been able to sustain it. Often, in our community, you see things start, but we're not able to sustain them.

WILHELM: Your strategic plan includes a focus on "equity-mindedness," but the Trump administration is going after diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts, including through executive orders. You're in California, with a Democratic governor, but how do you feel about this new environment?

CURRY: Some people in California also believe certain DEI programs and services shouldn't be offered. They're supportive of some of these executive orders. I'm mindful of different perspectives and having conversations to understand people's views, but our student population is students of color, and they haven't gotten enough attention to be successful.

How do we create programs and services open to everyone but also look at disaggregated data from a racial-equity perspective to find out where the gaps are for different ethnic groups? On our campus, we created a program for Black males and males of color among our students. We have a director providing social and academic programming for them, but it's open to everybody. I don't believe in programs that are just for 30 or 60 students. I don't believe in boutique programs.

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WILHELM: Do you have examples of how you've approached prioritization, including saying no to things?

CURRY: When certain people say, "You need this program," I've been able to say no based on data. I'm into establishing processes, policies, systems, and structures for equity work, which can be the basis of saying no. We had a call center for two years and noticed, through data, that it wasn't effective.

WILHELM: *The Chronicle* has been reporting on declining public confidence in higher ed, and Sophie Nguyen, you've thought a lot about that at New America. You and your colleague Kevin Carey wrote a piece for us in October titled "[Americans Have Not Turned Against Higher Ed](#)." You wrote that journalism about the issue is often "getting the story wrong. The polling data that form the basis for the narrative of college declinism is far more limited and nuanced than this framing suggests. Much of the data doesn't actually measure changes over time. News accounts routinely confuse people's attitudes toward colleges as political and cultural institutions with their desire to attend college or to send their children there." What do you think is really going on?

SOPHIE NGUYEN: In 2023, Gallup released new numbers showing a huge decline in confidence — and a widening partisan gap on the issue. The media latched onto that data. At New America, what we've found in public-opinion surveys we've done is that Americans' opinions are more complex than one number in a Gallup survey suggests.

What we see in our surveys is that even when Americans say they're unhappy with how things are going in higher ed, a majority still want their children to have some education after high school — and for state governments to fund higher ed to make it more affordable. People talk about loss of confidence as a cause of enrollment decline, but that decline is impacted by other factors, including demographics and the economy.

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WILHELM: Keith, do you see evidence of declining confidence in your community — or perhaps how opinions of individual colleges differ from views of higher ed overall?

CURRY: Individuals have perceptions — some positive and some negative — but they know Compton College exists, which is positive. I’m conscious of making sure people have a positive experience with any program or service on campus. We want individuals out in the community saying, “This is a good institution, and here’s what it did for me.”

NGUYEN: You’ve got to show that you provide quality for your students and your communities. In our surveys in the past five years, we’ve almost always seen fewer people say colleges have a positive impact on the country compared to on their local communities. We also tend to see the mainstream media portray the Ivy League and public flagships as if they’re the only higher-ed institutions in the country.

WILHELM: Keith, I recently heard a college leader argue that part of the issue is that the Ivies see themselves as separate from the rest of higher ed. Do colleges need to make more of an effort to speak with one voice? Is that even possible?

CURRY: It’s possible, but some Ivy League and Tier 1 institutions need to recognize the rest of us aren’t just here when they need us. We’re not just here when they get a grant to work in a community like mine or send me a letter about how we need to join together to participate in something. They need to recognize we’re all partners in support of student success and to change public perceptions.

In this tiered system we have, students are being forgotten. How do you build a pipeline so students see it’s possible to go to the Ivy League and major in STEM — and faculty members who look like them come to their communities and show them what’s possible?

WILHELM: New America’s research suggests white Americans are more likely to say higher ed is having a negative impact on the way things are going in the country. What thoughts do you have on that, Sophie?

“A lot of perceptions about higher ed are driven largely by the partisan divide, and educational attainment is part of the reason for that.”

NGUYEN: We often see differences between white people and people of color on general perceptions of college's value. I don't have a particular explanation for why that may be the case. A trend we have seen over time is that the most dramatic difference is between people of different political ideologies — between Democrats and Republicans — as well as between white people without a bachelor's degree and white people with at least a bachelor's degree.

We saw this in the election that just happened. Even though our society has become more educated and the share of voters with at least a bachelor's degree has increased, white voters without a bachelor's degree still make up a plurality of the electorate. A lot of perceptions about higher ed are driven largely by the partisan divide, and educational attainment is part of the reason for that.

WILHELM: Keith, do you see potential for broad agreement and progress on work-force preparation such as apprenticeships?

CURRY: We need paid internships and apprenticeships, linked to academic programs and ultimately full-time employment. I do see this as an opportunity. We've got to make sure students are able to complete their degree or certificate, make livable wages, and buy a home in their community.