

Strategic Planning Dialogue Session #3 – October 29, 2024

Changing Landscape of the Community

Description

In this dialogue session, we will explore the transforming demographics, economic trends and social dynamics shaping our community college district. Harper College has already experienced major changes to the community it serves as evidenced by recent distinctions as a Hispanic Serving Institution (HSI) and an Asian American Native American Pacific Islander Serving Institution (AANAPISI). Who will be a part of the communities we serve in the next decade, what programs and services will they need, and which organizations will we identify as partners? Explore these topics and the important role Harper plays as a convener for our district during this session

Panel discussion – Question 1

How might changing family structures and living arrangements in our community impact student needs?

The discussion centered on how changing family structures and living arrangements affect student needs, particularly in community colleges. Several key points are made:

1. **Post-COVID Family Dynamics:** Many families have reverted to more collective living arrangements with older children, parents, and grandparents, creating multi-generational households. Immigrant families, particularly Latinos, often form similar multi-generational living arrangements due to cultural norms and financial needs.
2. **Impact on Students' Learning Environments:** Students from multi-generational households often face challenges such as limited personal space, weak internet connections, and overcrowded living conditions. For these students, community colleges become crucial as second homes where they can find quiet spaces, better internet access, and social support. These students often use campus as a place to study, eat, and access essential resources.
3. **Challenges Faced by Students:** Family structures in flux can lead to students balancing multiple responsibilities. Some students may be the breadwinners for their families, which can force them to juggle work and study. For students who are the primary English speakers in their families, they may also become the family's primary point of contact with external services, further complicating their educational journey.
4. **Role of Community Colleges:** Community colleges, such as Harper, are crucial in offering the flexibility that these students need. Unlike traditional universities where students often live away from home, community college students tend to have more complex, localized needs, including balancing family responsibilities with education. The flexibility in class schedules, support services, and campus resources plays a vital role in helping these students succeed.
5. **Diverse Student Populations:** Many students in adult education programs come from diverse backgrounds, including refugees and immigrants from countries such as Ukraine and Venezuela, who have experienced trauma and may be separated from extended family members. These students

often lack a local support network, making community colleges essential as they navigate both educational and personal challenges.

6. **Single-Parent Families and Young Students:** There's also a rise in single-parent families among the student population, with some students living alone or without strong familial support systems. This further highlights the need for community colleges to provide tailored resources and support services to accommodate a wide variety of family structures.

In conclusion, the changing family dynamics, including multi-generational households, single-parent families, and immigrant populations, have a significant impact on students' ability to succeed in education. Community colleges play an essential role in providing the necessary support and flexibility to meet these diverse needs.

Panel discussion – Question 2

What new partnerships should we be exploring to enhance our ability to serve our changing student population?

The discussion focuses on exploring partnerships to better serve the changing student population, with an emphasis on holistic support systems. Key points include:

1. **Evolving Nature of Partnerships:** The concept of partnerships is dynamic and constantly evolving. Colleges have become central hubs for community support, providing not just education but also essential services such as meals and mental health services. These partnerships help address the broader needs of students and families.
2. **Deepening Existing Partnerships:** Rather than creating entirely new partnerships, the focus should be on strengthening and deepening existing collaborations. This includes partnerships between K-12 districts, higher education institutions like Harper College, and community service agencies.
3. **Addressing the Whole Family:** The partnership approach should also focus on the educational development of parents. Many parents are still on their own educational journey and may benefit from access to job training and educational programs. Supporting parents helps improve the overall stability and advancement of the entire family, which in turn benefits students.
4. **Creating a One-Stop Shop for Services:** A critical need is for a centralized location where students and families can access various services—mental health, physical health, job training, and more. Rather than requiring individuals to navigate multiple locations, a one-stop shop can streamline access to these services, reducing barriers and making it easier for students and families to get the help they need.
5. **Adapting to Changing Needs:** The student population is increasingly diverse, with many newcomers, particularly refugees fleeing war zones. An influx of new students from different countries, some dealing with PTSD, adds complexity to the support needed. As the needs of these students evolve, partnerships must be adaptable to meet emerging challenges.
6. **Anchor Points for Support:** The role of schools and community colleges as anchor points for bringing together resources is emphasized. By partnering with community agencies and other local

institutions, educational systems can create a stronger support network, ensuring that students and families can access the services they need more efficiently and effectively.

In conclusion, the focus should be on building and strengthening partnerships that provide comprehensive support for students and their families, ensuring easier access to necessary services, and addressing the diverse and evolving needs of the student population.

Panel discussion – Question 3

How can we adapt our student support services to address evolving mental health needs and social challenges faced by our diverse student body?

The discussion focuses on adapting student support services to address evolving mental health needs and social challenges faced by a diverse student body. Key points include:

1. **Normalization and Awareness of Mental Health:** Mental health has often been stigmatized or overlooked. To address this, colleges should enhance communication efforts to normalize mental health discussions. Acknowledging mental health as a common issue will help reduce stigma and encourage students and staff to seek support.
2. **Increase Accessibility of Mental Health Services:** While many colleges may have mental health services available, these need to be more accessible. Harper College, for example, currently relies on external referrals through services like Hawks Care, but there's a need for deeper partnerships and more on-campus mental health support. Expanding mental health services on campus will improve access and reduce barriers for students who may not seek help due to the difficulties in navigating external services.
3. **Training Faculty and Staff:** It's essential for faculty and staff to be trained to recognize signs of mental health struggles in students, such as trauma or episodic challenges. This training will not only help identify students in need but will also allow faculty to recognize their own potential mental health issues, creating a supportive environment for both students and staff.
4. **Stress Management and Workshops:** Given the high levels of stress students face, offering stress management workshops is vital. These workshops can help students develop healthier coping strategies and normalize conversations about stress. Addressing stress early on can prevent it from escalating into more serious mental health concerns.
5. **Impact of Parental Stress on Students:** The Surgeon General recently noted that elevated stress levels among parents can hinder their ability to function, which may impact their academic success. Addressing mental health in student parents is crucial for overall success.
6. **Collaboration and Funding for Mental Health Services:** Effective mental health support requires collaboration across institutions, services, and community groups. Advocating for shared grant funding and resources is key to improving mental health access, especially since many mental health providers have waitlists and limited capacity.

In conclusion, adapting student support services to meet the mental health and social needs of students requires a multi-pronged approach that includes raising awareness, improving access to services,

providing training for staff, and fostering partnerships with mental health professionals and community organizations. Additionally, securing funding through grants will be essential to sustain these efforts and ensure comprehensive support for students and their families.

Panel discussion – Question 4

What role should our college play in addressing social issues such as income inequality, housing insecurity, or food insecurity among our student population?

Harper can play a key role in addressing social issues like income inequality, housing insecurity, and food insecurity among its student population through strategic partnerships and community engagement. Key points include:

1. **Leveraging Partnerships:** Harper cannot solve these complex issues alone but can work effectively with local organizations, community groups, and government bodies that already have the resources and expertise to address these needs. The college can act as a connector, guiding students in crisis toward available resources.
2. **Addressing Food Insecurity:** For food insecurity, Harper can partner with local townships, such as those in northwest suburban Cook County, to direct students in need to community food programs. The townships can provide immediate assistance to students who require food support.
3. **Tackling Housing Insecurity:** Housing insecurity presents a significant challenge, especially in suburban areas where rising housing prices can limit access for lower-income individuals. Harper College can advocate for more equitable housing policies by collaborating with local leaders, mayors, and developers. By raising awareness and participating in zoning discussions, the college can push for more affordable housing options in the community.
4. **Social Support Services:** The college can expand its social services offerings by partnering with community organizations like the Kenneth Young Center to provide broader social support, including counseling, housing assistance, and family outreach programs. By building these networks, Harper can address various social challenges that students face.
5. **Thinking Beyond the Immediate Crisis:** While addressing current needs is critical, Harper should also think long-term about future challenges. This includes preparing students for the workforce of the future by providing training for emerging industries. Offering career-focused education that anticipates job market trends over the next decade is part of a sustainable solution to addressing broader social challenges.
6. **Expanding Innovation and Technology Solutions:** Harper College can explore innovative solutions to help solve some of these issues, such as providing mobile hotspots for students who lack internet access or using technology to improve access to social services.

In summary, Harper's role in addressing these social issues lies in its ability to foster partnerships, provide immediate support through community resources, advocate for long-term systemic change, and prepare students for future opportunities.

Audience question #1

Harper used to have a site in our (Rolling Meadows) neighborhood resource center offering free ESL classes within our community. We need you back. Can we partner more for early introduction to college as a possibility for them (children) to see themselves here early on in life (by age 12)?

The discussion touches on several key areas where Harper College can further engage with the community, particularly in Rolling Meadows, and address local challenges:

1. **Rebuilding Community Presence:** There is a call for Harper to reconsider re-establishing programs in these community spaces, possibly through alternative funding sources to support ESL and other basic courses.
2. **Early College Introduction for Youth:** There is interest in partnering more with Harper to introduce younger students (around age 12) to the idea of college, helping them see themselves as future college students. This early exposure could create pathways for continued education and ensure that more youth view college as an achievable goal.
3. **Transportation Barriers:** Public transportation access is a significant issue for students, particularly since COVID-19.
4. **Hawks Care and Expanding Access:** Harper College's Hawks Care program, which provides student support services, is seen as a good start but needs expansion.

In summary, the community looks for Harper to increase its involvement in local neighborhoods through education programs and better transportation access, while also expanding support services to all students. The focus is on making education more accessible, providing early college introductions, and ensuring that essential support is available for all students.

Audience question #2

How can we move from food insecurity to food empowerment with our community partners?

The discussion focused on strategies to move from **food insecurity** to **food empowerment** for students and the broader community, with an emphasis on collaboration and creative solutions:

1. **Partnerships:** Building strong community partnerships is crucial. Harper College can collaborate with local organizations, such as food pantries, faith-based groups, and township services, to provide food security. Expanding these partnerships can enhance access to resources and avoid financial strain on the college itself.
2. **Encouraging Student Engagement:** Involving students in food justice initiatives empowers them to address food insecurity. By participating in food-related community projects, students not only gain practical experience but also contribute to shaping solutions, generating ideas that can be brought back to the administration.
3. **Food Pantry Expansion and Accessibility:** Establishing multiple food pantry locations on campus and ensuring they are easily accessible and stigma-free can provide immediate relief. In addition,

Harper can collaborate with organizations like the Greater Food Depository to avoid burdening the college's budget.

4. **Community Gardens:** Harper College could expand or introduce a community garden where students can grow their own food. This initiative would teach students about sustainability, food production, and empower them to take control of their food sources.
5. **SNAP Advocacy and Education:** Many students may not realize they are eligible for the **Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP)**. Educating students about how to apply for SNAP benefits and advocating for expanded eligibility could address the financial barriers that prevent them from accessing adequate food.
6. **Non-Traditional Funding Streams:** Leveraging creative funding methods, including grants, could help provide additional resources to address food insecurity. By partnering with local organizations and serving as a fiscal agent for grant funds, Harper College could access funding streams it might not typically qualify for.
7. **Addressing Underlying Causes:** It's essential to recognize that food insecurity is often a result of deeper financial issues, such as rising rent costs or medical bills. Addressing these root causes can help mitigate the factors driving food insecurity. Recognizing that food insecurity often stems from financial instability is important for creating sustainable solutions.
8. **Community Engagement in Long-Term Solutions:** The idea of holding a **Food Insecurity Summit** could bring together stakeholders like food distributors, nonprofits, food pantries, and educational institutions to brainstorm comprehensive solutions to the ongoing food insecurity crisis. This kind of initiative could put Harper College at the forefront of proactive efforts to tackle food insecurity before it becomes a crisis.

In summary, addressing food insecurity involves a combination of direct support, community partnerships, creative funding, and long-term policy advocacy. By engaging students in food justice work and providing resources like community gardens and expanded food pantries, Harper College can empower students to become active participants in solving food insecurity while also addressing the broader financial challenges that contribute to it.

Audience question #3

What recommendation would you have to better connect and partner on federal and funding opportunities to build capacity and connections between Harper and partners?

The recommendations for improving connections and partnerships to access **federal and state funding** opportunities for building capacity at Harper College and with its partners include:

1. **Breaking Down Silos:** One major barrier to accessing funding is that organizations are often working in isolated silos. There is a need for **cross-agency collaboration** to streamline access to resources.
2. **Forming Collaborative Bodies or Consortia:** To overcome silos, creating collaborative bodies or **consortia** could bring multiple stakeholders together to pool resources, share information, and

identify funding streams. While some grants may require specific entities to apply, there could still be value in creating a platform to exchange information and explore joint funding opportunities.

3. **Navigating Grant Processes:** Securing funding from federal or state sources often requires mastering the complex grant-writing process. Many smaller organizations lack dedicated staff or resources to navigate this, making the process a **capacity issue**. Pooling resources through a consortium could help share the burden of identifying opportunities and writing competitive grants.
4. **Engaging the Business Community for Workforce Development:** Harper College is well-positioned to connect with the **business community** to enhance workforce development. Many companies are struggling to find skilled workers, particularly for **technical roles**. By building stronger partnerships with employers, Harper can advocate for funding that supports the development of a skilled workforce. Additionally, engaging businesses in these discussions can make it clear to legislators and state officials that workforce development is a **critical economic need**, not just a social initiative.
5. **Advocating for Comprehensive Funding:** There is an opportunity to work with business partners, educators, and policymakers to present a **unified message** that emphasizes workforce development and its role in sustaining the economy. By aligning goals and showing how investments in education benefit the broader economy, Harper and its partners can advocate for **comprehensive funding solutions**.
6. **Connecting the K-20 Education Continuum:** Finally, Harper College can help **bridge the K-20 education continuum**, creating smoother transitions from K-12 through higher education and into the workforce. By connecting with local schools, community organizations, and employers, Harper can create a **comprehensive pathway** for students that aligns with workforce needs and funding priorities, strengthening ties with partners and improving educational outcomes.

In summary, to better access and leverage federal and state funding, Harper and its partners should break down silos, create collaborative groups to share resources, engage with the business community for workforce development, advocate for comprehensive funding solutions, and align efforts to bridge the education-to-workforce pipeline. This integrated approach will improve capacity, streamline access to funding, and enhance the overall impact of initiatives.

Audience question #4

What advice do you have about how Harper can strategically address the root causes rather than merely the symptoms of inequality?

To address the root causes of inequality, Harper College should take a strategic, multi-faceted approach that goes beyond addressing symptoms. Key steps include:

1. **Acknowledge Inequality:** The first step is to fully acknowledge that inequality exists. This includes recognizing the different starting points for individuals—such as disparities in educational opportunities and resources—before they even enter college. Only by owning the issue can meaningful change begin.

2. **Focus on Equity:** It's critical to prioritize equity, not just equality. Equity ensures that all individuals have access to the same opportunities, regardless of their background. This includes addressing opportunity gaps, even within wealthy communities/schools, and ensuring everyone has a fair shot.
3. **Make Equity a Strategic Priority:** DEI (Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion) must be embedded into the college's strategic plan. This involves measurable outcomes, evidence-based initiatives, and appropriate funding. Without institutional commitment, DEI efforts risk being superficial or ineffective.
4. **Commit to Long-Term, Generational Change:** Inequality is a deep-rooted, generational issue. While immediate actions, like forming partnerships and providing support, are important, Harper must focus on long-term solutions that chip away at systemic issues. Over time, these efforts will improve opportunities for future generations.
5. **Create a Culture of Inclusion:** Fostering a culture where people feel seen, heard, and valued will have a lasting impact. This includes equitable treatment in all interactions with students, staff, and the wider community. As this culture grows, it will help dismantle the systemic inequities that persist.
6. **Navigate the Cultural and Political Climate:** DEI efforts can face significant resistance due to the current cultural climate. Harper must stay focused on the long-term goal of meeting basic human needs, emphasizing that equity work is about fairness and opportunity for all, not divisiveness. Ignoring the noise and staying committed to the work will be key to overcoming opposition.

In summary, Harper's strategy should focus on acknowledging inequality, prioritizing equity, making DEI part of the institution's strategic plan, committing to long-term solutions, and fostering a culture of inclusion—all while navigating external challenges with pragmatism.

Audience question #5

What conditions need to be in place at Harper to help non-profits and government partners to do deeper work on campus, including potential cohabitation?

To support deeper collaboration between Harper College and its nonprofit and government partners, including potential cohabitation on campus, several key conditions must be in place:

1. **Stable Funding and Sustainability:** Nonprofits and social service organizations often face uncertainty due to year-to-year grants. To foster deeper partnerships, Harper needs to help secure stable, long-term funding sources. This includes advocating for joint funding opportunities and ensuring sustainability for both partners, such as case managers who are critical to services on campus.
2. **Strengthened Partnerships:** While Harper already has existing partnerships with social service organizations, these need to be deepened and formalized to enable more impactful collaborations. This includes advocating together for grants and mutual funding opportunities that can support shared goals.
3. **Equitable Pay and Support for Social Service Workers:** To address workforce challenges, particularly the high turnover rates for case managers, Harper must work with partners to ensure fair

compensation. Equity is essential in retaining skilled professionals, especially in the social service sector, where demand is high but pay is low.

4. **Coordinated Services and Expertise:** For the partnership to be successful, it's important that Harper and its nonprofit partners provide consistent, high-quality services. This includes having case managers with relevant lived experience who can serve the community effectively, and offering a centralized location for services, potentially on campus, to better serve students and the local community.
5. **Changing the Social Structure:** On a broader level, sustainable, long-term change requires shifting the underlying social structures that affect these partnerships. While everyday advocacy and community-based work are crucial, there must also be efforts to address systemic issues at higher levels, ensuring that local initiatives can thrive within a supportive framework.

In summary, key conditions include stable funding, strengthened partnerships, fair compensation for workers, expert services, and long-term structural changes to ensure these efforts have lasting impact.

Audience question #6

What responsibility does Harper have to help students who encounter unexpected issues, which prevents them from completion and then having to repeat classes, which is a tremendous cost and cause of anxiety?

Harper College has a significant responsibility to help students who encounter unexpected issues that prevent them from completing courses, which can lead to financial burdens and anxiety. To effectively address this, several approaches are necessary:

1. **Crisis Response and Partnerships:** Harper should collaborate with local nonprofits and mental health organizations to create a crisis response system on campus. For example, partnering with agencies like Kenneth Young for mental health services could help provide on-campus crisis support through shared grants, where a mental health professional is stationed at Harper to support students.
2. **Expand Support Services:** Harper should increase its counseling services, including adding more counseling faculty to support students facing challenges. Expanding advising services to consider not just academic needs, but also mental health and personal struggles is essential. This could involve creating specialized advising positions or counselors who help students navigate both their academic and personal challenges.
3. **Invest in Long-Term Solutions:** Supporting students in crisis is an investment. Helping students work through personal or mental health issues allows them to return to class, complete their coursework, and become part of the workforce. This requires funding and institutional commitment, but the long-term benefits, including higher retention and graduation rates, are well worth the investment.
4. **Rethink Institutional Structures:** The current educational system, with its rigid structures (such as fixed timelines for completing courses), can be an obstacle for students dealing with crises. Harper

should explore more flexible structures, like "on-ramps" and "off-ramps," which would allow students to return to their studies after dealing with personal or health-related issues. This may involve questioning traditional practices like the Carnegie unit or semester-based timelines to better accommodate students' needs.

5. **Address Staffing and Resource Gaps:** While partnerships with outside organizations are crucial, Harper also needs to examine its own staffing and internal resources. There may be opportunities to enhance existing staff roles, create new positions, and tap into available resources more effectively to better serve students' needs.

In summary, Harper College can help students facing unexpected challenges by expanding mental health and counseling services, building partnerships with nonprofit organizations, and creating more flexible support systems and institutional structures. These efforts would not only support students in crisis but also contribute to long-term retention and success.