



# Diversity's Hope: The Sandy Shoreline of Disaggregated Data

By Rachel Winston

Burrowing toes on acres of warm, smooth, pristine sand leaves an indentation into thousands of tiny particles that seem similar, yet are each unique. Scooping up a handful of these white, tan, brown, and dark brown grains of sand and inspecting their variation in shapes and hues, it is clear that each piece, like each individual, is robust with nuances. Scanning the beach from afar is akin to categorizing humanity as a homogeneous sandy shoreline. On college campuses, diverse student bodies may be viewed as a ubiquitous whole or subdivided and disaggregated to offer depth of understanding. Aggregate data provide a large scale macro picture while disaggregated data reveal important clues regarding pockets of successful programs versus those that are underperforming. We can zoom in and out to consider academic achievement, graduation rates, basic skills, and accreditation issues. Yet, our intense focus on data may lead us to unfounded assumptions and generalizations. The big picture is the answer. We should take care not to sift through the sand of data's colors, shapes, and sizes and finely divide our beach into clumps. To do so may undo the promise of diversity, economic vitality, and powerful opportunity community colleges bring to the state by washing away the footprints we leave in the sand.

In a climate of Pell Grant cuts, class cancellations, categorical program extinction, college funding reduction, student fees increases, and threatened benefits, it is only natural to want to protect key areas by pointing to disaggregated college and student data. Yet, a unified voice emphatically cheering on the dreams of this generation may turn on those who feel disconnected, disengaged, and disempowered. Community colleges as a whole are the solution, not the problem. The magnificence of who we are and what we do may serve us better than the protectionism we project. Education's power to harness human potential, energize personal commitment, and build financial bridges is the answer. We need a leader like Clark Kerr, whose Master Plan for Higher Education drove policy and funding to higher levels. An impactful, unifying voice can echo the benefits to society even better now than ever before through social networks, viral media, and spirited optimism. YouTube, Facebook, and other networks have literally changed decades of practices in entire countries. With our collective wisdom, why can't we?

Community college leaders, when inspired, have the power to transform education's promise rather than merely defend the threat of cuts. To do otherwise only hurts students, class offerings, transfers, job creation, financial opportunity, and the state as a whole. Community colleges can fuel our economy with an energy never seen before. This is not happening. As we separate data into more finely divided units and turn the dial to analyze details, we may miss the effervescence that originally brought faculty to classrooms and students to pursue a future of hopes and aspirations. Our diversity is our strength, connecting beaches with the ocean, threads into tapestry, voices into harmony. Within classrooms, students not only learn from each other, but achieve greater success together and can create a city, state, nation.

Zooming in on a closer level, sharing diverse perspectives allows for deeper and richer understanding of our college's potential. Some caution, though, should be taken in the compartmentalization of students, staff, faculty, and departments into disaggregated data units. While inspecting disparate groups in order to obtain more information, we must continue to remember that not all students who are African American, Asian, Hispanic, Caucasian, and so on, are the same, but are truly another vast stretch of sand containing great diversity. Not that disaggregation is bad, but we need to be cognizant of making generalizations. In some cases, this may further emphasize differences rather than taking advantage of our collective commonalities in order to work towards blending the sand into a marbled beach of our vast coastline of intellectual promise.

Our colleges form a shoreline that mixes the sands of culture, religion, race, gender, age, class, and ancestry. While researchers break down and disaggregate data in order to investigate what is truly happening within demographic groups, many assumptions are made based upon socio-demographic analysis. Moreover, this very act may further divide the whole rather than bring individuals together. Take, for example, a college that invites one target group of students for a special summer program to feel more comfortable with the campus, learn their way around, develop a strong rapport with fellow entering students, meet faculty, and create stronger academic preparedness. This is laudatory and in some cases very successful. The generally homogeneous target group may get the extra push to persist through college, support each other, and fuel later successes. Yet, consider this possibility: the group coalesces and separates themselves into a disaggregated unit rather than blending into the diverse student life the campus hoped to achieve.

When those students start in the fall, college leaders may wonder why fewer of that target group did not integrate more in campus activities, but rather seemed to embrace limitations and isolation. Scanning past the beach to the horizon, many college students do not feel a connectedness to their college and merely come to take a class. On a bigger scale, the beauty of diversity is that we should strive to be better community members, Californians, and Americans to form a common culture and common bonds that may be lost through disaggregation and refocus on Mexicans, African Americans, Chinese, Indians, Caucasians, and so on.

Often, there are many levels of underserved populations with specific challenges, needs, and considerations unique to themselves. Data provide evidence of varying levels of student success, persistence, retention, and graduation rates as well as special needs for advising and support. These are key goals in *Vision 2020*, the American Graduation Initiative, and college/district strategic planning documents. These efforts have identified gaps, revealed important information, and led to more questions about what is happening on our campuses. Yet, we must step back and consider the virtue of intermixing groups to gain an integrated perspective rather than merely considering sectors apart from the whole. When disjointed viewpoints are offered, we often assume these speak for the whole of their separated “homogeneous” group and miss the vast diversity contained within that group as well. Students from a single ethnic or socioeconomic group are not the same.

I wonder what would happen if we spent more time personally inviting “aggregated” groups to participate in our student leadership or workshops or summer programs. If there were “targeted” programs that offered special opportunities to blended groups, maybe we would achieve the promise of diversity. All of our students could blend better on our sandy beach. This suggestion does not discount differences in needs, but embraces multidimensional outcomes and possibilities. Disparity, injustice, and insensitivity exist as evidenced through disaggregated data, but consider the possibility that our efforts may be a culprit of division.

Although we live in the same state and yearn to sew cloth that intensifies the richness of our individual threads, harmony may elude us as we pull out each strand to analyze its hue. As our demographics change, there are dominating shades in the tapestry of our colleges. Some seek emphasis on a societal or institutional level. Within these shades, there are vibrant opportunities for blending. Visionary leaders consider no issue unsolvable. United - students, staff, faculty, and administrators - can brainstorm creative options to resolve the complex financial, social, and academic issues we face. Intercommunication of values, dreams, and visions is the key to unlocking the doors that have not truly been open to many segments of our population. Our combined wisdom will contribute to the recharging of our community colleges into a revitalized, interdependent, and interwoven system that is not competing for funds, but synergistically feeding students who matriculate seamlessly from community colleges to four-year universities with a common purpose: to energize our population, help citizens achieve their full potential, and ultimately contribute to the growth of our economy.

Diversity and equity are at the root of higher education's profound conversation. In order to obtain the wide ranging support for our public colleges, we need to come to a consensus regarding the social, economic, and democratic value of education. Race is a societal construct – we cannot have racism if we do not divide people into races, although we can have intolerance if we do not work to better understand one another. We can hear, read, and see stories that frame our reality, like the case with Shirley Sherrod, who was forced to resign from the U.S. Department of Agriculture after an out-of-context excerpt of a speech shined a new light on racism. We must listen better in order to hear the depth of the real story behind the story. Although we can use data to better understand and then ask more questions, at this moment, maybe we should seek greater unity. When we disaggregate data, there is a tendency to construct a new reality that may or may not be true. When we zoom in to find deeper meaning, we must work harder to understand and not invent.

Within the sheaths of cloth that wrap our exterior as we protect ourselves from the storm of life's challenges, we may find that the differences are not so distinct and each individual brings his or her own luster of experience.

On the macro level, we may see a community college. Zooming in, we see students, staff, faculty, and administrators; within those individuals, we see families; within the family, we see logistical and environmental challenges; within those situations, we see living conditions, health, finances, and hope; within that we see ancestries, belief systems, specific events: rape, domestic violence, exploitation, apathy, nepotism, elitism, spirituality, security, or lack thereof that can range from exploitation to privilege, from vulnerability to security, from negligence to diligence. If we liken this to a huge camera lens, we can slowly turn the dial to zoom in on the root causes in order to more clearly visualize varying degrees of harmony and distress. The camera can capture a realistic picture on the macro or micro level and both are true images of reality. When people attempt to solve the macro problem by ignoring the roots, some will be left out because resources cannot be allocated to every root problem. Thus, we need to be leaders who open up opportunities, show people the way. We can support students, staff, faculty, and leadership by providing information, avenues for success, and support on the advisor, mentor, or administrative level to smooth out the roughness from within.

Tolerance occurs when we visualize a blended shoreline or woven cloth. If we take the larger picture of values, we can be less concerned about pointing fingers at a political party or individual statement and refocus the discussion on what we as a whole want to achieve in our community college system. Finger pointing only alienates people and makes them less likely to want to come to the table. This is one fundamental argument for including a diversity course as a graduation requirement. We talk about inclusion, while at the same time dissociate people into groups and disaggregate data. The cultural dynamic that vibrantly molds our community colleges, offers our system a multidimensional educational opportunity. As difficult as this may seem, while we consider funding allocations, we must take care not to devolve our conversations into science verses humanities, technology verses security, basic skills verses transfer programs, and so on. We can talk amongst ourselves about the huge supply and demand with thousands upon thousands who are unable to enroll and those who may no longer be able to afford to enter if the cost of college education continues to soar. Students are clamoring at our doors, petitioning classes, and restlessly sitting on wait lists. The reduction in the number of classes, cuts to part-time faculty, elimination of services, and loss of essential support are unconscionable at a time when more students are attempting to enroll and companies need literate, trained, global thinkers. Funding is imperative. But, while there are grave concerns, community colleges should not become defensive, but remain clear and resolute in our mission, secure in our commitment, visionary in our perspective. We are one – diverse, yet united. We are the solution to our economy, not the problem.

On the defense, we separate and fight for our programs, our groups, our enclaves. United we conquer; divided we fail. Diversity is our strength, not our weakness. Profound conversations should reverberate throughout the state and the nation; our educational system at one time was one of the core missions that made us great and can lead us again into greatness. At this moment, when the axe of cuts seem inevitable, the union between ourselves and those we serve should be stronger. As Californians, as Americans, as participants in a united force to make this state and this country great, we should be aggregated, not disaggregated. Sure, we should separate data in order to understand the roots of our problems and seek solutions. However, the shoreline of community college opportunity may be best served at this moment in time if we sing with one voice, wear one cloth, and imprint our toes into the millions of particles of sand on our shoreline of hope and vision.