

## California Community Colleges Chancellor's Office Podcast Episode 49 **Inspiring Women Leaders in California Community Colleges**

Daisy Gonzalez: Hi everyone. This is Daisy Gonzalez, Deputy Chancellor at the California Community Colleges Chancellor's Office. And you are listening to another episode of the California Community College Chancellor's Office podcast. Welcome, and thank you for joining us. Leaders in the California Community College system play a critical role in preparing students for the future and they fuel California's economic recovery. The California Community College system has many women leaders who drive change in support of the vision for success. At the center of the system's vision for success are six goals to significantly increase the number of students transferring to UC and CSU, increasing the number of students earning degrees and certificates and completing career education programs leading to good paying jobs, as well as reducing time to completion and eliminating achievement gaps once and for all.

Today we are celebrating Women's History Month with three distinguished guests, women leaders who are working to ensure that California Community College students from all backgrounds succeed in reaching their goals in improving their families and contributing to their communities. I want to welcome Trustee Linda Wah, President Pamela Luster, President Denise Whisenhunt. Welcome everyone.

Denise Whisenhunt: Thank you, Daisy.

Linda Wah: Hi.

Pamela Luster: Thank you. Great to be here.

Daisy Gonzalez: So let me share a little bit about each of you just to make sure that everyone understands what a distinguished set of guests we have here today. First, let me introduce Trustee Linda Wah. Linda has served on the board of trustees for Pasadena City College since 2010. She has served in a number of leadership positions, serving our students statewide through multiple different roles. She most recently was the president of the California Community College Trustee Board, the CCCT. Linda also served in the Trustee Diversity, Equity and Inclusion work group, which aims to eliminate the equity gap in California's education system by 2027. She also held critical roles in statewide task forces for the league that cover a range of different areas from workforce to financial aid reform to student success metrics. She's also the proud co-founder of the Asian Pacific Islander caucus and the Women's Caucus, very relevant to today's podcast. I want to also welcome President Denise Whisenhunt who serves as Grossmont College's President most recently appointed president in July of 2021. Woo.

Denise Whisenhunt: Thank you very much, Dr. Gonzalez. Thank you.

Daisy Gonzalez: Congratulations.

Denise Whisenhunt: Thank you.

Daisy Gonzalez: And she has served our students, but primarily our students at San Diego City College in a number of roles since 2001. I'm going to cover these, and of course you can remind us when we get to the podcast, Denise, but most recently, prior to her role as president of Grossmont College, she was the Vice President of Student Services at San Diego City College. She was also the Dean of Student Affairs, the Dean of Student Development and Matriculation, the Associate Dean of Student Services and outreach at the college. And before that she has a longstanding expertise in transfer. She was a transfer center coordinator at the University of California Merced, also holding roles in outreach at the University of California, San Diego. And then of course our third guest, President Pamela Luster. Welcome Pamela.

Pamela Luster: Thank you, Daisy.

Daisy Gonzalez: President Luster is the President of Mesa College and she has been in this role since 2011. She is the immediate past president of the chief executive officers of the California Community Colleges board. And most recently was appointed to the American Association of Community College's Commission on Diversity, Equity and Inclusion. She has served our students in statewide roles that also include the California Community College Athletics Association as the co-chair of the league's Affordability, Food and Housing Task Force. And was appointed by Governor Gavin Newsom last year to the Basic Needs in Higher Education Task Force. And of course I cannot miss this part. She's the proud co-founder of the Equity Avengers. So welcome.

Pamela Luster: Thank you so much, Daisy. It's wonderful to be here with everyone.

Daisy Gonzalez: Yes, absolutely. Well, listen, I get to spend this time with some of my favorite women leaders in our system and it is truly an honor. But I want other people to get to know you a little bit better because you are really driving local implementations, local interventions to ensure that every student can succeed. And I handpicked each of you to spend this time with you. And I want to start off by asking you a question around what inspires you to be a leader. So I find that most individuals who want to help students who do it with such an intention, with such a commitment, do it because of their own journey, their own educational journey. So in many ways they do it because of their why. So let's start with this first question and I'll head to you, president Luster, and ask please share a little bit about your local efforts that have led to student success that are inspired by your own educational journey. And then from there, we head over to Trustee Linda Wah and then President Denise Whisenhunt. Go ahead.

Pamela Luster: Thank you so much. I could take up the rest of the podcast with this answer, but I won't. My personal why comes from something that just intrinsically stands out to me when people are not being heard, people are not being included, and we are in environments where we're not fully expanding the potential of the humans who seek us out in education. And it comes from probably one of my first jobs, right out of school, and also my schooling working with students with disabilities when I was at West Valley College and watching the assumptions people would make about someone's intellect or capabilities around being educated. My own experience was even though I had parents in my life who had gone to college, still feeling like I didn't belong in higher ed. And so I've always had that why of, "Who are we missing? Whose voices aren't we hearing?" And so the intensity that I bring to spaces is about making sure that everyone's included. And that can be annoying from time to time. But I think of it as good trouble.

Daisy Gonzalez: Thank you for sharing that with us. Linda, what about you?

Linda Wah: Yeah. So my personal why really starts with how I started in college. And I see that our college students come from many different paths, and not everyone fits a certain mold. So even when I started college, I started off as a traditional student, but I took a detour to start a family early on. And then when I returned to school, I found myself to be a single mother and I could not go to school full-time even if I wanted to. Because I had two children I was supporting, I had to work full-time. And I could never, at that time, qualify for any financial aid. There was no resources available for single parents. So that was a struggle. And then I majored in an area, technology, which at the time had almost no women in it. And you could not get into the field because you didn't have any experience.

And so a sort of pivotal point, there was a college professor who worked at the city of Los Angeles and he formed an internship. And when an internship was offered to me, it was a great chance for me to get into the field. I had to work for \$4 an hour for two years, but it allowed me to really set a course that helped me really move forward in a field that's been really good to me. So those are sort of my personal why's. And to be sensitive to how different all of our students are and to understand that not everyone is going to come in the same flavor and the same mold.

Daisy Gonzalez: That tells me so much about the advocacy that you do statewide, Linda, everything from financial aid reform to work based learning and those opportunities that are critical to our students' careers. Thank you for sharing that. Denise, what about you?

Denise Whisenhunt: I would say as I think about it, I moved from many years ago the idea that to much is given much is required. And I would say that it really stems from my family's commitment to service. Much is given not monetarily, but in terms of values. My father attended college. He was from Alabama at a time when African Americans were not allowed to pursue his field of study in the state. So

the great state of Alabama would give them money to go somewhere else to be educated. And it is that sort of drive, that commitment to service that moves me. It is those discussions at the table with my family that really affirmed my belief and want to commit my life to make sure that people that look like me know that there are spaces for them.

And so that's the way that I lead. That's really important to me. Those that look like me and others, women, other groups, other communities to recognize that there's space for them. And that's how I do it. Just last week I had some students in a line and they were getting tacos in a line. We had a welcome back week and I asked a group of women, "Want to come sit in my chair?" Because that's how I do it. I make them come sit in the chair. "This is your chair. This is how I see this. See yourself in a way that oftentimes I didn't see myself." And so that's the way that I lead. Much has been invested in me and I think it is my obligation, it is my life core commitment to carry that forward.

Daisy Gonzalez: I love that message, Denise. Oftentimes we hear, "Bring a chair to the table," and you're basically giving up your chair. That's a very powerful message and action that you have taken at the local level for your students. It is Women's History Month and I want to acknowledge that over 54% of the students that we serve are female students. And that was certainly data just from last year. And many of those women are first generation college students, which means that they are making history. Just like each of you, just like me. We are making history. I know that you have all held different roles where you have been the first and certainly occupy some of those roles today. What advice do you have for the next generation of women leaders coming after you? And Linda, I want to head to you first.

Linda Wah: Yeah. Well I think my advice to women leader is just be bold. I think many times we always think there's someone else who knows more than us. We always think there's someone who's smarter than us. But I do think that we have so many smart women at the table. I'm joined by two, including yourself, Dr. Gonzalez. But just be bold and not let people cow you, even though sometimes you may feel like you're not being heard. Just keep going forward. Keep raising your hand. There's a lot of hidden opportunities. And sometimes we think, "Oh, that's not going to really come to anything." But what I've recently heard a number of young women in technology speak and they raise their hand to do things that no one else wanted to do, which then ended up putting them in line for other really important jobs. So don't turn your back on any opportunities that may come before you. We all have those. So those would be my best... And also, reach back. Because somebody helped pull you forward. And reach back and help others and pull them forward too.

Daisy Gonzalez: Thank you. What about you, Denise?

Denise Whisenhunt: One of my favorite quotes is by Nelson Mandela, that it always seems impossible until it's done. It always seems like there's no way I'm going to get this job. I mean, until you get it done. And I would say for women, I would say to

be competent, do your homework. You've heard that before. My dad would say you have to work twice as hard. Oh, it's for women the same way too. Two, three times as hard. You have to be confident. You have to be on game. You have to use your superpowers as a woman. I mean, we carry superpowers, right? We often tend to be more... Men as well, but we tend to be intuitive. We have a certain grace in the way that we carry ourselves, those are superpowers. Leverage your superpowers. And then above all, believe in you. Just believe in you when others don't believe in you. You just got to find that spot inside of you that you can do this. So always believe in you.

Daisy Gonzalez: Thank you, Denise. I love that. I definitely see that in the leadership, how you bring others to the table. And as you think about growing the next generation of community college leaders, I've seen you do that in your daily work. And certainly every time-

Denise Whisenhunt: It takes one to know one, Dr. Gonzalez. You got that down.

Daisy Gonzalez: Thank you. President Luster.

Pamela Luster: Yeah. I really, I was resonating with what Linda said about just having trust in yourself, that confidence. And people often say, "When did you know it was time to be president?" And I said, "Well, lots of people told me I should." But we just sort of... I don't know how graceful we are in accepting those kinds of accolades. And we're like, "Well, there must be someone more qualified than we are." Don't wait. Don't wait. You don't have to have a certain number of years of something. You don't. It's when you're ready to go. And then ask good questions of those around you about why they believe in you. Because you can't hear it often enough. Like, "You're a good strategist," or whatever your things are, really think about what that looks like to be in those positions.

And then as Vice President Kamala Harris says, "Don't be the last." It's great to be the first, but be competent, be confident, build that culture and that climate where there is inclusion and we are pulling each other up and looking back and saying, "Come with me," so that the next time it's not as hard for someone to come behind you and be seen as that relevant, confident woman in the job.

Daisy Gonzalez: Thank you for sharing that. I resonate a lot with what you just shared around you may be the first, but your job is to make sure that you are not the last. And I see all of you nodding your heads. For those who are listening, we actually have the privilege of seeing each other via Zoom. I want to ask you a final question, but before I head there I feel the urge to ask you a question I didn't mean to ask, which is what is your top pitch to get more women to community college CEOs? And I have the pleasure of having a rockstar group that is thinking about growing the next generation of leaders. So what is that one sentence or question that you could give to a woman leader in one of our campuses who has held many different roles, I'm thinking of you, Denise, who finally gets the courage to do it? How do we convince more women to become CEOs?

Denise Whisenhunt: If I can say anything, I think that Dr. Luster was spot on. Thinking, "I got to do this. I got to be dog catcher. I got to do 200 things to do this job." And it's like, "Really? No." I would say the hardest thing for me to do, and this is kind of sharing who I am, was to apply. To say to myself, "I'm ready," and to write it out and to push send was the hardest thing. But that's been the hardest thing my whole life. College applications, law school, "Can I do it?" Always questioning myself, but it's the apply. You've got to apply. Apply, period. So I would say if you're thinking about it, turn it in. Turn the application in. Let someone else make that decision whether or not you're going to get the job. But don't eliminate yourself.

And that I think traditionally is something that happens with women. Some disenfranchised communities in particular are not thinking, "I can do this." But when you do this, when you apply, when you put yourselves in those positions, you open doors. And I can't say, I mean I can tell you I've had this job for eight months, but the conversations that I've had, particularly with women of color about this position, I can't tell you how many people have like, "Can I talk to you about this?" Because they're ready to apply and they're not doing that. So don't hold people back. Apply.

Daisy Gonzalez: Thank you. I love that. Pam or Linda, anything you'd like to add?

Pamela Luster: Yeah, I was thinking about, I was about three months into this incredible, wonderful job. I can sell it to anyone. I love this work. I was at one of our women's volleyball games and I was sitting there in a Mesa shirt or something. And someone who worked at the college that I hadn't yet met asked me if I needed anything. I said, "No, I'm just here watching the women play and I love sports. And so I want to be really supportive." And she said, "Well, what's your name?" And so I said who I was and I said I'm the president. She goes, "Of the college?"

And so it was that moment. One, I had taken the time to come to a women's volleyball game to meet people. And what I would say is this is the best job ever. You get to do so many different kinds of things. And our students need to see people like us in these leadership roles. They need us. They need to see us in these roles and we have to show up. And so I think it's just so critical. My pitch is same as Denise, get your application in there. Look for places where when you're reading the mission statement and you're reading what that college is about and you think, "That's my jam," then that's where you should apply. And if you're writing that letter of interest and you're not really excited, then stop writing it and look for a different job.

So I would just say, if you're not excited in the process... And you will be. You will be. You start to think about, "Oh, I could do this, and I could do that." It has been the pinnacle and joy of my life to do this job from a professional perspective. It has fed my soul and continues to. And it will feed yours too, if you find the right spot and you can do it. And ask us, ask those of us that are out

there. We'll mentor you all day long, seven days a week, 24 hours a day. So, yeah.

Daisy Gonzalez: Linda, anything you'd like to add?

Linda Wah: Well, I think what Denise said really resonates with me. Many times I was the first woman in management in many of the areas I was in, the only woman at the table. And people would always ask me, "How did you get there?" And I said, well, first of all, "I applied for the job." So don't hold back, just apply. And the other thing I used to counsel... So I've mentored a lot of women, and one of the things I always counseled them in when they tell me, "Well, I'm not qualified. Look at how many other people are qualified." And I said, "Okay, well think about it this way. Think about who's going to be applying for that job, because that's who you're going to be working for if you don't apply." And instantly people got it. So yeah, just don't doubt yourself. Just go ahead and apply. And be thoughtful, pick the areas you really want to be in and then just go for it.

Daisy Gonzalez: I love that. Well, thank you for humoring me. I didn't mean to ask the question. But what a good task to do as we're thinking about Women's History Month, to lift up and to give mentorship through our podcast. Let's end with a really good question. I gave you some homework before this podcast. It is Women's History Month and we want to lift up female legends, role models in our lives. And so I asked you to bring a photo of a legend or a role model that you admire. And I want you to pull that out if you have it, or just have it in your mind. And I'm going to ask you a question. The question is this. I want you to describe the photo and just share one core leadership value that this woman leader taught you. So a leadership quality, a core value, and I'm going to go to Denise first.

Denise Whisenhunt: Okay. Thank you. The picture that I chose is my mother. In one of her monumental octogenarian, because that's what we say, celebrations. And it really is I thought about her because she's her own corporation. The picture has pictures of her when she was 19 years old, it's all Team Patricia in my family. And I chose my mother, too, because she has a hundred percent outcomes in college completion rates for her kids. For her grandkids she got one more left, but it's going to be a hundred percent completion. Everyone in that picture has a degree, and it's so much has to do with her.

So I would say one quality is that she is so dedicated. She is so dedicated. My mother, when she endeavors to do something, she is 150% and she just goes like the Energizer bunny. And so I say that my mother's one leadership quality is to be dedicated. To swim all in, a hundred percent, do as best you can. Don't get caught. My mother is closed mouth, don't get fed, go for it, do it. And that really embodies who she is and her values. Who she is, her character is what makes her a phenomenal woman. And so that's why I chose my mother, Patricia Whisenhunt, because she is an amazing woman.

Daisy Gonzalez: Bravo, we celebrate you Patricia. Thank you for gifting us Denise and all of the incredible work that you've done. Thank you for sharing that, Denise.

Denise Whisenhunt: Thank you.

Daisy Gonzalez: Let's go to President Luster.

Pamela Luster: So I chose my grandmother. Her name was Margaret Brown and she had a degree from the University of Oregon in social work. She was a social worker and not many women had a degree in the 1920s. It was a very big deal. My grandfather was a conductor for the Northern Pacific railroad and saved every dime he had to make sure that he could send his little girl to college. My grandmother was a social worker during the Depression and her job was in San Pedro and there were lots of families that were living under bridges and in other sort of abutments out under freeways. And it was her job to literally, physically go out and pull them into different spaces. So that's the level of grit that my grandmother had for just fairness, inclusion, commitment to human beings, and that leadership quality of that indefatigable commitment to making sure that people are okay. Whether you're a mom, a grandma, whatever that might be, just meant that she loved people.

And she was also a truth teller. So you were going to hear about it in terms of if you'd done something you shouldn't have done. But just that unwavering commitment and love to humans and not judging them, but bringing them to where they needed to be to have full lives. And it was tough and she really modeled that. She is the reason I went to college. The minute I got my bachelor's degree, both my grandparents said, "So when's the masters start?" It's just that commitment to higher education. But just that commitment to human capacity is something that just lives in me every day. Hmm.

Daisy Gonzalez: Thank you so much for sharing that, Pam. Linda, what about you? Who did you bring to share with us?

Linda Wah: Well, so being an elected trustee, I'm a little consumed by politics right now, and this is campaign season. I picked Hillary Clinton. And I'll tell you, I campaigned against 116 women in my congressional district to be the delegate for Hillary when she ran. And I came in first so I was the name delegate. And I never thought in my lifetime I would see a woman rise to that level. And it was just so wonderful to be able to hear her speak. And it actually is the place where I met Chancellor Martha Garcia. She was also a Hillary delegate and she and I happened to sit to other at the convention in Philadelphia.

But I fought for affirmative action for women for many years throughout my career. And it was really just so wonderful for me to see this and to see the rise of women. And today, even at that level, she then cut the path for many women to succeed. And today, even in LA City, we are seeing the first woman fire chief in LA. There's the first woman who is now applying for the sheriff, who's going



to be running against the guy. So I really think that these are pioneers that help many of us who aspire to be in politics and in elected positions. She was very inspiring to me.

Daisy Gonzalez: Thank you, Linda, for sharing that with us. For me, it was truly an inspiration to be able to bring all three of you together, certainly for Women's History Month. So I just want to acknowledge that having the three of you here, what I've learned from each of you, as we think about lifting up those that you lifted up during this podcast, I want to lift you up. Because from you, Linda, I've learned throughout this journey that we serve to empower. Always being inclusive. Pam, from you I've learned anything is possible. Literally. Bringing people together, anything is possible. And being able to meet Denise at the Aspen Institute and seeing her lead with grace, never underestimate grace. It is strength. It is dangerous. So I want to thank all three of you for joining me to celebrate Women's History Month and for being you and for serving our students with compassion, with integrity. I know you give a lot out of your own personal life to serve our students. So thank you.

Linda Wah: Thank you, Dr. Gonzalez, and back at you. Yeah.

Pamela Luster: Thank you for your leadership.

Linda Wah: You're a great leader. Thank you for having me.

Pamela Luster: Right back at you, Dr. Gonzalez.

Denise Whisenhunt: A hundred percent.

Pamela Luster: You inspire us every day.

Daisy Gonzalez: Aww. Thank you.

Denise Whisenhunt: Even when we're coughing you inspire us.

Daisy Gonzalez: Thank you. Well, I want to thank you for joining us. I want to thank our listeners. And let me just summarize our incredible time together. I want to thank you for sharing your inspirations, what drives you to do the important work of transformational change in our system. I want to thank you for sharing your core values as leaders. And I want to thank you for the advice that you shared with our listeners, certainly for women leaders in higher education. I'm going to close up our podcast and just say to our listeners, you have been listening to another episode of the California Community Colleges Chancellor's Office podcast. Thank you for joining us. Happy Women's History Month, and we will see you next time.

Speaker 5: Be sure to join us for the next California Community Colleges podcast. This has been a California Community Colleges presentation.

