

Chancellor's Office Podcast Episode 37 – Transcript

Eloy Ortiz Oakley:

Hi, this is Eloy Ortiz Oakley, chancellor of the California Community Colleges, and you're listening to another episode of the California Community Colleges Chancellor's Office Podcast. Today, I have the great privilege of speaking with John B. King Jr. John is the president and CEO of the Education Trust, which is a national nonprofit organization that seeks to identify and close opportunity and achievement gaps from preschool through college. But I'm sure many of you know John as our former secretary of education. He was the 10th secretary of education serving under president Barack Obama, and led the US department of education during that time. As many of our listeners know, the California Community Colleges have been pursuing a vision that is focused on ensuring that students from all backgrounds succeed in reaching their educational goals, and in doing so, improve their families and their communities through economic and social mobility. The system's vision for success sets some aggressive goals to significantly increase the number of students that transfer, the number of students that obtain a quality credential, as well as ensuring that they get into good paying jobs.

Eloy Ortiz Oakley:

But most importantly, the goal that is at the center of the vision for success is eliminating the achievement gaps, the equity gaps, that have persisted in our system of higher education for decades. So today, I'm going to be talking to John King about that issue, about equity, about access, particularly in the environment that we're in today with COVID-19, with the economic fallout from the pandemic, and of course the social unrest as we continue to deal with structural racism. So who better to have this conversation with, than with John King? So welcome, John. It's great to have you on the show.

John B. King Jr:

Thanks for the opportunity to join you.

Eloy Ortiz Oakley:

Well, it's wonderful to see you and hear you again. I hope you and your family are well in these crazy, crazy times. But first of all, just in case some of our listeners don't know what the education trust is, can you give us a little bit of background on what your mission is?

John B. King Jr:

Sure, we're really an education civil rights organization. Our focus is education equity for low income students and students of color. So our day to day work lines up perfectly with your priorities for the California Community Colleges. We are deeply committed to access, affordability, and completion in higher education, and particularly closing the gaps that we see for low income students and students of color when it comes to getting to college, and through college. We also do work in the P through 12 space, and we do a mix of research and advocacy. We've got our headquarters in DC, but we have a state office, Education Trust West, in Oakland, and Ed Trust West, as you know-

Eloy Ortiz Oakley:

We're big fans of them. We're very big fans of them. They're a great partner.

John B. King Jr:

That's good. That's shared. I know they're big fans of yours, and of the work that you're doing to try to close equity gaps within the California Community Colleges. So there are a presence in California, they're

very active in, certainly in Sacramento politics, all with the goal of trying to ensure that we're a society where opportunity isn't determined by race, or zip code, or the language you speak at home, or your family's immigration status.

Eloy Ortiz Oakley:

Right. So I appreciate that background, and clearly your work is more important than ever. We live in a very crazy time. 2020 has been just an incredible year, incredibly frustrating year. Given what we know about the impacts of this COVID-19 pandemic, how it has exacerbated the challenges that students face along their academic journey ... And by the way, we had a crisis in our communities before this pandemic. We had, in California Community Colleges, some of the highest food insecurity, some of the highest housing insecurity, of all the systems of higher education. So COVID-19 has really exacerbated all of this, and students continue to struggle with their basic needs, such as food and housing. So John, from your vantage point, what challenges, as well as opportunities, do you see ahead as public education continues to wrestle with this pandemic?

John B. King Jr:

Yeah. Yeah. Well, it's exactly as you say, COVID-19 has been an equity disaster, and it's really exacerbated gaps that were longstanding. And that's true in health. And we know, for example, black and Latino folks are three times as likely to get COVID, twice as likely to die from COVID when they do get it right. We've seen a disparate economic impact, shockingly high rates of unemployment, particularly for black and Latino folks, and loss of income, so even if folks have been able to stay employed, they are making less. And that is exacerbating housing insecurity, food insecurity. It's making it harder for folks to support their families. There was a recent survey that suggested maybe as many as 40% of black and Latino families are struggling with providing food reliably to their kids. We know there are 14 million food insecure children. In the wealthiest country in the world, we've let this happen.

John B. King Jr:

And so we have all those challenges. And then, of course, there are the education disparities. And as you say, already, community college students are more likely to be vulnerable to food insecurity, to housing insecurity, struggling financially to keep up with school and their personal expenses. The financial aid from the federal government and from the state warrant enough before COVID, but now folks are that much more vulnerable. I worry we're going to lose a lot of students who aren't going to be able to continue their education. I worry that we may see cuts around the country to public higher education. We certainly saw that in the aftermath of the 2008 recession. In fact, in some places we haven't even recovered from the cuts that followed the 2008 recession. And less resources for public higher ed institutions means less opportunity for low income students and students of color. It's a direct line relationship between those things.

John B. King Jr:

So the challenges are huge. We also know, as many schools now have gone back virtually [inaudible 00:00:06:51], that a Pew studies suggest that about 79% of white families have reliable internet access, 66% of black families, 61% of Latino families. So that means the schoolhouse door, or the university door, is literally barred for students because they don't have reliable internet access. So huge challenges. I think the opportunity is, hopefully, this becomes a new deal moment for the country.

Eloy Ortiz Oakley:

Exactly.

John B. King Jr:

Right? Where we respond to this crisis by saying, "We've got to do things in a more just way. We've got to strengthen the safety net. We've got to invest more in education. We've got to build towards a better, more equitable future."

Eloy Ortiz Oakley:

Right. So I think you just highlighted one of the key areas that I know we're struggling with in California. And of course we pride ourselves in California as being really the cradle of technology, entrepreneurship, innovation, some of the most innovative tech companies come out of Silicon Valley, yet we're struggling with providing access to broadband to a huge swath of our state. And this crisis has really exposed this inequality. So as schools, colleges and universities, not just in California but across the country, as all of us have had to convert almost overnight to some sort of remote platform, that of course requires broadband access, we've seen huge challenges in low income communities and communities of color.

Eloy Ortiz Oakley:

We've had to jump through hoops to try and provide them some sort of access. So through the work that you all are doing, what do you see as some of the greatest challenges as we move forward with this whole issue of continuing to be in a remote learning environment? And what thoughts do you have on, how do we actually support this learning, particularly our most vulnerable students? What do we have to do as a country to turn this around so that we don't lose this generation of students?

John B. King Jr:

Yeah. So you're exactly right. There are multiple dimensions to this challenge. We've got high needs rural communities, where they just don't have internet access. We've got high needs urban and suburban communities, where there may be internet access but the cable company says, "Well, you have an unpaid balance, you can't get internet." Or, the internet speeds are so slow that you can't actually have multiple people in the home working on the computer at the same time. Right? So we have these multiple dimensions to this challenge. This really is a federal challenge, in my view. We need the federal government to step up. There's a proposal in Congress from Congresswoman Eshoo and Senator Klobuchar to dedicate funding specifically to address the digital divide in higher ed, focused on institutions that serve large numbers of students of color, minority serving institutions. Congress needs to act here, just as they need to act on unemployment insurance and a slew of other measures that are desperately needed.

Eloy Ortiz Oakley:

There's a long line of what they need [crosstalk 00:10:14].

John B. King Jr:

That's right. But this is a federal challenge. If you look back to the new deal, right, part of what happened in the new deal ... And you'll forgive me, I was a high school social studies teacher, so I go to these historical comparisons. But in the new deal, there was a realization that the parts of the country that didn't have electricity were never going to be able to participate fully in the economy. And so there

was a federal commitment, things like the Tennessee Valley authority, to make sure that folks got access to electricity. We need that level of federal commitment to internet access. It's critical for P through 12 education. It's critical for higher education. It's critical for accessing benefits. It's critical for looking for a job. We should make sure that everyone in the United States has internet access, so they can participate in the 21st century economy. And again, this is the wealthiest country in the world, the wealthiest country that has ever been in the world. We can afford to do it. We just have to have the political will.

Eloy Ortiz Oakley:

Right. And this is one of those issues that doesn't just affect blue States or red States. This affects every lower middle class, working class community throughout America. So I think the example of the Tennessee Valley authority is a great example. We have to lift these communities, and the economy is now built on access to the internet. Whether it's for commerce, for education, it's something that I agree, we really have to take on this challenge.

Eloy Ortiz Oakley:

I know that education trust recently issued a report entitled social, emotional, and academic development through an equity lens. I appreciate the use of the term equity lens, it's something that we're certainly talking a lot about in our system. How do we apply this equity lens? So in this report, your organization advocates shifting the focus from fixing kids, toward addressing our beliefs and mindsets, as well as school and district policies, to create equitable learning environments. I know we're focused on similar strategies with the vision for success, but can you tell us about the report, and some of the findings and recommendations that came out of it?

John B. King Jr:

Yeah. So in this report, what we tried to do is actually talk to students and families of color throughout the country, and ask them about their experience of what is often called socioemotional learning. And what we heard again and again, is this real fear that socioemotional learning was being used to problematize kids, to make it seem like kids have this thing wrong with them that needs to be fixed, as opposed to saying, what are all the systems around the student that affects their lives? And this is true in higher ed as well. Right? If you are hungry, you're going to have a hard time concentrating in class. That's not because you don't care about class, that's cause you're hungry. And so we need a strategy to address food insecurity. So one of the recommendations in the report is that we need wraparound services.

John B. King Jr:

We have to remove obstacles that get in the way for students, right, if we're serious about creating an environment that supports their social, emotional, and academic development. If you're in an institution and you're a student of color, but you never see any faculty members of color, you're a first generation college goer and you never see anyone on faculty or staff who can talk about their experience as a first generation college student, then we haven't done the things necessary to create an environment that addresses your socioemotional wellbeing. We've got to be intentional about a diverse faculty. If your coursework is such that you never see yourself represented, whether it's in the authors we read, the texts that we study, the history that we study, then we're not doing the things necessary for you to feel like you have those windows and mirrors that we all need. Right?

John B. King Jr:

And so we have to think about student's curricular experience as a part of the associate emotional environment that we create around them. In a K12 context, when you have disparate discipline where black and Latino students being suspended and expelled from school, or in some States subject to corporal punishment, right, that's-

Eloy Ortiz Oakley:

Are you serious? That still exists?

John B. King Jr:

Yes, yes, yeas, we have 15 States, more than 15 States where corporal punishment is still legal, where students are beaten with a wooden object, right, in an act of state sanctioned violence. So if you think about one of those schools where students are subject to corporal punishment at school, but then there's a mindfulness workshop, well that's not a coherent strategy. That's not being serious about creating an environment that supports students socioemotional wellbeing. So the argument of this paper really is that we have to think holistically about socioemotional supports. And we have to interrogate institutional behavior, we have to interrogate institutional bias, and the implicit bias of individuals in those institutions, to try to create environments that truly see student's full humanity.

Eloy Ortiz Oakley:

Yeah, no, I couldn't agree with you more. That is a conversation that is front and center right now in our system, the whole issue of how do we begin to change our culture? How do we begin to identify and pinpoint the biases that we all come to work with, and how do we begin to really take that on and reprogram ourselves and how we think about students? Now in case our listeners want to access this report, or other reports from Ed Trust, do you have your website handy where they can go and pick this up?

John B. King Jr:

Yes, glad you asked, edtrust.org, E-D-T-R-U-S-T dot org. And folks can access our reports, they can also sign up for essentially a regular education civil rights newsletter that we put out as well.

Eloy Ortiz Oakley:

Great. All right. So let me jump to another one of my favorite topics, selective public universities and the challenges that we face, particularly, and I'll focus on just the publics, not the privates. That's a whole different podcast that we can rail on for a long time. But there seems to continue to be this pull for public universities to want to look like an Ivy league university, and thus continue that selective mentality, which of course then challenges the university to reflect the diversity of the community it's supposed to be serving, and it distracts from that public mission. I know that Ed Trust issued this challenge to the top 101, curious how you pick 101, but to the top 101 select public universities. Tell us a little bit about that challenge, and of course some of the strategies that you're recommending to achieve this challenge, which basically is that that public university should reflect the diversity of the community it serves, as well as the country.

John B. King Jr:

Yeah. So what we tried to do this report was to look at selective admission public colleges, not just flagships, but colleges that are state universities that have selective admission policy. And we asked,

how well do their student populations match the student populations of their state? Right? That's their mission, is to serve the people of their state. And what we found is there's not a single state where the percentage of black and Latino students, in their selective public colleges, matches the percentage of black and Latino 18 to 24 year olds in their state. Not a single state. And in fact, in a majority of cases, the percentage of black students has gone down relative to 20 years ago. Now, in many cases, the percentage of Latino students has gone up, but not nearly as much as the percentage of Latino young adults has gone up in the state. And so we have this huge disparity. It's true in California. I think seven out of nine UC undergraduate campuses got either a D or an F, for their access for black and Latino students.

Eloy Ortiz Oakley:

We're trying to change that. So, thank you for your work.

John B. King Jr:

Yes, yes, yes, yes. But part of what we try to argue in this report is, there are policy choices and institutional practices that make the difference here. So California, this November, will have the opportunity to repeal the mistakes guided ban on affirmative action that was put in place with prop 209, right? So with prop 16 there's an opportunity to change that. That ban on affirmative action hurt the admission of black and Latino students in the UC campuses. It also hurt the ability of UC campuses, the CSU campuses, your campuses, and within the committee college system to hire faculty of color. Right? So we need to get rid of that affirmative action ban.

John B. King Jr:

We know financial aid matters. We have to look at the level of federal aid. Pell grants, in 1980, accounted for almost 80% of the cost of a public four year degree. Today, they account for about 28%. We out to double Pell grants. We ought to increase the Cal grant, right? We ought to make more financial aid available. That would make it more possible for students of color, who are more likely to be from more modest means, to be able to go to these universities. These universities need to look at their admissions practices, their faculty hiring, their campus climate, and importantly, their transfer policies. If the UCs and CSUs want to have a more diverse students, we both know where they should come look. They should look at the state's community colleges.

Eloy Ortiz Oakley:

That's right. Yeah, no, I completely agree. And we have so many barriers to students of color and low income communities. This year we've really heard a lot about the barriers that standardized admission tests creates. And so glad to see so many universities, whether altruistically or not, taking advantage of this environment to rethink their admissions policy. So hopefully something good comes out of all this, with regard to admissions.

Eloy Ortiz Oakley:

Let me ask you one more question before we wrap up, and I think it's, certainly for us on the West coast, the elephant in the room. And I won't get into the politics too much, although I'm always tempted, but we here in California have had our challenges with the department of education in DC. And I know that you're very familiar with how the department of education works. And of course, as a former secretary, you understand that role and you have a unique perspective of the role of the department of education. So I, along with many of leaders in public education, as well as throughout California, have had serious

concerns about the decisions that have been made, everything from how we think about for-profits, to what support for students that attend our public colleges and universities. How do you view what's happening in the department of education, since you're really only a few years removed? And what advice do you have for states like California, which are trying to pursue an equity focused agenda in the current political environment?

John B. King Jr:

Yeah. Well, look, it probably won't surprise you that in my view, that the current administration has been an extraordinary failure, and the education department in particular has been a disaster. The job of the education department is to, in my view, protect civil rights, advance education equity. If you look at the history of the education department, going back to the elementary and secondary education act, the higher education act, the creation of the department during the Carter administration, the history of the department, right, is grounded in a civil rights history. The federal role, those 1965 laws, the elementary secondary education act, the higher education act, those were about civil rights. The creation of the education department in the Carter administration, that was about addressing civil rights.

John B. King Jr:

So if we use those as the criteria, the administration has gone backwards on protecting students against sexual assault and sexual harassment on campus. They've gone backwards on protections for transgender students. They've gone backwards on protections against disparate discipline in the K-12 context for black and Latino students. They've gone backwards on students from predatory for profit colleges. We did a tremendous amount of work in the Obama administration to crack down on schools that were taking advantage of students, stealing from them. And what the current administration did was they brought people from those predatory for profit institutions, and put them in charge of higher ed policy. And they have then systematically dismantled the protections we put in place for students, and the ways in which we were trying to make whole the students who had been taken advantage of by those schools.

John B. King Jr:

So on the civil rights front, a disaster. On the equity front, well, really the department at this moment should be championing investment in saving the early childhood sector, protecting K-12 from cuts, and protecting public higher ed from cuts, and actually increasing investment in education to try to help rebuild our economy. But instead, the department's invisible. Other than some reckless calls to open schools in person regardless of the public health conditions, they're largely invisible. They're not fighting for education equity. So it's been a disaster, and that's not a partisan point. If you look back to prior administrations, Republican and Democrat, the leadership of the department saw their responsibility as advancing civil rights and education equity. They may have had different philosophies about it, but they were clear that that was the mission. That has not been true of this administration. And so what should States do? They should Sue frequently.

Eloy Ortiz Oakley:

We do that.

John B. King Jr:

To challenge ... Right, exactly, to challenge some of the misinterpretations of the law. And then they should create state initiatives to protect students, whether it's protecting the ability of undocumented students to continue their education, whether it is putting in place state regulatory oversight of bad actor for profit institutions, but states really have to protect their students themselves, because they can't count on the federal government.

Eloy Ortiz Oakley:

Right. No, I think you're exactly right. I think the only time we interact with this department, unfortunately, is in federal court. And it's just amazing to me. Hoping to enjoy a conversation like we're having with you, with Margaret spelling, George W. Bush's secretary of education, and obviously a Republican administration, but it was nothing like we're experiencing now. There was always an interest in improving public education. And you can disagree on the way to do that, with the priorities, but you were always on the same page when it came to supporting students. In this environment, I don't know what page we're on. But anyway ...

John B. King Jr:

That's right. That's exactly right.

Eloy Ortiz Oakley:

So, John, I really appreciate you being with us. If there's anything that you'd like our listeners to know about Ed Trust, or things that you're working on in the future that we should keep an eye on, what would that be?

John B. King Jr:

Yeah, sure. Well, look, I think we need Congress to step up here and make a significant investment to protect public higher education. We need action on another stimulus bill. Now we need that action to direct resources to community colleges in particular, which are vital to the future wellbeing of not only our economy, but I would argue our democracy. We need Congress to step up and address the digital divide issues that we're facing. And long term, we need a reauthorization of the higher education act, that honors the civil rights tradition of the original higher education act of 1965.

John B. King Jr:

And to me that means at least doubling Pell. It means making it possible for students to earn a college degree debt-free. It means expanding Pell access to undocumented students, and to incarcerated students. It means eliminating artificial barriers that prevent students who were formerly incarcerated from participating fully in educational opportunity. It means investing in partnerships between community colleges and employers, to strengthen access to economic opportunity. It means better data transparency, so that we can know which programs are succeeding and where students need more support. That vision is possible. And we all, across every dimension, civil rights organizations, higher ed institutions, student organizations, we should be organizing for a vision of the higher education sector that meets the moment, that responds to the challenges we face as a country and says, "Education is our path towards longterm economic development."

Eloy Ortiz Oakley:

Well, I think that is the perfect way to close, really meeting the moment, because that's exactly where we need to be right now in our country's history. So John, thank you so much for being on our show. Thank you for the work that you're doing at Ed Trust, and for all you did for us in higher education as the secretary of education. Really appreciate everything that you do, so thank you for being with us.

John B. King Jr:

Thanks for your leadership. Appreciate the opportunity.

Eloy Ortiz Oakley:

All right. Well, you have been listening to another episode of the California Community Colleges Chancellor's Office Podcast. I've had the pleasure of talking with John B. King, president and CEO of Ed Trust, as well as a former US Secretary of Education. Thanks for joining us, and we will be back to you soon.

Recording:

Be sure to join us for the next California Community Colleges Podcast. This has been a California Community Colleges presentation.