

VCCCD prepares for post-COVID aftermath

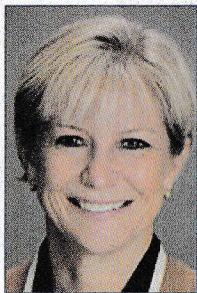
By Dianne McKay

Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, Ventura County Community College District has worked tirelessly to adapt to the new normal, pivoting in every way possible to provide engaging learning opportunities for students at Moorpark, Oxnard and Ventura colleges while making safety a top priority. Now, with vaccination rates increasing and a clear light at the end of the tunnel, the district faces a completely new set of challenges as we prepare to welcome students back to campus.

HELP WITH HARDSHIPS

The pandemic hit our most vulnerable students the hardest, with many dropping out in the past year. Students who struggle are much more likely to succeed with in-person classroom teaching than online. Due to a lack of technology and a quiet space for online learning, these students were least equipped to deal with the drastic change in education delivery.

Now that we are preparing to return to in-person learning, giving students a much greater chance to succeed, the challenge is helping them find their way back. Many went to work to help during tough economic times and may not be able or willing to return. Community college students don't get the same kind of financial aid as four-year



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college students do.

The assumption when the system was established was that community college students would be living at home and not have rent and living expenses, but that's not the reality for most of our students — especially those who need financial aid and are the first in their families to attend college. Many experience significant poverty, often living out of their car or couch surfing when possible.

With this in mind, our district is focusing on support systems for these vulnerable students. From student services to help with basic needs, counseling and tutoring, to scholarships, financial aid and grants, we are striving to remove barriers, improve access and facilitate success for lower-income students.

ALLEVIATING SAFETY CONCERNS

Full-time equivalent student enrollments decreased by approximately 11% in the fall and spring semesters, compared to last year. In addition to financial hardships preventing students from enrolling, many may also have concerns about safety — and it is our responsibility to help them feel comfortable returning to campus.

We have created comprehensive plans to ensure the safety of our students, staff and community, and we are now focusing on communicating that the district is working to safely reopen and is taking every possible step to protect the health of everyone involved.

Our ability to safely offer several programs that required in-person learning during the pandemic—like the Fire Academy, dental hygiene program, nursing,

auto tech, and, of course, the America's Teaching Zoo Moorpark College—is a testament of our commitment to safety. We were recognized nationally with the prestigious Bellwether Award for quickly transforming the Fire Academy to a safe in-person environment, allowing much-needed first responders for the area to join the local labor market.

FOCUSING ON DIVERSITY

As we reflect on the past year and prepare for a better future, we have been carefully examining our policies and procedures through the lens of improving diversity, equity and inclusion in all areas. One of the benefits of virtual meetings during the pandemic was having access to speakers who otherwise would not have come to our campuses. Without travel as a barrier, we had the opportunity to learn from experts in this field, and we will continue to do so in the weeks, months and years to come.

Our primary post-pandemic objectives as we return to campus are protecting the health of our students and employees, removing economic barriers and increasing diversity to create an environment where each of our students can safely learn and progress. This journey will not be without its challenges, but we will meet every obstacle with resilience and determination, emerging stronger than ever to benefit all of our students and community.

• Dianne McKay is a member of the Ventura County Community College District Board of Trustees.