

Harper College thrives by removing barriers to student success

Q&A with **Dr. Avis Proctor**, President, Harper College

William Rainey Harper College is a public community college in Palatine, Illinois, which opened in 1967 that currently serves approximately 35,000 credit and noncredit students. Dr. Avis Proctor brings over 25 years of experience as a mathematics educator and academic administrator focused on teaching, service and research into her role as the sixth president of Harper College. We recently spoke with her to learn how she's engaging the community and enabling student success to help Harper successfully serve its mission of equity of access and bettering lives through education.



What has been your vision for Harper College since you arrived in 2019?

Equity permeates the work that community colleges do. Sometimes people view community college as a last chance opportunity to rise out of poverty or achieve career changes. As a community college, it is so important that we are responsive to the needs of students, as well as the needs of employers. To that end, we've been partnering with employers and understanding what their needs are and designing relevant programs for our students.

We've also put a premium on making sure people have the right information at the right time, that they understand how they can fund their education, and have the right resources they need to make those decisions. Student success is deeply embedded in our culture, operations, and strategic vision.

How have you prioritized equity of access to education?

Everyone understands that equity is important, but in order to make real progress, there needs to be a shared understanding of what equity means for our institution. So I asked our Diversity and Inclusion Committee to define equity for Harper. I also established a new position of vice president for diversity, equity and inclusion, both as a symbol to the community of equity's strategic importance but also to demonstrate that it would be infused into everything that we do. We make sure we're considering everyone, and it's important to have diverse perspectives at the table so we don't mistakenly overlook anyone.

The pandemic accelerated and narrowed a focus on issues around equity of access. In response, we initiated or promoted emergency grants, technology loans, a mental health support app, a Finish Line Grant (for students who are close to completing their program but have encountered a financial setback), as well as enrollment initiatives.

We want to avoid the possibility of a lost generation due to the pandemic. We know community colleges have been seeing enrollment declines—even above national averages—during COVID, but at Harper we've had a very strong retention strategy and a focus on removing the financial barriers for those considering beginning or restarting their educational journeys. This allowed us to maintain strong enrollment.

How has Harper lessened the impact of COVID-19 on enrollment?

Typically, in an economic downturn, there is a surge in enrollment at community colleges. But COVID-19 was different because it affected nearly every part of the economy. In some ways the decline in community college enrollment was somewhat representative of the inequity in our economy and society, when it came to who was affected most by job losses, the infection rate, and the uneven access to internet connectivity.

We tried to address this by offering flexibility, shining a light on opportunities, and simplifying the student experience. For delivery of education, we offered different modalities: synchronous classes at a fixed time online or asynchronous classes available at any time online. The latter really helped students with varying circumstances like having children of their own to

“Community colleges are the engine to economic growth in the U.S. and will be critical to the rebuilding effort post pandemic.”



educate, or elderly parents to care for. Students have really responded and it's even empowered students to return to finish their education, an option that wasn't really possible before flexible online learning. This helped us stay ahead of both national and state-wide trends for enrollment; while others are sometimes seeing double-digit losses.

What role do you see community colleges playing in the economic recovery post-COVID-19?

Community colleges have long been a catalyst for jumpstarting the economy. Part of the reason for that is we're very accessible, nimble and flexible, and we can quickly stand up new programs in response to the strongest needs. We draw on data from the labor market, from the needs of industry, and have direct conversations with our community to ensure we are aligned.

The jobs of the future won't all require bachelor's degrees, but they will require training and credentials beyond high school. Community colleges provide a pathway to stable, even high-earning careers, and do so without creating a lot of student loan debt. Community colleges are the engine to economic growth in the U.S. and will be critical to the rebuilding effort post pandemic.

You recently invested in Oracle Cloud Applications for your ERP, HCM and EPM platforms. How does that fit into your vision for Harper?

Moving to the cloud was about responsible stewardship of our resources. It helps with data security, risk management, and it's going to help us develop reports and improve efficiency. We will be able to look at data at a deeper level to strengthen our workforce planning and decision making. It enables us to shift resources to those that remove barriers to student success and engage the community. An effective institution can focus more on its mission while building more efficiencies into our work processes via cloud technologies. The cloud enables us to automate and transition routine functions to Oracle, freeing us to focus more on students. That also relates to our value of equity, because we can help more students access an education—and succeed.

For example, the data we have now allows us to show students how they're progressing while at Harper, so we can make sure they're hitting certain thresholds or milestones and staying on pace to reach their goals. The cloud ensures that Harper is always using the latest technology, and that we have access to a stream of continuous innovation. This helps us to improve our business processes and provide our community with a better institutional experience.

Working with Oracle is one significant step forward, and we will continue to build and improve the efficiency and intelligence of our operations so that we are better positioned for the future.

ORACLE
Education and
Research

UB University
Business