

## Establishing LGBTQ+ Community at Community Colleges



Mesa Community College, Photo courtesy of CactusPilot/Shutterstock

In April's Higher Ed Careers interview, during Community College Month and Campus Pride Month, HigherEdJobs spoke with Nicole Collins and Beth Ann Wright from Mesa Community College in Mesa, Arizona. They shared their thoughts, goals, and practices on establishing LGBTQ+ community at their community college.

**Andrew Hibel, HigherEdJobs:** In many instances, community colleges can provide different opportunities for their communities. What are the unique opportunities and obstacles for community colleges when it comes to LGBTQ+ diversity initiatives? And how does being in a large system of community colleges make the circumstances even more unique?

### **Nicole Collins and Beth Ann Wright, Mesa Community**

**College:** Our community college is located within the community it serves and draws its students mainly from that area, thus getting a stratum of the mentality that represents our community. Individuals perceived by a majority group as being "different" run the risk of being singled out. If that attention is fueled by prejudice and misinformation by that majority, it could result in destructive biases being fostered, as well as potential harm being rendered against the innocent people of that population. Much the same way that prejudice exists due to the color of one's skin, ethnicity, or able-bodiedness, the LGBTQ+ community has been negatively impacted by individuals that use stereotypes and misinformation, without developing relationships with the individual, and respecting the value they bring to a campus environment.

The colleges within the Maricopa County Community College District (MCCCD) function with some autonomy and are privileged to serve an extremely diverse student population based on each college's surrounding demographics. This autonomy is helpful as each college is poised to better address the needs of their communities in a dynamic academic and jobs skills landscape. A major obstacle when it comes to LGBTQ+ initiatives is the lack of demographic data, which makes it more difficult to measure improvement. Regardless, our district and college strive to positively impact the LGBTQ+ community by incorporating in our practices and within our mission, vision, and values -- diversity, equity, and inclusion -- for all of our students and by intentionally providing services, resources, programs, and inclusive pedagogy geared toward those students. When the college leadership and staff truly embrace understanding of our LGBTQ+ students, without attempting to "assimilate" them, we give these students the recognition and appreciation they deserve as members of our community.

**Hibel:** How do you build an inclusive community college campus climate? And how has it differed during pandemic times?

**Collins:** Mesa Community College's first strategic direction in our 2020-2025 strategic plan is "MCC is an agent for diversity, equity, and inclusion." This aligns with our mission to create an inclusive and vibrant learning community where everyone is supported to achieve success which was adopted over the summer semester 2020.

As we went virtual during the pandemic, some of our students and employees struggled with the new online environment. I and my DEI Council co-chair met with each of the more than 90-member DEI Council and Advisory Board to build the trust necessary to develop strong relationships. We litigated each space desiring to provide the safety that is foundational in possible. By using HigherEdJobs for our colleagues and students and how we use cookies.

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An important thing to remember about inclusion is how it is a relational construct and foundational to one's sense of belonging. Critical in providing that experience to our students is first understanding how we see ourselves and how others see us. The transition that students and employees had to make from being present on campus to a partial or fully online platform was a major upheaval to so many aspects of how students process relationships, as well as to build an understanding of those unlike themselves.

Social media has had a positive impact by giving communities the accessibility to connect and unite around important issues. Unfortunately, this increased connection has also given a voice to negative remarks, which can build social and emotional walls among students, that the personal interaction was attempting to tear down. However, there have been those who have chosen to learn more about others, have done their own research to learn about things they were not familiar with, and have not allowed the negative subcultures to permeate their thinking with hateful speech and thought.

We were forming a Diversity, Equity, and Inclusivity (DEI) Council prior to the pandemic. The coronavirus did not thwart our efforts. We persevered, pulling the college's existing programs and resources under the DEI umbrella for review and embarked on the work outlined in our mission of creating an inclusive and vibrant learning community where everyone is supported to achieve success by:

- providing strategic oversight, guidance, and accountability along with processes and resources for DEI initiatives and goals;
- centralizing DEI efforts and communication with our internal and external college communities;
- supporting and sustaining a system of inclusion and equity for ALL students and employees; and
- guiding ongoing student and professional development as related to DEI.

**Hibel:** For Nicole, as counseling faculty and a counselor on a community college campus, how do you promote/highlight your services across campus for all students?

**Collins:** The Counseling Department at Mesa Community College provides free counseling services to help students successfully manage their personal, academic, and career development via video chat, phone, or in-person appointments. In addition to our partnerships with college departments and community stakeholders, we promote counseling support services and programs through a dynamic blend of academic courses, presentations, support groups, workshops, seminars, and professional credentials. Additionally, we strive to model our department's mission by embracing and celebrating the kaleidoscope of diversity through our expertise, best practices, compassion, professionalism, stewardship, and work ethic. Moreover, the Counseling Department at Mesa Community College delivers a plethora of critical support in countless arenas essential to not only students' success but to institutional effectiveness, community efficacy, and societal welfare.

As counselors, we serve on instrumental district and college committees, projects, councils, and executive boards responsible for fostering student leadership, strengthening students' civic engagement, and collaboratively innovating with a wide variety of colleagues and community resources to create and implement critical components to support student success. We individually, and collectively, advocate for our students on multiple levels to bridge student success gaps and support our students' well-being by remaining current and competent with the continuous shifts, trends, and issues impacting students and our communities.

We also provide tips, tools, and resources to our students via the college's social media channels. The college's website was significantly updated in the spring of 2020 based on engagement data to make finding resources and services easier for students. We added an "Ask MCC" button/link to the college's homepage to offer students, and employees assisting students, a one-button link to connect to all of our virtual services, which sometimes are difficult to find (i.e. contact Enrollment Services if you need transcripts or for basic needs support contact Student Life & Leadership.)

**Hibel:** For Beth Ann, what is the primary goal for those working in student life on a community college campus? What steps do you take to accomplish that goal?

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**Wright:** Student Life provides opportunities beyond the classroom for students to become engaged in the college and find basic life supports to succeed. Studies have long indicated that students who are engaged in campus activities during college are more successful than students who are not. It's the goal of Student Life & Leadership to help students find connections to the campus.

Student Life & Leadership at Mesa Community College has four main areas of focus: clubs and organizations (including an active student government); campus and virtual events, leadership training opportunities, and important services such as our free Mesa Market food pantry and monthly fresh food distributions to students and the community. Co-curricular and multicultural programming is another way we support what students are learning in their classes and a sense of belonging at the college.

**Hibel:** What are your best practices in developing LGBTQ+ campus events and initiatives? What event or accomplishment are you most proud of?

**Wright:** It is very important to have a student-led club or organization as well as established, consistent staff and employees to support the students with campus activities and the transition when students graduate or transfer. Connections with community partners are always beneficial as well as opportunities for mentorships.

MCC Friendly Colors (LGBTQ+ student club) helped to plan and co-sponsor an Equality Maricopa employee group for the LGBTQ+ community including students and employees from the other nine MCCCCD community colleges. The inaugural Pride of Maricopa conference highlighted the LGBTQ+ community, while creating a safe and inclusive environment. The conference commemorated National Coming Out Day, celebrated the diverse community, and discussed issues impacting the queer and trans communities.

**Hibel:** What advice would you give for anyone looking to work in diversity, equity, and inclusion at a community college?

**Collins and Wright:** The work of diversity, equity, and inclusion is a very challenging and rewarding experience that will never be complete. Unfortunately, some individuals and organizations can be reluctant to embrace an inclusive environment. However, when an institution's leadership has made a clear commitment to the success of ALL students, then inclusion is not a byproduct, but a norm for the college community.

Students have a myriad of higher education institutions to choose from when looking to begin their career goals. Private or public four-year institutions tend to be more expensive, selective, and more challenging for non-traditional students to gain access to. Community colleges are ideal because of their low cost, smaller class sizes, and ease of access. Because of the diverse community we serve, DEI efforts are geared towards addressing not only academic needs, but needs that involve food, housing, health, and family challenges that can impede student success.

Collaboration is key when doing DEI work. At Mesa Community College, the DEI Council in partnership with Guided Pathways for Success and Strategic Planning, are working to address the myriad of issues our students face in order to increase student success rates. We will accomplish these goals with individuals at all levels and positions collaborating within the college creating a more diverse, equitable, and inclusive environment to give our students a greater sense of belonging. When we put the needs of our students first, we are able to celebrate their success with them.

**Hibel:** In attempts to embrace diversity, The **American Association of Community Colleges**, as well as the College Board, have identified various demographics on community college students regarding race/ethnicity, age, parenthood, or disability which is positive, but it is more difficult to find demographics on students who identify as LGBTQ+. What are your thoughts on this?

**Collins and Wright:** Requirements for federal funding is one of the main reasons demographic data from colleges are collected. The data helps track the success of various underrepresented groups within higher education that may otherwise be overlooked.

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Many higher education institutions are choosing to give students the option to self-identify their sexual and gender identities. By collecting this data, institutions have the ability to be informed and support admission, retention, and graduation rates. We would be remiss not to consider factors that impact the collection of this data. First, whenever

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sensitive data is collected, the organization must ensure its employees are adequately trained, such as Safe Space Training, which addresses students and employees who may only feel safe enough to report with that designation clearly identified. Next, the college must intentionally focus its programming on providing an inclusive and diverse environment. Lastly, the institution must address students feeling unsafe from the bias that may accompany this disclosure by having safe ways to report issues that may arise.

**Hibel:** Often times there are **resources** available, and events aimed for students, but how does a prospective staff or faculty member know that the community college they are considering is inclusive for employees?

**Collins and Wright:** We recommend potential employees review information that is readily available on a college's website. **MCC's Strategic Plan**, Mission, Vision, and Values statements, Strategic Directions, and goals are all outlined online as well as the strategies we are taking to meet our goals.

**Hibel: Scholarships** specifically aimed for LGBTQ+ students are becoming more prevalent as shown by several community colleges. How do these types of efforts help support the inclusion outreach and are there other things that community colleges could be doing for outreach to prospective students?

**Collins and Wright:** A scholarship is a grant or payment that is used to support a student's education, awarded on the basis of academic or other achievement. Many scholarships have an academic component, but adding the achievement qualification helps to recognize life experiences. We as a community should actively recognize and reward the contributions of students in the LGTBQ+ community and have achieved in advancing the causes of their communities, to fighting the racial hatred and stigma they experienced. A school that has scholarships or support programs specifically for these students is more desirable because students can see they are there as a result of the mission of the college to bridge communities, fight stereotypes, and prepare every student for a successful collegiate experience. We and our colleagues at MCC are creating an inclusive and vibrant learning community where everyone is supported to achieve success. We are successful when our students thrive.

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