CLASS WARFARE

INSIDE: Peter Reyes did the near impossible – quitting a gang and living to tell about it. Now, he’s looking for another escape route through higher education, while counseling an at-risk population on avoiding his past mistakes.
It's called the “palabra stick” or “talking staff,” and whoever possesses it has the floor to discuss life's challenges and personal blessings, or as they are described on this Thursday night in late August, “baggage and gifts.”

The Capitol building in the distance reflects the last sunlight of the evening through the window of a cramped conference room in the heart of downtown Denver, where Gang Rescue and Support Project (GRASP) is holding its weekly meeting.

At-risk youth, and some who’ve already experienced street life, intermingle with mentors attempting to squash the cycle that leads to poor decisions. And, as the final agenda item, gather in chairs to form what the group calls a healing circle.

Boys and girls – certainly not yet men and women – tackle heavy, adult-themed topics as the wooden stick is passed around like a psychological relay baton. Drinking problems, estrangement, engagement, unemployment: these topics are broached in heart-wrenching detail.

One client tearily admits that the way his life is spiraling out of control, it makes him feel like Alice dropping down the rabbit hole.

Peter Reyes, a former gang member and current Community College of Aurora student, is among those charged with catching him and lifting him out of that crevasse.

Reyes is running the healing circle, ensuring that speakers demonstrate truth and integrity in their words. He sets the rules, keeps the session moving by asking hard questions, and, when the stick has traveled 360 degrees, is tasked with providing a last word of encouragement.

A 12th grader at one point talks about perhaps going back to school.

"If you need help with anything, I got you," Reyes responds.

One young boy remains haunted by his mother's death.

"I see a lot of strength in you, bro," Reyes assures him.

Another young girl wonders aloud how to extricate herself from the pull of gang life. It's a heavy question, one that Reyes knows well. He's inquired that of himself hundreds of times over many years, since causing havoc on the north side of the metro area as a teenager, doing much of his work with his fists and not his words. Now, he's allowing his voice to create the direct impact.

One of the ways Reyes has filled the chasm inside himself is by committing to this type of volunteerism. He not only helps at GRASP, where he recently organized an eastside peace march in Aurora. He shuttles kids without rides to the weekly gang-prevention meetings or simply accompanies them to the movies to allow them an escape.

Reyes also runs similar groups with high-risk populations in schools and the community as a part-time job for Aurora Mental Health. There, he provides direction on academic and behavioral plans, interspersed with tales from his past and present.

CCA plays a large part in filling the divide that lurks inside Reyes, too. Going back to school after eight years away has instilled in the now 26-year-old a long-term vision that he hopes will take him away from the neighborhoods that once defined him to a place still unknown.

"There isn't an answer to what you fill the void with," he counsels the teen struggling to shed what seems to be her gang DNA. "You have to think about what will really help you, and it can be anything, really. I've done all kinds of things – boxing. Just don't give up when it doesn't work."

"But nobody's trying to help me," someone says later during his turn clutching the palabra stick.

"We are," Reyes responds.

"I know," the boy answers sheepishly.

"I want you to know that," Reyes says firmly, peering straight in the child's eyes. "You say it enough, you start to believe it."

Reyes joined GRASP as a client, and over time, has become one of its most reliable and well-respected volunteers.

Help others enough, he figures, and perhaps he can even the karma score. Just maybe he can one day stop looking over his shoulder for danger for his commission of the unpardonable street sin of quitting a gang.

Perhaps he can one day leave his people, his neighbor-
judging such actions. He'd get beaten for his missteps.

Wearing certain colors was, of course, taboo and could be perceived as a slight by the wrong folks, as well.

Complicating matters was that Reyes was light-skinned and of Puerto Rican descent. He was seen by many as white within the largely African-American area where he resided, but even Mexican sects didn't like him because he was deemed the 'wrong kind' of Hispanic.

"That was my introduction to the gang world, and I don't think I handled it very well," Reyes admitted. "I was trying to impress people and fit in and that got me into more trouble, where they kind of targeted me for that."

Reyes was an observer of gangs and not a participant through his middle school years and early into high school in his Park Hill neighborhood. He simply didn't understand the etiquette necessary to effectively maneuver within that world.

"At that point in my life, I was not cut out for that stuff. I didn't know how things worked," he maintained. "I would have gotten killed at that point in my life if I ran my mouth more since I couldn't back it up."

Reyes said he only participated in about five fights back then "and probably didn't participate in three of them, watching them slam my head into the ground."

Yet, clearly, Reyes' demeanor was beginning to change.

Bitterness was creeping in from the beatings he took and his inability to forcibly strike back. What kept him from digging his heels in deeper was fear and naiveté. So, he only imagined the gang experience. Thoughts didn't turn to action – yet.

"When kids would mess with me, I'd fantasize of getting up in class, taking a book, and just, 'Wham!' I would want to do it in my mind, but I was too scared. I wasn't used to fighting. It really wasn't in me," he said. "But I always wanted to do those things so that people would leave me alone."

Then, a breaking point. His mom and dad, with whom he already shared a complicated relationship, both were fired from good jobs. The family lost its house in the ensuing financial meltdown and was forced to move to a trailer in the suburbs north of Denver.

For Peter, there was shame that accompanied the new living arrangement. There was bitterness at the prospect of changing schools.

His timidity soon morphed into rage.

"That was kind of the turning point in my life. That's kind of when I went bad," he suggested, pushing his meal away for emphasis and leaning back in his chair.

"I was kind of sick of the way that things were in my previous neighborhoods – getting messed with and picked on, not really fitting in. So for this one, I had a mental check with myself saying, 'This is not going to be the same. It's going to be different here.' And I really did it. That's how I started dabbling with crime and gangs. It started off with just protection. But after time, it consumed me and because who I was. I went from nobody to somebody."

The feeling of importance it created became intoxicating. Reyes started on a tagging crew, just to tick people off and get his gang's name out into what was now his new community. When other crews would spray paint over their work, he and his comrades would show up at their rivals' school and beat the artistic side out of them.

Laying people out was a perverted sense of purpose. He could potentially move up the hierarchy. It became a driving force – a perverted sense of purpose.

"I got tired of people doing it to me, and I realized someone was going to do it no matter what," Reyes explained of his sudden metamorphosis into a street fighter.

"After awhile, I had to re-

change.

By his senior year of high school, two years removed from his shift up north, he was a full-fledged member of a totally new crew with a totally new set of rules. Most of the tagging crew didn't get promoted. Reyes did.

Friday's, bring two shirts to school, and change into the backup after inflicting pain. He'd then simply go home with a ready-made excuse about stomachaches or high

Happier times, growing up on Denver's eastside.
temperatures that didn’t exist and bring in a parent’s note on Monday.

And, driven by doubters, he pushed hard to graduate – and pushed even more buttons along the way. He’d taunt teachers by sleeping in class, awakening when a pop quiz was put in front of him, designed to expose him as an academic fraud, but failing to do so. His grades actually were good, in spite of himself. His senior year, he was offered a scholarship to a diesel mechanics school and, temporarily, felt he’d earned an I-told-you-so.

“I busted my (butt) to graduate. I took so much pride in that, being in class and the teachers not knowing what to do,” he said, adding, “I was the biggest jerk ever, but I did my homework.”

There was deep-seeded complexity to all of his actions. Teachers were scared of him. When called upon to pull him out of the class, security guards didn’t grab him and would only coax him to walk with them, fully aware of his reputation.

He’d become the bully of the bullies. Everyone knew it; well, nearly everyone.

“I used to train to gangbang,” Reyes remembered. “I had a punching bag. I would lift weights twice a day and I was on the high school wrestling team. My coach had no idea. I got my (butt) beat all season, but I didn’t do it for wrestling. I did it so I could suplex in the middle of the streets. I was in shape. But I was using it for the wrong reasons.”

At the same time, he often would sit with the kids in the trailer park who would routinely get hassled and serve as their protector. He had not long ago been in their shoes. And as much as he loathed the locale, he despised the treatment of these underdogs more.

He tricked himself into thinking he could live both lives – scholar and thug.

A brawl on school grounds three months shy of graduation disproved that warped viewpoint. He was expelled and lost his scholarship.

Even today, that incident haunts him. There’s a tinge of, ‘Oh, what could have been had he not been wronged’ subtext to his recollections. But when he’s subtly reminded of all the things he’d probably done for which there were no repercussions that could have produced the same end result, he fesses up.

“Yeah,” he said, face down, noding. “You’re right.”

Getting expelled had another unintended consequence: revealing to his family the person he’d become. Part of his anger, Reyes said, stemmed from the fact that his parents didn’t recognize the boy who eschewed Peter and now answered to a pair of colorful handles in the streets.

“They knew I was fighting and stuff, because there would be times I’d take lumps and frozen bags of vegetables would go missing because I’d use them as ice packs,” he said. “They started missing more and more because I was fighting more. I got a haircut in a design and my mom couldn’t see it but my sister did and saw that it was a gang sign. So everyone was slowly catching on, but rarely was I confronted about it.”

A sweep of his room by his parents removed any doubt of just who Peter Reyes had become. There were ice picks, brass knuckles, marijuana, rolling papers and scales. And since the cat was out of the bag, Reyes opted to flaunt what, to his family, had been his secret life.

“I’d wear my bandanas in the house. I’d smoke weed in the house. My homies would come over. It was full-out exposure from there.”

But getting jumped by five rival gang members, which precipitated the end of his schooling, was exactly the wrong kind of exposure. It was a movie premiere-sized spotlight shining right on him.

The complicated family dynamic didn’t preclude Peter’s mother fearing for his life. She implored him to bail to Chicago until things settled down.

Just before departing, Reyes had something of a bathtub epiphany. His thoughts drifted to his choosing a gang over his mother and picking friends over family. It let him to make a decision that day to not only flee to the Midwest, but consider bolting the gang life entirely.

“I knew what I was going to do wasn’t easy and maybe wasn’t possible. I knew it wasn’t the smartest thing because I knew my friends and how they were going to take it. But I knew it was the right thing to do.”

He was 18 when he left, nearly 21 when he returned. To say he’d gone over to the straight and narrow during his time away is folly.

During his Chicago escape, Reyes did what he had to do to live, using some of the survival skills he’d honed on the street as a means to that end. But, at least unofficially, he was out of the gang.

Funny thing, though: Leaving a gang isn’t the same as simply turning in your two weeks notice in the workplace. And, when it was time for Reyes to return to Colorado, this time to Aurora where his family now resided, it wasn’t a case of out of sight, out of mind where he was concerned.

“I know how the game goes,” he said. “There’s no getting out – ever.” At one point, Reyes considered taking a significant beating as a price to rejoin the gang over what could be a choice B, which was, potentially, an ugly death.

Nevertheless, he decided to try to beat the system and cut ties, partly out of foolish pride – that he was harder and stronger than everyone else – and because, to him, it didn’t add up to return to the streets after being away for so long.

Since when, it’s hardly been a clean break. There has been accidental run-ins. He’s needed to combat looking over his shoulder by making sure he was packing some sort of weapon at all times, just in case.

But his careful demeanor was balanced with a sort of death wish. He once inexplicably went by his old high school and sat across the street, where he would be, and was, in full view of everyone.

“With a gang, a mask comes along with it,” said Gerardo Lopez, a gang-prevention leader with GRASP who lived the thug life in California from age 14 until his early 20s. “Now they’re not called Little Peter or Little Johnny anymore. Now they’re called Killer, Psycho or Boxer and they feel they have to prove themselves to that level. And they keep this gangster mask on for many, many years.”

Lopez first met Reyes about 4½ years ago. Reyes was hustling at the time, one foot out of the gang, but one foot in trouble after return-
Change
From Page 4

ing from his forced gang hiatus.

“There’s different ways of
taking the mask off,” Lopez
continued. “You either take
it off or slide it off your face.
And when you slide it off
your face, it’s taking more
time. And that’s what we saw
with Peter. He did struggle
– back and forth; back and
forth. So, it was like sliding
it off your face then putting
it right back on. And I think
his biggest process of change
came from helping others.”

Reyes, for all the wrong
reasons, had been a role
model within a gang. They
looked up to him because of
his toughness. But he’s had to
turn his life around to respect
for the right reasons.

His past gives him credi-
bility behind his words and
actions that kids have
embraced.

“He’s putting hope and
faith into them,” Lopez said
of Reyes’ work with the
younger generation around
the area. “One girl said that
because of Peter, she con-
tinues to not give up. They
know Peter’s life isn’t perfect
or anything like that. But
whose is?”

Lopez joked the biggest
concern with Reyes now
isn’t that he’ll slide back
into his former life, but that
he’ll make good on his goal
of leaving town and live a
humble, anonymous life
elsewhere, far away from
GRASP.

At the same time, there’s
pride in knowing Reyes’
strong passions are being
channeled the right way.

“He has charisma. He
knows how to be respect-
ful to others. He presents
himself well and at the same
time, he has a huge heart,”
Lopez said. “He not only
wants to change himself and
help himself out, but take
people along with him – take
kids along with him.”

A new mask

It’s 15 minutes past a
scheduled interview to dis-
cuss Reyes’ life. Suddenly,
a beat-up, mid-1990s Honda
roars into the parking lot. An
apologetic Reyes approaches
the restaurant booth, ex-
plaining that he got caught
at the Department of Motor
Vehicles, where the license
for the car that just whizzed
by had been secured.

This isn’t just a mode of
transportation. It’s a key part
of an overall transformation.

Reyes joked that he cried
taking 22-inch rims off the
white Chevrolet Caprice he
also owns but now often sits
in his garage. Also gone is
the kicking beats produced
by a high-end stereo that
would call attention to any
car, much less a converted
police cruiser, which this ve-
hicle once was.

He drives the Honda more
now “because of the stigma”
of his former ride.

Reyes is removing many
of his more visible tattoos for
similar reasons: how he’ll be
perceived. He’s already rid
his hands of the artwork, so
he can wear a long-sleeve
shirt without potentially
drawing stares. Ink that
reads, ’Fear No Man’ on his
neck will be the next to go.

There’s a certain irony in
losing those words at this point
of his journey, when he’s let
his guard down the most.

“I just don’t want people
to think I’m the same knuck-
lehead I was when I was
younger.”

He didn’t start acquiring
the tattoos until his early
20s. It told his story in way
sometimes he couldn’t. It
was a means to let his pain
and anger out.

When his best friend was
murdered several months
ago, he marked the occasion,
literally. “I felt better after I

The flames represent
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The horror and beauty of
the surface than his other
gang tattoos. The left
arm, he added, “This is

The right arm – the good
side in the good versus evil
motif – bears his murdered
cousin’s and grandmother’s
names. There’s an angel, a
rosary, praying hands, and
another RIP for a friend who
was shot. Flames seem to
engulf his forearm.

“The flames represent that
I can either do good with
these hands,” he explained,
“or burn everything down.”

Student body

It’s Monday. And on this
sunny afternoon, Reyes is
using his hands to secure
his backpack on his shoul-
ders for the first day of CCA
classes.

College is perhaps the
biggest part of his metamer-
phosis, though less noticeable
on the surface than his other
changes.

There had been one pre-
novious failed attempt at get-
ting back inside a classroom,
when he returned from Chi-
cago. The experiment ended
after about a year. While
standing outside Emily
Griffith School downtown,
a gang-banger rolled up to
Change

From Page 5

him in his car. The two exchanged threats and backed off. Semester over.

The canine units that go through there surely would have found something had he stuck around.

He tried to earn a general-equivalency degree in a high-school program and in one week passed all of the tests, save for the math section. Spurred by a deadline that would wipe out his previous scores, he tried to pass the GED again and did so on the second try.

But he still didn’t feel good about himself, despite his association with GRASP already having begun and his trajectory seemingly headed upward.

“I felt the choices I made had ruined my life,” he said, candidly. “I’m just getting my GED at 24 and people in my class are graduating college, coming home and enjoying their years of work now. It was like, ‘Damn, I should have been there’. I had a scholarship and everything.”

That was the past, though, and it couldn’t be changed. The present didn’t seem much better.

He was growing tired of dead-end jobs and going back to the street hustle to make extra money dealing drugs. He was becoming worn out from always feeling that he was being targeted and having to load up for bear to ensure he could live through whatever may present itself on any given day.

So, college it was. CCA was situated away from downtown, a big plus. He liked the challenge of learning, and actually missed it ever since the 2007 riot that prompted his expulsion.

On his first day at CenterTech campus last fall, Reyes steeled himself like a prizefighter about to enter the ring for a huge fight. He remembered feeling anxious and nervous.

“I remember telling one of my friends during the first month that everybody knows my real name and no one calls me my street names. They think I’m just some smart kid in the class and have no idea who I am outside of the class.”

A high grade point average his first semester boosted his confidence, even though he admitted to feeling some staves.

Jackson said, “especially as a man of color in this type of environment and being able to navigate it, with him not knowing the ins and outs of this type of institution and being able to do it successfully, particularly with all of the things he has to deal with.”

Jackson has become close with Reyes to the point where they speak about numerous aspects of life outside of school.

“One of his best friends ever since the 2007 riot that prompted his expulsion.”

He knew he was bright. He just needed to prove it without trying to get over on his teachers this time. It shaped his goal: “to be the shining star in the class, to be a friendly guy, be a cool person and make them feel different than they already do.”

Robyn Jackson, advisor in CCA’s Trio program, met Reyes after he saw a sign advertising open spots and inquired about its services. The support he would receive aligned with what he was missing in his life. And by last spring, Reyes was lauded as a North Star winner, given to an inspirational student who’s overcome obstacles in order to succeed.

“It’s very impressive,” just passed away because of gang violence and Peter had to make a really huge decision of giving in or stepping away from that environment and really isolating himself,” Jackson added. Fortunately, he isolated himself, but it was for the good because everyone else in his realm either is in jail, has died or is running from the law. So he had to really think about who he really is and how he can navigate this environment without family and friends, because it’s all tied together.”

Reyes’ plan is to build a solid educational founding before his planned move away from the area. He’s currently focusing on Criminal Justice in his studies.

“We give people the tools enough to get out of a gang and make right choices,” said Lopez, his co-worker at GRASP. “But because you get out of a gang doesn’t mean your life has changed completely. Now, you have to get a job. Now you see what your responsibilities are. You have to provide for yourself and your family, if you have kids or not.

“For him to be busy in a positive atmosphere and be surrounded by positivity around him such as the job and college is huge. You just can’t take the person out of the gang and not replace it with something else. And Peter has found his replacement.”

“Change”

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The all-college kickoff breakfast on Aug. 20 was serious fun, where eggs and pancakes were served with side orders of cheerleaders, hand-clappers, the wave ... and a healthy portion of CCA’s strategic vision moving forward.
Assignment allows student to turn page

Mindset changes after critical look

Laurel Esstman, now a high school senior, had never taken a business class when she opted to get an introduction to the subject in a CCA intro course this summer.

It’s a decision that could have lasting implications.

Esstman didn’t just receive a grade but may have found her calling, courtesy of Heather McMichael’s book review assignment. The teenager discovered a potential future that perhaps could merge her passion for altruism, desire to travel and need to be adequately compensated.

“Before reading this book I always thought I had to choose between being successful and helping people, but my outlook on the future has changed,” Esstman said in her written submission examining, “The Promise of a Pencil: How an Ordinary Person Can Create Extraordinary Change,” by Adam Braun.

“I learned helping people is how I want to be successful,” the student added. “I now do not define success by money. I want to help children gain access to education and, by doing that, I will not only be happy, but also successful.”

McMichael, chair of the college’s Business department, developed the book-review model at a university where she previously worked and installed it into the BUS 115 curriculum at CCA over the last couple of years.

The students are asked to not just write a book report – which summarizes content in written form. Rather, a book of a their choosing is submitted for presentation to the class. The assignment is more of an analysis of the book: why the student chose it and what he or she hoped to learn from it.

The review also includes lessons learned, a critique of the author’s presentation, and a critical examination of the data presented.

“I thought it wouldn’t be possible to do something to change the world and still be successful,” Esstman said in a phone interview, “Adam Braun made a difference while still staying true to his values.”

Braun’s bestseller discussed the creation of a nonprofit that builds schools and helps children in the developing world get an education. He wrote that his inspiration largely came from a meeting in India with a young boy on the streets begging for food and money. When he asked the boy what he wanted most in the world, the response was, “a pencil.”

The campaign Pencils of Promise was born out of that encounter and has since resulted in the for-purpose organization that has since built more than 300 schools, trained teachers and funded scholarships.

Braun’s book helped change the non-profit archetype into a “for-purpose” model where organizations make money in order to tackle social issues. So, the business content and its application to the CCA course content was clear beyond any visceral reaction Esstman may have had.

Esstman was so moved by the author’s message, she backed up her words by actions. Her 17th birthday party this year was a fundraiser, in which she asked family and friends via e-mail and Facebook to donate to Pencils of Promise in lieu of gifts.

“The book inspired me to want to help these kids get an education because I’ve been so fortunate to have education given to me, and they don’t have the necessary resources to get educated.”

McMichael noted that the book review assignment, we weren’t sure how students would respond to it,“ McMichael added. “But they love it.”

Students have written about wanting to always run their own restaurant and how they had ideas of how it might look, but how it’s ‘now raised questions I never even knew I should have.’ Students have started retirement plans because they’ve read about money management. We get all kinds of write-ups.

“When we first launched this assignment, we weren’t sure how students would respond to it,” Esstman discussed having done book reports in the past and maintained that the book review concept was considerably more impactful.

“The assignment was presented in a way that I’ve never learned before,” she said. “You really got to critique the book and get into what the author really meant in the book.”

Such deep reflection ultimately may have shaped Esstman’s path. She continues to hold out hope that she’ll be able to travel the world, as Braun has done.

McMichael’s response: “I don’t know what’s going to happen two years down the road for a lot of these students, but in the moment, the idea that they’ve been inspired to think about something that they haven’t thought about before, that’s really the best we can hope for,” she said.

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**A Few Good Questions with Dr. Byron McClennen**

To say Dr. Byron McClennen is merely the Community College of Aurora’s liaison to the State Board of Community Colleges and Occupational Education gives short shift to a man whose professional life has been dedicated to improving higher education.

McClennen is a nationally renowned expert with 52 years experience working for, and with, community colleges. His strong focus continues to center upon student success, institutional effectiveness, developmental education, leadership, strategic planning, and organizational development and transformation.

He was met with a captive – and captivated – audience when he stopped by CCA on Aug. 10 to brief a group of more than two dozen college directors, chairs, deans and Cabinet members on his experiences.

McClennen’s hour-plus, question-and-answer session focused on exacting the will to do what is necessary to foster change, and he provided suggestions towards that path.

“What’s happening across the country is that we’ve really elevated the conversation around student success in a way that never would have happened in 40 of the 50 plus years I’ve been associated with community colleges,” he said after the session.

“They’re the right questions. And you have to start with the questions, that’s appropriate,” he added. “Then, the commitment to the agenda begins to emerge and has to be there.”

McClennen has experienced agendas and conversations in myriad forms throughout his distinguished career.

He’s coached 10 colleges, served as the director of student success initiatives at the University of Texas-Austin, provided oversight of leadership coaching for Achieving the Dream (a national, non-profit leader in championing evidence-based institutional improvement, affecting more than four million students), and directed a major collaborative of eight community colleges and 11 public school systems.

He’s been a community college CEO for more than three decades in five different locales, including 14 years as president of the Community College of Denver. McClennen’s also has served as a consultant to state governments and professional associations in 47 states and internationally.

“You need to talk about college through the eyes of the students,” McClennen suggested. “What the student experience is, is the college. And all too often, there are too many different versions of what that is, and too many students are lost because of that.”

Over the past decade-plus, McClennen has had 44 coaches working with community colleges that already are on board with transforming their work to increase student success.

Multi-day visits to such institutions has resulted in more than 2,200 reports that have helped inform the book, “Redesigning America’s Community Colleges,” by Thomas A. Bailey, Shanna Smith Jaggars and Davis Jenkins.

The concepts espoused in the book have been paired with the concepts espoused in the book (“Redesigning America’s Community Colleges”), the student literally follows a first-year pathway for a full-time student or a two-year pathway for a part-time student, something like that. But giving them clarity on what the next steps are at many colleges begins with an education plan in concert with advisors.”

**Colorado has done good work around helping degrees to transfer. But, for the college, there are still some problems associated with students self-advising to the extent where they are choosing courses that don’t fit in degrees with designation, or if they’re undecided, wasting time without a stated goal. How can CCA better reach in and help structure it for students so that they have a clear path?**

“Ideally, if you are really talking about the kind of pathway that’s being suggested in the book (“Redesigning America’s Community Colleges”), the student literally follows step-by-step what’s laid out, so that there’s no wasted time or energy and no lost classes. There’s a pathway laid out that can clearly monitor progress. ... But the colleges that are working on these kinds of issues are thinking about both full-time and part-time students. So you might think about a first-year pathway for a full-time student or a two-year pathway for a part-time student, something like that. But giving them clarity on what the next steps are at many colleges begins with an education plan in concert with advisors.”

**One of the intriguing ideas put forth in the book is starting with the end-game in mind, with the idea that every student, to the extent that they can, declaring at least a “meta-major” and the days of being undeclared for an extended time made a thing of the past. How do we better help students have the goal first – and help them decide where they should be headed – so that an accompanying plan can be implemented?**

“With career programs, the idea of stackable credentials is productive for some colleges. Some colleges have a clear path to an Associate of Applied Sciences, but miss the opportunities there would be for a certificate followed by another certificate, each of which would be followed by employment, if necessary. But stacked on top of each other they lead right to an associate degree and maybe even transfer to a four-year college to pursue a baccalaureate degree.

“But the notion of meta-majors is a good place to start a conversation, to be sure. And in some states, state law says what they are. The legislature in Florida recently said in class statute, ’Here they are.’ So, you might look at those meta-majors and how they’re laid out.

“Are they the right ones? Well, it is a good place to start as you start thinking about how you might organize yourselves. It lends itself to cross-discipline, cross-department conversations, and there are always fears that come up when you do that, because people begin to worry about maybe losing a pet course along the way that might not get into the pathway as an elective. So, there are a lot of lively conversations that come up. But the meta-major conversation is an important one.”

**One of the experiments ongoing at the college relates to advisors being embedded into certain discipline-specific departments, which has been helpful in developing step-by-step plans for students. The process also has included meeting with administrators and faculty at our top four-year transfer schools to ensure that accurate information is being forwarded to our students regarding next steps. Can you speak to the validity of that type of model and if that’s something you could see working if more universally applied?**

“It really becomes a necessary part of the ultimate model that comes out of the book. So, if you got to, say, seven or eight meta-majors and you have your advisors assigned so that they become somewhat expert in those disciplines grouped under a meta-major, then it works very well. My colleagues at Columbus State in Ohio are doing exactly that. Last year, they assigned three of their advisors to three different meta-majors in their college and they’re on a pathway to get all of them assigned.
McClenney

From Page 12

to meta-major areas that will emerge in their conversation."

S

o
times great ideas are interrupted by financial constraints. Do many of the schools that are out front on some of the ideas we’ve discussed have great resources or are they making do with what they have?

“I sometimes shock people when I say what I’m going to say. But it’s really not about money. It’s more about what people think is most important. So, if you have the kinds of conversations that produce the clarity about what’s most important, the money issues can pretty much take care of themselves. There’s never enough money to do all you’d like to do, but invest your energy in what’s most important and the most important next steps. That’s where colleges fall way short of what they need to do.

“Most colleges in the country have strategic plans, but they never think about a way they’re going to link that to the work they’re doing next year. And that’s the link that needs to be made. So, in the next year, what’s most important out of that strategic thinking? And the next steps are going to be one, two, three … it probably shouldn’t be more than three, since the more you have, the less emphasis you have on what’s important. And then, when you talk about money, it’s a question of, ‘Do we allocate resources in line with what we said is most important?’ That’s what follows if you’re disciplined in the work you do together.

“As far as people resources, you may have to talk about reallocation, as well. Reallocation of slots, positions. So when you have vacancies, don’t just jump to fill each one, but put it in the pot, and in the next round of allocating resources, where do we have a bigger need?”

D

uring a recent meeting with members of the Ethiopian community in Aurora, one of the messages was that enrollment could increase from its stakeholders if there wasn’t so much choice. How have the students at the colleges you’ve worked with responded to narrowing their choices, and saying ‘Here’s your schedule. You’re doing this?’

“You’d be surprised at the result there. The community college culture over the years has been a fascinating thing to watch. I’ve been at it a long time and we’ve always had this thought that we don’t want to mandate anything and that we’re here to provide opportunity. And if we’re providing opportunity, then the student has a responsibility to learn how to live up to it. We’re going to provide choices.

“The truth is that if you do focus groups with students, and we’ve had lots of evidence from focus-group work that my wife’s center (Dr. Kay McClenny’s Center for Community College Student Engagement) at the University of Texas did. Student engagement was one of the aspects that came out of that. So they’ve done hundreds of focus groups all over the country and students really respond positively to the idea of, ‘If you know something, we’ll help you succeed. Tell us what it is and we’ll do it. Even if I don’t quite like it, if I know everyone’s going to be doing it, I’ll do it.’

“Carefully planned, the pushback isn’t nearly as much as most people would think. Frequently the pushback comes from more traditional faculty members who started back in the 1970s and were imbued with a spirit of, ‘We’re going to provide opportunity and not narrow choices for students.’ So there has to be a solid conversation there as well. And if the results aren’t producing outcomes that we’re not proud of, we have to think of ways to do things differently. And that’s the conversation that gets you talking about pathways and plans, and monitoring progress towards outcomes.”

M

aking things mandatory and incapable is one of the themes you strongly advocate. How can that be done, say, in a gateway class setting when there are only 10 hours a week which may not allow for individual remediation, and what types of consequences are available for not adhering to what’s set forth as mandatory?

“The consequences have to be things like being in effect penalized in the grade of the course if what’s mandated isn’t done. You might even be administratively withdrawn if you don’t adhere to the expectations of the course, because you’ve set up what you’ve set up for them to succeed. And if they know that up front, they have to plan accordingly.

“What gets communicated up front is important, which then talks about the process in which you take students. There is no place for late registration in any of this. Let me say that again. There is no place for late registration in any of this. And it can’t be on the shoulders of individual faculty members. This has to be a college-wide decision that says we’re going to be about student success in new ways, and here’s the way it gets represented.

“The companion piece is student responsibilities. I’ve seen some great banners hanging in college hallways lately, eight or nine points, ‘Here are the student responsibilities. If you walk in our front door and choose to become a student here, here are the eight or nine things you have to step up and do.’ They’re laid out there and attractively presented. But they need to understand that and the motivation behind it, that you’re declaring to them and to the community that you’re stepping up your game on student success. In order to do that, here are some decisions we’re making in order to ensure that happens….

“And it takes a collective will. Your president can’t mandate that. She can, but it won’t work very well.”

H

ave you seen in guided pathways success limiting choices in classes?

“It’s a good step that can be taken. The reality is most colleges have too many courses in their course inventory. And that’s been done because faculty members love to teach what they leave to teach. That’s understandable. But at this point we’re kind of saying it’s time to reverse the field. The conversation is what’s going to serve student interests most effectively. Very few colleges can sustain the course inventories they have and do that. I would bet if you took a look, that in no more than 20 or 25 courses, you have 75 or 80 percent of your total enrollment. Once you understand that, in a sense, students are voting with their feet already.

“But there really is no way of sustaining the kind of course inventories that most colleges have and do the work you’re thinking about doing with pathways. Because we’re trying to narrow the choices for students to get them what they need to take the next step that they want to take.”

The book discussed an exploratory track, relating to a student is in his or her first year, not knowing what he or she wants to pursue. What’s your experience with that?

“The best experience that I am currently watching is at Valencia College in Orlando, Fla. They have what they are calling the new student experience that, this fall will be mandatory for every single student entering that college. It’s a completely redesigned student success course at the front door. That’s where the exploration takes place. If you’re not careful, and you get guided pathways where it’s going and you allow the biggest one of those to be the exploratory one, you’re not solving much. But what Valencia’s been working on very thoughtfully for about four years now, and I saw the evaluation data, is a model that’s promising and builds in co-curricular experiences to go along with the course that they’re taking.

“So, the course is called Student Learning Success. But the notion is that every student without exception starts his or her career in that course. Houston (Community College) realized what they needed was a differentiated student success course and started backing into the meta-major idea. So they created a student success course for Business majors, a student success course for STEM majors, fill in the blank. That captured their general area of interest, along with learning how to do college and career exploration.”
Welcome Fest
In Pictures

Clockwise from top: The thrill of victory and agony of defeat run simultaneously after a spirited game of Jenga falls to pieces; peace in the world via some delicious blue cotton candy; tied up in knots in a game of Twister; administrative assistant Stephanie Agner and personal trainer Jack Howard walked over from Building 859 at Lowry for a chance to show off a freshly drawn caricature; a drone equipped with a camera for use in a future CCA commercial is launched by a freelance photographer, who controls the unit with an iPad.
Clockwise from top: smiling for the camera; student-led organizations out in full force; a celebratory dance in front of Business Chair Heather McMichael after four reds in a row in Connect Four; peeking through a sea of holes; Tamara Conley, assistant to the vice president of instruction, can’t believe her eyes as she lifts a Jenga block out without doing damage; philosophy on the brain.
The National Science Foundation (NSF) awarded CCA a $570,000 grant over the next five years to support its efforts to open access to careers in Science, Technology, Engineering and Math (STEM). CCA has earmarked the NSF funding (grant number: 1458447) to provide approximately 48 two-year scholarships, as well as support and transition services for college-ready students enrolled full time in STEM-related fields.

“The STEM scholarships that this funding provides will allow our students to attend full-time, focus on their studies, maximize their considerable potential, and realize their academic and career aspirations,” CCA President Dr. Betsy Oudenhoven said. “We are very excited about the doors the NSF has opened for students who might not otherwise have had the opportunity or support.”

Welcome Centers at CentreTech and Lowry campuses sponsored “Welcome Days” on Aug. 24-25, the first two days of the fall semester. Welcome Centers were stocked with information sheets, maps, schedules and more to ensure that students’ first few days back at school were stress-free. The centers also offered tours and assistance with finding classes.

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Students interested in taking CLEP or DSST exams, allowing them to get credit for prior learning, can save $15 on proctoring fees for tests booked through Oct. 31. Please visit the testing center page on CCA’s website for more information.

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CCA is introducing an Honors Project Program, allowing those students choosing to participate to earn Honors credit and differentiate themselves in areas of interest. Work will be conducted outside of class and afford students more individual time with faculty.

Faculty was urged to discuss the fledgling project with entire classes and individuals, and submit proposals. Instructors will be given a $50 stipend for each project (up to three) that he or she designs and completes with a student.

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Welcome BBQ for Buckley Air Force Base residents and families on July 31. Food, college information and fun activities for children were available. Staff answered questions and provided tours of the CentreTech campus, while military families learned what it’s like to get a first-class education minus a commute.

Institutional Research released the 2015 CCA Graduate Report highlighting data for fiscal year 2014 graduates. CCA’s graduates are a diverse group: 53% are first generation students, and 44% are students of color. Students were happy with their education at CCA, as 96% indicated their CCA program met their educational goals well or very well.

The report highlighted outcomes both for Career/Technical (CTE) and Transfer graduates. Over 67% of students graduating with a transfer degree were continuing their education in Fall 2014, and 99% of transfer graduates said CCA prepared them well or very well for continuing their education. Over 86% of CTE graduates reported that they were employed, and 93% are employed or continuing their education.

The report also showcased the work of the CCA Career Paths Center, which works with all students on the next steps in their careers, whether that is employment or continuing education. The full report is available here.

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Career Services hosted its annual Fall Jobs and Internship Fair on the CentreTech campus on Sept. 2. About 70 employers were on hand to connect with current students and alumni for the purpose of hiring, networking and providing internships. This is the third straight year the event has taken place at CentreTech, providing outstanding results. Denver Cupcake Truck, Moe’s Original BBQ and Mike’s 2K Kitchen served food.

CCA’s student-led organizations held their 2nd Annual Club Kickoff on Sept. 9 at CentreTech. On-campus groups represented included: Behavioral Sciences Club, Colorado Film School Producers Guild, Fade In, Interfaith Alliance, International Student Association, LatinX Alliance, LGBTQ Student Alliance, Phi Theta Kappa, Student Government Association, and the Women’s Coalition.

Workshops for student-led organization leaders – touching upon budgeting, marketing, navigating finance paperwork and facilitating meetings – are scheduled throughout the fall. Sessions will be held Sept. 25 (CentreTech $100), Oct. 23 (CTC A108) and Nov. 13 (CTC A108). All three workshops will run from noon-1 p.m. Light refreshments will be provided.

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A Convocation procession is scheduled for Sept. 11 from 10-11 a.m. at the Fine Arts Forum on the CentreTech campus. Convocation is a new campus tradition, which will help set the tone for the student academic journey at CCA.

President Oudenhoven and student leaders will speak at the event. The gathering also will provide an opportunity to learn from successful students, meet faculty and staff, and celebrate another academic year.

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The college said goodbye to Joyce Benson-Fox, director of the Center for Workforce Development, during a farewell celebration at Lowery on Sept. 2.

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The film “Not in Our Town: Waking in Oak Creek” will be shown Nov. 12 from 12:30-1:45 p.m. in the Student Centre Rotunda at CentreTech. The movie centers on the Sikh community in Oak Creek, Wis., whose world was shattered by a deadly hate attack and its resiliency in the face of such turbulence. Together, a community rocked by hate is awakened and transformed by the Sikh spirit of relentless optimism.

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October is Breast Cancer Awareness Month. CCA is doing its part to spread the word by hosting the University of Colorado Health Sciences “Pink Life Saver” mobile mammography van on Oct. 13 (CentreTech) and Oct. 20 (Lowery).

Appointments can be scheduled by calling 720-848-1030. Walk-in appointments are available from 10 a.m.-4:30 p.m. Please bring your insurance card. Panel discussions, information tables and open-mic sessions will be held as part of accompanying campus events, running from 10:45 a.m.-2:30 p.m.

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CCA served as a sponsor of the City of Aurora’s Global Fest on August 22 and staffed a booth with college information. Global Fest celebrated the cultural diversity of Aurora with food, music, dance and activities representing Aurora’s many immigrant communities and their cultural traditions.

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Everyone has natural strengths. Discover yours at StrengthsQuest Workshops from 12-1:30 p.m. Sept. 17 in the Rotunda. StrengthsQuest Workshops are geared to help individuals better understand themselves and their talents, which potentially could help in academics and future employment.

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CCA is planning on 10-15 classroom visits this fall to watch CCAs teachers and learners in action. Those interested in having her observe during a one-hour time frame, please schedule an appointment with Tami Morrissey, administrative assistant to the president, at Tami.Morrissey@ccaurora.edu.

The Women’s Coalition at CCA is holding informational meetings for the campus club ROAR (Rights, Options, Awareness, Resources) on Sept. 11 (1-2 p.m., A108) and Sept. 14 (5:30-6:30, A108).

Students interested in transferring to a four-year college or university can obtain information from numerous representatives on hand at the Fall 2015 Transfer Fairs. Sessions are scheduled at Lowery on Oct. 27 and CentreTech on Oct. 29. Both events run from 11 a.m.-2:30 p.m.

The CCA Observatory on CentreTech campus will be open Sept. 27 at approximately 6:30 p.m. for viewing of the total lunar eclipse, weather permitting. The event is free and open to the public. A public viewing also has been tentatively scheduled for Oct. 16 at 7 p.m. The observatory is located directly behind the Fine Arts Building.

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IN REMEMBRANCE

JIM MARSHALL (1946-2015)
Former CCA Director of Facilities

Funeral services were held Aug. 26 at Fairmont Cemetery for former CCA Director of Facilities Jim Marshall, who passed away Aug. 17 at age 69. Marshall is survived by his wife Jeri, to whom he was married since 1970; two children, Elizabeth and William; and a granddaughter, Eliza. Marshall lived in Aurora for 42 years. He began his CCA career in July 2007 until his retirement this past June. Marshall was born in Burbank, Calif., to James and Helen Marshall, but had been a Colorado resident since 1961. He was a graduate of Denver’s Thomas Jefferson High School and a former student at the University of Colorado in Boulder before embarking on his career endeavors.

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The Outreach and Recruitment and Communications departments partnered on a...
Around campus

Clockwise from left: Jamme Gonzales from the Facilities department captured a rainbow peering over CentreTech campus in late August; one of 13 Japanese middle and high school teachers in the United States to learn English as a Second Language curriculum listens to instructor Irene O’Brien during an Aug. 28 Citizenship class at Lowry; Legal Studies adjunct faculty Doug Rossi introduces himself to tutor/adjunct Shirley Bunch during faculty orientation Aug. 20 at the Fine Arts Forum; JoAnne Barnes ended her two-decade association with CCA with a retirement party Aug. 31, attended by Mary Westendorf, David Spiegel and others, including one of her former work studies, Enrique Silva.