Youlonda Copeland-Morgan is nationally and internationally recognized as a visionary leader in higher education. In September 2022, she retired after 11 years as vice provost for enrollment management at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA), where she was responsible for formulating and achieving enrollment and financial goals for the university’s over 32,000 undergraduates. In that capacity, she oversaw the university’s $1 billion financial aid and scholarship budget for the undergraduate college and for UCLA’s specialty and professional schools. Her enrollment management leadership resulted in the most socially, economically, and ethnically diverse classes in UCLA history.
Expert Spotlight: Youlonda Copeland-Morgan  The Campaign for College Opportunity • August 2023

Put your money where your mouth is.

Many highly selective private schools are enthusiastic about diversity, but don’t make much progress toward achieving it. They may be genuinely committed to diversity and inclusion, but haven’t provided the resources to make it happen. I believe that higher education institutions, especially public universities, have a responsibility to create opportunities for all qualified students, including those from underserved communities, to achieve an education that can change their lives.

The simple truth is that often budgetary resources and allocation do not align with an institution’s diversity goals. Funding often depends on one-time grants, donations, or reallocated funds from another department. This is especially true during tough economic times. Senior leaders should not underfund a college or university’s ability to meet its diversity goals. We don’t run other operations at the university this way. Operations that are central to the college or university’s mission receive the investment necessary for success. We have to stop piecemealing funding for diversity. If diversity is truly a goal, an institutional budget should reflect it. When I meet with CEOs, presidents, and chancellors of colleges and universities, the first question I ask them is, “What portion of your budget is committed to diversity?” Their answer tells the story.
The highest levels of university leadership, including the governing board, foundation board, president, and chancellor, must actively support the work to increase diversity and inclusion if it is to be successful. For example, at UCLA I asked for development to hire a person specifically to help meet our financial aid needs. I presented my case to senior leadership, and they responded. They couldn’t always give me everything I asked for, but they listened, didn’t get in the way, and gave me space to be innovative and build the resources I needed. The head of enrollment management must lead constantly to secure necessary resources and support from senior leadership. If you don’t lead, your organization will not move forward.

Regularly examine all admission and financial aid policies. Institutions rarely examine existing policies that are designed to support diversity and students from middle- and low-income communities. Many financial aid policies and practices are inadequate to support talented students from first-generation and low- and middle-income households. Our financial aid packages were based on equality instead of equity. Equality is giving every student the same thing. Equity is giving a student what they need based upon differences in their family resources. Inequitable policies can last for years if colleges and universities don’t regularly examine their financial aid policies and adjust them to address the financial reality for students and their families. Insufficient financial aid builds a barrier, instead of a pathway, to enrolling a diverse student body in our institutions.

Another barrier to achieving diversity is a lack of funds to cover the full cost of student orientation or summer start programs that acclimate new students from underserved communities to our campuses. Many of these students are coming into majority white environments that they haven’t experienced before. We know that students want to come to these programs, but institutions often require students
from underrepresented communities to pay for a summer start or orientation program. When families can’t pay for these programs, the students simply don’t show up. If we believe these programs are critical to their success, we should provide free access to these programs.

We also changed the way we package scholarships. We ended the practice of awarding one-year scholarships and began awarding two- or four-year scholarships, depending on whether the student was a freshman or transfer student. Additionally, in order for a student to renew a scholarship, we no longer require students to have a GPA significantly higher than the average GPA of the student body. To maintain a four-year scholarship, students are required to demonstrate satisfactory academic progress toward their degree.

It is important to make sure that legal counsel are close advisers when you are changing policies and practices like these. Counsel needs to understand what you want to accomplish so they can help you make changes in ways that are legally permissible.

3. Strengthen transfer recruitment and set ambitious goals.

Most four-year colleges and universities do not have transfer enrollment targets. Admission and financial aid policies are largely developed with high school students in mind. Even colleges and universities that admit transfer students often do not have any outreach programs to help them understand the pathway from community college to a four-year institution. Just as college admission staff visit high schools, they should also visit community colleges on a regular basis to help students aspire to, and prepare for, a four-year college. Given the diversity of our community colleges, we need to give transfer students the same attention we give freshman.
Invest in community relations, build trust across diverse communities, and start early.

Colleges must build relationships of trust in diverse communities where low- and middle-income and minority students live, work, and learn. Our presence in the community helps students see themselves at our institutions as early as middle school. The process of connecting with students cannot begin in the 11th grade. By that time, all you can do is give students instructions on how to apply for admission. Too often, outreach and engagement programs are not central to the institution. These programs must be a priority and receive the funding necessary for success.

Building a diverse student pipeline into your institution requires partnerships. At UCLA, we were intentional about talking to community leaders, high school administrators, counselors, university faculty, local businesses, and superintendents of various school districts to hear their concerns. As a graduate of the Los Angeles Unified School District, I was able to go out and meet with parents and students in Los Angeles communities. I brought admission and financial aid staff with me so they could hear what people thought about our efforts and tell us what was missing. We learned that individuals were generally proud of UCLA and the institution’s commitment to diversity. However, they were not seeing the level of engagement and support that was needed, especially after the 2008 recession. As a result of this feedback, I worked with my senior staff to build a culture of inquiry and regularly seek feedback from communities, partners, families, and students.
Challenge assumptions and interpretations about what is or is not legally permissible.

In 1996, California passed Proposition 209, which said that the state cannot discriminate against or grant preferential treatment on the basis of race, sex, color, ethnicity, or national origin in the operation of public employment, public education, and public contracting. When new laws are passed, it is typical for institutions, whether private or public, to become extremely conservative and restrictive in an effort to ensure full compliance with the new law. This is understandable, but at some point we have to move forward and find alternate methods of achieving our institutional goals. At UCLA, I requested a review of the decisions that limited our recruitment and outreach strategies after the passage of Proposition 209. My approach was to identify what could still be done, while remaining legally compliant. After many conversations with my colleagues in the Office of the President of the University of California system, a systemwide task force was created to review prior decisions and explore other opportunities to achieve diversity. Energy must be spent on identifying what we can still do, what we haven’t been doing that could work, and what are some best practices that we can implement. Efforts focused on recruitment, community outreach, and creating a welcoming campus environment are key. If students are admitted to your institution but they do not feel welcome, or you haven’t built a relationship so they can fully understand what it would be like on your campus, you’re not going to enroll them.

Following the Supreme Court’s recent decision to curtail the use of race-conscious admission practices, institutional leadership must repeatedly review all policies and practices to ensure compliance, while not limiting its ability to achieve goals critical to the campus mission, including equitable admission and support practices. React, evaluate, gather feedback, and do it all again a few months later. You can be innovative and compliant at the same time.
Be sure that you have a student- and family-centered customer service strategy.

How we communicate with students is critically important, especially for a diverse student body. It is essential to set high customer service goals and standards. It can be helpful to engage a top customer service consultant to guide you through the process of developing the vision and values of your plan. Our strategy was informed by continually listening to family and student “customers” to understand what they needed. The result was our “Blue and Gold Customer Service Standards,” which not only transformed our department but influenced others in the university. To hold ourselves accountable to these standards, we met regularly to evaluate our progress, reward top customer service representatives, and develop new ways to help our customers.

We also recognized that our communication strategies and publications should ensure that all students could see themselves at UCLA. We developed key publications in multiple languages, redesigned our website to reflect the range of diversity at UCLA, placed newspaper ads in Spanish, and made sure our marketing materials portrayed students in a relevant and inclusive manner. Our overarching goal was to encourage students from diverse backgrounds to apply to UCLA.
Finally, in the wake of the Supreme Court’s recent decision on race-conscious admissions, we must affirm our commitment to access, diversity, and inclusion in higher education.

The historical belief that admission to college is based on race is present again in our society. The truth is that students are admitted because of their strength in their academic curriculum, their preparation for college-level work, and their co-curricular experiences. We know that a college education changes lives, especially for students from underrepresented communities. We must continue to provide qualified students a pathway to a college education and an opportunity for a better life. We will continue to challenge false beliefs about college admission by constantly reinforcing that no student is admitted because of their race — no one.
About Youlonda Copeland-Morgan

Youlonda Copeland-Morgan is a nationally and internationally recognized leader in higher education. Having been a first-generation college student herself, Copeland-Morgan understands the unique struggles American families face getting access to a quality K-12 education that prepares students for college. Copeland-Morgan’s 44-year career is a testament to her lifelong commitment to access, equity, and inclusion in K-12 and higher education.

She joined UCLA in 2012 as Vice Provost for Enrollment Management, leading several offices such as the Office of Undergraduate Admission, Financial Aid and Scholarships, Early Academic Outreach and created the Office of Strategic Partnerships and Community Engagement. She was previously Vice President for Enrollment Management at Syracuse University, Vice President and Dean of Admission and Financial Aid at Harvey Mudd College, and Director of Financial Aid at Occidental College. She was also Chairman of the College Board for two years and a Trustee for nine years. Copeland-Morgan has also testified before congressional and state legislative committees and other policy forums, where she has advocated for strengthened federal student aid and college affordability.

A decorated scholar and spokesperson with numerous awards recognizing her equity-centered leadership, Copeland-Morgan is currently an adjunct faculty member at the University of Southern California. Since 2011, she teaches courses on “Leadership in Enrollment Management.” She was also a faculty member at UCLA’s Continuing Education Department for nine years.

The Campaign for College Opportunity is a California non-profit bipartisan policy and research organization focused on a single mission: to ensure all Californians have an equal opportunity to attend and succeed in college in order to build a vibrant workforce, economy and democracy.

In June 2023, the U.S. Supreme Court announced a decision to curtail the use of race in college and university admissions, a powerful tool that has been used to address the legacy of racial injustice and advance the inclusion and integration of Latinx, Black, Asian American, Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islander (NHPI), and American Indian/Alaska Native (AIAN) students.

In response, the Campaign for College Opportunity has launched a national initiative, Affirming Equity, Ensuring Inclusion, Empowering Action, promoting evidence-based solutions through practice briefs and toolkits that advance more equitable strategies in college preparation, admission, affordability, and success to ensure those who have been historically excluded and underserved by our colleges and universities have a real opportunity to go to college and succeed.
Acknowledgements

We are grateful to the funders who are supporting this series of briefs, including The Lumina Foundation, The Stuart Foundation, The College Futures Foundation, The Kresge Foundation, The W.K. Kellogg Foundation, Eileen and Harold Brown, The Evelyn and Walter Haas, Jr. Fund, and Great Public Schools Now.

*Please visit our website for more resources to affirm equity, ensure inclusion, and empower action.*
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