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# 'Need for Love More Profound, Harder than It's Ever Been'



Liann Herder  
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The Belk Center for Community College Leadership and Research, housed within the North Carolina State University's (NCSU) College of Education, held its tenth annual Dallas Herring Lecture on Tuesday, featuring Dr. Russell Lowery-Hart, chancellor of the Austin Community College District (ACC). The Belk Center is known for its support for North Carolina's 58 community colleges and for training leaders, conducting research, and sharing best practices with community colleges across the country.

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NCSU. "His belief in effective leadership is not rooted in power or influence of even charisma, but in something much deeper—love and affection."



Dr. Russell Lowery-Hart, chancellor of Austin Community College District, speaking at the Dallas Herring Lecture on Tuesday.

Love is needed now more than ever, Lowery-Hart said, as he acknowledged the politicized and divided nature of the country, as well as and devastation faced in many communities in western North Carolina after extreme flooding from Hurricane Helene.

"The need for us to love is more profound today than it has ever been," said Lowery-Hart. "But, because of those realities, leading with love is harder than it's ever been."

Lowery-Hart previously spent almost a decade as president of Amarillo College in Texas, where he was recognized with the Aspen Prize for Community College Excellence in 2023. Now, he is

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Lowery-Hart shared three elements required to transform institutional framework for leadership that's built on love: culture, impact, and communication. Love, he said, is not "fuzzy-wuzzy," but real and often difficult work.

"Leading transformation is scary. It's painful. It's ugly. And it's necessary," said Lowery-Hart. "Leading with love requires a different ethic. Leading with love will only expose deeper fissures that exist within an institution. Entrenched bureaucracy must give way to data and student voices."

In order to change culture, Lowery-Hart said institutions and their leaders must listen to their students. It requires getting to know the students an institution has, versus the students they used to have or wish to have. At ACC, Lowery-Hart established a group of student "secret shoppers," with whom he met during a focus group. He asked them to define their perfect college experience.

"The perfect college for our students is defined by care and help. They just wanted a college full of people who cared about them and were willing to help them," said Lowery-Hart. "Loving students to success starts with listening to them. Once you do that, and evaluate data that explains their experience, you've got to build a clear theory of change."

That means incorporating the new culture of care into the budget, structure, organizational charts and job descriptions at the university. To create impact, Lowery-Hart said the use of data and data summits can build an environment where data "creates curiosity and problem solving" within the faculty and leadership." He also underscored the importance of professional development for faculty, acknowledging that those closest to the students are those who can often make the most impact.

Lastly, Lowery-Hart reminded attendees that communication is vital to the success of these measures—and that does not mean sending out yet another email. Communication requires a face-to-face opportunity for feedback and connection. He holds monthly town halls at ACC where all members of the institution are invited to speak, and Lowery-Hart said these meetings have gone so well he is getting requests for more.

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Loving your students, colleagues, and community to success is directly based on the works of philosopher and educator bell hooks, said Lowery-Hart, adding that her book *all about love* had a profound influence on his life.

"[hooks] calls us to be greater and higher leaders—the ethic of love should be seen in all aspects of our lives. For me, love and leadership are synonymous. They may have nuanced differences, but one cannot be separate without the other," said Lowery-Hart.

Transformative leadership, Lowery-Hart continued, must be "rooted in culture-building," as opposed to a check-off list of initiatives that work within traditional bureaucracy. Lowery-Hart created a picture of his average community college student, "Maria," a parenting, adult woman of color, working two part-time jobs while attending courses part-time.

"We need to fall in love with Maria. We need to see her, understand her, champion her, and dedicate ourselves to her. She's remarkable. She's smart. She's ambitious. And she can get it done as long as we can get out of her way," said Lowery-Hart. "In a country that feels different today than it felt a month ago, we can no longer ask our Marias, our women of color, to step in with the courage that white men and woman have surely been missing. We have to step in with courage."

*Liann Herder can be reached at lherder@diverseeducation.com.*

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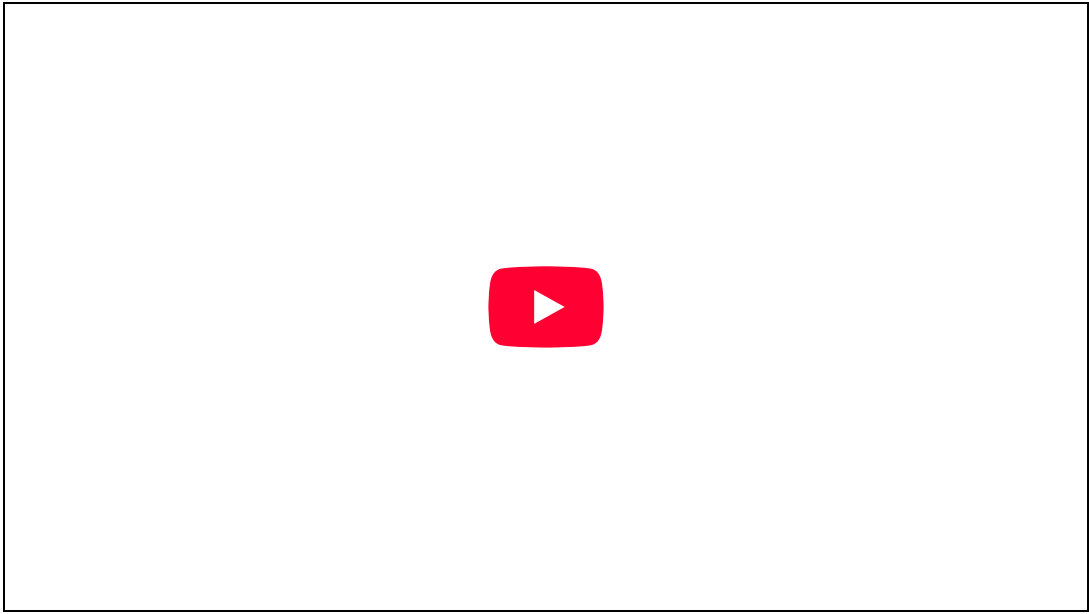
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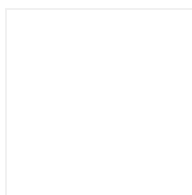
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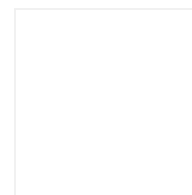
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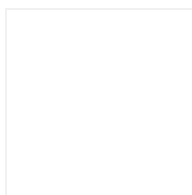
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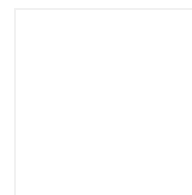
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