**Dr. Mordecai Brownlee Interview**Be inspired and energized with Dr. Mordecai Brownlee

**AS** [00:00:00] For today's podcast, it's a pleasure to have Dr. Mordecai Brownlee, president of Community College of Aurora in Colorado. It's such a pleasure to have you on the podcast, Dr. Mordecai.

**Mordecai Brownlee** [00:00:11] Hey, man, I'm excited to be here. Dr.Al. I appreciate the opportunity.

**AS** [00:00:15] I've been wanting to have this podcast with you. I reached out to you about, I would say, but it was about 14 months ago because I was in the middle of putting together a guide after years and years of coaching and just being in the trenches implementing, helping to increase student success and equity, I wrote a guide on titled, Why Do Colleges Struggle to Implement Priorities and What to Do About It. And as I was searching people for input, any kind of testimonials, I came across, because I was following you on Twitter, and I just appreciate you so much because you're just ooze with kindness. I appreciate, and I so much of my approach is about kindness. And you're so positive. Your videos, the fact that you have close to thirty thousand followers says a lot because people really listen to you. You're just so positive, so kind. And so when I reached out, this stranger here reaching out, hey, would you like to read my guide? You're so nice. And you did. And you gave me a quote. And I just really appreciate you, man. Thank you so much for that. I start the podcast, I'd like to ask guests questions about if they have a particular hobby or talent or superpower that they would mind sharing beyond their good work. So do you have anything you'd like to share?

**Mordecai Brownlee** [00:01:47] You know, man, I would tell your talent that I've had for quite some time. I'm a pretty good drummer, man. I, I grew up as a kid, playing drums, played in a few bands, and that was my thing. And I'll be honest with you, my pathway for the longest I really thought was going to be music. So after music, I thought that I was going to be the next MTV veejay on BET, the music videos, man. But yeah, that was my path for quite some time.

**AS** [00:02:16] Do you still dabble once in a while?

**Mordecai Brownlee** [00:02:18] Gosh, man, it's about as good as it gets on the kitchen floor with my seven year old girl hitting on pots and pans at the time. I have a drum set at one point, all the things that I've done lugging those things around. So I pick up stuff this year to go, but I've had one or two situations where I needed a drummer and I try to keep going.

**AS** [00:02:48] If I had that skill back in my administrative days, I would have a room dedicated to just those drums and when I would come back from work, had maybe a little bit of a rough day, boy I'd be playing those drums like there's no tomorrow. Do you like jazz drumming or any or are you just pretty much anything?

**Mordecai Brownlee** [00:03:08] You know, to be quite honest, love, love, jazz, improvizational, jazz. But, you know, I've listened to folks like Robert Glasper for a while. I was following a friend of mine that's a drummer who was his band is doing quite well. Hopefully I'm pronouncing their name Currumbin, but they're doing quite well for themselves. But, you know, I try to just mix it up. And I'm one of the folks that I learned this back in college, it's my study style. I had to have music in the background in order to help me think. I'm not the guy that can be in a quiet room and write and type. OK, I have to have that background noise, I wish I would have figured that out a lot sooner along my academic path, perhaps would have done better. But even to this day, like right before our podcast, I guess I was probably listening to my Pandora station, but I keep music in background.

**AS** [00:04:07] Yeah, I hear ya. I want to touch on this improvizational because so much of educational leadership is like jazz. You got to, you got to improvise. You got to adjust to what's happening in your environment. And your your leadership has a rhythm to it. And I think all educators were. put in a very interesting situation when the pandemic hit last March, I wanted to just if you wouldn't mind, unpack some of that improvizational leadership, the strategies, the rhythm that you had to take, a new rhythm to ensure that we can continue to serve students during a pandemic A, and B, what are some lessons learned, because, you know, we're not going into really year two of the pandemic academic year. We're going into your three if you really think about it. Could you tell us a little bit about that experience? What are you going to take now moving forward with this new academic year?

**Mordecai Brownlee** [00:05:17] I'll tell you three things come to mind and I'll do my best to say them as quickly as possible, my friend. One of those things being, and you hit the nail on the head when you called it a rhythm, when pandemic first entered into this country's borders. We're full fledged at that point into what I believe was the spring semester and quickly having to pivot back then to ask the question of how do we ensure continuity of service. And I remember going through that exercise at that time with Alamo colleges and me serving as vice president of St. Phillip's College at that time and being called and given the opportunity to lead that work for student success, the vision of the entirety of the district system, which was an absolute honor, but it was also a strong responsibility. Part of that first lesson that I would say that we learned is that a lot of what we took for granted that we could provide online, we found that we could. I think that for quite some time it was this idea that we could not provide a quality support service to students in that online remote space. And I think that requirements of the day, the crisis of the day, forced us to quickly realize that we had what it took to provide quality service. I think through collaboration, through strategy, leading towards action, the integration of technologies that were present and I would say even untapped, really the responsibility that we had, the students really innovated that work. The second thing that I would say is, is that through this pandemic that it has certainly brought to the forefront and that is a renewed commitment to student success with the focus on access. As we look at low socioeconomic communities, as we think about the charge, especially in this community college space that we have toward social and economic mobility, the empowerment of the students, the diverse communities in which we serve access, has to continue to be at the forefront of our minds. And I think that this pandemic in this time period has encouraged us to really evaluate our commitments to access and what we ended up finding, especially in these low socio economic spaces that think about some of my fellow educators that we're working in Arizona, working in New Mexico, are really working. And some of these other territories, as they told their horror stories of the lack of broadband access, yet they still had to find a way to get students to have the resources and accessibility that they needed. And so grateful for the infusion of dollars that have come in federally and through state funds. But colleges themselves had to quickly figure out, had to pivot and figure out what it was going to do to commit itself to access. As we think about the histories of community college, access looked a certain way now in the pandemic, it certainly looks a certain way. So something to certainly continue and to work with our local communities and legislation to look to further broadband access in our respective communities. The third thing I would say was, is the ethical responsibility that we had as educators to still serve beyond our enrollments. What I mean by that is, is that in San Antonio, Texas, for those who don't know the most impoverished metropolitan city in the country, also the most economically segregated metropolitan city in the country, we had a responsibility at this point to really ask ourselves, are we only going to serve the individual if they are students? What about if they were former students? They were with us. Yet the pandemic has created some hardships that don't allow for them to concentrate on their studies. At this time, we ethically still have a responsibility to this person to provide service. And so I would say that the third point that I would say is for anyone that's listening, that this is really think beyond the enrollment's, think about humanity, think about the communities in which we serve and ask yourself where can you institutionally provide services to the community as a whole? Because that is still a part of the advancement of our institutional missions. And people will not forget what you've done for them. People will not forget ways in which you empower them. That could look like a lot of the work that we did. And we do it here in this community here in Aurora, in Denver of the food bank, the food drops, clothing closets, looking at what resources can we have towards displaced employment. What can we do in terms of resources to support students, former students with childcare access as they're looking and seeking new jobs and opportunities for themselves? So, know, Dr. Al, I said a whole lot. I told you I was going to say it as quickly as possible. But I think these are some of the things that I've certainly been at the forefront of the work that we've been doing during this during this period.

**AS** [00:10:04] Yes. Thank you for that. I really like what you said about beyond enrollment. I know right now so many leaders are focused on enrollment. It's it's going down at so many community colleges. And that's just the reality. There's been so many focus groups with students and life happens. They are choosing work and forgoing another year. I think you're right. People will remember what you did for them. And when you are able to serve the community that way, the community that you serve because you've been at this job in Colorado. How long?

**Mordecai Brownlee** [00:10:42] Oh, gosh. Let's see a vigil for our date with July 15 and after you do the math there.

**AS** [00:10:51] So, I was so excited when I heard the news. Speaking of community, you came from a community, the last college you were in was both an HBCU and HSI. Can you can you tell us a little bit about that experience?

**Mordecai Brownlee** [00:11:09] Amazing, amazing experience. Now, it's not often can anyone say that they have work for the nation's only historically black college that is a Hispanic serving institution. And it's something that took great pride in. It was great responsibility. Along with that, the institution, St. Phillip's College, one hundred twenty three years old, founded as a school for emancipated female slaves to teach them how to cook and sew. And then if you look at what has happened demographically in that community throughout the years in its foundation has now shifted to a heavily, heavily Hispanic, Latinx community, Chicano, kind of community. And so the opportunities that were present then was now being the only duly federally designated institution to hold such a responsibility really was the charge. And I think for any institution that has such a designation of being either HSI or HBCU or minor minority serving institution, it's really the commitment to say that you have an understanding of the students in which you serve and you have an understanding and you honor who they are as individuals and who they bring and what they bring to your institution and that you're creating environments that ensures not only do they feel welcomed and cared for, but that they are empowered to succeed. As we look to break down the various social constructs that we've had historically in this country, it's a responsibility. And it was one that I learned firsthand working in that community. It's something I will never forget. And I've brought it now with me to my current institution, Community College of Aurora, which is a Hispanic serving institution. So, again, we have the opportunity to continue to advance. And I would say in a lot of regards, defined for a lot of people, what does that mean to be an HSI? And how do we bring about the advancement of Servingness, if you will, to our student body,

**AS** [00:13:12] Yes, I like that you mentioned Servingness. I did a podcast with Dr. Gina Garcia and she kind of coined the term and she talks about how institutions have been Hispanic erolling, but not necessarily Hispanic Serving. I love the fact that you have this HBCU that embraced the community. The demographics change and embraced the Latino brothers and sisters. And it reminds me of a friend of mine. He's a Korean American who works in L.A. in Koreatown. They have a lot of different kind of nonprofits, but they've embraced the fact that they are surrounded and a lot of Latinos moved into their community, and they actually embraced them. And a lot the nonprofit work goes towards educational ,after school programs, things that actually help the Latino community. So I just think that's beautiful to take care of, of our fellow human beings. When you were at your previous institution are there any strategies, any kind of activities that were done to to ensure students success and equity that you could mention?

**Mordecai Brownlee** [00:14:26] One of the things I would say was, is that we were Alamno Colleges was a strong partner with Achieving the Dream, achieving the dream has done some amazing work. And from a student success standpoint, it comes down to identifying the barriers as we think about diversity, equity and inclusion work, and we think about student success work. Those that have worked in this space like yourself, Dr. Al, understand the power of disaggregating the data, the power of strategy and action and the impact comes down to disaggregating the data and institutions, being willing to have a conversation that won't necessarily be as popular and won't necessarily have a success narrative associated with it. Because once you begin to segment the data and you further understand and honor the students that you're serving and who have been historically serving, you can have some very good questions about have you been doing a good job of serving them? Yes, you may have opened the door to them, but did you welcome them? Did they have the resources necessary and really began to then build the infrastructure to ensure student success? That's the equity piece, right, is not only honoring who the individual is, but it's building the systems to ensure the individual succeeds. And that is key. And there's so much in that that can be unpacked. We end up finding, especially in some of these spaces, I think about my time when I served in Charleston, West Virginia, at the University of Charleston. For those that are unaware, West Virginia and it still may be this case. West Virginia was the only state in the Union at that particular time that there were more people passing away than being birth born in the state. And you dealt with an economic deficit that heavily played a role in the K-12 system. At that particular time, we were the worst had the worst K-12 school student success scores in the union, the United States of America. I think second was Mississippi at that particular point. I bring this up to say that working in these various spaces that have had various hardships has really taught me the importance of honoring who you serve and really being willing and understand the responsibility with building systems, whether that be advocacy centers, whether that be the employment centers. And there's various aspects to advocacy student crisis impact. We can expect the student to choose whether or not to pay for class or to pay for the lights to be on at their home, their gas to be turned on. If I'm having to make a decision whether or not to buy books or to buy a meal for my child, what do you think I'm going to choose? So as we then talk about the student success narrative, it's very important for institutions to build their student success infrastructure around who they serve, not who they're hoping to serve.

**AS** [00:17:19] You know, you're so right about the infrastructure. As I've been telling so many of my colleagues, so many colleges, that it's fine to be proud to tout course success rates. Nationally, they're not too bad. They're around 70 percent on average. But again, as I've been saying that it masks the fact that the completion rates tell a different story. More than half drop off in the first year and the completion rates at some institutions are single digits or or below 20 percent. So if there's high success rates in the courses, there's something that's happening in their student experience that's not allowing them to complete. And then moving beyond blaming external factors or blaming students. But really, what do we have control over. What can we actually do? What can we do to be better prepared for the community that we serve? So thank you for sharing that. Now that you were at an HBCU and HSI, this experience in West Virginia? Well, I didn't know that. That's really sad. And given that we discussed what you experienced during a pandemic, putting all this together, what are your thoughts on what we need to do this coming academic year and then also looking more forward, looking, thinking about what is the future of student success?

**Mordecai Brownlee** [00:18:53] The one thing I would tell everyone is that while I would I wish Dr. Al, that we were at a point to where we were talking about higher vaccination rates, talking about the rebounding, the continued rebounding of our communities. But now at the point of us recording this session, I think it will continue to be a part of our conversation for quite some time now is the Delta variant and its impact now in our communities. But certainly as we are now starting at the fall semester, kicking off here in a matter of days, what does this mean for us now in the semester? Whereas we've made a promise or we've began to move towards reincorporating instruction back on our respective campuses. And we wanted to provide that experience. And then you have the mental health impacts that have happened during this time. We've already talked economic impacts, but now the mental health impact of people wanting and desiring connectivity and connection, Face-To-Face interactions, and now we're dealing with a variant that is running rampant. And who knows the next variant. If we look at it from a Greek alphabet, what would that be? Gamma, Alpha, Beta, Delta, Gamma? I think Gamma would be the next variant, hopefully that we're not dealing with. So these concerns, as we look at to the fall semester and the academic year institutions need to be ready to pivot at the drop of a hat. Yes, we would love to be able to say we're all in for the fall semester, you know, ready to provide this onsight experience. We're going to do it now responsibly. You almost can't even say it. You can say at this point in time we're ready to provide this for you at this point in time. These are our commitments. However, states and cities are now mandating certain things in regards to vaccinations and mask mandates. It'll be very interesting to see over the course of the next 90, 60 to 90 days what happens with faculty, staff, instructors and their response to some of these mandates that will be coming down the pike. Some folks will say, well, hey, I'm all about it. I've been vaccinated. That is to say, that is not my right is as a citizen, I can choose otherwise. Yet now is this now hinged on my employment. I bring these things up because they're real serious conversations that should be happening if they're not already happening. But what does this mean for us and our commitment to student success? Well, there will be an impact. I would encourage our institutions to stay students, stay student centered and ask yourself what is the best situation for the health safety of your students, your faculty, staff, and and be ready to pivot. We may start inside, but come October, November, we may have to head in another direction. I was just sharing with my staff and cabinet this morning. We're dealing with Delta to now, but no one has even talked about flu season. What is this going to look like when we don't even know even further? Don't only understand what's behind the cough, what's behind the sneeze, what does that really then mean for us? So student success. Now we're talking just the logistics of how to ensure continuity of service once again. And while there has been some fatigue in this space, I'll tell you, Dr. Al, we have to renew our mind, renew our commitment to students, be transparent as possible, but also have some serious contingency plans in place, because while we may begin face to face, we may not in face to face. And then on top of that, the kickoff of the spring semester in the midst of winter, in the midst of flu, in the midst of hopefully not another variant. What does that mean for us? So times are very interesting. It's a historic time, as we've said and heard, unprecedented. But so does our commitment to student success need to be? It needs to be historic. It needs to be unprecedented. And if we can keep that at the forefront, we'll make it through these times.

**AS** [00:22:51] When the pandemic hit, there were some things that finally campuses that I've been wanting to do for years, get rid of what signatures, for example. Finally, we got rid of what signatures for the most part. The other thing is I do a lot of work with faculty, a lot of work around continuous improvement, pedagogy, data-informed pedagogy, and how do we integrate technology and this forced faculty to how can we use technology? And what I was hoping, was when things were going to get much better, we can go back that they would still leverage that technology even when they're back in person. You're so right about this pivot. We have to be ready in case of an emergency. We've got to pivot to online. And so what I mentioned earlier about the success rates, the course success rates. A faculty member was just so smart, she says, well, don't don't get us off the hook. It's not only the structural stuff. We have students who earn C's who have a bad experience in the classroom. We got to do it. We got to up our game and structurally, especially online. And so I think there's going to be a need to have perhaps even more quality professional development to be ready for that pivot. So back to now, the the future of student success. Let's think now some happy thoughts post pandemic. How does that look like?

**Mordecai Brownlee** [00:24:24] That's a hard question. You know, I hope that it looks like institutions have found deeper, more meaningful opportunities to improve access, that they have found deeper and more meaningful opportunities on how to advance initiatives that further remove barriers to student success and strengthen the infrastructure towards student success. I certainly hope that I will tell you that as we think about the impact to student success metrics throughout this pandemic, thus far, institutions looking at their completion rates or the lack thereof, looking at the impact to productive grade rates, looking at the the potential increases attempted hours towards completion in comparison to successfully completed courses. There is a recalibration that certainly has to be at the forefront of our minds on how we are picturing success during this time period. And it needs to be in a form, in a fashion that leaves the student feeling whole. Everyone is attempting to succeed during these times, yet we have never been here as a society in modern times. And so I was telling you, sharing this with my faculty and staff, that we should take it to be a privilege that in the midst of a pandemic and uncertainty, that students have found a way to still entrust our institutions with their academic pathways and their career aspirations. And so that's something that we shouldn't take for granted. And so with that in mind, remaining student-focused, keeping student success at the forefront. Let's make the proper recalibrations to encourage to sustain our students to ensure their vitality, their health, and continue to during these times, because society as a whole depends on

**AS** [00:26:25] I have a nuts and bolts question. You mentioned earlier about, during that there's been money allocation, allocated, and what I'm finding so many colleges actually awash in money, the challenges, they're given a very limited time to spend that from. Just a practical strategy perspective, do you have any suggestions perhaps? How have you looked at all this funding? What kind of process have you used to ensure that people are not going to argue over fight over it, but that it stays student centered, that there's some kind of steps to ensure that that funding is used for the right reasons?

**Mordecai Brownlee** [00:27:04] Yeah, what I would tell others is other educators is that never forget that the mission drive strategy and strategy drives action. And I would say that if you already haven't went through the exercise, certainly there is an opportunity to reengage fellow educators at your institution into asking the question of an environmental scan with your current strategies that have been guiding your work, perhaps with the utilization of her funds and additional funds at your state level and CARES funds. And the strategy has to guide that work in your environmental scan, should assist the institution and pivoting appropriately and be sure that you are giving yourself grace and honoring what you have accomplished institutionally during this time. And it should inform your work for the 2021-2022 school year. It must, how we would have approached this strategically and from a resource allocation standpoint 12 months ago certainly should not be the same space that we're approaching it today. And so be sure to create those opportunities for yourself is certainly what we're doing here at the Community College of Aurora is having those conversations to say what is it that we need to do to showcase our learning and continued commitment to process improvement, to ensure that the utilization of these dollars are effective and efficient to the needs of now.

**AS** [00:28:30] And as we wrap up, I wanted to ask you about leadership. You have all these wonderful videos, you're so positive, again. You're such a kind. Well, first of all, what does that come from?

**Mordecai Brownlee** [00:28:44] That's a good question. I would tell you, I was raised by a single mother who was an educator who taught me firsthand the importance of faith, the importance of understanding our responsibility in this world to be a light and empowerment of watching the sacrifice that she made since childhood, to ensure that others had in a moment where she didn't have, I think was the living example. That is always been ingrained in my mind that the work that I do should honor the works and the sacrifices of my mother. And I just that's remained with me.

**AS** [00:29:24] Thank you for sharing that. As leaders have to adjust to what's happening at campuses, heck in the world, the rhythm, if you will, the beats. They're drumming. Do you have any suggestions, especially for those that are up and coming, you've been doing this for a while. You just became president. I'm so happy. I'm so happy for students. Do you have any anything you'd like to impart on those those who are maybe would want to become a president one day?

**Mordecai Brownlee** [00:29:56] Three things very quickly. First thing is, especially now more than ever, take care of yourself. That that simply said. But it takes a lot of intentionality. Be very intentional with your rest, be very intentional with your diet and be very intentional with your mental health. Be very intentional with how you're spending your time. Make sure, it's real hard as educators. And you know this. We give so much of ourselves, but we don't do the best job of pouring back into ourself. And so we have to sustain ourselves. Our students are depending upon it. Our communities are depending upon it. So it's critical to sustain yourself during these time. Whatever a poor habits that we've perhaps taken up during these times, you know, take that accountability and rid yourself of those those habits, and receive the supports and helps that you need and keep sustaining your health internally and externally. Take care of yourself. Second thing that I would say is on this path is never forget that you're only as good as your ability to make impact. Doesn't matter what your desired outcome was, the question is, is were you impactful? That impact is heavily driven by your ability to embrace the institutional mission and its strategic plan. So really focus on that. I would say that my mentors did a very good job of instilling that in me, and it is carry me throughout my career to this point to now be a college president. So no matter your role, there is a leader in every seat. Dr. Dana Williams, who was the first person I ever heard say that. And it stayed with me. There is a leader in every seat. A leader has nothing to do with the title. And that work that you are doing within the academy, look at what you can do to advance the mission, a strategic plan. The third thing I would say is remember, students first. Our job is student success. Whatever the role, whatever the initiative, whatever the cause, the care, the concern, students must succeed. And let's be sure that you, the listener and educator, are part of the work of advancing the lives of our students.

**AS** [00:32:07] That's beautiful. And thank you for imparting that. I think one of the beauties about community colleges and open access universities is that really everybody can play a leadership role from the analyst to the president to faculty who are so critical. They are part of key committees. They chair certain initiatives. Everybody has an opportunity. So I think what you those three points are for everyone. Thank you for that. Any last parting words?

**Mordecai Brownlee** [00:32:38] You know, I've enjoyed this time. I've enjoyed this conversation. I'm grateful to parting words will be for educators. Never underestimate your impact and be the change that our society in our world really needs.

**AS** [00:32:50] With that, let's just keep on drumming man.

**Mordecai Brownlee** [00:32:55] That's it.