

## **Viewpoint: Growth comes from reflecting on our experiences**

*By Michael Berndt, president of Dakota County Technical College & Inver Hills Community College*

Between DCTC and Inver Hills, nearly 1,300 students will graduate this spring. This milestone is a joyful time for our campus community. We celebrate our students' accomplishments and look forward to the coming year.

This year's celebrations, like so much of spring semester, have been impacted by the pandemic. Both schools will host virtual ceremonies on Sunday, June 14th. Each campus also honored our graduates in other ways, including a drive-by celebration at DCTC.

While the year didn't end the way we hoped, our students and colleges have much we can learn. As Governor Walz summed up so well, "The class of 2020, you will not be defined by staying home . . . and missing graduations, you will be defined by understanding how interconnected our world is and what it means to come together and solve hard problems."

In my experience, growth comes from reflecting on our experiences. It also comes from seeking insights from those we serve. Recently, our colleges held a panel to hear from students about their efforts to adapt to the pandemic. I was moved by the students' stories. They demonstrated resiliency and dedication in meeting the current challenges.

For example, Tim Smith, a Navy veteran, is studying at Inver Hills. At the best of times, he has to balance school and parenting. Now, he is adapting to his online classes; sharing space with his spouse, who is working full-time from home; and providing care for two young children. The pandemic has intensified the challenges students like Tim already face in balancing life, family, work, and school.

Boyd Lee, a recent graduate of DCTC's electrical line worker program, shared the challenges of finishing his program while looking for a job. The uncertain job market has made the search difficult. The pandemic has intensified the uncertainties students already face in a dynamic global economy.

The students' insights have reminded us to be kind and compassionate, understanding all that our students are trying to manage. Students also reminded us of our capacity to adapt, and the need to create organizations responsive to changing conditions. Finally, students reminded us that while we have learned new ways to engage one another through technology, we still need opportunities to connect in person.

As we look forward to next fall and to new students starting their paths to graduation, we hope to offer courses and support services in modes that are both engaging and safe. Our planning will be guided by our students' needs and in on-going partnership with the Minnesota Office of Higher Education and the Governor's Office. We are all learning, so we can adapt and continue to thrive—after all, that is the real goal of education.