



2022 TIAA Institute Theodore M. Hesburgh Award

For Leadership Excellence
in Higher Education

Honoring Alex Johnson, Ph.D.
President, Cuyahoga Community College



“Under President Johnson’s leadership, Cuyahoga Community College has expanded industry partnerships, developed community resources and introduced new academic programs—all in the service of preparing students for careers that pay a sustainable wage. His achievements provide a model for community colleges nationwide.”

David P. Richardson
Head, TIAA Institute





Honoring Alex Johnson, Ph.D. President, Cuyahoga Community College

2022 recipient of the TIAA Institute Theodore M. Hesburgh
Award for Leadership Excellence in Higher Education

When Alex Johnson was named its president in 2013, Cuyahoga Community College (Tri-C®) graduated fewer than 2,500 students annually across its four campuses and had an IPEDS graduation rate of 3.7%. Recognizing what raising these figures could mean for Tri-C students and the regional economy, President Johnson set the college on a path of self-evaluation and continuous improvement.

He transformed Tri-C's capacity to train people for careers in STEM, manufacturing, information technology and healthcare—and expanded educational access, equity, success and completion for disadvantaged students and students of color. His efforts paid off. In the 2020–2021 academic year, Ohio's first and largest community college conferred 4,600 degrees, despite COVID-19's impact, and raised its IPEDS graduation rate more than sixfold, to 24.3%.

Making a difference

In the impoverished communities Tri-C serves, where many residents lack basic resources, improving economic equity and growth does not come easy. But leaders nationally have long recognized the potential for community colleges to make a difference. Shortly before the start of President Johnson's tenure, President Obama signed the American Graduation Initiative, which challenged community colleges to graduate students in less time and in greater numbers. There also was pressure at the state level to do so.

Promoting student success

Seizing on this momentum, President Johnson launched or significantly expanded numerous initiatives aimed at increasing educational access and alleviating poverty in the Greater Cleveland area:

- **One Door, Many Options for Success** provides structured educational pathways and support to reduce time to completion and increase graduation rates.
- **First Year Experience** helps new students engage with the campus community, plot a course for degree completion, and acquire the skills and habits needed to succeed.
- **College Credit Plus** lets students in grades 7–12 earn free college credit while completing high school, significantly lowering the cost of a college degree.
- **Tri-C Centers of Excellence** offer high-quality, industry-relevant courses that provide the comprehensive, hands-on preparation needed to thrive in today's job market.

“I am thrilled to receive this award commemorating Father Hesburgh's legacy on behalf of all who serve Cuyahoga Community College. This great honor underscores the important role community colleges play in strengthening society by helping individuals experience the dignity of work and the happiness of a fulfilling life.”

Alex Johnson, Ph.D.
President, Cuyahoga Community College

- **2017 Capital Bond Issue** raised \$227.5 million for facilities upgrades and new construction, expanding Tri-C's capacity to deliver leading-edge training.
- **Institute for Community Engagement and Development**, comprised of leaders from community entities, oversees Tri-C's community-based educational and workforce programming.

Pandemic response

As Tri-C's new initiatives were racking up successes, COVID-19 suddenly created huge complications. Eight months into the pandemic, community college students nationwide were canceling their college plans at more than twice the rate of four-year college students.¹ To help keep students on track in a remote-learning environment, President Johnson oversaw efforts to provide lower-income students laptops and Wi-Fi access. He also launched two major enrollment initiatives meant for those harmed financially by the pandemic:

- **Full Tuition Assistance Program** covers up to one year of academic courses or the full length of a workforce training program for new or returning Tri-C students whose financial need intensified during the pandemic.
- **Level Up**, a partnership with Cleveland State University, helps recruit, recover and re-enroll students who postponed or stopped their education during the pandemic. To date, more than 1,000 students have been enrolled or re-enrolled as a result.



Moving forward

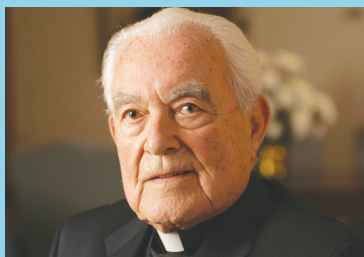
President Johnson believes in building the capacity for transformation and continuous improvement into an organization's day-to-day operations. He has authored two books, *Change the Lapel Pin* and *Capturing Change*, outlining his style of leadership, which emphasizes the importance of cooperation, engagement, learning and listening.

He challenges himself, and those around him, to continuously grow as a communicator and collaborator and to remain open to new ways of thinking. His ideas are rooted in the belief that leadership can never be stagnant: leaders must constantly work to get better and refine their skills or others will lose confidence in them.

Throughout his tenure at Tri-C, President Johnson has put these ideas into practice, helping students overcome tremendous obstacles to reach their educational and personal ambitions. His achievements have solidified Tri-C's reputation as an engine of economic growth in Northeast Ohio and paved the way to a better life for countless residents.



About the Award



Rev. Theodore M. Hesburgh
President Emeritus, University of Notre Dame

The Hesburgh Award is named in honor of the Rev. Theodore M. Hesburgh, C.S.C., past president of the University of Notre Dame and longtime member of the TIAA and CREF Boards of Overseers. A world-renowned educator and humanitarian, Father Hesburgh (1917–2015) was a lifelong champion of human rights, the cause of peace, and care for the poor. He received both the Congressional Gold Medal and the Presidential Medal of Freedom, the nation's highest civilian honor.

As a tribute to Father Hesburgh's lasting legacy, the TIAA Institute grants the Hesburgh Award to a current college or university president or chancellor who embodies Father Hesburgh's commitment to higher education and the world at large. The American Council on Education administers the award on the Institute's behalf, and recipients are chosen by an independent panel of judges.

About the TIAA Institute

Since 1998, the TIAA Institute has helped advance the ways individuals and institutions plan for financial security and organizational effectiveness. The Institute conducts in-depth research, provides access to a network of thought leaders, and enables those it serves to anticipate trends, plan future strategies and maximize opportunities for success. To learn more, visit www.tiaainstitute.org and follow us on Twitter [@TIAAInstitute](https://twitter.com/TIAAInstitute).

About TIAA

TIAA (TIAA.org) is a leading provider of secure retirements and outcome-focused investment solutions to millions of people and thousands of institutions. It is the #1 not-for-profit retirement market provider, paid more than \$3.6 billion to retired clients in 2020 and has nearly \$1.4 trillion in assets under management (as of 12/31/2021).

About Cuyahoga Community College

Cuyahoga Community College (Tri-C®) opened in 1963 as Ohio's first community college. It is Ohio's largest public community college and offers the lowest tuition in the state. Over the past half-century, Tri-C has provided high-quality, affordable education and programs to more than 1 million community members, fueling economic growth and meeting workforce needs throughout Northeast Ohio. The College is among the top institutions in the nation in conferring associate degrees. Visit tri-c.edu to see why Tri-C is where futures begin.

¹ Community College Research Center, "Behind the enrollment numbers: How COVID has changed students' plans for community college," November 19, 2020.