

CELEBRATIONS

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A Chancellor's Crystal Ball: Innovation in Times of Limited Resources, Increased Demands, and Heightened Accountability

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Introduction

I had to select my topic for this talk quite early—September 2008 to be exact. It is amazing how the principle of serendipity works. Who would have known that since then we would be expressing the worst economic decline in our history; the election of the first African American President; the nomination of a community college president to serve as Under Secretary of the Department of Education; a new-found appreciation for the nation's community colleges by a wide range of stakeholders; a surge in enrollment that exceeds all of our expectations and projections; and a new-found appreciation for the community college by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation and the Lumina Foundation. As some would say—"the times, they are changing." The topic that I selected last fall is quite apropos for today.

The Want-to Factor

To place you in a frame of mind to hear me clearly, I want to share a story that some of you may have heard before.

According to Dr. Richard Curwin, "People and organizations only change when they want to." That being the case, I want to bring to your attention the essence of the WANT-TO factor and its role as we seek to innovate and bring about changes in our colleges. The story goes like this.

A little prospector walked into a saloon, wearing clean new shoes. A big Texan said to his friend standing at the bar, "Watch me make this dude dance." He walked over to the prospector and said, "You're a foreigner, aren't you? Are you from the East?"

"You might say that," the little prospector answered. "I'm from Boston, and I'm here prospecting for gold."

The Texan then told him—"Now tell me something. Can you dance?" He replied—"No sir. I never did learn to

dance." To which the big man replied—"Well, I'm going to teach you. You will be surprised how quickly you can learn."

With that the Texan took out his big six-gun and started shooting at the feet of the prospector. Hopping, skipping, jumping—by the time the little prospector made it to the door, he was shaking like a leaf.

About an hour later the Texan left the saloon. As soon as he stepped outside the door, he heard a click. He looked around and there, four feet from his head, was the biggest shotgun he had ever seen, in the hands of the little prospector.

The prospector said, "Mr. Texan, have you ever kissed a mule's behind?" "No," said the quick-thinking Texan, "But I've always wanted to."

Obviously, the prospector knew how to pump up the Texan's "want-to" cooperation and collaboration factor. Because of your roles as faculty members and administrators, you must play a vital role in "pumping up the want-to factor" at your institutions.

That was a humorous story designed to capture your attention. Now I must move into the serious vein.

The Critical Role of Innovation

The renowned humorist Will Rogers once said, "You can get run over when you stand still." His wise counsel rings true today for the community college movement as we pursue excellence and navigate the waters of student success in an era of heightened accountability, limited resources, and increased demand for services. In this environment, enlightened leaders are caused to look for viable ways to innovate—to follow the innovative, creative, and entrepreneurial impulses that are our trademark.

But it is not so easy today to innovate. In a recent study conducted by McKinsey on leadership and innovation,



researchers found a sizable gap between the aspirations of business leaders to innovate and their ability to execute. Some 70 percent of the top executives surveyed said they expected innovation to be among the three drivers of growth for their companies over the next three to five years. Yet, these same executives expressed disappointment in their ability to stimulate innovation, with about a third of them saying they could innovate only in an ad hoc manner.

There are, thankfully, creative exceptions. Bill Johnson, Chairman and CEO of H.J. Heinz, the Pittsburgh-based maker of condiments, soups, and prepared foods, views innovation as key to the company's growth potential. In that spirit he posed this question to the organization: "How does one innovate with a flagship product (ketchup) that is probably as old as the 138-year-old company itself?"

At first, Heinz toyed with ketchup variations, including using different colors such as green, which kids loved for all the obvious reasons that kids love things that adults cannot abide. But soon they concentrated on new ways to use their products. They armed their marketing gurus with video cameras and captured their customers in their kitchens storing ketchup bottles upside down. So they introduced the top-down bottle and increased their business 25 percent over two years. They also took a product, baked beans, that fundamentally had not changed since H.J. himself introduced the product 100 years before, and put it in little plastic microwaveable single-serve pots, thus reviving their customer base.

I found it interesting that this 138-year-old dog could learn new tricks and was struck particularly by the unintended staffing plan that the CEO used to sustain the company's efforts. As he told a reporter, "The best thing about innovation is that it attracts talent. People like to be around things that are evolving, moving, and changing."

As I look out on this sea of faces this morning, I can only believe that you have chosen community college work and arrived here (during the Great Recession) at NISOD's International Conference on Teaching and Leadership Excellence because you too are "evolving, moving, and changing." You, I believe, are a representative cross-section of the professionals who will teach and lead us into the future, who will give us the courage to study the crystal ball to find clues for the journey ahead.

I should share one bias at the beginning of these remarks. As one who is by title an administrator, but who has continued to teach virtually every year of his professional life, I will use the terms leading and teaching interchangeably today. In my belief system, they grow from the same root, flower from the same branch, and bear fruit from the same tree. In my finest moments of leading, I am a teacher. In my life-long commitment to teaching, I am a leader.

The Crystal Ball Begins to Turn

What do we see when our collective interest in innovation begins to turn the crystal ball and glimpse the future? Let me share a few current factoids drawn from the "Did You

Know?" videos developed by Karl Fisch and Scott McLeod. (Just Google "Did You Know?" to find them.)

- Today's 21-year-olds have watched 20,000 hours of TV, played 10,000 of video games, talked 10,000 hours on the phone, exchanged 250,000 e-mails, and more than half have created content on the web.
- The amount of new technology is doubling every two years.
- The U.S. Department of Labor estimates that today's learner will have 10-14 jobs by age 38.
- More than 3000 books were published—today.
- There were 31 billion searches on Google—this month.
- The total number of text messages sent and received—today—exceeds the total population of the planet.
- Since I began speaking (five minutes ago), 67 babies have been born in the U.S., 294 in China, and 395 in India; and 695,000 songs have been downloaded—illegally!

A Disarmingly Simple, but Strategic Response

The world has placed daunting challenges at our doorstep. Keeping pace with a global, fast-changing, information-primed world with its increasingly fragile economy certainly leads the way. But for educators it is followed, as night follows day, by increased demands for accountability and transparency and a heightened scrutiny of quality and costs. Although we have been evaluating student learning for decades, the current societal pressure for data beyond course grades, degree-granting rates, and similar "production" measures represents a sea change of considerable magnitude.

Today I want to recommend a disarmingly simple, but profoundly demanding, approach that will enable us to move forward. Our task is to live effectively in the present while honoring the past and preparing for the future—to live willingly with the tension and ambiguity such a stance creates. In the words of Rainer Rilke, we must "live the questions," until gradually the very discipline of questioning that the crystal ball represents to me, leads us to answers.

I am a proponent of preserving the academy's culture, values, and commitments, and keeping all that is good from our past, especially programs and services related to the heart of our mission. At the same time, I need to take steps now that will not only serve our organization today, but will prepare us for the future. As you can imagine, it is not easy to manage these variables, and the correctness of my responses are almost always open to interpretation. Here are a few tensions I live with every day as Chancellor of the DCCCD:

- Serving dramatically new student enrollments in the face of rising expenses and infrastructure costs

- Responding to external stakeholders pushing for increased accountability while building the internal structures to manage these demands
- Finding new curriculum paths and delivery methods amidst fears of loss of identity and autonomy within the college community
- Acknowledging the concerns of sometimes fractious constituent groups while continuing to move forward—to act in spite of the dissonance
- Striking a balance between making investments in campus learning spaces and addressing the infrastructure needs of the electronic campus
- Processing more and more information while trying to make room for reflection and historical perspective.

Living the Questions

But even more fundamental to my own crystal ball journey is a handful of questions I find myself living just now as I consider my own institution:

- Are we changing fast enough? Are we keeping up with the revolution?
- Are our students changing faster than we are?
- Are we prepared to keep up with them?
- Do we understand how to help students sort through information to find knowledge?
- Are we inculcating the values of our democracy?
- Are we creating a culture that welcomes change?

As We Turn the Crystal Ball, a Prophet

To help us live the questions, let me recommend a prophet—Thomas Friedman. In describing “flat-world realities,” he speaks with prescience of new “middle jobs” that transcend a single job niche, build cross-disciplinary and multi-dimensional skills, and are clearly relevant to the future. What if we were to take his advice and prepare students to be:

- Great collaborators—who have learned to work effectively with others
- Great leveragers—who can do the job of 20, using technology
- Great synthesizers—who can merge two ideas into something new and valuable
- Great explainers—who in their clarity can guide us
- Great localizers—who can turn a home-grown venture into a global enterprise

- Green adapters—who are proficient in green design, consulting, manufacturing, and science
- Passionate personalizers—who can bring an energetic personal touch to a “vanilla” job
- Great adapters—who can make quick changes to whatever new comes along.

Friedman goes on to describe the high-risk nature of these educational challenges: “It’s like training for the Olympics without knowing what sport you’ll compete in.”

As I Turn My Crystal Ball—Wise Counsel

Even so, as the crystal ball turns, I see encouraging signs that the walls that have created silos in our higher education system may be starting to come down. The country may well be on the verge of creating a new paradigm for discussing and acting on some of the most critical issues we face.

I particularly am encouraged by the wise counsel in this room and at this conference. As a long-time community college leader, in my view there has not been a period as rich in talent as the present. Under The University of Texas umbrella with its broad focus on preparing leaders, let me just highlight three resources available to us here and now. Our host, NISOD, continues to build on the profoundly simple and effective truth that sharing and celebrating best practice strengthens us. Achieving the Dream, with its focus on data and results, is creating a revolution of sorts in our movement, holding our feet to the fire to help more of our at-risk students succeed. There is also CCSSE, providing us constant, robust data about our students and learning environment, and in that process giving us powerful tools.

No wonder the Lumina and Gates Foundations are collaborating with community colleges as the primary mechanism to reach the underserved. Their spotlight will make us better, as we need to be; and in this collaboration, our opportunities to learn will be mutually enriched.

Principles I Am Following as the Crystal Ball Turns

As leaders and teachers, it is our responsibility to position our colleges to be successful and relevant in the future. Here are some principles I am following to adapt to the challenges the crystal ball reveals:

- I am focused on vision. As John Kotter argues in his book, *Leading Change*, one requirement for being an effective organizational change agent is the ability to create a vision that fits organizational purpose. And so each day I ask myself, “What does an institution that holds itself accountable for student learning look like?” If I can envision it, I can make it happen.
- I am learning to take action without having the full picture, before the extraordinary opportunities coming my way pass me by. I am not clairvoyant, but I find at times that I must lead as if I were.

- I am calling on the communities I serve for help. They need to understand clearly how to help us prepare our students for a knowledge-driven future. Then, out of enlightened self-interest, they need to help us!
- I am acknowledging the importance of building a more complete student experience that includes social and civic activities. Even though most are part-time, I still want them to develop leadership skills and a love of the college.
- I am relying on technology to help me assess our students' prior knowledge, determine their academic strengths and weaknesses, and develop personalized learning plans.
- I am acting on my belief that the design of physical space has a positive effect on the learning environment and that some of this adapted space needs to be intimate and quiet.
- I am learning from competitors, especially for-profit providers, carefully observing how they educate and operate.
- I am focused on preparing career lattices, rather than ladders, building processes that will equip students to branch out according to their interests and aptitudes, rather than limiting their choices to a specific job.
- I am collaborating with other colleges, industry, and the community, participating in critical and sometimes difficult conversations with a wide range of stakeholders, convinced we only have scratched the surface in our capacity for new types of relationships.
- I am constantly looking for new sources of revenue!
- I am engaged actively in my own learning and leadership development as the only way to remain a credible, active advocate for learning.

Building a Culture for Innovation

What remains for me is to describe the college culture that best supports innovation. I will keep it simple. It begins with trust, the glue that creates vital institutional life.

With trust, ideas are shared candidly; without it, communication is guarded. With trust, there is risk-taking; without it, fear overtakes action. With it, there is mutual support and the willingness to express vulnerability; without it, there is suspicion. Trust is fundamental to our capacity to prepare for the future. It grows when people respect each other and act with integrity.

A climate for innovation is linked equally to staff members who have found their vocation. It is uncannily true that when we are called to our work, we have the necessary energy to explore and grow. I have labored long in the

vineyard of education. Even today my wife frequently intones, "I have never seen anyone who loves to work like you!" And that is true. The work I do is my passion and suits my gifts and interests. So should it be for all who labor here.

My challenge to you is to continue to honor and, if necessary, rekindle the passions that have called you to this work—so that together, we can continue to innovate. Together, as we innovate our way into a challenging future, we can build the needed trust and honor our chosen vocation to teach, lead, and serve.

Living Stones

I conclude with a story that I constantly embrace in my own professional and personal journey. The story is from a book, *Secret Place*.

"On the island of Jersey, in the English Channel, stands an old stone church. It has withstood the ravages of time, even though much of the cliff on which it was built has been worn away by the water and storms of the passing centuries.

The walls of the church are made of stones of all sizes, for every member of the congregation contributed to them at least one stone—the best he or she could carry. The Master Builder used them all. There they are to this day. The rocks brought by the men have their place in the foundation. Stones large and small are there, and even pebbles that mothers had placed in the tiny hands of the babies are there.

That old building stands as a symbol of what a church can be in a community—each worshipper and worker being an essential living stone. We are needed, and the Master Builder has a place for each of us."

While this story is about a church, it is apropos for those of us who serve in the nation's community colleges. All of you represent a living stone in the beautiful edifice that is your community college. Whoever will may come—enriching your college by becoming an instrument for progress during these challenging times. Each of you must be committed to pumping up the "want-to" factor at your institution.

Best wishes for success in all of those endeavors.

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