

2015 Dallas Herring Lecture

Leadership for the 21st Century Community College

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It is my distinct pleasure and honor to be with you this afternoon and present the 2015 W. Dallas Herring Lecture. Tonight we will consider the leadership challenges and opportunities facing 21st century community college leaders, the skills and attributes that these leaders must possess to meet the challenge, and build on the opportunities.

I must confess when Bob Templin called and asked me to consider this opportunity I was honored and excited on the one hand, and on the other, intimidated and scared out of my wits. Me? I was being asked to give a signature lecture to honor the “father” of the North Carolina Community College System, W. Dallas Herring whose vision of “total education” led to the development and evolution of the North Carolina Community College system. A system developed “with an eye toward access for all” and “a commitment to take people where they are and carry them as far as they can go.” That is access and success for all.

This coupled with another remark Bob made to me that day, he suggested that I might be particularly well suited for this task as I currently served as president of William Rainey Harper College, a college named for the visionary educator in the late 1800s who is most associated with the vision that led to the development of our nation’s community colleges

Well, in the company of these two giants in higher education, I had a moment of extreme panic. When I look at their backgrounds and success there is very little common ground between them and me. However, I do believe the three of us may have one attribute in common and that would be imagination, coupled with a tad bit of daring.

If you talk to folks who know me well they'd say, "Ken? That crazy fool! He actually believes he can do the things he imagines," or others might, more charitably, say, "he's a fellow who dares go where angels fear to tread." So it didn't take me long to plunge into this assignment with the hope that these remarks might stimulate great discussion, perhaps debate, and provide additional fodder for consideration by the architects of NC States' *Envisioning Excellence for Community College Leadership* program and for other aspiring community college leaders who need to consider the challenges that they most assuredly will face in a leadership role in the 21st century community college.

This afternoon, I will think aloud with you about the challenges of 21st century community college leadership from three perspectives:

The **context** from which the 21st century community college is emerging within;

The **future** of America's community college or, how might we imagine what the 21st century community college will become. Now I must warn you, this might be the part of the talk where fools and angels meet.

And finally, the **skill sets and mind set community college leaders** will need to develop to both build and sustain our evolving sector of higher education.

First, the context for a primer on the disruption of higher education occurring today I would suggest a reading of *Unsettling Times*, a recently published analysis of the state of public higher education, a report issued by the University of Denver in 2014. You know, today, more than ever in our nation's history, never has there been so much disruption in the higher education scene.

This disruption has three distinct accelerators: first, the internet; second, the realization that universal post-secondary education must be achieved across our nation for the US to remain an economically viable leader; and finally, third, the tremendous scrutiny we are facing with respect to our accountability for student learning outcomes.

The internet has virtually commoditized higher education and has led to the proliferation of for-profit providers, diverse delivery platforms, and the micro-credentialing of knowledge and skills completely independent of the Carnegie credit hour. Also, distance education has exploded, competency based education is gaining traction, and new, third party providers are being identified by the federal government as new recipients of Title IV dollars.

Let me provide three current examples. In the last several weeks I have been visited by:

Pearson Education wants to partner in distance education and provide content, marketing, technical support—they make the upfront investment, we split the profits; second,

Cengage has offered to provide all of our GED educational offerings within a contextualized approach to a career/job. I think about this as the I-Best model on steroids; and, last my favorite,

Southern New Hampshire University offers traditional bricks and mortar in an idyllic setting, the 2nd largest distance education program in the country offered on several floors of an old New Hampshire manufacturing plant, and last, a competency based distance delivered associate and bachelor's degree that is a business to business operation with employees only eligible for participation if their employer joins the "College for America" network.

These are the new players in higher education. In this context is it difficult to believe that the leadership skills that one needed to possess to compete and lead a 20th century community college could be sufficient in the 21st.

The history of the American community college illustrates that leaders must possess the skills and talents that are relevant for the times. Cathryn Addy in her book *The President's Journey: Issues and Ideals in the Community College* offers a historical perspective of community college presidents based on the issues that were prevalent at the time. In the early stages, the "pioneers" courted politicians for funding and designed organizational structures borrowed from universities and colleges (this was Dr. Herrings' era).

The second wave within the community college movement saw a time of rapid growth, thus leaders needed to deal with building infrastructures and managing staffing issues such as the introduction of unions in some environments.

The third generation of community college leaders needed to adopt technological enhancements and bring those innovations to their campuses.

And, according to Addy, the 21st century represents the fourth generation of the evolution of the community college. This is marked by even more rapid changes in technology, scarce funding, and the need to change rapidly in response to challenges and trends. We might think of this as a transformative era.

This latter characterization aligns well with my views that I will share later regarding the leadership characteristics that are needed to ensure community colleges remain viable in a transformative era. We must also consider the scale that must be achieved in order to assure universal post-secondary education.

Former Under Secretary of Education Martha Kanter had it right several years ago when asked about the US competing in a global economy. She said, "We cannot educate only the top 20% of Americans...we must educate the top 100% of our citizens!" And she had it right, in today's economy it is hard to imagine an individual leading a successful self and family sustaining life without the benefit of a post-secondary credential, or its

equivalent and on-going access to credentialing systems supporting a lifetime of work and advancement.

America has clearly become a “knowledge economy,” one that demands post-secondary readiness for all high school graduates and post-secondary credentialing for life. The challenge for us is to provide access at a scale never realized before and at a cost that promotes real value for the learner who invests. Again, it is hard to imagine our current arrangement of community colleges and the skills it took to build them holding up under the pressure of scale at this magnitude.

Finally, add to this context our current state of increased governmental attention to demonstrated outcomes and accountability. In this era of decreased funding and needing to address an ever growing number of diverse learners, one might say we face an insurmountable challenge. Yet, I prefer to view these conditions as presenting insurmountable opportunities.

How could that possibility be the case? In my view the challenges we face present the perfect catalyst for imagining a future public education system that is more responsive across our states and regions. Let’s face it, as good as our institutions are, they are extraordinarily inefficient, too costly to run, and too disconnected and fragmented from other public educational providers. The future will require us to leverage existing resources and align educational systems and possibly move into a new community-based organizational model that supports access and success over a lifetime of education and employment.

In the 21st century we need to seek organizing strategies that enable us to leverage the existing public resources of our secondary schools, the community college and our regional public universities. The 21st century community college leaders must conceptually view and extend their definition of “community” as extending beyond the community college campus to K-12, university, and non-profit community-based service partners.

We must move from a highly disconnected array of institutions to a more tightly bundled system of community-based education. What is needed is a new institutional model, and an organizing model that promotes “stickiness” between K-12, community colleges, universities, and community-based service non-profit organizations (think of an organization like Goodwill Industries).

I prefer to think of this as a “Communiversities” form of public education. A form of public education that stitches together the time and talent of our employees with the capital and fiscal resources of existing institutions and organizations: building out a new, more powerful ecosystem of public education.

In many ways the community colleges of today are best positioned to promote that stickiness by serving as conveners or organizing bodies to leverage the joint capacities

of the K-12, community college and regional university partner. This arrangement would be well positioned to develop and deliver career and educational pathways that integrate secondary and post-secondary education through a new delivery paradigm. Combining local consortia of secondary schools and community college partners with a regional public university, these partners could deliver multiple career pathways that are localized and far less costly than today's distributed system.

Imagine a regional Communiversity that stitches together the resources of community colleges and local public secondary systems to deliver high value, low cost certificates, associate degrees, baccalaureate and master's degrees through a networked system, both virtually and face-to-face. Through the distribution of community colleges across our country, these educational credentials could be delivered locally so that they are tightly connected to employer needs, aligned with economic development initiatives, and anchored by an institution that provides research and analysis supporting ongoing information collection and analysis that informs investments in talent development which is aligned with regional and local needs.

Utilizing the combined resources of these institutions, multiple delivery platforms could be built out and delivered across the system—think face to face, digital, competency-based, credit for prior learning and the like. Some common features of this organizing model would be:

Open admissions where all students would be eligible for admission in certificate and associate degree programs and all completed associate degree programs would guarantee access to the companion baccalaureate degree across the system.

Customized delivery platforms designed to accommodate both young learners and adults and more customized to individual learner needs. Opportunities to offer earn and learn experiences for students, such as internships or apprenticeships, that allow students to determine earlier rather than later if a career focus is the right fit for them.

Affordable, so that students could live at home and afford an education through summer jobs and part-time jobs. Independent students would be able to access the continuum of credentials offered at a price point that is aligned with the current community college pricing model.

Continuous enrollment and all programs **aligned with work force needs or economic development initiatives** would be offered both virtually and in-person and would be available at every site.

Information systems, data sharing agreements, analytical tools, and learning support systems would be common across the system. Student Enrollment Services Systems would be on a common platform and available 24/7 at all sites.

All credentials would rest on a **core of essential workforce competencies:** communication, critical thinking, technology literacy, writing, numeracy and problem solving.

This Commuiversity that I am imagining is a very different model from its organizational design to its implementation strategies. It leverages the geography, price point, and connectivity of community colleges to the local community school systems, employers, regional universities, and non-profit community-based service organizations. This system would move from focusing on access and enrollment to a system of access, assessment and completion. Additionally, a special word about assessment, in many ways we have the access agenda solidified and we are currently working to solidify our commitment to student success and completion.

We are lousy at student assessment and, in my view, this is the thing we must do very, very well if we are going to succeed with student success at the scale that is being called for. This could be the secret sauce of the networked secondary-post-secondary stickiness that this model is imagining. Assisting students, very early on, in their personal development and career aspirations would lead to much greater levels of student commitment and persistence to completing educational credentials rather they be technical, occupational, or academic.

What would it take to lead in this new institutional setting? Certainly something more than William Merrit Wriston, the 11th president of Brown University suggested when asked what a president is expected to be. He responded, "The president is expected to be an educator, to have been at some time a scholar, to have judgment about finance, to know something about construction, maintenance and labor policy, to speak virtually continuously in words that charm and never offend, to take bold positions with which no one will disagree, to consult everyone and follow all proffered advice, and do everything through committees but with great speed."

My guess is that the 21st century community college will require leaders with all that President Wriston spoke of and much, much more. It shall require knowledge and skill sets that are more comprehensive and complex than our current organizational design demands. Leaders in this system will need a strong set of management skills. In fact, a prerequisite for leading in a system like this will be an excellent set of management skills. These leaders will need an enhanced ability to deal effectively with ambiguity because what we will see in the future will be much different than what we have been accustomed to.

Expertise for leading and managing organizational change strategies will be at a great premium. These leaders will need to be imaginative, system design thinkers, calculated risk takers and extremely good at people picking. Deep content knowledge will be required in collective impact strategy, in public education administration, and in both workforce and economic development strategy.

These leaders will need to be capable of flying the plane while re-building the fleet. They will need the attributes of Level 5 leaders as described by Jim Collins in his text, *From Good to Great*. They will need to find a voice that promotes urgency yet confidence. They will need to promote a vision that folks have the freedom to reject, but the compelling nature of which enables them to follow. Building cultures, picking the right people, reducing complexity, and being prepared for a long journey will be essential. There will be no quick fix. Leaders will need to embed themselves into their communities: think of commitments of 10 years or more.

And last, but surely not least, the 21st century community college will require a leader who is deeply committed to access, assessment, and achievement for all. This is an issue of equity. All students do not start equal, irrespective of their earning a high school diploma. We know that history, social and economic conditions and a host of other factors put students at many different starting places, some at much greater risk than others.

Today in our country between four and five million young adults, age 18-24, are neither employed or in school. This is the casualty of an equity agenda not met. We must commit to end this growing number of disenfranchised young people in our country. One can only imagine the implications for our nation's economic security and social stability if we allow this trend to continue unabated.

The 21st century educational leaders must understand this, and commit to delivering curriculum through multiple platforms and pedagogies with individualized support systems to meet students where they are and move them forward with workforce valued certificates and degrees. In this system credit for prior learning and competency based learning all become the norm.

In closing let me say how honored I am to have been invited to deliver this lecture. As a first generation college kid, all that I am and all that I have directly aligns with my educational opportunities. It enabled me to live the American Dream. I believe that 21st century community college leaders have the great distinction of leading in an era that places great value in the work we do. Our biggest mistake, for our sector and for our country, would be to believe that the institutions of today will be sufficient for the challenges of tomorrow.

We must accept that in order to do more we must re-imagine a system of public education. A system that requires us partner in ways, here to fore, thought unimaginable. Our future demands an expanded vision of the "community" in community college education. If we do our jobs well we can be part of the leadership of this country that assures 21st century America remains a place where "dreams" come true for everyone.

Thank you.

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Kenneth Ender is President of William Rainey Harper College, a large community college located outside of Chicago, Illinois. Through partnerships and alliances, Dr. Ender has positioned Harper as a leading 21st-century community college by increasing graduation, transfer and certificate completion rates, aligning Harper's curriculum with high schools, training students for new economy jobs and implementing new accountability and transparency standards. Before coming to Harper, Dr. Ender served as President of Cumberland County College in New Jersey for eleven years. Dr. Ender holds a Ph.D. in urban services leadership from Virginia Commonwealth University, a master's degree in education from the University of Georgia and a bachelor's degree in business management also from Virginia Commonwealth University.