

President Kanosky's Remarks – Spring 2012 Opening Days

As open-door community college educators, support personnel, and administrators, it likely is pre-supposed that each and every one of us is egalitarian and altruistic in belief and spirit. That we all believe in and support the notion that education is a social good which should be available to all who knock at our door – no matter their background or circumstance. Yet the underlying reality leaves room for individual contradictions because so many who knock at our door are not prepared to benefit from what we have to offer.

How could we have gotten to this sorry state of affairs? I am afraid that it becomes all too easy for us to be victims of “good old days” thinking as we bemoan today’s sorry state of student preparedness.

Does anyone here remember whether there was ever a time in the really early days when students were “prepared to our satisfaction” when they came to HCC? If so, everyone’s job must have been much easier back then – less challenging – and less frustrating with fewer obstacles to overcome.

I am not personally able to testify about the preparedness of our students in those earliest days but I can verify that the Learning Assistance Center, now the Success Center, has been in existence since shortly after I came to Highland in the fall of 1981. In fact, the LAC reported to me when it was first established.

Even in those long ago days, tutoring was essential for many students – the math lab was in full operation and there were remedial communication classes. You get the idea. I fear that we have forgotten that the preparedness issues we are struggling with have been present as long as I have been at Highland and long before that.

Admittedly, the issues may have intensified, but they appear to be the same issues which continue to confound and frustrate us. In other words, the preparedness issues we continue to face did not just magically appear in the last few years. We also have not been able to find any magic solutions of our own to this continuing dilemma.

Unfortunately, our frustrations over this lack of preparedness are not likely to diminish as we move forward given the current and much maligned state of K-12 public education.

If this is to be our reality, and we hope to continue to be successful and true to our core values and beliefs, each of us must be prepared to seriously engage in and discuss questions similar to the following:

- How can each of us best deal with the seemingly ever increasing number of students who do not meet our expectation that they come to us adequately prepared for the responsibilities and rigor of college work?
- How will we – as an open door community college – maintain access for all students who choose to come to us, while at the same time we are pushed ever harder by state and federal mandates to deliver ever greater completion rates? Completion is the new

challenge. It is no longer good enough to just enroll students. Completion is the new game – the new rule we will be judged by.

- How will we maintain our “open door” as the door to success and not a revolving door leading to yet another failure for an increasing number of our students?
- How will we best equip each of our students, as individuals, to lead lives enriched by the process of learning – learning how to learn – so that they are finally prepared and able to continue learning and succeeding throughout their lives? To be completers!
- Since it is up to us to finally find ways to develop lasting solutions to these challenges, what must we do and how must we equip ourselves to think and act differently?

I believe that we all know that today’s students are increasingly challenging, and that is not going to change – whether they are as prepared as we want them to be or not. Today’s students are likely not satisfied with static environments. They expect and demand instantaneous responses, 24/7 access to information and entertainment, and they are not afraid to make their needs known.

As a comprehensive community college, we will continue to be bombarded with issues and challenges which will arrive with increasing speed, complexity, and almost certainly no one right answer. But, we have to make decisions. We must plan. We must continue to move forward in the face of increasing uncertainty – in spite of the discomfort we might feel as we are confronted by the natural human tendency to reject change and stay within our comfort zones.

We must find the internal strength to deal with questions and challenges we each will face on a regular, if not daily, basis. Some of those challenges include meeting the often conflicting needs of students – of colleagues – of local taxpayers – of state and federal regulations, and – lest we forget – the challenges of meeting our own personal and family needs and obligations.

As the individuals who collectively make up Highland Community College, we are the ones entrusted to structure the learning opportunities and student development services which each of our students needs and expects us to provide in order for them to be successful – to be completers.

As an open door institution, we all certainly understand that we do not get to select just the students most likely to succeed. In fact, we really do not get to select any of our students – our students select us.

After they select us, and we welcome them to Highland, it is our responsibility and our obligation to help each of them succeed, regardless of their status when they come to us. Of course, each student has a role to play and we need to continue to expect them to work in partnership with us if they are to succeed. That is and must remain an expectation of each student and we in turn must live up to the expectations they have of us and our obligation to them.

My challenge for the spring semester is that each of us – no matter what our role at Highland Community College – seriously contemplates this somewhat hypothetical question: Are we more successful as an institution when already successful students continue to succeed while

they are with us – or if we transform poorly prepared students into success stories? Into completers?

While we certainly do not want to diminish the importance of any student who chooses to come to Highland, least of all the prepared, highly successful and highly achieving ones. That different philosophy of measuring educational growth and success might surprise us, and open our eyes in many ways.

But what is success? Is it the same for every student? Is it growth? Is it credit gathering? Is it the ability to synthesize and solve problems? Is it the ability to finally grasp concepts and apply them? Or is it only degree and certificate completion as the state and national agenda appears to be dictation?

We remain the ones who must critically discuss and carefully design (or carefully redesign) Highland Community College's systems and processes to enable all of the students who knock at our door the opportunity to succeed at the national college completion agenda – since that apparently is to become our benchmark.

If the two metrics – degree and certificate completion – end up being all that matters – all that counts (and I certainly hope not) then the core essence of the comprehensive community college – the various bullet points in our mission statement – may well be diluted and diminished in importance to the disadvantage of our district residents and to all of us.

While we must adhere to the state and national completion agendas, I firmly believe that we must find ways to retain and value the various educational options our founders included as the mission components of the college and which our district residents have come to expect.

We must hold true to these elements if we are to remain a comprehensive community college. We also must remember and constantly remind ourselves that every student who comes to us is important, regardless of their preparedness level.

We simply cannot afford to allow any student who upholds their end of the bargain to be unserved, to remain unprepared, to not complete their program of study.

That is our duty – that is our obligation – that is our agreement with our students. We must live up to that agreement to the best of our ability while not lowering our standard of excellence.

I wish everyone a great 2012 and a highly-productive and satisfying spring semester.

Thank you!

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President