

August 31, 2009

An Eventful First Week

As I began my fifth year at Mesa, I was filled with trepidation about the great things about to happen and the possibility that much could go wrong. We were starting with an “East Entrance” newly completed and repaved (a minor miracle given the fact that on Friday August 21, the street was still closed), the Allied Health Building would open and be ready for classes for the first time (even though the keys to all offices and classrooms were still not working the Friday before), we were about to test the capacity of the new Parking Structure and the synchronization of traffic lights and of course, we were starting the semester with record breaking enrollment growth, 239 fewer courses and district wide waiting list of 11,000 students. What else could we ask for?

As the first two hours rolled along, things appeared to be going miraculously well. Traffic was still difficult to navigate, faculty, students and staff were engaging in newly discovered behavior regarding parking protocols (most of it friendly and courteous), and the sun decided to beat down hotter than ever (record heat not usual for San Diego). As I walked the campus, I was struck by an amazing feeling of well being and happiness. Smiles seemed to abound and I was greeted by many students, faculty and staff more eagerly than I remember being the case in prior years. I headed for the Welcome Back Kiosk to help greet new students all of whom asked for--water, granola bars, campus maps, free planners and schedule of classes--in that order of priority (Maslow is right again). One of the beneficial effects for me as a nervous president was the immediate calm and doses of infectious enthusiasm that made me believe that all was right with the world.

The rest of the week was not uneventful. On Thursday, we had an unfortunate pedestrian vehicle accident in the crosswalk in front of the L-500 building. The good news is that the student involved was not seriously hurt and that our police, and emergency response groups all reacted flawlessly. Kudos to Sergeant Diana Medero, who managed the situation, gathered information, visited with me and also visited with the student at the hospital. My greatest relief came when Sergeant Medero informed me that the student’s primary concern was missing her Friday World Religion class (of course, we assured her that we would contact the instructor).

Each day brought a new challenge but none of the anticipated behavior problems stemming from irate and frustrated students (and yes--frustrated faculty and staff) happened. That’s not to say that there were no “testy moments.”

The week also included the fourth of Mesa’s Town Hall Meetings designed to update the college community on budget issues, anticipate problems, provide a venue to dialogue, and discuss our concerns. Each of these Town Halls has been a bit different even though the objective has remained constant. Abstracted below are some of the remarks I made this morning as I welcomed the group to the meeting.

TOWNHALL REMARKS

August 28, 2009

Over the past 30 years, Community Colleges in the State of California have experienced budget cuts with great regularity (1981, 1991, 2001 and 2008). This current cycle came sooner (it should have been 2011) and will last longer, at least five years by some predictions. Interestingly, these same 30 years coincide with the precise length of my career within the California Community Colleges thus providing me with some historical and philosophical perspective about our ability to manage and rebound from each of these cycles.

The California Postsecondary Education Commission (CPEC), The Public Policy Institute of California (PPIC), The Community College League of California (CCLC) and the State Chancellor's Office, each in turn have analyzed these cycles of economic downturn and they have had the opportunity to look at the impact of these economic downturns and the accompanying budget reductions passed on to community colleges; the outcome has been consistently the same: increased enrollments, a reduction in overall access for community college students and a disproportionate impact on special populations.

In addition, these reports make it a point to note that the impact of reductions is always exacerbated when coupled with fee increases. As we well know this is the case now. What is different about the current scenario however, is the overlay of an eroding tax base and the prospect of a longer recovery cycle aligned with the largest enrollment growth in our history. The picture is at once grim and hopeful particularly for the 2.5 million Californians who see in their community colleges as the one positive in their future.

The Good News Is

It is always important to note that our District has done one of the most effective jobs in the State preparing and managing this protracted economic crisis. It has been one of our hallmarks to be proactive, to plan ahead and to implement changes incrementally so no one immediate action would result in serious damage to our core values, programs and courses. In addition, at Mesa we have focused on the lessons learned from the past as we moved to identify best practices and to look for new and creative ways in which we could come together in times of crisis as members of the college community. It was through the process that the idea for the Town Halls emerged.

In times of uncertainty, one of the key factors in helping to mitigate a crisis is the degree to which communication continues to flow. This is particularly important in times when "truth is stranger than fiction" and when even the most reasonable among us is unable to reconcile the rapidity with which changes are happening, let alone the lack of apparent rationality behind some budget reductions. It is at times like these, that the best thing we can do is to keep on talking so that we can share with one another the layer of complicated factors that build from week to week.

This is the fourth such gathering since June of this year. The first one came following a discussion with Academic Senate leaders as we tried to identify ways to "best inform" faculty about the rough budget Summer ahead. Mesa's Executive Team provided the Senate with the best information available to us at that time along with a stark warning that the picture was changing day to day. Little did we know then that not anything resembling final figures would be

made available to us until July 24. Matters worsened as we noted that many of these allocations were predicated on factors that may or may not be realized; in other words, “a house of cards.”

Since July 24, four very serious factors have been added to this passion play

- Workload measure reduction
- Categorical Reductions
- Categorical Backfill Reductions
- Expected Mid-year Cuts (December 2009)

Lessons Learned:

The process of “mutual shaping” and discussion has yielded some interesting outcomes. Listed below are some of the most salient suggestions made:

- Change the tone of the discourse from purely fiscal to programmatic. Let’s identify the pragmatic and the possible.
- Change the climate of the college from a “poverty mind set” to one that focuses on the resources still available to us, the most valuable of which being our own commitment to students, our intellectual vitality and our creativity.
- Let’s evolve the thinking from doing more with less to “doing better with less” This kind of thinking forces us to discard those practices, requirements and procedures that do not add to our ability to serve students but simply exist as rollover practices that may no longer be relevant or useful. Let’s look at what we consider most critical so that we can support, and in some cases, enhance those practices by maximizing our resources in the most relevant and targeted manner possible.
- How do we do this? By focusing first, last, and always on our Strategic Plan, Priorities, Mission, Vision, Values and the Standards required of an accredited institution of higher learning.
- Collaborative Partnerships are the key – we need to focus on sustaining a climate of civility, trust and respect as we continue to be secure in the knowledge that we share the same goals even if we might disagree on the best avenue to achieve the desired result.
- Students as True North – We are all educators on this campus and we are all committed to education as our highest common value. The challenge/opportunity for each of us is to continue to serve our community in the best manner possible.
- Resource Development—We must develop our entrepreneurial talents. We have to invest time and energy not just managing reductions but also in thinking of ways to acquire new resources, particularly given “Federal Stimulus” opportunities as well as those resources available through the private and philanthropic sectors (“Show me the Money!”).

We're In For the Long Haul – or – The Marathon vs. the Sprint

Being a novice in all matters related to sports, I nevertheless recognize the value of a particular sports metaphor that would serve us well, namely to place the context of our work together in the context of a marathon not a sprint. I promptly turned to various search engines looking for some crisp examples that I could use. I found just the right description in a narrative produced by Nathaniel Talbott a young entrepreneur, trainer and software developer:

“Both sprints and marathons have starting lines, and the people lined up behind them are equally pumped up to start running the race....And yet – what happens between the start and finish of a marathon and a sprint couldn't be more different. In a sprint, the effort is focused on mere seconds, or perhaps minutes, and the runners push hard, giving everything they've got with each foot traveled. It doesn't matter if they collapse after only running a few hundred yards—as long as they make it over the finish line first, they've won. The start is critical, as it makes up a huge percentage of the race, and as the race is run, a tiny stumble spells doom.....A marathon is something altogether different. Everyone knows as they leave the starting line that they're going to be running a long time, and that if they don't pace themselves they'll never make it to the end, much less have the best time. The start is important, but pales in comparison to sustained progress. Even a large stumble disappears in to the noise of the race so long as it doesn't result in any physical damage...” (Talbott, January 2009)

We're in for a marathon and we probably will stumble along the way. When we do, let's be forgiving and help each other up because in the long run this is the only way in which we will all win this race.