

Words of Wisdom from FACCC's Presidents

by Amy Leonard, De Anza College

To celebrate the 70th anniversary of FACCC, we chatted with former presidents Dennis Smith, Carolyn Russell, and Leslie Smith. We delved into their experiences during their respective tenures as presidents and gained insights into their perspectives on the present condition of community colleges in California.

What was the highlight for you of being FACCC president?

Dennis Smith: The relationships with FACCC members, staff, and board members plus the student-focused campaigns with the other California community college faculty groups.

Carolyn Russell: The highlight of my presidency was the purchasing of our building, which became visible proof of our stability and substance. Before that, we rented space in what has become The Standard Hotel. We were at the mercy of landlords. Now we are owners.

Leslie Smith: The opportunity to make a difference, every minute of each and every day.

How do you see the community college landscape changing since you were president?

Dennis Smith: While the lowest per-pupil funding rate hasn't changed, a more restrictive "student success" funding formula has emerged as a barrier to access for some students.

Leslie Smith: California was a purple state, we transitioned from a Republican governor to a Democratic one; the Legislature was divided, and you needed bipartisan support to get anything accomplished; Consultation Council had just been established and we were learning to work together; there were major changes inside FACCC itself.

We focused on:

1. making basic skills an equal mission with academic and vocational [training];
2. part-timer rights, including funding for office hours and healthcare;
3. increasing full-time faculty and expanding the definition to include counselors, librarians, and nurses;

4. defeating performance-based funding;
5. responding to national welfare reform through inclusion;
6. continuing to serve all students [despite] budget cuts, being commended and recognized for that, and receiving full funding when the budget came back;
7. defeating common course numbering to ensure that all colleges had the ability to provide courses to meet the needs of all members of their local community and NOT reducing to the lowest common denominator found at all UCs and CSUs;
8. doing our own research to determine the most effective course of action rather than relying on foundations and other players with their own specific agendas and monetary goals;
9. stopping (a) attempts to make the community colleges a statewide system and ending local control which enables serving each and every local community, and (b) discussion of subsuming under CSU as New York does; and
10. creating unified advocacy and lobbying across all segments and organizations so we spoke with one voice and did not hit each other in the Legislature or administration, which meant we had to speak for everyone, NOT regard one group as more important than another.

California has gone "blue", but seems to have abandoned the brilliance of the 1960 California Master Plan for Higher Education, which strived to make higher education free and available to all of California's adults with the full intention of increasing upward mobility and social justice and equity. I heard former University of California President Clark Kerr address the Legislature and he was fully aware that the goal of the Master Plan was to transform our society. Luckily, a significant amount of research has been conducted on how the brain works (reference: www.pbs.org/wgbh/nova/series/your-brain/.) It is clear

that the more open, experimental, and creative the learning environment is, the greater the brain excels and achieves. The marketing ploy of naming all current policy pursuits "student SUCCESS" should entrap no one. Science, as always, should be the underlying basis of all policy proposals focused on learning, education, innovation, and breaking through all barriers.

We have never achieved accepting the top 12% of high school graduates to UC nor the top 33% to CSU. Community college enrollment has plunged by over one-third, yet we have stopped putting ACCESS as the top issue. We are focused on tick marks for researchers and foundations rather than increasing economic opportunity and upward mobility, social justice and equity, dreams, and sustainability for generations to come. While California is certainly building a global economy, we seem to have lost the goal of inclusion. Instead, we are being led by organizations and institutions that are conducting fundamentally flawed research that is encouraging or forcing students to go deeply in debt, enriching international loan companies; focusing on the troubling goals of completion and time to degree; focusing on the student group du jour rather than outreaching and embracing the entire adult population of California. This is tragic.

The concept of deciding what or who you want to be in high school is one of the reasons people left Europe, where you became what your parents were. When I was president, we pushed back on these unenlightened efforts. We were lucky that most folks recognized this was a route to the rationing of education, which became the mantra of Chancellor Jack Scott starting in 2008. The damage they have done is unimaginable. While there have always been the small minded in any community, through unity, valid research, hard work, commitment, and common values, we were able to hold them at bay.

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What do you think the biggest issues are facing faculty today, and how do they differ from when you were president?

Dennis Smith: There has been a tremendous acceleration of faculty workload creep in the past 40 years. Faculty primacy for academic and professional matters, student learning objectives, performance-based funding schemes, shared governance, and technology-assisted learning are some of the reasons and too few faculty doing too much work is the result.

Carolyn Russell: The teaching environment has largely changed from in-person contact to virtual. Anyone who has participated in Zoom meetings understands that the dynamics are not the same. The sense of community is gone.

Leslie Smith: Today California has a more diverse population with a wider range of needs; never has the planet had such a pressing need to change the way we do almost everything, and change very rapidly; democracy itself is under attack, and many, many groups are LOSING rights and autonomy; AI is a game changer in ways we are only beginning to imagine; and many, many more globally and locally pressing issues.

I was president in the previous millennium. Faculty were fighting for change and gaining power and unity. We were part of California becoming a blue state, committed to serving more students, and the system itself was embracing throwing off all vestiges of its K-12 past and becoming an equal partner in California's higher education system. We were trying to fulfill the dreams and promises of the California Master Plan for Higher Education. We were always fighting to move the entire system forward, for everyone.

This millennium is a very different era with much tougher and bigger issues. Unfortunately, I think we have lost ground since 2012, but are beginning to turn it around with AB811. Every single facet of society needs the breadth and depth of a comprehensive community college, based on open, and I hope, free enrollment, risk-free, learning from failure, demanding relevancy, serving all communities with endless innovation and experimentation. The task is daunting, but exhilarating; endless, but feasi-

ble; and, of incomparable importance. We can't let the small thinkers, the fear mongers, the entitled "my group first and foremost" zealots destroy the dream. We are too fundamentally important to every single member of our society.

What is one issue that you think all faculty should be paying attention to?

Dennis Smith: More than two of every three California community college faculty have part-time temporary positions and are excluded from doing any of the above "college service" work. This only exacerbates the workload creep for full-time faculty.

Carolyn Russell: Social media are redefining society, creating detachment and isolation. The text you just received supplants the importance of the person standing next to you. Faculty gathering at lunch to discuss teaching failures and successes, to be, well, collegial, is becoming a thing of the past.

Leslie Smith: In the last decade or so, there has been incredible pressure to ration education and compress the mission into a 1950 junior college vision. The result has been a massive loss in enrollment. I remember when we marched in March of 2003 with an enrollment of 2.9 million students. We were protesting proposed fee increases and cuts to enrollment. We won and continued to win for about 10 years. Now fees have increased, enrollment has plummeted to about 1.8 million, although the population and budget have grown significantly, as has the need for an education.

Faculty are on the front lines serving students and different faculty are serving different students. I think the most important issue is for faculty to keep their eye on the big picture, talk to each other, and become a unified voice fighting for an open enrollment, free community college system that is a creative and innovative force for all our adults, regardless of age, gender, background, goals, hopes, and dreams. While it's important to understand and pay attention to the details, the war for the future of the community colleges is in the big picture policy. Faculty need to be leaders at COFO, in Consultation Council, in the Legislature and the Governor's Office, at their own college and across the state in all venues.

What advice would you have for someone interested in becoming FACCC president?

Dennis Smith: The FACCC is the only singularly focused professional organization for California community college faculty. Every faculty member should be a member. One route to learning more about the organization is through the advisory committees.

Carolyn Russell: The assault on free speech, the disrespect for what we can learn from and say about the past, the refusal to listen to opinions contrary to our own are stifling growth and contributing to an incredibly naive American perspective. In 1990, the faculty at my college were using Jerry Rubin's book *Do It* as a teaching tool. In the chapter "F__ God," the F word is repeated 468 times. We had lively discussions.

Leslie Smith: Jump at the opportunity to make a difference. The California community colleges play an incredibly important role in creating opportunity, upward mobility, and fulfilling dreams for California's adults. We are living in a time of incredibly rapid change and the only feasible way of developing solutions, successfully adapting, and thriving rather than fearing change is through education and lifelong learning. The California community colleges need the best thinkers and open-minded leaders to fulfill our mission and obligation to our state. The presidency of FACCC is a critically important position, not only to our faculty and students, but also to the entire public education system, our economy, social justice, equity, and, quite literally, to the future for all of us.

What do you miss most about not being FACCC president?

Dennis Smith: Being at the center of the professional and political universe for California's community college faculty and students.

Carolyn Russell: Don't underestimate the need for, and power of, activism and advocacy in contributing to student success and maintaining safe places to explore controversy.

Leslie Smith: Making a difference, finding friends and allies, fighting the good fight 24/7/365. There was never a dull moment—sometimes good; sometimes bad; sometimes thrilling; sometimes infuriating; sometimes fun; sometimes exhausting—but always important.

Final thoughts to share with the FACCC audience.

Dennis Smith: Even if a person has retired as a community college faculty member, they can remain connected to FACCC and be effective as an advocate for the issues they care about. Also, much gratitude to the FACCC staff and members for the ongoing excellent work.

Carolyn Russell: I miss working with Jonathan Lightman, one of, if not the, brightest, most compassionate, respected, and creative persons to have ever worked in Sacramento. Best of all, he was FACCC's face.

Leslie Smith: Remember that completion is not the best or most important aspect of anything, especially education. The journey, learning, exploring, creating, enjoying, failing, trying, and getting back up are all part of the experience, and success is wonderful. Take your time to fully engage. It's the opportunity of a lifetime.

In anything that is important, there are always detractors, people or groups who find power in destruction and fear, rather than building and enlightenment.

Never let them drag you down, pull you off track or subvert your soul.

From American poet Jorie Graham, "this is your moment, the moment your soul showed up incarnate. In this world. It is an astonishing moment to be alive. It's your one life. You've entered it at a point when everything you do matters. How often does a soul get to live in such an era?" ■