Inaugural Address

I am truly encouraged by the kind words and pledges of support expressed by our speakers.

Vice Chair Gavan and Trustees, I want to thank you all for the trust you have placed in me by selecting me as the fifth President of Sussex County Community College. I look forward to continue the working relationship we have developed over the past 10 months as we continue to stabilize and move the College forward.

Director Rich Zeoli, thank you for your kind words and for the proclamation that you and the Freeholder Board approved for this occasion. I am looking forward to continuing to build upon the cooperation and understanding that we have developed these past months as the College rebuilds and renews itself for the benefit of all the county’s residents.

And Secretary Hendricks, thank you for the leadership that you are providing for educational change in New Jersey, for speaking on behalf of Governor Chris Christie’s Administration, and for presenting me with the Governor’s proclamation.

I really appreciate Senator Steve Oroho’s commitment to the College and his agreeing to deliver keynote remarks for this gathering. I have had the pleasure of getting to know him these past months. Senator Oroho, thank you very much for your words of support and I believe we will have a fruitful working relationship.

Assemblypersons McHose (and Chiusano) I’d also like to thank you for your remarks. I believe that the direction we are setting for the College is consistent with your hopes for the future of this institution.

Chairperson Chuck Roberts and College Foundation members, your fundraising for scholarships has helped promote student success. I am looking forward to working with the Foundation as we re-orient it for future efforts.
Dr. Frank Ancona, thank you for your remarks on behalf of the faculty. Faculty members are the front line of the service we provide the community and I appreciate your commitment to the change we need to realize for the betterment of the College and our 21st century learners.

Lauren, you are one of our 21st century learners. I appreciate your words of support on behalf of the students, and thanks to you and the SGA for the gift. I really need to say again and again how open and forthright the students at this College have been in engaging in dialogue with me as I casually meet with them. This is especially important because we need your input as we renew our efforts to promote individual learning.

I also want to thank Larry Nespoli of the New Jersey Council of County Colleges and my colleague presidents for their show of support this afternoon.

And I must sincerely thank Harry, Kathleen, Wendy, and all the members of the Inaugural Committee, and the student volunteers, as well as Sophie and our maintenance staff, who have worked so hard to make this event happen.

And, of course, I would like to shout out to my sisters, brothers-in-law, nephews, and friends who traveled here from Pittsburgh and Florida (and California?) to support me on this day.

Community Colleges have come to be recognized in recent years as potential incubators of innovation, as providers of the type of learning that will provide the education and training people need to lead productive and fulfilling lives as playing a critical role in economic recovery economy of this country, and as providers of an affordable choice for a high quality and relevant education. Sussex County Community College is proud to be a part of this community college movement and this community college moment.

Community colleges are known for policies of open access and service to lifelong learners. Community colleges have traditionally carried out this mission by: preparing students for college level work and transfer, providing career education and non-credit courses for workforce development, and service to the community.

Sussex County Community College has fulfilled these roles well. The quality education and services needed to meet the higher education demands of our constituencies.

Yet today the expectations and demands placed on us are greater than ever.

Government, accrediting bodies, and the populations we serve are demanding greater accountability. There is pressure to improve completion rates. Public financial support for higher education has been dwindling, while a greater share of the financial burden is placed on students.
And industry leaders demand a workforce with the education and skills to meet the needs of the new type of jobs being created, like those in advanced manufacturing and other high tech industries.

And in this new societal and economic landscape, it seems everyone is turning to the community college, with its ability to quickly update and change programming, its propensity for innovation and its capacity for flexible scheduling to meet the lifelong learning needs of the people it serves.

I believe that we are on the threshold of a new era in higher education at Sussex County Community College and that we can rise to meet the challenges we face head on.

Now I’d like you to know that I believe in and practice reflective leadership, a style that requires a constant self-examination not only of personal awareness and reactions, but also of decisions and actions taken in an effort to always do better.

For example, I have long understood that I like to keep up with current trends and thus push change and innovation.

A friend of mine some years ago recognized my propensity to want to re-create, and he gave me a Walt Whitman poem, which, I believe, was written in the context of war, but that he said reminded him of me. The poem begins:

As I lay with my head in your lap, camerado,
The confession I made I resume;
what I said to you in the open air I resume:
I know I am restless and make others so;
I know my words are weapons full of danger, full of death,
For I confront peace, security and all the settled laws to unsettle them…

For I confront…all the settled laws to unsettle them.

Now as I think about these words, it sounds as if I want to scramble things up for the sake of scrambling things up. But that is not quite the case.

You see, I myself am a lifelong learner. That has meant not only learning in school and university, but also learning on the job, through volunteer activities, personal experience, and observation.

I’d like to share with you an experience I had that reflects the type of non-classroom learning that has been important in my life and that, in fact, is often more important than formal education. This lesson is about leadership and management.
In 1983, when I was the National Coordinator of Pax Christi USA: the Catholic Peace Movement, the Bishops were preparing a national pastoral letter on Catholic teaching on peace. The letter was called “The Challenge of Peace: God’s Promise and Our Response.”

They were gathering in Chicago to debate, amend and vote on the third draft of the letter, written by a committee of 5 bishops headed by the late Cardinal Bernardin.

I believe they had received over 1500 proposed amendments from the approximately 350 bishops in the U.S. Conference. The bishops were quite divided over the tone and direction of the letter, and the third draft was very disappointing to the so-called “peace bishops,” perhaps 30 to 40, many of whom had already written stronger letters on the subject to the people of their dioceses.

A few days before the meeting, the Bishop President of Pax Christi called me and asked me to get a room at the Palmer House to accommodate a meeting of 25 to 30 of the peace bishops, who were to meet to plot a strategy for strengthening the proposed pastoral letter.

These bishops, along with three prominent theologians, gathered in the room I arranged the night before the beginning of the Conference meeting, which had attracted national and international attention. And I got to be a “fly on the wall.”

As this evening meeting began, the bishops expressed their concerns about the direction of the pastoral letter and discussed a strategy of building momentum during the meeting of all bishops for passing the amendments that would strengthen it, from their point of view.

In the midst of this discussion, word came down from the Conference leadership that the rules for debate would be changed in order to systematically get through the unprecedented number of amendments.

As I recall the last minute change, technical amendments would be passed in a block, but there would be a time limit on other amendments with no more than 3 bishops speaking for and three against an amendment, with strict time limits.

This change in rules upset the plans of the peace bishops to use the force of debate and lengthy discussion and the logic of their position to move the persuadable bishops to their position.

As they were agonizing over this change in the rules of debate, the double doors of the room swung open and there appeared the then-retired and now deceased Bishop of Memphis, Carroll Dozier, a founding bishop of Pax Christi USA and a leader of the peace bishops.

On seeing Bishop Dozier, he presiding bishop said something like, “Let’s pause to honor our mentor.” And then to Bishop Dozier, he said, “Well, Carroll, you’ve been at this a long time.
Do you have any words of wisdom before we enter the fray tomorrow?’

To which Bishop Dozier responded: “I don’t suppose there’s any way you can scrap this thing and start from scratch?” There was a very pregnant pause, and then Dozier himself broke the silence, saying, “Well, I suppose not, so let’s figure out how to fix this thing.”

What followed was a very focused meeting and the development of a tactical effort, using the rules change, to find another way to shape the pastoral letter in the direction the peace bishops preferred; and their strategy prevailed as the pastoral letter that was approved met nearly all of their hopes.

I have to confess that throughout my higher education experience and career; there have been many times that I reflected that sentiment: Is there any way to scrap what is done in higher education and start from scratch?

Whether it was when the University of Pittsburgh refused to accept my Russian credits from Syracuse University and my junior college credits, forcing me to begin college all over again at the age of 25 or when I vowed to stay out of higher education forever as I finished my master’s degree at Johns Hopkins or when I found myself unemployed or underemployed working in a basement shoe department with a graduate degree, I have personally experienced and understand the frustration felt by so many students today as they confront the idiosyncrasies of college that are the marks of a bygone era: the Carnegie unit, created during a period industrialization and of public administration theory, no longer held, known as scientific administration, or the class and semester scheduling structure of education designed to meet the needs of an agrarian society.

I believe we are now at a critical moment that demands we meet the challenge of change in higher education in this country. And we can begin this effort here at Sussex County Community College.

Calls for change in higher education are coming from every sector of society. If you are following the national dialogue you know that there are many complaints about the state of higher education, from the seemingly limitless rising cost of a college degree to unsatisfactory graduation rates at both two and four year colleges to studies that question the value of higher education itself in light of the fact that so many college graduates are unemployed or underemployed at a time when they have taken out so many loans to pay for that degree.

Because of these concerns and many others, the constituencies we serve, government officials, donors, and students are demanding accountability from our colleges.

And experiments that are challenging the hide-bound traditions of higher education are beginning to proliferate, from Khan University on YouTube to the proliferation of online learning and even free online classes from world class institutions like MIT and Carnegie-Mellon
University to the promotion of the notion of DIY U (the Do it yourself university) to portfolios for documenting acquired skills and knowledge that might serve as alternatives to traditional transcripts.

I believe that Sussex County Community College must rise to the occasion and explore opportunities and experiment with new and even unproven ideas to meet these challenges for the people of our county and state.

Fortunately, others have provided us some guidance along the pathway to the new demands of the 21st century.

In his important work, *A Learning College for the 21st Century*, written in the 1990’s, Terry O’Banion, points out that the 21st century college is one that considers the learner first in every aspect of the college, including each college and administrative policy, each service the college provides, each class the learner takes; In this conception of 21st century higher education, Promoted by the League for Innovation, which is the premier Community College organization promoting these ideas and best practices to achieve them, 21st century colleges must provide learning experiences anywhere, anyway and anyhow.

O’Banion points out that there are a number of features of the learning college of the 21st century, of which I will mention a few:

The learning college creates substantive change in individual learners. It engages learners as full partners in the learning process with learners assuming primary responsibility for their own learning, and it creates and offers as many options for learning as possible;

Going forward and working together with all our constituencies, Sussex County Community College must find ways to implement these ideas suitable to our environment. We will, of course, use data from student satisfaction surveys, pay attention to the changing dynamics in higher education, search out new and relevant programming and emphasize learning that will meet the needs of the people of Sussex County and New Jersey.

Along the path to becoming a model 21st century college is the goal of the Completion Agenda, the commitment to find ways to increase the number of students who complete degrees and certificates.

We must find suitable ways to help our students complete: Ideas and best practices that can be employed include providing greater opportunities to give credit for prior learning, creating relevant skill-related certificate programs, providing non-credit certifications attached to credit completion in order to enhance a student’s portfolio; developing an efficient mechanism for documenting a student’s achievements that can be counted in state and national data bases.
We will continue to prepare learners who will be able to adapt to the changing work environment by providing the foundation for future learning. Further, in speaking with leaders in industries, it is clear that many of the new good-paying jobs require education and skills in report writing, math appropriate to the job requirements, hands on lab science, including experience with instrumentation, problem-solving, the ability to understand and analyze data, and, of course, computer skills, among others.

Once acquired, these basic college-level skills can be built upon in the future as different or advanced re-training may be required.

Quite frankly, in thinking about this, none of this is entirely new to the community college. What is new is the intentionality of the efforts to achieve these ends, the new types of documentation we will have to create to serve the needs of our learners, the change of emphasis and priorities in our programming, re-tooling existing systems, keeping pace with the technological advances necessary to become a learning college for the 21st century, exploring new mechanisms to fulfill the completion agenda, and providing the skills needed for the workforce of today and tomorrow.

I cannot do this alone.

To the faculty and staff: I ask you to join me in this effort, in whatever way you can. Find ways in each of your areas to transform your operations consistent with the current and future needs of our learners. To paraphrase Sandy Shugart, the President of Valencia Community College in Florida: “We must work with the students we have, not the ones we wished we had.” We must take our students from point A and bring them to Point B, wherever that is for each of them. That is what we really do in community colleges.

To my colleague Community College Presidents: We have begun an effort to reform community college education and services in New Jersey. Let us persist, unafraid, in our Big Ideas project, which will require significant effort on each of our campuses.

To our state and local government officials: I would ask you to recognize the importance of the directions we are following to meet the needs of the residents of the county and to support these efforts with funding and capital.

To the residents of Sussex County, I ask for your support as we renew our commitment to provide meaningful and productive learning that will continue to lead to successful transfer opportunities, as well as enhance the workforce in support of regional and state economic development.

Finally, on a personal note…to my family and friends: well, what can I say: it has been a long journey from the Strip and Lawrenceville. I remember once meeting a vice-president at the
Community College of Allegheny County at a conference in Chicago; and when we discovered we were both from Lawrenceville, having gone to different grade schools (he to St. Mary’s and I to St. Augustine’s), we started laughing and said at the same time: “What good can come from Lawrenceville?”

Especially today I’d like to remember two women who are not here: my best friend of more than 30 years who passed away a couple years ago: Marge Bobu, who was as strong an advocate for higher education as there was.

And my mother who passed away 8 years ago and who always kept it real. I recall that in 1999 when I called to tell her that I was becoming a dean, my mother, who quit high school at 16, asked me what that was. After I told her what a dean does, she just said, “And they pay you for that?” Keeping it real.

And so to all here, in the words of Walt Whitman: I urge you onward with me as we remake the educational experience for these difficult and changing times.

I relish the idea of working with all of you to realize the full potential of Sussex County Community College.

Thank you all!!