

Spring Opening Meeting Remarks

January 14, 2011

Dr. DeRionne Pollard, President

Montgomery College

Introduction

Good morning!

It's so nice to see all of you here today.... Thank you to the Takoma Park/Silver Spring Campus for hosting us. And thank you to the Academic Assembly for organizing today's event, which includes a panel discussion on student success and completion here at MC. It's crucial that we chart our completion plan in a way that makes sense for **our college**. So I'm grateful that we are kicking off the new year with this kind of collegewide conversation about student success.

I want to talk for just a minute about the tone of our conversations. Whether we're talking about completion, or the budget, or any number of provocative topics, let us agree to always start from a place of mutual respect. Let us agree to be deliberate; to engage each other... to not "otherize." For we are better than that.

The need for civil discourse is especially crucial given the major challenges and responsibilities that lie ahead of us. The manner in which we choose to respond – and how we choose to view each other - will surely impact our future.

Let's talk about those challenges and responsibilities, and begin with a good one: our crucial role in preparing the region's workforce. We are very lucky to live in a part of the country that should see substantial job creation in the next 10 years.

Last month I had the opportunity to meet Stephen Fuller, an expert on employment trends in our area and the director of the Center for Regional Analysis at George Mason University.

Dr. Fuller predicts 759-thousand new jobs will be created in the next decade here in the Washington metro area. Again, that's 759-thousand brand-new jobs!

And what are the education levels needed for those jobs? More than half – 56% - require a post-secondary award, an associate's degree, or a bachelor's degree....

It's clear that we are key to the jobs of the future, including those careers that don't yet exist. Community colleges must lead the way not only because we provide access, and affordability.... but because we are the most flexible, the most able to respond to the need for workforce-driven curricula in the new economy.

And if we don't fulfill our mission and help prepare this skilled workforce? Well, job growth without skilled and qualified employees to fill those jobs means a stagnant economy at best.

And while this innovation economy certainly needs more STEM graduates, every employer will tell you they also need critical thinkers, team players, and good communicators. They need the ongoing skills training that W-D-C-E offers. All of us here have a role to play in growing the region's economy.

At the same time, we face other challenges.

Our elected officials have warned that everyone will feel the impact of declining revenues and ongoing budget shortfalls. This means greater pressure to be more efficient and effective.

Vision, outcomes, accountability... all are key watchwords for policymakers.

As you well know, there is also a national movement to improve college completion rates. The U.S. has fallen from first to 12th in its share of young adults (25-34) with post-secondary degrees.

In response, Maryland community colleges have signed the "Promise to Act," a pledge to increase the number of degrees awarded by nearly two-thirds by 2025.

What does that mean for us at Montgomery College? As I noted in my inaugural address, our most recent data shows that 32 percent of our students transferred to four-year colleges or universities, while 14 percent of our full-time, degree-seeking students earned a degree or certificate within three years.

We need to improve that rate substantially over the next 15 years to meet the state goal. We must also remember that Workforce Development and Continuing Education is already involved in workforce preparation, through efforts that include professionally recognized certifications. So again, **all of us** have a role to play in addressing college completion goals.

And let's not forget our end goal: preparing our students for those new jobs of the future, which will contribute to the economic health of our region and stronger communities.

We have a full plate in front of us -- from completion goals and workforce preparation to budget and accountability challenges. As I've heard our governor say, we've got "a new normal" to contend with.

The way we choose to respond to this new normal is crucial to our success. We may not be able to control every challenge and pressure we face, but we can control whether we choose to take an active or a passive approach.

Active versus Passive Approach

Let's talk about the active versus the passive voice for a moment.

When you use the passive voice, something – or someone – acts upon you. When you choose the active voice, you do the acting. As a former English professor, I would say that in writing, some situations call for passive voice... but as your president, I would say the active voice is almost always better.

We can decide if our future is going to be dictated for us – or if we are going to dictate that future ourselves.

Active Next Steps

I have taken an active approach to my presidency by laying out my presidential priorities on my Web page – priorities aimed at ensuring we remain as relevant and strong as we can possibly be. But I know full well that the future of Montgomery College depends upon each and every one of us working together.

I want to talk about three active steps we can take to shape this future. First, we can develop a shared vision for this college. Second, we can focus on measuring performance in a way that makes sense for us as a community college. And third, we can choose to drive the completion agenda ourselves, rather than let others drive it for us.

Visioning Task Force

First, let's talk about our future - our vision – for our College.

We have some hefty issues to face. Community colleges have always tried to be everything to everyone. We have prided ourselves on that goal. But in a time of declining resources – and with a focus on not just access but also success – can we continue on that path? Let me add that our colleagues across the country are struggling with the same question; we are not alone in this.

It's time for some self-examination. Our mission was adopted by the Board of Trustees over ten years ago. It's clear that our College embraces the core principle of Changing Lives. But could you tell me our College's vision for our students? And would we all have the same response?

After the College's 2008 self-study, Middle States recommended review and possible revision of our mission and vision statement. Most importantly, having a clear and current mission and vision is essential to guiding our work, our decision-making, and our priority setting.

That's why I've established a Vision and Mission Task Force, a 29-member group that includes representatives from all our stakeholders: full-time and part-time faculty, staff, administrators, alumni, community, business and education partners, and yes, students.

I will serve as the Chair of this Task Force, and I invite you to see all the members of the task force by visiting the Web page at montgomerycollege.edu/missiontaskforce. We'll also have more information in an upcoming "Inside MC" article.

Our work begins on January 18, and I look forward to it. Working together as ***one college***, it is my hope to develop a vision that will guide us through our challenges, well into this decade.

For isn't it better to shape our future in a deliberative, thoughtful manner – one based on a shared vision and shared priorities – than to lurch forward with a series of ill-conceived reactions to the external pressures of the day?

VFA Pilot Program

Looking closely at our mission and vision requires a deep and thorough self-examination.

But we can't stop there. In a time of declining resources, we face external pressures to determine how our resource allocation is resulting in the biggest "bang for the buck." Policymakers want data; they want to see measurable success.

Unfortunately, many traditional measurements of institutional effectiveness don't work for community colleges. For example, with a majority of our students attending part-time, it just doesn't make sense to compare our graduation rates to those of... say... Towson University.

Our second active step as a college should be defining a system of accountability that makes sense for us. We don't want to wait for the federal government or others to do it for us...

That is why I'm excited that earlier this week, Montgomery College was selected as one of 40 pilot colleges to test drive a new accountability system... A system developed by a national group that does understand us: the American Association of Community Colleges. This new effort is designed to measure outcomes and processes that are **specific and relevant** to community colleges.

Here are some examples: licensure exam pass rates. The percent of students who transfer with no degree. The percent who transfer with a degree. Noncredit workforce enrollment. The percent of students who complete a GED. And so on. This new system gets us! We'll start by meeting next week with the other pilot colleges and AACC. We have work ahead of us; data submissions are due to AACC in June.

I know data collection is not always the most exciting topic, but we should be excited about this opportunity. It allows community colleges to create an accountability framework based on our

unique student population and services, not those of four-year institutions. And as a result, we'll improve our completion strategies, focus our resources, and give our funders and policymakers a clear understanding of our needs and effectiveness.

Completion Agenda

Third and finally, let's talk about our completion strategies. As I said earlier, I'm excited about the upcoming panel on "Student Success at Montgomery College." No one – not the Lumina Foundation, nor the Department of Education nor the Compete to Complete program - knows MC students better than our faculty and staff. You should drive "Completion at MC." Just look at the inspirational – and courageous - work of your colleagues who are redesigning developmental math.

To those hard at work on that effort, and to all of you, I want to be very clear about one thing: failure *is* an option. I would rather we be courageous and learn from our mistakes, than timid and unwilling to take risks. The possibility of failure exists for every scientist, every inventor and every pioneer....the key is continuous learning and identifying that which does work. So please know, you have my support to be bold!

You'll also have support through the newly created Montgomery College Innovation Fund. As you may recall, I announced this initiative in my inaugural address. The intent was to invest in our experts—our faculty and staff— and to lead higher education by embracing research and development that benefits student learning. The Innovation Fund is about creating sustainable, systemic, intentional organizational improvements at Montgomery College. Each project should include creating a cycle of discovery, testing, and scaling up, because a good idea shouldn't just live with one person, one department, or even one campus. If your innovative ideas can make a difference in the lives of our students, enhance their education, and improve services, the Innovation Fund can help.

I am thrilled to say that thanks to the generous support of the Webber Family Foundation, our foundation board, and many of you who chose to donate, we have our funding! The foundation will send out the application via email and Inside MC during the last week of January. So stay tuned! And start thinking about your proposals and apply.

Conclusion

If we choose to fully embrace these three efforts – (1) shaping a collective vision for our future; (2) adopting a new system of accountability that makes sense for our community college; and (3) having our faculty and staff lead the completion efforts here at MC – then we will see long-term positive outcomes for our college.

As I said at the inauguration – we are a transformative institution. This is our defining moment. And much of where we go from here comes down to approach - how we choose to handle the responsibilities of preparing the future workforce and increasing completion; the challenges of fiscal austerity and demands for increased accountability.

And always, please, no matter how challenging or bold the topic is, let's look for common ground. Let's agree to sometimes disagree. And let's hold conversations that stem from a place of mutual respect and civility. Because if we start from this place... and if we choose to frame and shape our future in a way that serves the best interests of our students and our community... then we will certainly be the most relevant community college we can possibly be.

Despite the challenges, this is **our** time to shine. Thank you.