In a continuing effort by the Obama administration to focus on the key role community colleges play in higher education, Vice President Joe Biden visited West Los Angeles College in January.

“The best kept secret in America is the community college system,” Biden told a group of students, trustees and administrators at WLAC. “Any country that out-educates us will out-compete us.”

Biden said those two lines are favorites of his wife, Jill, who teaches at a community college.

The vice president spent two hours touring the WLAC Dental Hygiene department, part of the college’s Allied Health Program, and taking part in a roundtable discussion. Also in attendance for the vice president’s appearance were employers interested in hiring college students. Biden stressed how critically important partnerships between community colleges and businesses are in providing students with career opportunities while bolstering the economy.

Biden also praised a proposal by President Obama to make community college tuition-free.

“Twelve years of free education is not enough,” said the vice president.

“Vice President Biden and President Obama understand that community college should be free so students can achieve their dreams of a better life and a brighter future,” said Scott Svonkin, president of the Los Angeles Community College District Board of Trustees. “The vice president was clear that community colleges are the road to careers that will enable our students to take care of their families today and tomorrow.”

In welcoming the vice president to his campus, Dr. Nabil Abu-Ghazaleh, WLAC president, said, “The challenges to students seeking social mobility, access to meaningful work and a fulfilling civic life are the story of America today. At West Los Angeles College – like all community colleges – my excellent faculty and staff dedicate their lives to our students. We need the support from industry partners to even better integrate our programs and the job training aspect of our mission so we can prepare students for jobs that are emerging tomorrow and for a lifetime of careers that have yet to be invented in this gloriously changing world of knowledge, growth and of the improvement of matters of social justice.”

Senior dental hygiene student Jessica Short, who was part of the roundtable assembled for Biden, said he seemed, “Super humble. The heart that he has for the people is inspiring.”

Fellow student Courtney Cylear, a junior, said it was “Surreal. He came to listen and really understand where we are coming from in the community college world.”

Vice President Joe Biden, accompanied by (right) Congresswoman Karen Bass, tours the WLAC Dental Hygiene facility.
Dear LACCD Colleagues:

What an unprecedented opportunity for our nation’s community colleges and for LACCD.

Community colleges are receiving well-deserved national attention these days. Specifically, attention is being paid to the significant roles community colleges play in transferring students to universities, building the middle class through workforce training, and elevating adult literacy in this country. We are also seen as a vital, national strategy to lift people out of poverty. In order to fulfill this promise, we must bolster the educational outcomes of the students in our institutions.

This dialogue surrounding institutional performance and student success in the two-year system is resounding and exciting, with virtually every community college in the country focused on ways to improve success rates of all students, with special emphasis being paid to historically underperforming students, who now make up a growing proportion of student enrollments. At LACCD, we recognize that, in order to “move the needle” on student success, a coherent plan needs to be constructed and monitored, and that it requires a districtwide institutional effort. In my view, without another major shift in diversity, equity, and inclusion in community colleges and higher education, our profession runs the risk of further bifurcation and passive perpetuation of racial inequality. We are, in fact, replicating sameness and embedding disadvantage without change.

In his State of the Union address in January, President Obama gave community colleges a visible, national platform by declaring through his America’s College Promise proposal that all Americans, who meet specific performance criteria, should be afforded the opportunity for a community college education – free of charge! For California, which possesses the lowest community college fees in the country at $46/credit hour, tuition-free education is a part of our legacy. President Obama’s bold proposal adds to his administration’s legacy of expanding federal support for students. Our district is on record formally supporting the President’s proposal and, just last month, unanimously passed a resolution to underscore this support.

California Governor Jerry Brown, through his January proposed budget for 2015/16, proposes an 8 percent increase to the state’s community colleges, bringing our total allocation to close to pre-recession levels and, as importantly, proposes no student fee increases. Our slow, but methodical, funding restoration in California allows us to invest in our infrastructure – our students and our people. At LACCD, we have added much-needed classes, bolstered student support services, and hired people for key leadership positions. As one example, LACCD stands to hire a record number of full-time, tenure-track faculty for 2015/16, our single biggest investment for student success in decades, perhaps ever.

We are proud of this capital investment in people.

Soon our students will discover that our community colleges in Los Angeles and across the country represent the greatest educational value per dollar and that our faculty, support staff, administrators, programs and services are among the very best in higher education.

Like so many other community colleges in California and throughout the nation, LACCD is riddled with challenges and opportunities, but I firmly believe that our opportunities for impact greatly outweigh the burden posed by our challenges. In coming to Los Angeles as Chancellor, I feel like I am coming back home to San Francisco, where I was born and raised. The noise, the smells, the sounds, the whole urban vibe speaks to me. Growing up in the City, I developed and now possess certain urban sensibilities and they have served me well in my transition since last June.

My principal charge as Chancellor is to raise the educational attainment of our students, while ensuring that our colleges, spread throughout this very large district, have the resources and support to be successful. As Chancellor, I am also responsible for setting the tone of excellence and expectations for the organization. I thank you all for your guidance and patience during this first year.

Enjoy the contained stories of this edition of Synergy – from an historic opportunity to offer a bachelor’s degree at West LA College to Vice-President Joe Biden’s remarks on the tuition-free proposal – stories that help to illustrate the promise and purpose of our district’s mission to serve and educate.

Thank you for your continued confidence and trust,

Chancellor

Francisco C. Rodriguez Ph.D.
Chancellor, Los Angeles Community College District
Three Los Angeles Community College District schools – East Los Angeles College, Los Angeles Harbor College, and Los Angeles Pierce College – are among the 16 community colleges selected from across the country to be designated the 2014 Achieving the Dream Leader Colleges.

“This is a very proud day at LACCD,” said Board of Trustees President Scott Svonkin. “Achieving the dream is not just something we talk about. It is something we do every single day in every single classroom.”

“Student success is our district’s highest priority,” said Dr. Francisco Rodriguez, LACCD chancellor, “and this national recognition of our colleges reaffirms the transformational work that our colleges are engaged in to improve student outcomes.”

This national honor is bestowed on community colleges that commit to improving student success and closing achievement gaps. These colleges have shown how data can inform policy and practice to help community college students achieve their goals, resulting in improved skills and better opportunities for employment.

The LACCD colleges are the only California schools awarded this ATD status. While it was achieved through the hard work of their students, credit should also go to the faculty of these schools, who embraced the program, designed the curriculum, set the goals and empowered their students in their quest for success.

The three LACCD institutions were specifically singled out because:

- East Los Angeles College increased developmental-education English success rates for all first-time-in-college students from 21.8% in 2007 to 34.1% in 2010. The developmental-education English success rates for African American students increased by 20 percentage points and for Pell recipients by nine percentage points. Said ELAC President Marvin Martinez: “It is indeed an honor for East Los Angeles College to be selected as a Leader College by ATD. This type of recognition certainly makes ELAC a national leader in its ability to serve students of color in our region. Our faculty and staff also deserve this honor for their hard work in developing programs that help students of color succeed in the classroom on a pathway to college and career success.”

- Los Angeles Harbor College increased fall-to-spring persistence rates for all students in the ATD cohort from 64.6% in 2009-10 to 69.6% in 2012-13. The fall-to-spring persistence rates for Hispanic students increased by eight percentage points.

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To all those connected to the Los Angeles Community College District,

As we approach the holiday season, I am happy to share some great news. My fellow trustees and I are proud to announce that Standard & Poor’s ratings services have upgraded LACCD’s rating from “AA” to “AA+.” This means lower borrowing costs, saving taxpayer’s money. We are pleased by S&P’s confidence and the higher rating, which results from strong management of District finances by both our board and our District leadership. This rating is also an affirmation of our relentless commitment to best practices, whether it be in the classroom, in our financial management or on the construction sites.

We are also pleased to share that the accounting firm of KPMG LLP has released its annual independent audit with no major findings and states that the District’s financial statements fairly reflect our financial position and the District is following generally accepted accounting principles.

It’s often said that, if you manage well in the hard times, the good times will be even better, and we are proud that the prudent and sometimes tough decisions we’ve made as trustees are now bearing fruit, as reflected in our strong financial ratings and audits.

I also wish to use this opportunity to thank fellow trustee Miguel Santiago, a two-time president of our board, for his service and wish him a fond farewell as he departs the board and begins his new role as a State Assemblymember. Trustee Santiago first joined the Board as an appointee to fill a vacant seat in 2008 and subsequently went on to be elected to two additional terms. He effectively led us through The Great Recession, his influence evident in so many areas. Along with the board, he worked for the passage of Measure J, a $3.5 billion bond measure to help fund the District’s building program. I am honored to have served with Trustee Santiago and am inspired by the example he set.

With a recovering economy, the generous support of our voters who supported our facilities bonds and the passage of Prop 30, our goal has been to restore classes and focus on student success as the board’s highest priority. On behalf of the board, my thanks to all the hard-working faculty, staff, and administrators of the District. Best wishes for a wonderful holiday season and an exciting new year ahead.

— Scott J. Svonkin,
President of the LACCD Board of Trustees
Barack Obama became the first sitting U.S. president to visit Los Angeles Trade Tech College Thursday, speaking about the importance of job training in front of a crowd of approximately 2,000.

“This is a school that does good work helping the unemployed retrain for new careers,” President Obama said. “Today, I’m here to focus on the one thing we should be doing which is training more Americans to fill the jobs we are creating. Right now, there are more job openings in America than at any time since 2007.”

A strong advocate for community colleges since entering the White House, Obama pointed out that Jill Biden, wife of the vice president, teaches at a community college.

Obama also told the story of a woman working as a waitress who enrolled in a community college and, today, is an accountant.

“I’m always impressed by people who have the courage to go back to school, especially later in life,” Obama said.

Two days earlier, he signed the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act. “It can help,” he said, “communities update and invest in job training programs like these (at Trade Tech).”

“Our strength in the Los Angeles Community College District,” said LACCD Board of Trustees president Scott Svonkin, “is our ability to connect business and industry, no matter the sector. Both can bring employers to the table to help develop course curriculum, tell us the skills that are needed in the future, and support internships and work-based learning. All these elements are in alignment with President Obama’s opportunity agenda.”

Late last year, Trade Tech was the recipient of a $19.2 million grant from the Dept. of Labor that focuses on healthcare and involves all nine LACCD colleges in collaboration with major hospitals and other healthcare providers.

“The president’s appearance is a testament to community colleges as places where jobs can happen,” said Svonkin. “His appearance is also a tribute to our faculty and staff who work so hard to turn people lives around and make dreams come true.”

“I am living proof that you can do anything you want with hard work and determination. You can go from being a high school dropout to being president of the board of the largest community college system in the nation.”
My Esteemed Colleagues of the Los Angeles Community College District,

We are tasked with building the District’s profile and reputation as the best urban community college district in which to study and work, and to focus on our No. 1 priority — student success. Not just to be the biggest, but indeed the best. To accomplish this goal, we must have a well-prepared and innovative faculty, responsive curricula, excellent educational administrators, superbly trained and professional support staff, and state-of-the-art buildings and modern instructional equipment. We must also enhance our business partnerships and community engagement.

As Governor Brown and the State Legislature direct new money to support public higher education, the California Community Colleges are focused on expanding access and improving our completion rates, including better serving underprepared, low income and historically underserved populations. The horrible recession translated to a depletion of financial resources over the last five years and a loss of 20,000 Full-time Equivalent Students (FTES) at LACCD. Even so, and to your credit, we maintained our academic standards and financial standing. This ‘can-and-will do’ attitude and level of excellence that I am witnessing throughout my college visits in the District has propelled tens of thousands of LACCD graduates to achieve their goals and dreams.

With the State’s economy now rebounding, we are able to improve access by restoring classes, increasing enrollments towards our aggressive enrollment target of 4.75%, while maintaining our focus on student success. The State’s adopted budget provides additional funding for access, categorical programs, and much-needed monies for deferred maintenance and instructional support. As a result, the LACCD budget is more stable than it has been in recent years, helping us to meet the challenge of ensuring equal educational opportunities and promoting student success for all students.

As we prepare for the 2016 districtwide accreditation, let’s embrace the accreditation process and professional self-regulation as an opportunity to refine and improve our institutional processes, and ultimately the educational outcomes of our students. Our students and their success—there is no more important goal.

Contained within this e-newsletter are samples of the many great stories occurring daily throughout our District and the transformative impact we are making in our communities. Thank you for your commitment to our students and to this District and please receive my very best wishes for a strong start to the fall semester.

Un abrazo (A warm embrace),

Francisco C. Rodriguez Ph.D.
Chancellor, Los Angeles Community College District

THREE VALLEY COLLEGES TAKE TO THE STREETS

BY DOREEN CLAY

Pierce College, L.A. Valley College and L.A. Mission College, the three LACCD schools that span the San Fernando Valley, have banded together to take to the streets in a bold new way. They have launched a unique advertising campaign to attract students, fully wrapping their college names, logos, mega-sized student photos and cool graphics around two Metro buses in a colorful display.

“We wanted to come out in a big way and let students in our communities know that we’re open for business, with more classes available than in recent years, and to invite them back to enroll,” said Pierce College President Kathleen Burke.

The budget cuts that plagued community colleges for the last several years caused some students to be turned away because not enough classes were offered to meet the demand. But that has turned around in 2014.

With the California budget picture brightened, the colleges are now able to open up more classes. To spread this message, the two eye-catching Metro buses will traverse the entire Valley over the next year, starting in Thousand Oaks, cruising along Ventura Boulevard to Burbank, north

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Q & A WITH DR. FRANCISCO RODRIGUEZ
INTERVIEWED BY STEVE SPRINGER

Dr. Francisco Rodriguez, the new chancellor of the Los Angeles Community College District, comes to LACCD from the MiraCosta Community College District in Oceanside where he has served as superintendent/president for the past five years. Overall, Dr. Rodriguez has worked in public higher education in California for nearly 30 years. He began his career at the University of California, Davis and went on to Woodland Community College in the Yuba Community College District and Cosumnes River College in Sacramento’s Los Rios Community College District. The 51-year-old Rodriguez has both a bachelor’s and master’s degree from UC Davis and a Ph.D. in education from Oregon State University.

Q: In introducing yourself to our district, can you tell us about your roots and your family?

A: I’m the son of parents who emigrated to the United States in the 1950s from Jalisco, Mexico. They came from a rural village where my grandparents and great-grandparents had a small plot of land on which they grew corn and beans. My father got as far as the fifth grade, my mother, the third grade. They did not have the benefit of a formal education in Mexico, so they came here knowing America would provide a different kind of reality and experience. They settled in San Francisco and, eventually, our family grew to include five kids, I being the only son.

My father spent 35 years working in a San Francisco factory making food and beverage containers on an assembly line, and my mother worked in an industrial laundromat for over 30 years.

Today, my folks, now both in their 80s, still live in the house they purchased in the Mission District in 1965. To this day, my siblings and I only speak Spanish to our parents.

I keep a picture of my grandmother Teodora, who I called Mama Lola, on my desk as a visual reminder to stay humble and to stay connected to my roots.

My wife, Irma, is a faculty coordinator at Sacramento City College for EOPS (Extended Opportunity Program Services), community college programs for the education of the underserved. She is a mental-health professional, a licensed clinical social worker, specializing in immigrant families. My son, Andres, just finished his master’s degree in ethnic studies at San Francisco St., and is now teaching at three different institutions. My daughter, Angelica, is a junior at UCLA studying communication and Chicano studies with a pre-law emphasis.

Continued on the next page
Q & A WITH DR. FRANCISCO RODRIGUEZ (CONTINUED)

Q: How do you envision your new role?
A: I never imagined myself being in this role, a homeboy from the Mission District. Yet here I am.
In coming to Los Angeles, I feel like I’m coming back home. The noise, the smells, the sounds, the whole urban vibe, it speaks to me. I’m very comfortable in it. I know and possess urban sensibilities and they have served me well.

My principal goal as I assume my new role is to raise the educational attainment of the students while ensuring that our colleges, spread out throughout this large District, represent the communities they serve.

Some would look at this position in this city and this district and think, “Too large, too urban, too diverse, too poor, too many low scores on the student scorecard, too this, too that. I’ll take a pass on the job.” For me, those are all the reasons I said, yes. I’m drawn to working in a large, urban district that desires to raise its educational profile and desires to use its size to influence legislation that will help the working class and poor students get the support they need to be successful. I’m excited about partnering with various agencies in the city and county on workforce development, putting people to work. Many are running out of the urban centers like Detroit and Houston. I’m running in with eyes open and hands extended, saying to everyone I meet, “You have a new partner here.”

To me, it’s a privilege to have this job. I am beyond excited. What an opportunity to make a monumental difference.

But it’s going to take some time. I’m in no rush here. I want to do it well with and through others. Leadership is a team sport. I’m not going to be able to do this alone. I’m certainly not coming in with all the answers, a know-it-all guy with all this experience. Not at all. I won’t just sit on the ninth floor and wait for things to happen, but I understand the role of the chancellor is not to get into the details of what’s going on at the colleges. That’s the role of the college presidents. I get that. I hope to be a friendly contributor to the conversation. I’ve been around this business for some time and I would hope that my views would be welcomed, and I think they will.

I’m going to be working with the Board to get a clear set of goals, to get a clear sense of the vision of the District. What I don’t know, and what I’m going to need the help of everyone who is reading this in order to learn, is an understanding of the relationship between the centralized District educational services office and the respective colleges. How do we find a way to maximize both? How do we avoid having unnecessary duplication in some areas and gaps in service in other areas?

Q: Do you feel your own background will help you relate to the struggles of so many students in the District?
A: Absolutely. I was the first one in my family to go to a university and obtain a degree. When I see the students in our District, I see myself. They’re more handsome, healthier, in some cases younger, but I am them. The fact that I grew up in a working-class family, that I learned English as a second language, that I’m a first-generation college student, all those things that people might consider deficits, to me, they are assets in my role as chancellor of LACCD. I understand the importance of financial aid. I understand the importance of a schedule that accommodates working people. I got my masters and my Ph.D. while working full time and raising a family. I understand the importance of mentorship and guidance. I understand the importance of hiring good people who can give our students support.

Q: The completion rate for District students – whether their goal is a certificate, a degree or a transfer – is disappointingly low. What suggestions will you bring to the table for driving those rates up?
A: I have several ideas:
1. Have better understanding of our students and their educational pathway through the monitoring of data rather than making assumptions that are not necessarily true. Do we know what the pattern is in terms of taking courses? Do we offer enough courses in the right sequence? I love data. It’s not the only piece of the puzzle, but there is too much anecdote driving our policies in general in education.
2. Support the systems that are in place to assist students, things like EOPS, financial aid, job opportunities.
3. Provide more assistance to faculty and students in the classroom, particularly in the basic skills and developmental classes. That’s where the faculty conversation comes in. Are we using models like accelerated math and English programs? Are there different pedagogical styles and approaches that work better with certain populations? A large part of the solution is to examine deeply what is going on in the classroom.
4. Use focus groups. Talk to students, hear their voices. How has your experience been? What could we have done better? What worked? What didn’t work? Was the website clear? Was the automated registration system fluid? What got in the way?

Also, do a survey of those who dropped out or, as I like to say, stopped out. Ask what happened. Was it work? Was it family? Was it an unresponsive curriculum? Was it the fact that you couldn’t get the classes you wanted?

Finally, we should talk to the students who have graduated, who have completed their studies, the shining stars. There

Continued on the next page
The Los Angeles Community College District is the fiscal lead agency for the Los Angeles Regional Adult Education Consortium (LARAEC), comprised of the District and four local unified school districts. The largest consortium in California, this group will collaborate under the legislative authority of Assembly Bill 86 that requires community college districts and unified school districts to come together to develop an adult education plan ready for implementation in 2015.

The LACCD representatives in the regional consortium are Dr. Chito Cajayon, Vice Chancellor for Economic and Workforce Development, Marvin Martinez, President of East Los Angeles College, Larry Frank, President of Los Angeles Trade-Tech College, Dan Walden, Vice President of Academic Affairs Los Angeles City College, and Dr. Adrienne Mullen, Associate Dean of Community Services/Non-Credit at ELAC.

The photo to the left was taken at a meeting of the LACCD Board of Trustees Ad Hoc Committee on Adult Education & Workforce Development. In attendance were trustees (left to right, front row) Ernest Moreno, Scott Svonkin and Mike Eng, and (back row, left to right) LACCD Interim Chancellor Adriana Barrera and Unified School District Representatives Veronica Montes, Joseph Stark, Donna Brashear, and Kathy Brendzal.

Q & A WITH DR. FRANCISCO RODRIGUEZ (CONTINUED)

A: If people think we should go back to the way it was in 2008, when we had all this money, and do those things we were doing back then, that’s the wrong way to think. The budget crisis over the last four to five years has positioned us to think differently, more creatively about not just who we are, but about who we aspire to be and how we are going to serve folks. I hope we take an opportunity to derive meaning from that crisis. Ultimately, a budget should be a reflection of your priorities.

People talk about recruiting in high schools and community service agencies. Yes, we need to do that, be vigilant about that. But why not also invest in the people who have already enrolled at LACCD and keep them enrolled and make them successful. Almost two-thirds of our students are part time. Instead of taking six units, how about nine? Instead of taking nine, how about going full time? Did you know, we should tell them, that, if you went full time, you would have more opportunities for financial aid, scholarships, work study, EOPS, etc.?

When a student is nibbling at the edges, taking six units, it’s going to take them ten semesters to get their degree. That’s five years. If they first need to take developmental and basic skills courses, that’s another one or two years. Then, it’s going to take them seven years for a two-year degree. That’s simply too long. The students lose interest and get off the track. They stop or drop out. And the longer you are away from education, the less your opportunity for success.

Q: Now that the economy is turning around, both here in California and on a national level, more money will be flowing back into the community college system. What would be the best use for this additional revenue?

A: If people think we should go back to the way it was in 2008, when we had all this money, and do those things we were doing back then, that’s the wrong way to think. The budget crisis over the last four to five years has positioned us to think differently, more creatively about not just who we are, but about who we aspire to be and how we are going to serve folks. I hope we take an opportunity to derive meaning from that crisis. Ultimately, a budget should be a reflection of your priorities.

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Q: What are your first impressions of the District?

A: One young man I talked to at Southwest College said it was a nurturing place for him. “I felt at home here,” he said. “It was different than the gang life that I grew up in. I was safe here.”

What a powerful statement: “I was safe here.”

Those are things that we take for granted, those notions of safety, nurturing, support. But we must never forget that our students entrust not only their educational lives to us, but, in some cases, life itself.

The community college system is the most egalitarian system of higher education in the world. We accept the top 100% of every high school graduating class, all of them without exception and without apology. We are beacons of hope and opportunity. For some, the first chance to go to college, for some, the last chance.