



SYNERGY



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.

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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 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

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Q & A WITH DR. FRANCISCO RODRIGUEZ (CONTINUED)

are thousands of wonderful examples. What made the difference? Was it a matter of being intrinsically motivated to complete your courses? Was it external support? A combination of both? Was it a belief in self?

The completion agenda is here to stay.

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.

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: 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. ■

ADULT ED ON THE AGENDA

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**. ■



LOS ANGELES CITY COLLEGE OPENS STEM ACADEMY

BY JOCELYN GRAF

For the spring semester, Los Angeles City College, with the help of a generous grant from the JPMorgan Chase Foundation, launched the STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Math) Academy, an invaluable resource for students who hope to transfer to a four-year college to earn a bachelor's degree in a STEM major.

One hundred students have already signed up for the new academy, which provides services that include academic counseling, tutoring, an engineering fabrication lab and skills workshops for the STEM disciplines.

"We are following a national trend in promoting education for STEM careers," said Jayesh Bhakta, chair of the LACC physics and engineering department, and the faculty adviser for the STEM Academy. "We are creating a program that follows the best practices established through research and through the work of programs like California MESA [Math Engineering Science Achievement]. We want to see students learn and succeed in their classes, connect them with internships and industry mentors, and then ensure that they can transfer and graduate with a four-year STEM degree."

Jocelyn Graf, director of the STEM Academy, is herself a former LACC engineering student. She brings a combination of teaching, program administration, academic advising and industry experience to the

position, and a determination to help disadvantaged students. "We are building a comprehensive support program to assist those students," said Graf, "in overcoming barriers to success in their courses, in building their resume, and in planning a career."

The Learning Center is the hub of STEM Academy activity, a place for tutoring, group study and socializing. "Since we have been able to hang out at the Learning Center," said STEM Academy student Megan Rose Scislowicz, "I have started to make friends with students in the other science majors for the first time. I also know I have a place I can go to get help with my homework or any problems that come up on campus."

Omar Martinez, STEM Academy member and Associated Student Government liaison, is working with the Academy to plan the first annual LACC STEM Academic Conference, to be held in September. This conference will bring together LACC students interested in the sciences, along with faculty and students from four-year schools. STEM-related student clubs will compete for prizes for the best research poster or service learning project.

"The campus atmosphere has already changed because of the presence of the STEM Academy," said Martinez. "Students in the STEM majors feel more of a sense of school spirit." ■

A MAGIC MORNING AT SOUTHWEST

The two signed basketball jerseys pictured to the right, donated by Laker Hall-of-Famer **Magic Johnson**, drew heavy interest in the silent auction at Los Angeles Southwest College's Invest to Impact President's Breakfast. Christopher Greene, son of Cassandra Walker, who works in Southwest's Office of Academic Affairs, purchased one jersey for \$190 at the college's fundraising affair. Carlos Chavez from Community Career Development got the other jersey for \$250.

Photo courtesy of Michael Fernandez.



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