

Interview with Dr. Margaret Lee

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Interviewer: Phil Pogue

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Pogue: My name is Phil Pogue. This is the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library Project on Community Colleges. We are going to be talking to Dr. Margaret Lee at Oakton Community College about Oakton and also the community college system as a whole. So we want to thank her. Today is July 17, 2013. We're doing this by a phone interview at the Presidential Library in Springfield. Dr. Lee, could you give us some background about yourself, educational and family background?

Lee: Sure, we work backwards. I have a M.A. and Ph.D. in English language and literature from the University of Chicago, where I was a Ford Fellow in the Humanities and a Woodrow Wilson Dissertation Scholar in women's studies. Prior to that I earned my Bachelor of Arts in English language literature and intellectual history, a double major, and a double minor in philosophy and theology at Regis College in Weston, Mass., where when I was an undergraduate, I was a member of the Sisters of Saint Joseph of Boston, a teaching order.

I spent eight years as a nun. After those eight years I went out to the University of Chicago and earned my master's and doctoral degree. From that time on, I have been working in some way associated with community colleges, first as an adjunct instructor and now as president and professor of English.



*Dr. Margaret Lee
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Pogue: What led you to the community college system?

Lee: You know, I never knew about community colleges when I was growing up. I was married in 1973, and in order to accept the dissertation fellowship, I had to not work. I was working still on my dissertation, and I was teaching in the Boston public schools. But I moved with my husband to northern Michigan, and the closest institution was Alpena Community College. Although I couldn't work full time, I went in and asked if I might have a two-day a week assignment, and that's how I got involved. It was bread and butter.

Pogue: And you were also at Kalamazoo Valley?

Lee: Yes, I went to Kalamazoo Valley in '82. Then I came to Oakton as academic vice president in '85 and became president in '95.

Pogue: How did those experiences in Michigan differ from the Illinois system?

Lee: That's a good question. In Michigan, there were twenty-nine community colleges, and there was no state organization like the Community College Board in Illinois. They were very independent, very local and as community colleges are, very reflective of their communities. However, there was a real liability in terms of funding, because each community college and each university had to go and make their case to the legislature on an annual basis. So first you had the flagship university, U. of M., and then Michigan State, then the other ones.

Then the K-12's got in line, and they had a state system. Then it was the community colleges. We used to talk about twenty-nine kangaroos jumping around trying to say, "Look at me; look at me. Here's what I'm doing for you lately." It was really... Funding was a real challenge.

Pogue: When you came to Oakton what was your first responsibility?

Lee: I came as academic vice president to an institution that was relatively young. I think it was eighteen years old. The president who hired me had replaced the founding president, and it was a difficult transition. The faculty had recently unionized and literally, my first obligation when I walked in the door on June 3, 1985, was to negotiate a union contract with the faculty.

It was a very difficult thing to do, because they were very angry with the board. They had a new chief academic officer that they didn't know from Adam. I had negotiated union contracts as a union member and had been on the other side of the table. I said to them, "I wouldn't ask you to do anything I haven't done or wouldn't do myself. I think we can work together to get a good contract." And we did.

Pogue: Had Oakton been a new college in 1969, or did it have some history before that?

Lee: No, it was established in '69 by the citizens of District 535, which are the townships and municipalities surrounding, from the Lake County line to Lake Michigan to the Evanston-Chicago line to a squiggly line around, near O'Hare Airport. That's the district.

Pogue: When the community college began its operations, was it located where it is today?

Lee: No. The interesting thing though is its name is derived from where it eventually was located. Its district ran from the lake across to close to O'Hare. That was the central part of the district. There was a lot of trouble finding land that was appropriate. Apparently the original land was going to be a cemetery. Well, that didn't go over too big with some of the families who were there. So I'm not sure who the key person was. I know Neil King negotiated the real estate and the main campus is currently on a 125 acre forest preserve, part of the landscape, which is proving to be its own challenges with flooding. But the original buildings were leased factory space on Oakton Street, and Oakton Street cut through the district. That's how the name was decided upon.

Pogue: And do you now have a campus in Skokie?

Lee: We have a campus on Lincoln Ave. and Skokie, and we have our main campus on Golf Road in Des Plaines.

Pogue: Does that Skokie campus have a unique historical name?

Lee: It is called the Ray Hartstein Campus, named by the board for our founding chair, Ray Hartstein, who is ninety-six years old and still comes to college events. He's quite amazing. He served as a trustee for over thirty years.

Pogue: As to the current status of Oakton Community College, could you give us some information about student enrollment, the faculty, its geographic size?

Lee: Sure. We serve a district of about 500,000 residents, give or take. It is a number of townships. I think it's fourteen or fifteen. We usually have between 10,500 and up to 12,000 unduplicated headcount students enrolled in credit programs and another, probably 36,000 in non-credit programs. The average age currently of our students is twenty-seven.

One of the most interesting things I think about Oakton is that although we're a comprehensive community college and we have a range of transfer, baccalaureate and vocational programs, probably more than 70 percent of our students in credit programs are enrolled in transfer-related programs. The **very** interesting thing is that about 30 percent of those enrollees already have at least a bachelor's degree.

What we understand from that is that people are changing careers. They need to take a course or a series of courses. They're not degree seeking, but they're

interested in preparing for further education, for example, in health care or for a teaching certificate. When I teach a Shakespeare class, for example, I will often have people who are trying to get an additional humanities credit for certification to teach history, English, something like that, in high schools.

Pogue: Now you, yourself, teach in the English area. Why do you do that?

Lee: I was very interested. In my heart and in my soul, I'm the child of teachers, and I've always been a teacher. I think it's one of the most profoundly important professions, and it is the thing that we do. So my title, it was vice president for academic affairs and professor of English, and my title as president is president and professor of English. I just believe it's a real message. It keeps me in touch with the students, and it also puts me on a level playing field with the faculty. I really think it's a very important thing to do.

I have not done it the last couple of years. I left the classroom as a teacher to go in as a student to take Arabic for a year, because I really felt so ignorant about the culture of the Middle East. I think that language, as a window to culture, demonstrates that you can... Even if you can't speak the language after a year—and certainly no one could speak Arabic after a year—you do get a sense of the way a language spoken shapes the view of the world. It really helped me a lot.

Pogue: Now, you have done a variety of studies of different languages. What ones have you been involved with?

Lee: Well, I started off learning French in grammar school, and I took four years of Latin in high school and four years of French and two years of Russian. Then [I] continued in college with French. And then, when I went to the University of Chicago, I studied German, because I had to have two reading languages for my dissertation. Subsequent to that, I studied on my own some Spanish and Italian, because I was interested in them.

Then, my husband spoke Chinese fluently, and he believed that our children should speak Chinese and Spanish, as well as English. Then I was on the school board in Wilmette, where we live and got language taught in the elementary schools for a couple of years. The language that I worked on, getting established and staffed, was Japanese. We had Japanese at Oakton, and I studied Japanese here. Then I studied Arabic here. So I've studied, you know, the Asian languages, particularly Chinese I find very difficult, but Arabic is the most difficult language I've ever studied.

Pogue: As far as Oakton, how has the college changed since you arrived in 1985?

Lee: It's grown by leaps and bounds. I think it reflects, as does our country in general and our state and our society, a really shifting demographic. It's much, much more diverse. We have probably seventy-two languages that our students speak, that you hear when you walk out into the cafeteria and through the corridors. We have students tell us that when they register. It is kind of a United Nations, and it

used to be pretty homogeneous. So I would say that that's probably the biggest shift.

Pogue: Most of the students that attend Oakton come from the high schools that are found in the district?

Lee: Well, our feeder high schools do supply us with many students, but I think that's not where most of the students come from, because our average age is twenty-seven. We have many, many adult students who are enrolled in the regular credit programs. They may have started someplace else. They may hold a degree from another country, which is often true with the health care students. There's just such a different story with every single student. But they're not predominantly the eighteen-year-olds who are fresh out of high school. That's a big chunk of our population, but I would not go so far as to say it's most.

Pogue: What is the current mission of the college, and has that changed in your time there?

Lee: We have revised the Statement of Mission, Vision and Values a couple of times, but the current one probably goes back to... I'm going to say at least fifteen years. Although these three statements are elaborated, our statement is, "We're the community's college; we're a community of learners, and we're a changing community." We really do believe that community is our middle name, and we try to create community, not just as a notion of a district that we serve, but as a way we relate to each other, to our students, to the businesses that we serve, and to the people who really support us with their tax dollars.

Pogue: During your years working at Oakton, what have been some of your biggest challenges? You mentioned early, the collective bargaining issues in the '80's, but what has happened since?

Lee: I think we've had a number of funding challenges. I think that the bad news is, we don't get much money from the state. The good news is, we don't get much money from the state. I think we're down to about 4 percent now of our budget. As you know, it's supposed to be 33½ percent, local taxes, tuition and state aid. But it's just not the case.

I think one of the biggest challenges—it's funding related, but it's not funding related—is kind of keeping our heads about us. I don't know if you're a hockey fan or not, but someone asked Wayne Gretzky, how did he score so many goals? And he said, "Being where the puck is going to be, not chasing it." The real challenge for us at Oakton, and I think for community colleges in general, is what programs do you grow, and which do you let go, based on what students are going to need in jobs that don't yet exist? That's a real challenge, because it requires space planning, equipment planning and especially personnel planning.

Do you hire a person who, because of Illinois law, if they're hired as a tenure track faculty member, will in fact, after six consecutive semesters, have a tenured

contract with you? And what if the program is outmoded? What if what the person did is obsolete? What if the person can't change? So I think it's a long answer to the question, the challenge, continually changing, of how do we equip students for lives of work and learning, whether they're going to transfer, whether they're going to go into the job market directly. I think the engine behind a lot of that change is, of course, technology.

Pogue: As far as the programs that have been added in the last few years, what types of retraining and programs have you had to add to meet the needs of the workforce and your local industry in the area?

Lee: Well, I think probably the most current examples are around the manufacturing sector, those requiring most change, including the newest one in nano-technology, which has affected, going backwards, all of manufacturing, certainly nano-technology in the health care industry. So we have two of our academic divisions who are working in nano-tech curricula that they had not been working in before.

We also have a very robust undergraduate research program in science, which I think few community colleges in the country have. We've been funded for those by the National Science Foundation. I think the changes in healthcare, the requirements that nurses and physical therapy assistants and those who work in health information technology, the old medical records industry, have just seen constant change in the demand to keep pace in the curricula. Every time the diagnostic reporting group manual—the DRG, I think it's called—changes, the whole curriculum in health information technology has to shift. It's a huge demand on the faculty. So I think those are things I would see as the biggest change challenges in the curricula.

Pogue: Could you give us a walk-through, as if you are adding a new program, how many months, years, does it take to put it into place before the students actually attend the class?

Lee: That depends. The Illinois Community College Board has a couple of different categories for program approval. One of them is called “a reasonable and moderate extension.” If it's a reasonable and moderate extension of an existing program, that doesn't take very long at all. If we put it in through a pilot or...I think there's another name that they use for it, and it's escaping me right now. But we can put it in as a kind of a trial balloon. We can get something actually to market and having students enrolled in as little as six weeks. But more realistically it takes six months to eighteen months.

The reason is that we have to decide not just that we need the program ourselves and to get the required approvals, but no longer do we add programs to expand the curriculum. We really add by reallocation and substitution. So if something's going to grow, something's got to go. You know how tricky that can be.

Pogue: How has the community college presidency changed from your first years as president, and what are your main duties now?

Lee: You know, I think it's changed because there are so many competing demands from both inside the institution and outside the institution. Let's just take one example, the tremendous calls for accountability and regulation. The regulatory burdens that we have to comply with come across the computer screen every day. Last week, we just got a request from the Illinois Community College Board that is due in three weeks that wants us to report the scores and pass rates for each individual healthcare program. Now we can report the graduation rates, and we can eventually report the pass rates, but the pass rates...the passing grades don't come directly to us. They come to the students, and we have to get them from the students.

I think it's the notion of changing funding from enrollment admissions to performance-based funding. It's trying to explain that graduation rates alone don't tell the story of community colleges, that there has to be mile markers along the way and significant points of performance. It seems like everybody and his uncle, especially people like the Gates Foundation and Lumina, who have lots of money—Stan Jones from Complete College America—they want to tell us what to do and how to do it.

I think juggling what's good in those funding opportunities and demands and what we're called upon to do by the accreditors, by the state, by the federal government, and then having to deal with the consequences of data, not completely interpreted and only a snapshot. There's just always the obligation to make the case for community colleges, to be accountable, as we want to be accountable, but having to array data, for example, in five different ways to satisfy five different demands.

Then you couple that with the need to work on private funding, grant funding, alignment with the school districts, good relationships with business and industry, so that we're actually doing what they want us to do, interaction with legislators, who are more and more concerned about the unsustainability of the costs of higher education, and the frustration that people have with the job market that is less than it's ever been, and that's going to be the new normal. I can't tell you how many times my president colleagues and I have just said at meetings, "You know, we've been in this job a long time, some of us, and it's never been this hard."

Pogue: Now you are or have been the chair of the forty-eight community college presidents. Is that correct?

Lee: Yes, I've been on the executive council. I have one more year. Your colleagues ask you to make the commitment to serve as secretary-treasurer, then as vice president, then as president. I've just transitioned to immediate past president.

I've done that for the last year. The biggest challenge for us, of course, was the pension stuff that is still unresolved this year.

Pogue: As far as Illinois has districts that cover the entire state, and as a member of the executive board, tell us what are some of the unique issues facing community colleges in Illinois, other than the pensions and the funding?

Lee: Well, pension and funding are the state problems. National problems relate to, most currently, the Affordable Care Act and the requirement for insurance for people who work over thirty hours and calculating those adjunct faculty who don't punch a time card; they teach credit hours. The horrible backlash [came] from adjunct faculty, who are fearing for the hours that they combine with work in a number of colleges. That was a very time consuming, emotion consuming issue this past year.

We initially thought that we would be able to respond as a collective, so that we could work together and come up with a solution, but it wasn't the case. Some colleges were able to say, "We're going to find a way, because of our dependence and reliance on long-term adjuncts, to make sure that those who qualify and are benefit eligible get the benefits." Others just had to say, "There's no way we can do this." And they had to cut hours.

Then, of course, the federal government failed to give us the guidelines that we wanted, to do reasonable estimates of part-time employment. Now, we just found out last week that we have another year to go to implementation. So, it's been a very difficult time to work through a problem whose solution I still don't see.

Pogue: As to the healthcare law, before we leave that, are there any current requirements that have been delayed, or is everything right now on hold?

Lee: No, I think that too differs by institution. I think some institutions are just going to maintain the fact that no one's going to teach over nine hours a semester, nine credit hours. Others of us have said, "No, we're going to look at how many benefit eligible positions we had, in terms of people who were actually teaching over the past year, and move to create a new status. We're calling it affiliated adjuncts. They will be healthcare benefit eligible.

I don't know if people who have negotiated that kind of arrangement will persist with it. We are going to continue with it, even though it's not required, because I think it will give us the opportunity to test out the problems and kind of work out the kinks, because what we do know is the penalties for screwing up are huge and very adverse to the institution, to say nothing of the impact on the lives of people, upon whom we rely as the deliverers of instruction to our students. They're a very important part of our community.

Pogue: Do you feel that the members of Congress who serve your territory are aware of your concerns?

Lee: Yes, because the adjunct faculty have gone to them, and we have also talked with them. I've talked with Jan Schakowsky; I've talked with Dick Durbin. You know, it was a bad bill, because there was so much that was left unresolved. The unintended consequences of providing healthcare according to that act will be very, very difficult to shake out.

I personally believe that we should have universal healthcare, and it should be single payer. But the way that this was cobbled together has created problems that no one wanted to create but that are inevitably present. There's going to have to be some way of resolving them.

Pogue: What role does the community college play in the community as a whole? You've talked about the issues of providing work training and have given some examples. What else is going on with the community, and how does the community feel toward Oakton?

Lee: I think that the community, our community, is very supportive of the college. They realize that we've been good stewards of the property tax dollars that come to fund us. We have the lowest tax rate, I believe, outside the city of Chicago and the lowest tuition north of I-80, the combination of tuition and fees. So we have kept the college affordable.

We've also engaged with the community in many ways. We have a number of heritage schools for the different language groups in our communities, who rent our facilities at a below not-for-profit rate on Sundays and Saturdays. We have a Bulgarian school; we have two Chinese schools; we've had a Persian school. So, we have roots with the ethnic communities. We also have very close relationships, especially with Skokie and Des Plaines, where our campuses are physically located. But we have 267 sites where we offer some kind of education, continuing education, adult basic ed [education], throughout the district. So there's all kinds of hooks into the community.

Of course, with the schools, we have a very unique arrangement for adult and continuing education. We have what we call that "Alliance for Lifelong Learning." Basically, the college delivers the continuing ed programs and the adult basic ed programs for the high schools. So there's a natural ladder and linkage to the educational needs of the community.

We have a very robust performing arts program. We have an art gallery and a museum that's written up frequently in the Chicago cultural stuff. So, I think people understand that we are a rich, educational and cultural resource in their midst. And our taxes, in a place where taxes for schools are extraordinarily high, the elementaries and the high schools, ours are down with the mosquito abatement district. So it's a wonderful, affordable resource.

Pogue: Well, have you had to run any referendums during your tenure at Oakton?

Lee: No, no. And we're building a science building right now that will be open in the spring. We did a small bond issue that did not require a referendum, because we still have room under our tax cap. I think it affected people's taxes by about two cents on the \$100 payment, so it was not a problem. We have the confidence of the community in our ability to work with our financial resources.

Pogue: How does Oakton work with the four-year institutions?

Lee: We have many, many articulation agreements and relationships. We have programs with Roosevelt with Northern with UI-UC [University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign] with Northeastern with a lot of the for-profit privates. DePaul has a program; it wants to be known as a "transfer friendly institution." So, while there are public articulation agreements that are part of the IAI, the Illinois Articulation Initiative, Oakton has agreements with many other schools that are both dual enrollment, dual registration, acceptance of the status of a person who holds a two-year degree.

I think one of our growing emphases, and it's in reaction to the completion agenda and to the realities of life. We'd like students; we say, "Come here; go anywhere" or "Start here; go anywhere." We want to say now, "Start here; finish something; go anywhere." So we're really pushing the completion of a credential, whether it's the associate's degree or some kind of certification that you've completed a learning goal that you've set for yourself.

Pogue: What have been the biggest challenges to get the community college started, after 1969? You were in Michigan during that time period, and you came in right during the collective bargaining change, but what did you know about the challenges to get Oakton off the ground?

Lee: It was fifteen years old, I think, when I came and it was... I think it was in its adolescence. Many of the faculty who had come in the early years of the college, the founding faculty, were still part of the college and remained part of the college. But the way in which you do things as a start-up are different as a grown-up.

They had moved from the factory buildings on Oakton Street to the new campus. The first part of the Des Plaines campus had been constructed. The enrollment had just mushroomed. Additional people were hired. It was founded on what was called the "cluster system." So there were, I think, five clusters of faculty. At the beginning, these were small, but each cluster kind of had its own dynamic and personality. The idea behind it was to have transfer subject matter areas and vocational programs together in a cluster, with a dean. Well, that had become unwieldy and really dysfunctional, because you had, in effect, five math departments, five English departments. It was much more kind of like the Home Depot do-it-yourself model.

When I came, the president had directed the redesign of clusters into four academic divisions. That was my challenge, because the faculty who were here liked the clusters. They weren't sure about the division system. And unionizing was probably a part of a resistance movement there too. But it's just worked out fine.

Pogue: And are you currently with the four division system, or has that been modified?

Lee: We still have the four divisions. We've moved things between divisions. We have science and health careers, math and technology, humanities, language and the arts, and social science and business. There have been some movements. It used to be humanities, math and technology, that was an original division. But we realigned them about, I want to say ten, twelve years ago. It was as much for size as for coherence.

Pogue: How has Oakton interacted with the local high schools?

Lee: We have a really good relationship with our local high schools, founded and rooted in the fact that we're partners in the delivery of their continuing ed and adult ed programs. But we're seeing, with the downturn of the economy, I would say over the last ten years, more and more of our high school students—in our high schools, by the way, 98 percent graduate and go on to college—more and more of them are coming to Oakton for two years, because it's the economy.

They realize that they can get a really good jump start for a very low price, and the quality is clearly there. If they don't start with us, they come back to us. We touch so many of them in so many ways. Now we're working on early college, dual credit, dual enrollment, Summer Bridge programs, so that we can help speed the time to degree.

Pogue: You talked about some of the unique programs Oakton has. You mentioned science. Are there some others that are fairly unique to Oakton?

Lee: We have a huge language program. Early on, we began offering the Asian languages. I think we have fourteen or fifteen language offerings, including Japanese, Chinese and Korean. We teach Hindi and Urdu. We have a great Arabic program that is very popular; we teach Arabic and Hebrew and then all the usual suspects, French and German and Spanish and Italian. I think the language array is impressive.

We also have a museum studies program that is kind of rooted and anchored in our art collection, which is both two-dimensional and three-dimensional. Do you remember the Navy Pier sculpture walk, Sculpture Park?

Pogue: Yes.

Lee: Many of the sculptures that were exhibited there are now on our campus and in our corridors. Throughout the institution, there are works of art everywhere. We

have a gallery with regular exhibits that are booked two years out, and we just have a fabulous collection. What that means is, it's not just the museum studies as a curriculum. The art that is on the campus, in and outside, is part of a curriculum of the environment, and the faculty really use it as part of their teaching. You will often see students standing in front of one of the big paintings and talking with a colleague about it. So it's really... It makes an impact on our students' lives.

Pogue: What have been some of the newest college classes that you've offered at Oakton?

Lee: The nano-tech curriculum is pretty new. We have a new... I guess I would say an expanded curriculum for the first responders. We work with Northern Illinois University, and we say we're the first providers for first responders. About 75 to 80 percent of nurses, EMTs [emergency medical technicians], physicians' assistants, come through the community college program. I think that is very much in the fore today.

We have a relationship with the Northeastern Illinois Public Safety Training Academy, NIPSTA is the acronym, and we do a lot of training for them. They use our campus for fishing people out of the ice training for fire departments in the winter. They have a actual facility that was the old Glenview Naval Air Station, which is about four miles from the campus. We do a lot of the delivery of their training through our programs in EMT and public safety, and I think it's public works management, because also on our campus we have the headquarters of the Northwest Municipal Conference of Mayors. We do a lot of work with them. They're kind of like our "second cousins once removed" on the campus.

Pogue: What is the current strategic plan that you're working on?

Lee: We have a strategic plan document that was new last year that was built on the prior one. The prior strategic plan was called "Change Matters," and it focused on seven or eight big goals, which we made good progress on. But we really focused in on three of those for the new strategic plan, which goes from 2013 to 2017.

There are essentially three big goals that we're working on. The primary one is around the student success and completion agenda; the second is around enhancing and increasing academic excellence, and this has a number of related bullet points; and the third is connected communities in every sense of that word, connected within the college and outside of the college.

This plan is accompanied by a facilities master plan, the centerpiece of which is the science and health careers building that's going up before our eyes on the campus. The other pieces of that are an integrated enrollment center, a student gathering space, and then a renovated infrastructure where we will reconfigure offices that were displaced by the enrollment center development at one end of the campus, and then additional space uses that we're working now with a vacated space committee to determine priorities for implementation.

Pogue: Since you came in 1985, how much of the campus has grown, and what has become of the building status during that time?

Lee: We have two physical facilities, and they are pretty much each, one big building, each one, except for the science building this time. It is at one end of the campus; it's very close, but it is not attached. The reason for that is the restrictions that we have by law and our own commitment to environmental stewardship to insure that we don't impact adversely the waters that come when there's flooding of the Des Plaines River. So we have put our campus, our new building, up on piers so that water actually flows under it.

The building projects that I've worked on have been... The new second campus, I think, was finished at its core in Skokie in '95. Subsequent to that, when I became president, we did a big pavilion addition. It's the art, science and tech pavilion. Then over here, we did, I guess, an expansion and renovation of the performing arts center and the library. The biggest project by far is the science and health careers building.

Pogue: Now you've done a lot of traveling, tied to education in other countries, such as China, the Netherlands, Thailand, India, Israel, Palestine. What have you learned from those experiences?

Lee: I've learned that the situation, the government structure and the opportunities, are all different, but the needs are essentially the same. I've learned that community colleges are an incredibly flexible, viable alternative that countries are incredibly interested in. I've also learned that you can't just pick up the American model and put it in another country, but that it is wonderfully adaptable.

The challenge in talking with other countries about community colleges as an educational option is to try to figure out with them how they can work to adapt it to their vision of what education should be, because so many of them track their students from the seventh grade, and everything depends on the results of the single exam, and you get a crack at this career or this university, and you didn't, up until recently, get a second chance.

I think there's a realization that what you learn when you're seventeen anymore, isn't going to hold you for your career, or even what you get your Ph.D. at M.I.T. in, isn't going to be able to be the only thing that you learn for your working life. So, I've learned, as a person who has been used as a resource for community colleges, I've learned as much as they've learned from me, I believe.

Pogue: You've also been involved in the Higher Learning Commission. What is that?

Lee: That's the accrediting body. It used to be called the North Central Association. There are five regional accrediting agencies in this country, and they're incredibly important, because if you are not regionally accredited as an institution of higher education, your students do not have access to Pell Grants. Accreditation has been aligned for over 100 years as the gatekeeper for student federal financial aid.

There's much ado about that right now, in terms of the appropriateness of the function and how well regional accreditation is working. I got involved when I went to Michigan as the person who was assigned by the president to coordinate the self-study for accreditation. Doing that in, I think it was '78, I got involved with the regional accrediting agency. I went to the meeting and found out how to do it and subsequently became a consultant evaluator.

So I went out on visits to other institutions, based on a peer review process. Through that, which was a great learning opportunity for me and a great professional development opportunity, I became elected to or appointed to a number of bodies within that organization, including the board of directors and then was elected president of the board of the North Central Association, I guess, Commissions on Institutions of Higher Education and then of the whole North Central Association, which was K-12 [kindergarten through high school] and colleges and universities in nineteen states, because the North Central is the largest of the five regional accreditors. It was and is the quality assurance body that deals with institutions of higher learning. You have to pass the test, and you have to do it on a regular basis.

Pogue: Our last question is, where do you see community colleges moving over the next decade? You've been giving us a wonderful look at the last twenty-five or so years. Where do you see community colleges going the next ten?

Lee: I think that one of the things that's going to happen—maybe not in my lifetime—is that we have measured learning, and we've measured the units by which faculty are paid, in terms of credit hours. And credit hours are calculated on the basis of seat time. We all know that it's no longer reasonable to think that sitting in a seat for forty-five hours over a semester gives you the skills and competencies that you need in “fill in the blank” course. So I think that there's a real push now to disaggregate time and place from learning and learning outcomes. I think community colleges are going to have to figure out a way to deal with that.

I also think one of the pushes for that is going to be the MOOCs [massive open online courses]. I don't think too many community colleges will put up MOOCs online and offer those learning opportunities. But I think what community colleges will and should do is to help students who are enrolled in MOOCs, because it is a real increase in access potential for learning.

Also, I think we've got to figure out what we do when someone from one of our local high schools comes in and says, “Here's my high school transcript. I have also taken four courses from Stanford and Harvard, and I have the certification that I have been successful in those courses. I want them included on my college transcript and considered for placement.” We have no mechanism to do that, and I don't know of a lot of places that do. So I think we have to figure that out.

Pogue: In closing, how do you feel the attitude is in the state of Illinois toward the idea of community colleges that grew out of the Junior College Act of 1965? Although some colleges had existed as part of the high schools, prior to that time, how do you feel the community colleges are now accepted in Illinois?

Lee: The first one was founded in 1904 by William Rainey Harper as the first two years of the University of Chicago. I think that's where our roots are. Community colleges, Ernest Boyer said in the 1980s, "are Democracy's colleges." If they hadn't been invented by that time, somebody would have to do it. I think what community colleges have proven themselves to be is a place where people can start at the beginning, start over, start anew, retrain, make and remake their lives.

And I think community colleges are seen as the cliché, "engines of workforce development." We can do customized programs; we don't have to have a sixteen week semester to do it. We can do it on site; we can do it in other languages; we can help people learn English; we can help people new to this country, who have credentials from other countries, learn English and demonstrate that they indeed can do the work that they've done in other countries in medicine, that we don't waste education. I think community colleges are commanding a lot of respect.

I think we have many, many promises to keep. I think we have miles to go. I don't think we can rest on our laurels. But I'll tell you, I think I have the best job in the world. I wouldn't trade places with anybody. I think people who look down on community colleges for any reason, "Well they're only two year colleges; therefore, they're something less," are really demonstrating and displaying their own lack of understanding of what we are and what we can do and what we have done. We change people's lives every single day.

Pogue: President Lee, I want to thank you very much for sharing your work at Oakton Community College and your involvement with the community college system, including the State of Michigan and also some of your extra activities that have been promoting the ideas of community college worldwide. I appreciate you spending some time with us today.

Lee: My pleasure. I'm delighted to do it, and thank you for doing this work about community colleges.

(end of interview)