

Interview with Dr. Christine Sobek

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Interviewer: Philip Pogue

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Pogue: My name is Philip Pogue. It’s February 27, 2013. I’m on the campus of Waubonsee Community College in Sugar Grove, Illinois. Today, I am going to be discussing the history of the Illinois Community College System and its development with Dr. Christine Sobek, who is the president of Waubonsee. Thank you, Dr. Sobek, for participating in our project. To begin with, could you tell us about your educational and family background?

Sobek: Okay. I began my education in higher education at Purdue University. I grew up in Indiana and attended Purdue University, and received a Bachelor of Arts degree in psychology. Upon graduation, [I] immediately attended Michigan State University, where I earned a Master of Arts degree in college personnel administration, with the goal of working in student development functions.

That was a turning point in my career, in that I had a professor, Dr. Max Raines, who was sort of a legend in that era in higher education. He had actually worked at a community college in Michigan prior to becoming a professor at Michigan State University. And he encouraged all of us in the



Dr. Christine Sobek

master's program to strongly think about working in a community college setting.

Most of us at that time—this was in the seventies—were unfamiliar with the community college movement and had envisioned that we would be working in a four-year college or university setting. I really credit Dr. Raines, in those early days, of broadening our perspective. That's what led to me taking my first professional job, after completing my master's degree at Michigan State University, in a community college.

I immediately began my professional employment at the College of Lake County in 1978. I would not have ended up in a community college had it not been for my professor at Michigan State. Later on, I pursued my doctorate at Northern Illinois University [NIU], began in 1990 and completed that degree in 1996. My doctorate is in adult and continuing education.

I was fortunate to be part of a wonderful program that NIU sponsored at that time, specifically for community college leaders. I was with a group of about forty individuals who were admitted into the program in a cohort style. All of us were working in the Illinois Community College System, either as faculty members or staff or administrators. That was a fabulous opportunity to spend our doctoral program, focusing not only on higher education, but with the opportunity to really focus on community colleges. That was a wonderful opportunity. So, those are my three higher ed [education] degrees.

Pogue: What involvement have you had with community colleges besides Lake County, which you mentioned?

Sobek: College of Lake County. I will say, growing up in Indiana, at the time they did not have a community college system. Again to me, I had no real familiarity with it. Even today, you may know that Indiana just only recently, in the last five or six years, created a community college system. It's very interesting to see the diversity among the states.

My employment began in 1978 with the College of Lake County. That's in the northern part of the state, a vibrant, dynamic community college, which is thriving and doing very well today. I spent eleven years there and had a great opportunity to work in student development, which is where I began and what my master's degree was in. But then, I also worked in the office of the president, got very involved in affirmative action issues, and then transitioned from student development to the business side of the house. I was in human resources for a number of years there. I also worked back with the office of the president, so I had a very eclectic career there.

Then I came to Waubonsee Community College in 1989 and have been here ever since. I've worked in the community college system in Illinois

since 1978. Let's do the math; that is a long time now, (laughs) more than thirty years I've been in the Illinois Community College System.

Pogue: What were your assignments at Waubensee, before being president?

Sobek: I came as dean of student development, which was my dream job. That's what my master's degree was in and what I had hoped to do. I was in that role for a couple of years, then was promoted to assistant vice president of student development, again responsible as the chief student affairs officer. Then I had the opportunity to switch to the academic side, and I became assistant vice president of instruction. So, for four years I was the chief academic officer for the institution.

From there, [I] was promoted to executive vice president of educational affairs. I had student development and also the academic side of the house but also workforce development, marketing, communications, the foundation, a wide variety of roles.

Then, for a year, I was provost, and then I was appointed president in 2001. So I am just completing my twelfth year as president here at the college.

Pogue: How did this community college begin, and how was the location selected?

Sobek: Well, we were founded, came into existence, in August of 1966 as Waubensee Community College, when the electorate of our area... which is a little unusual, because we're southern Kane County, and we have northern Kendall County, and then we have smaller portions of DeKalb County, and also a very tiny little spot in LaSalle County and Will County.

What I have been told about the history is... Again, our main population base is Aurora. So, most of the original folks that came together to plan the initial referenda to create our taxing district and taxing body really came out of the larger Aurora community. But then there was a community of interest, defined by the residents of the twelve public school districts that we serve. Through the work of the community, through the work of the focus groups, they determined that, because of the shared interest, we would make for a good boundary.

So, when you look at our map, you wonder... Because they're very jagged boundaries, you wonder why parts of one county and parts of another, but it was just, as the leaders at that time felt that they were able to gain that support.

You may know, in the early days of community colleges, not every community was required to be part of a community college district. So, for example, when I first went to work at College of Lake County, which was just Lake County, we had certain municipalities that had opted out of the district.

In the early days, unlike today, where everybody is in a community college district, the dynamics were significantly different.

One of our interesting twists is, in this region you may know, there's the tri-cities, St. Charles, Batavia and Geneva. Well, only two of the tri-cities are in Waubonsee's district, Batavia and Geneva, but St. Charles went north into the Elgin Community College district. Again, I've just been told that the original founders...that St. Charles looked more to north and felt more affiliated with the Elgin community than they did with the Aurora community. But people always ask me about that. There's the tri-cities; why aren't they all in Waubonsee's district?

It's hard to envision; in 1966, we would have been a much more rural environment than we are now. We weren't as much of a suburban community. Aurora was half the size it is today. So it's a little bit hard. But those were the initial... Voters got together and approved for us to come into existence in August of 1966.

I know that the board assembled itself. I know our first president, Dr. Nelson, was hired in January of 1967, along with our first dean of instruction. Then we began classes in September of 1967. They had a relatively short amount of time, when you think about that. A college does not exist in sixty-six; they hire their president in January of sixty-seven, the first dean of curriculum. They create the original curriculum; they figure out where to house the classes, and they open their doors in September of 1967.

Of course, we were spread in a number of facilities in Aurora, such as a church. We were in high school settings. I know we were in a former grocery store. We were in an old YMCA. That's a similar story throughout the state. People kind of started in these storefront operations, as a way to get the classes out there and then worked on their permanent facilities.

Pogue: How would you describe the current Waubonsee Community College, in terms of enrollment, demographics, number of faculty, geographic size, your funding sources and number of programs? You mentioned the twelve school districts; is that still current?

Sobek: Well, our district remains the same, so nothing about our original district boundaries have changed over this long time. We cover a little over 600 square miles. There are twelve public school districts, and we have a number of private high schools, of course, that we work significantly with. In our area we're known for that. We have eight private high schools in our general region.

Of course, those school districts have changed significantly since 1966 and have grown. For a while, Kendall County, which we serve, was the fastest growing county in the United States. So, [there has been] explosive growth in

pretty much all of our twelve public school districts since 1966, especially in the last decade, before the recession. But the actual physical boundaries have not changed. That would be not true for every community, because as I said, in some community college districts they've had municipalities join that weren't part of the original.

We started with just a couple hundred students. And last year, if you looked at our total enrollment for the entire fall, spring and summer, we had more than 31,000 students enrolled over the three semesters. The average age of a credit student for us is twenty-seven. Interesting, that's a little bit lower than it has been in the past, because we're seeing a tremendous surge of traditional-age students coming to the college. That would be in that age group between eighteen and twenty-two or twenty-three. So, our average age of our credit students is actually down a year or two than it had been historically. The average age of our non-credit students, those students enrolled in community education or workforce development and training, is forty. As you can see, that's a much more adult returning population.

Between 42 to 45 percent of our students are male, the balance female. I know that's been pretty consistent since we were founded, which is interesting, that the male/female ratio has stayed pretty consistent over these forty plus years. Fifty-five percent of our students are in transfer programs. About 20 to 25 percent are enrolled in our occupational programs. And the rest would be in developmental courses or adult education.

As I mentioned, an interesting trend is with regard to the number of full-time students. We're at the highest percentage we've ever been, at about 33 percent. When I came here, we were 20 percent full-time, 80 percent part-time students, and that remained constant for a couple of decades. It's just really been within the last five to seven years that that's shifting. So again, we're up to about 33 percent of our students full-time. That's a direct response to the recession, the economy, accessibility of our programs and services. That's why that average of our credit student is going down a little bit. So, some interesting changes there.

We currently have about 120 full-time faculty. In the last decade, we've actually added forty-two full-time faculty positions in response to the growth we've had in our district residents and our campuses. We have several hundred-adjunct faculty. Ninety-two percent of our faculty hold a master's or doctoral degree. We're very proud of that.

We currently have about 120 degrees and certificates and occupational programs. When we started, we probably had five. So that's a constant area of growth and change with regard to needs in our community. Of course, the demographic diversity has changed significantly. Our community that we serve has a very large and thriving Latino population, so the percentage of

students attending the college has grown significantly in diversity over the last several decades.

Pogue: I think you've pretty well covered the major changes since the college was formed. Were there any other additions that you can think of?

Sobek: I'm trying to think. We've talked about full-time/part-time, male/female, ethnic diversity, cultural diversity. I think I've covered it.

[There's also been] the definite shift in more students coming to us directly out of high school. That's a population or percentage that we monitor very closely. We feel it's a benchmark of our success. We look at the graduating seniors of the schools, the high schools that we serve. We look at what percentage of those students attend Waubonsee. It's hovering between 25 and 30 percent. In some schools, it's more than 30 percent, of course, and some it's less. I recall, when I arrived here in the late eighties it was probably closer to 12 to 15 percent. So again, that's a huge shift for us in the number of graduating seniors who come here directly out of high school. That would be another big change.

Pogue: What is the mission of the college, and has it changed?

Sobek: The mission of Waubonsee... We're a public, comprehensive community college. We were organized in 1966, and we operate under the Illinois Community College Act, which that enabling legislation was... I noticed your notes said sixty-five. I was always told it was 1964, so either 1964 or 1965, which really created the community college system, the basics of it as we know today.

Of course, there were the class I and class II colleges that existed before, but we really have always operated under that basic enabling legislation of the sixties, to provide educational and training programs to the communities that we're designed to serve. Our philosophy and mission statements talk about us being based on the premise that education is the cornerstone. We still talk about a literate democratic society. Learning is definitely a lifelong process, so you would see in our programs that we have programs for youth, all the way up through a very active Lifelong Learning Institute for seniors in our community and everything in between.

And we have core values of accessibility, service, value, quality and innovation, which really inform everything that we do. From the time we were founded, we originally had transfer programs; that was always part of our mission. We always have had occupational programs, part of our mission. We always had adult education. By that I mean English as a second language, GED, adult basic education. When we were founded, we had a community ed department. That's that lifelong learning part of our mission, where you'll see courses and programs that are not-for-credit.

The piece that's newer to us, but to the system, as well, is economic development/workforce development. In the eighties, that was formally adopted and integrated into the community college mission. That was not part of the original vision. We never, in the early days, would have talked about economic development or even workforce development in the same specific ways that, not only Waubensee, but all the colleges in the system now would and have adopted as part of their fundamental mission.

As I think about change in programs and services, that's probably the number one change that I would identify that has been integrated within the Illinois Community College System, not just at Waubensee, but with all of our other... We have thirty-nine districts and forty-eight colleges, so that's been adopted in the mission of all these other institutions as well.

Pogue: What working relationships do you have with other community colleges, technical schools, industry, public schools and other partners?

Sobek: I have an unbelievable list here; I could probably talk forever about this. From the community college's end, we have a wonderful system of networks throughout the state. Of course, our coordinating agency is the Illinois Community College Board, a State agency, as well as there's actually a board that is appointed by the governor that helps with that.

We interface primarily with Illinois Community College Board for curriculum matters. Any new programs for credit that we offer go through an approval process with the Illinois Community College Board. Of course, the Community College Act talks about purchasing, talks about the role of the board of trustees, talks about all those things. But on a day-to-day basis in Illinois, we really operate with a fair amount of local autonomy as community colleges.

Having said that, we have the Illinois Community College Board that we work with, and there are several advisory groups that exist within that structure. There's the Illinois Council of Community College Presidents; every [community college] president in the state is automatically part of that, and that's a very active and vibrant network. We meet on a monthly basis, so we have great opportunity to see and learn from our colleagues. Similarly, there's a group for the chief student affairs officers; there's a group for the chief academic officers; there's a group for the chief financial officers; the list goes on and on.

There's a group for all administrators, called ICCCA, Illinois Council of Community College Administrators. There's a faculty association group. So pretty much with all the major functions, there is a statewide organization supported by the Illinois Community College Board that allows colleagues throughout the state to come together.

There's a technology group; there's one for the registrars. I think that's healthy because we don't need to reinvent the wheel at each of our institutions. Again, we negotiate our own labor contracts; we do our own purchasing; we do a lot of things with independent autonomy at our local district, yet it makes sense to partner and have colleagues.

So, many, many networks exist on a statewide basis. And of course, then the Illinois Community College Board reports under the Illinois Board of Higher Education. In Illinois, there are some similar groups, not as many, with the Illinois Board of Higher Ed that are opportunities for us to also network with four-year colleges and universities. I could do nothing but attend all these meetings. (laughs) The network is pretty impressive. That is the piece with other community colleges.

We are also members of a couple of the national associations as well. Illinois is very active at that level. In addition, there's an association called the Illinois Community College Trustees Association [ICCTA]. That is a member-driven group that trustees belong to. The ICCTA serves as a wonderful place for professional development, networking, advocacy for our trustees.

In Illinois, we operate with seven-member elected boards of trustees. There are no specific requirements for those roles, other than wanting to volunteer countless hours towards the mission of the community college. As a result, people come to those roles with varying backgrounds and levels of experience, often really no experience related to community colleges. So, the Illinois Community College Trustees Association plays a critical role in professional development and staff development and really helping our trustees do the best that they can for the state of Illinois and for their individual colleges.

There's all of that that goes on at the state level. I think that was one part of your question; that's one part of it. What else did you want to ask about?

Pogue: Other technical schools?

Sobek: In Illinois our mission encompasses really what you might think of as technical schools in other states. We serve that role, so there's not necessarily... Other than the for-profit technical schools, which sometimes we partner with, there really isn't another network in the state of technical schools. We are it.

Pogue: Are there any partnerships with your neighboring community colleges where you offer a particular program, and because of costs or maybe limited enrollment, you share that program, so students from the other community college can come to you and vice versa?

Sobek: Yes. Actually, the state has a charge-back system in place that was created by legislation, which basically states, if you want to attend an occupational program or certificate [program] that your home college does not offer, you apply for a charge-back, which your home college approves, which allows you then to go to another community college in the state to pursue that degree or certificate and get charged the in-district rate.

In addition, however, community colleges can form cooperative agreements. That basically means the individual student doesn't have to go through all that paperwork. [In] northern Illinois, we have a mass cooperative agreement for pretty much all of our occupational programs and services. A couple of colleges choose not to participate. That is not required, but the rest of us do. I always give the example of culinary arts.

Waubonsee does not have a culinary arts program. Why, people ask me? Because we are surrounded by fabulous culinary art programs. Joliet Junior College has an award-winning culinary arts program. Elgin Community College, they have a special expertise in baking and pastries. And then College of DuPage has opened an unbelievable building, with like fifteen kitchens in it, for culinary. So, it would not be a good use of our resources. But a student can come to us, since we don't offer culinary, and because we have a cooperative agreement with both Elgin Community College and Joliet Junior College, they can freely go to either one of those community colleges, pay the in-district rate as though they were a resident of that home district, and pursue that degree. It works very well and very seamlessly.

Pogue: Is there some sort of council that involves the community college with local industry?

Sobek: Yes, and that varies by district. In our particular area, Waubonsee Community College is a member of every chamber of commerce, every economic development commission or entity, as well as the Valley Industrial Association, which is unique to our area. It's a 100+ [year] old association that works specifically to address the needs of manufacturers. We're very active with that board.

We have advisory councils for our occupational programs, and we are involved in pretty much every organized entity around economic development or workforce development or training. That community engagement, that external engagement, is a core part of our mission in staying in tune with what the needs are of our local business and industry.

Pogue: Does Waubonsee have anyone representing them on the P20 Council?¹

¹ The Illinois P-20 Council was established by the legislature in 2009 to foster collaboration among state agencies, education institutions, local schools, community groups, employers, taxpayers, and families to collectively identify needed reforms and to develop a seamless, sustainable statewide system of quality

Sobek: No, we don't have an individual member of our team. There's one president that represents the entire state from the Council of Presidents. But we follow the work of the council.

Pogue: You said there's twelve feeder public schools that are in your community college. How do you keep communication with those schools, as well as the private schools that you mentioned?

Sobek: Before I forget, too, there's one other entity, our local Workforce Investment Board. Under the Workforce Investment Act (WIA), workforce investment boards were created. That's another very important relationship that we have, with our local Workforce Investment Board.

Shifting gears to the high schools, that's a definite strategic initiative of ours, to be sure that we have excellent relationships. I can't read all of this to you, but I have an eleven-page document that we put together a couple of years ago that literally documents all of our college and high school initiatives and partnerships because we know that relationship is critical. Our goal is to have seamless education of our residents, so that when they begin in grade school, they know college is attainable to them and that that's the focus that they have.

For example, I meet with each of our superintendents on an annual basis at that high level to be sure that the relationships are going well. More specifically, members of our team are engaged regularly with the high school principals. We have a very, very large, dual-credit partnership program with virtually all of our high schools, public and private.

We, for decades, have run a large high school summer school program for our high schools. Last year, we had something like 1,300 students enrolled in that. We do high school visits all the time, where our teams of folks go out and meet with the high schools and meet with students. We have an annual counselor breakfast, where we invite all the counselors, so that they're up-to-date on Waubensee programs and services. We run several competitions; we have an automotive tech competition. We do the Worldwide Youth Science and Engineering, the WYSE competition that's throughout the state; we host that. We have a CAD [Computer-Aided Design] competition. We have a business competition day.

We also have a Gustafson Scholarship Program that our board approved about thirty years ago, and we award a full tuition waiver, if you will, a two-year scholarship, to every high school, one for each 100 graduating seniors. So, we have a very vibrant scholarship program that we meet with all

education and support. The P stands for preschool, and the 20 stands for grade 20, education after college. (<https://www2.illinois.gov/sites/P20/default.aspx>)

of our high schools. And every year we welcome about fifty new Gustafson scholars to the college; they're part of our leadership team. We've done some creative things with driver safety, outreach with diversity.

Again, like I said, we don't have time, but I have like a list of eleven pages. That is clearly part of our strategic initiative, to be sure that our district high schools are as fully informed as they can be about our programs and services and that they know us, they know us on a personal basis; they can pick up the phone; they can call us, and that we work together.

A huge national conversation, and also location conversation, is college readiness, the national concern that students are coming out of high school not ready for college. So, we also have a very large college readiness initiative going on, where we're working faculty-to-faculty, looking at math, reading and English to determine where the gaps are, what it means to be college ready, how we can work together with our partners to ensure that. Those are just some examples of many, many of the initiatives that are going on around that high school piece and the school district piece.

Pogue: You mentioned dual credits; that's fairly new, I guess, when you look at the history of the community college.² I think Belleville may have been one of the first to actually do that. There was some resistance because some people thought it was double dipping with funding. How has that expanded in Waubonsee?

Sobek: Interestingly enough, when I became the chief academic officer here in 1993, we already had a dual credit partnership going on with Batavia High School and Rosary High School. But it was just... It was calculus at Batavia High School, and it was American history at Rosary High School. I always think back about that now, because those individuals were pioneers, and they didn't know it at the time. It was an early, early form of dual credit.

You are absolutely correct that it's really probably been within the last decade or maybe even in the last five years that there's been a statewide push towards dual credit, as well as a national push towards dual credit. I think it's become more possible for a variety of reasons. One is cost. People see the advantage if they can, by the time they graduate from high school, already have earned some college credit. Those are dollars that they're saving as they pursue their baccalaureate degree. I think the quality of community colleges has grown over the years, so there's a much greater acceptance now of the fact that these courses are comparable to college level.

Quite honestly, dual credit is very similar to AP [advanced placement]. We've had advanced placement around for years. It's the same concept. AP,

² Dual credit in effect enrolls students in college courses while they are still in high school, allowing them to earn credit for both. (https://www.stltoday.com/news/local/metro/ap-courses-vs-dual-credit-what-s-best-for-high/article_32de45f2-37e8-572c-a01a-aa7726797e62.html)

you're getting high school credit, but you're taking a college level course, same thing with dual credit. With AP, you have to follow their book. When you take a dual credit, you have to use the college book. You have to follow the AP curriculum. You have to follow the college curriculum. If you think about it conceptually, it's the exact same thing.

The difference is, when you take dual credit you are assured that you're going to earn that credit. When you take AP, you're not assured of the credit. You have to take the test, and if you don't pass the test to the right degree, you don't get the credit, and colleges and universities don't always accept AP credit.

So conceptually, we've been doing a version of this for a very, very long time. I think just the fact that it was offered in a different delivery method or something, people felt like it was some totally brand new concept that we had never done before. I would say it's fully embraced. There are rules and regulations now that were passed by the state legislature a couple of years ago to be sure that it's done in a uniform way.

The Illinois Community College Board had taken the lead in drafting rules and regulations, and the legislation pretty much followed the guidelines that we were already operating under as a system.

Pogue: With the colleges, I think there was also a push to make sure credits at the community college level were being accepted by the major universities. Did Waubonsee have any problems with that prior to this push, to make sure that those credits would be accepted by the universities?

Sobek: Historically there were compact agreements or transfer agreements throughout the state. When I joined the system, back in the seventies, when I came here in the eighties, there were already many vibrant articulation agreements in place between community colleges and the universities, both public and private, in Illinois.

There was a feeling that that could be strengthened, so what was created for the system is the Illinois Articulation Initiative, the IAI system that we operate under today, which is a vast, some might say, bureaucratic system of really looking at transfer courses, especially general education courses and ensuring consistency and transferability and rigor in quality throughout the state. If you've looked in our college catalog, you would see the courses that have an IAI designation, which means that they have gone through the system of approval to verify that they meet those standards. Those courses are supposed to be accepted, without question, throughout the state at the public universities and for all the private universities who choose to participate in the IAI program. There also are major courses, specifically, meaning if you want to major in science, or you want to major in a particular field, certain major courses have also gone through this IAI approval process.

There's been a lot of work at the state around trying to ensure that there is smooth transfer. The numbers are amazing. People tend to think of transfer as community college to a baccalaureate college or university, but there's a constant swell... I think the number is something like 60,000 students transfer every year, and they're going everywhere. They're going between private, public, up, down, in, out. The IAI was supposed to be for everybody, even if you transferred between, let's say, Northern and Western [Illinois University], this would assure that you would have a smooth transfer. It's quite a massive system. Some would say it needs strengthening and that it could be enhanced, but it's clearly the statewide system that we all operate under.

Pogue: What have been some of your newer community college classes?

Sobek: A lot of our innovative curriculum work occurs in the occupational programs, and that's in direct response to looking at our local labor market and what the needs are. One of the biggest areas of development the last couple of years has been around sustainability, green jobs, the green economy, both again at a national level but here within this state. We've created a series of renewable energy technology programs around such things as geothermal, solar voltaics, small wind, trying to really tap into the evolving new jobs that are coming as a result of sustainability initiatives and a green economy.³ We have a unique automotive recycling certificate. There are some amazing industries that are growing up around recycling, so we're trying to take advantage of that. We also offer a transfer course; it's a multidisciplinary course around sustainability. That's been huge.

We also are constantly looking at the allied health programs and the health fields, because we know that that's going to be a high-demand area. We have some unique programs. We are very much into the health information systems technology. That's in direct response to the new electronic medical record that was part of the National Healthcare Act, that we're all going to have these electronic medical records that follow us around. You need a different level of expertise in terms of medical records now, in order to do that.

We also have a unique interpreting program with healthcare interpreting. There was a need in our area, because we have so many bilingual individuals in the healthcare setting, to have professional trained interpreters, so that patients have somebody that can interpret for them, so that they're clear on the medical procedures that they need.

Those are examples. So, we look at healthcare, definitely going to be big in our area. Are we meeting those needs? We look at occupational

³ Solar voltaics, or photovoltaics are best known as a method for generating electric power by using solar cells to convert energy from the sun into a flow of electrons by the photovoltaic effect. (<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Photovoltaics>)

programs around sustainability. Manufacturing is having a resurgence in our area. We're part of a new network to create the Illinois Network of Advanced Manufacturing. We're one of twenty colleges, community colleges in northern Illinois, going to be part of that program. We just got a federal grant, a \$2.8 million federal grant, to create a new laboratory technician program, based on chemistry and biology, because we have a growing industry in our area around technical products in the food service industry, and they need more technicians.

I think for community colleges, that's one of our greatest challenges, to be sure that our occupational programs and certificates are relevant and meeting the workforce of today, and that we're letting go of occupational certificates and programs that there is no longer a job market for. I think that's one of our biggest challenges.

Pogue: Talking about shared programs, do you have apprentice type programs?

Sobek: Not specifically. The history of apprenticeship programs has been up and down. The last couple of years, for a lot of the trades and a lot of the labor unions, it has been tough. Even locally, several of our local councils and labor unions are sort of reorganizing and restructuring and having to let go of some of their training programs because the jobs just have not been there. I think that's an area that's really undergoing a significant kind of reassessment and reorganization.

We all keep hoping that we're going to be pulling out of this recession, that the economy is going to be picking up again because many of the trades have been significantly hit. In our area, we were booming with housing and commercial development and the construction industry and housing industry, but all that's kind of come to halt the last couple of years. I think that's going to be an area, not just for us, but others that, hopefully, in the next five years we can sort of revitalize again.

Pogue: With the funding sources right now, part of the money for operating a community college comes from tuition, some from the State, some from the property tax. How has where Waubensee Community College gets its money from changed over your tenure here?

Sobek: The radical change has been in the significant decrease in State funding, no doubt about it, not only at Waubensee, but throughout the state. We're down to only about 8 percent, maybe 7 percent of our operating revenue coming from the State. The original, theoretical model was supposed to be one-third from tuition, one-third from the State and one-third from local property tax. I don't think that there was ever one-third coming from the State. But clearly, it used to be more like 15 percent, 20 percent higher percentages. So that constantly, then, re-shifts or rebalances how those percentages...

Throughout the state and at Waubonsee, the higher percentage of operating revenue then is coming from tuition and also coming from property taxes. With the State of Illinois's **dire** financial situation, not only has the percentage of appropriated dollars gone down, but as you may be aware, their ability to actually pay the money that they've appropriated has been a problem. For us, we haven't had a cash flow problem, but clearly, some of our sister institutions have actually had a cash flow problem because the State has been so behind in literally paying the dollars.

The formula in Illinois for community colleges has several components. The State dollars that Waubonsee receives, basically, are supposed to be in relation to the credit hours that we generate. Literally, one student may take a three-credit hour course. That generates three credit hours, and we are supposed to get reimbursed for the production of those credit hours. Over time, as the State appropriations have gone down, there is less and less relationship between our enrollments and the credit hours that we're actually producing and the dollars that we are getting from the State, because the State takes the money that's left and then recreates the formula to match the dollars that they've received.

For Waubonsee, we have been one of the fastest growing community colleges, not just in this state, but in the country. You would **think** that we'd be getting significantly more State dollars because our enrollment's increasing. But that clearly is not the case at all' it's gone down and down. What that means is our local district residents, who are paying taxes to our district, are paying a higher percentage, and students definitely are being asked to pay a higher percentage.

So, tuition... Our Board of Trustees is very concerned about Waubonsee's tuition remaining affordable and accessible. We are up to \$105 a credit hour, which, by anybody's definition, would be a great value. But it still is a concern to our board, every year to have to raise tuition, because they want our tuition to be sure that for our district's residents that it's affordable and accessible.

Another change I have seen is an incredibly significant variance in tuition rates now for community colleges throughout the state. We used to all be within five or ten dollars of each other. I think the highest rate in the state now is \$140 a credit hour; we have one of our community colleges charging that. Waubonsee's charging a \$105. So, you can see there's becoming a great disparity around the state in our individual tuition rates. That is **very different** from what that would have looked like ten years ago.

Pogue: Are there any other challenges on the economic side besides the funding?

Sobek: I think tuition remains a challenge in the sense of, at what point do you begin to cut off access by your tuition rate? Then, in terms of students' ability to pay

and their access to financial aid, that's always a concern. Financial aid dollars are managed statewide, but also at the federal level.

Then the biggest challenge, really, I would just say, within Illinois, is the State coming to grips with its budget situation and whether or not there will be pension reform. We're in the thick of that, and there's been conversations for two years, so how the pension reform affects us, how state funding affects us, how the federal new rules and regulations affect us.

We're all really doing quite a bit right now with national healthcare. That's a major economic concern for not just community colleges, but that's a big topic of conversation. There are many, many external economic challenges, most of which are out of our control.

Pogue: How does the community college work with city, county, state officials?

Sobek: We work very closely with all of our elected officials. At Waubonsee, we are fortunate to have a person who works directly with me. Her role is to help me manage all of our relationships with governmental affairs, because we have the federal level, our congressman, our state senators, the federal agencies. Then we have all our statewide agencies and the executive team, the governor, lieutenant governor. And then we have... Because we're in five counties, and our county form of government in Illinois is very important, we have the county governments to work with. Then we have twenty-two municipalities within Waubonsee's district. They all have mayors or village presidents, and we have to work with them. And then we have our state representatives, and we have our state senators.

With the last redistricting, which we're implementing, our particular Waubonsee territory got, as I say, sort of sliced and diced in a lot of different ways. We have many, many more legislators now that have a piece of our district than before. It's a lot of individuals and a lot of people that we need to know and work with. But—I think you may know this—Illinois has more units of local government than any other state in the United States. So everywhere you go, there's another entity, whether it's a township, a library board, a park district board. We have a lot, a lot of other elected officials, and to be effective as a community college, we have to know who our colleagues are, and we have to nurture relationships with them. It's a very, very large responsibility.

Pogue: With that number of legislators and city and county officials, what major state laws and federal laws have had great impact? You've talked about the potential of the healthcare law and the pension discussion. What else is going on?

Sobek: At the federal level, it's been primarily healthcare and then the whole authorization of the higher ed act, the reauthorization of the Higher Education

Act, which is the act that forms the basis for how Pell Grants are implemented, how financial aid is implemented. That's at the federal level.

At the state level, the basic Community College Act is the fundamental act that we operate under, and from year to year they're sort of tweaking on that sometimes, like the purchasing component. What will happen with pension reform is huge for us, so we're monitoring that very closely.

Other things, Open Meetings Act, very important because it defines how we conduct the business of the board. Freedom of Information Act is critical because that's an ongoing piece, with people having access to our documents and papers and things of that nature. Property tax cap, when that was enacted, huge; [it] changed the way that we are able to access our local property tax dollars, and there's always possible legislation pending there.

Collective bargaining in the...I believe it was in the eighties, the state passed the Illinois Educational Labor Relations Act, which created our system of collective bargaining that exists in Illinois. There's an Educational Labor Relations Board. Almost all of the community colleges' fulltime faculty, I think maybe every single one of them, are unionized. We operate in a collective bargaining environment, so there are a lot of rules and regulations with regard to that.

The veterans' grant in Illinois significantly affects us, because it's an unfunded mandate. The Illinois Veterans' Grant awards tuition to Illinois veterans, and the state is supposed to reimburse us for the tuition waivers, but they do not. So that affects us with hundreds of thousands of dollars in an unfunded mandate.

The college insurance grant was established that provides a system of benefits for health insurance for community college retirees. That was a separate law that was created, and now that plan is having financial problems. Again, you can kind of see this theme of finance. A lot of this comes back to...These acts were passed at a time when the financial situation of the state was much different. So we struggle to adhere to the spirit of these acts now with no money.

That's just kind of a sampling of some of the state...and we monitor that very carefully; we try...It's tough, because, as you know, thousands of bills get introduced every year at the state and federal level. We definitely work together as a community college system to monitor all of those things.

Of course, the big one now is concealed carry weapons, and the community colleges want community college campuses to be exempt from concealed carry. There's been a lot of activity the last couple of years around emergency preparedness and safety. A new law was created that made each of us establish, as community colleges, whether we were going to have a security

team or a campus police team. We all had to officially designate that, and we had to authorize... We now have a campus police department. So many, many things have happened around emergency preparedness and safety issue, too.

Pogue: Are there any issues with the state tied to your accrediting?

Sobek: Not specifically. We get a recognition statement from the Illinois Community College Board. One of their authorities and responsibilities is to—I don't know if it's every three years or five years—do an official recognition review of each of the community colleges to ensure that each of us is operating within the scope of our responsibilities and authorities. Then we get an official statement from them saying that we are authorized to continue to operate. So that is an important function.

Most of the accreditation that we go through is on a regional basis or a national basis. More regionally, you may know, in the United States for higher education, we have a regional system of accreditation for colleges and universities. We are housed within the North Central Unit, which is the Higher Learning Commission, and that's really where our key accreditation comes from as well. That allows us to secure federal financial aid. What we're seeing is a trend with a lot of programmatic accreditations at the national level or statewide level. There are various things going on, a big discussion going on at the federal government about that as well.

Pogue: What is the college's current strategic plan, and how much has that changed?

Sobek: We have a strategic planning framework. I have my visual aid here, which of course you can't see on the tape, but we have a document; it's called our Strategic Planning Framework, which we update every year. It includes the college's vision statement, our core values, our vision, and also strategic goals and objectives. We have five broad strategic goals and objectives, with several subsets.

That is reviewed on an annual basis by various stakeholders and ultimately endorsed by our Board of Trustees. As I think about the themes and trends and changes in that document over even the past five years, they would include a much stronger focus on accountability, on data, on being data-driven, on documenting student learning, on documenting learning outcomes—that's that whole student success theme—on documenting completion of certificates and programs, so there's transparency, accountability... If you read today's document versus ten years ago, those themes probably would come through more loudly and clearly. I think that's where some of its internally driven but driven.

We've also incorporated a lot of language about sustainability, about diversity, multiculturalism, also about emergency preparedness and safety, given what's gone on in the higher ed community throughout the country.

Those are themes that you would not probably have seen in our strategic planning documents, even five to seven years ago. Those are some of the changes that I would say form our sort of strategic vision at this point.

Pogue: You talked about Waubensee starting in sixty-seven in YMCAs and all sorts of places. Now you have a campus, which I would call in kind of a rural type setting, your major campus. You've got a new one in Plano; you've got a new one in downtown Aurora, and you have another one over by the Rush-Copley Hospital. How was the building construction and remodeling handled, and how do you determine where you go?

Sobek: First of all, I would say that our Board of Trustees, from the beginning, has had a very strong philosophy about taking programs and services out into our district. It's been their philosophy for more than thirty years of looking to maintain permanent extension sites and campuses. That's somewhat unique to us; that's been a strongly held belief of theirs for more than thirty years. So yes, we are now officially a four-campus network, and the Sugar Grove campus is our main campus.

The good news is we're very accessible. The original people who bought this site... We're right on Route 47, right off of I-88 and right off of Route 30; we remain very accessible. I'd say this campus is now on the border between being suburban and rural. Route 47 is kind of still a dividing line between... West is still pretty rural. To the east, it's pretty much all suburban. This location is absolutely excellent for us.

We have about 240 acres, and this campus will have a longstanding commitment to sustainability. We're a Tree Campus USA campus because we're surrounded by forest preserve. So, long after we're all gone, this campus will still have a beautiful, wonderful feel. We're so fortunate to have this as our main campus.

The second commitment the college made was to have a permanent extension site in downtown Aurora. While we have a brand-new campus down there, it's important to note that we've had a permanent campus in downtown Aurora for almost thirty years. This was back when downtown Aurora was really a ghost town, and there was nothing downtown. My predecessors here, in terms of board and past president, worked with many individuals to create our first downtown Aurora campus. That campus served us very well for almost twenty-five years. We were out of space in that campus, so our brand-new campus—which we're almost into two years of operation—we moved across the river and pretty much tripled what we're able to do in terms of programs and services. That campus has been phenomenally successful.

The third decision the board made was to build a campus... When Rush-Copley—at the time they were Copley Hospital—moved out of

downtown Aurora on the east side, when they were building their brand-new campus, Copley's vision was to not just build a hospital, but to build more of a campus environment. So, they welcomed other partners like Waubensee. That was our third commitment. The reason that the college wanted to build there was because that was one of the fastest growing parts of our district at that time. It's right near the east side of Aurora and Oswego, and they really wanted to have an extension that would be in the fast growing hub of that part of our district.

The Plano campus story is similar, in that when we looked at the demographics of our district—again this is pre-recession—Kendall County, where that campus is located...Kendall County, as I mentioned earlier, was one of the fastest-growing counties in the whole United States. So the communities that that campus is designed to serve, starting with Yorkville, Plano, Somonauk, Sandwich and Wheeling, each of them was growing, tripling in population.

We were able to do that campus. That's another wonderful story, because the land was donated; the city put in the traffic light for us at an incredibly affordable price, and to serve that explosively growing part of our district. Now that growth has stopped for a bit, while we've been in recession, but Route 34 corridor goes right through all that communities. All the development from the east, coming out of Naperville and Plainfield, people are still settling in Oswego. Oswego School District is still growing, but they're settling and continuing to move west. The goal of the college, the goal of the board, was to ensure that our services were accessible.

Now, all of this building has been done locally. The college has not received any State dollars for building all of these facilities. We have a 2020 college master plan. We went out to the voters in 2002 and 2003 and passed two referenda, which allowed us to start building all of these new facilities, because in addition to the new Plano campus and the new downtown Aurora campus, we have four major new buildings on our Sugar Grove campus. So, this Sugar Grove campus, as well, has been totally transformed in the last decade, in terms of new buildings, new parking areas. Everything about this campus...infrastructure, a waste water treatment system; we have one traffic light; we're going to have a second traffic light.

All of that has been done with great financial stewardship, starting with the passage of the two referenda, but then our board being very creative and innovative in terms of grants and bringing other resources to the table. We've done it all on our own because there have been no State dollars. There have been no State dollars in the last several years for any kind of capital projects. Eventually will there be? Who knows? But it's been really tough. So, community colleges, Waubensee, we're fortunate that we have access to our local taxpayers, to local means to do this. If we were waiting for the state, we

wouldn't have one of these buildings that we've been able to do in the last ten years.

Pogue: You mentioned you didn't get any money from the State, but did the State or ICC higher ed have to approve those building projects?

Sobek: The Illinois Community College Board, as part of its regulations and authority, has to approve any new construction or if you purchase land or if you sell land, but no other agency does. For example, the state has the Capitol Development Board that manages state-funded projects. We have not interfaced and have not been required to interface with the Capitol Development Board because all of these projects have been locally funded and locally managed. Our approval is, of course, the voters giving us the initial financial authority to do this.

But then the Illinois Community College Board does have a fairly streamlined, straightforward process for approving building construction, like I said, acquiring land, selling land, I think has to be approved, remodeling of a certain magnitude. If you remodel one classroom, they don't need to get involved, but there is some threshold of remodeling that they would have to been involved with as well. They do require all colleges to submit their updated facilities masterplan. We have various reports that we're required to submit each year so that they have those records on file as part of their state agency responsibilities.

Pogue: I just have two questions left. The first deals with your trustees. You touched upon that in earlier in our interview. What are their main duties, and how are they elected? Are they elected at-large; are they elected from districts?

Sobek: In general, throughout the state, all of our community college trustees are elected at-large. For Waubensee Community college, we have a seven-member board. All of the community colleges have seven-member boards, and their terms are staggered. Every two years we have a trustee election. Two thousand thirteen is an election year, and they're staggered.

This year we have two trustees up. In two years it will be two trustees, and then in two years there'll be three. They serve six-year terms, strictly volunteer, strictly volunteer. There's absolutely no compensation at all associated with this; I mean nothing. This is strictly one of those wonderful volunteer roles that people in our communities play that we could not operate if they didn't do that. They run; it's a non-partisan election. They have to go through though a typical kind of process of getting petitions, getting officially on the ballot. It's a formal election process, and it's a simple majority.

For example, we have two seats up in this election. We have five people who have submitted petitions and are on the ballot. The two people that get the highest vote counts win the election. It's not like a specific seat

you're running for. It's like there are two seats up; five people run. The two with the highest votes are the two that are on the board.

I know that in the Springfield area, with Lincoln Land Community College, and maybe one or two other districts in the state, they do elect their trustees by sub-districts or wards or whatever the right terminology is. But the vast majority of us, our trustees run at-large. I think I already said this, but it's a non-partisan election, so they don't run on a particular platform. Anybody that's a registered voter, within the district boundaries of Waubensee Community College, is eligible to vote in our trustee election, which this year is on April 9.

Some of their duties are specified in the Community College Act, very broad governance duties, typically around financial responsibility, fiduciary responsibilities, hiring a president, of course, following all the rules and regulations with regard to Open Meetings Act compliance and all those things, but very broad-based policies, primarily, again, around financial responsibilities, hiring of staff, approving bids and contracts, purchasing, accounts payable kinds of things, paying the bills, those sorts of broad things, as well as, of course, helping shape the mission and vision of the college.

Pogue: My last question is, where do you see the community college moving over the next decade?

Sobek: This is a great time, an excellent time to be involved in community colleges because we are really being looked to as the segment of higher education that is going to help our country, our states, our communities remain competitive, as we look at the global economy and as we look at the changing workforce.

Having been in this sector for, what did I say, more than thirty years, we have the highest visibility, the highest level of credibility, the highest level of quality that I've ever experienced in the entire time I've been in the area. The recession, the economic realities, have positioned us extremely well because we are affordable—that's the number one criteria for many people now—we are accessible, our facilities; we are able to respond more quickly. I like to think of our sector as having the best of all worlds. We have all the tradition, all the academic rigor of the traditional baccalaureate colleges and universities, yet we operate in a much more entrepreneurial mode. So, we are more flexible, more responsible, more responsive, and can adjust and react more quickly. That's why we're being looked to at all levels, to provide new training programs, new facilities, new occupations.

And, there's a lot of research indicating that a four-year degree isn't necessarily the key to economic viability. What is key is to have some level of higher education, whether it's a certificate, an associate degree or bachelor's degree in an area where there will be jobs. That's the key. We tend to do a better job of aligning our programs to really meet our local and state labor

market needs than some of the other sectors of higher education. You know it's all about jobs, jobs, jobs right now. It's all about the economy. It's all about getting people back to work and ensuring that we have a trained workforce. We are the sector of higher education that's positioned to do that.

Last but not least, we are also the gateway to higher education for first generation college students and for people of color. You've heard the phrase "demographics is our destiny." You look at the high school graduation rates, and you look at the youth of today. If our country's going to survive, we have to have different methods of reaching what our future youth are going to look like. And community colleges are at the forefront of really attracting more diverse students and, as I said, first generation college students, economically-challenged students. We are the gateway; we are absolutely the gateway to higher education. That will continue, I think, to be our future as well.

Pogue: I want to thank you for giving us an in-depth look at Waubonsee and the role of community colleges, and thank you very much for your time.

Sobek: You're welcome. It was a pleasure to talk to you.

(end of transcript)