

Interview with Dr. Gayle Saunders

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Interviewer: Phil Pogue

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Pogue: We're in Decatur, Illinois. It's July 10th, 2013. The project that we are on is the history of the Illinois Community College System. My name is Philip Pogue and we're on the campus of Richland Community College. We're going to be talking to President Gayle Saunders about Richland and learning more about its history. So we want to thank her for participating in our community college project. To start with could you give us your family background and educational background?

Saunders: Yes, my family background and educational background is going to be full of Illinois history all by itself, because I've lived in Illinois all my life. I grew up in a rural community, agricultural community, Harvard, Illinois. It's only about five miles from the border of Wisconsin. So, if I'm speaking and sound like I have a little Wisconsin accent it's because I spent a lot of time learning how to speak there.

There's four generations of the Saunders' family that live in Harvard, Illinois and so you can imagine that there's a heritage there that's been very important to my development and growing. I went to school in the Harvard School District. Graduated from Harvard High School. I did spend college, public college time, in Olin, Illinois. Went to Illinois State University where I studied elementary education and graduated from there and then went into the world of work for a short period of time. Worked at Bradley University as a director of student activities and then moved to Eastern Illinois University where I worked in residential housing and residential life. While I was at

Eastern Illinois University I finished my Master's Degree in Guidance and Counseling. After receiving that degree went on to public school for just a couple of years, Kansas, Illinois School District, where I was the lone counselor for the whole K-12 School District. I really, really enjoyed my time in that small community.

The one area or sector of education I had not spent any time in was the community colleges. I was very curious about the community college system and thought that while I was not making a great deal of money, it would be a good time to check out a community college system and was employed then in 1983 at Elgin Community College. I thought I would spend a couple of years at Elgin and then return to the university setting; however, the passion of the mission of a community college really drew my interest and at that point in time led me to the career that I've had over the last thirty years in community college education. While I was spending time at Elgin Community College was a time for trying to identify what kinds of pathways I would end up in as an educator and was leaning towards becoming a community college president. I knew that I needed to get a doctorate and I needed to get a wide breadth of experiences in order to be a good president, so pursued all those things that I thought I needed to do over the next ten years to prepare for community college presidency. I went to Lincoln Trail College in 1996 as the dean of the college and while I was there also pursued and finished my doctorate from Northern Illinois University in Leadership and Educational Policy Studies. In 2001 then was hired at Richland Community College to become its first female president and I'm still here twelve years later leading Richland Community College.

Pogue: That's quite a background. When you talk about working on a doctorate at Northern and community college, what kind of courses does that involve to learn about being in a community college?

Saunders: Well, you know, the very interesting part about the program that I was engaged in gave me an opportunity to really study community college leadership, to study adult learning theories, and to really look at the kinds of pedagogies that exist for helping adults learn. I found during my time at Northern Illinois University and attending classes and learning a great deal about community college systems in general and then working on a dissertation—by the way, that was on access and opportunity and higher education—which was a focus on community college history and the community college movement in 1965 and how the leadership and federal government as well as the leadership in state government, particularly Illinois state government, moved to change the face and educational components of a community college system to be the comprehensive community college that it is today.

Pogue: Now when you were doing your doctoral work, you were at Lincoln Trails?

Saunders: I started my doctoral work when I was at Elgin Community College, but completed my doctoral work when while I was at Lincoln Trail College. So worked on my dissertation during the five years that I was at Lincoln Trail College and graduated with my degree in December of 2000.

Pogue: And having experience with the community college, did that help you with your course work?

Saunders: Oh, absolutely. That was another great thing about the faculty at Northern Illinois University; they had as much to learn from those of us that were working in the community college system as we had to learn from them and their teaching of theory and other kinds of aspects of learning that we needed to have to have that terminal degree. So, many of my projects, many of the articles that I read, many of the research that I did was surrounding that of the community college movement and what was occurring in community colleges. It gave what I was doing day-to-day at Elgin Community College a focus that the higher education learning components could fulfill. I got the practical side and I had the theoretical side going on at the same time. It was great.

Pogue: How did those experiences that you had at Elgin and Lincoln Trails help you with your position here at Richland?

Saunders: I think every job that I've had leading up to becoming president at Richland Community College gave me particular kinds of strengths or skill sets, talents that I still have today. Even if I went back to Eastern Illinois University and spent time in the residence halls of providing the leadership for a five million dollar building and having 480 women living under my roof and having the time spent with interpersonal relationships that you have with students and learning so much about how students need to learn from each other as well as from what their getting in their environment in the classroom, leads to then the experiences I had both at Elgin Community College and Lincoln Trail College that gave me the day to day perspective of comprehensive community college which is very local.

Community college is a very unique kind of environment for students to learn in. It provides those students who are place bound or those students who are interested in living, residing and raising their families in the community that they've been spending time in an opportunity for higher education which they couldn't have acquired many years ago. And even before 1965 it was very difficult to receive a higher learning credential without moving away from your home and spending time somewhere else. It was also a very expensive endeavor to do which kept many, many people from being able to go to any kind of higher learning institution because they couldn't afford to do so. Community colleges gives an affordability aspect to higher education. Gives us accessibility to higher education, no matter where we live, at a particular level that is of high quality and high caliber. It also

gives us the opportunity to choose a variety of different occupations that we're going to be interested in and carrying out as a career.

Pogue: When you came to Richland in 2001 you had been at Elgin and Elgin is one of the largest community colleges in a suburban environment. How different was it to come to Richland although you had been at Lincoln Trails and had been a counselor at Kansas?

Saunders: You know, that's a really good question to ask me because I talk about this all the time, particularly with my new employees that I work with here at Richland Community College. When they get employed we have an hour and a half session or so teaching our employees about the comprehensive nature of the community college system. The one thing that was very intriguing for me and gave me a great foundation was that I came from, you're right, "the gold coast" I called it, of the community college systems in the State of Illinois where there was an incredible amount of economic development and property tax base that surrounded that community college. There were many times where we didn't have to spend much time thinking about how much something cost in order to be able to do what we wanted to do.

Then I moved to what I would call the strategically most deprived of the community college systems in the State of Illinois and the Illinois Eastern Community College System which came from a very low EAV community area where those that lived there had a very difficult time affording to live and make a good living. It was a very agricultural rural community and there were many days where we took a hundred dollars and tried to decide whether we really should spend it or not. So there was a real difference there. I went from, what I called the wealthy community college system to, the poorest community college system, where I learned most importantly that it's about the human resources that you have that are providing the education in a community college more so than it is the financial resources or the bricks and mortar that you have to serve students in. The dedication of the human resources and those who were delivering the education at Lincoln Trail in Robinson, Illinois was some of the best education and the best faculty I've ever had the chance to work with and that really taught me a great deal about the giving that we have expectations of doing to help students be successful no matter where they are in the state and whatever their financial resources or background is.

Then I got to come to Decatur, Illinois, where Richland Community College is home and we're kind of in the middle. We certainly aren't the richest community college in the state and we are certainly not the poorest. We reside in what I would call in the middle. Not only are we centrally Illinois located, but I think from a financial perspective the college's resources that it has available to it are very comfortable kinds of resources, where we're funded three different ways and our property tax base has a strength in central Illinois that allows us to do our job. We're able to help the students that we're

serving, I think, at great levels because we're a good size community college as well. We serve about 7500 students a year in one capacity or another; when you're serving that number of students and you have the resources that we have available to us at Richland, we're able to serve our communities very, very well.

Pogue: Well, talking about Richland, was the college formed in 1971?

Saunders: It was. It was founded in 1971 through a referendum. We weren't the first community college after 1965 when the movement started but we weren't too far behind. So we just recently celebrated our fortieth anniversary at Richland.

Pogue: And could you give us an idea of the square miles that are in the district and what counties?

Saunders: Yes, we have eight counties. We're not a very large district but we have all of Macon County and parts of Christian, DeWitt, Logan, Moultrie, Piatt, Sangamon and Shelby Counties. As I said before, we are right in the middle of the State of Illinois and we serve that district that surrounds us.

Pogue: How did the name Richland come about, because it wasn't the original name of the college?

Saunders: No, it was the Community College of Decatur but as we recognized in our communities, that we served more than Decatur, Illinois. We really wanted the name to reflect that of the district that we were serving. So I think there was a competition that was going on at the time, with the community all providing input about what the community college should be named and it came up with the rich lands of Richland Community College. That was really how the determination was finalized. I think if you read some of the history of Richland Community College they'll tell you that it was determined at a board meeting and that there was a big divide about who was going to actually pick one name over another name; the student trustee at the time really preferred and liked Richland and so Richland stuck.

Pogue: Could you give us a little history of the building development about the college? Most of the colleges obviously were going to be new so they used temporary buildings, downtown buildings. Eventually there would be a phase one and then possibly phase two, phase three. So how did all that develop for Richland?

Saunders: Richland was actually very slow to determine that it needed a full campus. So we started in an old bank building downtown. So downtown Decatur was our first home. We opened for classes in the fall of 1972 after we were founded and found ourselves quickly running out of room. After a while we were all over the community serving students in classes. As you might imagine, we couldn't really be a comprehensive community college in that particular environment because the occupational programs had no laboratories. We

eventually moved out to an industrial park in the early '80s in preparation for trying to pass a referendum to build a permanent campus in Decatur. The first attempts at passing a referendum to build the campus failed. So it was 1984 before we finally passed a referendum to build Richland Community College's campus, which was also very controversial in terms of where it would be located geographically. There were a number of popular places in the community for Richland Community College to reside, but ultimately it was determined that we would be on the northeast side of our district and just north of Archer-Daniels Midland, which is the home of agri-business in our community – and probably in the world.

Pogue: The campus today has how many buildings?

Saunders: We have one really, really large building because we've added lots of additions to our main campus. We had about a hundred and fifty-one square feet that was built on the original master plan for the campus. Since then we have added additions on to our main campus, which now takes us over 300,000 square feet. So we've added a number of additions over the years with the first addition being in 1993 with the Shilling Community Education Center and then growing from that point on. We're in the middle of a growth spurt right now in terms of adding additional buildings. We will have, by the time we're done in another year, or year and a half, we will have three buildings that are not attached to the main campus building and that's the Center for Sustainability and Innovation, our National Sequestration Education Center which have both been built over the last three to four years. Then our new Workforce Development Institute which will be built directly east of the main campus but still on the Richland property.

Pogue: How did funds come about for those?

Saunders: A variety of sources—as you might imagine—with the main campus when we built the original building that was through bond referendum. Then the Shilling Education Center was built through a variety of state funds as well as private donations that came to the college for building it. When it comes to the Center for Sustainability and Innovation, that was a bonding project in order to house the University of Illinois Extension Center on our campus. And so, the University of Illinois Extension leases part of that building and we will be retiring the bonds over the next eight years for that project. The National Sequestration Education Center is a large partnership with U.S. Department of Energy as well as the Archer-Daniels Midland Corporation, Schlumberger Carbon Services and the University of Illinois Geological Survey. That very large project is a research demonstration project for carbon capture utilization and storage and so it's now the national home for the National Sequestration Education Center. That building was built through the funds that were collected both from the Department of Energy and Archer-Daniels Midland Company to build a National Sequestration Education Center which is also the research demonstration point for carbon capture utilization and storage of

carbon captured storage off of the ethanol plants that are just south of us. It's a wonderful, wonderful opportunity for our students to be engaged in, real field research, applied research, and also receive the first sequestration technology degree program that's being offered in the world. Once the five-year project is completed, then it will become a commercialized product for Archer-Daniels Midland Company and we will be servicing opportunities like this project throughout the world and providing students with the training necessary for taking the careers that will take them all over the world.

Pogue: How did Richland get involved with that project?

Saunders: Well, surprisingly enough, we have perfect Pore Space, as they call it. The geological makeup which is a mile below the surface of Richland Community College is perfect Pore Space for the collection and storage of carbon captured CO₂ off of the ethanol plants. The first well was drilled on ADM property. It was an interest of Archer-Daniels Midlands to go to a second well that would then give them an opportunity to study over the five year period what they called the interaction of the plume that would occur between the two wells as they met, which was going to be directly under Richland's campus. We became the identified sight for carbon capture storage utilization research and with that we became an excellent applied partner for the research, not only to be expressed and to be determined learned and about, but for us also to be the outreach center for teaching the community as well as teaching the rest of the nation about carbon capture utilization and storage.

Pogue: So what uses for teaching is in that center?

Saunders: We're teaching everything from bio-fuels to carbon capture utilization and storage to a number of varieties of sustainable agriculture and a number of interests that are related to sequestration technologies.

Pogue: Now the campus has some buildings that are named for people or parts of that. How did all that come about?

Saunders: There were a variety of different ways. Every time we've added a wing or have tried to add a part of our campus because of some unique program growth that was necessary in central Illinois, we pay really close attention to what's going on in our local markets, what's happening regionally as well as nationally and around the world. We take advantage of the trends of our own natural resources which here we have, obviously, the agricultural base as well as a strong manufacturing community base for a number of different kinds of products. In addition to that we have a very strong transportation system that is "hubbed" right in central Illinois, particularly through our train systems and our airlines. To take advantage of all those different kinds of activities, we've engaged in a number of partnerships and many of those partnerships have been government based, some of them have been private-corporation based and in other cases, they have been the passions of individuals in our

community. We have a very strong college foundation; it was founded in 1980 and with the funding of the college foundation, particularly since 2001, the foundation has grown in its assets from two million dollars to over seventeen million with a major gifts campaign handled through the foundation that started in 2007. It was our first major gifts campaign which gave us the means to raise funds which ultimately put names on the different buildings on our campus.

Pogue: What are some of those names?

Saunders: Well, Andreas would be a strong name which all of us know from Archer-Daniel Midland; the Andreas family gave us the Andreas Agri-business Education Center. We have the Shilling family that is the Shilling Community Education Center. We have the Schrodts Health Education Center which is named after Joe and Martha Schrodts. Dr. Schrodts was a very family-focused physician here in the community and his wife Martha, who is now deceased, was a faculty member at Richland Community College; their gift helped us with the Schrodts Health Education Center. We have the Scherer Industrial Technology Center which was a wonderful gift to Richland Community College. The Scherer family is a very self-made family. They pulled themselves up by the boot straps, taught themselves the education that they needed in order to be successful. They really felt a need to give back to community college education. Their interest was to give students and families the opportunities to higher education which they were not afforded when they were young, and to give people the opportunity who couldn't afford to attend higher education. So their gift was close to a seven million dollar gift to Richland Community College for scholarships for students to attend Richland Community College, and will be in perpetuity – grateful as a college that we're going to be able to give back in scholarships to our students for the very, very long future.

Pogue: Now did this campus have any issues with student parking? When I have talked to some of the other community colleges, that was always a hot-button issue, either because of the construction of the colleges out in kind of corn fields and getting access roads to get there, and then with the growth of the college, not being able to handle all of that. Did Richland deal with that issue too?

Saunders: We were fortunate for one reason and that is because I think it took us so long to get our referendum passed to build our campus out here, that we are still considered a very young community college campus. We just reached, I think, twenty-five years of being out here. So I guess we're maturing at this point. We were designed initially to have lots of access from a lot of different parts of the campus. When you come out to Richland Community College we look more like a mall than we do a structure of lots of buildings and lots of difficulty in walking and getting from class to class. We intentionally built the campus so that no matter where you park you walk in the door and at least

you're inside. You may have to walk from one end of our campus now to the other end, which is about a third of a mile, to reach a class, but you can do that from the inside. Many of our students have learned to park wherever the majority of their classes are and they almost park up near the door. We have not had any complaints. If there's the number one thing that people like about Richland Community College is that they always can find great parking here.

Pogue: How many referendums have been held in the district and have they been successful?

Saunders: Well, we had the original referendum, of course, in 1971 which founded the campus. We had several referendum attempts in the late 70s and the early 80s. Actually, to build the campus that's out here on One College Park now, it passed in 1984 so that the campus we have today was formed then. In 1995 we had a tax shift referendum which passed and then in 2005 we also had a tax shift referendum that passed. I'm not aware of anything else that we've done that would be of a referendum nature.

Pogue: And when you talk about tax shift, what is that?

Saunders: We had done some bonding and in two different time frames where the bonds were retiring. At that point we asked our taxpayers to provide us the opportunity to continue that tax levy in order to maintain from the debt fund into the education fund. In both cases it gave the college about a million to a million and half more per year for operating funds in our education fund.

Pogue: What unique programs has Richland offered? You've been talking about the Sequestration Center. What are some others?

Saunders: Well, we have really gotten interested in sustainability, as I think a number of our community college counterparts have, and so there a number of new programs that are related to wind energy, solar energy, bio-fuels and those kinds of things that we can take advantage of. Again, because we're in central Illinois, they're all natural resources to us. They make sense that we would be taking advantage of those as career opportunities for our students. We've also continued to expand in our engineering technologies programs. We have a number of new certificates as well as new applied associate degrees and engineering degree transfer program arrangements with the University of Illinois that's allowed us to expand there. What's particularly notable, I think, for Richland's opportunities for their students is that right now we have an arrangement with the College of ACES, which is the Agricultural, Consumer and Environmental Sciences College at the University of Illinois. Students that attend Richland Community College and receive their Associates degrees in one of ten different fields of study in the College ACES have a guarantee transfer as a junior to the University of Illinois where they can then pursue their Baccalaureate Degree from the University of Illinois in the majors that they started here at Richland.

Pogue: As a college president, how do new programs get started?

Saunders: First of all, I want to say that we think that to start any new program it costs about a quarter of a million to start a new one. So when you think about that you have to consider what the varieties of interests are for your own particular community, because community colleges focus on regional economies and a regional need. We spend a lot of time talking to area employers about what their needs are for skill sets and for talent to come and work for them. We look at entrepreneurial opportunities that might be emerging because of new technology changes or for new industries that are coming in to the communities. Economic development is always a great interest to a community college like ours where we are living in a community that has lost population rather than gained population and trying to identify the needs that our future work force need to have in order for our employers to be enticed to stay here or for them to want to move here. Because of that, we spend time doing feasibility studies on what are the different career opportunities that are available, how many of them are saturated or not saturated, and then what we can do to raise the funds to start a new program. In some cases we are able to get funding or partnerships through the companies that are really desiring those kinds of career sets and in other cases we are looking to the state government or the federal government to support new program initiatives that we're going to be starting. The Department of Labor has been a really good partner to Richland as has the Department of Education, the Department of Energy.

Pogue: How long does it take once this seed is planted to have a program?

Saunders: In some cases only six months. In other cases it might be years of development, depending on how far in the future we have been looking. That is one of the best parts about community colleges; we don't have a lot of tradition and a lot bureaucracy that we have to fight through to change what we need to change in order to keep our curriculums current and to keep our certifications and to keep our occupational programs at industry standard. As we learn that we need to make changes, we're able to do them fairly quickly. Illinois Community College Board and the Illinois Board of Higher Education are both authoritative bureaucracies for us to work our curriculums through but that's really to maintain quality and consistency of what we're trying to do. We are accredited by the Higher Learning Commission and the Higher Learning Commission also has some responsibility for ensuring quality. We're able to start our programs almost immediately if there's a strong need to do so, with a follow-up that comes through the evaluation process of those programs over the next two to three years to determine consideration of keeping them or changing them, improving them or not keeping them at all.

Pogue: While you take your recommendations to start a program, do the Board of Trustees approve that, then, as a program?

Saunders: They do. All of our programs are approved by our Board of Trustees and then are submitted to the Illinois Community College Board for approval as well.

Pogue: And what do you have to show to the Community College Board for their approval?

Saunders: They have a variety of forms that we fill out which include feasibility information about the number of students we are going to be serving, the number of faculty we might need or need to hire or the costs that are going to be associated with them, how long it takes for the program to sustain itself, and a variety of other interests that might include support from industries or employers in the community or the area who will hire the graduates that come out. Then followed by those kinds of conditions, the follow up is to see how many graduates that we have that come out of the programs and whether they're able to find jobs or not and whether there's a good follow up and good success rate of those when they enter the work force.

Pogue: Is the Illinois Community College Board the final recommendation source or is the Higher Ed Board involved?

Saunders: Depends. If it's a certificate program, an applied program, the final authority is the Illinois Community College Board. If it's a degree program, it's the Illinois Board of Higher Education.

Pogue: And does the Community College board look at how many other community colleges are doing this same project?

Saunders: Yes, we do have a long sustaining system of acknowledgment about which programs different community colleges hold. In most cases because we have local jurisdiction and our districts are all self-contained, many of us have the exact same programs and degree programs because we have similar need for employment following those degrees being completed by our students. In some cases there's a state designation or a regional designation given to a program which then means that not every community college in the State of Illinois will provide the services for those programs, but our students are given the opportunity to attend the programs wherever they reside.

Pogue: The student body: you said right now it's about seventy-five hundred, that includes adult learners, transfer students and certificated people?

Saunders: Yes, that's everybody.

Pogue: How has that changed since you came in 2001?

Saunders: The numbers are fairly similar; we have stayed over the years, we're fairly consistent in the numbers but necessarily by year. When recession hits, which it did in 2003 and in 2010 particularly, some of our highest enrollments occur when our unemployment rates go up. In central Illinois, particularly in the

Decatur area, our unemployment rates surged in 2003 and then again in 2010 and those also ended up being the following two years, the highest graduation rates that the community college has ever had. There are some benefits, again that make community colleges in their communities the gems, when particularly there are hard times and recession times occurring in those communities because we really spend a lot of time retooling those who may have been in the workforce before but needed to come back and get a new career. We try to do that as quickly as we possibly can to help get them back into the workforce again.

The greatest changes that I see demographically about how our students are attending Richland Community College are really the things that are of interest to us. In 2005 we increased the number of correctional programs and correctional students that we had. We had four correctional centers that we were serving and the numbers of students that were engaged in those programs grew significantly. With the financial situation in the State of Illinois today, the number of correctional programs have diminished, so we serve less students today in correctional education than we did in 2005 to 2010 and that affects our enrollment in some cases.

Pogue: What is the ratio of transfer classes to certificated classes, and has that kind of changed since you've been here?

Saunders: It has stayed fairly consistent since I've been here. But as I had said very early in the interview, when the college first opened downtown in the old bank building their opportunity to be anything but really a two year transfer program was difficult because we didn't have laboratories and we didn't have applied opportunities for most of our students. Once 1988 and the new campus came about and we started to build the number of additions that we've been building, occupational program opportunities have surged, so the number of certificates that we have today has at least tripled what they were probably in 1999 or 2000. At the same time the occupational program offerings have expanded to around thirty-five different occupational program areas and about a hundred different kinds of certificates that we offer. We still have about sixty percent of our students that enter Richland Community College intending to transfer and so they're here for associate degrees and will be transferring to a number of either our private universities or public universities, mostly here in the State of Illinois.

Pogue: Well you've talked a lot about the importance of the community college to the state. Has it changed from the original act of 1965 when you were learning about that in your college courses?

Saunders: The comprehensive nature of the community college to me is still intact, that we have always been about being accessible. It's been important to us and to the State of Illinois that we remain affordable, and that we provide opportunity for those who live and reside in our communities that we're

servicing. The new thing, or the additional thing that I talk about now, has been that we have really focused on college readiness in most cases. We talk about the enrollments into our colleges but we haven't spoken that much about those students who complete and carry on and the successful careers that they enter into. One of the greatest agendas I believe community college system has morphed into is not taking away any of the three that have been the focus of our comprehensive nature, but that we've added a fourth, and that is that we have taken on a significant interest in helping students be successful and completing, persisting in programs that they come to the community college to participate in. That is somewhat of a shift of how we have thought of ourselves in the past. We are now starting to count how many people are leaving our institutions with credentials as we are those that are coming in to pursue the credential and I think that's an important shift that the community colleges are undertaking right now and it's a great challenge to us. Because our students come to us mostly part time, mostly with family obligations that they have, and maybe work obligations as well, and so they are balancing a lot of different kinds of things in their personal lives at the same time that they're pursuing education and trying to make their lives better. We know that for many of our students it takes a great deal of additional persistence and effort to get through our curriculums and to pursue the dreams that they have when they came to the college.

We're spending a lot of time now revamping and redesigning our career clusters and our curriculum in order to help students navigate the complexity of opportunities and options that are available to them today and giving them career pathways to follow so that they can get through our programs in a short period of time and with the credential that they were originally seeking and that we don't lose them along the way. I think that's a big change for the community college. The other is the change in our delivery systems that are moving more towards on-line learning and using the internet for a great deal of our delivery of education that wasn't available and wasn't even really being thought of at any great extent in 2001 when I came.

Pogue: As a college president, what kind of questions do you have with on-line learning and use of the internet, which is different from how traditionally it'd been done?

Saunders: I don't have a great deal of concern about it. I did early on because many of our faculty members that were at Richland Community College weren't given the learning or the teaching methodology that was necessary to make good on-line learning happen. And so, many of our faculty members have had professional development opportunities along the way and have really taken a serious moment to engage with one another on how to make quality on-line education happen and occur at Richland Community College. I'm really pleased with the development and I'm really happy with the learning system base that we use now. We have gone through iterations of the learning management systems that we're using in order to teach on-line learning and

that's always a constant review and renewal that's going on at the college to keep up with the technology that's continuing to shift, but it provides better on-line learning and better on-line education. So, we all have been willing to take on the learning curve that's necessary to do that which, if you go all the way back to 1988 when our campus was built, this is kind of an interesting point too, they were only two computers on the campus in 1988 when we came to Richland. We have over a thousand computers on campus today. So a great deal of changes had to occur over the years to make the technology options available in all of our classrooms and to change classrooms to build additional laboratories that support the desktop computers. Now, the challenge over the next ten years will probably be how we eliminate that kind of technology which is a desktop technology to more of the pad technology that's emerging that students will be using instead.

Pogue: Going to some of the challenges, what federal laws have had the greatest impact on Richland?

Saunders: Probably the financial aid would be the one that stands out the most. Our students have gone from needing about two million dollars in financial aid to over eight million dollars in financial aid this last year. So the number of students who have required and needed financial aid has soared over the last twelve years that I've been at Richland. In thinking about that and the changes that they are doing with loan portfolios and with financial aid in general, there is a great deal of concern about the huge loan debt that's occurring among our students, as well as the inability to have access to financial aid, whether you're talking about the State of Illinois or the federal government. Our students really need, even though we're very affordable—which so many people will say in the community college, they probably don't need financial aid—our students, many of them, live from pay check to pay check and really have difficulty affording even the affordable cost of education that Richland is able to provide. Financial aid is an important component of that. In the summer federal financial aid has gone away and so has the enrollment in the summertime for Richland Community College. So that affects our bottom line. In general, policy over the years that support community colleges has been improving, so community colleges in the '80s and '90s were really almost afterthoughts if you looked at federal policy or you looked at state policy in terms of education. We have really shifted that since 2001; in most cases you will see community colleges being purported as an important educational vehicle in the country and so we're all reveling in that part of it. The difficulty in being recognized as being an important education vehicle is that the funding hasn't followed with it. So, while we have expectations of doing a great deal more, we do have a great deal less.

Pogue: Going to state laws, what have had the greatest impact on Richland?

Saunders: Again, the State of Illinois is one of the funding sources for community colleges. We were founded with a funding formula that included one third of

the funding for the community college system in Illinois to be state funding, one third of that being tuition and one third of the funding being our property tax bases in our different communities that we were serving. What has actually occurred over a period of time is that the state funding model for the one-third has diminished significantly over time. We're being funded at the 1992 levels and yet we're operating in 2013. So that's really difficult, just for my leadership at Richland Community College. When I came in 2001, about twenty-nine percent of our funding came from the State of Illinois, which was really close to the one-third formula idea. This last year we were just under fifteen percent funded by the State of Illinois which means you have to make up your portfolio of financial resources in a different way today. So that has really provided community colleges in Illinois a lot of challenge in terms of how to keep our doors open and to serve with the quality that we've become known for.

Pogue: Well currently the General Assembly has enacted a few laws or have submitted a few bills to the governor. One is marijuana and the issue with health care. The other is the concealed carry override and you've got the issue of pension reform. How do you see those impacting Richland?

Saunders: We should add one more and that's the Affordable Care Act which is also a federal mandate, but that will go into action in 2014 as well. So we have a number of different things that we manage as we go along and all of those will impact us in one way or another. The Affordable Care Act has a lot of obligations for community colleges, particularly, as it relates to our part time employees and adjunct faculty. Having lack of definitions has been a very difficult task for us to manage how we determine who on our college campuses we will be providing health care benefits to and who we won't be providing health care benefits to; depending on the definitions for that we could really lose the model that community colleges were founded on and that was a strong adjunct faculty model that allows us to operate as efficiently and yet effectively as we do. If we have to treat adjunct faculty as full time employees on our campuses, most colleges won't be able to afford that kind of employee in the future.

Pogue: If all of these go into effect, and some are going into effect but we don't know all the details with them, how is an individual president of a community college, how will leadership... Do you get information as to how all the thirty-nine community colleges are going to be doing this or you get direction from some other sources or is each community college on their own?

Saunders: Well I might be a little bit biased but I think that Illinois Community College System is the best system in the country. It's the only one I've worked in, but I have many, many colleagues who have worked in a lot of different community college systems across the country. I think Illinois had founded a very, very good system to operate from. The community colleges in the State of Illinois have what we call a President's Council. The Community College

President's Council is made up of the CEO of each community college and we meet regularly. We meet on a monthly basis to have just those kinds of discussions about these various topics. In some cases we provide advocacy, in some cases we provide legislative alternatives. We try to speak with one voice and we also have a strong Community College Trustees Association System in the State of Illinois; all are elected officials who support and govern the community college system. Together, we try to align our interests so that we can best lead our community colleges and ultimately provide the students success opportunities that we've been able to do in the past. I think we are our communities' best asset in terms of building strong work force and giving a life to our communities. We support a thriving of our communities, the prosperity in our communities and we provide economic development opportunities for our communities. We don't want to suffer because if the community college system suffers, then the delivery of education to those in our communities who most need it will suffer and ultimately all of our communities will be diminished. I don't believe the State of Illinois wishes that for its communities. I think it wishes for it to be a prosperous and thriving state and we can only be prosperous and thriving if we have educated people living in our communities doing really, really good work. Community colleges have become the backbone for getting that accomplished. We stay at the table as a community college group with legislators and others to try to ensure that the philosophy and the knowledge about what community colleges are all about and what we have to deliver and need to deliver, our communities stays in the forefront and that ultimately the system will stay intact, as strong as it's always been.

Pogue: How have your relations with the high schools and the four year colleges changed since you came here in 2001?

Saunders: We have all learned that partnerships are incredibly important because we do what we do better if we are in concert with one another. We have been looking at seamless education. I call it the "seamless education highway" at Richland Community College which is that we reach down to our high schools and work in partnership with them to help their students be college ready. Then we transition them to community college programs that they can flourish in and be successful at and then turn them over to our partners at the university level to help those who want to complete their education at a Baccalaureate or higher level do that seamlessly and without confusion or difficulty. We work hard at articulation agreements, both at the college and university levels in the State of Illinois, and even outside the State of Illinois, and at the same time work with our counterparts, particularly our faculty counterparts, to align the curriculum that the high schools are teaching with the expectations the college have for those students when they enter into the college level courses. We've also expanded significantly our dual credit programs with our area high schools which allows our juniors and seniors in high school who are college-ready, the opportunity to take a college level course and receive both the high school and the college credit at the same time

for it, so that we even have some of our students who have most of the general education core requirements out of the way by the time they graduate from high school and then can seamlessly move into a university or onto the community college curriculum and graduate in a shorter period of time.

Pogue: Well, we just have a few more questions. How difficult is it to eliminate a program?

Saunders: It's not too difficult for a community college to eliminate a program; on the other hand we do spend a great deal of time remediating a program before we give it up. And there are expectations and guarantees that we have to our students who are being served in a particular program to ensure that they receive everything they need to graduate from the program that they've chosen, even if we plan to, or do, eliminate the program. Depending on the program, they could be ended quickly, particularly if there's no interest, which often times might be the decision that we make. We have finite resources and the philosophy that I carry at Richland is that we always move our resources every year to where the students are enrolled. So, if students aren't enrolled in a particular program area, we do some research to determine why that is. It might be that the program needs reinvention. It might be that the program is obsolete. It might just be that it's not of interest to our population at a particular time and moment. We can suspend a program or we can eliminate a program for a variety of those kinds of reasons. In other cases we will spend time with our advisory committees.

All of our occupational programs at Richland Community College have an advisory committee made up of those who work in the field and they spend time talking to us about what's happening in the industries that they serve, what's happening across the country and what the trends are and look at our curriculum to see if we have outdated equipment, outdated programs that we're teaching and then help us to refurbish them or to bring them to the standards that they have expectations in the industry quality is there. And if it's there, chances are we're going to have the enrollment, we'll keep the program.

Pogue: As far as your duties go from 2001, what has changed? Are you doing something more that you weren't doing in 2001?

Saunders: We do a lot more with our legislators than we used to. I believe that both at the federal level and at the state level, our impact and our information that we can provide our legislators, I think is significant, because a lot of the policy that's made at both the state level and federal level have a great deal to do with what happens to our community college students. We do a lot more economic development conversations than we used to. We used to be considered the thought leaders and the academics in our communities and in many cases now there is as much given to us in looking at economic development, workforce development and how we link employers to skill sets

in the people that live in our communities. So we do a lot more connecting and a lot more partner-shiping with our community than we ever have before. I think we always have done some of that, but now it's imperative that we are always doing it and I'm glad that we do it. The other, I think big challenge for community colleges and for college presidents is that there's a much greater need to look for financial resources in different pockets than we used to. We could in 2001 refer to the state funding and the local funding and the tuition to keep our programs vibrant and keep them moving now to enrich or to enhance anything that really takes fundraising to do it. So our fundraising and fundraising opportunities have grown significantly for a community college presidents and we spend a great deal more time in our communities, probably than we used to.

Pogue: Our final question is, where is Richland going over the next decade?

Saunders: We're going to continue to look at what's happening in our local community, in our region and how we're going to impact the international community at large through some of new programs that we've just launched. We think international programming will continue to grow and we need to be engaged outside of our district as well as inside of our district. I think it imperative for us financially, if nothing else, to do so. We're going to be spending a great deal of time looking at what I'm calling "chain management systems" and "chain management programming" for our Decatur area and for the region. We have an inter-modal system that's going to be put on line. It's an inland port system through our transportation systems, train systems, and Decatur is going to, I think, be recognized all around the world as becoming a huge hub for transportation, distribution. We need to prepare our students for the new careers that are going to become available to them as we start moving and shifting in that direction.

Community colleges always have to be reinventing themselves because we have to stay one step ahead of whatever it is our community is going to need from us next or need from the workforce next. I think whatever it is that we'll be doing in the next decade, I don't even know that we know it yet. But it continues to emerge all the time and we still live in the center of the global agri-business community and global agri-business is always going to be an important component to us here in central Illinois and probably the State of Illinois, as well.

Pogue: Well, President Saunders, I want to thank you for sharing some insight about the history of Richland Community College as well as the duties of the presidency of the college and your work with all of the partners that are found inside the district.

Saunders: Thank you, I've enjoyed doing the interview.