

President Chris Reber Remarks
HCCC College Service Day
Wednesday, August 29, 2018

Good Morning!

It is a great pleasure and honor to join you this morning as your new President! The theme for today's College Service Day, "Renewal, Innovations, Beginnings," is especially fitting.

Today we begin a new chapter in the proud story of this inspirational college.

Today we begin a new year of challenge, opportunity, discovery and collaboration in our life-changing educational mission.

Today we begin to imagine a shared vision for future excellence in support of our students and community.

Many people have contributed to planning this day together and I'd like to recognize and thank several of them. We thank Senior Vice President for Academic Affairs Eric Friedman; Dean of Instruction John Marlin; Director of Curriculum Heather Devries; Lecturer in Academic Foundations English Michael Whelpley; Director of Faculty and Staff Development Lilisa Williams; and All-College Council Chair Denise Rossilli. And a particular shout-out to Lilisa who has led all of this planning!

Although I've been here since July 1st, I haven't had the pleasure of meeting many of you due to the summer vacation. I look forward to meeting and working with all of you to serve our students and our community and to realize our collective vision and aspirations for Hudson County Community College.

Since I arrived, here I have been conducting what I call a "listening tour," meeting with faculty, staff, students and members of our community to hear everyone's perspectives, concerns, ideas and hopes for our academic community. I have thoroughly enjoyed and have been repeatedly inspired in some 90 or more meetings with many of you and others.

What has inspired me most is the shared commitment that everyone at Hudson County Community College has to our students. We have the privilege of working in an institution that changes and transforms lives and it's clear that our common shared value—what everyone here champions—is our students and their welfare.

Some of my remarks this morning will sound familiar to many of you since I've been engaged in so many discussions and meetings, so let me apologize for that at the outset.

As I was preparing these remarks, I had a flashback. I began thinking about my early days as a new freshman student at Dickinson College in Carlisle, PA—my Alma Mater. It was 1976 and I had my entire career and future life clearly mapped out. I would major in political science, go on to law school, and engage in a career in politics and public service. I had been active in politics as a teenager and was ready to take it to the next level and make it my life's work.

At that time, we had arena registration. Some of you will remember this—you stood in long lines in a gymnasium to try to build a class schedule with the courses you wanted to take. There was a different line for each academic area. I was successful in scheduling the political science course and two other courses that I needed for that major, but I also needed a language. I had taken six years of German in junior high and high school, but I decided that I should take a Latin class, which would be helpful later in law school. Besides, that class meeting time fit neatly into my schedule.

I had never taken a Latin course and wasn't sure what to expect. I remember vividly that first day in my first Latin class. There were about 20 of us sitting in the classroom, waiting for our instructor to arrive. In walked Dr. Philip Lockhart, Clarke Professor of Classical Languages. I remember that he resembled the "absent-minded professor" just a bit. He had horn-rimmed glasses, his pants were a bit high off his shoes, and he rode a bicycle to school from his nearby home.

And then Dr. Lockhart proceeded to do something that forever changed my life. Although he had never met any of us, and having no notes in front of him, he proceeded to introduce each of us to the rest of the class. He knew our names and he knew other things about us, such as where we were from and some of the things we did in high school. He had taken the time to study our admissions files, which included a picture of each of us.

Dr. Lockhart had a national reputation for his scholarship in the classical languages. He was a prolific writer and scholar. That he would take the time to make our first meeting so personal and meaningful made an indelible impression on me. And Dr. Lockhart turned out to be the finest teacher and one of the finest human beings I have had the honor of knowing in my life and career, and fortunately for me there have been many exceptional teachers and people.

He made classes come to life by engaging with us as students, by knowing us, by making connections between classical literature and our lives and what was important to us. And if we missed several classes Dr. Lockhart would call to make sure everything was okay, and he would take time with us at difficult moments and turning points in our lives—time to listen, offer encouragement and to let us know he cared.

Many years later, I returned to Dickinson for an alumni weekend, and I attended a dinner with alumni held in his honor. Several hundred alumni from all over the world attended that dinner, and there were tributes from so many of his former students, all having a common theme: that Dr. Lockhart cared about, and thereby inspired, each person he knew. My tribute that evening included giving Dr. Lockhart a copy of my recently completed doctoral dissertation, which I had dedicated to him for inspiring me to strive to be everything that I could be, and to give back and help others.

It is no coincidence that I majored in Latin, went on to graduate school and chose a career in postsecondary education, where I could hopefully make a difference in the lives of students following Dr. Lockhart's extraordinary example. Dr. Lockhart inspired me because he was a great teacher who also CARED ABOUT ME.

While HCCC is a very different institution than Dickinson, and while we don't offer a Latin major or class—at least the last time that I checked the catalog—this is an institution that cares about its students, inspires students and changes lives in much the way that the late Dr. Phil Lockhart changed his students' lives. The combination of a commitment to our students' welfare, including challenging students and

holding them accountable—with a caring attitude that pervades our students’ experiences both inside and outside of the classroom—this special combination is the secret sauce that creates an environment of student engagement, promotes student grit, and facilitates student success. This has become very clear to me in my listening tour. We have many “Dr. Lockharts” here. Many are in this room. I have already met many of them.

Andy Rooney once said, “Most of us end up with no more than five or six people who remember us. Teachers have thousands of people who remember them for the rest of their lives.” I believe it is a privilege and honor for all of us to be part of a profession and an institution that has such a profound impact on so many people.

I believe that at this moment in our nation’s development, and in postsecondary education, community colleges are uniquely positioned to address many of the nation’s highest priorities, challenges and aspirations. The mission and principles of community colleges—to meet students where they are, offer access that can change lives, and focus on the specific workforce, economic development and quality of life needs of the community—make this the most exciting and fulfilling part of our nation’s higher education system, which is clearly the best in the world.

God willing and College willing, I hope to work side by side with all of you and our students, other colleagues and members of our larger community for many years. And I am so honored to have this opportunity! Thank you for your trust!

As I have met with and heard the ideas and concerns of so many members of our College and community, and as I have studied and become familiar with HCCC’s culture and heritage, there are several overarching priorities for the coming year that have surfaced for me. I have been inviting feedback on these, and so far they seem to resonate with everyone. I invite additional feedback.

First, I am very mindful of what I would describe as a general climate of low morale across the campus. I have heard many perspectives about the reasons for this, and, most important, I want to provide leadership that will help create an atmosphere of trust, transparency, inclusiveness, integrity, and a commitment to the academic enterprise as the overarching priority of the College.

I’d like to emphasize that last point. We are an academic community, and teaching and learning are at the forefront of what we do and what we value.

Allow me to comment briefly on my philosophy of leadership, and, again, my apologies to many of you who have heard me speak about this in other meetings.

I aspire to be what some refer to as a servant leader. I want to support your efforts and your successes in every way that I can. I believe in transparency and inclusion. I believe in a campus culture that values everyone’s ideas and celebrates the contributions of each member of our community. I believe that every person matters and everyone’s perspectives should be valued. I believe that student-centeredness must be the foundation of all that we do: our students’ success is our success, and we are partners with our students on their educational journeys.

I further believe that trust is essential throughout the campus and I will work very hard to earn and maintain your trust.

We have scheduled monthly Town Hall Meetings for all employees and students, and we held our first two Town Halls last month and earlier this month. These meetings are open to everyone—faculty, staff, students and others. They will provide an opportunity for campus constituents to share information, initiatives, challenges, and engage in open discussion. This will be a time when we can celebrate successes as a community and discuss ideas and concerns openly.

I have met with the officers of our All-College Council and our four Collective Bargaining Associations and we have agreed to meet monthly throughout the academic year to share ideas and enhance communication. We have already held our first meetings with the officers of all four Collective Bargaining Associations, and I very much enjoyed attending a retreat of the All-College Council earlier this week. I look forward to working with these colleagues as we strive to serve students and our community to the best of our collective abilities.

I welcome your suggestions and your participation as we focus on these principles of caring and shared governance, which, I am confident, will lead to heightened morale and an environment of trust, mutual respect, productivity and happiness.

I believe that successful colleges are happy colleges. As we become happier, we become more successful, and as we become more successful, we feel happier and more fulfilled as an institution, as a community, and as individuals.

Second, we must strive for continuous improvement around student success and degree completion. Throughout my career, when I have had opportunities to meet and greet new students at Orientation and in other settings, including several already at HCCC, I have emphasized that greeting new students is one of our College's two favorite times of the year. And then I have asked the students what they think is our other favorite time of the year. It is, of course, Commencement, when we celebrate the success of our students.

I can't think of a better reminder of our collective shared values and goals than Commencement, the culmination and celebration of our students' successful journeys, and our successful journeys in teaching and supporting them. And what an inspirational event the HCCC Commencement is! I have watched videos of your spectacular ceremony, including Joe Gallo's phenomenal introduction of actor Christopher Jackson last May!

In our student success efforts, I hope we can commit to making student retention and degree completion a College-wide priority, including the assessment of our current completion and transfer rates and trends, the establishment of goals informed by data, and the use of best practices to inspire and guide our collective efforts for continuous improvement in this singular most important area of institutional focus.

Third, and very much related to student success is the priority of continuous improvement in our Strategic Enrollment Management processes. I hope we can work together, in all parts of the College, to review best practices in the recruitment and retention of our students, and to review data that help us better understand the student behaviors, environments and supportive services that are strongly correlated with success in the recruitment and retention of our students. And I hope we

can set enrollment goals by major that are informed by data. We must invite and facilitate everyone's involvement and contributions in the achievement of these goals, and share and celebrate our progress openly and systematically.

Fourth is the priority of growing our financial strength over time. One of our greatest points of pride, the significant growth of our student population over the last decade, also presents a significant institutional challenge. HCCC has been the fastest growing, by far, of New Jersey's 19 community college over the last 25 years. We have been exceedingly successful in serving more and more students in Hudson County and beyond, and we serve one of the most diverse populations of students in the United States.

But as our student population has grown, our local and state appropriations per FTE student have declined. Simply stated, local and state funding support have not been able to keep pace with our enrollment growth. And the state funding formula actually penalizes institutions whose enrollments are growing, while effectively rewarding, or further subsidizing, those institutions with declining enrollments. One of our greatest successes—the growth of our student body—has resulted in our receiving what is today the lowest state appropriation per FTE of all of New Jersey's community colleges.

Currently, we have only three sources of funding: state appropriation, local appropriation, and tuition/fees. Only 1% of our revenue comes from sources other than these. The first two sources have been declining steadily over the last ten years relative to our growth, as I have stated. And to HCCC's credit, we have not penalized students by increasing tuition and fees to an unacceptable level in order to make up the difference. Our tuition and fees are lower than at least half of our sister community colleges in New Jersey.

In order to ensure HCCC's ability to advance to the next level of institutional effectiveness, we clearly cannot rely upon government to increase our funding, and we must remain disciplined in keeping tuition as affordable as possible. But there are two things we can do to help grow our financial strength and manage our destiny. We have already discussed the first, which is strategic enrollment management. If we can continue to grow our enrollment, we can increase our tuition revenue while delivering upon our fundamental mission of serving the people of our community.

But in tandem with strategic enrollment management, we must over time create new revenue streams, including revenue from gifts, grants and corporate and other partner investment. This is, effectively, growing the fourth leg on our financial stool, and it will be a priority for us going forward. I look forward to doing everything I can to support these goals, and to working closely with our Foundation and with all of you who write and support grants and partnerships.

And I have saved our number 1 priority for last. That is, of course, the successful reaccreditation of Hudson County Community College by the Middle States Commission on Higher Education, our regional accreditor. Middle States accreditation is required in order for HCCC to be authorized to award federal financial aid, which is essential to our ability to support our students and operate our College. We must therefore continue to work hard, with all hands on deck, so to speak, in order to complete our Middle States Self-Study that contains a compelling narrative with evidence that we are fulfilling our mission and meeting or exceeding the seven standards of performance required of accredited institutions. We must also demonstrate how we are addressing the continuous improvement of our programs and services.

We must further prepare for the November 9th visit to HCCC of Dr. DeRionne Pollard, President of Montgomery College (MD), who will chair the HCCC Middle States Visiting Team; and the Team Visit that will occur on both of our campuses from Sunday, March 31st through Wednesday, April 3rd.

Since this is the year of our Decennial reaccreditation, achieving full Middle States reaccreditation must be priority #1 for all of us. I want to thank so many of you who have worked very hard, and who continue to lead and support the successful attainment of our collective goal of reaccreditation that is of central importance to our future.

In conclusion, we have many strengths to build upon thanks to the good work of so many on campus led by President Gabert, and to the leadership and support of our Trustees and community partners and friends, now and over the past quarter-century and beyond. In the short and intermediate terms, we also have many challenges, primarily attributable to financial and enrollment pressures and trends. We will be open in discussing those challenges, and, working together, we will address them while maintaining our commitment to the needs of our students, our community and other constituents. Essential in these efforts will be the use of meaningful data and research to inform the choices that we make, and a culture of ongoing assessment to ensure quality and continuous improvement in everything we do.

I believe that together we can move to the next level of excellence and engagement with students and the region. Indeed, together I believe we can do more for students and for our community than any of us might believe possible at this moment. I pledge to do everything I can as your President to support our collective efforts to grow and excel as an institution that is committed to serving our students, community, our region and beyond.

Clearly we have much for which to be thankful, much to celebrate, and much more to do! I encourage all members of our HCCC community to share with me your thoughts, your ideas, your concerns, and to let me know how I can be helpful. Feel free to stop in and see me at the office, drop me a note, give me a call, or schedule time to talk. I'm honored to have the opportunity to work side by side with all of you, to celebrate our successes and work through our challenges together, and to be HCCC's advocate in everything I do!

Ladies and gentlemen, thank you for all you do for our students, our academic community and our region. Now, let's begin our work together around *Renewal, Innovations, and a New Beginning*. And I look forward to a year filled with experiences that are rewarding, inspiring, and, most of all, CARING.

Happy New Year!