

The Evangelist

Profile: California Community College Chancellor Mark Drummond California Journal, September 2004

California Community College Chancellor Dr. Marshall E. (Mark) Drummond might be the only public official in California who doesn't mind being compared to a mule. That is because Drummond, who grew up on a Bay Area farm and raises horses and mules when he isn't steering the state's community colleges, has great appreciation for the equine cousin's legendary tenacity and work ethic. If recent events are a harbinger of things to come, he will need plenty of both as he tries to lead the largest education system in the world through some of its most difficult financial times.

Although generally considered to be one of the top systems in the nation, the California Community College District is also one of the nations' most poorly funded, ranking only 45th nationally in per student funding. A report from the Public Policy Institute of California released earlier this year also noted that despite having more students than the UC and CSU systems combined, 2.8 million in 2004, the California Community College District has seen only a fraction of the funding increases those institutions have been granted since 1971. The system was also recently asked to enroll thousands of additional high school students the CSU and UC systems couldn't handle, an assignment for which they were neither consulted or offered additional funding to accommodate. Drummond says the perpetual second-class status of the state's two-year colleges is both draining and surprising.

"It is remarkable that the state has been so short sighted in not taking a better look what they're paying for, what they're getting and what they need," says Drummond, 62, who took over as head of the 109-college system in January. "California should not be funding its community colleges at the very bottom of the barrel in the nation. It doesn't make any sense for building the workforce and the citizenry of the future."

Drummond clearly knows his way around the state's education system, earning his a bachelor and master's degrees at San Jose State and his doctorate in education from the University of San Francisco. He began teaching at Chabot Community College in Hayward in 1967. He left for the private sector in 1981, running several technology firms in California before eventually returning to serve nearly a decade as the president of Eastern Washington University. He took over the 130,000-student Los Angeles Community College District in 1999, where he is credited with turning around a declining enrollment and being the driving force behind a pair of bond measures that combined to raise more than \$2 billion for improvements to the system's nine campuses.

Through it all he has earned a reputation as an intelligent and driven leader who likes to spend time in the trenches with teachers and staff that he says often "just need to be able to tell me if something is right or wrong." He also has become well known for his often-blunt vernacular, something that has earned him both friends and detractors.

“I consider myself an evangelist for the community colleges,” he explains. “But I don’t go out and cause confusion and dissension for the sake of doing it. I try to rock the boat because I want to be sure that the causes I believe in dearly get a fair hearing.”

State Senator Jack Scott of Pasadena counts himself among Drummond’s fans. Scott, a former president of Pasadena City College, says it is Drummond’s direct nature that makes him an effective leader.

“I like Mark because he is a straight shooter, and that’s the kind of leader the community colleges need,” Scott Says.

“I am actually very excited about Mark being our chancellor partly because he is a very bold and candid leader,” says Brice Harris, Chancellor of the Los Rios Community College District in Sacramento. “He’s not afraid to take on tough issues, he’s not afraid to be candid with members of the Legislature and the administration, or even to our own trustees and CEO’s about what the system needs.”

Kay Clark, president of the Academic Senate for California Community Colleges, also praises Drummond’s candor, although she says it isn’t for everyone.

“He is very up front about what needs to be done and changes that need to be made, and change terrifies some people,” she says. But Clark also notes that although the system’s struggles have driven morale to an all time low in recent years, Drummond has “galvanized teachers and faculty and completely energized the system.”

“There was a great deal of fear when we were recruiting him that he wouldn’t take the job,” Clark says. “Given the challenges here and the success he was having in Los Angeles, a lot of us wondered why he would want the job. But thankfully his opinion was, ‘why wouldn’t I want it?’”

Drummond says he knows the success he has enjoyed in the past will come harder at the state level. He says two things have worked their way to the top of his priority list since January: expanding the relationship between community colleges and corporations who help pay for some of the job training the system provides and educating the numerous community college students who are not prepared to handle college coursework.

“Growing relationships with industry - job training – is a key for future success of system, but we also have an unbelievable problem with remedial education,” he says. “About half the people that come to us are simply not ready to take college classes. In some of the colleges in our system it is as high as 90 percent.”

But getting the money to address those issues remains difficult. Even with a 7 percent boost in funding for next year, community colleges still get nowhere near the money promised by Proposition 98.

“Since prop 98, there has been an inherent disparity in how community colleges are funded,” he says. “The K-12 schools have gotten the first swipe of the plate, which means we have had the leftovers. Instead of getting the 11% we got the year prior to Prop 98, we have been around 10%. (It is 10.35 percent under the new budget) That might seem small to the causal observer, but when you are talking about a base of \$50 billion, it adds up so us getting short-funded in the neighborhood of \$400-500 million every single year.”

Drummond says that even if the system got everything it is supposed to get under Proposition 98, California would still only be 35th in per student funding. Budget woes forced community colleges to turn away more than 175,000 students last year, and Drummond says the consistent lack of resources has hurt the system’s ability to keep up with the community college mission of training the state’s workforce and reaching out to the state’s diverse population.

“Chronic under-funding has made it much more difficult to keep up with modern technology and resulted in us not keeping as close to the cutting edge as we should,” he says. “Frankly, we have not expanded access as far as we should. We enroll about 2 million students a year, but we probably should be enrolling 2 ½ or 3 million.”

Funding might soon be the least of his concerns. The recently released California Performance Review (CPR) commissioned by the governor suggests placing several education agencies, including the chancellor’s office, under the administration of the Office of the Secretary of Education. The idea makes Drummond – and many of his supporters – bristle.

“If you look at the CPR, some retro people wrote that thing and want to throw us backward into the K-12,” he says. “That’s crazy. We should be looking more like the CSU and UC systems, not less.”

Brice Harris echoes Drummond’s stance.

“If we’re not careful, we’re going to end up with a 1958-style community college system, which is what the Legislature and administrations of the past have sought to break us out of,” Harris says.

Clark says the CPR just illustrates another of the great challenges Drummond faces - getting lawmakers and the governor to understand just what the role of the chancellor should be.

“The community college system is far too sophisticated to be placed under an appointed official,” she says.

Whether the consolidation happens could come down to how well Drummond makes his argument with Gov. Schwarzenegger. Drummond says he has a good relationship with most lawmakers, but says, “Frankly, we’ve done less well with the governor.” That

doesn't bode well with the people who remember the results of former Governor Gray Davis' dislike for Drummond's predecessor, Thomas J. Nussbaum.

"My predecessor fell into disfavor with Davis and this agency took unprecedented cuts, almost 50 percent. No other state agencies were reduced more than 25 percent," Drummond says. He quickly adds, however, that Schwarzenegger is a much different person than Davis.

"Gray Davis was not a friend to the community colleges. He was an elitist who clearly favored the UC system," Drummond says. "I think Gov. Schwarzenegger values us, but the problem is that he inherited a hellacious mess, and we're simply not his biggest problem within that mess."

Ironically, the whole CPR situation comes along just as Drummond is in the midst of his own internal performance review, something he, his staff and a host of others have been working on for months. He says that regardless of what might happen with the CPR, his plan is to push forward with his own plans to streamline the office.

"I hope it's (the CPR) not a big fight," Drummond says. "I hope we emphasize the positive, and I hope everybody understands we need higher education. If it goes the other way and it gets ugly and nasty, with the Legislature against the Governor with me in the middle screaming and yelling, that's just the way it has to be. But when it's all over, we have to put the system back together and support the system. That's the important thing."

- By Rich Ehisen