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Living in Difficult Times

**Scott Peck begins his well-known book, *The Road Less Traveled*,
with these arresting words:**

**Life is difficult. This is a great truth, one of the greatest
truths. It is a great truth because once we truly see this
truth, we transcend it. . . Because once it is accepted, the
fact that life is difficult no longer matters. . . . Life is a series
of problems. Do we want to moan about them or solve
them?**

**This statement is not meant to be pessimistic, for Peck would affirm
that life has its joys as well as its problems.**

**Yet, if you have lived very long, you know this truth, that life is
difficult. Most of us have experienced serious difficulties such as the
loss of a loved one, harsh financial reversal, a failed marriage, or a
chronic illness. And just as problems occur in our personal lives, so also
do problems arise in our professional lives. That is why I have titled my
speech “Living in Difficult Times.”**

There is no question that 2009-10 is an extremely challenging time for California community colleges. This year we experienced a huge 8% cut in our state allocation. My experience in California community colleges dates back to 1973, yet I have never seen a reduction of this magnitude.

Ironically, at the same time our funds have been reduced, our enrollments have surged. The students still came. This fall, our enrollment increased by 3% over last fall. Colleges report that at registration time this fall, 95% or more of their course sections were completely filled, with many students on waiting lists and some—sadly—turned away with no classes at all.

At the same time that the colleges have increased enrollment, they have been forced to decrease the number of classes that they offer. This fall, colleges cut classes, most by 10% or more. This reduction certainly made economic sense since our colleges were experiencing a severe cut. Furthermore, most colleges are over their enrollment cap; thus, they are educating many students for which they receive no remuneration.

In one sense, this overcrowding is good news because it demonstrates our popularity. Why are community colleges so popular? Let me cite some reasons.

First, in a time of high unemployment—more than 12% in California—people flock to our colleges for job retraining. Our excellent career technical programs offer great training for job opportunities in a relatively short instruction time.

Second, our transfer programs are filled to capacity. Some students are there because the University of California and the California State University have reduced their enrollments. However, for many, the community college is their first choice because students know they will receive quality education from dedicated teachers at a reasonable cost.

After all, we are the college of the open door. Where else will the person from a low-income family, the beleaguered single mother, or the immigrant seeking language skills go? Our willingness to educate all who come explains why 2.89 million students enrolled in California community colleges in 2008-09, an all-time record for the largest system in higher education in the world.

And in terms of continued high enrollment, the future looks very bright. The California Post-Secondary Education Commission (CPEC) recently did a study of future enrollments in California community colleges. The title of this document is “Ready or Not, Here They Come.” CPEC concluded that community college will grow by an additional 222,000 students in the next decade. They also warned that as many as 400,000 students could be turned away in the next two years because of our financial crisis.

So the conclusion is clear: we have more than enough customers. Not only in California, but also nationally the community colleges are riding a wave of popularity. President Obama recently announced a \$12 billion federal initiative for community colleges. A few months ago, *TIME* magazine published an article suggesting that community colleges may be the key to leading us out of the recession.

Never have I known the community colleges to be held in higher esteem than now. In a recent statewide survey, released last week by the Public Policy Institute of California, respondents gave community colleges an approval rate of 65%, an approval rate higher than either the University of California or the California State University.

But there is still the indisputable fact that we are woefully short of funds. I firmly believe that the state of California is making a huge mistake by failing to educate the students that are vital to this state's future. And, realistically, we cannot hope that 2010-11 will be any better than the present year. In the last two years, the revenues of the state government have dipped by 18%. Furthermore, the state revenues in the first quarter of 2009-10 year are one billion dollars below budget projections. Just last week, Governor Schwarzenegger predicted that the budget deficit in 2010-11 will be fourteen billion dollars. So we must prepare for a tough two years ahead.

I can assure you that the Chancellor's Office will fight fiercely for just a share of state funds in the upcoming budget process for the 2010-11 year. We will join the League, the Board of Governors, faculty groups, and other interested parties in budget advocacy. And I encourage each of you to become a community college lobbyist in your community. Go to your legislators' offices, invite them to your office, and impress upon them the invaluable education you are providing to their constituents.

Once again, I return to the question, "How can we live in difficult times?" We can simply moan and complain and point out how unfairly

we have been treated. Or we can start to turn on one another and engage in the blame game--faculty against administration, staff against the board—and engage in this intramural battle *ad nauseum*. Someone has well said, “The manners get bad when the food gets scarce.” But the truth is that neither moaning and complaining nor turning on each other is profitable; in fact, they are self-destructive. Rather let me suggest three successful approaches we can take in this time of crisis. I call this “A Blueprint for Success.”

First, we must prioritize. What would you do if your personal budget were cut by 8%? I am sure you would look carefully at your expenses and determine what is essential and what could be eliminated. You would continue to pay the mortgage but probably eliminate expensive vacations and frequent dining out. And so, each college must determine what must be kept and what can be removed.

Let’s be honest. In the past, in our rush to serve the needs of many, we may have initiated classes and programs that we now can get rid of. We have engaged in what I call “mission creep.” We did some good work, but not essential work. Now we can use this crisis to better ourselves. As I have often quoted a statement by Stanford economist Paul Romer: “A crisis is a terrible thing to waste.”

I read where one of college presidents simply explained one of the college's class cuts this way: "We cannot maintain an aerobics class for seniors and cut transfer classes for recent high school graduates." I think he is exactly right. And the public will support us in these reductions.

You recall that last spring in the budget discussions that there was one proposal to reduce funding for all physical education classes to non-credit funding. We fought that proposal, pointing out that many P.E. classes are transferable, and some are even vocational requirements for such careers as physical therapy and coaching.

Fortunately, we won that battle, but it may not be over. For when the legislature granted us the ability to reduce our class sections by 3.39%, a statement of legislative intent was inserted that community colleges should emphasize transfer, career technical, and basic skills courses.

So now is the time to eliminate courses that are primarily avocational, or, in some cases, to move such courses to self-supporting community education. It is not our job to provide physical exercise for adults who don't want to pay the fees to join an athletic club or provide a course for those who want to learn quilting.

In other words, prioritize. Explain to disappointed constituents or unhappy staff that we have no choice because of this fiscal crisis. If one is ever going to downsize to essential classes and services, now is the perfect time to seize this opportunity.

Second, we should aggressively seek funds to supplement state dollars. This is an ideal time to become entrepreneurial. In 2008, the Osher foundation gave California community colleges the largest gift in the history of community colleges. That donation was \$25 million for scholarships for needy students. Furthermore, the Osher Foundation has promised an additional \$25 million to our colleges if we raise \$50 million by June 30, 2011. Recently I attended a fund-raising event at El Camino College that raised over \$600,000 for this cause, simply meaning that this sum will immediately increase to \$900,000 as a result of Osher's generosity. If we as a system succeed in fully meeting the Osher foundation challenge, we will have established a \$100 million endowment that will provide over 5,000 scholarships to community college students each year, in perpetuity.

But let's not stop there. We can aggressively seek donations of equipment for our career technical programs. Some of you are already doing this, but you can redouble your efforts. Car dealerships can

provide cars for our auto servicing programs; hospitals can give equipment to our health care training, and the list goes on and on. We can also seek gifts from our alumni and other businesses in our community. We should also step up our grant applications for the federal money that will become available in this year and in the coming years. I pledge that our office will seek these grants on a system-wide basis and support you in your own applications.

And we can explore new and innovative ways to generate revenues. Just a few ideas are the use of land for swap meets and other activities, rental of facilities for events, and exploration of joint-use with cities and other entities. This is an ideal time for the expansion of our contract education program. The Cuyagoha Community College, located in Cleveland, Ohio, now has three corporate colleges serving industry in that city. These institutions are built strictly on contract education. These corporate colleges not only are self-supporting, they actually turn a profit.

You recall the old saw: “Necessity is the mother of invention.” Forcefully make your case to the public. Remember, you are serving your community. Now is the time to let the community know that you need their help.

Third, I want to suggest another bold approach. Now is the time to innovate. You may object and say, “How can we innovate when we have no money?” Yes, there are new programs and services that cost money; frankly, we will have to forgo these approaches at this time. But there are innovations that don’t cost money or may even save money. And now is the time to explore these innovations.

Let me suggest five possible areas of innovation to consider during this fiscally stringent time. I don’t claim that this list is exhaustive; actually, I want these suggestions to be an impetus to many other fruitful ideas that our inventive faculty and staff can initiate.

For one, I believe that there are many ways that technology could improve instruction, counseling, and other student services. Too often in the past, computerized instruction was used only as an add-on to classroom instruction. This addition may have enriched instruction, but rather than decreasing costs, it simply increased expense. Now we have on-line courses; such courses need to be further developed since our on-campus facilities are often stretched to the max.

But what about courses that are a mixture of lecture and computerized instruction? One of the major reasons that America’s productivity sharply increased in the 1990s was the explosion of

computerization in industry. We need to have that kind of innovation in higher education. For instance, we could consider putting some portion of basic skills instruction in math or writing centers. These could be self-paced activities that do not require the assistance of a credentialed faculty member.

And increased technology could be a big boost to counseling. Although our present counselor-student ratio is woefully inadequate, a lack of funding will not permit us to hire large numbers of new counselors. We can, though, analyze information and determine what can be given to students through technology and reserve face-to-face counseling for those times when personal counseling is necessary.

For example, the program ASSIST now furnishes comprehensive transfer information about individual universities to interested students. The Student Services Division in the Chancellor's Office is now helping guide this program through an ambitious technology rebuild called ASSIST: Next Generation. This will be a decided improvement for providing transfer students the information they need. If we carefully analyze other student services, perhaps we can determine other innovative ways that technology can help.

Second, let me make another suggestion involving student services. Recently, I learned that in Connecticut, all community college students who seek financial aid are given information on the financial aid that would be available if they would attend college full-time even if they are part-time students. Why is that an advantage? This information encourages students to go full-time when possible. And all studies indicate that students are more likely to complete their goals if they are full-time students.

Three, let's work on common assessment. Presently we have 110 assessment measures for 110 colleges. This means that students who transfer from one community college to another often are forced to be re-assessed. We in the Chancellor's Office are working with experts in assessment in our colleges to produce a common assessment test. Not that colleges will be forced to use this test, but this can save colleges money since individual colleges can then use this test and have it scored at about one-half the cost of the present assessment process. Not only will this save money, but this also has the decided advantage of many colleges having a common assessment test.

Four, there are now promising breakthroughs in developmental education. We all know the unfortunate attrition in our present

developmental (i.e., remedial) education. Of those who begin at the lowest levels of developmental English or math, fewer than 10% make it to the freshman level.

Last week I heard exciting presentations by Diego Navarro of Cabrillo College, Tom deWit of Chabot College, and Deborah Harrington of the Los Angeles Community College District. Each of these faculty members described approaches to accelerating developmental education into one semester. These intensive approaches produce more successful outcomes than our traditional two or three-level developmental courses. The students are happier; the results are better; and the expense is not greater. It is amazing what can be done when we think outside the box.

Five, we must improve the transfer process. Presently, the average community college transfer to a California State University graduates with 150 units when only 124 units are ordinarily required for graduation. I understand that some of the excess units occur because students change their majors or some community college students deliberately take courses of interest that they know will not transfer. But many of these units do not transfer because of inadequate articulation between community colleges and CSU.

Articulation must be done on a system wide basis rather than college by college. Think of the difficulty of each college articulating transfer agreements with each California State University. There are 110 community colleges and 23 CSUs in the state. If there were an agreement between each individual college and each CSU, that would be 2,530 agreements.

Therefore, I hope that the recently formed task force with five representatives from UC, CSU, and the community colleges will come up with solid recommendations, including a comprehensive transfer arrangement. The failure of comprehensive transfer arrangement costs students much time and money and the state of California literally millions of dollars.

As I said, these are only five suggestions. I am confident that the present dynamic combination of trustees, faculty, administrators, and staff has many more innovations to bring forth. Now is the time to innovate; a crisis is a perfect time of receptivity.

We are in difficult times; one would be a fool to deny that. But I am convinced we can not only survive, but also we can emerge from this time both leaner and stronger.

What is it that undergirds and strengthens people in difficult times? I firmly believe that it is a belief in the importance of the mission.

Over 200 years ago, our nation was engaged in a life and death struggle for its independence. We were pitted against the most formidable military nation of that era, Great Britain. In the winter of 1776, the American troops under George Washington had suffered several stinging defeats in this struggle. In December of that year, Thomas Paine would write: “These are the times that try men’s souls.”

Yet America triumphed against almost impossible odds. Seven years later they had defeated Great Britain and emerged as a new nation—the United States of America.

Why? Because of the belief in their mission of freedom. In the Declaration of Independence they enunciated their belief in freedom. This mission sustained them in bleak and trying times, and eventually it led them to victory.

In like manner, we will survive these tough times because of our important mission. We transform thousands of lives; we are institutions of hope. UC and CSU have their unique missions, but only the

community colleges can serve the vast majority of Californians that seek higher education in our state.

I feel most fortunate to serve as the Chancellor of this great system; it is humbling to give leadership and support to 110 community colleges in California. Today I have suggested a blueprint for success in difficult times: prioritize, seek additional funds, and innovate. I am confident that these approaches can assist us this challenging time.

But the real key is to rally the vast array of talent in our institutions—trustees, faculty, administration, and staff—to serve theses students. Let nothing deter us from the fulfillment of our important mission.