

FCCCC President's Address  
CCC Board of Trustee's Meeting  
Thursday, January 12, 2012

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Chairman Cabrera, Chancellor Hyman, members of the Board, Officers of the District, faculty, staff and all others present, Happy New Year!

Our individual colleges routinely assess student satisfaction and needs through a variety of questionnaires including the Community College Survey of Student Engagement and student evaluations. Even retention rates are indirect indicators of student satisfaction. But these surveys represent what the administrators and the faculty think are appropriate and important questions to ask of our students and focus on academic concerns and student services; these surveys do not necessarily measure what students deem important. In this address I want to step outside my role as FC4 representative and share with you some student concerns and challenges within the context of one student assignment. I recognize that this is an anecdotal report, but I think it's illuminating nonetheless.

Last semester I taught a DePaul/ CCC bridge course in which one of the final assignments was for small groups of students to produce a game. The subject of the game, and even the idea of what a game is and how to play it, was open-ended. The focus for the assignment was not the product per se, but instead the assignment was designed to push students to devise questions about the interdependence of creativity and games, about the process of negotiating assigned responsibilities within a group, and about the integration of other assignments into a larger project. Interestingly, even in our world of iPads and Facebook, most of the groups constructed fairly conventional board games.

One group of non-traditional students produced a board game, College Graduation, for want of a better name, similar to *Chutes and Ladders* in which players won the game when they reached their objective, college graduation. The students who created this game were women who were older than traditional college age and had children of traditional college age and older, and whose experiences provided multiple perspectives on graduation. The game was set up so that a player would roll the dice and, depending on where she landed, might be required to pick a card. These cards heralded either bad events or good outcomes. Bad events included inability to pay tuition (for a variety of reasons), three absences and being dropped from the class, a lost job and lost wages, having a baby and needing to take a semester off, missing registration, moving out of the district and losing in-district tuition, and getting caught cheating on a test. All of these events resulted in either losing a turn or falling down a chute and starting over in the game. Good outcomes included receiving money for tuition when a family member died, getting help from a smart classmate, and being elected to a student government position. These cards allowed the players to advance more quickly toward the goal of graduation.

I'd like to emphasize a number of interesting points to this representation of the game of graduation here. First, in this game, the cards which represent setbacks are four times more prevalent in the stack of possible outcomes than the cards which encourage completion and achievement. This stacking of the deck toward negative events, I believe, reflects the fears that many of our students have that completing college is about overcoming barriers, not necessarily learning something. Moreover, the realities of their lives, economic instability, lack of social support, and family obligations, further complicate the demands of college work.

Most disturbing, however, in these cards we see a subtext of powerlessness and lack of control: A smart friend helps you achieve, achievement is not through your own initiative and drive, and losing your job depends on a random throw of the dice. Even the positive cards have dark ramifications: Why no mention of scholarships or extra funds except in the context of a dead relative? Even the cards which suggest choice and control, skipping classes, oversleeping, plagiarizing material, and missing registration, are all negative behaviors with negative consequences; why no cards about studying for the exam and advancing three squares or induction into Phi Theta Kappa and getting an extra turn? (These are all questions that we discuss when we critique the assignments.) Even graduation is not a guarantee of success: Graduation in this game can land you with a job paying \$25,000 and straddled with \$100,000 in student loans.

But let's be honest here: Our students don't have the luxuries of college life portrayed in popular culture. This ain't *Animal House* or even *China, Illinois*. Many of our students are juggling young children and limited or expensive childcare and are absent because a child (or a parent) is sick. A student has overslept because he works as a night watchman until six in the morning and tried to get a nap before class. Some of our traditionally aged students live at home and, with working parents, share parenting duties. Some non-traditional students are worried about meeting their tuition bills as well as tuition bills for their children's schools. And the biggest worry is that if an employer asks for anything, even working overtime during exam week, the answer must be *yes* in an unstable economy. These are real challenges to the ability to concentrate on studies, to complete assignments and courses, to plan coursework and careers, and to move toward graduation.

I'm not suggesting these challenges are appropriate as excuses for work not done or goals not achieved, but they are mitigating circumstances as we look at performance indicators. As recent research suggests, good teaching and quality instructors really matter in students' lives in the long term (Chetty, Friedman, Rockoff, *The Long-Term Impacts of Teachers: Teacher Value-Added and Student Outcomes in Adulthood*, National Bureau of Economic Research Working Paper No. 17699, December 2011), a point I will be exploring in a later address. Indeed, most of us at the City Colleges are here because we value these students, their grit and their determination, and yes, their follies and their fears, and support wholeheartedly their success, but there are socioeconomic forces that can only be at best indirectly addressed in the classroom. Our challenges as administrators and faculty is to recognize these mitigating factors, to eliminate the hurdles to access and completion that we can control, and to encourage our students as best we can in their educational journeys.

Respectfully submitted,

Polly Hoover

President of FC4