

September 24 Podcast Transcript

Eloy: Hi, this is Eloy Ortiz Oakley, Chancellor of the California Community Colleges, and you're listening to another edition of the California Community Colleges Chancellor's Office Podcast. Today, I have the great pleasure of welcoming Lieutenant Governor Eleni Kounalakis. The Lieutenant Governor in California has a huge role in California's higher education system. She is a member of the University of California Board of Regents, also a member of the California State University Board of Trustees. And she is publicly and loudly been committed to bringing down the cost of higher education in California, something that students throughout our public and private systems, here in California, throughout the nation, have really been feeling lately.

California has one of the greatest systems of higher education in the world, but, as many of our listeners know, the cost of attendance continues to rise. So our Lieutenant Governor has been working hard to reach out to Californians throughout and work on this problem. So it's a pleasure to have you, Lieutenant Governor.

Eleni: Well, thank you so much, Chancellor Oakley, it's wonderful to be here.

Eloy: So let me just give a little bit of background about our Lieutenant Governor. Ambassador Eleni Kounalakis was sworn in as the 50th Lieutenant Governor of California by Governor Gavin Newsom on January 7th, 2019. She is the first woman elected as Lieutenant Governor of California. A native Californian, she visited each of the 58 counties during her historic campaign and she has an extensive biography that includes serving as U.S. ambassador to the Republic of Hungary. She's also chaired the California Advisory Council of International Trade and Investment and is a virtual fellow at the U.S. Department of State Bureau of Intelligence and Research.

So, as we get into the conversation, Lieutenant Governor, I wanna ask you, what's it been like being Lieutenant Governor? You've been in this role over 6 months now? Any surprises? Anything that you really feel that has been just an amazing experience for you so far?

Eleni: Well, first of all, Chancellor Oakley, thank you so much for having me here. The community-college system in our state is one of the shining jewels. You have more than two million students enrolled, I'd hope lots of them are listening today, but the role of the Community College is so important in our system of public higher education in California. And yeah, it is a really important part of my job. The job so far has been incredible, it is just such a privilege to serve in this state. I had never been in elected office before, I served in appointed office, so I certainly felt the responsibility associated with public service in my life. But to be elected is a really different experience. And every

day I go into my office thinking, "What can I do to deliver for all of these people in our beautiful state who get up every day, who work so hard, who have ambitions to build a better life for themselves and their families? And for our young people who now more than ever are looking at a future that is less certain, pathways that are less mapped out than in the past, and they're really looking to California's leadership to help ensure that they have the opportunity to succeed, as our generation did?"

Eloy: Well, I think that's a great transition to our first question. We talk a lot about California and, you know, really the great work that it's done in educating its own citizens. Through the California higher-education master plan, there has been a great partnership between the University of California, Cal State University System, and the community colleges that has really fueled the economy in California. But I think now many people are starting to question where we're at as a state. And certainly addressing students' needs today is a top priority for all three systems. As you spent time with the UC, with the CSU, as you've heard from our students in the community colleges, what do you think are the things that we need to do as systems and as a state to really address the needs of students and, particularly, the challenges they face affording College today?

Eleni: So, Chancellor, I think it's incredibly important that we recognize that the energy, the talent, and the ambition of California students is there. They want to have access to public higher ed in this state and to the kind of job training and CTE that the Community College offers. We have, at any given time, about three million students enrolled in public higher ed in this state, it is the largest number of any state in the country. To me, the most important thing is ensuring that those opportunities are as accessible and as affordable as possible, now more than ever. So that's number one.

And I'll also say I'm optimistic because, in this budget, Governor Newsom, who's also is, you and I very well know, so committed to this same objective, has allocated a record amount of resources out of the general fund to public higher ed in our state. That's really terrific. We also have to be looking at strategies for how we can more efficiently use those funds in order to be able to bring the effective cost to attending public higher ed down to our students. And there are lots of different ways to do that, as you very well know. The College Promise is a good part of that. For a long time, with my generation, there was this gold standard of graduating high school and going straight into a 4-year college. I think students are savvy, students are quick to recognize opportunities. And as the cost of a 4-year college has increased...and not just the cost per year for 4 years but also how hard it is for students to actually be able to graduate from the CSU and the UC in 4 years. So, if you're there for a 6-

year experience, which so many of our students are, it increases the cost that much more. And so, you see students today recognizing that, "Wait a second, if I get my degree ultimately from a CSU or UC, the fact that I started out at a community college isn't a black mark. In fact, it kind of makes me look smarter and savvy that I've taken some classes before going to the 4-year college in order to be able to get some of those requirements out of the way." And by the way, for a lot of students it means being able to stay at home for an additional year or 2 where they're able to save money on housing, which, as we know, has also dramatically increased the cost of going to college in California.

Eloy: Absolutely. And I'm glad you mentioned that it was a smart choice so that makes me feel better since I was a transfer student. But you mentioned housing. I know our students, in the California community colleges, have really struggled with housing insecurity. By and large we have more students with housing insecurity, in the community colleges, than any other system. I know the CSU is suffering as well, as well as the University of California. Any thoughts about some of the things that we should begin to think about doing as systems or as a state to address this problem?

Eleni: So people sometimes ask me what keeps me up at night. When I started hearing stories of students sleeping in their cars, it's just so wrong that here we have students who are so committed to getting their degree, and yet, unable to find housing on our campuses and, as a result, choose the option, choose...they are forced into essentially sleeping in their cars. And it bothers me so much, I just, you know, can't tell you. And I think that addressing this housing crisis for our students is a critical part of addressing the housing crisis in our state. Because what usually happens if there's not enough to go around of a scarce resource, whatever it is, it's the most vulnerable who pay the price. So there are a lot of initiatives, moving through Sacramento right now, to increase the housing stock across the board. That I think is really important and I hope students get behind these measures to make it easier for people to build secondary units in their yards. Right? In their homes. Because those are the kinds of units the students very likely are going to have access to.

And then, very specifically, what we do about housing on campus, we have to build more of it and we also have to look at these public-private partnerships. It's been sort of the Wild West coming up with these creative solutions to build more campus housing. To me, it's really important that we start to look at the P3s that have not just delivered more housing using these relationships with the private sector but have been the most effective in doing it in a way that keeps that housing affordable to our students on campus.

Eloy: Those are all great comments and I'm really glad to hear, on behalf of all of our students, that both the Governor and the Lieutenant Governor are very much focused on this issue. We realize that it's not going to change overnight but it's these conversations, the courage that we're showing that's gonna help us get to where we need to be for all of our students. So, another challenge that our students are facing is this ever-evolving economy. The workforce continues to change, for both students who are coming out of high school into higher education and beyond but also for working adults who see their jobs changing before their eyes every day. So it's a very dynamic and fluid workforce. What role do you see the California Community College playing in terms of filling that skills and degree gap that we see continuing to be present? And, if there's anything that you would suggest that we do different or continue to evolve to do, what would that be?

Eleni: Well, so, I told you what keeps me up at night, what kind of makes me feel like it's all going to be okay out there, right, when we think about the uncertainties of the future, is the fact that we don't sit still. And so, our leadership, whether it's at the community colleges, the CSU, the UC, the state, we see these challenges coming at us and we're not frozen in fear, we are prompted to action. And I think it's important and part of what I try to do is really get out there among the community and talk about these things, listening to the challenges people are facing in order to help inform the kinds of policies that we can put together to address these challenges. But we are, and I really learned this when I was the United States Ambassador, we really [inaudible 00:10:58] people. So I think, first and foremost, the fact that nobody is going to sit on their laurels, we're looking at these challenges coming down, separating what we have to prepare for and what maybe are things that get put out there that are not necessarily as scary as sometimes people make them out to be that we're going to have jobs in the future, that we have an incredible system of public higher education with people who are prepared to be flexible and nimble enough to be able to work with students, to help ensure that they're prepared for them. And then, frankly, getting to work on what exactly it is that we can do.

And I think that the work the community college is doing with corporations, frankly, and hearing from the private sector of where the jobs are going to be, that's something that's really important, getting into high schools so that students from a younger age can take their interests and their talents that they know that they're already ready to develop, things like tech skills but also things like welding, you know. When I was in Stockton, I think was last year, and I was meeting with people who were working with mostly young men helping them get prepared for the workforce, what I heard was that Delta College has the longest wait list for welding classes because there are lots of really good-paying jobs out there in construction, particularly, by the way, since SB 1,

which, you know, as this raises funds through a tax on gasoline to fix our roads. Lots of good-paying jobs there too. So there are things that are happening to address it but I also think that, when we talk about education, there are really, to me, two main objectives. One is absolutely preparing our students for the future with the kind of specific training that they need in order to be able to do their jobs. Things like, okay, welding, but also being able to write well. Those are very specific skills. But there is also something that goes back several thousand years which is critical thinking. And I don't underestimate the power of what it means to open up a student's mind, to be able to think for herself and himself in a way that for literally millennia we've recognized that human beings have this incredible capacity to problem-solve. And that, when you learn how to problem-solve in one area, when you learn how to think for yourself, be somewhat skeptical, be largely creative, that you can apply those skills to other things. And so, when young people say, "Gee, why do I need to learn algebra?" Right? Well, because the training that your mind gets as you pull apart problems has then the ability to be applied in so many other areas.

And, you know, I'm very proud of my Greek-American heritage. And it's part of my own education, when I was in college and, you know, my father went to a 4-year college, he went from the fields of California, he was an immigrant farm worker, and he ended up at Sacramento State University where he got his education but he didn't quite graduate. And I was the first in my family to go to a 4-year college and graduate and I went off and I studied English, literature, and classics. And I apply what I learned in those fields every single day because I got a perspective of the kinds of challenges that human beings have grappled with for thousands of years. And it's remarkable how little really does change. And so, I encourage students to not just be thinking about the very specific training that they can get in Community College or CSU or UC and apply them to a job but also in this incredible privilege that we can offer to anyone who seeks its benefits, the ability to learn how to think critically, how to put challenges of today in context of what human beings have been grappling with for millennia, and be able to participate, as Californians, in, not just our economy, not just our society, but also in building a better society for future generations.

Eloy: Well, that's great. And I really appreciate the way that you wove in your immigrant background because, clearly, today in California we have so many stories of current former present immigrants into this state. And well, perhaps, on the East Coast, in Washington, DC, they don't always value our diversity. I think it's one of our strengths. And so, being able to support the needs of students from all backgrounds is certainly something that we see, in the California community colleges, has the greatest value that we offer. Now, I know that, soon after you took office, you made a pledge to visit all of the

University of California campuses, all the California State University campuses, what inspired you to take this pledge? And of course we would welcome you to visit all 115 California community colleges but that may take you a little while, but what inspired you to do this and how's it been going so far?

Eleni: Well, I fundamentally believe that anyone who asks to represent a constituency needs to be out there listening to what those constituents consider to be priorities. I don't think there is any substitute for it. So I visited all 58 counties when I ran and, because the education portfolio is such an important piece of the Lieutenant Governor's office, it was obvious to me that I needed to get out there and visit the campuses. And what I'm hearing, again, has a lot to do with affordability. I hear a lot about mental-health issues right and the need for more support for students in that regard. And then, you also hear about things like just, you know, access. The CSU system, unfortunately, turned away over 30,000 students last year as a result of not having enough space for them. This is a concern and something that, you know, I'm very focused on as well. So if you don't get out there and listen to people, how in the world are you gonna know what is most on their mind? So that is really fundamentally why I'm going to visit all of the campuses, and I learned something new with every visit.

But, going back to what you said about California's diversity. It is another thing that just fills me with inspiration. It's not surprising to me, Chancellor, that you connect California's booming economy, challenges that we do have in ensuring the economy delivers for more Californians, but that you connect our growing economy with our diversity because I am absolutely sure these things are connected. We are now in California 27% foreign-born, that means more than one out of four Californians was born outside of the United States. The average for the country is about 14%. It does make a difference for us here and it certainly does contribute, not just to our economy, but to our culture and our vibrancy and to our being on the cutting edge of innovation. And when you're around students, students who are first-gen students, it's evident. Being out on campuses and regularly meeting kids who just by virtue have enrolled in higher ed, have already done more, you know, and exceeded the academic achievement of anyone in their family history, it's electric. And they know that they're doing something extraordinary and that they have an opportunity that they're not going to let go to waste.

Now, that doesn't mean it isn't fraught with challenges when you don't have mom and dad saying, "Well, when I was in college, this is what we did." Right? And, you know, in my own life, my parents could give me some encouragement but there was a lot that I had to figure out for myself. And I think it's important

to send the message to first-gen students that we see them, we are proud of them, and that we have enormous faith in what they are going to bring to our state if they are able to succeed through the process. So I wanna give you one point of inspiration, I just love this story. So in, I think it was May-June, during graduation season, 60 Minutes did a profile of 300 first-generation students, student who are the first in their family to go to college, who were graduating from Princeton University, the top of the elite colleges of the United States, and they did this to show, you know, an incredible thing, incredible accomplishment for these kids, no question about it. They were given a lot of support, particularly from the Gates Foundation. And the Chancellor of CSU Fullerton sees this story on Twitter and he tweets at 60 Minutes and says, "Hey, that's great that you're profiling these students but, you know, here at CSU Fullerton, we graduate some first-gen students too. In fact, I just graduated 6,500 first-gen students, and I do it every year, and the CSU across the board, you know, across our 23 campuses, are graduating students in similar numbers. Forty four percent of the UC students are first-gen students. So I think it's important to shine a light on this, I think it's important to continue to invest in these students. And what I see is the future of our state, the future leadership of our state is going to be largely driven by the fact that we have had, not just an investment in first-gen students but we have realized the capacity, the ambition, and the energy of these students accessing our public higher-education system. And they are going to show us all what is possible.

Eloy: Well, it's great to hear the pride in your voice over what's happening in California because I agree with you. I mean the Cal State Fullerton example alone, Cal State Fullerton graduates more [inaudible 00:21:43] students in one year than the entire Ivy League combined. That's just one school. One out of every four community-college students in the nation is a California community-college student. Ten percent of all undergraduates in the nation is in the California community colleges. So that is the impact that our great state is having. It's wonderful to hear leaders like you talk about it in that way. So, as we wrap up, I wanna give you the opportunity to talk to our listeners, and primarily our students who do listen to this podcast, and as they struggle, whether they're first-generation, second-generation, whether they're working through poverty or they're middle-class, you know, this economy...working through higher education is a challenge for them. What would you like to say to our listeners, as Lieutenant Governor, about the future of California and what they should expect from us as leaders? And if there's any last words that you'd like to give our students, I'd love to give you that opportunity.

Eleni: So, again, when I was working overseas, and I was 3 and a half years in a country that had been behind the Iron Curtain, Hungary was a Soviet satellite, and young people were not, to say the least, encouraged to find their voice and

get ready to lead. But that is the tradition in the United States where the message that our generation, Chancellor Oakley, our leadership is constantly trying to project to young people is, "Get ready. This big great democracy, it's yours. You are the future leaders." And I think that young people can hear that language and sometimes feel like it's just rhetoric.

And so, I guess what I would say to the young people who are out there is, whether you believe us or not, keep moving forward. Keep putting one foot in front of the other. When you feel discouraged, dust yourself off, get back up on your feet, and keep going. Because, one way or the other, the future is gonna come. And truly, the leaders of the next generation, in California, I believe are going to be the leaders in our country. Because, if we can continue to show that newcomers and their children in California are able to uphold the principles of American democracy, as well as, I believe, that they will be able to do that. And what I mean by that isn't just ensuring that the voice of the people is heard but also that we strengthen our democratic institutions, our judiciary, our free press, you know, whatever that free press ends up looking like in the future, our educational institutions, that this is the challenge for their generation at a time when the digital revolution is changing how we live and how we think. And so, I say, "Get ready. Because we need you." And even if it doesn't feel like you're headed for leadership, believe in what we're saying enough to keep putting one foot in front of the other because, eventually, I think that they will see that there are the leaders of the future and that we need them to be ready.

Eloy: Well, on that note, thank you, Lieutenant Governor, it's been a pleasure to have you. Thank you for taking time out of your busy day, your busy schedule, to be with us to talk to our students, to talk to our listeners. It's been a pleasure having you.

Eleni: Thank you so much, Chancellor Oakley, it was wonderful to be here.

Eloy: So, you've been listening to another edition of the California Community Colleges Chancellor's Office Podcast. I wanna thank all of our listeners for tuning in. We look forward to coming back to you soon, and thank you for listening.

Male: Be sure to join us for the next California Community Colleges Podcast. This has been a California Community Colleges presentation.