

Eloy: Hi, this is Eloy Ortiz Oakley, Chancellor of the California Community Colleges, and you're listening to another episode of the "California Community Colleges Chancellor's Office" podcast.

As California and its leaders look to recover from the impacts of COVID-19, the state's higher education system will undoubtedly be at the forefront leading the way in creating new technologies, growing our economy, reaching out to those who have lost work and preparing our workforce for the future of work.

These same challenges that we're experiencing in California are being faced across the country in higher education and, in particular, community colleges are such an important part to our nation's recovery, and it'll take working with federal leadership on bipartisan solutions to ensure that we can bring this country back.

So with that backdrop, I have the great privilege and the honor to have a very special guest with us today. She is the CEO of Texas 2036, former U.S. Secretary of Education. And before all that, she held a few other positions. She was a president of the University of North Carolina. She also served in the role of White House Chief Domestic Policy Advisor, Senior Policy Advisor to then Gov. George W. Bush, and President of the George W. Bush Presidential Center.

So it's my great pleasure to welcome Margaret Spellings to the show. Welcome, Margaret.

Margaret: Thank you, Eloy, and it's great to be with you, my friend, and someone whose professional paths have crossed together for many years. Anyway, it's terrific to be with you. Thanks for... invitation.

Eloy: Absolutely. Well, it's great to have you, Margaret. It's hard to believe it's been a few years since you were U.S. Secretary of Education, but a lot has happened since then and you've been quite busy.

But let's talk about what you're working on today. The organization that you currently lead is Texas 2036. Tell us a little bit about the organization and what you're trying to accomplish for Texas.

Margaret: So since most of your listeners are in California, they probably don't know that 2036 is the bicentennial of Texas, our 200th birthday. And so we use that sort of as an anchor to think about the future, and what we're trying to do in this organization is put the sensible center together to think long-term about the most important issues that we have. I think often our politicians get distracted

on some of the shiny object du jour, and we know for sure that education and health and infrastructure and natural resources, those were the things that are going to take us into the future.

And so we do that by using hundreds of publicly available data sets to inform our work because we want to have a fact-based conversation about what the needs of our state are today and what they will be in the future. And like California, we are big and growing and very diverse. And it's a great hand to play, but we're going to have to do a lot of things differently if we are to maximize the potential of our people.

Eloy: That's great to hear, Margaret, and I really love a phrase you mentioned, "the sensible center." That seems to be missing from our vocabulary these days. What do you see is a sensible center in Texas? And how is it informing the way forward in Texas given the crazy political divisions that we face as a nation?

Margaret: Well, Eloy, we're having this conversation on Election Day so it's easy to think about our differences on a day like this. But what I see traveling all over our state when I could and now zooming all over the state is that people are really starving for leadership, people are starving solutions, and people understand what those most important things are. And they are education, they are health, they are infrastructure, our roads, our ports, our housing, and they are our justice systems and how well our government works.

And there's a lot more in common than there is that divides us, these kitchen table issues that we talk about, especially [inaudible 00:04:01] education, our shared passion.

Eloy: That's right. And clearly, for most of our experiences in higher education, this is an issue that resonates on both sides of the aisle. This is an issue that's about the future of our children, of our grandchildren, you know, of our states and of our country.

Texas, like California, has seen quite a bit of demographic changes over the last decade or two. With increasing population, the diversity has increased. You have 10 many more Texans that are expected to live in the state by 2036. That's a lot more Californians coming your way.

Margaret: Mm-hmm, that's right. And together our states are really, really important. Together we're about 20% of the student population of our country. And if we get Texas and California right, our country is going to be in pretty good shape. We are on the frontend of the changes that are happening all across

the country but big growth. We're getting older, and we're getting younger. And so lots of interesting dynamics.

Eloy: Well, perhaps Texas and California can succeed together at some point. But with these demographic changes, I mean the face of Texas continues to change. How do these changes impact the education ecosystem in Texas, higher education? And what are some of the things that you're proposing that Texas do to respond to these changes?

Margaret: Well, I think our first principle is that we understand that our people, our human capital in a state that is big and growing, very diverse, young, and old, that that is our number one asset. It's not the financial services industry or the high-tech industry or the oil and gas industry, all of those are hugely important, but those industries are powered by high-quality workforce.

And so what we need to do is be more attuned to the needs of our changing—I know we don't like this word in higher education—customer, user, student, whatever word you want to use. And right now, we have a lot of friction in that relationship between the provider, education, and the supply side, and the demand side and the employer community and the student community.

And so we need to look at things, and we have all of us worked on affordability issue. Clearly, that's important but we also need to work on, you know, efficiency and taking the friction out and better signaling between our employer community, what leads to a good job, and what we in higher education are providing.

And frankly in our community colleges, in Texas at least, we're doing too much gen. ed., too much remediation, and not enough, you know, short-circuit pathways into high-paying and high-skill jobs.

Eloy: Right. Let's turn our attention to what's been going on over the last six, seven months. I'm sure, like California, Texas had been hit hard by the pandemic, the subsequent economic recession that has followed.

Texas has a lot of low-income communities spread across the state, a lot of communities of color. How has the pandemic hit those communities? And what are some of the things that schools, colleges, and universities have been doing to respond to those challenges?

Margaret: Well, I hate to say this but just today Texas has passed California in the number of COVID cases. A dubious distinction given the fact that you're significantly larger than we are. But neither of us have anything to brag about in

that realm, and you're right it's impacting our poor and minority communities the most.

And so what COVID has done is reveal a lot of things that we knew were there before the pandemic, and that is gigantic disparities in health, gigantic disparities in education in particular. To the good, it's also shown all of us that your neighbor's health matters to you, that your neighbor's ability to recover from a job layoff matters to you. And so there's this greater understanding about why these things are important to all of us.

Now, with respect to responsiveness in our educational institutions, K12 and post-secondary, we're seeing them try to work hard to get broadband ubiquity into these communities. We have a lot of work to do as you all do in California. It is fundamental to modern America either because of telemedicine, e-learning, e-commerce, all of that.

And we have a ways to go. We have almost 6 million students in our K12 schools and about 1.7 million of them were unable to access e-learning before the pandemic. We've worked hard on hotspots and those sorts of things.

Clearly, we have shifted to almost all online learning in our post-secondary institutions. That has been dramatic and not perfect, but we're learning a lot. And our scholars—and I frankly wish they'd do a little more of this—are starting to help us understand, "Well, what are we learning from this giant experiment that we're doing? What are best practices for teachers? What are best practices for families?"

And I will say I think families are more attuned to what is really happening with their children or to themselves in terms of what learning looks like, how valuable is it, how affordable is it, and how useful is it in terms of finding a job.

Eloy: So let's talk about jobs. I have the privilege of having lots of family in Texas. So I hear a lot about what's been going on there, hear a lot about...

Margaret: You're welcome any time, too, Eloy.

Eloy: I may swing by for Thanksgiving. But there's been a lot of job creation in Texas. Certainly, Austin area, Dallas, San Antonio, a lot of things going on there, and you have some great community colleges there by the way—Dallas Community College and great community colleges in San Antonio, El Paso, and Austin.

How are your community colleges preparing the workforce particularly those individuals in Texas who may not have been participating in the workforce in the kind of numbers that you need to see in order to maintain prosperity in Texas? What do you see going forward in terms of workforce preparation in your state?

Margaret: We have just launched an effort in conjunction with the Texas Association of Community Colleges, the United Ways of Texas, a couple of our chambers, our rural funders, and whatnot called Aim Hire Texas. And what our purpose is is to get those linkages between the employer community, and the user and the provider or colleges better cemented and with strong signaling.

And there's no better leader in doing that than Joe May here in Dallas at the Dallas Community College System. You know, for example, to answer your question about how they responded in COVID, they immediately stood up a program for culinary students as to how to establish COVID protocols in restaurants and how to make that work and so on.

And to the other side of the equation, Joe talks about how he had a faculty member come to him one time and said, "Hey, I want to start another zookeeper program," and he said, "Well, how many zookeeping jobs do we have in Dallas?" "Well, about one a year."

So rather than create programs that are things that we in higher education want to do, we've got to get totally aligned with our employer community and get synced up with them. We also need to do it in a way...that sort of ala carte, so that these stackable credentials, these badges, those sorts of things that work for students really are more ubiquitous.

Eloy: That's very much the conversation we're having in California as well, and I know that we work very closely with a lot of the leaders that you just mentioned, Joe May including in Dallas. He's doing a fantastic job.

Margaret: And, Eloy, I don't want to carry on too long, but one of the things that's going to be a struggle for us in higher education is we've got to go to war with the army we have, and the army we have is a faculty that is often not prepared to do what the employer community wants to do.

And so I picked on my friends and French literature or whatever and certainly there's a great place for the liberal arts no doubt about it, but how do we get that alignment between our own workforce in higher education and what's needed?

Eloy: I agree. I mean, you know, we continue to have this gap in communication between the employer side, particularly the hiring managers and our colleges and our curriculum. We have been focused a lot in California. And how do we shorten that gap? How do we improve the communication? How do we more rapidly respond particularly as we think about the future of work?

And I'm sure Texas 2036 is thinking about the future of work in Texas. We're thinking about the future of work in California. And it's here. So we have to significantly improve our ability to respond to the changes that are taking place particularly for our adult learners who may not have gotten their higher education who are now stranded in this workforce. So I'm sure that's something that's on your mind as well.

Margaret: Exactly. And we're working on a policy agenda because frankly, we need our policymakers to put their money where their mouths are. We say that we want people who are skilled for this modern workforce, etc. but what we pay a premium for in higher education is graduate and post-graduate education.

Now, I'm not dissing that. I'm just saying we have undervalued, if you will, some of the work that community colleges, for example, do. And so if we're real about that, we've got to get organized for success and put our money where our mouths are.

Eloy: Hey, can we get you back into the U.S. Department of Education right now?

Margaret: We'll see about what happens tonight, Eloy.

Eloy: So let's talk about your perspective. I mean, obviously, you've been involved quite a bit in higher education and certainly, you've held the office of Secretary of Education for Pres. Bush. Those of us in higher education very much value the work that you did during your time there. You have a unique perspective on what's been going on.

You know, in California, we've had a little bit of a struggle. I mean, we've been very vocal about our struggles with the U.S. Department of Education particularly as it relates to how we serve every student in California, but how do you view what's been going on over these last several years in the Department of Education? And what would you say the states like California or Texas or others who are trying to pursue support for higher education in this current political environment?

Margaret: Well, Arne Duncan and John King, Pres. Obama's secretaries of education and I have been doing a lot of things like this together. Just because I think we all believe that there needs to be some leadership about federal policy and frankly the convening of experts around some of these problems that we have and we share.

And so the secretary has a great platform to be a proliferator of good practice and also a great listener about what's going on and to align policy around that. And so I frankly haven't seen all that much of that, especially on the higher ed side. I do commend some of the things they've done on HBCUs and the like. But there's been a missed opportunity in my view.

Eloy: Well, let's hope that there's a lot more opportunities on the horizon because, from my perspective, I mean this is a critical time for students in California, in Texas, the economy is changing so fast. We need to create better and greater opportunities for every [inaudible 00:15:34] to get to higher education succeed.

I may begin to wrap up on this Election Day and ask you: is there any final thoughts that you'd like to share with our listeners about what's happening in Texas and what you see for the future of higher education?

Margaret: Where I thought you're going to go with that question is kind of where are we with respect to federal policy and what might come of this election and what does it mean to us in the States. And I think one hope I have is that there will be some federal leadership around broadband so that we can make that really truly ubiquitous for every single American. Secondly, and you know this, I don't know exactly how the California Community Colleges are funded but certainly their local government here and we need additional federal support for local governments and community colleges in particular, school districts, etc. And we need them yesterday.

Eloy: Amen.

Margaret: And so I hope that we will see that kind of infrastructure and commitment to post-secondary education. And then thirdly I think, you know, we need a real understanding of incentives around this greater connectedness between our employer community and our providers like community colleges and our comprehensive universities especially.

Eloy: Well, on that note, particularly on a note of more federal stimulus for our colleges and universities and our local governments, I want to thank you, Margaret, for spending some time out of your busy day with us. We really appreciate your perspective. It was great to have you with us.

Margaret: Thank you, Eloy. Thank you for your great leadership, and I hope to see you soon.

Eloy: I hope to see you soon as well. So you've been listening to my conversation with CEO of Texas 2036 and former secretary of education, Margaret Spellings. And this has been another episode of the "California Community Colleges Chancellor's Office" podcast. Thanks for being with us.

Be sure to join us for the next "California Community Colleges" podcast. This has been a California Community Colleges presentation.