

## H. NEIL MATKIN

### EDUCATIONAL AND LEADERSHIP PHILOSOPHY

This brief statement of educational and leadership philosophy is an effort to present the underpinnings of my personal beliefs and convictions in order to better inform the search committee and Board on the vision and the values I bring to bear in fulfilling the role of district president.

**Understanding the Modern Community College Environment:** My longstanding personal philosophy of putting students first and providing service without excuses is directly related to accomplishing the extraordinary mission of the modern, comprehensive community college. Community colleges are called on to play many roles today and, as such, we serve the broadest spectrum of students imaginable with programs and awards ranging from adult basic education to honors courses to professional licensure.

On one hand, we are a transfer institution; on the other we are a technical institution offering professional degrees, certificates, and just-in-time training to meet student and employer requirements. We are a key employer and, at the same time, an economic driver, business partner, and community leader. We are a preparatory institution for assisting students to achieve the skills to succeed in college and in the workplace. We are an early college provider to high schools seeking dual enrollment and a leap forward in reaching student goals. Most of all, the community college is closely aligned and working with the greater interests of our stakeholders throughout the communities we serve.

The amazing aspect of our work is that we do it all at less overall cost and are more nimble in our delivery of services in comparison to all other sectors of higher education. Our story is powerful and worthy of sharing with all. As an open access institution intrinsically tied to our community and region, we accept the top one hundred percent of students who come to us. Rather than merely asking if a student is “college ready,” we focus also on the more difficult aspect of ensuring our institutions are “student ready,” fully committed to the success of each student.

**Valuing People First and Foremost:** Educational institutions are made up of individuals. Valuing people creates an environment where individuals can freely choose to contribute their skills, abilities, and hearts to a truly worthy cause. While current literature speaks of internal and external *customers*, these distinctions blend subtly together in a college community – especially in an environment where the college is predominant as either a direct employer or key provider fueling economic development within a region. But, we are also a cultural center and community liaison in continuing education and workforce development endeavors. In short, we are comprised of many different individuals from many walks of life with many different skillsets and experiences. Regardless of origin or the role performed in our college community, individuals deserve recognition, respect, and trust. Experience teaches me that a leader receives these attributes from faculty, staff, and students as well as the community at large to the degree that the same is practiced from the leader.

I remain convinced that every individual has invaluable lessons to teach me if I am but willing to listen. I have yet to meet a person from whom I cannot learn something. When I earned my doctorate my father said something I can never forget. He hugged my neck and said, “Don’t let all of your education get in the way of your learning, son.” It was a teachable moment. Reflecting back though, even my dissertation used a methodology (Delta Method) that ensured that all voices were counted equally in coming to a consensus. It is not surprising to me that the quiet and sometimes overshadowed voices are often able to tender sizable contributions and wisdom when welcomed and given opportunity to participate. Problem solving is a team effort and teams are fueled by trust, fairness, transparency, and inclusion. I am convicted that ‘every day folks’ can accomplish truly great things when we work together willingly. An ethical, trustworthy, and plain speaking leader cannot accomplish a mission alone, but he or she can provide the nucleus and catalyst to inspire others to contribute to and ultimately adopt a shared vision. It is not enough to talk the talk – to be an effective leader one must value people first and foremost in every interaction – public and private. We know when we are valued and we react accordingly.

**Attraction and Retention of Students:** The higher education community has marveled at the meteoric growth of institutions such as the University of Phoenix and other mega universities. These institutions have grown for a reason – they are providing a service that their students want, they pay attention to their audience, and students are willing to pay a premium. Among supporters, most discussion focuses on the marvelous technologies that have enabled the incredible growth and delivery of educational materials to a rapidly expanding national and international clientele. Is it enough though to be a distance learning powerhouse or is there more to the formula for success? When students choose an institution why do they do so? When they return to complete an award or contribute with their time or resources down the road, why is it? How do we align ourselves with the real needs of our students, communities, and business and industry to forge those lasting relationships?

The University of Phoenix specializes in a target market of degree completers and professional, employed students furthering their reach through savvy use of technology in a structure that works well. They are an exemplar of service to their target market and, as such, recognize technology as one of the tools to provide their core services. I use this example purposely to demonstrate that today’s students have choices – whether living in rural South Dakota or urban New York City or McKinney, Texas. With the advent of high-speed network access and the increasing utility of quality online offerings from multiple educational providers, technology, albeit vital, is insufficient on its own as a key differentiator today. There must be underlying dedication to world-class service and an understanding of what today’s students expect – think Amazon or Apple levels of service and precision with the steadfast reliability and ease of ownership of Toyota and Lexus. The message of meeting the student where he or she lives is powerful, poignant, and relevant in today’s higher education environment. Services alone are not enough – there must be a sense of active engagement emanating from the institution.

The Gallup organization drew from longitudinal research and learned a bit about student motivation in 2014. As it turns out, if a student perceives an institution to be aligned with his or her strengths and a faculty or staff member helped them to be excited about their future, that student is thirty times more likely to persist and complete an award. Thirty times more likely to persist and complete an award is unbelievably powerful. Clearly, the excellent enrollment trends exhibited by Collin College are evidence of a student-centered approach fueled and furthered by embracing key technology. Upon examination, Collin appears to have fostered high tech and, more importantly, high touch or personalization of services to its students. This commitment to student service – as well as service to faculty, staff, and the community at large – is essential to sustain growth, and to attract and retain students over the long term in the maturing, competitive market in which we must operate.

Allow me to close this section by commenting briefly on developmental programs extant in most community college environments. As a sector, it is severely disappointing that we have yet to truly solve and make meaningful headway on developmental education outcomes. Certainly there is debate as to causality (e.g., nature vs. nurture, human nature, socioeconomic, insufficient investment, etc.). So many times I see students churning through developmental courses over and over with little opportunity of ever reaching their hopes or dreams much less finding a path to achievement, a meaningful and rewarding job, and a living wage. The statistics at the state and national aggregate data are simply discouraging. Paul Tough’s wonderful book entitled “How Children Succeed – Grit, Curiosity, and the Power of Character” is perhaps the best treatise on a solution that I have read in my entire career. Carol Twigg, President of the National Center for Academic Transformation, and her work resulting in alternate education models (such as the now widely adopted Math Emporium), align with the principles Tough emphasizes and have shown amazing results where adopted. We know many factors that are effective in developmental education such as total immersion programs, targeted boot camps, strong one-on-one mentoring programs, required co-requisite tutorial labs and classes, just-in-time assistance, targeted time on task, and block scheduling that supports life and work requirements. None are inexpensive or glorious. It is my intent to continue passionately championing student success at all levels with particular concern for those least able and to creatively explore and discover successful venues to improve developmental outcomes. Nothing would please me more than for Collin College to become a national exemplar in successful developmental education outcomes and I believe that this vision is within our grasp.

**A Model of Collaboration and Accountability:** All institutions face unprecedented challenges with increasing expectations that seem to correspond inversely to shrinking resources or, even in times of sufficiency, diminishing purchasing power and rising costs. This is particularly true of state supported institutions since state, federal, and even regional accountability and delivery requirements continue to increase. Our colleges are in the midst of an ever-changing landscape and we are called upon to play the dual role of adapting to external changes while preserving treasured traditions and successes. Never before has collaborative leadership been more important in refining priorities, ensuring quality, and maximizing productivity.

As president, my first role would be to fully understand the unique institutional characteristics that distinguish Collin College. I bring the advantage of “new eyes” but must first understand the unique dynamics of the institution, the Board’s vision and priorities, and the services provided to local constituencies and stakeholders. From that foundation, building collaborative relationships informs the sustenance and further development of a worthwhile vision to meet the mission of the institution, focus on immediate planning and next steps, and sustain and update long term strategies to guide and shape future success. Collin must live up to its unique mission and determine its future opportunities within a collaborative framework.

Collin College enjoys a national record of academic achievements that speak well of the accountability of the institution and I believe this must continue and be enhanced wherever possible.

**Leading Progress:** First, an administrator must seek to do no harm, which in and of itself entails listening and learning about the institution ensuring the rhythms are fully discernable and well understood. Within the parameters of the Board’s directive and established policy, my mission is to preserve those elements that are clear successes and build on existing foundations recognizing that wise progress is an intrinsic component of a thriving enterprise. Oftentimes, worthy purposes are thwarted due to mismanagement of change or not fostering true transparency and discourse prior to pulling the trigger on a plan. To that end, I believe that there are some simplistic but axiomatic views associated with progress that are invaluable in moving an agenda forward successfully. Two anecdotes sum up my views on change management. First, ‘ready, aim, fire’ is fine as a modus operandi – but only if ‘fire’ is less than five percent of the equation. Rushed planning is the harbinger of unfortunate retreats. Inclusive planning is essential to sustained forward movement and too often I have witnessed this formula in reverse with disastrous consequences, short-term victories, and predictable long-term failure. It helps me to remember that erosion moves more earth in a day than all of the tornadoes, cyclones, hurricanes, and typhoons do in a year. Well thought out incremental and systematic change with sustaining infrastructure is ultimately more powerful and substantive than ‘flash in the pan’ efforts that may garner great publicity but fade when the videos stop rolling. That is not to say that actions cannot occur rapidly but rather to give a nod to proactive planning and mindful execution resulting in real and measurable, sustainable progress over time.

**Decision Making:** While I believe in and practice inclusion and collaborative governance I do not shrink from difficult decisions or worry incessantly after difficult decisions are executed. A leader has to be prepared to gather input from a wide variety of sources, however, must also be willing to make difficult decisions and stand behind those decisions. Lines of authority and delegation must be clear as well and a true leader always stands behind his or her officers when acting within their authority. In my career, I have enjoyed victory but I have also felt the sting of being wrong. I recognize that the president must bear the responsibility of leadership and this entails clearly communicating our shared vision such that even strong adversaries have the opportunity to become able supporters.

I maintain that the highest reward is to win hearts and minds while championing a worthy cause. My experience tells me that there are specific qualities that produce good results in this venue. First, it is incumbent upon the leader to always tell the truth with kindness and compassion. Secondly, it is vital to give credit to others publicly and to solve mistakes and failures privately whenever possible. As District President of Collin College, I would bring accountability with the highest degree of professionalism and

personal ethics liberally garnished with kindness. There would never be a secret or private agenda between my office and the Board.

**Securing Funding:** Taking a long-term view, as president I would work to develop a clear road map to continue the successful funding of Collin College and increase it where possible. Every state is different in how funds are secured and appropriated and these variances include both operating and capital funds as well as generous gifts from friends and supporters of the college. I have stated earlier that funding accompanies accountability but the conversation cannot begin without a clear vision. If I am giving of my own resources or time it is because I believe in a cause – otherwise, I am simply buying a product. Given the comprehensive focus of the college, I am interested in exploring and strengthening ties to business and industry both within and outside of the immediate service region. I believe that the geographic location is advantageous in further developing partnerships with neighboring cities, counties, towns, and educational institutions as well as specializing to attract business that would perhaps, at first glance, appear outside the reach of Collin College. Top quality training and distance learning do not necessarily face service area boundaries and can be instrumental in creating or sustaining existing or emerging revenue streams.

One challenge of a community college is to encourage graduates to have a strong connection to the college and in giving, as they are able. Again, I believe that a long-term strategy ultimately yields the best results. When graduates believe they are well served by their college and have an active role and stake in its future development, the stage is set for greater and more consistent alumni support. In surveying the higher education landscape, I believe some of the private institutions have provided excellent benchmarks and guides in engaging alumni in the future of the institution. Positive and successful relationships at every level and a crystal clear vision well communicated are the keys to enhancing private funding goals and revenue streams.

Lastly, it is imperative that two sources be maximized in addition to the local tax and student tuition revenues. Albeit fiercely competitive and becoming more so, gaining additional grant funding in conjunction with private foundations and federal programs are two areas that hold great opportunity.

**Management Style:** Books and philosophies are endless when it comes to the discussion of management styles and it seems that there are a thousand different formulae extant today. Perhaps it is somewhat old fashioned, but I am strongly convicted that fairness, honesty, directness, and sincerity eventually win over insincere cunning and craftiness. Accountability is king in establishing and maintaining credibility. In my years overseeing the Illinois Century Network and working with Illinois education as well as serving as Vice Chancellor for the Virginia Community College System, President of San Jacinto College Central, and now as Executive Vice President of the Louisiana Community & Technical College System, I am proud to state that every single procurement for which I have had responsibility – now ranging I the multiple millions of dollars – has been pure, every contract open and honest, and all employees treated with respect, fairness, and equality. People, fairness, and relationships are more important to me than immediate results or ego gratification. Once one understands that another person's perspectives are as important as one's own it opens the door wide to the practice of mutual deference. Realizing that there is a time to lead and a time to follow is an attribute of wisdom that I strive daily to put into practice.