

# A New 'Marshal' For Long Beach Community College District

## Q&A With Superintendent-President Eloy Oakley

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Long Beach Business Journal  
January 30, 2007

Long Beach City College (LBCC) celebrates an impressive 80th anniversary this year, but newly appointed Superintendent-President Eloy Oakley isn't about to let the institution just fall back on tradition.

"Well, the way I like to put it is, my predecessor, Dr. Jan Kehoe, sort of paved a road, and it's my job now to start driving down that road and to try to find ways to advance the college based on that foundation," Oakley says.

And with construction, renovation and repairs – the fruits of a \$176 million Measure E bond voters passed in 2002 – still very much underway at the college's Pacific Coast and Liberal Arts campuses, it certainly appears to be an opportune time to bring in new leadership.

Prior to his January appointment, Oakley, who holds an MBA from the University of California, Irvine (UCI), was the assistant superintendent and executive vice president of administrative services at Long Beach Community College District, where he has served since 2002.

**LBBJ:** First of all, how do you anticipate your educational and professional background will help you in your new role as superintendent-president?

**Oakley:** Well, as far as my education, one of the biggest pieces is that I actually went through the community college system. That's when I first became really aware of the great job that community colleges do in helping students like me get in, get focused and get transferred.

I got into the military right after high school, turning down a few opportunities to go on to higher education . . . and Golden West College provided me with a clear path to transfer to UCI. So certainly, that laid the foundation for my interest in [public] education.

As far as my work background, around the same time I was attending Golden West College, I began working as a consultant . . . in the community college system's administrative services office. Beyond that, I did spend some time working in the private sector . . . for Keenan & Associates, an insurance brokerage firm that deals with K-12 and community colleges. [There], I was able to work in the private sector, but also focus on education – I got to see it from a different angle . . . which gave me a whole new set of insights into how community colleges work.

So all of my experiences have . . . sort of prepared me, I think, for the role of superintendent-president.

**LBBJ:** We also read that you are currently enrolled in a doctoral program at Walden University. What are you studying?

**Oakley:** I'm on a leave of absence from the doctoral program, because I took some time off when I got into the presidential search. The program I had enrolled in was a doctorate in community college leadership.

**LBBJ:** Well, you're getting a lot of hands-on experience, so that works out well. So taking everything you've learned into consideration, in your view, what is the role of a superintendent?

**Oakley:** My sort of expectation for this job is to be the person who

marshals the resources of the college – the human resources, the financial resources – and focuses them on particular areas that I feel, and, from faculty and community input, that we all feel are areas LBCC needs to react to.

Community colleges have to try and get a feel for the need in the community, because we have open enrollment. We take everyone and anyone. Our job is to prepare [students] for work or transfer – or, if they're in the workforce, improve their skills so they can be promoted.

So my job is to help look at what's going on in the community and see where LBCC needs to change and adjust to meet those needs. I represent the college and the community, and fight for resources at the state level for the college.

**LBBJ:** Taking a step back – LBCCD has certainly improved in many ways under Dr. Kehoe's tenure, but are there particular areas you'd like to continue to build on?

**Oakley:** There are many things that Dr. Kehoe did that advanced the college, but one of the main ones would be the Measure E construction bond. That's certainly provided us with the funding necessary to give a much-needed facelift to the college, and that is something that I plan to continue to leverage – to find ways to build facilities and classrooms that meet the needs of today's students.

She also did a lot in terms of bringing together good, solid planning processes to the college, and helped the college mature in . . . how it plans for the future. I'd like to continue to build on those processes so that we can really utilize our human resources. We have a lot of fine faculty here to address some of the needs of today's students, which can be very different than the needs of students 10 years ago.

**LBBJ:** Regarding the Measure E bond, what are some of the major projects that are underway?

**Oakley:** We have a number of projects that are ongoing or about to begin construction.

Here at the Liberal Arts Campus (Carson Street at Clark Avenue), we're modernizing our library, and we are well underway with the largest facility that we're going to build: our South Quad complex, which will introduce a number of high-tech classrooms and faculty offices, as well as move the entire administration off of this site of the college to make room for more classrooms and services. That should be complete by this time next year, so we're very excited about that.

At the Pacific Coast Campus (Pacific Coast Highway at Orange Avenue), we are building a new library, two new technology buildings and giving a general facelift to the entire college – and that's all happening within the next year. We're also building new central plants on both campuses, which will . . . economize our utilities [usage] and improve our efficiency.

We're trying to get to everything. Unfortunately, we can't because we can't close down the college, and the rising cost of construction . . . is really outpacing our ability to bring these projects within budget.

**LBBJ:** Let's switch gears and speak more broadly about some of the issues facing community colleges in general. You mentioned budget issues in relation to construction improvements. Are there other concerns?

**Oakley:** I think [LBCC's] success over the next five, 10, 15 years [hinges on] figuring out how we address the underprepared student. Our population of students who are coming to community college ill-prepared to do transfer-level work keeps growing.

That's sort of a general symptom in our education system. The high schools are dealing with it. The middle schools are now trying to deal with this – students are just not as prepared to go on and get into the four-year universities as they were before, and this is a [struggle] across the state, not just in Long Beach.

So we're developing what we call a "Basic Skills Plan" to deal with how to remediate these students and provide services to help them succeed. We feel that this is a very important agenda and we've [pooled] a lot of resources and a lot of people to begin developing a strategy that helps us determine how to best support those students.

Beyond that, there are always the [ongoing] fiscal concerns. Community colleges over the last six years have suffered from some deep funding cuts, and it hasn't been until the last year that the governor has begun to reverse that. Still, there's always the [question] of whether there will be a sustained commitment from the governor and the legislature to fund community colleges at a level where we can actually deal with some of these problems that are facing us.

Some of our other concerns are very much in-line with the basic skills agenda, like improving our transfer rates to four-year institutions and working to make the transition for students as seamless as possible.

We have an excellent seamless education program here in Long Beach, and we have a great relationship with California State University, Long Beach (CSULB), but we have to also look beyond Long Beach and get our students into the other universities throughout the regions.

**LBBJ:** When you talk about seamless education, does that also tie into vocational programs and workforce training?

**Oakley:** That's certainly part of the whole picture. Sort of the buzz-phrase these days for workforce training is "career technical programs." It's a key mission of community colleges in general, and certainly at LBCC. We have one of the largest programs in the state, everything from nursing to aviation mechanics, auto mechanics, welding – a whole slew . . . that we offer.

Certainly as important as transferring students is providing those students who want to go directly into the workforce with some tangible skills, and we're working very hard to provide certificate programs that give students what they need to get into the workforce and actually earn good wages.

We're constantly working with the business community to retool and focus, as part of the seamless education initiative in Long Beach. We want students who were born and raised in Long Beach to be able to go to high school and then have the option of going to LBCC for transfer or to go into the workforce – and then have CSULB right there for their upper-level work.

**LBBJ:** So do you feel that community colleges can play an even bigger role in dealing with vocational education?

**Oakley:** Absolutely. You know, many people don't realize it, but the community college system in the State of California is the largest higher-ed system in the world. We have 109 colleges and we educate around two million students – it's sort of unmatched anywhere else in the world. And, for \$20 a unit, we do it cheaper than anywhere else in the world.

Of course, it's becoming increasingly difficult to do, but I strongly

believe that community colleges in general are sort of untapped resources for families who traditionally think that if you don't transfer to a four-year university, something's wrong.

They sometimes fail to recognize that the level of education at the community college is as good or sometimes superior to what you get at a four-year institution, because during the first two years, many times you're being taught by a TA, or the professor just doesn't have time to spend with the 300-odd students in a huge classroom. Here, we're talking class sizes of 35 to 45, where professors are accessible and can actually work one-on-one with our students.

So we feel LBCC is certainly an important asset, and we want people to recognize that particularly here in Long Beach, LBCC is not only a viable option, but it should be looked on as a [first-rate] opportunity.

**LBBJ:** At the State of the City address, the mayor mentioned his plans for "Long Beach Construction Tech," a partnership with Long Beach Unified School District (LBUSD) to help students who are thinking about going into the construction trades. Is this something you think LBCC could support?

**Oakley:** Absolutely. And our folks are in touch with the mayor's staff, making sure that they understand that we've had programs in place at LBCC for many, many years that prepare students to go into the workforce in construction trades.

We understand that the mayor is working with LBUSD and we feel that we have resources as well that can assist him in his goal. We are obviously very used to and willing to work with Long Beach Unified, so we're hoping to make sure that the mayor's staff is aware of the resources we have at LBCC, and that the mayor knows we are here to support him.

**LBBJ:** We know you've only been superintendent for a few weeks, but has there been anything that has particularly surprised you?

**Oakley:** Well, the one thing . . . is the amount of support that I've received, not only from the community at large, but also from the community here on campus. I've really been blown away by the number of emails, phone calls and visits from people offering their support and just saying that they wish me luck. I think that's certainly a great start.

I think it's a testament to how well people think of LBCC, its reputation, its place in the city, and I'm hoping to ride that wave of support as long as I can.

**LBBJ:** Is there anything else you'd like to say about LBCC's link to the Long Beach community?

**Oakley:** I would just say that we hope the business community really understands that one of our primary missions is to support economic and workforce development. We're here for the business community and we have [several] great resources available.

We have programs like the Small Business Development Center and the Center for International Trade Development that primarily focus on helping businesses in the greater Long Beach area succeed. We are the lead Small Business Development Center for the entire Los Angeles region, which includes L.A., Ventura and Santa Barbara counties, and our Center for International Trade has been around for a number of years, doing a lot of work with businesses with training and helping them learn how to export and work abroad.

We have many other programs for employers – we can give training directly to their staff or help them put together a business plan, and more beyond that. The information is on our Web site, [www.lbcc.edu](http://www.lbcc.edu), and they can call our Office of Economic and Resource Development [at 562/938-5020] if they have any questions. ■