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Training for Change: An Interview with Dr. Jeremy Brown, President, PCC

Sheila A. Martin
Portland State University, sheilam@pdx.edu

Jeremy Brown
Portland Community College

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Training for Change:

*An Interview with
Dr. Jeremy Brown,
President, PCC*



When Portland Community College's board of directors announced its choice for its next leader one year ago, it described Dr. Jeremy Brown (who has a doctorate in physics) as "a collaborative leader skilled at creating strong internal and external relationships" and a "polished communicator who is insightful and inclusive; a quick learner talented at navigating new environments with new players..." IMS director, Sheila Martin explores with Dr. Brown his vision for PCC's future.

Sheila Martin: *You started at PCC about a year ago. What attracted you to the job?*

Dr. Jeremy Brown: It's exciting to think about PCC on many different levels. On the national level, forty-five percent of all undergraduate students in the U.S. go to community colleges. So community colleges have a huge impact on the lives of many of our students. PCC is the 19th largest community college in the nation, in terms of head count of numbers of students. On the state level, PCC is dealing with issues that the Higher Education Coordinating Commission (HECC) has brought to the attention of policy-makers. And, of course, funding for higher education is first and foremost in our minds on most days.

As the largest institution of higher education in the state, we believe that we have a significant responsibility to play a leading role in providing information and feedback on directions that we might wish to take. And some really

exciting and creative ideas are coming up. Obviously on the local scale, PCC has a tremendous impact in our community. It's been amazing to go out into the community and talk with people and hear so many positive stories and to realize how much we're held in high esteem by people in the community.

Before I arrived we ran a survey. Two-thirds of the households said that one or more family members had taken a class at PCC, which is just enormous. Eighty-five percent of folks said that they would recommend PCC to somebody else. So we're starting from a great position. My predecessor really did a terrific job. It's a very fundamentally sound institution. But it also has great aspirations. So all those things put together make for a really great institution at a fascinating time, locally, regionally, and nationally. And of course, Portland's just a fantastic place to live, and having a five-year old son who really enjoys the outdoors, we're having a great time.

SM: *How does PCC meet the challenge of developing programs that prepare students for the jobs that are going to be created in the future?*

JB: That's an easy question, or a difficult question, whichever way you want to think about it. We have to prepare students to get a job immediately after they graduate. But sometimes they leave us early because they get a job offer, and we've in essence met their needs, but they'll still hopefully come back and finish that degree. We also want them to think of education as a lifetime pursuit of knowledge and self-improvement.

We also have to recognize that we're training students not just for today's jobs but for tomorrow's jobs, and even jobs five years from now--jobs that don't yet exist. We have to rely on many sources of information and guidance. Sometimes it's not just the "book skills" that we have to work on, it's also those soft skills. So as graduates change jobs, or change careers, then they rely less and less on what they learned in the classroom or in the lab, or the shop so to speak, and more and more on those soft skills that they may learn outside of the classroom. The important question is, how do we then bring that into the classroom?

We're seeing more and more employers who think carefully about the people that they hire. They may have the requisite skills, but do they have the right approach and understanding of what it takes to be employed in the workforce? That's something that we think about on a regular basis.

The other thing that really helps us a lot is having advisory boards for our academic programs. These boards represent those folks who are out there in the business sector, and who come back to us on a regular basis and talk about our recent graduates. The let us know what skills

they see in our graduates that they really like, and what skills perhaps we need to emphasize more within our curriculum. So we can be quite dynamic in changing our curriculum to meet those needs. Then, of course, we ask them the familiar questions. What skills will students need two years from now? For example, we're seeing right now, and I'm hearing from several quarters, that there's a tremendous need for millwrights. Currently we don't have a program in millwrights, so we're looking at that carefully.

SM: *That's a specific technical skill that people are looking for. Is there a predominant type of soft skill that the employers are looking for in graduates?*

JB: I think a lot of the time it's the problem solving side of things. What happens in the workforce when you encounter a problem that wasn't in the textbook, or that the instructor didn't cover in the welding labs? Can the student or graduate think critically in order to discover creative ways of solving it?

We want our graduates to have the confidence to overcome whatever challenges are put in their way, both in their professional as well as personal lives. So, I think problem solving is an important soft skill. And, of course, we also emphasize leadership, teamwork, time management, and others.

SM: *PCC traditionally has been an important path to high school graduation for students who haven't been successful in the traditional path. What is your view about the future of that role for PCC?*

JB: There are several angles to answering that. For those students who are currently in high school, what can we do to assist

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the high schools in helping them finish? Additionally, what can we do to help those students who dropped out of high school, and who, after years have gone by, realize that they need to get some adult basic education, or a GED?

Focusing on the latter, we do provide adult basic education to about 4,300 people each year. We provide a doorway for those students to get that skill, and to get that diploma that will lead them to other accomplishments. We also recognize that for some of those students, the amount that we charge for the program is expensive. So we provide some scholarships, and we also provide students with some money towards PCC tuition once they've completed a certain number of hours in the adult basic education program.

We have more than 5,300 high school students taking dual credit classes with us on an annual basis. That's a huge number.

For students who are currently attending high school, we offer many different options. Obviously, we have a lot of dual credit programs with a large number of schools within our district. We have more than 5,300 high school students taking dual credit classes with us on an annual basis. That's a huge number. We're also providing students with the opportunity to see what college would be like. They start thinking, "I'm taking a college level class. I'm going to get college credit for this, and I'm still in high school, so maybe college is for me after all." In cases such as the Jefferson Middle College Program, students attend classes on a college campus and begin feeling comfortable in the higher ed environment, so that when they're about to graduate from high school, the thought of "going to college" isn't as intimidating as it might otherwise be.

The Future Connect Program is another option that really is changing people's lives in myriad ways. It's designed to help low-income and first-generation high school students get on the path toward college by

offering career counseling, academic and personal advising, and some scholarship money.

The students themselves have some spectacular stories of opportunity taken and success accomplished. Perhaps their parents didn't speak English. Perhaps their parents thought that the student's chance of going to college was limited by the expense. So if the student gets to go to college for free, and is still living at home, and able to get some work that contributes to the family economy, then we're building bridges to folks who never thought college was an option. And at the end of the day, people run out of reasons not to go to college.

SM: *More generally, what role do you see for PCC in meeting the state's 40-40-20 goals—the idea that all Oregon adults will hold a high school diploma or a GED, that 40% will hold an associate's degree or higher ed certificate, and that another 40% will hold a baccalaureate or higher degree, all by the year 2025? Some observers consider this an audacious vision.*

JB: I'm a big fan of audacious goals. When we think about 40-40-20, clearly we have a role to play in the first 20 percent, as we've just discussed, on the high school graduation and the GED side of things. And we obviously play a significant role in the middle 40, by offering two-year certificate programs, two-year associate degrees, and workforce training. On the other 40, the four-year degree side of things, we have an ever-increasing number of students who see the value of starting at community college and then transferring to a four-year institution. They realize that two years at a community college is a whole lot less expensive than two years at a four-year institution. And they are close to home—perhaps living at home. And



PCC Cascade



PCC Rock Creek



PCC Sylvania



also they are making a transition from being in high school to being in an institute of post-secondary, higher education. Sometimes that transition is too much too soon and some people struggle in their first term as an undergraduate. Getting used to living in a dorm, making a whole new set of friends, and facing a different set of classroom expectations can be daunting all at once. We're taking away at least half of that, if not more, if they've also spent time with us taking dual credit classes in high school. At last count, we had more than 4,200 students who went from PCC to Portland State, for example, in one year. We had nearly 800 who went to Oregon State and more than 400 who went to University of Oregon. So, we are providing that pathway to students. I think that community colleges play a really crucial role in this 40-40-20 goal, and we're committed to ensuring that we do our part in that.

SM: *PCC's partnership with PSU is critically important because so many of the students that we serve wouldn't be able to attend PSU if they didn't take advantage of the financial benefit of attending community college for their first two years.*

JB: If I remember correctly, forty percent of PSU's recent graduating class had taken classes at PCC. So it is a great partnership, and we really value that. And of course, a lot of the times students who transfer have already taken college classes, so they're used to college credit. They recognize that the courses that they take transfer in, so the rigor is comparable. So when they do transfer, then they're very well prepared to be successful.

SM: *I want to talk a little bit now about your relationship with the neighborhoods in which your*

campuses are located. How do you think PCC's presence affects those neighborhoods?

JB: You know, one of the things that I'm really struck by when I visit the various campuses, the three campuses—Cascade in Portland, Sylvania near Tigard and Lake Oswego, Rock Creek in Hillsboro—and the new Southeast Center in Portland, is the amount of construction that's going on. In 2008 we passed a bond for 374 million dollars, which at the time was the largest bond in the state of Oregon. It was the height of the recession, and yet we passed that. It's been interesting, because other community colleges have struggled, from what I understand, to have bonds passed within their districts. I attribute our success to reaching out to our communities from the beginning and getting them involved in the process.

I was out at the Cascade campus this morning on Killingsworth, talking to those folks about what we need to do, and what we'd like to do, and asking them, how does this work for you as a member of our community? Parking is a huge issue, obviously. And so we built underground parking. We assuaged the fears that local folks may have that we'd be parking on the streets. And we actually do a pretty good job of discouraging our students from parking in the neighborhoods immediately around our campus. So that has gone remarkably well for us.

The Southeast Center on 82nd and Division officially opened two new buildings, which essentially doubled the size of instructional space in that area. I think that's going to have a huge impact for that community. Not only do we have a first-class dedicated library for that campus but we also we have a coffee shop, and retail spaces on the front side of some of our buildings. We are starting to integrate and

Parking is a huge issue [at the Cascade campus]... and so we built underground parking.

...the key elements are to engage the community early in the planning process, and to have them become champions of what we're trying to accomplish.

be part of the community, while remaining an institution of higher education.

We really want PCC to be a part of the larger community. I always say that we are a community college, which means we are a college full of community. So we want our neighbors in the larger community to be a part of the things that we do, and to realize that the events that we hold on campus are for them too, that we reach out and invite them to be part of campus life. We don't think of ourselves as an ivory tower. We think of ourselves as a commons where people come for intellectual dialogue, to enrich their culture, as well as also being an inviting, open space for people to be.

We've also done some remarkable things in terms of working with the community and local law enforcement to make our communities much safer. We've received many kudos for doing things like that. All of these efforts are important. But the key elements are to engage the community early in the planning process, and to have them become champions of what we're trying to accomplish.

SM: *What has surprised you the most about this community?*

JB: Well, my wife and five-year-old have been impressed by the warmth of the welcome we've received in this community. And you know, we talk about Oregon being nice, but this is way over being nice and so it's been great. And, again, it goes back to how people perceive PCC. They understand that having an institution like PCC in their backyard, so to speak, is a tremendous benefit. People here in the district are just amazing in terms of the support they give to the arts, to culture, to a whole variety of

different things, and to education. Not that I've been surprised by that, but I applaud it. It makes it a great place to live.

I've worked at some places before where emails from students have typically talked about the faculty in not so glowing terms. And here, I would say that probably if you were to take ten emails that I get from students, nine of them will be saying how great our faculty are. And you think for every nine people who take the time to write something positive about a faculty member, there's probably another ten people who felt that way but just didn't write.

Students and people who go to PCC say, "I feel like I get this individual attention, that they know who I am, they understand my issues and they help me solve them," rather than saying, "Oh, I'm just one of 90,000 people who stands in a long line and gets to the front of the line and then has to go back to the line because I forgot a piece of paper." We don't have lines, which I'm just totally amazed by. Students seem to be very satisfied with the service we provide.

SM: *It sounds like you've taken a page from the business community in terms of having a customer-focused model for how you're running your organization.*

JB: I think of the relationship between customer service and customer loyalty. And I like to think about customer loyalty. So if somebody had a choice, would they stay with us out of loyalty rather than just because we're here and it's convenient. That's where customer service comes in—it promotes loyalty. I really think we're developing an environment where our customers are loyal to us. **M**