

## UNDERSTANDING HIGHER EDUCATION FINANCE

### INTERVIEW WITH DAVID LEVINSON PRESIDENT, NORWALK COMMUNITY COLLEGE

As part of a project on higher education finance supported by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, Nate Johnson interviewed a number of experts and leaders to gather different perspectives on how major budget choices are made. The interviews have been condensed for publication so that the key insights are available to anyone who is interested.

This interview with David Levinson, who has a background in sociology, highlights the importance of partnering with communities, how to develop successful learners, and the interdependency of colleges and universities.

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***At Norwalk Community College, you have the extremes of higher income and lower income that's typical of Connecticut. I'm interested in how you bridge those extremes. Is the foundation something that you started, or was it ongoing when you got there?***

No, the foundation was solidly established when I arrived. What impressed me from the get-go was the engagement of high-net-worth donors in a community college. The appeal then and is now is really the people that you come into contact with in Fairfield County, and we focus a lot on health sciences, nursing, and other allied health professions, that the people that you will be dealing with in Fairfield County, many are NCC graduates, because our graduates stay here. We have a phenomenal nursing and allied health program. Our foundation actually raised \$20 million toward a state-of-the-art building that we opened a few years ago for health and life sciences. That was pretty much the ethos of what existed when I got here.

What I've tried to do is to increase that level of engagement, because I really believe that we are one of the few institutions in Fairfield County that transcend the income and wealth dividing line and also in many ways the achievement or opportunity gap, because we bring in people here. Our students are predominately lower income than our donors and incredibly diverse. We're a majority student body of color. We're a Hispanic-serving institution at NCC. From what I can tell in Fairfield County, because we don't have county government (for better or worse), we are a countywide institution that brings in people from all walks of life.

Just to be able to work with everyone, our local congressmen, the mayor's office, the redevelopment authority, the residents who have a strong voice on this coordinating committee, the financial folks, the bankers, so to speak, has been a really great experience. The more that we do that in Norwalk and Stamford, which are our two biggest cities, the better for all involved.

***What do you think the key supports or revenue sources—off your own books, within the community, within the state—for your students might be?***

Basically, our students, given the majority are first-generation students, and right now two-thirds, unfortunately, are testing into remedial math or English. They have tremendous needs. They have the academic needs, the social capital needs. They have the grit, but they may not have the direction or the mentoring or someone in their family really orienting them, so I think our students really need more resources than the student at Wesleyan University to succeed.

For me, you want to make these linkages to the community because there are incredible resources there, and there are things that we just can't do alone.

In terms of higher-ed. financing, it is very hard to come up with enough resources that to really properly deal with students, because I look at our students and what we've tried to do in terms of tailoring and individualizing our advisement and assessment processes. It's really more from a case-management perspective. I think our individual students individually have a number of needs, and I think it's important that we understand the constellation of those needs; however, as an institution directly, we're not going to be able to fulfill those, but what we can do is make the linkages, because one of the things that I think occurs here and in most situations is a lot of siloing. There are a lot of turf battles that often go on.

I think if we want successful learners, because what we're about is creating successful students, they need a number of things. They need engaged classroom instruction, but they also need other services, and I think that's critical. Those are really hard to provide and impossible to provide unless you bring in larger community resources. That's always been my strategy here, to try to do that in somewhat of a purposeful way and to also bring the college in that regard, because I would say that when I first got here and really made this a major focus, there was a lot of concern why was I going out into the community for a number of things that "deprecate" the mission of the college.

Even though we're a community college, I would say that when I got here, the college was pretty separate from the community, at least the local low-income communities. It had connections to some high-net-worth individuals, but in terms of the city of Norwalk, for example, the college, even though it was physically embedded here, did not have those larger community linkages.

***Say you could generate another \$10 million in recurring revenue, and you had a choice about how to do it—state appropriations, financial aid, a gift in philanthropic revenue—or you could direct \$10 million to the school district for programs that would help prepare students, or dual-enrollment programs, or social service programs in the community that would benefit your students. What do you think would have the biggest impact?***

To me, the guiding principle for that is always the issue of sustainability. How can we create a revenue fund that's going to be sustainable over time? If I had a magic wand, it would be a line-item appropriation from the state of Connecticut that would go directly to the college. If I had my druthers in general, I'd much rather the funds come directly to NCC and that we are held directly accountable. I think that would be important.

It would be something if we could build it into our operating budgets in our public schools. Working out a provision of responsibility that each of us believe would be sustainable, that would be the ideal thing.

For me, strategically, it would be the expansion of early-college high schools. When I look at the issue of student success and, of course, in the community college world there's been a major movement toward success completion, improving graduation rates, you name it. I really firmly believe that for the youth of today, early-college high schools are the way to go if they're well-designed.

***Is there anything else you'd like to say or anything I haven't asked you?***

One of the things that I think is very interesting for people to look at is the Strive Network that originates out of Cincinnati. That really is the overall vision that we have of creating these kind of community-based

coalitions. There was even a case study in the *Harvard Business Review* about Strive that really shows it to be really a beneficial fiscal strategy, not only for communities but, from my vantage point, colleges.

My own feeling is, when we think of higher-ed. finance, we have to think more globally and really leverage other assets and certainly in the public sector not expect to have the kind of appropriations we had before, and also in the private sector. One of the things that's really clear there as we go through the financials of private colleges and universities, except for the real big players, the Wesleyans, etc., a lot of the smaller liberal arts private colleges, they're having a real difficult time, to say the least.

I think the way we think of finance has got to be a bit different, and it's not just the philanthropy. I think we need to get out of this idea of higher ed. as standalone institutions. We are very dependent, and we are an entity that needs to look at these different partnerships. We just need to rethink about what do we really mean by "philanthropy"? What do we mean by "private support"? What is the role of public v. private finance?

The current structure and the system is, in my mind, overall as a country, not sustainable. The Harvards will be here forever, but if you look at the issue of access, completion, employment, student debt, if you put all of it together, it's not a pretty picture out there.

*David Levinson also serves as the Vice President for Community College with the Connecticut State Colleges and Universities and is a former commissioner for the New England Association of Schools and Colleges Commission on Institutions of Higher Education.*