

**President's Day Keynote Speech**

September 21, 2023, 10:45 a.m.

Delivered by Bradley Lane, Ph.D.

Hello! I am so excited to be with you to kick off the new academic year. I am Bradley Lane, and I am beginning my second year as Interim President at Seattle Central College. For those of you who I have not yet met, and I know they are quite a few of you, (we were busy hiring lots of people last year), let's connect! I'm genuinely interested in meeting you, learning about the work you do, and why you chose Seattle Central.

When I think back on where we were a year ago, it's very much full circle moment – a familiar starting point: the beginning of a new school year. When I think back to last year, as we ushered in fall quarter 2022, at what is usually a time of hope, renewal, and excitement, it was a moment for us to face the many challenging issues that lay ahead of us and how we could tackle those issues together.

We started last year with uncertainty and likely some worry about our future: budget deficits, program closures, drops in enrollment, leadership changes, safety on campus, our sense of community, and more. I know challenges like these can cast a long shadow and cloud our path with questions and ambiguity. They can obscure our vision for the future and challenge our sense of stability. They can make us question why we work here and affect the satisfaction we feel in the work we do, as has been evidenced by recent campus surveys.

Shortly after I started as Interim President last year, people asked about my vision for the college's future. As I mentioned then, visions cannot be developed by one person. We build a vision together. We must collectively reimagine, rebuild, and revise together.

And that is exactly what we did last year. From August of 2022 to now, we have hired over 90 new full-time employees at the college. If you are new to the college in the past year, or if you were hired permanently into a role over the last year, we are so excited to count you as our colleague! If you served on a search committee over the past year, thank you for your service as we build our community. The college may not have hired as many full-time positions in one year since it opened!

Fun fact: I inquired with the Registrar's office how many faculty and staff it looked like the college had when it opened in 1966. It was about 300. We have between 500 and 600 full-time faculty, staff, and administrators now, and either way—100 new hires in a year is simply amazing. Congrats and many thanks to all of you for making it happen!

Also through your hard work and shared commitment, we stabilized our budget. We stabilized our enrollment. We kept all programs open for the foreseeable future. We fought the rumor the college was closing. We invested in our community and in our building. We built new partnerships. We testified in front of Congress. We lobbied the state for increased funding. We

won grants. We sailed through our mid-cycle accreditation visit with flying colors. We worked to close the completion gap through Guided Pathways, Umoja, ANNAPISI and more. We accomplished an enormous body of work, and I will go into more detail on some of our wins, because we deserve to revel in each one of our victories.

So today, the start of this fall quarter, I am filled with a deep sense of gratitude for the opportunity to celebrate, focus us on the tasks ahead of us, and encourage us to dream big as we think about the future of our college 5 or 10 years down the road.

### **Major Win: The budget**

Last year, like most years in recent memory, the College faced a budget deficit of about \$3 million between our expenses and the money coming in. I should note, budget deficits are nothing new to community and technical colleges, which are historically underfunded by our state legislature. For the last five or six recent fiscal years, Seattle Central ran budget deficits, but we could balance the books by drawing down on savings. By last year though, we were getting to the point that we no longer could rely on our savings, and we were mandated to present a balanced budget to the Board of Trustees.

I know this time was frustrating and scary for people – the prospect of sunseting popular academic programs as a way to balance the budget – and because of how hard it seemed to thoroughly understand and pinpoint the exact deficit figure. First, it was \$7 million, then \$4 million and then it was finally \$3 million.

Regardless of the exact figure, the fiscal situation when I came back last summer told me three important messages:

- 1.) we needed better tracking and reporting tools, so at any point, we know what the ledger says
- 2.) we needed better transparency around the budget process, ensuring that stakeholders have a clear understanding of how financial resources are managed and;
- 3.) to ensure the long-term sustainability of the college, we have to have a stable and balanced budget.

We started last year assuming it was going to be another year with a deficit. But because of everyone's hard work, including budget managers who carefully monitored expenditures, those of you who participated in the budget development process or provided feedback in our monthly town halls, or assumed extra responsibilities while we were adding back capacity in our staffing, we accomplished the almost unthinkable. We went from projecting a \$3 million shortfall to projecting a balanced budget by February. And in June, we wound up with a balance of \$562,000 left over. Again, this was amazing. And we are projecting another amount

to be left over this coming year—maybe \$150,000, but current budget indicators for the 2023-2024 fiscal year continue to reflect your hard work as we anticipate a surplus this year. Stay tuned for monthly town hall meetings for budget updates throughout the year. This is very encouraging news, and I am grateful for and amazed by your work on our budget.

**Major Win:** Support from State Legislature, Donors, New Partnerships

Seattle Central garnered so much media and community attention last year, and we were able to harness that energy into local and legislative action. I'd even mention national attention – US Secretary of Education (that's *US* Secretary, in Washington DC) Miguel Cardona and US House of Representative member Pramila Jayapal visited Seattle Maritime Academy this summer to showcase the importance of affordable workforce programs like ours that lead to middle class jobs.

The potential closing of four professional technical programs at Central last year kickstarted conversations about funding high-cost workforce programs at all community and technical colleges across the state. As a direct result of Central's effort to find sustainable funding solutions for high-cost programs, the State Board for Community and Technical Colleges lobbied for \$77 million in supplemental funding for workforce programs across the entire state in the legislative budget session.

While this request did not make it into the final biennial budget, Seattle Maritime Academy did receive \$1.5 million over the next two years in partnership with the state department of transportation, that will help provide a pipeline of mariners to Washington State Ferries, where they are badly needed. And we want to use this opportunity to pave the way for more women and people of color to move into this industry in much higher numbers than ever before.

For the first time since 2008, the Washington state legislature decided to fully fund COLAs, without leaving a portion of the cost-of-living adjustments to be funded locally by colleges however they can find a way. This year, finally, we could provide much-needed cost of living increases without offsetting expenses through budget cuts elsewhere to bridge the funding gap. This includes historic, well-deserved increases between 7 and 14 percent over the next two years for all of our employees.

There have also been some amazing partnerships and major gifts over the past year too. We've entered into a partnership with Seattle's Office of Economic Development, who awarded the Seattle Maritime Academy almost \$1 million to engage in community-based recruitment. The Apparel Design & Development program received a \$300,000 gift from a donor, the family foundation of a program graduate that will sponsor student navigation and assistance with industry partnership for the next several years. This month, the Wood Technology Center is pursuing partnerships with the Urban League and the Port of Seattle to start running evening cohorts again. And just on Monday, you might have seen the *Seattle*

*Times* (no bad news this time!), where it was announced the Wood Technology Center received a \$750,000 grant from the Lowe's Foundation to train more skilled workers. It was the largest private gift Wood Technology Center has ever received!

The support for our programs and students is truly remarkable. We have taken a challenging situation, and out of it we are stewarding relationships and partnerships that can give us substantial backing and support for some time to come. Thank you for your voice. Thank you for your activism. Because of our efforts, all our programs will remain open, and they will stay that way for the foreseeable future. This advocacy has not only helped to sustain these programs, but also to contribute to their expansion and growth going forward.

### **ANOTHER Major Win: Enrollment**

A major contributor to stabilizing our budget last year was stabilizing our enrollment. Though modest, enrollment grew at Seattle Central last year for the first time since 2011. When it was all said and done, the academic year saw only an increase of 1-2 percent in our full time equivalent students, but trust me when I say what a big deal that was. After a dozen years of steadily dropping enrollment numbers, a global pandemic, and a range of geopolitical factors, including immigration and visa policies that reduced one of the largest international student populations here, at any community college in the nation, a 1-2 percent increase in FTEs last year was actually very, very encouraging news. And let me tell you this year, we are in for even more enrollment growth.

To offer some perspective, statewide enrollment at community and technical colleges peaked at around 200,000 FTEs in 2011. That year, we had more than 8,400 full-time equivalent students, not people – people was more like 15,000! From 2011 - 2023, Washington state community and technical colleges experienced a 33 percent enrollment drop from 2011 - 2023, from 200,000 students at a state level to around 133,000. During the same time span, Seattle Central went from an all-time high of 8,400 FTEs to around 3,900 last fall.

Despite the dire appearance of those figures, I have some exciting news to share. Enrollment is really, truly turning around. Several weeks ago, we surpassed our final fall numbers from last year – we were already ahead of where we were last year, a month or more ago. And the busiest part of enrollment period had not even happened yet. When comparing year-over-year enrollment numbers, we have recently been finding days when we were 50 or 60 percent over the same day from last year. Right now, before the start of fall quarter, we already 13 percent higher in state FTEs and 9 percent higher across all FTE categories than our final fall quarter numbers from last year.

This accomplishment is the result of lots of hard work by many people, and there are so many successes to celebrate as a part of this. We have hired additional staff in admissions and financial aid to provide faster service to students. We are reducing the time students take to

complete the different steps of the enrollment process. We are reducing processing time for financial aid and having more students move through the financial aid process faster. Our collective work improving the admissions and enrollment experience is paying off. Kudos to our colleagues in Student Services for making this happen, and we are just getting started. This year, we will be focusing even more on strategic enrollment planning and process improvements across admissions, financial aid, and enrollment.

As of today, we are expecting over 8,000 people to enroll this fall. It's about 4,800 FTEs, which is noticeably larger than 3,900! Better yet, we still have a few days to go before the quarter starts. Let's keep getting students enrolled and open sections where there is waitlist, ok? And just maybe we could get to 5,000!

It's been a long time since I've been so excited about enrollment, but I want these figures to be the floor, not the ceiling. We are nowhere near those 2011 numbers, and we don't have to be there yet – but we can be back to where we were just a few years ago, and we are going to be back there soon because these are very, very positive numbers.

**The work ahead of us:** Being a good neighbor.

National Good Neighbor Day is on September 28. This kind of obscure national day started in 1978 under the Carter administration to remind us that “caring for our neighbors and contributing to one's community are the most important things we can do.” So as we look at the work ahead of us, 5 or 10 years into the future, what kind of neighbors do we want to be?

I spent much of the summer at various conferences. I took a team of Central and District leaders to a strategic enrollment planning conference, and another team to a strategic planning conference. Let me tell you, it's going to be a year for being strategic! I felt like I was back in school. As part of my summer school, I also traveled to Copenhagen in August with the Capitol Hill EcoDistrict, a community roots organization that focuses on making our neighborhood more livable. We studied ways to make our neighborhood safer for pedestrians and full of public art and street activities. We also studied ways to build affordable housing and how to mitigate impacts of climate change in urban neighborhoods like ours.

I was invited on the visit because it is recognized that Seattle Central is a cornerstone of this neighborhood, and as we plan for the future of Capitol Hill and for Seattle itself, the college must step up and be leader, and once again step into its role in developing community spirit and community life in the neighborhood around us.

As part of our visit, we went to a culture house called *Absalon*. It is a former church that has been turned into something like a community center in the US. They call it your living room away from home. It's your breakfast cafe, an afternoon hangout, and a place where you eat

dinner. They even have a yoga studio that doubles as a club in the evenings. Table tennis, music, movies, parties, lectures and more. Because *Absalon* believes the social ties we form with each other are what gives life value.

I felt inspired; and it underscores to me how our college can play a role in making Capitol Hill more engaged, more sustainable, and more livable as we serve as the cornerstone of our community. Logistically speaking, the decade of capital projects ahead of us fit well in this vision: Renovating Broadway Performance Hall while preserving community theater and meeting space, renovating our student leadership building and our gym in ways that can open out onto Cal Anderson Park and invite the community in, orienting our front door with a welcome center within steps of public transit, one day even building affordable student and employee housing. We can re-energize our community and our campus at the same time.

I've already started meeting with groups on campus to engage our approach to the community in new ways – whether it is in continuing education, or the rentals we host for outside groups, or maybe a community gym membership to the activity center across the street, or maybe a visit to our bakeshop, our bistro or our restaurant. This year you can look forward to new ways we will be a good neighbor. Michelle McBreen, who really led planning for President's Day, is here to jump start our community relations and events work up again, and we are so happy to have her. We will be having food trucks on campus starting on Wednesdays and growing to more days over the course of the academic year. We are looking at opportunities to fill this place, and I am determined to see our campus thrive and be filled with activity. Stay tuned later this year for something I am calling Capitol Hill Family Dinner. It is an idea that is partially inspired by the nightly ticketed community dinners that *Absalon* hosts for 200 at long communal tables every night.

## **Conclusion**

In the past few years, COVID profoundly disrupted all education, and you know that community colleges were the most impacted sector in higher education. There are colleges I know that lost 50 percent of their enrollment just in the past three years. In the coming years, we are expecting to see a significant shift in the college-going landscape. We know 1 million people stopped out of higher education during the pandemic. For students in K-12 education right now, we see loss in math and writing ability that is persisting in the years beyond the time people were learning remotely or at home. And when the value of higher education itself is being questioned, many in the generation that follows the pandemic may choose to skip college all together.

We cannot let this happen, because of the generational impacts it will have for the communities who can most benefit from higher education – those same communities that have been disproportionately under-resourced, historically excluded from all systems of education, including our own, and structurally locked out of access to capital and methods of building and passing on intergenerational wealth. Plus lower birth rates across all demographic



groups, which started during the 2008 recession (and have not yet returned to their pre-2008 levels) also will have a significant impact on college enrollments in the coming years. This underscores the need for colleges like us to adapt and evolve in an environment where higher education enrollment is going to be subject to fluctuations, even while access-oriented institutions like us are arguably more important than ever before as a lever for social, economic, environmental, educational, and, yes, even racial justice. And it feels like there are not a lot of those levers around these days.

Seattle Central has a tremendous legacy in the city. And we are continuing to adapt and evolve as a college. Did you know that we will welcome over 600 Seattle Promise students to Central this year? When that program was first being planned, it was never dreamed that it would serve as many students as it is serving. Now, somewhere between 50 and 60 percent of all Seattle Public School graduates apply for Seattle Promise. And around 40 percent wind up attending either North, Central, or South as part of Promise. Before Seattle Promise, those rates were 10 or 15 percent, some of the lowest rates in the state for community colleges serving their local 12<sup>th</sup> grade high school students directly out of graduation.

As a result of programs like Seattle Promise, and cohort-based approaches like Trio, Umoja, and AANAPISI, Central is starting to stand out among the Seattle Colleges. (Well, we have ALWAYS stood out, but now I mean in new ways). Central currently has the youngest student population across Seattle Colleges (and our average student age is getting lower every year) and now we also have the most full-time student enrollment of any of Seattle Colleges by far. Neither of these facts used to be true before. In addition, you probably already know that 71 percent of Central's students identify as BIPOC, 20 percent identify as LGBTQ+, 40 percent are first generation students, and 6 percent are student parents. We remain one of the most diverse community colleges in this state, and we lead the work with do with a commitment to antiracism, with a commitment to racial equity, and with a commitment to maximize opportunities for our students in service to all of our diverse communities.

So, with trends like the ones I have been describing, you can see that everything is not all dire. So many things that are happening at Central these days are wonderful, they are exciting, and they are the result of our collective hard work and intentional effort over these past couple of years. Our working together. I fully believe now is our chance. Now is the perfect time to think big. I want to challenge you to let your creativity run wild. If there are no limits, no barriers, no constraints, what do you wish for our students, our campus? What kind of neighbor do you want us to be? How can we be the cornerstone of this neighborhood? How can this campus grow, set even deeper roots on the Hill and across the city?

No matter what challenges the college faces, Seattle Central is here to stay. This college has a promising future ahead of us that matches our legacy and our history. Now we just need to step into what's possible for us.

I am so happy I get to do this work with you.



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