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Anne Kress and the reinvention of MCC City Newspaper - Online

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It's hard to think of another local institution that has more successfully reinvented itself than Monroe Community College. Not long ago, if you were going to MCC, it was often cynically assumed it was because you couldn't get into a "real" school.

MCC has successfully jettisoned that image, and a good deal of the credit seems to belong to MCC President Anne Kress. In the relatively short time she's been in office, Kress has helped to significantly elevate MCC's stature.

MCC is increasingly seen as a smart choice – a reliable pathway to a rewarding career and-or a four-year college, minus the high tuition.

MCC is in a unique position at an unusual time in higher education when many students are concerned about accumulating debt in an uncertain economy. And even though MCC doesn't have a huge endowment to work with, Kress is able to offer students affordability and value.

Just weeks ago, Vice President Joe Biden used MCC as a backdrop to talk about job preparation for a global economy.

Since her appointment in 2009, Kress has quickly embedded herself in the Rochester community. She serves on the boards of several nonprofits and on Governor Andrew Cuomo's Regional Economic Development Council.

And she recently returned from a trip to Washington DC with Rochester Mayor Lovely Warren. The pair lobbied for economic aid to make the Rochester region an advanced manufacturing hub.

And Kress has shown she can handle herself in a tough, politically charged debate. Shortly after arriving at MCC, tensions sparked over where to relocate the college's downtown campus.

After a lengthy search for a suitable site, Kress and MCC's trustees opted to purchase vacant property from Eastman Kodak near High Falls. Former Mayor Tom Richards opposed the idea, and unsuccessfully tried to convince Kress and MCC officials to stay closer to East Main Street's downtown development. Kress says the decision to move the Damon campus to the Kodak site has been made and she's moved on.

And Kress has not been timid about stepping into a broader discussion about city schools and the importance of K-12 education. MCC leads more than 20 programs with the Rochester City School District ranging from preventing summer learning loss to increasing college readiness.

Kress talked about the challenges facing community colleges, MCC's relationship with the city school district and Superintendent Bolgen Vargas, and how to prepare students for the new skills-driven economy in a recent interview.

She also talked about Vargas's controversial strategy to have colleges take over the management of some city schools. And she shared her concerns about Rochester's poverty rate and how it impacts city schools and the area's colleges.

The following is an edited version of that discussion.

CITY: What are your plans for the new Damon campus? How many students will attend and what programs are planned?

Kress: We anticipate when we open in 2017 we'll have about the same enrollment that we have right now at Damon – between 2,800 and 3,000 students.

One of the biggest benefits of that campus is that we'll be able to add programming that will draw even more students to Damon.

We have room for about 20 percent growth built into the facility we're developing. And when we look at the programs we'll be bringing there, it's a really nice mix. Certainly we'll move everything that we already have at Damon, but we also have

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what we call our "program clusters." For example, we'll have our pre-college programs there under one roof.

Upward Bound helps students who are underrepresented in higher education. They come from low-income families, first-generation families, and it helps them get a leg up on going into college.

Maybe two years ago, MCC was one of the few community colleges that received funding for an Upward Bound STEM program, which has a special focus on science, technology, engineering, and math.

We'll also have work force development programs, career and technological education programs, and we'll continue to look at how we can expand our college partnerships as far as transferring institutions.

Right now, Keuka College is the only transfer partner we have at the Damon campus, but we'll have room to grow so that students could potentially complete their entire four-year degree at the new campus.

And then we'll be able to bring MCC's Corporate College under one roof, which is for both credit and noncredit instruction typically for non-degree seeking students. Many already have a degree and they're working; they're just seeking to advance certain skill sets.

We've heard a lot from community-based organizations and the nonprofits who may want training and academic programs directly related to preparing for occupations in those fields. How do you effectively lead a community-based organization? How do you manage a nonprofit?

If we could create a two-year program that could lead to a transfer to a four-year program, that would be fantastic.

We've also been approached by some community agencies to expand in the academic areas that we already have at Damon. Human services is a good example. We've been approached about expanding [human services] to include specific training for dealing with child abuse victims.

Nursing would stay at the Brighton campus?

Yes. We don't want to duplicate incredibly high-cost, capital-intensive programs. Nursing was created in a building that was specifically built for it. It models a hospital, and that would be hard to duplicate somewhere else.

We do have a grant proposal out there to create the Workforce Development Center, which would be very flexible. It would be sort of a quick response training center so that when businesses came to us, we could gear up really quickly, recruit students, get them in, and get them trained.

How much of the space at Damon will be available for START-UP NY? (Some of MCC's Damon campus space could be available to business partnerships resulting from Cuomo's plan to attract businesses to the state with tax-free zones. All of SUNY's community and four-year colleges qualify as tax-free zones for business developers.)

We acquired 547,000 square feet, and we'll use roughly half of that. The other half of the facility we've provided to START-UP NY to essentially be part of that broader program.

There's about 200,000 square feet that START-UP NY is marketing and there's also some land that is owned by the [MCC] Foundation that we've put up for START-UP NY that could [potentially] be used for an advanced manufacturing plant.

We hear that there are thousands of jobs in the area that are not being filled because employers can't find skilled applicants. Yet we also hear that there are no jobs. What's going on?

Here's the challenge: the jobs are there, but what skill sets are people bringing to the work force?

Optics is a good example and it sort of fits into the conversation around advanced manufacturing. I think the issue is that advanced manufacturing today isn't what it used to be; it's a very specific skill set.

Let's say you have a bachelor's degree in finance; it doesn't necessarily qualify you to be an optics systems technologist. Yes, you may have a four-year degree, but what the employer is looking for is someone with a relatable two-year degree.

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This question shows the challenge with our economy right now in that employers are far less focused on degrees per se, and much more interested in skill sets.

And middle skill sets is a good way to describe them because those skills are taught at the community college level and they don't necessarily involve earning a two-year degree. Maybe they need noncredit instruction or certification, because when someone is hiring, they're not hiring the degree. They're hiring the skills.

This is a fundamental shift that's hard for some people to understand. It doesn't seem like we should have an employee gap because we have so many people coming out of college with degrees and we have so many people unemployed. But the challenge is, has their background prepared them for the new economy?

There are all sorts of jobs out there that few of us understand because they didn't exist when we were applying to college or preparing for a career.

Mechatronics – I had to have that field explained to me several times because I had never heard of it. And I still don't know if I could explain it properly, but I know there's a big demand for mechatronics degrees. [Mechatronics is an emerging field that combines mechanical engineering with several other types of engineering.]

How do you balance courses that students find interesting and courses they'll need for the job market?

If there's one thing that we're all trying to find the secret recipe for, it's that one. I have a liberal arts degree and I value the liberal arts. But I had to laugh when President Obama wrote a letter of apology to art history teachers after the comment he made recently about majoring in art history.

It was fascinating that focus was on art history and not what the president actually said. I don't think this society has had difficulty valuing traditional college degrees. In fact, we've had difficulty valuing nontraditional degrees.

There's no shortage of art history programs across this country, quite honestly. But there is a shortage of programs in mechatronics. There's a shortage of programs in clinical laboratory technology. There's a huge gap between the number of employees we have and the number we need, and you see that when we have to bring in people from other countries to fill those jobs.

But in terms of creating programs, I would split this between typical transfer programs and the way we look at career technical education programs. When somebody comes to MCC and enrolls in one of our CTE programs, there's kind of an implicit promise in the very title of those programs: When you graduate you can find a career. When we can't promise that anymore, we sunset those programs.

We did that with massage therapy a few years ago. Students enjoyed studying it, and everyone here really liked it because the students did their field work on employees. But when [students] came out of school the most they would get was part-time work.

We look at real labor data from the state and national levels that forecast where the jobs will be, and we try to create programs to meet local need at the level it really exists. For example, we don't grow the dental hygiene program any bigger because we're meeting the local need.

On the other hand, one of the reasons we started the accelerated machining program was because the local demand is so much bigger than the number of graduates produced. We had to make it go faster.

On the transfer side, we look at a much bigger picture of where our students go. For example, we make sure that our students have access to programs that will allow them to transfer into another college or university.

Sports management is a good example. We noticed around the state that several institutions added four-year degrees in sports management. Students at MCC didn't have a pathway into those programs, so we've added a sports management associate's degree program.

So the model of community colleges as a feeder to working-class jobs and four-year colleges as the feeder to the professional class doesn't apply anymore?

Absolutely not. Something like 70 percent of our students are in transfer programs. And they transfer into everything from

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anthropology to nanotechnology.

We have a young woman, Elizabeth Kennedy, who I would say is one of our stars because Elizabeth transferred into Cornell University where I believe she's studying chemistry. I ran into her not long ago and she has three other MCC students in one of her biology classes. That's pretty extraordinary.

At a recent event you said that K-12 education is everybody's responsibility. What did you mean? For instance, what is the relevance of universal prekindergarten to MCC?

College readiness doesn't start in high school, especially if you enter high school at a reading level that's not at ninth grade – or eighth, seventh, or sixth. That's a serious challenge. You've got to close a lot of gaps in a short period of time.

So college readiness really does begin at pre-k because from the very beginning you need to be adding all of these steps together. And that's what I meant when I said I think it's everybody's business – not just higher education leaders and not just the school districts. It's a concern for business leaders and community leaders.

Every taxpayer should be concerned about the quality of K-12 education because we all pay for it one way or another. And we pay twice when there are deficits because when students can't make it through the system, they end up somewhere. And that's usually not a very productive place.

My interest in this subject has to do with my years of working in community college and seeing what happens when students have to start with remedial work.

We can call it whatever we want so it doesn't sound so bad, but the truth is far too many are beginning by doing remedial work; it's pre-college work that they should have already mastered. And they're far less likely to be successful than if they were to start college-level classes on day one. It's terrible for them. It's terrible for all of us. And there's not a single institution that will tell you anything different.

What are we doing right at the elementary and secondary levels and what are we doing wrong?

Students are more likely to succeed the more we can make their outside school experience as positive as possible. We need to reinforce the message that learning is important. They're more likely to succeed when they get that message across the continuum – not just from their classroom teacher, but from somebody at the community center, from somebody on their block, or in their church.

We talk a lot about how MCC students really are on every block, even the most challenged blocks in this community. And when you think about it, what a powerful force that is, to look next door and see that girl, your neighbor friend, is going to college. That sends a message, 'If she's going to college, I can, too.'

One of the most powerful things for me at commencement is seeing parents graduating from college because it sends a message to their children: they can do it, too. And it's never too late to get your education.

What we need to do now as a community is say that it's never too early.

Also, we talk a lot about our failing schools. We need to think about what message that sends. We can be honest about our situation, but think about what that says to a kid [who] is going through incredible odds just to show up at a failing school.

Some research suggests that when more than 50 percent of students in a classroom come from low-income households, there's a corresponding drop in test scores. Is that true in the community college setting?

I think it's relevant. We acknowledge that many of our students are from low-income families. That's in front of us every day. It impacts every community college. It impacts retention. It impacts success.

Students carry with them everything from outside when they come into class. If they haven't eaten, if they've got trouble at home, if they don't have a home, if they're a returning veteran dealing with significant re-entry issues or Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, I mean all of that comes into the classroom.

So one of the big challenges that almost all community colleges face is, how do you serve the needs of this remarkably

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diverse student population?

At an education-related event recently you said that Rochester is a community rich in programs to support the city school district and that we don't need more programs. What did you mean?

At some point we have to come together and say, 'These are our collective goals.'

If we say we want city school children to be more successful, then we need to leave all that other stuff on the side. And a lot of stuff will be programs.

There's a great graphic that we use sometimes in presentations that shows every single program in the community intended to help the city school district. When you look at that, it's a gestalt moment because it quickly becomes clear why none of this is adding up.

The problem is that it's not about the programs. It's about alignment.

We have this real tendency to begin these sorts of boutique programs that serve these 10 students here and these 20 students there. One community college researcher calls it "piloting ourselves to death."

We have all of these pilot programs going everywhere. And when you add them together, they do a fantastic job for the 300 students out of the 15,000 you serve. But what about the other 14,700? How do you scale that up?

The only way to scale that up is by not starting any new programs and by looking at the ones you already have, seeing what works, and finding a way to bring those programs out to the entire student population.

You really need to pause and look at the programs that are already out there and figure out what's the evidence behind them.

It seems like it would be easier to get funding for something that exists and has evidence supporting it.

I would say that is a really big shift in the nonprofit world. What we're seeing more and more is that funders don't want you to start something new. They want you to take something that's proven and scale it up. To use that cliché, they realize that re-inventing the wheel isn't a good use of funding.

Rochester schools Superintendent Bolgen Vargas has proposed having area colleges take over the management of some city schools. Are you considering his proposal? Would MCC ever take over a city school?

I think we're in some ways already doing that. We're one of two partners – the other being St. John Fisher – with the Early College High School. But I think for us, the most exciting thing going forward is P-Tech or Pathways in Technology Early College High School.

It's not MCC taking over a high school because I would be the first person to say that we're a community college, not a high school. But this is a reconceptualization of what high school is.

It's a [grade] 9 through 14 high school, which means that students sort of graduate twice from the same institution. They graduate with a high school diploma and two years later with a two-year college degree. It's based on the Brooklyn P-Tech model.

Ours has a focus on two different pathways – information technology and information systems. And it's not just four years of high school and two years of college. It's really an intermingling of the two. (MCC received state funding in 2013 to create the joint-venture with the city school district.)

It's a whole new animal, if you will, in education. And it has extended day, extended year, and strong business partners around internships and mentoring so that students come out and are ready to go to work.

It's free all the way through, and that's pretty amazing if you think about it.

Critics of traditional urban public schools say that too often poverty is used as an excuse for low student performance.

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My concern when we talk about poverty and how it intersects education is that I do think that it starts to absolve the rest of us to address the issue of poverty. It's not like the only people who are poor are kids in school.

It seems like there should be two parallel conversations, and it relates to expertise. I know how to run a community college, but I am not a social policy person. And the same is true of the superintendent [Bolgen Vargas]. He's not a social policy person.

It seems like there should be some way of addressing these foundational issues so that students can go to school, teachers can focus on teaching, and community colleges can focus on providing access to higher education and careers.

And there should be other discussions and actions around helping people so they can be productive in these settings. That's a conversation about everything from substandard housing to hunger to health care and transportation.

We've been throwing all of this into one bucket and I think we need to start unbundling this.