

Chancellor committed to students

by Joie Nishimoto

Behind every college campus, there is one person who takes the lead.

Leon Richards has been chancellor at Kapi'olani Community College for almost five years. When he first stepped onto KCC ground at its initial location in Pensacola in 1971, Richards was an assistant dean who then worked his way up.

With about four decades of work experience in the University of Hawai'i community college system, Richards has experienced a variety of challenges to improve KCC, while never straying away from his idea that students come first.

Richards had taken some time to sit down for an interview with Kapi'o.

Kapi'o: Since you started at Kapi'olani Community College in 1971, what changes have you seen on campus?

Richards: Since I came here in '71, of course, all these buildings (have) been built. I think also our student enrollment has about doubled, in the sense that we are approaching at least 10,000 students.

I think we've added some new career and technical programs to the college since that time.

We've at least made a considerable effort to reach out and provide every service to the state of Hawai'i and our community, and that can be done through online classes or taking our programs into areas where certain populations are not represented in the state, like for instance our nursing program (in Leeward Community College and Windward Community College).

Kapi'o: And they still get their degree from KCC?

Richards: Yes, and they are still KCC students, although they would be attending classes in another campus.

Those facilities would be open for us on those campuses. Since (1971), we've also expanded our programs to the neighbor islands.

So what I've seen over the years that KCC has become more and more a statewide CC, not only in terms of enrollment but in terms of programs.

Kapi'o: You mentioned that enrollment has almost doubled. What has been done to accommodate all of these students?

Richards: Some of the things that we've done, like I've mentioned, are offering our programs at some of the other campuses. This will ensure that students that they don't have to commute.

Let's say that they live in Waianae or in Kahuku, they could go to Leeward or Windward. That way, they save us in terms of parking spaces and also classroom spaces. Also, we've put classes online and in hybrid format.

We felt essentially that the student population was growing. This college made an effort to at least put classes online. Once a class goes online, students from any part of the state can take that class. What we're seeing is that we have close to 30 percent of our classes either online or in a hybrid format, which is part-online, part-face-to-face. This has helped us in terms of accommodating the large influx of students.

Kapi'o: Is parking still an issue here?

Richards: Parking is still a major concern. We don't have enough parking. As a result, we've partnered with Diamond Head Theatre. Students can park there during the day, and DHT uses our facilities in the evenings and weekends when they have plays.

Also, we've created overflow parking at our CIP (Culinary Institute of the Pacific) site, where we plan to build a four-year program. In the past, we've also partnered with the Department of Land and Natural Resources for the last year (except for this current year).

Students could park across the street, but they plan now to build a park, so we no longer park there. We also moved in terms of working with The Bus company to see whether or not they can increase the number of buses coming here, especially in the morning when a lot of students come on campus.

We encourage students to carpool or to take the bus, or come on bicycles and things of that sort to really save our environment.

We recently completed our Long-Range Development Plan. What it does is outline new facility developments, like what new facilities we will need, in let's say 15 to 20 years, to accommodate at least our programs and students.

The Board of Regents have approved, in principal, at least our LRDP. We'll work with faculty, staff and students in terms of what priority we should go with facilities to match student needs.

Kapi'o: What has been your proudest accomplishment on campus?

Richards: It has been really quite the opportunity to work with and for faculty and staff, and also students.

Seeing a number of students who come to this campus and who have as the years go by gone on to achieve some great things.

For me, providing an atmosphere where faculty can do their job in teaching and working with students and where students can at least feel comfortable in an environment where they can feel respected.

I feel that the faculty and staff are open and that students can have a dialogue. And they see their faculty and staff as role models. To me, that has been the biggest achievement in terms of focusing this campus on students because I say time and time again, we do our best to meet the needs of students.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR









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As long as we put students first, then this college will continue to grow. We do require a lot from our students, but our students do not disappoint us, either in terms of transferring to four-year campuses or going into a career in a technical program and being able to score top in the nation.

Kapi'o: As chancellor, do you also have to face certain hardships?

Richards: Yes. I think as you are aware (of) the financial difficulties that this state is experiencing. We realize that we are a part of the solution to helping the state recover from the economic downturn.

As a result, there are budget cuts. At times, we don't get all the money that we request or ask for. In that sense, that can be a letdown. But if we don't get the money from the state, then we will write grants and things of that sort and apply for grants from the federal government or we will raise money from private companies and individuals.

We've been quite successful in raising funds. This is why I say we're part of a solution. We don't just sit back and say, "We don't have this, we don't have that." We are more proactive. We will go after money and funds.

Kapi'o: Do you have any advice for students?

Richards: Take advantage of the resources you have here. You have very good faculty, infrastructure. The faculty and staff here cares, and they are friendly and outgoing.

So my advice is: Don't wait. Take advantage. We're here to provide opportunities for students. If you don't have money, apply for financial aid. If you're having trouble in a class, there is tutoring. Don't waste this opportunity. If you want to study abroad, we have scholarships where your expenses are paid.

In this time and age, there are many, many opportunities. Take advantage of this and go for it.

Ask questions. If the students are not here, then there is no need to have an institution. Work very hard. If you have problems and questions, ask us.

We're here for you. But I'll also say to students that education can be both fun and hard work. It's up to you to make it that.

Don't look upon as education or going to class as a chore. Look at it as, "I'm getting an opportunity to learn something new." Have fun. Take time to study, but take time to enjoy, because this time of your life will not come again.

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