

Transcription

California Community Colleges Podcast
Episode 9 – John Chiang

Eloy: Hi, everyone. Welcome to another version of the California Community Colleges Chancellor's Office Podcast. My name is Eloy Ortiz Oakley, and I have the pleasure of being the Chancellor of the California Community Colleges. Welcome. Today, I have the pleasure of speaking with our State Treasurer, John Chiang, who is a candidate for Governor of the state of California. Welcome, Treasurer.

John: Oh, it's great to be here. Happy to be at the home of the Community College System.

Eloy: Well, it's great to have you. I want to spend a few moments not only talking about you and your association with the California community colleges, but what you want to do as Governor if the voters select you next November to lead this great state, and what you see as the role of California community colleges. So let's begin with the "Vision for Success." And the California Community Colleges recently published what we call the "Vision for Success." It's sort of a blueprint for the next several years. And it really highlights the need to not only strengthen public higher education in California but to really put a focus on ensuring that every Californian has access to a quality public education through our California community colleges. That we really focus on improving social and economic mobility, and that we do a much better job of serving Californians.

You know, we estimate that, in addition to the 2.1 million students that we currently serve, that there are nearly 3 million other working-age adults out there that have some college but no credential and that are stuck. So we've put an emphasis also on reaching more Californians and helping them get into the workforce with real skills that will allow them to earn a livable wage. So as you think about what's going on in California and you think about the California community colleges, which I'm sure you've had experience with both as Treasurer and as Controller of the state of California, what do you see are some of the biggest

challenges facing not only California community colleges, but public higher education in general?

John: Well, first of all, the most important thing is to understand that community colleges, education, provide the gateway of opportunity, and I strongly believe that education is a civil right. My parents' stories were one based on the magnet of education. My parents were immigrants who came to this country separately from Taiwan. My dad came to this country with three shirts, two pairs of pants, about \$100 in his pocket, English was his fifth language, but he came here for an education. And so we know that your education changes the trajectory of your life. Community colleges are at the heart of communities. They are best able for institutions of higher education to respond to the needs of local communities, to the needs of the students.

And so we know that each community has a local flair, a local flavor. It's made up of the people. And those community colleges can best reflect and most immediately act upon the dreams of the residents of those communities.

Eloy: That's great. And to us in the California Community Colleges, we really see ourselves as operating in 114 different communities throughout California and really reaching the heart and soul of those communities. So we really appreciate your support over the years. Now, the Public Policy Institute of California, which I'm sure you're familiar with, does a lot of great work looking at higher education in general, and there's a couple of findings that I'd like to ask your opinion about. First, the recent survey suggests that 45% of adults that were surveyed in California feel that public higher education is generally going in the wrong direction. And just a little over half of likely voters say the system needs major changes.

What do you make of that survey and those findings? And as Governor, what would you do differently to lead public higher education in California?

John: Well, I think there's an effort that we really need to double down on, making our institutions of higher education more accessible for everybody. And one of the key points is that we know here, in California, despite the remarkable recovery in our economic condition, the price of education, the price of housing, the price of transportation has made life much more difficult, especially, those middle and low-income individuals. That's where community colleges are absolutely key, restoring trust in

the institutions in California. Unfortunately, throughout the United States of America, we've lost trust in our mainstream institutions whether it's the financial institutions, whether it's education, whether it's churches, whether it's corporations.

We have to make sure that people feel that they can be part of institutions, they can be part of the leadership, part of the transformative authority. And then, I think, we'll change it. So we have to work much harder in state government, especially, after that last financial crisis, to make sure that students when they graduate from college, don't come out with massive debt.

Eloy: Right.

John: What do we do to make sure that our students aren't living with great food insecurity and housing insecurity? And so community colleges, I think, are the most adaptable. Right? Because you're building, today, the bridges to high schools. You're building the bridges to the private sector to create the jobs. You understand what the workforce skills and needs and developments need to occur. And so if you can implement that within a year, year and a half, you get the students who leave those community colleges, whether they choose to go for additional education or into the workforce, newer, better opportunities that bring hope and faith and inspiration to their lives.

Eloy: Well, that's great to hear. And you talked about student debt, which certainly is, in many respects, a crisis across the country. Although California is a relatively low-tuition state, it is expensive to live here and so that adds to the cost of education. One of the other findings in the PPIC study was this great concern over affordability in our public higher education institutions. And as you know, California community colleges have the lowest tuition in the country, but yet they lack a lot of access to Cal Grant or other forms of aid. So the cost of actually going to college continues to go up. How do you think about tackling this question of affordability? And what things in your mind can we do as a state to bring down the cost of attending college?

John: Well, a whole bunch of different things. First of all, we have to make a commitment to higher education, to making sure that tuition, the housing costs, are more accessible and affordable for everyday Californians. Simple things. My parents, they started off not making a whole bunch of money. But in the 1960s, early '70s, they used to take us to the bank almost on a weekly basis and deposit, when my dad was

making \$16,000 a year, \$1 each week. And then as he made more, \$2, three days, \$3. When you think about it today, if you started investing in a child 17 years ago, even without making any interest, \$4 a week, you'd pay for your entire AA degree today in the state of California. Little smart habits.

So I want to encourage Californians to participate in the ScholarShare 529 program. Invest early. We know that kids, once they know they have some money saved for them in college, they're headed for a higher degree if they choose to do so.

Eloy: Right.

John: One of the legislative proposals that I sponsored this year, SEIU was an advocate for it, State Senator Ben Allen carried it, was to provide some financial incentives for financial institutions so that they would renegotiate student loans to get them to lower interest rates. As Governor, I would make sure that that passes through. Because when you can help thousands upon thousands of Californians reduce their student loan interest rates, saving money over the long term, they can proceed to that next stage in life. You know? How do you put down money for a house? How do you make sure that you start putting in money for your retirement security? How do you invest in your kids' and grandkids'...

Eloy: Right.

John: ...college education. So I'm working very aggressively, and one of the things that I've worked on -- I'm the only person who's served in all three state financial offices -- getting California back to a better financial path. You know, you're thinking just five years ago, 2012, California was in financial crisis. We passed Prop 30. We pushed for more money for education. I want to make sure that we provide sustainable financing for higher education in California.

Eloy: I think that's a great point. Although, we're talking to most of the other candidates, and you either have mayors or individuals who've been in public instruction, your experience has been in the constitutional offices as Treasurer, as Controller. How do you translate that experience into looking at improving higher education? And what have you learned in your time in those constitutional offices that California can do differently to not only, as you said, better prepare families to afford college, but also, you know, leverage the assets of California to do a

better job amongst the three systems to lower the cost of attending college? Are there some thoughts that you've had in your different roles in those constitutional offices that you could bring to bear as Governor?

John: Yeah. One of the things I would do is make sure we spend our money much more wisely. So I have audited, when I was the Controller, some of the community colleges. I audited the Los Angeles Community College.

Eloy: Yes. I remember when you audited my former college, Long Beach City College.

John: Well, the Los Angeles Community College District, right? So we audited the construction practices. Right?

Eloy: Right.

John: Much to the credit of the trustees, they implemented the practices. And so the good thing about it is they're refinancing at lower rates throughout the state of California, saving money. So that we can reinvest the money saved to use for the Community College System. As the Treasurer today, I've worked aggressively with our enhanced credit rating, showing good, strong financial management that has been recognized by the ratings agencies. So over the lifetime of the debt, we will save \$5.9 billion, monies, what we know, that 51% to 53% of those dollars will be used for education here in the state of California. So we're just implementing best practices at the state level that people are doing with their own pocketbook, their own businesses.

Eloy: So let me ask you one last question regarding, certainly, your experience in, particularly, the Treasurer's Office. So one of the great concerns that's brewing in our public higher education system is this perceived lack of capacity once community college students transfer to the CSU or the University of California, and the lack of facilities. You know, we've gone quite a long time without a state bond to finance new facilities at the CSU or at the UC. So there's growing concern that even though community colleges are increasing the number of students ready to transfer, that there might not be room at our 23 CSU campuses or 9 undergraduate UC campuses. So as Governor, how would you look at financing facilities for public higher education?

John: Eloy, that's a fantastic question. So we actually work on it today. So as the State Treasurer, one of the things that we've gone to in

partnership with the University of California is century bonds.

Eloy: Right.

John: So these are 100-year bonds. Right? Traditionally, you used to look at bonds for 30 years, but we're looking at borrowing it up front, lower interest rates over that longer period of time. So we'll use some on the smaller projects. But for instance, if you have a University of California campus that's using it, let's say, for some infrastructure for one particular college, as they pay back and those monies become available, we can use those proceeds for another University of California campus. As we have these conversations, we know that there's much more financial pressure on community colleges, on CSU campuses, on UC campuses. So part of that conversation will be shifting some of those responsibilities from the college systems themselves to the general fund, so to relieve some of the pressures on higher education facilities in the state of California.

So we're working on it today. And so I'm very excited that we're going to be able to save additional monies that will help build the capacity, help build the infrastructure, most importantly, help build the opportunity for our students both young and old going into the future.

Eloy: That's great to hear. One of the issues that has brewed from some of the recent changes in the federal government has been around our ability to serve some of our most vulnerable populations in our colleges and universities. In particular, students who are undocumented, students who have had the protection of DACA, and who are now struggling to understand whether or not they're going to be allowed to continue to live and work in California. So certainly, in California Community Colleges, we have nearly 70,000 students who are on DACA, and certainly another 100,000-plus who are undocumented. What do you see, the role for the governor or for the state of California in working with the Administration in D.C. to help protect these students, these Californians and to a larger extent, all Californians?

John: Yeah. The governor has to be the moral and economic leader on these issues. This is a nation principally built on immigrants. So what makes California especially special is our great diversity. We have people who come from every stretch of this globe, who choose to be Californians, who work hard, who want to build a better future not only for themselves but for each other. And then you have students and workers who are here on DACA and they're vital to our economy. We're

going to face economic hardship, we're going to see economic stagnation if we don't continue to celebrate and encourage the work of those who qualify for DACA.

And so I think it's important that we send a powerful signal. This governor, I will work with others to demonstrate how important it is not only for California's future but America's future that we support the students and others. What's also important to understand that we're going to have to come together on values. This is an American value, right?

Eloy: Right.

John: "Are we kind? Are we compassionate? Are we supportive? And what's our vision of America going forward?" And I think we need to stand up and speak out, and be strong, and be unequivocal about who we are, and that includes the DACA students.

Eloy: Well, certainly, on behalf of all of our 2 million-plus students, we want to thank you for your voice in this discussion. You've been a vocal proponent of DACA students, so we want to take a moment to thank you for that.

John: Well, I have a staff member, Brenda, who's a DACA student. Right? She volunteered on this campaign, and she's just doing extraordinary work. So we hired her.

Eloy: Well, these are amazing students. And so we would be losing a tremendous asset if we suddenly shipped them to countries that they know nothing about. So let me shift back to the Public Policy Institute of California. One of the other interesting findings that we picked out of their survey was this issue of perceptions about higher education and the impact colleges have on society. We saw in that survey that, although 59% of Californians say that the effect is positive, there's sharp differences across party lines. For example, 70% of Democrats say that it's having a positive impact, 54% of Independents say the colleges and universities are having a positive impact, and only 38% of Republicans say that our colleges and universities are having a positive impact in California.

What do you see in this finding? And how can we ensure that everybody understands the value and the importance of receiving a higher education for all Californians?

John: Yeah. I think we need to have many more conversations, deeper, substantive conversations about those perspectives. "Do we want our airline pilot to be well-trained? Do we want our teachers to be well-educated? Who do you want fixing your car? Or who's designing your next version of your smartphone?" I think once we refashion those questions in asking who they want, "Do you want a highly educated, well-trained doctor performing your bypass?" I think if we reframe those conversations, we may get different responses. But I think it's important that everybody understand, this is a globally competitive economy.

You may not feel you need your AA degree or bachelor's degree, but you need education whether it's a certificate, whether it's training or it's some type of apprenticeship program. This world continues to change. So access to education, especially, lifelong education, is going to be indispensable.

Eloy: Right. Well, we certainly agree with that point of view. And particularly, with the major shifts in the workforce and the economy, we see that higher education is going to play a bigger role going forward in terms of everyday Californians having access to a quality job. So let me ask you, to begin to wrap up...Obviously, you have held several positions in the state of California. You understand the politics and the complexity of California. You've seen this last governor, over the last eight years, deal with a myriad of crisis and changes both in-state and nationally, and globally. So why are you interested in running for Governor, and what would you do different for the state of California?

John: So I mentioned in our earlier conversation, I'm an immigrant too, to this state. Right? [inaudible 00:15:53] born in New York, raised in suburban Chicago. I came to California because I firmly believed that this was the very best plot of land on this Earth to make my dreams possible. I am blessed with six godchildren, Latina, biracial, Asian. I want to make sure that what previous generations of Americans have done for me, and we all...My family had to work hard, make a lot of sacrifices. But today, I have the opportunity to run for Governor because it's my dream. I want to make sure that every child gets the greatest opportunities to live their dream.

That's what I want to make California, the very best place, reinstall the hope and faith and belief. Everybody used to believe, "If you want to go anywhere, go to California." I want to make that clear in people's minds that for this next generation, California is still the very best place on

Earth.

Eloy: Well, thank you for that. And we really appreciate your support for the California Community Colleges, your willingness to run for Governor, and just how much you care about this great state. So thank you for joining us. I've been talking with our State Treasurer, John Chiang, who is running for Governor of the great state of California. Thank you, Mr. Treasurer, for joining us.

John: Thank you, and Godspeed.

Eloy: You've been listening to the California Community Colleges Chancellor's Podcast. I'm Eloy Ortiz Oakley. Thanks for listening in, and we'll see you again soon.

Announcer: Be sure to join us for the next California Community Colleges Podcast. This has been a California Community Colleges presentation.