

Transcription

California Community Colleges Podcast Episode 11 – Amanda Renteria

Eloy: Hi, this is Eloy Ortiz Oakley, Chancellor of the California Community Colleges. And, welcome to another episode the California Community Colleges Chancellor's Office Podcast. Today, I have the great pleasure of interviewing Ms. Amanda Renteira, candidate for governor of the great State of California. Welcome, Amanda.

Amanda: Thank you. Thank you for having me here.

Eloy: It's great to have you here and we're very much excited to have a chance to get to know you and congratulate you on your willingness to jump in the race for governor of California. What made you decide to jump into the race?

Amanda: Well, let me first start off by just saying thank you, to you, and to, really, the work that you do and anyone that's listening...and I know there's 2.1 million students there out there. And if you're not studying, you're listening -- thank you. But, also, on just a much broader perspective, I grew up in the Central Valley. And community colleges, that was the only way I knew about higher education. There's nothing else that's close enough, that's tangible enough that really painted the picture of what higher education meant so it is a real honor to be here with you.

The question about why I ran? I believe it's time we need to change the culture of our politics and we need a new generation to be engaged and to be involved. I believe that's the only way we start to change peoples trust in politics and really get to a place where we have new ideas and we're taking the state in a new direction. I'm excited to be a part of that conversation and some that starts with having some of the tough conversations about what are we going to do to make sure that we're geared and set up for the future and that's...I know some of the discussion we're probably going to have, today.

Eloy: Exactly. Let's talk about higher education, in general. And,

specifically, the California Community Colleges serve more than 2.1 million students or 114 campuses in the largest system of higher education in the United States. Nearly one in four of every community college student in the nation is California Community College students. So in the California Community Colleges, we issue what we call our vision for success, which really focuses on opening up more doors for Californians. Ensuring that more Californians have access to a quality affordable higher education and that there getting the credentials that they need in order to thrive in today's workforce. Now, some 45% of adults surveyed by the Public Institute of California say that public higher education is generally going in the wrong direction. And just a little over half likely voters say the system needs major changes. What your view of the role of community colleges in California and the nation? And in higher education, more broadly, are there any things that you, as governor, would do differently or focus on, in terms of working with your public higher education institutions?

Amanda: So as I think about and take on education, in general, I think we really do need to think about education as a system. Many people talk about if we just did this in higher education or if we just did that in preschool, we'd solve the problem. Where we are, right now, in education, it really is going to take a systemic approach to really think about that. The role that I see community colleges can play is really the hub. My first public service job was actually going back to my hometown, working as a high school teacher. Being able to see kids/students right before they're going to become trained for adulthood if you will, is a really interesting moment because they're going to be on their own. When you think about the role that community colleges play, they really are and can be a hub, in terms of for a lot of those kids who -- I'm not sure where I'm going to go. I'm not sure what I'm going to do. I'm not sure what it means to be on my own. When you come from rural America, specifically, or you come from these places where your community college is the first thing you see, that is where you can answer that question -- and you can do it in an affordable way. You can get a little bit of your feature wet in learning what the different options are and I believe that community colleges can play a role in the community who the business community as well. Some of what I've seen around the country is, there has been examples where community colleges are playing the role of how are you making sure that kids have the skills to go into the business community but, also, that the business community feels invested and a part of the community colleges as well. So one of my visions for the role of community college is, really, to be that hub. I think we've got to invest in it and I think we've got to start

talking about that kind of style. And, certainly, when you grew up in rural America, you have a sense of it because just by the nature, they're the only ones there, they become even more of the hub but we can do better at it and I've seen it across the country where we have had examples where community colleges have really helped revamp industries and make sure that the workforce is ready.

Eloy: Speaking of community colleges and the nations community colleges, recently, President Trump has talked about changing community colleges and calling them vocational or technical colleges. We, in the community college community have had some concerns about that. What is your feeling about the value of community colleges? You talked about it, in terms of providing an opportunity for rural American and all Americans. But given the president's statements, what do you feel we need to do differently to ensure that all Americans understand the value of a community college?

Amanda: I've had this notion, in general, about public institutions. Is, we've got to do better at explaining what we do and having a conversation so podcasts are a perfect way to do that. We've got to start talking about the various things that community colleges can and do play. I know my two nieces, right now, who are at the College of Sequoias in Community Colleges. This is their moment of understanding and hopefulness of, how do they get to that next step? I think we're not looking at community colleges as an entryway to whatever it is you want to do. For some folks, it might be technical school. For some folks, it might be that they want to go onto a four-year university and someday have a Ph.D. For other folks, they might just want to learn the skills of how do I create a job. How do I actually start a business? That is the beauty of what I believe community colleges do. Is, they give you that first window into all these incredible pathways that you have for your life and the more we talk about this public institution, this particular sector as that hub for folks, that changes the discussion about the importance of them because they literally are the center of that discussion at a time when a lot of kids are figuring out what that next step or adults are looking to change their own career track records. And, no, I just believe community colleges play a unique role in that and we've got to be talking a lot more about that.

Eloy: So you grew up in California Central Valley -- a very rural community. One of the communities that the California Community Colleges system is focused on. The Central Valley has tremendous income gaps, tremendous opportunity to improve the lives of many

Californians, particularly communities of color/low-income communities so it's certainly a focal point for our system in our vision for success. So growing up in the central valley, what could higher ed do a better job of supporting opportunities for those who have lacked opportunities for decades in our state and in our country?

Amanda: I actually grew up in the poorest district in our state, the 10th poorest across the country. And went to public school in a pretty underserved school. My parents were former farm workers. My dad was actually, at one time, a bus driver for the community college. So one aspect of this entire conversation is really understanding that people come from different places. I've had the blessed opportunity of growing up there and also seeing a world that, frankly, for me, was really difficult to go to four-year university -- incredibly difficult. I was always afraid I wasn't going to be able to keep up academically. I wasn't going to be able to keep up financially. I wasn't going to be able to figure out how to pay rent. We've got to start looking at our kids and really, almost standing in their shoes of what they're facing today. And the idea that, right now, you have 18 and 19-year-olds asking, how am I going to make ends meet? How am I going to find a place to live? How am I going to be able to pay a car payment? We've got to really internalize that and understand that you know, not all kids are growing up in cities, to the extent that we understand that, we can then build programs to be able to bridge it for folks that are in the central valley right now. And I do think when we talk about really exposing them to the opportunities, whether that's at a four-year university or opportunities career-wise, we've got to be deliberate about it. Because it doesn't happen on its own. I know that we all think that the internet, all of a sudden, opens people to new opportunities? It opens them to a vision but that's not tangible enough. We've got to start building programs. And whether it's linking community colleges with high schools, even more, that might be one of the big answers. And certainly, back when my dad grew up he talked about the fact that community colleges were more aligned or at least working a lot more with high schools. And so thinking about capturing those kids at the early ages, before they step out. And saying, "Here are some opportunities for you." I think that's a first step because you don't know it if you're not exposed to it and we've got to think about that deliberately, here, in California. Because we have assets, whether, it's big cities in Northern California or Southern California, that we should be sharing with all of our kids.

Eloy: Speaking of affordability, which you touched on briefly. Affordability in higher education has become a huge issue, nationally.

Here in California, there are thousands of students lacking basic needs - food, housing...even though the cost of education in California, whether you're at the Community College, California State University, or University of California -- is some of the most affordable in the nation. The cost of attending colleges continues to go up and we have this constant debate about tuition and the cost housing. As you think about becoming governor of this great state, how would you address this affordability issue, specifically in higher education but more broadly, for all Californians?

Amanda: One of the issues that is facing us right now is our homelessness crisis and that is not just big cities. We've got to understand that this is happening with college kids/community college kids. And so there's no doubt that we've got to start working with cities and counties and colleges that see this as a crisis and start to call what it is and use the tools necessary to build what we need in the short-term but start thinking about our long-term housing stock in a real way. And I know spending time on campuses, this is something young folks are worried about. It used to be something that people worried about after they graduated but they're now worrying about it right now, as they're thinking about can I go to college because I'm not sure I can pay the rent? So needing to address it and call it what it is, and using every single tool in our bucket to be able to address the homelessness issue right now is a huge piece of making sure all of our kids can see opportunity and can actually go to college.

Eloy: We absolutely agree with that. We have so many of our students who are reporting that they are either living in cars or couch surfing, just to be able to survive. There's also been a lot of talk about tuition in California, whether it's the University of California talking about raising tuition and the California State University. Or, even just the cost of attending a community college -- books and other things. As you look at how this governor has dealt with those issues, what would you do different to control the cost of tuition in our systems?

Amanda: We've got to work much, much closely together to make sure that kids can make it. Some of this is exactly what I talked about, in terms of the housing reality but there's also really working with the state government to say, "All right, how are we making sure that we're increasing attendance but giving public institutions, really, the resource to be able to cover that?" I've read a lot of the different reports. Right now, we're leaving it to colleges to figure out how to make that happen

and I think we need to work in much stronger partnership to say, "What can we do to ensure that, as you increase attendance that we are making sure that you have the resources to provide for that increased attendance?" And then, I think, the other piece to it is, we've got to start working with our business community and our philanthropists to bring them into the discussion, to say, "How can you be a part of this conversation so that we make sure that there's a workforce force for you as well?"

Eloy: Let's switch subjects a little bit to talk about a specific population of students, here, in California that's been a huge topic, nationally. The California Community Colleges server 70,000 or above students who are also DACA recipients. The Board of Governors for our system is deeply committed to persevering the ability of these DACA students, to remain in our colleges and to continue to make positive contributions to our communities and t our economies. We really see them as economic assets. Can we hear your thoughts on this issue? And what specifically would you do to engage on this?

Amanda: I've been really honored to have worked in the California Department of Justice as a Chief of Operations, there, working under the Attorney General. When we first got there a year/a year and a half ago -- there really wasn't a dedicated immigration unit so some of this is making sure that we have the legal teams to be able to fight the battles that we need at the national level with the administration to make sure that we do everything we can to protect kids and students but I'll say this different way, as well, which is, it's not just about the legal framework, it's as much of people understanding who these kids are. My dad is Zacatecano -- born there. I grew up in a place that had a very big undocumented population. And I was a high school teacher when I was pushing one of my kids. I said, "Alberto, I know you're smart. I need you to get a good grade on that math test," right? And he was one of those kids, you just know it. And I kept pushing him. And after class, he came up and said, "Listen, Ms. Renteria, with all due respect, the way I do on that math test doesn't really matter because at any point, I can be taken to a country I have never known?" When you hear and see that from a kid that is supposed to be full of hope as they enter their adulthood, I just believe that the more we can talk about who these kids are, and what's really going on here? That maybe we won't only hit the legal framework but we'll hit people who may h never met a DACA student. And, maybe, if we can tell those stories and really connect people, they'll understand a little bit more. So I believe we do need to tell some of those stories about who these kids are and really community colleges

play the role of taking in these kids and giving them the hope and inspiration that, in many cases, is lost at the high school level because they're not sure what's going to happen next.

And then, I'll just end on this point. Which is, we've got to start working with governors around the country. The AGs have started working, of course, together on they multi-state efforts and their legal efforts but we've got to start working with governors as well. Because we're not the only state that phases this and, in order to win, we're going to have to make sure that we're bringing in all of our allies together and so I look forward to doing that as governor.

Eloy: Now, there's been a lot of talk and a lot of discussion about various surveys throughout the country that suggest that more and more Americans value, less, actually colleges degree. They're not seeing the value anymore. What would you say to those Americans? What do you do see as the real value that colleges and universities create for the students that they serve in this economy, and in the future of the workforce?

Amanda: Two big things -- hope and skills. I believe this the moment and, again, it comes from being a high school teacher, where I've been able to see the students every time before they go into what am I going to do next? And colleges give you a unique skill set but they also give you hope on whatever you want to do, going forward and how to get there. But, in general, no, I think this is why we need to start changing the culture of our politics? Is, we've got to have much more of a dialog of what government services do, what our public institutions do for people today. I think there are a lot of folks who don't realize what community colleges are doing or what government, in general, is doing. And I think, the more that we can open the dialogue, the more we will bring public trust back into the system. So for all those folks who don't believe in this stuff, we first have to ask the question whether they know what higher education is providing? And so I start there. Because I believe if people really walked in the shoes of what it means to go to community college, or what it means to get a higher education, that they might look at it a little bit differently. It still might not be for everyone. But then they at least know the value of what higher education brings.

Eloy: So as we close, is there anything that you'd like to tell our listeners about you, your background, your passion and why want to for governor of the great state of California?

Amanda: I believe with everything I have it is an honor to be a public servant and I believe that the work that you do in public service is really making a difference in people's lives every single day. Right now, as a country and as a state, what you see from a lot of kids, really, from a lot of people out there is, they're wondering whether they can trust and believe our public institutions, right now. What I believe is we need to be talking to everyone we can. That we've got to bring in new leadership and new ideas. We need the new generation to believe in it. We need everyone to begin to say, "Let's take the state in a direction that is going to get us to be future-oriented," to making sure that we are serving all people. And particularly, here, in California, where we have some of the richest areas and some of the poorest areas. We have to be one California. And when you think about where our country is, right now, at this very moment -- when people are questioning public trust -- we have an opportunity, as California, to be role model in what it means to be innovative, what it means to be welcoming and inclusive. And really bringing trust back into our systems, again. And so I hope anyone that's listening, I don't want you to just engagement in voting. I want you to make sure that you believe in our public system. And, hey, if you don't believe in it -- join us. Join the public service sector and make it better. Because the way that this country has been what it is, is we've had great public servants with great policy really connecting to everyone around the country. And so, as governor, I want to bring that back, again. Where people believe it is an honor to serve. And if you're not serving, you trust it has your best in mind.

Eloy: Well, thank you, Amanda. Thank you for taking the time to join us, today. It's been a pleasure talking to you. You have been listening to Ms. Amanda Renter, candidate for governor of the great state of California. And this has been the California Community Colleges Podcast. I am Eloy Ortiz Oakley, Chancellor of the California Community Colleges. Thank you for joining us and we'll see you again, soon.

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