

Democracy's College: An American Original

Terry O'Banion, President Emeritus,

League for Innovation in the Community College

College of the Desert's State of the College Event

Reprinted in Palm Springs Life November 2018

The history of American higher education is the history of adapting models of education created by other countries. The first college established in this country in 1636 was Harvard College; it was an English college, and all of our four-year colleges today reflect that model. In the 1870s education leaders transplanted the German model of a university to the United States, and all of our current universities are based on the German model. Although most of our institutions reflect an idiosyncratic American culture, we imported our models of higher education from other countries.

With one major exception: In 1901 the president of the University of Chicago, William Rainey Harper, and the superintendent of Joliet, Illinois high school, J. Stanley Brown, created the first two-year college, Joliet Junior College, still operating today. Joliet Junior College was the beginning of an American Revolution in higher education.

Today there are over 1200 community colleges with systems in every state enrolling over 10 million students. There are now community colleges all over the world "Made in America."

These are local colleges governed by your neighbors who are elected or appointed community leaders.

These colleges are designed to reflect the values and needs of their local communities.

They concentrate on teaching and learning rather than research.

Their purpose is to help every student earn a good living and live a good life.

And what makes them special is that they are open-door institutions giving every student, every resident of this valley, an opportunity to attend college.

The open-door college is an experiment in democracy that has never been attempted in the history of the world. No great empire in Greece, Rome, or Mexico has ever attempted to try this idea. No great modern empire in Russia, China, or India has fully embraced the idea that everyone should be given the opportunity to go to college.

Today, the American community college is Democracy's College standing alone like the Statue of Liberty welcoming all who seek a better life through education.

Democracy's College is an attempt to live up to Thomas Jefferson's mandate: "Educate and inform the whole mass of the people. They are the only sure reliance for the preservation of our liberty. If a nation expects to be ignorant and free, it expects what never was and never will be."

In California we are fortunate to live in a state that has embraced the idea of Democracy's College more than any other state in the union.

Today the California Community College System is the largest system of higher education in the United States with 114 colleges enrolling over 2 million students. One in every five community college students in the nation attends a California community college.

In a flagship community college state, the College of the Desert is a flagship community college recognized throughout the state and nation as one of the best of its kind. The College of the Desert is the

Crown Jewel of the California Community College System and the epicenter of the Coachella Valley for economic and social justice.

College of the Desert enrolls 17,000 students 80% of whom are first-generation college students; 50% work while attending college.

College of the Desert provides 152 different associate degrees and certificates and in 2018 graduated 1,350 students.

80% of the alumni stay or return to the Valley to live and work.

The annual economic impact of the College's operations on the Coachella Valley is \$302 million.

One of the reasons College of the Desert has been so successful is because it is here in the Coachella Valley. The collaboration between the Valley and the College is phenomenal.

The Coachella Valley is a series of 12 plus small cities linked by a commitment to big ideas. The Valley is a magical place which is why we all live here. It is not just the quality of the air, the view of the mountains, the year-round flowers, and the numerous happy hours; it is a special community that respects great diversity, appreciates great art and culture, meets challenges with great gusto, and is supported by the most generous and gracious philanthropists in the world. The operating motto of the Coachella Valley could well be "Do nothing in a small way."

Now the College and the Community have a very special opportunity to engage in a Grand Experiment to design and build one of the most innovative and substantive educational institutions ever. The new campus to be constructed in Palm Springs is just waiting for college and community leaders to merge their interests, their ideas, and their resources to create a model to reflect President Kinnamon's vision when he said, "I'd like to find the road to travel that all other community colleges want to follow." In the Palm Springs campus, you have an

opportunity to find the road less traveled by, and, if you do, it will make all the difference.

College of the Desert and its leaders have received a number of state and national awards in recognition of their outstanding record of student success. The current record of student success at College of the Desert is a solid foundation on which to build an outstanding version of Democracy's College for the 21st Century.

If this cannot be done with one of the best visionary presidents in the nation like Joel Kinnamon, one of the most dedicated and outstanding board of trustees ever to govern a community college, and one of the most highly qualified faculty and staff ever to grace a community college--with support from the legendary quality of leaders in the Coachella Valley—the community college we know today may cease to exist, and the community college we dream of for the future may never come to be.

Terry O'Banion has worked in the community college field for 58 years as one of the leading spokespersons on leadership, innovation, learning, and student success. President of the League for Innovation in the Community College, an organization of over 800 community colleges around the world, for 23 years, O'Banion has written 16 books and over 200 articles on the community college; his 17th book was published in early March, *13 Ideas That Are Transforming the Community College World*.

He has consulted in over 1,000 community colleges in every state in the nation and in Australia, Japan, Canada, and the United Arab Emirates. O'Banion has been recognized by five national awards established in his name. He has been a professor of higher education at the University of Illinois, University of California Berkeley, University of Texas, University of Hawaii, and University of Toronto.

A resident of the Coachella Valley, Terry O'Banion is a proud supporter of the College of the Desert.

