San Diego’s ‘urban college’ gets a new leader

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Plans to expand the college’s prominent history of effecting social change

Dr. Anthony Beebe (Courtesy SDCCD)

Dr. Anthony Beebe said he has spent his entire post-high school life preparing for his new position as president of San Diego City College. The Oregon native became a county firefighter right out of high school for a total of eight years locally and spent a great deal of that time teaching others how to become firemen in the academy.

“That’s how I got into education, through that experience,” Beebe said.

The Bankers Hill resident was recently chosen after a lengthy application and selection process. Later this summer, Beebe will step away from an eight-year stint as president of San Diego’s Continuing Education program and right into the head post of San Diego City College.

As one of four presidents in the San Diego Community College District, for the last eight years Beebe has steered an institution that serves over 85,000 students seeking education from 25 career and technical areas on seven different campuses located all over the county. He had a $30 million budget, 600 full and part time faculty, 100 classified as staff, nine deans and two vice presidents. While there, Beebe created a nonprofit, the Continuing Education Foundation, which in part offers student scholarships.
“[The Continuing Education Program] is probably one of the most diverse institutions of its kind in the country,” Beebe said. “We had about 142 different countries represented last spring and about 50 languages that were spoken across the seven campuses every day.”

That is as diverse as it gets, and according to Beebe, it’s just one of the many perfect precursors to his new role as president of another multi-cultural institution.

In addition to his teaching experience at the firefighting academy, Beebe also climbed the full ladder of instruction, eventually obtaining a doctorate in education — he has almost completed his second — but he said it was the community colleges he came in contact with throughout his life that made lasting impressions on him. In fact, his dissertation was an analysis of Oregon’s community college system.

“I recently told the board, in some ways I’ve been training to be the president of City College my whole life,” he said.

Taking a look at his resume, that is clearly an accurate statement.

Aside from all the higher education he’s been involved with, he’s been touched by five different community colleges and worked in six community college districts, holding such positions as faculty/coordinator, director of continuing education, instructional dean, associate vice president of instruction, and vice president of instruction and student services before his presidency here, again with continuing education.

Despite his lucrative resume, the Oregon native remains humble about his path to success.

“I’m not a typical academic, I don’t think,” he said. “I don’t think of myself in that way in any way shape or form, anyway. Just through lessons of life. I just kind of prepared myself for this position. There are a lot of things I have yet to discover about City College but I am certainly excited to tackle the job,” he said.

Community colleges in general have often gotten a “bum rap” in the education system hierarchy, but according to Beebe, there is much more than meets the eye, especially the pocketbook.

“A lot of people don’t always think of a community college first, they’ll think of San Diego State or UC San Diego,” Beebe said. “But community colleges are such a tremendous value for the community. In terms of being able to get started there, go to the first two years, get
an associate and transfer on or go out into the world of work, and save yourself in the process a lot of money when you go through that.”

Beebe said he recognizes that many shy away from returning to college, either because they had a bad experience at a college or university at some time in their life, or even had a bad experience in high school.

“The community college is all about helping people come back to that educational environment and they do so in a very warm and caring way.” he said. “Which frankly is one of the things that drew me to community colleges.

“The educational experience you get at a community college — as the name implies — is all about community,” Beebe continued. “For me, starting out at a community college really gave me the foundation in the learning community that I wanted in an education.”

Beebe is taking the helm of City College in its Centennial year, having first opened in 1914 as an extension to San Diego High School. All community colleges originally grew out of the K-12 school districts, which is why Southwest as well as Grossmont and Cuyumaca colleges are not directly associated with Mesa, City and Miramar colleges.

Taking over the institution at this time in its history is personally significant to its new leader.

“To be president of City College on its 100 anniversary, knowing that the college has been modeled this way for more than 100 years, is an honor and a privilege beyond words,” Beebe said.

“I am a student of community colleges and am nostalgic about their mission,” Beebe said. “In 1901, Joliet Junior College was started in Illinois as the very first public community college in the United States. Of course, San Diego City College opened its doors in 1914, a mere 13 years later.”

He said that both Joliet and City colleges were part of the “community college movement,” a social justice crusade that challenged the fact that higher education was only open to the elite and wealthy. The movement pushed to allow all the opportunity for higher education and the greatest change happened in the 1960s, he said, and the guise was “if they have the willingness and capability, they should have that opportunity.”
“Community colleges such as San Diego City College changed all of this in the democratization of higher education,” he said. “The doors to college were opened to a nation.”

Today, as the college continues to grow, expand and upgrade the campus infrastructure, Beebe sees its many advantages as an “urban college.” Located just steps from the center of Downtown San Diego, Beebe feels it is important to deepen the relationships that exist between the campus and the surrounding neighborhoods of Downtown.

He also wants to further expand relationships with the City of San Diego and the San Diego Downtown Partnership. In addition, he has plans for a small business outreach initiative where he sees the college putting on seminars and conferences to help the small businesses grow stronger and more knowledgeable.

The history of social change at City College is quite meaningful to Beebe, and he said the college still has a responsibility today for continuing to effect social change. He plans to expand upon that ideology during his tenure and has already begun to reach out to faculty in advance of his arrival regarding his ideas.

“That’s really one of the cornerstones of my vision, to strengthen the advancement of that social change element,” Beebe said. “So that not only are we teaching math, and we’re teaching history, and we’re teaching anthropology, and all the great sciences, but overarching all of that, we’re also teaching students to be the change that we want to see in the community.

“When you stop and think of all the different issues that we’re facing here in San Diego, whether it be homelessness, immigration, drop outs, gay rights issues, and on and on and on … I think it is beholden upon the community college, particularly one that is in the center of the city like City College is, to take a leadership role in framing some of those discussions.”

Beebe takes over as president of San Diego City College August 1.

“The San Diego City College Story: A Centennial History” is a hardbound book that tells the entire history of City College, including those days of social change. Once published the book will be available at the campus bookstore. It can be preordered now on the sdcity.edu website.