

Conversation with: Gena Glickman

By Suzanne McLaughlin Journal Inquirer | Posted: Saturday, July 15, 2017 6:00 am

Gena Glickman is in her 10th year as president of Manchester Community College. She has a treadmill and weights in her office and she said students can find her in the community at Planet Fitness, Big Y or Aldi. She says that students who come to college for technical skills also can benefit from a liberal arts education and should have the opportunity to transfer to a four-year institution.

Q: You moved here from Chicago?

A: I moved here from Chicago land. From Elgin, Illinois. It's about 40 miles west of Chicago. I grew up in Manhattan. I'm a New Yorker. I was anxious to get back to the East Coast, and this was an incredible opportunity for me. I don't think I've ever felt more at home anywhere.

Q: You're education was in the Maryland area?

A: I went to art school and got a Bachelor's of Fine Arts. I went to graduate school at Hopkins. I worked in a variety of community colleges, starting as a counselor, then moving to the academic side. I had a long career in Maryland in higher education in community colleges and at the University of Baltimore. While I was there I got my Ph.D. at the University of Maryland College Park. I worked in higher education and was recruited to go to Illinois. I was at Elgin Community College, a large community college in Illinois, as the vice president of academic student affairs.

Q: Have you always been drawn to community colleges?

A: I've been in community colleges for the majority of my career. I was drawn to them for many of the same reasons students are. They're accessible, they're pretty easy to navigate, there is a real sense of being centered around student life. I am so proud of the work we do and I love the engagement in the community and the support from our foundation board and regional advisory council. The support to make this college a destination and to have feelers out in the community to be part of economic development, those are some of the reasons.

Q: Your undergraduate degree was in general fine arts and sculpture. Is there a way that informs what you do now, here?



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A: A degree in the arts gives you a different perspective. It informs things like culture and change and integration of ideas. It has a liberal arts function, but it also has an applied function. One of my many jobs after I graduated from college was I worked as an art therapist. I worked at a day treatment center with a team of health professionals. My background is a little bit applied, technical, professional and liberal arts. Then I focused on counseling and educational history and policy. We are part of a larger industry. We want to ensure that MCC is always on the cutting edge. We present at national conferences and are involved in national organizations. I want to ensure that any student who comes here is getting the very best that they could get at any community college and that we are at the top of our game.

Q: There seems to be financial pressure to trim down the administration at the top of the community colleges in the state. Is that supposed to be a gradual thing?

A: I think it is really important for people who are wondering if something is going to change to say that MCC is a fully accredited institution. We will be maintaining our specialized accreditations, and whatever form higher education takes because of a budget issue, community colleges will remain accredited institutions.

Q: Are you hoping to stay here?

A: I'm hoping that by the time any changes take place I will be able to lead the college in the right direction so that it has a sustainable future. It is my intention to stay until my retirement. I am not looking for another opportunity. There is still work to do to insure that we're constantly moving and changing and satisfying the needs of the community. I'm deeply committed to that.

Q: I know you have applied for jobs in the past.

A: I recently applied for a job at Nassau Community College, which is my hometown. I was recruited and I withdrew from the search. Along with my work here I teach graduate students in a doctoral program online at University of Maryland University College.

Q: Your focus at MCC has been on students getting an affordable college education. I guess community college is the most affordable way to go to college?

A: Sure. We always strive to be one of the most affordable and accessible ways to go to college. It is still hard for many families to be able to afford college and all of the ancillary expenses they assume. Our demographics have changed and the job market goes up and down. Typically, when the job market is good people are going back to work and when it is bad they are coming back to retool skills. I think we're in a labor market that is requiring many more technical skills. A lot of companies are not in a position to do apprenticeship training on their own.

Q: So it might be harder to just graduate with your liberal arts degree and get a job? Or to get a good job?

A: I think there are different types of jobs. I think it really depends on the student and what their ultimate goals are. One of the things I appreciate about what we do is that even in our technical programs there is a general education core so we graduate a whole student who has exposure to sociology and psychology and

history along with technical skills. The degree can lead to what we call a middle skills job, but it also leaves room for advancement and transferability to a four-year institution should students decide that is what they want. You are talking to someone with a bachelor's degree in fine arts.

Q: Has the diversity of the student body changed?

A: When I came here in 2008, our student body was 28 percent diverse and it's now close to 50 percent.

Q: I read that Manchester Community College is the number one community college chosen in the state and fourth among all colleges after UConn, Central and Southern.

A: We're number one if students are choosing a community college and number four in any sector. People don't necessarily think of community colleges as destination colleges. Noticing that a high school graduate considers MCC number 4, if not number 1, is something I think we should be very proud of. We have the right programs and talented faculty. A student can come here assured that they are going to get a really good education and a well rounded education as well as employment opportunities. There is also the ability to transfer, often with a scholarship.

Q: You have a transfer arrangement with UConn. Do you need a certain grade point average?

A: UConn has a guaranteed admissions program and has awarded thousands of dollars in scholarships for students coming in, per an agreement we made several years ago. We recently had 20 students that got \$8,000 each.

Q: Is Eastern is also one of your big partnerships?

A: We've always had a very strong transfer articulation agreement with Eastern. We were noted for that nationally by the Community College Research Center at Columbia as one of six partnerships across the country doing excellent work in transfers for students. Since then the Connecticut State Colleges & Universities system has created transfers for all students in a variety of disciplines. For any student there is a pathway. We happen to have a long history, whether it's with UConn or Eastern or Central.

Q: There are private colleges recruiting MCC grads?

A: When you graduate from MCC with an associate's degree, you can really go anywhere. We have a student who graduated from here and went to Yale. We have a student at Princeton. There are scholarships with the University of Hartford and the University of St. Joseph's and Trinity. It amazes me when students don't think of community college first. For students who want to stay in the community, we have a full student life.

Q: Is community college enrollment down somewhat?

A: It is 3 to 4 percent down across the country, and we are no different. When the job market starts getting better, enrollments always fall. The high school population in this community hasn't declined as much as some communities. When you see elementary schools close you think, Who are our students. The average age of our students is 26. The age for our students is still trending up. It is hard to find the adult students.

Q: These are adults who never completed even a two-year degree.

A: Yes. For whatever reason. They had a family. They were sending their kids to college. There may have been a cultural reason or a financial reason that they didn't go to school. We want to say to people, You can come back. We want to be welcoming to people who may be tentative about going back to school.

Q: It must be hard to go back and to find the money to pay for it.

A: In part it's the money, but in part you're sitting in a class with students who could be your kids. You're wondering if you have the stamina. I always tell adult students to take a course you love. Take a poetry class that re-engages you.

Q: How do older students afford college?

A: The same way everybody else does. Many times they're eligible for grants and scholarships and work study.

Q: You just have to decide it's worth your while and then it's possible.

A: Education is not discretionary, in my mind. We had a younger student whose family didn't support going to college. Our financial aid director visited with the family. Sometimes I think it is to dispel myths. I have a work study student who is a religious Muslim young woman with now two children. When she came to work here her husband came with her to the interview because he wanted to insure that the environment was safe for her. We try to assure families as much as the students. At orientation we encourage the families to participate. It can be stressful when mom is writing a paper.