Keeping the Promise of Education Alive
A Candid Conversation with Cabrillo College's Brian King about Staying Positive in Troubled Times

by Linda Pridie

In many ways, Cabrillo College sits at the hub of what’s happening in California’s economy. Like all state institutions that depend on their funding from Sacramento, community college officials have been riding a roller coaster from one state to the next, and spending $8.5 billion on the state’s economic fate. Cabrillo, which has about 60,000 students, has been taking a hit this year. Yet even though it can’t serve every student who would like to attend, Cabrillo is still not being paid for all the ones it’s able to serve.

The Changing Role
In the past, Cabrillo has been, as King said, “all things to all people”—from recent high school graduates to lifelong learners to those seeking a new pastime. To manage deep cuts, King says that the college has to be selective about what it offers.

Specifically, King sees the college’s most important duties as helping students looking for careers—either through vocational training or by certifying a person in a technical field, or by offering courses aimed at pushing a student onto a four-year program and then getting a bachelor’s degree.

Then, he said, there are the students who did not prepare for college. Those students need extra support learning to work at a more demanding level before they can pursue either a degree or skilled job training.

People in all three of those categories are coming to Cabrillo in greater numbers than ever. This fall the college has a record-breaking 10,000 students, and would have even more if all of them could get the classes they wanted, King said. However, Cabrillo was forced to cut about 100 course offerings to balance the budget, and that means students can’t always enroll in the classes they want and need. Yet even though it can’t serve every student who would like to attend, Cabrillo is still not being paid for all the ones it’s able to serve.

“It’s so clear that what we do does make a difference in the lives of students,” he said.

Keeping Degree Students on Track
California long ago abandoned its dream of a free college education for its high school graduates and now struggles to keep prices affordable at its public universities. Cabrillo and other community colleges have long been an affordable option for students worried about the costs of a four-year school or those still uncertain what they wish to study.

Both of California’s public university systems recently approved fee increases, which likely will only add to the number of students choosing Cabrillo for their first years of college. However, they are finding it harder to get the classes they need in the current standards two years, King said. It’s possible but difficult,” he said.

Part of the difficulty comes from class availability, and from students’ need to work. Staff tries to address the latter by emphasizing that financial aid is available and encouraging students to try to enroll full-time.

Unfortunately, even those students who complete the required courses for a transfer don’t always get in as the Cali- has been a hive of construction activity over the last several years. First, new student services buildings framed the college’s entrance; then the lower portion became home to the new visual and performing arts complex. Most recently the health and wellness buildings opened on the north end of the campus.

Next up is a green technology facility that just broke ground in Watsonville.

All this expansion and improvement came courtesy of community support in the form of voter-approved bonds, and it has allowed the college to serve more students more efficiently.

On the Dele side, King says, the college looks so good some community members have trouble understanding the reality of the college’s debt crisis. He and other college representatives still find themselves explaining the strict division between what is and is not supported, and the state funding that covers operating costs and keeps fees low. Simply put, money for buildings cannot be used to pay instructors.

To bridge some of the gap left by years of state funding reductions, a stable of private donors has stepped in, easing some of the pain.

The Cabrillo College Foundation is the top earner in the state among community colleges, King said.

Along with its fixed donations from individuals, it has successfully competed for grants from the Hewlett Foundation and Gates Foundation aimed at getting and keeping at-risk students in the college.

What makes Cabrillo so popular? King’s answer: its people.

“I don’t think there’s any better facility in the state of California,” he said.