

Spring 2023 Opening Day – President Ralston’s Remarks

Good morning, LOS MEDANOS COLLEGE! I’m Pamela Ralston, the new Interim President. I am honored to be here with you today, and to start off what will be a challenging and fabulous spring semester. I could not be more proud to serve in this role at this incredible institution and to stand alongside such effective, engaged staff and faculty members.

Welcome to the Opening Day!

We start this spring, this new year with even more than the seasonal, calendared sense of transition. After years of leading this college, Dr. Bob Kratochvil has stepped into his retirement. We’ll spend this semester picking up important initiatives, projects and conversations, and we will be opening new possibilities. As you’ll hear later this morning, we have also invited new members into our college community and encouraged current members to try new roles as we work to fill vacancies and serve students and the college.

It is my sincere hope that in the midst of these opportunities and challenges, you found time and space to breathe over winter recess. You’re essential to the success of our students, and we are so glad to have you back. Thank you for joining us here online.

The world shifted on its axis in 2020. Since then we have weathered a global pandemic, a local and national reckoning on race and gender, massive swings in our economies, and the disruptions we have experienced in our work places, our neighborhoods, our homes and our families, not once, but repeatedly over the last three years. We have contended with change, loss, and hopefully moments of great joy. It has been a messy, disrupted time. Our winter has been filled with much appreciated rain and snow. As a Northwesterner who moved south to sunny California after the year it rained 93 days in a row, I have sworn an oath to never complain about precipitation. I’ve been pretty close to breaking that promise of late.

Thank you all for switching to online environments over this stormy period. We’ve been contending with some water intrusion (looking at you, Gym Roof), and the extreme weather has pushed our power systems to the edge. Let’s take a moment to thank the facilities and information technology teams who have kept us connected and safe this week, and who are busy making the campuses ready for students next week. They have been heroic.

We’ll be addressing those electrical problems over the course of this semester and summer. We’ll work to make that as free from disruption for you, your working and teaching environment, and most of all for our students. I’m asking in advance for your flexibility and patience.

That’s a refrain almost at this point as we move further into and past pandemic conditions and their aftermath.

Los Medanos College students are starting, continuing, and hopefully in the [midst](#) of completing their college experiences in the most disrupted period in the history of community colleges. And LMC has been the center of hope and continuity during these difficult days. And that is because of you, and the power of the work you do together.

And you, we, will need to ensure they land here—supported, engaged, and seen. These students are brave, hopeful, and we welcome them here, even as we ourselves contend with continuing challenges and a sense of disconnection. We're here in the midst of hardship and great opportunity.

It's a time to focus on the goals of possibility, and not on the flawless. Like Leonard Cohen's *Anthem* encourages us:

Ring the bells that still ring
Forget your perfect offering
There is a crack, a crack in everything
That's how the light gets in

It's important we not only acknowledge the cracks, but that we use them to illuminate the gaps. We're busy building again and again the college we imagine will best serve our students. And the cracks are those places where we need to focus our attention, in our physical spaces and in our cultural practices.

This is our first all-college gathering since my hiring, and it's one of our first steps as we get to know one another. Stepping into a new college in the continuing aftermath of a pandemic underscores the excitement, possibilities and the discomfort our students may face as they start here at Los Medanos College.

I took a faith leap in the midst of the period of disruption when I applied for and then accepted the position as interim president here. And I have to tell you, I could not be happier. LMC serves this community in so many meaningful ways, and you all do it with such professionalism, compassion, and academic strength.

My own experience mirrors much of what our students and staff have experienced of starting at Los Medanos College in the last few years.

I learned about the opportunity at the college from an acquaintance. I read about you online. I interviewed in person, thankfully, vaccinated, masked and a little nervous. Even though I've been either a college or graduate student, faculty member, or administrator for the last 35 years, my first experiences on campus felt exciting and unfamiliar. I appreciate moments like this, when the privileges of experience and age and position are disrupted and I can have a "beginner's mind."

Serving as an interim is a particular sort of "beginner's mind." I'm new to the college, to Pittsburg, and to the East Bay. And I can't wait to dig in and learn all about you and our students.

I grew up in Boise, Idaho, attended high school and college in Oregon, and graduate school in Seattle, where I studied Comparative Literature and American Ethnic Studies. I served as a lecturer at the University of Washington, where I worked with many community college transfer students, who inspired me to join seek out a job focused on teaching at a two-year institution, and I was thrilled to earn tenure at Tacoma Community College. At TCC, I helped redesign developmental education with colleagues that was so successful, we eliminated 4 levels of course work that was holding students, particularly Black and Indigenous students and students of color, back from the college-level work they expected to be doing. And we increased success, retention and completion for those students. That work focused on reducing barriers led me from the classroom to administration, and from the Puget Sound to the Central

California Coast. I have served as a dean, a vice president of student learning, an executive vice president over student and academic affairs, and as a president. That trajectory has landed me here, with you. Thank you for the opportunity.

As we begin our conversation this morning, let's take time to acknowledge that the past three years haven't been easy. We've lost family, friends, students, colleagues. We've seen political division, ethnocentrism, and racism rear up at a time we need our greatest unity.

While the past nearly three years have been rough, they have also been filled with been innovative, sustaining, and caring work and relationships. We need to keep building on that foundation as we shape together the next incarnation of Los Medanos College for our students and for all of the communities we serve. We join together today in optimism. You all are our greatest strength because of your remarkable capacity and grace.

LMC's emphasis on "College YOUR Way" helps us center on the work we do to engage, connect and succeed, personally, professionally and for our students. We are an institution that adapts to be a college that can serve each student the way they each need.

We're embarking on the next phase of envisioning a post-pandemic college. We know about the students we've lost, and the students who haven't made it yet to our campus. We're not alone with dropping enrollment.

We find ourselves in a paradox of opportunity, where two opposing ideas are true at the same time: The deeply troubling loss of students pulls us into the possibility of even more meaningful connection opportunities. In the move online, we've found new and better ways to serve students, and with a smaller student population, we can redouble our energy on each of them. Our instructional faculty have innovated to make online education engaging, rigorous and meaningful. The work presented at the Focused Flex workshops is a great example of people working to provide powerful learning in new ways.

Our student services staff have stepped up to increase outreach and enrollment support. We have continued to improve support for students who experience food insecurity and other economic challenges with the LMC Marketplace, Panera Pop-Up Pantry, and Clothes Closet. The Tech Equity Program resumes this term with laptops and hotspots made available for students to check out for the semester. There are a number of programs that support students, and the folks who do that work are some of the champions of the College.

We've worked to create the changes needed to support a Guided Pathways approach, including how we share information with students and work to build relationships with them. We've also changed a number of business practices across the college as we adjusted to an online work and learning environment, including adopting dynamic forms in Admissions and Records and Financial Aid (a total game changer for students and for staff). We're making changes so that LMC is simpler for students to access critical processes regardless of place or time. Folks have adopted some of the great learning technologies that support instruction for other learning purposes, including deploying Canvas to house task-specific trainings for departments in Student Services. A variety of focused calling campaigns reconnected students with the college and provided a human contact to ensure students stayed connected with us.

There are dozens of other examples, but the point is that we have made good use of a crisis to strengthen our resiliency and open avenues for innovation.

And these efforts are working. The number of degrees students earned in 2019-2020 was 1649, and by 2020-2021, that number slid to 1494. Through the work of faculty and staff and the students themselves, we're rebounding. Last year, LMC awarded 1505 degrees, and we will do even better this spring, I'm sure. We do, however, continue to experience loss of completion in certificates across the board. This is an area we can strengthen as we help students respond to just-in-time learning opportunities that will change their career trajectories. Let's work on completion in those areas as well as across our disciplines and programs—we cannot waste the opportunities we have to serve each of the students who arrive here ready to change their lives.

I'd like to share a little about where we've been and where we're headed in terms of resources, funding, and the budget.

As someone new to the College and the District, I am happy to report a balanced budget, the first since 2019-2020. Our unrestricted General Fund is \$48.5 million dollars. As always, the vast majority of that funding is people, us, paid to do the real work of the college. Through negotiations, revenue has been allocated for raises.

Since 2020, Los Medanos has received, allocated and distributed over 16 million dollars in federal Higher Education Emergency Funding for the Institution. 2.7 million was awarded as emergency grants to our students. \$466,000 made free student parking possible for Fall 2022 and Spring 2023, and \$1.6 million was used to clear student debt. These allocations were likely life changing for our students, and enabled us to remove some of the barriers that pre-date the pandemic for many of our students. In addition, LMC received \$11.5 million for direct student aid. As of 12/31/22, we had distributed 11.2 million, and I'm sure we're moving to release the last 300,000.00. And finally, I'm pleased to share that LMC received a new \$4.6M COVID Recovery Block Grant Allocation to support our students.

The 2023-24 Governor's Budget has been released. While there are economic uncertainties and a projected deficit, the Governor's Budget remains committed to the higher education roadmap. We will continue to follow the conversation in Sacramento and use every opportunity to advocate for our students. We'll pay close attention and keep informed as this moves forward.

Our community will need all of us to be as well prepared and engaged as possible as we move forward during and after the pandemic, as we embrace the opportunities in front of us to realize the greatest move forward for equity through education in our history. In front of us lies the rebuilding. And we will need to be here, making the place where students belong, where students succeed, because we will need each of them to achieve all they aspire to.

During the course of the fall semester, Los Medanos engaged in a series of all-college meetings to discuss and respond to incidents of racism and to bring voice to concerns about the work in front of us in becoming an anti-racist college, workplace, and community. We need to continue these discussions and our work. Making headway in dismantling starts with each of us, practicing talking about the realities of the world we live in.

Nobel Prize winner and profoundly amazing author Toni Morrison has written about her experience considering the legacies of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., whose 94th birthday we recognized this week. She

writes that she was inspired to “his mission, [...] his audacious faith.” And then she goes on to explain Dr. King “made the act of assuming personal responsibility for alleviating social harm ordinary, habitual, and irresistible.” That’s a personal goal for me—to do as much as I can to live and breathe the changes I want to see happen, and I hope to reach the point where it’s “ordinary, habitual, and irresistible.” I understand that you at LMC and folks across our District have been working on this, too.

Talking about racism, calling people into these conversations, and sharing across different group of people might be more than uncomfortable, even frightening. We often respond to discomfort by not speaking about it, not addressing the difficult issue. Legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw, however, reminds us that: “When you make racism unspeakable, you make equality unachievable.”

I am pleased to join a college that is committed to continuing that dialogue where people are working to realize our commitments to being a college that has pledged a commitment:

to end institutional discrimination and racism and will support deeper training that reveals the inherent racism embedded in societal institutions, including the educational system; and ask individuals to examine their personal role in the support of racist structures and the commitment to work to dismantle structural racism.

This pledge is formal, earnest. It’s a good solidifier of the biggest goals. Let’s not let it feel intimidating or daunting. The steps to the goal of ending racism are many, small, and daily. We’re far from the “perfect offering.” How we approach our relationships, our work, and our service can be adjusted regularly, and it helps to be listening, to be open. That’s when we’ll see the light coming in and hear the bell that still can ring.

We’ll be working with constituent groups, our educational partners, our college community and our larger communities as we respond to the items that emerged in the college conversations regarding our efforts to Stand Against Racism. Let’s make it our personal responsibility to make social justice “ordinary, habitual, and irresistible.” There is no better place than at this college, and no better time than now.

I love how bell hooks captures the sense of possibility that education holds. She explains it this way:

[...] hope emerges from those places of struggle where [we] witness individuals positively transforming their lives and the world around them. Educating is a vocation rooted in hopefulness [because] we believe that learning is possible, that nothing can keep an open mind from seeking after knowledge and finding a way to know.

Please keep us informed about the good work you and your colleagues do here. More than ever, we should celebrate our strengths. Thank you for coming today, and for the brave, consistent good work you do every day. And thank you in advance for the stepping up and in you’ll be doing this year.