New leader and new challenges for MCC

Lars A. Hafner's recent inauguration as president of Manatee Community College was a formality. He'd been on the job since July 1, after all.

Dr. Lars A. Hafner is formally installed as the fifth president of Manatee Community College in an inauguration ceremony Dec. 4 at the college's Neel Performing Arts Center.

But the ceremony and its participants did more than give Hafner a stately induction. They cast MCC, its students, teachers and staff in a positive light, reminding us of the institution's value.

Hafner's inauguration was Dec. 4. Though weeks have passed, it's worth recognizing both the event and the educational, social and economic contributions that MCC makes in the community.

From the musical prelude through the recessional and reception, the pride that the students, staff, family members and new president have in MCC was evident -- and appropriate.
A diverse body of work

Student involvement showcased the range of talent and diversity at MCC. The 41 flags displayed on the inaugural stage represented the countries from which current students have come to the college.

Ambassadors from the student body greeted guests as they gathered at the Neel Performing Arts Center, Music and Theatre Building at the Bradenton campus. Theater student Dayton Sinkia read a poem selected by Hafner, and three MCC choirs -- chamber, concert and gospel -- delivered inspiring performances.

After the ceremony, enthusiastic students guided guests through a tour of the new Music and Theatre Building and student musicians performed a jazz concert.

Before joining MCC, Hafner held positions at St. Petersburg College, including provost. Hafner spent 12 years in the Legislature -- experience that will serve him well in his new role -- and has a sound education portfolio: He has an associate in arts degree from St. Petersburg Junior College and earned a bachelor's degree while on a basketball scholarship at the State University of New York at Buffalo. He got a master's in organizational and political communication from the University of Maryland and a doctorate degree in leadership and education from Barry University.

Hafner became the fifth president in the college's 51-year history at a time when Florida faces one of its worst fiscal crises.

"The budget challenge gives the college an opportunity to show our ingenuity in meeting the community needs. MCC does this really well," he said. "Moving ahead and doing what is right by students, employees and community can be done by collaboration and strong partnerships."

The potential for cooperation is being demonstrated: With input from hospitals, MCC is creating a bachelor of science nursing program. The University of South Florida has committed to classes at the MCC Venice campus and a high-speed Internet-based research network is being created.

Nod to the past

In his address, Hafner praised his predecessors and the historical value of MCC: "I have come to know many leaders in Manatee and Sarasota counties and they have helped me to understand the significance of the college to the families and businesses in this area, the importance of the college's role in providing for the work force and the contributions that the college has made to so many lives."
The degrees and the education offered by MCC have helped improve the lives of its graduates and their families. The courses and services provided by the college improve the community as well -- especially the economy.

"MCC provides an excellent resource ... when assisting with the expansion of existing companies and the recruiting of new companies to Manatee County," said Nancy Engel, executive director, Manatee County Economic Development Council. "MCC's Center for Innovation and Technology houses an excellent workforce development department, providing timely training programs for incumbent workers to improve and enhance their skills, in order to address the technological changes companies must implement to remain cost effective and competitive."

Kathy Baylis, president, Economic Development Corp. of Sarasota County, said: "Businesses often consider the quality of an area's workforce development programs before making expansion and relocation decisions. We consider Manatee Community College to be an asset to our region and a valuable tool in the EDC's efforts to retain and recruit businesses."

Education has a direct, powerful influence on the quality of life in our region and state. A highly skilled work force is imperative to the state's economic viability.

Labor-force quality is directly related to economic growth, and education is the strongest proven influence on the quality of the labor force. Quality education provides returns to economic development through improved productivity, increased labor pools, learned skills, technology and workers' average earnings.

Many believe that education is at the core of economic growth -- the engine of an economy. Universities and community colleges are critical to local economies. They stimulate jobs, foster new businesses, promote innovation, empower workers, improve the quality of life and increase production.

"Florida community colleges generate a large number of benefits to both students and the state," a 2006 report by Florida TaxWatch concluded. "Students benefit from higher personal earnings, and the state benefits by having higher employment, enhanced tax revenues, and an increased gross state product. There are additional advantages to the state in the form of social savings through avoided costs of crime, welfare, and unemployment benefits. These elements entice new businesses and industries to come to Florida, which further supports a growing, vigorous economy."

The Florida Agency For Workforce Innovation projects that 56 percent of the fastest-growing jobs in the state will be in occupations requiring postsecondary education but less than a bachelor's degree. These are jobs for Floridians who can be educated in the community college system.

Ticket to progress
The inauguration included excellent speeches from student Yolanda Ibasfalean, John Schaub, Rod Risley, executive director of Phi Theta Kappa International, state Sen. Charlie Justice and former state Sen. Lisa Carlton. But many of us might want to reflect on a story told by Dr. Felix Rizk, associate professor in natural sciences during the inauguration:

Almost every Western film has a scene with a stagecoach. In reality, stagecoaches had three types of passengers: first class, second class and third class.

If you had a first-class ticket, you could remain seated during the entire trip no matter what happened -- if the stagecoach got stuck in the mud, or had trouble making it up the hill, or even if a wheel fell off.

If you had a second-class ticket, you could remain seated until there was a problem. If a problem arose, second-class ticket holders would have to get off until the problem was resolved. You could stand off to one side and watch other people work. When the stagecoach was unstuck, you could get back on and take your seat.

If you had a third-class ticket, it was your obligation to correct the problem, whether it was pushing the stagecoach up a hill or out of a hole or fixing a broken wheel.

Rizk pledged his support of the new president and MCC, saying he'd buy a third-class ticket. That's something we should all consider.

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