By any other name, it's still my school

I didn't realize when I planned to drop in on a former professor's class that it was the last day of the Manatee Community College name.

The first column I ever wrote for the Herald-Tribune was about the college changing its name to better reflect the service area in December 1999. I was president of the student government and was asked for an opinion on the matter, representing the student body. Back then, after 15 or so hours in listening sessions and meetings with college administrators and community stakeholders, over many days, I was sure that each person had been heard.

So, just recently, I was just as shocked as anyone to read that MCC would be changed to State College of Florida, and scoffed at the idea. (Pun intended.) But having been a student lobbyist during the years I was president, an education activist afterward, and a teacher who biked 300 miles to Tallahassee last year to give letters to the governor and lawmakers, I understand the haste in the matter, even if my voice wasn't heard this time.

No matter what the school is called, Manatee Junior College, Manatee Community College or now State College of Florida, it will still be ours. Even if the school were nameless, it would still be an institution that offers its community an exemplary education. It is the people of the college who make the college, not the name.

I realize how fortunate I am to have had MCC so close to home when I needed it.

I once was a 20-year-old, high school dropout, earning 80 bucks, baby-sitting three kids, for 32 hours a week.

My husband and I went to St. Augustine that year, to celebrate our first anniversary. He told me I should be a teacher because I knew so much history. I didn't even have a General Equivalency Diploma.

I remember following dinner-plate-size dots to the financial aid office a few months later at MCC. The woman behind the desk hugged me and told me I WOULD be starting school in August, before I even filled out the first paper.

No one complained when those dots were replaced with easy-to-read signs. Former graduates didn't write blasting letters when the barrack-type buildings were renovated and converted, or when technology was updated and expanded, or parking and pathways improved. The community wasn't outraged when courses were revised, advanced, and kept to par with state universities.

Now MCC is changing again, regardless of what it will be called. Our humble school will be offering new opportunities to a whole lot of folks. Rather than be upset by the quick change, I am excited that our community is educating so many members of the work force.

We no longer live in a nation where only the privileged and the few can attend college. People from all walks of life are able to seek a new direction by the open door policy of community colleges and change their lives forever.

As for the college having a generic name, the rose still smells sweet, no matter what it is called. I doubt many people wake up and choose MCC because of the name or the mascot. They choose the school because they want to further their careers or seek higher education. They want something better for their lives.

We are on the right road. Some community colleges are already ahead of us. The sheer number of college-bound individuals in the future will cripple the overburdened university system unless another model is implemented.

We have to be ready to take on the additional people who can't gain admission to a university due to lack of space. One day, the state colleges might be the only system for people to get a four-year degree. Universities will either become so elite that only a marginal percentage can hope to get in, or they will offer mostly advanced degree work.

Our world is rapidly changing. The education system must be ready to serve the population. I may be a bit nostalgic, I might always call it MCC, but I am confident the institution I trust is heading in the right direction.

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