It was just one year ago, on April 25th of 2011, that the Board of Trustees selected me to be the next president of Middlesex Community College. I was thrilled to be given the responsibility to lead this great college and I continue to love every day of my work here. And I thank you all who have welcomed me so graciously to Connecticut.

I feel like I have come, as Shakespeare put it in Measure for Measure, an infinite distance from my life in Minnesota, the colleges I worked for, the neighborhoods I lived in, the Midwestern culture that I knew and understood.

In Measure for Measure, and in many other works of literature, it is a familiar rite of passage to leave what is known behind, and venture out into the unknown, in order to discover one’s true self, and to find one’s place in the world.

I am happy to report to you all today that, in this last year, I have truly found myself, and my place, here at Middlesex Community College.

Viewed from afar, this college appeared to have all the pieces required to be an extraordinary community college.

Now that I have been here for nearly a year, I know much, much more about this institution… and I still have the same view. Middlesex does have all the pieces required for success, but, as the small print on the box often says, some assembly is required.

Our great good fortune is that the assembly is gathered here today – the faculty, staff, former faculty and staff, students, the advisory boards, the leaders of the Connecticut Board of Regents, the elected officials, former trustees, delegates, college alumni, and friends. We are the assembly, and together, we will make Middlesex Community College more extraordinary than ever.

Inaugurations are a time of rebirth and regeneration… as is spring, a celebration of the earth’s natural cycle of rebirth.

All week long we have been celebrating Earth Week, in anticipation of tomorrow, the 42nd anniversary of the first Earth Day. On Monday, I signed the American College and University Presidents’ Climate Commitment. On Wednesday, we planted a sugar maple, the first tree of what will become a permaculture orchard. In the past few days, we’ve shown films on peak oil
and the consequences of fracking, and followed them with discussions. Students hosted an overwhelmingly successful e-cycling event – so successful they had to turn people away at the end. Next year – we will be getting an even bigger Green Monster truck!

Just as in the natural world, higher education in this country has gone through cycles too, passing through crucible moments, as the new report just issued by the National Task Force on Civic Learning and Democratic Engagement portrays it, and finding its path anew. According to this new report, we are in the fourth such crucible moment.

The first one was the period of the American Revolution, during which Benjamin Franklin founded the institution that became the University of Pennsylvania and Thomas Jefferson founded the University of Virginia. Both of these statesmen believed that to sustain democracy, you need strong institutions of higher education.

The second crucible moment was the Civil War, in the middle of which Congress passed the Morrill Act of 1862, establishing a land grant institution in every state, ensuring that a college education would be available to all citizens, no matter their social or economic status.

In 1947, during the third crucible moment, the Truman Commission on Higher Education assembled a group of college and university presidents and policy makers. They were to take stock of the issues of the day and reconstruct the American system of higher education so that it would heal and protect the nation.

What stood out in their minds was the shattering experience of World War II, the holocaust, the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, persistent racial segregation, and the mammoth task of integrating back into civilian life sixteen million people who had served in the military.

It was the Truman Commission report that gave birth to the community college movement in this country.

Community colleges were one of the big, new ideas: a systems response to a set of compelling, interwoven issues confronting our society.

How is it that we find ourselves today at the fourth crucible moment? Unfortunately, there are many, many reasons.

Because, for example, of the 172 democracies that exist around the world, we rank 139th in voter participation. Our nation is at risk because not enough citizens participate in the electoral process, one of the signal features of a functioning democracy.

Because, on the PISA tests of fifteen year olds in developed nations (Program for International Student Assessment), our students rank 17th in Science, 14th in Reading, and 24th in Math. A rising tide of academic mediocrity does not position the nation for global competitiveness.

Because we have been painfully slow to appreciate just how radical the transformation of our economy has been over the last twenty years. As academic achievement levels continue on a
steady decline, relative to other developed nations, the industries that are growing exponentially in this country cannot find the highly skilled, knowledgeable workers they need. We hear this often in the state of Connecticut. On the other side, individuals with average or below average academic preparation enter the labor market at their own peril, because the supply of routine jobs is vanishing quickly. Most of the jobs they used to be able to do can now be done more efficiently by technology.

And because we now see environmental degradation everywhere. We understand the relationship between carbon in the atmosphere and global climate disruption, but we are not yet able to muster the forces required to solve the problems we have created – for example, the storing of nuclear waste, the acidification of the oceans, the drying up of the global water supply.

And because no matter where we are, even here in the middle of Connecticut, we make our living in a global economy made possible by the revolution that is information technology. The world wide web is a universe without national borders. We have a long way to go in understanding what that means for the balance of world powers.

One can feel the heat emanating from all the forces roiling in this crucible. Opposite conditions are everywhere in modern life: the opposites of great accumulated wealth and the concentration of wealth in a few, the interconnectedness of the globe, driven in large part by the use of fossil fuels, and the environmental degradation caused by economies made rich by extracting natural resources, the United Nations, on one hand, and rogue states and groups, on the other.

It now falls to us to seize this moment and work together to forge systems of higher education that will produce citizens capable of making a positive mark on the future. This will require new ways of thinking about our newest colleges, our community colleges.

If past is prologue, it is useful to ask what were the results of the Truman Commission report?

Well, first of all, the United States is a nation with a massive network of 1,167 community colleges, of which Middlesex Community College is one. There are no parallel systems of this scope elsewhere in the world.

Secondly, one of the most profound findings of the Truman report was that there was no relationship between the ability to benefit from a higher education and the ability to pay for it. Community colleges started out almost tuition free, and they are still relatively affordable, and, because there are so many of them, they are accessible to nearly everyone.

Following that 1947 report, the United States made a huge investment in more and better education*, proving that, with adequate resources, we could mobilize our human and social capital…to put a man on the moon, to create the Peace Corps, to extend international aid to developing nations to promote health, education, and agriculture, to make advances in medicine and technology that ended epidemics such as polio and brought about the invention of communication and information systems that knit the entire world together instantly – the iPad, the iPhone, and now the cloud.
As the Truman report had the perspicacity to assert: “education is the making of the future.” And that it is.

But with all these advances, came unintended consequences, complicated by the human factor—we created a consumption society, within which the contented became complacent, and the discontented developed anomie. We now have rampant cynicism about bureaucracies of any sort and less and less confidence in leadership of any kind. It is daunting.

This is no doubt how Henry V felt the night before he gave his famous St. Crispin’s Day speech. Despite all signs to the contrary, what he was able to see with remarkable clarity is what we must also see at this moment, an opportunity to dream big, re-group, and do better, much better, than anyone could reasonably expect.

As they were half a century ago, community colleges are a big part of the solution today. We are the most flexible institutions in the entire system of higher education. By design, we are of, by, and for our communities, in order that we can be instruments of positive change. We are the grassroots colleges, the people’s colleges.

The community colleges of the future will continue their legacy of breaking new ground in American higher education. To envision how that can happen, we need a new way of looking at our newest colleges. Yes we will continue to provide the first portion of a baccalaureate degree. Many of our graduates will earn degrees in the liberal arts. I hope most of them will. I am a fervent believer in the value of a liberal arts education and I continue to benefit from the one I received every day of my life.

But in this new generation of community colleges, these institutions will also function as graduate schools do, in that they will offer certificates, diplomas, and degrees in programs that lead directly to work.

This would be nothing new, if students and the labor market hadn’t changed much in the last fifty years. After all, community colleges have been offering occupational training programs since the start. But students and labor markets have changed, dramatically, and that changes everything.

Jobs in the expanding parts of our economy didn’t exist five or ten years ago, and probably won’t exist in their present form five or ten years from now. These new jobs are not the natural terminus point for graduates of academic programs developed decades ago. They are coming and going with lightning speed and it takes flexible institutions able to stay abreast of employers’ needs to produce qualified workers.

I would be remiss if I did not note, in the same breath, that all jobs in the new economy require high degrees of skill in critical thinking, problem solving, quantitative reasoning, written and oral communications, social responsibility and collaboration. These skills have to be embedded in occupational programs, just as they have been the essential learning outcomes of general education programs across all institutions of higher learning for nearly a century. The technical ability to run the diagnostics on the computers that monitor a city’s water supply, on its own, is
not enough to equip a person to hold that job. That person must also be able to read, write, reason, solve problems, and weigh the ethical consequences of his or her actions.

As a society, we need more and should expect more from everyone in any job, which is why we must be vigilant in advocating for more and better education for everyone.

In the 1950’s and 60’s, community colleges broke the mold of “who” could be a college student. The new, and staggeringly democratic answer then, was “anyone,” anyone with a high school diploma or its equivalent who is willing to do the work required.

The “how,” as in “how do students progress toward their degrees?” is the new transformation. Students today pay little heed to the linear paradigm of AA to BA to MA to Ph.D., despite the fact that we carved it into stone long ago. And calling academic programs by two and four year attributions misses the mark completely. Today, college students enroll in many different colleges on their way to a degree. Sometimes they enroll in two or three institutions at the same time. We call that swirling, and that is not in the least a derogatory term. It is simply how it is done. They learn what they set out to learn at their own pace, and graduate when they finish whatever requirements we place upon them.

In this new world, community colleges are affordable, accessible way stations for students. Some of them have never gone to college before, some of them already have degrees or parts of degrees, but all of them can come to a community college to add to their portfolios evidence that they have the knowledge and skills they need, either to keep the jobs they have or to get their next job. And they can come back again and again, as the need arises.

This is why affordability and access to higher education is so critical, especially for our community college students. They are a resplendent rainbow of diversity, but their life ambitions are often impeded by limited financial resources.

Governor Malloy has said in many of his speeches about the achievement gap in K-12 education here in Connecticut that this is the civil rights issue of our time. I think he is right about that. But I would add that maintaining access to affordable, high quality higher education at our community colleges is equally a civil rights issue. And it is a profoundly important economic investment issue. The people of our country are our greatest natural resource. To invest in the people is to sustain democracy, and community colleges, in my mind, along with free public education, are the strongest expressions of democracy in our nation.

The basic tenet of social capital theory is that vibrant societies depend on robust, mutually beneficial relationships between and among people in order to optimize all the physical and human capital that is available.

When inequality is reduced, cooperative relationships can thrive. I think that is where the synthesis begins to take shape in the crucible moment…in understanding how imperative it is to work to reduce inequality, both here in our local communities, and everywhere around the globe.

What part can we play? What will we do here at Middlesex Community College?
Here are what I hope will be the hallmarks of this period in the history of our college – that twenty years from now, we will all look back at this time and say “this is what we did, and it was for the good.”

We will be champions of an exceptionally high quality of higher learning, the kind that increases knowledge, hones skills, and creates the habits of mind in our students that, all together, will result in the kind of society we would be proud to sign our names to.

We will be the loudest voices in the crowd calling for a renewed commitment to engaged citizenship – the kind that embraces democratic ideals, civic practices, altruism, and dedication to the common good.

We will be ever relevant, ever young, always eager to be partners with our local communities, employers, institutions, neighborhood groups, schools, families, and friends AND keen with desire to make a difference in this interconnected and interdependent world in which we live.

We will be relentless in placing a very high value on compassion and on creativity – instilling curiosity about the world by helping to produce centered, confident people who can connect with others they know, and others they know about but will never meet – and who can experience the joy and satisfaction of inventing new ideas, new ways of seeing the world, new solutions to what seem like insurmountable problems.

We will breathe new energy into our campus life, the curriculum and co-curriculum, with a commitment to environmental stewardship – that draws on knowledge of the sciences and the social sciences, the arts and humanities, and that helps us understand how each one of us has a positive role to play in sustaining the intricate web of life that is our natural world.

I couldn’t be happier to have lived this long, to have found myself in this age of discomfort and discontent, and to be in this role as president of Middlesex Community College because I know that I, and all of us assembled here today, can gain sure footing on a path of rebirth and regeneration. We can reconnect with our revolutionary urge for democracy, our spirit of discovery, our enthusiasm for individual expression, freedom, justice, and native curiosity about the frontiers of consciousness. We can do all this right here, at Middlesex Community College, because all of us, working together, have the capacity to make these big dreams come true.

And I pledge to give every ounce of energy that I have to working with you all to get there.

Selected sources:

- *A Crucible Moment: College Learning and Democracy’s Future: A Call to Action and Report* from The National Task Force on Civic Learning and Democratic Engagement, January 2012.