



David Harrison

Columbus State Community College

Overview

This is a transcript of a speech by Dr. David Harrison, President of Columbus State Community College, delivered during a Change Makers event. The talk blends gratitude, context about higher education challenges, and an overview of Columbus State's transformative initiatives designed to drive talent development and regional economic growth in Central Ohio.

1. Context: Challenges and Opportunities in Higher Education

Decline in Confidence and Enrollment

- National **confidence in higher education** has steadily declined since 2015.
- **Enrollments peaked in 2011** and have continued to drop nationally and in Ohio.
- The **number of high school graduates** and those pursuing post-secondary education is projected to **shrink dramatically through 2042**.
- This presents a significant **talent pipeline challenge** for businesses and communities reliant on educated workers.

Columbus and Central Ohio's Advantage

Despite national headwinds, Central Ohio stands out as a **growth hub**:

- **GDP, job, and population growth** outpace other Midwest cities.
- Projected **regional population increase of one million by 2050**.

- A **diverse and resilient economy**—spanning education, healthcare, government, and emerging industries—buffers against recessions.
 - Columbus State is positioned as a **key player in talent development** discussions for new regional projects.
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2. Columbus State’s Role and Mission

Institutional Profile

- **Largest community college in Ohio** and **third largest higher education institution** in the state.
- Among the **most diverse institutions** in the region.
- Operates as an **open-access college**, admitting 100% of applicants.

Student Demographics and Realities

- **43% of all U.S. undergraduates** attend community colleges.
- Many students are **working adults or parents**; 1.4 million nationally are single mothers.
- Columbus State students often face **financial and academic barriers**, but the college focuses on **minimizing student debt** and providing **accessible pathways** to degrees.

Guiding Philosophy

- Columbus State is **“a bridge, not a destination.”**
 - Strategic priority: **“Go nowhere without a partner.”**
 - The institution’s foundation is **student success**, supported by data-driven infrastructure and community partnerships.
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3. Transformative Partnership Initiatives

A. The Columbus Promise

- **Origin:** Concept introduced by City Council President Shannon Hardin in 2019.
- **Launch:** Revived post-COVID to address learning loss and inequities.
- **Program:** Offers **three years of tuition-free education** at Columbus State for all **Columbus City Schools graduates**.

- **Funding:** \$5M each from the city and the college, plus \$6M in private funds.
 - **Impact:**
 - Enrollment **more than doubled** from pre-program levels.
 - Participants outperform pre-Promise students in GPA, retention, and completion.
 - Every Columbus City high school is involved.
 - **Lessons:** “Strategic patience” and the mantra “**Think big, start small, scale fast.**”
 - **Next step:** Expansion to a regional scale.
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B. The Buckeye Bridge (with The Ohio State University)

- **Objective:** Create a **tuition-free transfer pathway** from Columbus State to Ohio State.
 - **Eligibility:** Families with **\$100,000 or less annual income.**
 - **Benefits:** Graduates of Columbus State can complete a **bachelor’s degree at OSU for free.**
 - **Genesis:** Informal conversations between Dr. Harrison and OSU President Ted Carter led to the agreement.
 - **Goal:** Establish a **sustainable, long-term pipeline** from community college to university.
 - **Broader Impact:** Ensures 5th–6th graders and families can **plan confidently for higher education.**
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C. OhioHealth Partnership

- **Challenge:** Severe nursing and healthcare professional shortages.
 - **Solution:** Creation of the **OhioHealth Hall**—a new **Health Sciences Center** at Columbus State.
 - **Funding:**
 - Supported by a **\$25 million endowment** from OhioHealth.
 - Enabled by Franklin County’s bond funding for capital expansion.
 - **Purpose:** Increase healthcare program capacity and create **earn-and-learn opportunities** for working students.
 - **Takeaway:** “A problem well defined is a problem half solved.” Focused collaboration led to innovative outcomes.
 - **Timeline:** Facility opening planned for **2027.**
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D. YMCA and Community Development Initiatives

- **Project:** New **Downtown YMCA** on Columbus State’s campus.
 - **Features:**
 - **Health and wellness facilities** for students.
 - **Free drop-in childcare** for student parents.
 - **Supported by:** The new **Columbus State Community Partners (501c3)**, enabling real estate development and auxiliary enterprise management.
 - **Linked Projects:**
 - **Opportunity Point** – an **affordable housing initiative** launching after early 2026, with units for students.
 - **Vision Example:** A student living at Opportunity Point can walk her child to YMCA childcare, attend nursing classes at OhioHealth Hall, and complete clinicals at Grant Medical Center—illustrating the concept of **“making help unavoidable.”**
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4. Leadership and Collaboration Themes

- **Gratitude and partnership** are recurring themes throughout the speech.
 - Dr. Harrison credits board members, staff, and community partners (e.g., Rick Ritzler, Katie Trimbitis) for progress.
 - Emphasis on **human relationships**—“Partnerships aren’t between organizations; they’re between people.”
 - **Guiding principles:**
 - Strategic patience.
 - Go slow to go fast.
 - Think big, start small, scale fast.
 - Make help unavoidable.
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5. Closing Reflections

Dr. Harrison concludes with optimism about Columbus State’s role in shaping Central Ohio’s future. Despite the broader turbulence in higher education, he believes the college’s **collaborative spirit, community trust, and focus on student success** position it as a **model of transformation and opportunity**.

Summary Takeaway

Columbus State Community College, under Dr. Harrison’s leadership, exemplifies a **“change-making” institution** that converts regional collaboration into tangible results—combining educational access, workforce alignment, and community transformation.

Through initiatives like **Columbus Promise, Buckeye Bridge, OhioHealth Hall**, and **YMCA/Opportunity Point**, the college is redefining how higher education can anchor both **individual opportunity and economic vitality** in Central Ohio.