

ADMINISTRATION

Chancellor Julianna Barnes leads district with empathy

Fostering a sense of belonging a top priority

By Larry Urish
contributing writer

Julianna M. Asperin Barnes keeps a small glass ball on her desk. It serves to remind her that, as chancellor of the South Orange County Community College District, she must keep a high number of proverbial balls in the air.

“The trick is to determine which of the balls are rubber and which are glass,” Barnes said. “If you drop a rubber ball, that’s OK. But you must keep the glass ones in the air.”

Given all that she does, prioritizing her activities is mandatory. Clearly, her efforts are working, since the district is home to two of the top 15 community colleges in the nation.

With more than three decades of experience in higher education, Barnes maintains an enthusiastic commitment

to educational equity, community engagement and districtwide transformation in an ever-changing academic world. As a result, she has helped position the SOCCCD as a top-notch educational institution.

“One of the things I like most about my job,” Barnes said, “is that I get to support and advocate for so many first-generation, low-income students.” After all, she, herself, was a first-generation, low-income student.

“I used to think that the trials and tribulations (of being poor) were a detriment, and I used to hide that,” Barnes said. “But now I’m kind of proud of it. You learn lessons and develop positive characteristics; it’s about being resilient and having empathy for those with the same challenges.”

Barnes recalls her struggle, not only as someone who grew up with financial

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South Orange County Community College District Chancellor Julianna M. Asperin Barnes identifies with first-generation students.

South Orange County Community College District

Saddleback College • Irvine Valley College • Advanced Technology & Education Park (Tustin)

Save
the
Date

State of the District

At Irvine Valley College on February 28, 2025

With the support of the South Orange County Community College District board of trustees, Chancellor Julianna M. Asperin Barnes will present to the community our district’s accomplishments, challenges, and plans for the future. Save the date and join us for this exciting event. To learn more visit www.socccd.edu



Chancellor

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stress, but as a woman of color. She discovered that excelling in school was her way out of poverty.

“During my first year of college (at UC San Diego; she later earned master’s and doctorate degrees at San Diego State), I worked three jobs, including washing dishes in the cafeteria. It allowed me to get free meals. UCSD wasn’t very diverse. While I found a sense of belonging in the cafeteria, I realized that students shouldn’t be relegated to just one section of the college. Today, I like to make sure that all students feel welcome.”

Barnes served as president of Cuyamaca College, east of San Diego, for seven years. “After I first became a college president, I used to sit in the president’s conference room, which had sketches on the wall honoring all of the past presidents. I saw that I was the first person of color to serve as president in 40 years. I got to see how I can represent a cohort of people who have never been represented in these top posts. I feel grateful to serve as a beacon for those

who’ve never seen a woman of color in a top position.”

Barnes’ past experiences continually motivate her to advance initiatives that promote diversity, equity and inclusion across the SOCCCD. This helps ensure that all students – particularly those from marginalized communities – can receive a quality education. She has led endeavors that focus on students’ basic needs: housing, food security, mental health assistance and financial support.

“Many students don’t see themselves reflected in the curriculum or in leadership positions,” Barnes said. “All students, including those in marginalized groups, need to have a sense of belonging, of being validated socially and culturally.”

South Orange County Community College District has thrived under Barnes’ watch. Over the past year alone, the district has seen a 12% year-over-year increase in student enrollment. The personal finance firm WalletHub last August named Irvine Valley College and Saddleback College the No. 1 and No. 5 community colleges, respectively, in California. Equally impressive are the colleges’ No. 6 and No. 14 national rankings.

Barnes’ involvement in a variety of key local and state organizations – each

one yet another proverbial ball to be kept airborne – benefits the SOCCCD, the surrounding community and the California Community Colleges. She serves as a member and immediate past chair of the Community College League of California’s board of directors; chair of the Orange County Community College Legislative Task Force; member and immediate past president of the Chief Executive Officers of the California Community Colleges’ Board; and member of the California Community College Chancellor’s Office’s Artificial Intelligence Council.

“At the state level (this involvement) is very beneficial for me as district chancellor. It allows me to shape policy and future legislation, which can positively impact my district, as well as the California Community Colleges.”

The chancellor understands that partnerships between the business community and the SOCCCD are essential to bridge the gap between education and the workforce.

“It’s important that our colleges tailor the curriculum to meet the specific needs of the current and emerging job market,” Barnes said. “This ensures that students are acquiring the relevant knowledge and skills needed to be job-ready. Additionally, such

collaborations often lead to internship and apprenticeship opportunities for students, which provide them with hands-on experience, allowing them to be more marketable in the future.”

Along with her role as chair of the Orange County Regional Consortium, Barnes is an executive board member of the Orange County Business Council, where she serves as co-chair of the OCBC’s Workforce Committee. Aligning programs and curriculum to meet the needs of business and industry, the OCBC promotes initiatives that boost career and technical education, as well as workforce and economic development efforts, throughout the county.

“Our community is counting on our community colleges to produce the next generation of skilled and degreed workers to contribute to the workforce,” Barnes said.

Fair and equal access to education and key resources, however, remains paramount. “When we look at our data, we note that there are populations of students who are falling through the cracks,” Barnes said. “We employ strategies to help them get to the finish line. It helps them and the community. That’s what equity is. Being mindful of who is falling through the cracks and remedying that.”