



with AASCU's New President Dr. Mildred García

Conducted for *Public Purpose* by Stephen Pelletier

Dr. Mildred García became the new president of AASCU on January 22, 2018. Prior to her taking office, García sat down with Public Purpose to discuss her aspirations for AASCU's future.

When Dana Hoyt, the president of Sam Houston State University (Texas) and the 2017-18 chair of the AASCU Board of Directors, announced the appointment of Dr. Mildred García as AASCU's new president, she noted, "She has a strong commitment to AASCU institutions and understands their distinctive mission." Further, she said, "We believe she is uniquely positioned to lead AASCU as public higher education confronts some of its most formidable challenges of the 21st century."

García—the first Latina to lead one of the six presidentially based higher education associations in Washington, D.C.—comes to AASCU from California State University, Fullerton, where she had served as president since 2012. García previously served as president of California State University, Dominguez Hills, and became the first Latina president in the largest system of public higher education in the country. Prior to that, García served as the CEO of Berkeley College (N.J.), where she was the first system-wide president for all six campuses. She has also held both academic and senior-level positions at Arizona State University; Montclair State University (N.J.); Pennsylvania State University; Teachers College, Columbia University (N.Y.); and the Hostos, LaGuardia, and City Colleges of the City University of New York.

A first-generation college student, President García earned a Doctor of Education degree and an M.A. in higher education administration from Columbia University, Teachers College; an M.A. in business education/higher education from New York University; a B.S. in business education from Baruch College, City University of New York; and an A.A.S. from New York City Community College.

"State colleges and universities are the preeminent paths to upward mobility in this country, and it is a privilege to now represent so many diverse and academically excellent institutions," García said upon her appointment.

About a month before García assumed the AASCU presidency, she spoke with *Public Purpose* about her aspirations for the association's future.



Before we ask you to discuss AASCU, can you give us an overview of some of your greatest accomplishments during your tenure as president at California State University, Fullerton?

Several things. Number one is graduation of a diverse student body. We graduated the largest

resident,

class ever of almost 11,000 students last May. Another accomplishment was developing the university's first ever strategic plan, which concluded in 2017, and hitting our goals for that plan. For example, during my tenure, the university saw a 30 percent improvement in six-year graduation rates and a 65 percent improvement in four-year graduation rates for first-time freshmen—both university records. Graduation rates had been stuck at around 52 percent for six years. Under our strategic plan, we pushed that rate up to 67 percent. We also reached our largest enrollment ever, of over 40,000 students.

Cal State Fullerton serves low-income students of all backgrounds: 40 percent of students are Latino, 22 percent Asian-American and 2 percent African-American. Among other accomplishments for that diverse student population, we eliminated the achievement gap for transfer students and cut it in half for first-time freshmen. That's amazing, since about 60 percent of the university's students are on Pell. Fullerton is first in California and second in the nation in graduating Latinos with bachelor's degrees, and we are fifth in the nation for awarding bachelor's degrees to underrepresented students.

We also increased fundraising capabilities from about \$8 million when I got there to today—in each of the last two years we raised more than \$20 million. We created some wonderful teams that work on student success in each college, paying close attention to the college's majors. I could go on and on.

Were there things you were not able to accomplish that you wish you had?

The university was founded in 1957, and I would have loved to have been there to finish the 60th anniversary year to celebrate and to continue to thank the faculty, staff, students and community for helping us lift Cal State Fullerton to where it is today.

What will you miss the most about Cal State Fullerton?

Number one is the students. I think the diversity of our students from all walks of life is amazing. While people think Orange County is not very diverse, it is. It is diverse



not only in ethnicity, but also in economic income. The university's students are engaged, amazing, bright young people who dream about where their journey is taking them.

I will miss a faculty and staff that understand student success and understand that we are there to graduate and help these students reach their highest dreams.

I will miss a community who embraced me and helped lift this university to new heights. Our philanthropic board and our community leaders really worked hard to move Cal State Fullerton to the next level.

How do you anticipate your experiences at Cal State Fullerton will inform your work as AASCU's president?

As I look back on my career, I feel that all of my experiences, in almost 18 years of being a president of one institution or another, have led me to see the importance of public higher education in this country.

I am a first generation college student who started at a community college and transferred to a state college and university. Now, I am going to be the president of AASCU. I am honored to be selected to represent 400 state colleges and universities in this country. I know about student success. I know about first generation students. I've been able to see the transformative power of education not only for myself, but for the thousands of students that I have served throughout my career. Now, as president of AASCU, I look forward to continuing my work to advance opportunities for all students.

What factors motivated you to consider the AASCU presidency?

I really believed in AASCU's mission. AASCU is about advocating for state colleges and universities and

talking about how we are an investment in this country. It is about the fact that higher education is about democracy, and it is about preparing our future leaders in whatever profession they have. It is about supporting the presidents of our organization and their leadership teams.

It is also about mentoring new presidents to take on these amazing roles. As people continue to retire, we need to replace that experienced talent. AASCU does an amazing job, not only in supporting experienced presidents, but also in bringing on new ones and assisting in diversifying presidents and their leadership teams.

What is your vision for AASCU's future? What do you hope AASCU can achieve under your leadership?

I know I have big shoes to fill as Dr. Howard retires, but my vision is about advocating and ensuring that people understand the importance of AASCU institutions in this country.

It is about talking about who we are and letting the public know of the many accomplishments of America's state colleges and universities. It is about being seen as a critical organization for students seeking bachelor's degrees and master's level education, and as an organization that is helping those students reach their dreams. And, of course, it is about supporting AASCU presidents as they serve their students.

I think it's important for our members to know what becomes of their graduates once they leave. Are they beginning their careers? Are they going to graduate school? This is a point I have been making and this will be a focus for AASCU as we move forward.

In some quarters, perceptions about the value of higher education seem to be eroding. In the current political and economic climate, how can AASCU best

make the case for public higher education?

I think we go to the research that's been coming out recently. The Center on Education in the Workforce at Georgetown reports that about 65 percent of jobs in the workforce will need some type of postsecondary education, and that employees with bachelor's degrees now earn 57 percent of all wages in this country. Within that context, we need to prepare our students to continue to lift all of our communities and all professions. We must prepare students to be leaders in our communities, with the degree of engagement that's so necessary today.

We need to talk about the value that AASCU institutions add to that mix. We need to help the public and legislators understand that AASCU schools account for 3.4 million FTEs in higher education, and that the over 556,000 graduates [from the most recent data collected in 2015] of AASCU schools are going to be the entrepreneurs, the leaders, the workforce of this country. We need to help the public understand that average tuition at AASCU schools is only about \$8,000 a year; we are not those institutions that charge high tuition and whose students graduate with high debt. Further, we need to help parents and students understand that faculty, not graduate assistants, are the ones who are teaching students in AASCU institutions.

Finally, what do you hope to accomplish in your first year as AASCU's president?

I envision my first year as being like the first year of a college presidency. It's a listening tour, at least for a couple of months. I want to talk with our board and our members and ask them to tell me



what they feel AASCU should represent. How can we best continue to advocate for and talk about the accomplishments and strengths of AASCU's 400 institutions?

We are educating the diversity of this country. Forty percent of all historically black colleges and universities are AASCU institutions. AASCU represents 19 percent of all Hispanic-serving institutions, and 45 percent of our students are students of color. We have the largest proportion of students with Pell Grants. We educate the low income regardless of race, and we are educating the populace for democracy. I think when it comes to bachelor's degrees, it's our state colleges and universities that are doing God's work in this country. We need to continue to make our message known to the public, to legislators and to the government. **P**

Based in Rockville, Md., Stephen Pelletier writes regularly about higher education.