

From politics to public education Ex-Governor Locke now interim president at Bellevue College

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Body

"We really need to bring all the elements of the community together, and just listen, and hear people out. ... We need to develop a climate where people feel respected."

Gary Locke

Interim president at Bellevue College

In his decades in politics, former Gov. Gary Locke has been the leader of King County, the state of Washington and the U.S. Department of Commerce. After years at the top at the local, state and federal level, he'll soon be charged with leading a much smaller entity: Bellevue College.

It's an unexpected position for the politician whose story of growing up in Seattle public housing to rising to the top tiers of government, including as the first Chinese American governor in U.S. history, is well known in Washington and beyond. So why, after years of high-profile roles, would he be interested in a 29,000-student school on the Eastside?

"Some people approached me and asked if I would consider it," Locke said. "I said 'Whoa, this is not something that was on my radar,' but given my longtime interest in high education, and I very much enjoy management, I thought I could be of help."

Bellevue College's Board of Trustees seemed to agree. The board voted May 28 to name Locke as the college's interim president for the year as it searches for a permanent president. Board of Trustees Chair Rich Fukutaki described Locke as the person most adept at navigating difficult budgets and building partnerships outside the college.

The announcement marks a new era for an institution that's endured internal and external blows for months, including the fallout from the defacement of a campus mural, and financial and educational uncertainties stemming

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from the COVID-19 pandemic. But while Locke has faced challenges of a much higher caliber in the past, it remains to be seen how well his breadth of experience will apply on campus.

"We need strong leadership and direction," said Juan Esparza, a Bellevue College case manager and member of the school's Diversity Caucus. "Are we going to be fully remote? How will we be on campus? There's anxiety over all our jobs. Are we going to start losing our jobs? The hurt and confusion and pain that is going on right now is intense. There's a lot of emotions."

Locke succeeds Jerry Weber, who resigned in early March with Gayle Colston Barge, a vice president, in the fallout over Barge's admitted involvement in the defacement of a campus mural, "Never Again Is Now." The mural by Seattle artist Erin Shigaki depicts two Japanese American children in a World War II incarceration camp. A portion of Shigaki's artist description, referring to the late Eastside businessman Miller Freeman and his anti-Japanese sentiment, was whited out.

The campus community requires healing from that incident, Locke says. As he met with students and faculty, he said, many told him they didn't feel heard by the previous leaders, especially as the campus was reeling from the defacement.

"We really need to bring all the elements of the community together, and just listen, and hear people out," he said. "So much of healing is finding out what is on the minds of people, and how they are feeling and respecting their views. We need to develop a climate where people feel respected."

Because of the COVID-19 pandemic, he and other college leaders face unprecedented challenges: How to provide education and a campus experience in an era of social distancing and remote learning. Meanwhile, Washington's community and technical colleges - of which Bellevue College is the largest - are projected to bear the brunt of state funding cuts caused by declines in revenue during the state's stay-at-home order.

Locke said he expects to see the demand for higher education increase amid the economic downturn, especially among those who have been laid off and want to explore another industry, or others who want additional training to try to ensure they keep their current jobs.

"The demand is going up, yet state funding resources are going down," Locke said. "This is going to be a huge dilemma."

With the other presidents of Washington's colleges, Locke plans to meet with state legislators and state officials to emphasize that "any strategy for economic recovery has to rely on and include our colleges and universities."

Locke, who served two terms as governor starting in 1997, has said he was the "nontraditional candidate" for the job, though he's not the first state leader to take the helm of a Washington public college, as Board of Trustees member Richard Leigh noted during a trustees meeting. After serving three terms, Gov. Daniel Evans was named president of Evergreen State College in 1977.

During interviews with campus community members, Locke hearkened back to his experience in politics in answers for questions about the college. When asked about professor evaluations, he cited an example from his time as the U.S. ambassador to China; for an answer about different viewpoints on campus, he referred to his experience overseeing the nation's 2010 Census.

Esparza, the Bellevue College case manager, said some called Locke the "celebrity candidate," and questioned his skill set when it comes to the specific issues of higher education. But they acknowledge he has connections few others have - "he knows President Obama," Esparza recalled his colleagues saying.

And Locke has stressed that he's long had an interest and fascination with higher education, including with the state's community colleges. His mother, at age 50, enrolled in classes at a community college. One was a course in tailoring, though she had been a seamstress for years, and the other - showing the range in program offerings - was a class on idioms of American expression.

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Leslie Lum, a Bellevue College professor who helped bring the "Never Again Is Now" mural to the school, called Locke a revered leader in the Asian community. She worked on his first gubernatorial campaign, and attended both inaugural balls with others in the activist Asian community.

She recalled the exhilaration of hearing Cantonese spoken in the State Capitol, and seeing members of the Asian community, "knowing that we belonged there," because of Locke's work.

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