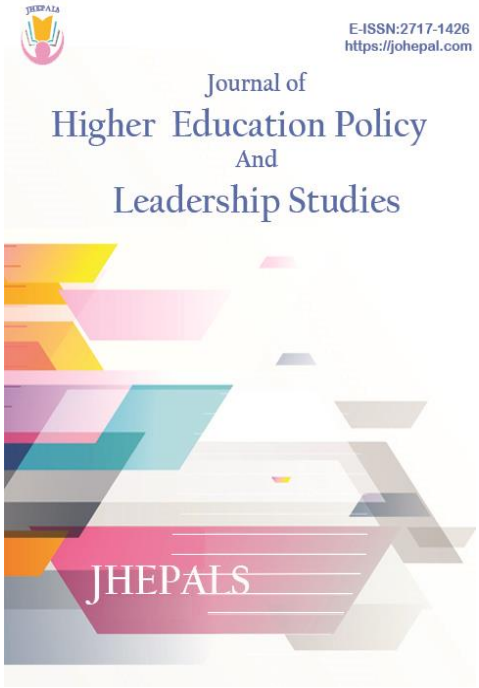
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Building Community and Connections -- Higher Education Today and Tomorrow: An Interview with Dr. Robin Matross Helms

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Interview

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Robin Matross Helms *



Dr. Robin Matross Helms is vice president for membership and educational services at the Association of Community College Trustees (ACCT). In this role, Robin leads and guides the association's member benefits and engagement initiatives, as well as trustee education programs, board services, publications and events.

Prior to joining ACCT, Robin led programs and global initiatives at the American Council on Education, where her portfolio focused on institutional transformation, student success, higher education leadership development, global engagement, and equity and inclusion.

Previously, Robin has worked in international education and academic affairs at the University of Minnesota, the Institute of International Education, EF Education, and CET Academic Programs. She has also served as a consultant to a number of organizations in the international and higher education fields, including the World Bank, the Institute for Higher Education Policy, and Harvard University's Collaborative on Academic Careers in Higher Education, and is a member of the National Academy for International Education.

Robin holds a bachelor's degree in East Asian Studies from Princeton University, and an MBA and PhD in higher education administration from Boston College.

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Matross Helms, R.

It is an honor and privilege for us to host Dr. Robin Matross Helms as the Vice President for Membership and Educational Services, Association of Community College Trustees (ACCT), USA and as a globally renowned scholar and higher education leader whose research, talks, interviews, and notes are extensively cited and acknowledged worldwide.

We are sure that Dr. Matross Helms's insightful, illuminating and critical responses enriched with her academic/ leadership experience in higher education and global cooperation will be of interest to a broad audience of international researchers, students, policymakers, and leaders in Higher Education.

Question #1

What is the purpose of higher education? Why are you passionate about it?

Answer:

I think one of the most exciting things about higher education is that it serves many different functions for many different stakeholders – from individual students, to families, to local communities, to our broader global community. My own passion for the field, though, stems from higher education as a space for people – students, faculty, administrators, trustees, and other stakeholders – to explore and develop their own passions and identities, and figure out what will be their unique contributions to the world.

This is one of the reasons I am particularly proud to work in the US community college sector. Many of our students, for a variety of reasons, have not had previous access to higher education. Many come from disadvantaged economic backgrounds, and may not have had the time, space, or support to develop their individual passions or pursue their own interests. Community colleges provide not only the opportunities and resources to explore their academic interests, but given the deep connections between these institutions and their communities and job markets, they provide pathways for students to immediately apply the knowledge and skills in their chosen focus areas, and further develop their career and life pathways.

Question #2

What are some key challenges higher education faces in today's world? and What transformational plans and policy recommendations do you suggest to solve these challenges?

Answer:

There is no shortage of challenges for higher education in today's world. Headlines in the higher education press address these daily: budgets and funding, cybersecurity, and others

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that I have addressed in subsequent questions such as the role of artificial intelligence and public questions about the value of higher education.

Looking more broadly at the macro-level challenges we're facing as a field, there are two big categories that are on my mind. The first is access and inclusion: How do we ensure that we are reaching and meeting the needs of as diverse and broad a population of learners as possible? This does not mean that every institution needs to serve every population, but how do we create systems and constellations of institutions that collectively meet a diverse set of needs, and meet students where they are at – literally, as well as in terms of preparation, academic interests, and career goals.

In order to do so, I think we as a field need to let go of some of our prestige hierarchies. In the US, not every institution should aspire to be Harvard or a major research university. Community colleges, the sector in which I work, serve over one-third of students enrolled in higher education in the US. They should not be considered "less than" a research university – rather, they are complementary, with very different missions and outcomes.

I think we need to do a better job of creating collaborations among different types of institutions, clarify missions and populations served, and measure institutional success not against a broad, uniform standard, but in terms of how well institutions deliver on their own goals and meet the needs of their target populations and communities. We need to develop narratives about the value of different types of institutions and the unique roles they serve, and inspire institutions to be proud of and embrace their strengths.

The second overarching challenge that is on my mind is wellness. I mean this broadly for individuals, populations of stakeholders, institutions, and the broader communities they serve. The pandemic took a toll on everyone worldwide, but I think it accelerated, rather than created, trends we were already seeing in higher education, such as shorter and shorter tenure for presidents, faculty burn-out, and increasing mental health challenges among students.

Amid much focus on outcomes, such as employment (more on this in subsequent questions), I think higher education needs to focus on being a space where people thrive and connect with each other. A number of years ago, I did a study of Generation X faculty in US colleges and universities. A key theme that emerged from my interviews was a desire among faculty to feel that they are part of a community – where they are connected to and invested in their colleagues and students, feel a shared sense of purpose, and feel supported in their work and, more holistically, as human beings.

Creating this kind of community and atmosphere happens largely at the institutional level, and loops back to fostering a sense of pride in individual institutional mission, and meeting students where they are at. I think it is important for institutional leaders to set the tone by being engaged and accessible, modeling good wellness habits themselves, and creating a culture of health and support that will permeate the institution.

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Question #3

It seems that reasons such as academic inflation, ineffective educational policy decisions, and the out-of-date curricula have caused doubts about the social authority and academic legitimacy of the university as compared to its traditional type. What is your opinion? What can be done to maintain the scientific and social authority and legitimacy of the university as before? Is this necessary at all?!

Answer (Question #3):

In the US, for a number of years now we have been grappling with declining trust in higher education, and questions about its value. I think it is important for us to listen – to really understand what the concerns are, and what is driving them.

Given comparatively high tuition rates in the US, key among these concerns is employability of graduates, and the return on investment of tuition dollars. A few months ago, I was at a meeting of community college leaders, and we asked participants what was their top overall institutional priority. The answer: Workforce development. The next day, I was at Princeton University, participating in meetings of an advisory committee I sit on for the East Asian Studies department. We met with PhD students, and asked them what their top concerns were. The #1 answer: Getting a job after graduation. No matter the sector and audience, how higher education outcomes map to employment – in the near and long-term - is something institutions need to address, by creating and articulating clear pathways and connections.

Along these lines, I think it is important for higher education institutions to interact deeply and regularly with industry, government, and other employers to understand their needs and ensure that academic programs provide students with the knowledge and skills they need to successfully enter the workforce. This does not mean narrowing down to teach only technical, field-specific skills, though those are part of the equation – it is also ensuring that skills that transfer across industries – like writing, effective communication, collaboration, and project management - are present across the curriculum.

Question #4

How can artificial intelligence (AI) affect the directions of higher education functions (i.e., education, research, social services)? According to your way of thinking, shouldn't the governance and leadership of universities be sensitive to this very important issue? How can we face the effects of artificial intelligence in the daily programs and policies of the university?

Answer:

In my view, this is an important question for everyone involved in higher education at this time, from governing boards, to administrators, to faculty, to students. And as we see in the press, there are a lot of different opinions and viewpoints, certainly between, but even within these populations of stakeholders. This question is playing out on a small scale in my

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own household – just the other day my children (ages 17, 13, and 10) were talking about the use of ChatGPT in their schoolwork. Some teachers in their schools have set policies to restrict its use – but the middle school brain being what it is, my son has already figured out "work arounds" to leverage AI without actually violating the rules.

My own opinion, as a parent and educator, is that students should learn to work effectively with AI as a tool. This means learning how it works, what it is able to, but importantly, what its limits are and what it cannot do. My own experience using ChatGPT is that it's a great starting point – but its output requires analysis, critical thinking, editing, refining, and personalization, all of which are good skills for students to learn and apply in a variety of contexts.

I am reminded of my statistics classes in graduate school. At the time there was a debate as to whether the focus should be learning formulas and the underlying math, or learning to use statistical analysis software. I took classes of both varieties, but in practical application, understanding the tools and how they work was most valuable for me.

Broadly, I think we are still figuring out what all the issues are surrounding AI – operational, pedagogical, and policy-wise. At the Association of Community College Trustees, there is certainly interest among our members, whose focus is institutional policy. We are in the early stages of facilitating these conversations and learning more about how they are playing out on campuses – stay tuned!

Question #5

What will higher education look like in the future? What advice do you have for the success of the younger generation who are preparing to go into the field?

Answer:

When I think about the future of higher education, the word that comes to mind for me is "connected". Partnerships, I think, will be essential for higher education institutions to thrive and meet the evolving needs of students and communities. Partnerships with industry and government will be crucial for building relevant curricula and content that prepare students for the workforce, and for creating career pathways for students post-graduation. Intra-sector collaboration is also crucial for advancing research – bringing together different perspectives and types of knowledge to solved shared problems.

While universities are and should be deeply connected to their local communities, higher education has become a global enterprise. Partnerships with counterpart institutions, as well as government agencies and other entities in other countries facilitate research and knowledge development, and provide opportunities for students to develop intercultural skills and work across differences – skills that will serve them well throughout their careers and lives.

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In terms of advice for future higher education leaders, I would say to approach our field with optimism and openness to a lot of possibilities, particularly in terms of career paths. There are so many different administrative, faculty, and leadership roles in higher education, and it is common for professionals to move between these. Higher education is by nature focused on learning, so I would also suggest taking advantage of opportunities for learning beyond one's immediate job path – take a class, find a mentor in a different role or department, and see what opportunities arise.

I would also say that along with openness to possibilities and opportunities, it's important to maintain a sense of equanimity. As noted previously, data show that in the US, for example, presidential tenure in higher education is getting shorter and shorter. When leadership changes, institutional priorities may change swiftly, and focus areas and job responsibilities may be adjusted. Recognizing that there are ebbs and flows, and being flexible to change directions (and sometimes institutions or organizations), is important in our field. Keeping a focus on what drives you personally in higher education (see questions #1 above!) is helpful in navigating and thriving amid these changes.

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