

John B. Cook, Ph.D., President of STCC on Diversity and Inclusion

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John B. Cook, Ph.D., President of STCC

On August 1, 2016, Dr. John B. Cook took over the reins of Springfield Technical Community College, becoming its sixth president.

Prior to his appointment, Dr. Cook was Vice President of Academic Affairs at Manchester Community College (MCC) in New Hampshire. He also worked for 12 years at Granite State College.

On February 15th, two Puerto Rican journalists, Natalia Muñoz, the host of "Vaya con Muñoz" on radio station WHMP (1400 AM), and Manuel Frau Ramos, editor and publisher of *El Sol Latino*, interviewed Dr. Cook in his office. The interview has been edited for space, style, and clarity.

MFR: Coming from Manchester Community College (MCC) in New Hampshire, what attracted you to apply for the job at STCC?

Many things. Certainly the opportunity to lead an institution that is tremendous and I feel quite fortunate about that. I spent a lot of time in New England's mid-size cities and, obviously in Manchester, one of their more diverse municipalities. But I spent a lot of time in Lowell. I did my Master's there at UMass Lowell and it really got in my bones so much so that I went back and did my dissertation there and I really looked at how universities and the community engage in meaningful ways and in some ways for them, many long lasting ways. So, when you add in Springfield, again the sort of third of these vibrant, diverse mid-sized cities, it seemed like a tremendous opportunity. With a nod to my family, I grew up in Central New York and they love this because they think I'm half way home, coming from New Hampshire.

MFR: STCC is located in a region with a large and growing Latino population, especially in Holyoke and Springfield. Approximately 80% of Holyoke Public Schools students and 65% of Springfield students are Latinos. What is the demographics profile of the STCC student body?

Almost 30% of our students identify as Latino, Latina, Latinx. It is tremendous. In some ways it speaks the story of Springfield, ever evolving. It's ever welcoming. We see the rise of many newcomer groups. I think it is a source of strength for us. When you add in our African-American student population which is still strong at maybe just under 20%. We are, I think its fair to say, a college of color. And yet, to also really bring in a degree of candor, we are not satisfied with things like equity gaps in terms of how our students are persistent and graduate relative to their white counterparts, and also they are not as representative as we would want in all programs.

MFR - What are the retention and graduation rates of Latino students at STCC?

We have what is called Pre-Health, which is really in essence a default and is more or less no different than General Studies. We see on average for white students a 50% retention rate in that Pre-Health, which for community colleges is pretty good, 10% points less for Latino/Latina students. So first, we have to recognize and acknowledge that disparity and then the question is, what are we going to do about it? I can answer that. We are doing things like actually creating a Health Science Degree in its own right, one that includes things like patient simulation and the chance to earn a certification embedded in this degree program that we are developing so you can become a certified EMT. Those are the types of things that we see that will really hopefully address some of these stubborn, persistent equity gaps.

NM – How is the college preparing with the emerging technology? Are you offering courses in that to prepare a workforce that knows how to work in these emerging technologies? Because otherwise all you have is MGM as one of the biggest employers after Baystate Health and UMass. How do we keep people in our area after they graduate?

I think it's an opportunity for us to talk about fit and to provide experiences for younger students and by that I mean Middle School and High School students and their families. We have, it seems, every program under the sun. Its not just Nursing and Health Care, we have Medical Assistant, we have Dental Hygiene, the list goes on. To that point, we have manufacturing. We have 120 students in what we call Mechanical Engineering Technology.

NM – Is that enough? Are 120 students enough?

No. I would love if we could just somehow find a way to double that. But it means working to demystify what it means for students of color and for women. Both are underrepresented in a program like that. But we also have programs like Digital Media, Cyber Security, Health Information Technology. To your point about technology, we absolutely have to stay contemporary with the movement on the economy. It's still about giving students experiences.

NM – You mentioned earlier that this is college of color and you talked about manufacturing and demystifying it for people of color and for women. The question that came to me is well, this great that STCC can demystify it, but then the workplaces have to have to do it as well. Does

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attended the listening session with the Latino Advisory Commission

raised their voices in opposition to the press being barred from the meeting. That was a perfect opportunity to speak up and advocate for transparency and accountability when it comes to Latino issues in the city.

En Holyoke... fue sorprendente saber que solamente unos pocos de los Latinos que fueron invitados y que estuvieron presentes en el listening session con el Latino Advisory Commission alzaron sus voces en oposición al hecho de que a la prensa no se le permitió acceso a la reunión. Esa era la oportunidad perfecta para hablar y abogar por transparencia y responsabilidad en lo que se refiere a issues Latinos en la ciudad.