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# Ready for the school year, and a new challenge

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**By Ruth Bayang**

Northwest Asian Weekly



Dr. Shouan Pan and former chancellor Jill Wakefield. (Screenshot from YouTube video)

Contradictions and paradoxes.

That's one of the first things Dr. Shouan Pan noticed about Seattle since he moved to the

Emerald City more than two months ago to head Seattle Colleges (SC) as its new chancellor.

Born and raised in Mainland China, Pan replaced Chancellor Jill Wakefield, who retired June.

"[Seattle] is a global metropolitan city, well recognized beyond its shores, with big tech companies, lots of natural beauty, and lots of diversity in people and businesses," said Pan.

"Few places in the country, even the world, have experienced the kind of economic growth we've seen in Seattle and King County."

"Yet, there are large numbers of underresourced youth, struggling to make ends meet." Pan said there are more than 15,000 disconnected youth. People aged 16 to 21 who are not in school, don't have stable jobs, and can't afford to live in the city.

The mission of SC, and all community colleges, is to help that underserved population, Pan said — to help youth from middle and lower middle class families get a post-secondary education, so they can get living wage jobs, join the middle class, and buy middle income housing. "We need to recommit to that fundamental mission."

## **Challenges**

"In the next four years, [SC] will lose \$8 million or more in state funding," said Pan.

The community college system received \$1.37 billion from the Legislature this biennium, or a little over \$650 million a year, according to Marty Brown, executive director of the Washington State Board for Community and Technical Colleges. Between 2007 and 2009, the system got \$1.45 billion.

At the same time, the state Legislature, starting two years ago, required the colleges to give raises to faculty and staff. Lawmakers didn't fully fund the pay increase, "so the colleges have to eat some of that," Brown said.

Pan said SC's pay for faculty and staff is not on par with community colleges nationwide.

He said attracting and keeping quality employees has become an issue.

Unlike Arizona, where Pan oversaw Mesa Community College (MCC) for eight years, community colleges in the state of Washington are not funded by property taxes and levies.

"In Arizona, the property tax levy is written into the constitution. It is guaranteed by the constitution," said Pan. Sixty percent of Arizona's community college funding comes from those taxes.

"[SC] is very underfunded. I see it in salary, in the infrastructure — buildings, classrooms are in pretty bad shape ... There's so much we need to do to catch up."

Pan said education has to be an investment. "We cannot raise tuition — tuition is set by the state, by the state board. And the state board can raise tuition only so much. You can't use tuition to run your operation."

### **What's the solution?**

"We need to build partnerships with businesses, the state government, city governments ... anyone who sees the same challenges we do and can help us politically and financially," said Pan.

"We need to raise private funds for infrastructure, raise scholarships for students struggling to come to school, federal grants, state grants — we need to explore all options."

Pan said SC also needs to bring more efficiency into its operation, avoid duplication and wasteful practices.

Pan has a proven record of successful fundraising. He partnered with many agencies, including United Way, Boeing, and the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation to raise big bucks for MCC. This skill was one of many reasons the SC board of trustees unanimously picked Pan to be its new chancellor.

“We have students who live in cars, who come to campus hungry,” said Pan. “How do we help them? Many of our faculty shared with me that they have not had a pay increase in several years. I don’t know how to help them other than the fact that the system needs to be aware. Nothing can happen overnight. I don’t know how much I can influence statewide policy making. I am one voice, one vote. I will forcefully articulate the value of investing in a community college education, not just at SC, but all of Washington state. I’ve got to learn to be patient, and that’s a challenge.”

## **Grow local talent**

The greater Seattle area is enjoying an economic boom.

Big companies like Amazon, Google, and Microsoft are importing talent from outside of Washington.

But Pan said, “For Washington and Seattle to continue to thrive, we can’t rely on importing talent,” said Pan.

Some employers he has talked to are having difficulty finding mid-level skilled technicians.

“We’re not talking about engineers making \$80,000 to \$100,000 a year. We’re talking the mid-level journeyman to fix cars, planes, marine technicians. The retirement wave of the baby boomers is coming,” said Pan. “We do not have a mechanism that is growing them at the rate that is going to be needed.”

Pan said that in eight to 10 years, the region will be in critical condition — not able to fulfill the need for entry level and mid-level jobs.

A high school diploma is not enough in today’s world, said Pan, particularly in Seattle. “One must have a post-secondary credential — a certificate or an associate’s degree at the minimum, to take on jobs that pay a living wage.”

“We have to grow local talent ... 16 to 21-year-olds ... give them the chance to live the American Dream.”

## **A broad stroke**

The underprivileged, lower to middle class, the homeless.

When the general public hears these terms, the Asian American typically does not come to mind.

Nationwide, U.S. Census data shows that Asians are doing better, even better than whites, in terms of graduation rates, college attendance rates, and high paying jobs.

“That’s a broad stroke,” said Pan. “Asian immigrants who do not speak English well have the same struggles as Blacks or Latinos. Often times, those Asian youth are overlooked.”

Pan said we should not ignore the difficulties experienced by Asian American youth. “They deserve support just like other minority students.”

## Settling in

While he misses the familiar faces of colleagues and friends in Arizona, Pan said everyone here has been warm and welcoming.

He said he enjoyed the gorgeous, beautiful summer and to have “escaped the heat” of Phoenix.

And he’s getting used to the traffic.

“The streets are better and wider here,” Pan said. “And I’m learning to plan ahead when it comes to traffic. Sometimes, I’m late. Sometimes, I arrive too early. Traffic is never predictable.”

When the Seattle Seahawks travel to the University of Phoenix Stadium, in Glendale, Ariz. to play the Arizona Cardinals on Oct. 23, Pan confirms that he will root for the Hawks.

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