

California Workforce Association – Speech on “Convener.” September 2015

I’ve been asked to explain the role of a Convener. As I do, I want to tell you a bit about the California I represent; the service area that includes 4 of the 5 most impoverished counties in the entire country. I choose to live in California’s Central Valley, where agriculture is King, and where the drought has been devastating. We are home to some of the highest need for workforce development programs.

But to the question, “What is a Convener”? To me, a convener is someone who understands their constituents. In our service area, half the homes speak a language other than English. Approximately a third of our families live under the federal poverty level. And less than 20% of our residents hold a four-year college degree.

A good convener begins with demographics, then gets out of their office and into the community bringing people together, promoting, cheerleading and advocating. They join every organization they can, Rotary, the United Way, professional organizations and volunteer organizations. They learn what other groups are doing and find synergies to capitalize on fragmented efforts.

They improve the community by connecting resources. Good conveners are not quick to celebrate success but quick to stop mourning successes’ absence. They find charisma. They bring people together by coalescing around a strong common vision. And to me, this is the key. A good convener is often a well-spoken visionary, which is exceptionally important, for without shared vision, you have, in essence, no foundation upon which to build. You see, a convener looks for things that are done well, then devotes major efforts elsewhere, for the low hanging fruit of material social improvement is using what already exists. But good conveners are thinking 2 or 3 years ahead. They build upon successful proven practices to galvanize partnerships and surround themselves with new voices.

One project Fresno State is currently implementing is the opening of a downtown center. This initiative is a partnership between Fresno State, a private corporation and government. It allows students to access innovation by studying in a facility surrounded by cutting edge technology start ups. My goal with this highly publicized program is to make it impossible to ignore opportunity. We have already begun by offering workforce development programs in business communication, grant writing, digital marketing, and intellectual copyright law at exceptionally low costs, even discounting the fees to zero when it was the right thing to do. Sadly, this is only one small place in the heart of our large geographic area and serves a small number of our population’s needs. The key to being a good convener in an area struggling with resources is partnerships.

Although our goal is to create access to education and workforce development opportunities, we would be remiss if we didn’t recognize that these efforts are often accompanied by unique challenges. Chief among them, when multiple agencies with similar visions are restricted by monetary and organizational constraints, we must work to bridge these divides where possible and, be flexible in our approach, and be understanding of the constraints of each partner.

In closing, the California State University looks forward to strengthening our existing partnerships. Personally, I would laud the opportunity to participate in programs that promote access to job opportunity.