

Getting to know Dr. Karin Edwards



Clark College President, Dr. Karin Edwards.

As she begins her Clark College presidency on June 22, Clark 24/7 sat down with Dr. Karin Edwards to learn a little bit more about her life, her outlook on higher education, and her experience guiding a college—in her former capacity as president of the Cascade Campus of Portland Community College—through a global pandemic.

Read a full biography of Dr. Edwards at the bottom of this Q&A.

Starting out

Q: Tell us about your family.

A: I'm the youngest of eight children. I have four sisters and three brothers. We were a tight family who ate dinner and watched TV together, did chores, stuck up for one another, and played games. We grew up in a housing project in the Bronx, New York. My parents finished high school in Atlanta, but they did not attend college. My siblings and I all attended college or some other post-secondary training.

I met my husband, Raymond Edwards, during my freshman year at SUNY Albany. We've been married going on 35 years. He is a major accounts manager with Northwest Natural. We moved to Portland in the summer of 2014 when I was hired at as Campus President at PCC Cascade. We have two children—an adult daughter and son. We have two granddaughters and a third on the way.

Q: Did you have a Plan A and/or a Plan B for your career? Are

you doing what you set out to do 25 years ago? Was there a moment or experience that changed your direction?

A: I learned the power of education early on, so I knew I wanted a career in education. It would provide me an opportunity to impact lives. I remember wanting to be a teacher and/or a guidance counselor. I wanted to help students. I knew that was my purpose. Some of that was based on my wonderful second-grade teacher, Miss Saxton, who demonstrated so much care and consideration toward her students.

I first set my sights on the K-12 sector, but while I was a college student, I got a job helping students in my college's Financial Aid office. I enjoyed being able to help students make the financial aid process easier. That job experience changed my path. That is when I decided to stay in higher ed. Since then, all my professional experience has been in higher ed. I worked in financial aid, admissions and advising.

Q: Are you an introvert or extrovert? Does it affect how you work?

A: I'm more of an introvert, though not shy and quiet. Instead of sharing about me, I'm more interested in learning about others. I find ways to build relationships with people based on what I learn about them. I also do quite a bit of reflection.

Q: What are the milestone moments in your life that have shaped you today?

A: Here is my first milestone moment: When I was in seventh grade at Clark Junior High School in the Bronx, my homeroom teacher, Mark Cooper, who also taught science, noticed that I wasn't being challenged academically. He suggested I apply for a private school, Columbia Preparatory—Columbia Prep—an affluent school in Manhattan.

At Columbia Prep, I was exposed to so many things I'd never seen before. I was in the same city I'd lived in my whole life, but I was having all-new experiences. I went to the ballet and Broadway shows. I visited my classmates in their Central Park West apartments. Growing up in the Bronx, I never knew or experienced such affluence.

Here's my second milestone moment: Six years ago, I moved across the country from Connecticut to Portland to take my job at PCC. I'm not afraid to try something new.

Q: How did your parents influence your educational decisions?

A: My mother was a homemaker with eight kids. I'm the youngest. My dad was injured while in the Army. He later worked with the railroad.

Both of my parents were very supportive of me attending Columbia Prep, the private school. They both finished high school in the South. My mother recognized that, if you're going to get a quality education, there's a cost associated with it. I received significant scholarship support through A Better Chance.

My graduating class at Columbia Prep had only 64 students, and I was one of only four students of color; a very different experience. I would go to school in Manhattan where I had to live by one set of rules, but then I'd come home to the Bronx, which had another set of rules. I was living in two different worlds. At Columbia Prep, it was very competitive. Students ranked themselves on practically everything, including wealth, grades, personal attributes, you name it. In the Bronx, we were family; we helped each other and didn't try to outdo one another.

Straddling those two worlds taught me to ask myself: How do you live in both worlds? It's a survival skill I developed. Long story short, I got an excellent education at Columbia Prep, but it was annoying to me that I couldn't get the same

education in the public schools in the Bronx.

That's been part of the basis for my fight for equity. If I hadn't had that foundation of the private school opportunity, I wouldn't be in the position that I am. I saw the power of education, the disparities that exist between the haves and have-nots. This has led me on the quest for equitable success for students.

Going away to college was that first step of independence. For me, as the youngest of eight children, it was a very big step. It helped me build my confidence and independence.

Q: What's a significant achievement in your life?

A: Earning my doctorate was significant. I had the pleasure of working with exceptional college leaders and presidents in Connecticut and New York. My mentors told me if I wanted to pursue a college president position, I had to get my doctorate.

When I was pursuing my doctorate, my entire immediate family was in college: my husband, our two children, and me. My husband was getting his MBA from Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute. My daughter got her BA in English from Columbia University. My son was studying at Morehouse College. Three of us—all but my son—graduated all in same year. Now my son is enrolled in a doctoral program at Vanderbilt University.

Q: What do you see as a teacher's role in a student's life?

A: I have so much respect for teachers. They can change the trajectory of a student's life. I know the power of quality instruction in education. I've witnessed it. In our work, we have the opportunity and the responsibility to help encourage, inspire and challenge students to reach their full potential. That's the power and the value of education.

Q: Who are your role models or heroes?

A: My mother, Roberta Slaughter, who is 97. She raised eight children and demonstrated that kind of unfailing love for us. Each of us were different. Some did sports, some were homebodies. She tried to find something that fit each of our tastes. When I think about equity work, I think about my mother, meeting the needs of the individual. My mother is still with us today. My father, Purchase Slaughter, also believed in me. He's now deceased.

I have worked with outstanding college presidents, both in New York and Connecticut, who demonstrated that kind of concern for me as an individual and continued to push me and encourage me for opportunities to learn and grow. I've tried to model that same leadership style in my work to recognize an individual's capacity and help them develop their talents.

I worked with two excellent presidents at Three Rivers Community College in Norwich, Connecticut: Dr. Booker T. DeVaughn and Dr. Grace Jones. Both took stock in me and showed me how to be professional—how to be prepared. They remain in my life now, even though we haven't worked together for many, many years.

I also think of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. as a hero and role model. His ideals and his ability to communicate powerfully inspires me.

Career and technical education

Q: You've had a lot of experience with career and technical education at PCC Cascade.

A: Of all the PCC campuses, Cascade has the highest percentage of CTE students and programs. About a third of Cascade students are enrolled in CTE programs.

Some of PCC's programs that lead directly to a career instead of going to a four-year college include Emergency Medical Services, Fire Protection Technology, Paramedic, Criminal Justice, Medical Laboratory Technology, Ophthalmic Medical Technology, and Addiction Counseling.

Q: Why are you an advocate of Career Technical Education?

A: For so many students who may feel college is not for them, career technical education provides opportunities to train and prepare for meaningful careers and living-wage jobs. As educators, we must ask ourselves: How are we preparing the next generation of workers?

The applied baccalaureate programs at Clark are designed to meet specific workforce needs. It's important to ensure the cybersecurity, dental hygiene, applied management and human services programs are meeting the workforce needs.

Clark's Career Technical programs are successful because they provide relevant training and education that prepare students for high demand jobs in our community. They play to a students' best strengths allowing opportunities for growth, challenge and creativity.

It's important there's a close tie between workforce needs and what the college is offering. Workforce changes can be quick and expensive. It means a college must be strategic. A college must be nimble to keep up with industry.

Working during a pandemic

Q: What have you learned during the COVID-19 crisis?

A: Traditionally, colleges are not well known for being agile and nimble, but most schools were able to very quickly shift from face-to-face operations and instruction to remote and online. It was quite remarkable. So, I learned we could move and respond quickly when needed. I learned different

technological platforms to communicate and create virtual groups.

I was further made aware of the disparities that exist for people of color and other marginalized populations as it relates to health, healthcare, access to equipment and internet service. Also, it became clear that the risk of exposure to COVID-19 is so much greater for people of color and other marginalized populations because of the jobs they hold. The service industries do not provide flexibility for employees to work from home.

I also saw the increased risk of physical and emotional abuse that occurs when staying home is not always a safe people for people who are living in very difficult circumstance.

We see stress and strain throughout the community. It's a poignant reminder, that while we are all in this together, we are not in the same boat.

Q: How have you navigated working remotely at PCC?

A: Initially, it was very exhausting. I experienced Zoom fatigue; my eyes and body were so tense from the back-to-back meetings. I felt like I was engaged every minute of the day. Eventually, I've become so much better at scheduling meetings and making sure I give myself screen time breaks.

Q: What has been your most humbling tech moment during COVID-19?

A: I've had a few humbling moments with technology. My granddaughter had to help show me how to retrieve notes in the chatbox.

I also couldn't figure out how to un-mute myself on a few occasions and there have been times, I've had to walk around my house to find sufficient bandwidth. But I take comfort in that, we're all learning as we go.

Q: What routines have you built into your workday while working remotely?

A: Both my husband and I are working from home—in separate rooms. We’ve designated the kitchen as our cafeteria. During our workday, we meet in our “cafeteria” for breakfast and lunch. I wear my FitBit and march in place to get some steps in.

Q: What are the lessons learned from this experience?

A: College faculty, staff and students are resilient. They are creative and they are motivated to be successful regardless of what challenges they face. I am impressed by their ingenuity and their commitment to this work.

There are opportunities for creativity as we adapt our traditional model of education. We want to engage our students, inspire them and support them. This can be challenging when working on line.

But I have seen examples of creative innovation this year that encourages me. Our students have learned to paint and draw online this year. They are treating patients using digital simulation models. They are becoming confident online learners.

For all the challenges, there are tremendous opportunities to rethink and explore new ways that as faculty and staff we can support our students whether online or face-to-face.

Colleges have learned they can and must adapt.

Q: You began your new job as President of Clark College on June 22 at a time when the college remains in remote operations. How do you connect?

A: I’m giving so much thought to that! I am a relational person. Because of COVID-19 restrictions, it will be months before we’re all on campus together. I want to maximize

technological resources to make it more personal—more real—so that by the time we're able to meet face-to-face on campus, people will know something about who I am and that I know about somethings about them.

I think the key to connection is a willingness and a desire to be authentic and at times vulnerable with people. I am not afraid to show people who I am and I am honored when they feel comfortable to reciprocate.

I met several Clark career technical education instructors during my first week at Clark College. We were all wearing our face coverings. We're learning how to use our eyes and gestures to smile and to listen a little more closely to hear the words in order to get to know each other.

I've received such warmth in every greeting during my first days at Clark. I am excited to be here at this time to lead this talented group of instructors, staff, and students. I'm honored to be the newest member of Penguin Nation.

About Dr. Karin Edwards

Dr. Karin Edwards' 36-year-career at community colleges spans roles from Admissions Counselor to Campus President. Since July 2014, she has served as president of Portland Community College's Cascade Campus. For the previous 14 years, she was Dean of Student Development and Services at Three Rivers Community College in Norwich, Connecticut. Before that, she served for eight years in leadership positions—from Student Development Counselor to Director of College Extension Centers—at Orange County Community College in Middletown, New York. Earlier in her career, she was Higher Education Opportunity Program Counselor at Skidmore College, in Saratoga Springs, New York and Admissions Counselor at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute, Troy, New York.

Dr. Edwards has been actively engaged with the American

Association of Community Colleges, attending its Presidents Academy Summer Institute and serving on its Commission on College Readiness and Marketing/Public Relations. Additionally, she has been an active participant in the American Association of Community College Trustees Governance Conference; National Council on Black American Affairs, Western Region Conference; and Creating Inclusive, Socially Just Campus Environments.

Her community service includes serving on the board of directors of Portland Community Reinvestment Initiatives and on the advisory board of the Oregon Association of Minority Entrepreneurs, as well as being an active member of the Partners in Diversity Leadership Council and the Oregon President's Council of the Oregon Community College Association.

Dr. Edwards earned her bachelor's degree in Psychology and her master's degree in Higher Education Administration at State University of New York at Albany, and her doctorate degree in Educational Leadership at Johnson and Wales University in Providence, Rhode Island.