

The Power of Community Colleges



Dr. Karin Edwards stands beside the “Penguin Talks” poster at the Fort Vancouver Library.

At the final installment of this year’s *Penguin Talks: Clark College Lunch and Learn* series, Dr. Karin Edwards delivered a heartfelt and insightful presentation on the “*Role and Future of Community Colleges*.” Drawing from nearly forty years of experience in higher education, she spoke candidly about the deep and lasting impact community colleges have on the lives they touch—and the communities they serve.

“We have the power to transform lives,” she acknowledged. “And we don’t take it lightly.”

With that statement, she set the tone for a heartfelt and thought-provoking session that underscored the mission-driven work of community colleges across the country. Throughout her talk, Dr. Edwards shared stories that illustrated these powerful transformations. One student, a recovering drug addict, enrolled in a community college as part of his journey to rebuild his life. He eventually earned a master’s degree and opened a drug rehabilitation center in Portland. Another student started college at age 62 and graduated at age 70, choosing to pursue her personal growth after a lifetime of raising a family.



Beyond individual stories, Dr. Edwards emphasized the broader impact of community colleges in advancing social equity, driving economic development, and fostering civic engagement. She noted how closely income and opportunity are tied to education, and that community colleges are often a lifeline for students who might otherwise be left behind.

“Community colleges foster both personal and communal growth,”

said Dr. Edwards. “I believe that this is our role and the important work we do, and I’m proud to be part of it.”

Community colleges like Clark don’t just educate students, but they actively engage the wider community. From hosting arts and cultural events to facilitating voter registration and addressing pressing issues like affordable housing, food insecurity, and transportation, the college has an active role in shaping community conversation, and solution-building process.

She also spoke of the challenges that lie ahead: fluctuating funding, questions around the availability of financial student aid, international policies for students, and the evolving workforce needs. But regardless of what the future holds, her talk was a timely reminder that, in a world of uncertainty, the work we do matters deeply.

As she concluded her talk, Dr. Edwards reminded the audience of Clark’s mission statement and the importance of keeping those words at the heart of our work.

“One of the things that I know to be true, as we’re going through this storm, not knowing what’s to come, is to stay true to what you’re doing,” she said. “If you change who you are, you’ll get lost in the storm. But if you stay true to the mission, you’re bound to still be standing after the storm is over.”



About Penguin Talks: Clark College Lunch & Learn

Hosted by Clark Community and Continuing Education, this free

lecture series invites the public and college community to explore impactful local topics and engage with inspiring speakers. *Penguin Talks* will return for another series in October 2025.

Photos: Clark College/Jenny Shadley