Community colleges are a distinctly American form of higher education that have always opened the doors of opportunity to students facing limited higher education choices. More than ever, today’s community colleges offer students educational options that are not only affordable but more responsive and flexible, providing online courses and shorter class lengths. By meeting the needs of these individual students, community colleges also play a crucial role in the economic, social, and cultural well-being of their local communities. The Texas Association of Community Colleges works to ensure student success remains the highest priority of every community college in Texas in order to meet current and anticipated workforce needs which continue to drive rapid and expansive improvements in public higher education.

However, rapid growth often creates structural, administrative, and managerial stresses and strains which, like ripples in a pond, inevitably impact the entire organization. Yet, healthy institutions are crucial if we are to continue satisfying the needs of community college students. This means our vision must be broad enough to consider the needs of faculty, administrators, and staff in addition to students. Recent studies have uncovered a disturbing trend. As community college enrollment continues to rise, job satisfaction among deans has declined.

Most of the recent research on job satisfaction in higher education has focused on college presidents and faculty. Community college deans have, by and large, been overlooked. Generally, deans come from an academic rather than a managerial background. That is to say, deans have extensive schooling and teaching experience, but their work experience has not typically prepared them to deal with fiscal matters, organizational and managerial issues, or administrivia. The most vital functions of the position—transfer, career preparation, community
education, and support services—revolve around these administrative leaders who are linchpins of community college life. Further, as the liaison or mediator between administration and faculty, deans must address the needs and concerns of both groups, ensuring faculty are satisfied, while giving student engagement and success the topmost priority. This balancing act requires deft skill and is one most deans are simply not prepared for initially.

Deans often rise to the position from the academic ranks but typically receive little to no training for this new role. Yet, they face significant challenges as they attempt to support faculty while simultaneously regulating faculty behaviors and sharing governance responsibilities with them. Maintaining strong interpersonal relationships in the face of these role-related stresses is a common challenge among deans. Because of minimal training specific to the job, it is not uncommon for deans to lose the desire or ambition to develop and grow within the role. In light of well-documented increasing demand for community colleges, the aforementioned presumptions about factors that are known to negatively impact job satisfaction among deans, and the lack of research focused on community college deans, I was motivated to investigate levels of job satisfaction among community college deans in one North Texas district.

I am pleased to report my survey of 67 deans in North Texas indicated high levels of satisfaction. Intrinsic satisfaction was rated highest with a mean of 4.2 on a 5-point scale. Intrinsic satisfaction derives directly from the work itself and includes factors such as creativity, independence, social status, compensation, moral values, and social service. General satisfaction, which measures responses to ethical standards, consequences of an organizational decision, or the value of job assignments, produced the next highest result with a mean of 4.0. Last, although still a solid finding, extrinsic satisfaction, associated with contextual or environmental factors such as authority, company policies, responsibilities, recognition, or security, produced a mean
of 3.6. These findings are comforting since, as we all know, the most critical asset in any organization is its employees. In fact, job satisfaction is perhaps the single most crucial factor in organizational success.

Job satisfaction impacts everything from physical and mental well-being to our general attitude toward life. Established research confirms our work experiences even affect our family relationships and self-perception. Further, high levels of job satisfaction produce positive behaviors while dissatisfaction generates negative, disruptive behaviors that can eventually become detrimental to the organization. Similarly, job satisfaction tends to be higher when employees are engaged in work they enjoy, while mismatches are linked to lower job satisfaction. Dissatisfied employees behave differently than satisfied employees, and their performance on the job, their stability, and their tenure are all impacted. In short, dissatisfied employees significantly impact organizational climate.

Job satisfaction is dependent on differences between perceived expectations, needs, or values and evaluative awareness of realized gains or returns associated with work. It is an affective reaction to work, the work environment, attitudes, and assessment of work. Individuals exhibit varying levels of satisfaction depending on their own personal value system. The greater the number of aspects in the work that coincides with their desires and expectations, the higher their level of job satisfaction. In other words, if the job delivers what was expected, job satisfaction ensues, and the more targets the job hits, the happier the employee becomes.

Finally, research has demonstrated a significant relationship between job satisfaction and appreciation. If employees feel appreciated by those around them, they are much more likely to be happy. Gratitude can be expressed through words of affirmation, quality time, acts of service,
tangible gifts, and physical touch. Most employees value authentic words of affirmation and quality time as important signs of appreciation by their managers.

While we celebrate the results of this one survey, we cannot lose sight of the fact that job satisfaction is a tenuous commodity. As our community colleges continue to pursue student success, we must also be sensitive to evolving needs and expectations of deans who represent crucial points of contact between faculty and administration, students, and success, as well as communities and colleges.