

An interview with former LCCC VP Dr. James Cook

by **Dave Featherly**

After former LCCC president Darrel Hammon was forced to resign, I had to decide whether our ongoing disclosures of life at LCCC under Hammon should end. An argument could be made for that to happen. But, Jim Mathewson and I are in the middle of so many things that I think could benefit LCCC in its search for a new president that I decided to go onward. In this issue, I will present an interview I did with Jim Cook, the vice president of student services who had been terminated by Darrel Hammon and prevailed in his appeal for wrongful termination. The interview will conclude in the next issue - with more explosive disclosures from an LCCC insider, Dr. James Cook.

1. Jim, let's start by going over your credentials. Where were you educated and what positions had you held prior to coming to LCCC?

A. Education

BS in Business Administration, Henderson State University, Arkadelphia, AR; MBA, emphasis in strategic management and planning, Henderson State University, Arkadelphia, AR; Doctorate of Education (Ed.D), emphasis in higher education administration and student development, University of Arkansas at Little Rock, Little Rock, Arkansas (graduated with a 4.0); Currently pursuing a MA in Theological Studies and Cultural Anthropology, emphasis in apologetics, Liberty University, Lynchburg, Virginia.

Prior Positions

Professor of Higher Education Leadership – Capella University (2004 to present) - Teach grad and doc-level higher ed admin courses and chair dissertation committees.

Dean of Enrollment Management/Assistant Professor of Management and Marketing – Tarleton State University (2005 to 2007) – Taught undergrad and grad-level business courses.

Associate Vice President of Student Services – Tarleton State University (2000 to 2005) – Supervised 40 professional staff in 6 departments, over 100 student staff and a total budget in excess of \$6 million. Was division's assessment and strategic planning officer.

Director of Academic and Career Services – Henderson State University (1997 to 2000) – Supervised Career Center and Student Success Center.

Director of Career Center – Henderson State University (1989 to 1997) – Built and administered a full-service career center from the ground up.

Director of International Student Programs – Henderson State University (1990 to 1995) – Administered international student services and marketing. International student population increased by 200%.

2. What attracted you to the LCCC position? It was vice president of student services, right? Is that the position you began at? Had you seen an ad in a professional magazine, etc.?

A. I was attracted by the opportunity to advance in my career, by the creative potential in a division comprised mostly of professionals early in their careers, by what I learned about LCCC from their website and in the interview, and by the opportunity to live in the West again. I became VP of Student Services on July 9, 2007. I applied after I saw an ad on higheredjobs.com.

3. Were you employed when you interviewed for the LCCC job or were you between positions?

A. Yes - I was Dean of Enrollment Management/Assistant Professor of Management and Marketing at Tarleton State University.

4. Did you report directly to the president of LCCC?

Q. Yes. He and I worked closely together on a wide variety of issues, plans, events, etc.

5. How many of the current vice presidents (not counting the woman who now has your former job) did you know? Was there a turnover during your tenure? Who and why, if you know?

A. I know the VP of Instruction – Marlene Tignor and the VP of Workforce and Community Development – Stan Torvik. Bob Cox, VP of Finance and Administration, left in January of 2009 and (Carol) Hoglund started right after I was placed on administrative leave in July 2009. I know Bob and I also know Michael Walters, former Vice President of Information Technology. He retired when his position was downgraded to director in 2009. (*Editor note: Carol Hoglund was hired as VP of Finance and Administration.*)

6. What were your primary duties and responsibilities?

A. I led a division consisting of over 50 professional staff and over 50 student staff. I

supervised the directors/coordinators of enrollment management, recruiting and admissions, financial aid, counseling and advising, career services, campus safety and security, student life, campus living and learning, transition services, international student programs and athletics. I provided oversight for all division budgets, lead strategic planning and assessment efforts, and dealt extensively with students and their parents/families on a great variety of issues. I co-chaired the quality council and chaired the emergency management plan committee. I coordinated the college's handling and response to the 2008 student suicide and I directed the college's Care Team to investigate the events in and after Costa Rica and to generate a report of their findings and recommendations afterward. I was also head referee, if you will. In two years in Student Services at LCCC, I had 25 staff-against-staff complaints, compared to 6 such complaints in 7 ½ years in my previous job in Texas (and I had more employees down there).

7. How many were deans (if any), faculty, etc.?

A. I did not supervise any deans – two of my charges did become deans the day they went to Hammon on July 1, 2009. I did not supervise any faculty.

8. What, if anything, is significant about the July 1, 2009 date you said the two women were made deans?

A. After a 3 ½ month-long period during which Hammon would support these promotions and then change his mind, he approved them in early June, 2009. This was a couple of weeks after the two promotees were in Hammon's office trashing me. He didn't see them again until the contracts went into force on July 1. Later that *same* day, knowing their promotions and pay raises (25% pay raises) were safe, they went to Hammon and knifed me for the second time. That one finished me off. I really went to the mat for those two young ladies. In fact, during June, one of the women even came into my office one afternoon and told me what a wonderful boss, mentor and friend I was. She didn't have to do that. The irony of it all is while those women were trashing me in May and June of 2009, Hammon was trashing *them to me* and I was defending them.

9. Did you believe either or both were undeserving of the promotion and received it based on other than merit?

A. Hindsight is 20/20, but I believe I made a mistake. I saw great potential in both of them. I was tremendously supportive of them, wanting nothing but good for them and their departments, and thought they were loyal to me. In fact, I do not believe I ever trusted a colleague as much as I trusted the one I made dean of campus living and learning. In the span of 1 ½ years, I promoted her from a part-time counselor at \$24K to a full-time dean at \$75K. It had nothing to do with favoritism. It had everything to do with her hard work, creativity, dedication to our students, and the extent to which I trusted her completely. I had no idea that what I was seeing was an act to get something and somewhere she wanted to go. If I live to be a 100, I don't think I will ever misjudge someone as badly again.

Looking back, she and the other young woman obviously lacked the maturity and character for the jobs. The woman I named dean of enrollment management also got her promotion on merit and she was really stressing over her new responsibilities as soon as she got them. Both were. My talent pool was very young, inexperienced and none of them had any professional experience at any other college or university. I picked from among the best I had because I had too many direct reports and I felt like I wasn't devoting enough time or attention to any of them. I had a steady stream of people coming into my office all day every day and I was so busy being in crisis or hand-holding mode, I didn't have time to do much of my other work. When I made the two individuals deans, I moved a number of reports to them, thinking it would result in the attention the various departments needed.

10. Were you familiar with the rules about credit card spending at LCCC?

A. I was never allowed to check out a credit card – from the day I got there - so I knew nothing about the rules. I would have to use my own credit card to make travel reservations and sometimes didn't get reimbursed until months later when the travel actually happened. I was very surprised to see how many cards had been issued to other people when I saw Jim Mathewson's story. Why some of my staff had credit cards and I didn't, I don't know.

11. Did you have a credit card? Did others who reported to you have a LCCC credit card issued in their name?

A. I did not have one. Jason Ficca, Josh Nighswonger, Lanae Koontz and David Browder all had one, but Bob Cox (1st time) and Herry Andrews (2nd time) told me I couldn't have one.

12. Were you aware of any abuse of use of credit cards at the college?

A. No.

(DLF note: The interview with Jim Cook continues on page 7. It will conclude in the December 28, 2010 issue. Dr. Cook will have more to say about some of the controversies of the Hammon tenure. This interview is offered to help the new Board of Trustees in the selection of a new president. What they take from it will be up to them.)

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13. Were you aware of any abuse of other spending at the college?

A. I was aware that people across campus regularly ignored purchasing policies and procedures with no consequences – except my division. I was very strict on that. I can recall a dean went out and bought a \$10,000 piece of equipment for one of the programs under her without getting proper authorization and going through a competitive bid process. Jerry Harris, Director of Purchasing, hit the roof, complained to the dean's supervisor, the VP of Instruction, and, according to Jerry, she did nothing. One day Jerry came to a cabinet meeting so exasperated over non-compliance with purchasing policies and practices and so upset about VP's not disciplining employees who violated those policies and practices that he angrily told the entire cabinet, "I'm ready to throw my hands up and walk away – if you guys don't care whether we comply with our policies or not." Hammon did not inflict a consequence on violating VPs and, as far as I know, those VPs did not inflict a consequence on violating subordinates.

Not long before I got to LCCC in July of 2007, the Rodeo Coach went out and bought a new pick-up truck for his program without authorization. Consequence? A stern talking to.

14. As you know, Darrel Hammon has been removed as president of LCCC. Do you think that will solve the problems at the college?

A. No, it will not solve all of them. There are a number of systemic problems that started before Hammon ever stepped foot in the door. He either made them worse or ignored them altogether. There are also some people problems that should be addressed.

First, there is an almost pathological hostility to legitimate authority. I often encountered anger or outrage, even when I issued directives that were, in the rest of the world, garden variety supervisor stuff. I was challenged on even simple decisions on the basis that I didn't get the rest of the staff involved in making them. There was this pervasive idea that virtually all decisions should be made by consensus. When I would chastise a staff member for ignoring a directive or not doing something the way I told them to do it, they would accuse me to others of engaging in retaliation. They did not seem to understand the difference between consequences for inappropriate behavior and retaliation. The extent of their naiveté with respect to the world of work was sometimes stunning. I was told that these challenges – work ethic and hostility to authority – went beyond Student Services into other departments.

Let me hasten to emphasize that there are many other employees – *most of them* – who work very hard and are passionately dedicated to making our students' living-learning experiences fantastic. However, the dysfunctional sub-culture in this respect – hostility to authority – is large enough to warrant a systemic approach to their resolution.

Second, too much opportunism near the top of the hierarchy muddies things up, confuses communications, creates chaos and discord and allows dysfunctional behavior to continue. I consider several current VPs administrative mercenaries – people with loyalties "for hire" to whomever is in power, is holding all the cards, and/or is in favor with the right people at that moment. I am already hearing reports of Hammon's sycophants rushing to the "other side" claiming they never *really* supported him and they had *really* wanted him out. These people, in the judgment of many either need to retire, resign or be fired.

Third, ineffective long-range planning and accreditation processes are holding LCCC back. Even though some in upper administration say otherwise, planning and accreditation at LCCC is widely considered across campus to be ineffective.

Fourth, the line function of a college is academics. At LCCC too many other priorities, biases and practices compete with academics for primacy. Presidential distrust of the faculty, vacillating advocacy of academics on the cabinet, an unwillingness to cut significant waste in spending, ego-investment in ineffective programs and practices and division sown among cabinet members for fear of their uniting were just a few of the factors that have prevented academics at LCCC from occupying its rightful, central position.

Fifth, a lack of trust by the upper administration in the staff and faculty and vice versa creates and sustains suspicion, hostility and mutual distrust. Every time a new committee of any consequence would be appointed, for example, Hammon would place almost the entire cabinet on it. This gave the impression to non-cabinet members that top leadership believed they need the cabinet's "adult supervision". Non-cabinet members were rightly resentful about this. Also, staff fear the administration will either ignore their concerns and grievances or turn those back on the staff member in some form of retaliation.

Sixth, Hammon is not the only administrator who employees fear retaliation from.

Seventh, financial and purchasing controls are weak. The purchasing problem is compliance, not what Jerry is doing. This all needs to be cleaned up. Eighth, I suspect wasteful spending and inefficiency, particularly in the staff functions, are widespread. And, ninth, there is a common perception among staff that behavior and performance expectations for faculty and staff are inconsistent: that staff can get fired for what faculty wouldn't even get written up about. I think there is some truth to that.

15. Do you believe there are other personnel in key positions who are responsible for at least some of the problems at LCCC? If yes, which problems and which key employees? Do you think those employees will or can change with Hammon gone?

A. There are indeed other personnel in key positions that are responsible for at least some of the problems at LCCC. HR is supposed to advocate for the employees not just be the president's "enforcer". In my view, the HR Director has made a sham of the Human Rights Officer role – ostensibly an advocate of employee rights, concerns and grievances. She has played a primary role in too many controversial firings and disciplinary actions; has done nothing in follow-up to too many grievances; has taken too long without making any substantive changes in the areas she first claimed needed her attention; and is too distrusted by LCCC employees to be effective in her position. On top of that, she clearly indicated in my hearing that she violated LCCC policy in order to follow Hammon's directives. That is not the kind of integrity we must have in her function. "I was just following orders" won't cut it.

Other cabinet members, besides Lisa Murphy, are widely distrusted. The two most senior members are considered by many to have been Hammon's most ardent sycophants and have a reputation for saying one thing to one audience and then saying something different – often contradictory – to another. Many consider their positions, opinions and loyalties to be tied more closely to expediency, opportunism and self-preservation than they are to expertise, conviction or principle. They seem to be brave when there is no danger, candid when there is no controversy and decisive when there is no complexity.

One has chaired LCCC's Quality Council – the body that spearheads strategic planning and accreditation – with too little real accomplishment. One would be hard-pressed to look around campus and identify where the QC has made a positive, substantive difference in something LCCC does or is.

I believe the third vice president is merely a Hammon puppet – he did the talking and she moved her mouth. As one who could help "take out the trash" associated with the past president and old ways of doing things, I have my doubts as to how helpful she would be. The fourth vice president – I don't really know anything about her. I have heard she is a nice person. Whether she is the right person would take some time to tell.

Financial Aid at LCCC was a debacle this past fall, not getting all FA processed for the fall until late in the semester. Although someone else is the Director, everyone knows it was Molly Williams who hid behind the curtain pulling all the levers and doing most of the work. Now that Molly has gone to Eastern Wyoming in Torrington, FA is in serious crisis. I believe its needs are beyond the current director's capabilities.

The Foundation recently went to the Board of Trustees asking for the funds to bring on three new staff members. Although they were bailed out by Hammon and the Board in 2009, they continue to flounder, mostly because one person is functioning as both foundation controller and director. That is too much for one person to do effectively. I am concerned that that individual lacks the qualifications and skills to function as both, particularly as director – the person who is supposed to make the asks. Again, a very nice person but I am not sure she is capable of restoring the Foundation to self-sufficiency and long-term viability. I would meet with her, set clearly-defined expectations and goals, and continue to monitor her performance and the performance of the Foundation.

Without Hammon and his conga-line of termination appeals, there is no need for a staff attorney, especially for a school as small as LCCC. I do not recall the fellow's name, but LCCC doesn't need him. All it needs is a firm on contract that possesses the requisite expertise. The consensus of the cabinet when I was there – Tignor, Torvik, Kresl-Hotz, Murphy and Cook – was that that firm was *not* Bailey, Stock and Harmon. I have nothing personal against them whatsoever. It is just that they are not in a position to give the advice on higher ed law, student services-related law, and, I believe, employment law that LCCC needs. In other words their considerable expertise and LCCC's needs do not align enough in my judgment.

I would suggest that someone needs to look closely at all financial controls and procedures to determine if the current leadership in related departments possesses the expertise and/or inclination to clean everything up and keep it that way.

Also, there is tension, ineffectiveness and other problems created in several areas of LCCC by people in positions for which they are not qualified. I believe a thorough job analysis should be conducted of all administration and support positions before any sort of reorganization is attempted. I suspect that through a process of targeted out-placements, reassignments, job consolidations and maybe even some new positions, significant savings and efficiencies can be realized.

Finally, there is concern among faculty that LCCC is too top-heavy with administrators. I concur. If one considers the administrative profiles of like institutions of similar size around the country, LCCC should be able to discontinue some and downgrade other positions with minimal, if any, disruption to its operations and recover hundreds of thousands of dollars.

(Editor note: I encouraged Jim Cook to be absolutely candid in his answers and opinions. He was on the receiving end of much worse in the Hammon-orchestrated termination and appeal hearing testimony coerced from many who had been supportive of Jim Cook and personal friends of his. The interview will conclude in the December 28, 2010 issue of the Cheyenne Herald.)