

Interview with Linda Thor, 2024 Candidate for Maricopa County Community Colleges Governing Board At-Large

By Clay Latimer, March 2024

Linda Thor was nearing the end of her first term on the Maricopa County Community College board in 2020 when she had an uncharacteristic thought:

Enough of this.

Fed up with right-wing efforts to gut the community college system, she seriously considered retiring rather than dealing with extreme Republican views and tactics.

Instead, she ran for a second term, won, then went to work.

Until then, community college students could only get two-year degrees at MCC or transfer credits to a university to continue to a bachelor's degree. Under her leadership, MCCC launched its first baccalaureate degrees. Students can now get four-year degrees in certain fields - at less than one-third the cost of university tuition.

"I believe it's a real game changer," she said. "It allows people to get a bachelor's degree in an area of high workforce demand for around \$12,000 for all four years. That's what it would cost for one year at the public universities.

"This is (the accomplishment) I'm most proud of in my career."

That was only the beginning. The board also repaired badly damaged relations with the faculty and staff, developed programs for cutting-edge technologies fields (semiconductors and AI), and focused on finding a long-term solution to expenditure limits.

In the process, the board stabilized the community college system after years of paralyzing chaos, an accomplishment that now drives Thor's campaign for a third at-large term having control of Maricopa's community colleges," she said.

"Every two years when we had seats up, we made progress towards a board that was rational and reasonable and serves the community. Today we're a board that functions as a team.

"We have a strategic plan that we haven't had in years, we've returned voice and representation to the employees. We now have a student trustee - a student voice. We want to keep it this way."

Thor is a former president of Rio Salado College, an online school that is part of the

Maricopa system. She worked in community colleges for 41 years, spending 29 years as a president or chancellor.

After retiring, Thor was elected to the board in 2016.

The seven-member elected board sets tuition rates, hires a chancellor to oversee operations for the 10-college system, and has the authority to approve an annual budget that can increase or decrease property taxes. The board president sets the agenda for board meetings and appoints board members to committees.

The trouble started when right-wing extremists gained control of the “non-partisan” board, making Lauren Hendrix president.

The district struggled through controversies during that time, including a decision to end junior college football and

a troubled upgrade to the payroll system that resulted in faculty being overpaid or underpaid, some by thousands of dollars.

Moreover, they went to war with faculty and staff, triggering a lawsuit that further divided a board already riven with ideological fissures.

“I believe there was a definite attempt to destroy public education,”

Hendrix was booted from his position in 2019, setting in motion a return to normality under Thor and some colleagues, including Democrat Tom Nerini, who is running for another term in District 5, which

“The college has been doing a lot of great things lately -like having a bachelor’s degree,” said Nerini, a former college administrator and counselor in the Phoenix Union High School District. “But don’t let them call it a four-year degree. It took me four years to get my associate’s degree.

“Most of our students are part-time. When we say four-year degrees, it makes them feel like ‘I can’t do it for four years. So why should I even try?’ It’s a bachelor’s degree. All 10 colleges are offering at least one bachelor’s degree. And we’re expanding that into even more fields.”

That’s a soothing thought to Thor, who, unlike four years ago, is actually enjoying her job these days.

“Running today feels different than when I ran in 2016. Frankly, I almost didn’t run

again in 2020 because those first four years were, well ...

“Then people started saying, ‘Look, you get to enjoy the job in return for fighting the good fight.’ And I’m enjoying it again.

“I’m a lifelong community college lover. It runs in my blood.” “