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<http://www.cityclub-chicago.org/videos/detail/938/dr-kwangwu-kim>

[01:05]

Good afternoon to you all. I'd like to first thank the City Club of Chicago for this very kind invitation to be here today. I am quite honored and thrilled to have this opportunity. I'd also like to thank you all for joining me today on this lovely, balmy November day. [Laughter.] When I saw the snow this morning, I didn't know what that meant, so I'm choosing to interpret it as a positive omen.

I think I'm going to frame my comments today about Columbia College Chicago based on at least two of the larger conversations that are happening in our country about higher education. One of them is the very large conversation about affordability. Let me say a word about that. In my estimation, the conversation that is currently being had around the country about affordability is actually a very incomplete conversation, because it is focused at this point almost exclusively on cost. Now cost, of course, is very important, but I think if we just examine our own behaviors, we realize that the way we determine what is affordable is directly related to what we value, and for some reason our sector of higher education is not engaging in the conversation about real and perceived value. So I'm going to talk to you a little bit today about what I think the value proposition at my institution is and will continue to be, hopefully.

The second big conversation has to do with the changing demographics of the United States, and the simple fact that the typical college student of the not-too-distant future is going to be a different person than the typical college student of today. Again, I have some concern that our sector is not really addressing this challenge head-on. So in the context of Columbia College Chicago, I'm going to talk a little bit about what we're doing in the areas defined by words like diversity and inclusion and community engagement.

But first, let me start with some facts and figures. To me, these are always the least interesting, so I like to put them right at the beginning. We were founded in 1890, so we are on the brink of celebrating our 125th year. We are, as many of you know, a major physical presence in the South Loop. Columbia College Chicago owns twenty-one properties in the South Loop and rents an additional four, and that translates into about one and a half million square feet of academic space and an additional million square feet of residential space. For those of you who don't know Columbia College Chicago, our campus has its northernmost boundary at the corner of Wabash and Congress, and we extend all the way south to 16th and State. It's a very interesting campus because it's completely discontinuous, so you see these buildings that clearly look like Columbia College buildings popping out of that very interesting urban landscape.

We are fully accredited as a liberal arts institution, but all of our majors are focused on creative disciplines. Just to give you a sense of what our students are studying, our largest major at Columbia is film; we call it Cinema Art & Science. Our second-largest major is Art & Design, which is primarily at Columbia focused on design, not fine art, and our third-largest program is

**Business & Entrepreneurship.** Many people are surprised to hear that we have a very large program in business at Columbia. In fact, it is the largest program focusing on the business and management side of the arts in the United States. We also have large, thriving programs in theater, music, dance, interactive media, fashion design, game design, journalism, creative writing, radio, and television. If an area stretches out into something that might be described as creative practice, we're probably teaching it at Columbia College Chicago.

We currently have about 9,500 students, mostly undergraduates; just under 500 of our student body are graduate students. Fifty-eight percent of our students come from the state of Illinois, with the vast majority of that number being students from greater Chicagoland. For the last two years, more than half of our incoming freshmen have come from out of state, so there's a shift going on with our student body even as I speak to you. All fifty states are currently represented at Columbia College Chicago, as well as sixty-one countries. Nine percent of our undergraduates come to us from the Chicago Public Schools. Eighteen percent of our student body are first-generation college goers from their families. Thirty-four percent of our students would be categorized under the current categorizations of the federal government as minority, students of color, and we're very proud of that number because this is a huge part of our identity and our value system. And just to give you a sense also of the unusual richness of socioeconomic diversity at our school, 39 percent of our students are Pell Grant-eligible. For those of you who don't know what that is, the Pell Grant is the federal subsidy, the federal support for families below a certain income level, and it tends to be a marker for students whom you tend not to find at certain kinds of schools. We're very proud of that number. It's a very high number, and it's a very unusual number for a school that's focused on creative disciplines.

What else can I tell you in terms of our students? It's very rare to meet a Columbia College Chicago student who is not working, which is very different from my undergraduate experience. I think about this all the time. If someone stood up in front of my graduating class at Yale and said, "Everybody who's worked at least part-time as a student, stand up", nobody would have stood up, because even those of us who did work would have been too embarrassed to admit it. Columbia is a very different place, and in fact, many of our students work full-time, which is an astonishing challenge as far as I can understand it.

One last group I want to mention, because I have a particular fondness for and pride in them, is our veterans' population. We currently have 165 veterans as part of our student body. They are very active, they are determined over time to take over Columbia College Chicago, and I honor them, because I think they bring a very important set of life skills and experiences into our student body, much to our benefit.

So that gives you some sense of numbers. Now I want to describe our students back to you in a completely different way. I'm going to ask you to join me in a memory exercise. This may be painful for some of us, but I'd like us all to transport ourselves back to when we were in high school. I think we all can remember that that's a time in life when it's really important to fit in, and it's not just important to fit in, it's important to fit into the right group. So we're all high school students. Look around. Some of you probably remember that there were some students who just didn't want to fit in. A lot of them were probably involved in, because we're talking about high school, maybe theater, maybe music, art. (I'm speaking from my own direct experience, I know.) And those were the students who sometimes got labeled as weird, strange.

Now let me continue on this, because I was almost one of those students in high school. The reason why I wasn't fully one of those weird kids is I was also one of those painfully stereotypical perfect Asian students [laughter], so my grade point average kept me out of being labeled as weird. But I still had one foot in that world, and what I would reflect back to about being in that cadre of young people is that it's a really scary place to be. You know you have something to say, you know you have something you have to do, but you have no way of really knowing if anybody else actually cares about it. And the other thing is, you just know instinctively that to pursue that path means you're maybe ending up walking around in the world with a label on your head that's not so positive.

Okay, now let's fast forward to Columbia College Chicago. A lot, not all, but a lot of our students – and I'm telling this story knowing that we have quite a few students here, so you have to forgive me if you're thinking, "That's not me" – come to Columbia College Chicago, and suddenly they're not on the margin, they're not on the edge, they're it. This is a large community of people who are used to being marginalized who suddenly realize that an entire institution revolves around them. That generates a very powerful energy. In fact, coming again from a very positive place in the heart, I sometimes like to refer to the community of Columbia College Chicago as the ultimate revenge of the fringe. It's a great place.

My entire career has been in some version of administration involving the arts and creative individuals, and I know from many years of direct experience that those of us involved in this work, either as practitioners or administrators or teachers, sometimes encounter skepticism in the world regarding value. There's the idea that the arts are nice to have; there's the idea, the fear that studying the arts is the ultimate impractical thing to do. I mean, I have to share with you, my undergraduate degree was in philosophy, all of my graduate degrees were in music. I was first-generation, born to a Korean family. That was the ultimate one-two punch to my parents – trust me, I know. But I want to tell you a story that will let you into my thinking about value a little bit. This is not a Columbia College Chicago story. This comes from my previous position, when I was a dean at Arizona State University. I had a student, a young painter, who came up to me and said, "Dean Kim, I'd really like to talk to you about the future." She said, "You know, my dream is to succeed in a career that does not currently exist." Now for those of you who know me, that is pure Kwang-Wu Kim language. I was hooked. So I thought, 'Okay, let's talk.' And she said, "Well, my challenge is, I'm a painter. I'm not really sure I'm ever going to get a job." So we sat down together and I said, "Let's try a thought experiment. I'm going to ask you some questions and I just need you to follow me." The first question I asked this young woman was, "When you're standing in front of a blank canvas, is that a frightening experience for you?" She looked at me and said, "No, that's the most exciting moment." I said, "Would you agree with me, then, that you are very comfortable in a highly ambiguous situation?" And she said, "I guess so. I never thought about it that way." I said, "Just stay with me a little bit. Now you've started painting. Are you referring to a set of directions?" Her eyes got really big. "What are you talking about?", she said, "Of course not." I said, "So let's agree that you are very much of a self-starter, and you are capable of operating in isolation at a very abstract level of problem-solving." By now she's looking at me like, 'What language is he speaking to me?' I said, "Okay, now imagine this. A gallery owner comes into your studio while you're working and you're about halfway done, takes a look at your canvas, and says, 'You know, I'm really fascinated by this work. I have a really important opening six weeks from today and I would love to be able to feature this work.' Is that painting going to be done?" She said, "Of course it's going to be done. That's what we live for, that kind of opportunity." So I say, "In other words, you are very good, you're confident about your ability to meet deadlines, which must also mean that you are very

good at managing your time.” The final question I asked her was, “A bunch of your colleagues walk into your studio, take a look at your work, have all kinds of ideas, not all positive. Are you going to fall apart?” She said, “No, that’s what artists do. That’s the culture of the critique. We spend a lot of time doing this. We talk to each other about ideas. We critique one another’s work.” I said, “In other words, you are comfortable and expert at both giving and receiving feedback.”

I think you all see where I’m going with this. There are some situations in which it’s good enough to talk about art for art’s sake. In some ways, I wish the world were always like that. But it’s not, and it’s very important that we recognize that when students are studying the arts and the creative disciplines, in addition to the specific skills they are learning, they are acquiring key life proficiencies.

Now here I am at Columbia College Chicago. So how did I end up here? Well, I ended up here because of two things. The real punch line is I ended up here because of my meeting with students, but the first hook that Columbia College Chicago set with me was the core of our mission statement, which reads, “Columbia College Chicago prepares young people to author the culture of their time.” I had to read that a couple of times, so I’m going to say it again – “prepares young people to author the culture of their time”. I mean, you might have a hard time imagining this because my hair is short, but it stood straight up when I read that. I had never read anything like that before, and here’s what I thought. Columbia is not an arts school, because an arts school mission statement would be something like, “Columbia College Chicago trains the next generation of performers/makers.” And it’s not a pure liberal arts college – I knew that by looking at the list of majors – because a pure liberal arts college would have said, “Columbia College Chicago prepares young people to be effective citizens for lifelong learning and meaningful contribution.” So I was intrigued.

So here I am, and here’s what I would like to say to you is our value proposition. It is a focus on student success. Currently it is a six-part recipe, and I’m going to go through this relatively quickly.

First, we take the best of that arts training model, which is based on the idea of skill development at a high level. Any student who graduates from Columbia College Chicago is going to be really good at something. They will have gone through a vigorous training, working with faculty members who themselves are directly involved in that professional area in the larger world, and they will be pushed to really get to levels of excellence that they may not have thought themselves capable of. In addition, we are constantly reevaluating whether the skills that our students learn mean anything, whether they are actually relevant not only to that profession as it stands today, but to where we think that profession or that industry or that creative practice is likely to be in the future.

Having said this, we know that’s not enough because of the following pitfall. You take young people, you focus them, you get them to be really good at one thing so that they can be in that sector or in that job. What happens down the line when that job no longer exists, when that skill set is no longer valid, when that sector goes away? So we get to the second part of our recipe. We also take the best of the liberal arts model at Columbia College Chicago. All of our students spend a lot of time in what we call the core curriculum. It’s our version of the general education curriculum that you find at all liberal arts colleges and all universities, actually, in this country, with a real focus on making sure that our students develop a set of key outcomes that will help

them to be successful. We're thinking about fluency in various modes of communication. Numeric fluency is not as important at Columbia as it might be at some other places, but the ability to reason with data is important. The ability to keep learning new things, obviously, because what we need our students to be able to do is to adjust to the following reality: today's college graduate, if you look at current statistics, will experience something like five to eight different careers in their lifetimes. That's not five to eight jobs, that is five to eight different careers. That is the current prevailing statistic. So the question for us, the challenge for us at Columbia is, what can we teach students as undergraduates that thirty years from now, as they're looking at career number six, they still will derive value from? We believe it's the ability to adapt, to adjust, to recognize and respond to opportunity.

So that's the liberal arts piece, but you see, the two pieces together are much bigger than either by itself, because the challenge with the liberal arts model – I speak from direct experience – is, you have your mind open, but the world looks at you and says, “What do you know how to do?” And the other challenge, from the student's perspective, is, “Okay, I'm prepared for the future. How do I start now?” So there's a third piece that's part of our recipe. We embrace at Columbia College Chicago the idea that our students need a suite of practical skills to navigate the real world. So in addition to skills and the open mind, we are moving in a direction where all of our students will take courses in business, in marketing, so that at least we know we've given them a piece of the tool kit to take their aspirations and their dreams and their imagination and translate them into something real. Because we understand at Columbia College Chicago that everything we do in the world is at some level a business. We're not uncomfortable with that idea. We embrace it because we want our students to be successful.

Now, ingredient number four. Let's come back to the mission for a moment – “author the culture of their time”. In other words, we expect that our students will be capable of creating things which currently do not exist – ideas, perspectives, objects, environments. So we ask ourselves, what are the conditions within our institution that are necessary in order to maximize the likelihood that that's going to happen? Well, here's one thing we know for sure: if we had a highly homogeneous student body, if our students were mostly alike, then what they would learn to do is to replicate what they currently know, and that would be reinforced by the fact that everybody else thinks the same way. Columbia College Chicago is deeply committed to the educational value of difference. That's what our commitment to diversity at a deep level is about, the idea that the more different perspectives we assemble, the more different ways of being, different ways of evaluating truth, different relationships to power and privilege and authority, different heritages, the more we bring that huge range of difference together and make that the setting for our students' exploration, the greater the likelihood that they will begin thinking about things that they never thought about before. What's even more exciting to me about Columbia is we're going to the next level, which is harder. I think we're pretty good at the community level. At the curricular level, the question that we're wrestling with now is, in a school that is so committed to the idea of difference, how well are we doing when you unpack our curricula? For example, what do we teach a student in a given discipline about what is primary, about which tradition determines value? We have some work to do at that level. By the way, for those of you who are educators or artists or creative individuals, I would never want you to think that I'm proposing the idea that it's all just relative. That's not my point. My point is we have to invite students into the dialogue about what they believe the necessary important trajectories are so that they can craft their own work.

Then community engagement, which pushes us out into the world. I have a little spiel that I'm going to share with you today about my idea about community engagement. As someone who has spent a career thinking about what it means to actually be engaged with the community, I want you to know, even at the risk of offending some of you – which I would never do knowingly – that I reject two expressions as not really having anything to do with community engagement: the word outreach, and the expression “service learning”. I want to explain why. Outreach is great, it is what it says, you reach out, but it's usually predicated on the idea that I have something that I think you need, so I'm going to give it to you out of the goodness of my heart. Service learning is also about sort of a good deed idea, and then because it's usually wrapped in with credit, it's sort of a ‘do something good for someone else for credit’. [Laughter.] Yeah, we're a little stuck in higher education when it comes to the idea of community. We have this tendency to think of ourselves within our walls as superior, and we're motivated by a certain kind of benevolence. We look out at the world at *those* people, and we recognize that they might benefit from what we have in abundance. Every once in a while, we reach out, bestow our favor, and then come back home and pat ourselves on the back. That has nothing to do with community engagement. Community engagement is about establishing reciprocal partnerships with as many different partners as possible, many of them, hopefully, highly unlike on the surface. It's difficult, it's challenging, it's messy, and it's frightening, but the end goal is that everyone who participates grows in unexpected ways. The reason why this is so important to me is two-fold. When I first arrived in Chicago, one of the first people I met was Terry Mazany at the Chicago Trust. He said, “So what's your dream for Columbia?” I was brand new; you know how hard it is to talk about vision when you don't even know your own institution. I said, “I want Columbia College Chicago to be known, among other things, as helping to animate the city of Chicago.” Those words continue to be true, and I think this idea of Columbia's talent, this force of talent and creativity we represent, being involved in the city is huge in that idea. But there's something else as well. We have an obligation to make sure that every one of our students has an opportunity to test themselves, to ask these questions: Who am I, and does what I think is important really matter to anyone? You don't do that at school. You only do that when you leave the safe boundaries and start really working with people with whom you may not share the same values. Now I'm not suggesting that we want to put our students in danger, but we can give them the opportunity to have those possible ‘click’ moments where they think, “Oh, now I get what's important.”

The sixth and last ingredient in our formula for success for our students is Chicago itself. I want you to know that I'm very aware that we could not do any of this, we could not succeed, without the context of Chicago. We need the cultural vibrancy of the city, we need the diversity of our neighborhoods, we need the plethora of professional opportunities that Chicago provides. And I have to say that given who we are and who our students are and what we believe in, the very gritty urban landscape of the South Loop is the perfect setting for us. But I also want to be bold enough to say to you that I happen to believe, after being here for not quite a year and a half, that Chicago needs Columbia College Chicago as well. Let me tell you why I say that. This is a city on a very distinctive trajectory right now. We're talking a lot about the city achieving the next level of greatness. There's a lot of language about really establishing Chicago as a major international city, as a major destination city. So I was thinking for today about what that might mean in terms of what we do at Columbia College Chicago. One thing I can tell you is that the greatest cities in the world are not defined solely by their mainstream cultural life. They are determined equally by all of the interesting, unusual things that happen in the spaces in between. There's a kind of density of cultural experience that characterizes the world's greatest cities. That interesting in-between space is something our students, who are involved in that

kind of work, specialize in. That's not to say that Columbia students don't achieve at the highest levels in the mainstream. If you could see the list of alumni that I'm about to fly to Los Angeles this afternoon to visit, you'd see how Columbia College Chicago rules in Hollywood.

The other thing that's important is, Chicago right now is on a mission to establish itself as a major leader in digital innovation. We are not a technical college, so our students can't necessarily contribute at that technical level, but all the interesting work that is happening in that intellectual and entrepreneurial space that's around innovation with digital technology requires individuals who are skilled in creative practice, who are prepared also to succeed in the real world, but whose bent is to push, to push boundaries, to ask new questions, and to get people to look at things from a different perspective. I know that Columbia College Chicago is not the only institution that can say its students are good at that, but that's our bread and butter. That's what we are teaching our students to be able to do.

In closing, I want you to know that a lot of what I told you today, I hope everything I said to you today, is true. I don't speak lies, hopefully. Some of it is more currently true; some of it will be true. So I hope you'll stay tuned. I have an appeal for everyone here, two things I'd like to ask your help with. One, we are going to need a lot of help continuing this conversation about what are the specific proficiencies that industry and business and commerce and creative practice are looking for in young college graduates, so that we can think about how we continue to revise our curriculum. I also would invite all of you to help us think about who are the many community partners with whom we should be engaged. And finally, an open invitation. I hope you will all take time at some point and visit us in the South Loop. Most particularly, I hope you will have a chance to interact with our students – again, today is a great starting point. I think you will find them incredibly open, engaging, bright, unafraid to be different, and extraordinarily generous of spirit. I know that every day, when I look at our students and I think, 'Part of the future is in their hands', I feel encouraged.

Thank you very much.

[29:20]