

Making an Impact

An Interview with Robert B. Catell,
Chairman, Advanced Energy Research and Technology Center, Stony Brook University

EDITORS' NOTE Robert Catell was formerly the Chairman and Chief Executive Officer of KeySpan Corporation and KeySpan Energy Delivery, the former Brooklyn Union Gas. His career with Brooklyn Union Gas started in 1958. Following National Grid's acquisition of KeySpan Corporation, Catell became Chairman of National Grid, U.S. and Deputy Chairman of National Grid plc. He currently serves as Chairman of the Board of New York State Smart Grid Consortium, Cristo Rey Brooklyn High School, Futures in Education Endowment Fund, and the New York Energy Policy Institute's Advisory Council (NYEPI). Catell received both his bachelor's and master's degrees in mechanical engineering from the City College of New York and is a registered Professional Engineer.



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INSTITUTION BRIEF The Advanced Energy Research and Technology Center (aerc.org) is located in the Research & Development Park at Stony Brook University and is a true partnership of academic institutions, research institutions, energy providers and industrial corporations. The Center's mission is innovative energy research, education and technology deployment with a focus on efficiency, conservation, renewable energy and nanotechnology applications for new and novel sources of energy.

Where did your passion for giving back and philanthropy come from and how do you decide what areas to focus on?

It started with me growing up in Brooklyn and being raised by a single mother. We didn't have a lot and we might have even been considered poor, even though we didn't think we were poor. She always told me there were people that were less fortunate than us, and if I was ever able to help people, I should think about doing it.

When I got into the corporate world, I went to work in the utility industry. I think all corporations have a responsibility to give back and support their communities, but this is especially true for utilities because they're so dependent on the communities they serve. I was also fortunate because the people that I worked for at Brooklyn Union had a real desire to give back.

There are so many good causes, and as a utility company, we can give to many entities. Brooklyn Union started the Cinderella Program, which was a program to enhance the housing stock

in the borough. They used to give out small awards for people to revitalize their houses.

When it comes to figuring out what people should do personally, they need to think about what is important to them and also where they can make an impact.

Education has always been important to me – I was fortunate to grow up in the New York City school system and got a great public education. I was also fortunate enough to get into City College, which was tuition free.

Whatever I was able to achieve in my professional life was based upon the fact that I got a good education. It's even more important today to help young people who might be more disadvantaged than I was to get a good education so they have a chance to succeed.

The other passion I have, which is related to giving back, is being involved with entities that support the community. I'm on the board of the New York City Police Foundation because I think the New York City police department does a really great job.

The third focus for me is medical research. I am on the board of the Feinstein Medical Research Institute at Northwell. Particularly in today's world, there is so much going on with a great potential to cure and prevent disease.

It's also not all about giving money. That's important, but it's equally important to give time to not-for-profit organizations which, in many cases, don't have business skills or need connections to other entities within the community that can support them.

Will you discuss the Cristo Rey model and is it one that can be replicated?

What makes the Cristo Rey model so effective is that it combines a very good education with experience in the workplace. It focuses primarily on low-income, inner-city, minority kids, many of whom are being raised by a single parent.

In most cases, they don't have any idea what the business world is all about. Through this program, they get a great education and they get a corporate work/study experience. They work in real jobs and dress in business attire. They have to be at work on time and they have to do real work.

The Cristo Rey model is replicable and it's probably one of the best ways we can really make a difference in education today. These are high school students who receive mentoring as part of the program.

When there is so much need in education, how challenging is it to meet the need?

The challenge is to meet the operating budget. In a Cristo Rey school, 50 percent of the support comes from the corporate work/study program. The other 50 percent comes from raising money the old-fashioned way – by holding events and asking people for it.

We put these students through an interview process in order to get into the school. We require that their family supports them throughout the process and for the family to pay some portion of the tuition.

The challenge is getting jobs for the students because some companies are concerned with them being teens, even though they are highly motivated. There is also a cost associated with hiring them for a company.

If we can get into a company to make a pitch at the right level, they will usually be responsive and once they employ our students they are sold on the program.

What is the value in engaging not just the child but also the parents in this kind of effort?

The family unit is critical and it's one of the biggest challenges education has today. Many of the students come from families where both parents are working. At Cristo Rey in Brooklyn, we have a boarding program with 50 girls who live all week in a convent building. It's supported by a great organization, Boys Hope Girls Hope. They also have a boys' program at another school. The students can avoid the many distractions at home during the week. We're looking to expand that model in Brooklyn.

Where will lasting change in education come from? Will it be public/private partnership?

We need to encourage more public/private partnerships. We cannot depend on the government – their resources aren't as great as they used to be and there are a lot of pressures on cutting down on government spending.

If corporate America is going to be successful, education is critically important, so we need corporate support.

I hope that the people growing up in the business community will have the same feeling as those before them on the importance of giving back. We need to educate them and do a better job in engaging them in the importance of philanthropy. ●