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Our Legacies of Learning and Leadership

I AM A PROUD MEXICAN-AMERICAN who was born and raised in a small border town, part of the culturally rich Rio Grande Valley, in deep south Texas. I am the daughter of migrant farmworkers who were the children of migrants, who understood that education is the key to success.

I was touched to learn, this past October, that many of you knew my father, as he was also a community college trustee and a member of ACCT. To say I am proud to be the living legacy of his pathway and accomplishments would be an understatement. I am certain he could have never known that he would become a member of a higher education governing board, when at the tender age of 18 and with little guidance and few expectations, he registered in a technical college. He enrolled so that he could gain a skill that would allow him to support his family, as so many of our institutions' students do. Shortly thereafter, he came to a crossroads when a freak welding accident left him with a life-changing choice: a life of disability checks or full paid tuition to complete his bachelor's degree. He chose the latter and became the first and only in his family at age 34 to graduate with a degree — a degree in education.

My mother left high school during her junior year and earned a GED a year later. She, too, knew the inherent power of education and chose to work as a teacher's aide for over 20 years. After 15 years of night school, she became one of only two in her family to graduate with a bachelor's degree at age 47.

My grandfather, who received his GED in his late 50s, would often remind us that he "rode in the back of a pickup truck so that [we] could ride in the front of an airplane." Each of them, like you, in their own way determined to be agents of transformational and generational change.

It is important that you know this history not only to share the legacy of my family, but to remind you that countless students at our colleges are living future legacies for their families. I tell these stories to underscore that we all share a similar history, founded in hope and dreams, that can only be realized through hard work and education.

I am sure we can agree that in today's global economy where knowledge is power, excellence in education is not just a mere advantage, but a fundamental necessity. In this country, we are not short of hope and dreams; the proof is in the millions who are attending and the tens of millions more who have graduated from our institutions. As community college leaders and public servants, it is incumbent upon us to ensure that opportunity is made available to everyone who needs or seeks it out.

As we govern our institutions, I'd ask all trustees to remember that the work we do is not for recognition but for realization. It is a reminder that our responsibility in public service is simply to effect progress, to work to make people's lives better, to work to make our communities better, and to work to make this world better.

Together we can and will continue to transform the lives of every young girl and boy who dare to pursue their dreams by nurturing that seed of hope that serves both as our anchor and their sail. That is our charge and our blessing. I thank you for joining me in this endeavor.

De todo corazón mil gracias,

Rose Benavidez
South Texas College