

‘AN EXTRAORDINARY TIME FOR TRANSFORMATION’

The 2023 National Legislative Summit showcased the growth of the community college mission.



BY MARK TONER

AS A NEAR-RECORD NUMBER OF COMMUNITY COLLEGE leaders and advocates came to Washington, D.C., for the 2023 Community College National Legislative Summit in February, the growing importance of the sector was hard to miss.

It was on television during the State of the Union Address, where at least two community college leaders sat in the gallery as the guests of lawmakers who spoke at the Congressional Forum on Capitol Hill (see p. 16). And it was evident in the ever-expanding range of federal leaders who spoke at the NLS, a testimony to how expansive the community college mission has become.

“The pipeline from high school to affordable community colleges to great jobs is the future of our workforce and our economy,” First Lady Dr. Jill Biden told attendees. President Biden, she added, “is bringing together his entire administration — not just the Department of Education, but Commerce, Energy, and Transportation as well — to build more programs across the country.”

With this in mind, nearly 1,100 community college trustees, presidents, and advocates came to Washington to help their institutions do just that. “It is crucial we continue to advocate to ensure that community colleges continue to receive the support we need and deserve,” said ACCT Chair Rose Benavidez, chair of South Texas College.



ACCT Chair Rose Benavidez and Transportation Secretary Pete Buttigieg



From left: Dean Designate of the Clinton School of Public Service at the University of Arkansas Victoria M. DeFrancesco Soto; American Action Forum President Douglas Holtz-Eaken; Agriculture Secretary Thomas Vilsack



A Growing Mission

Biden and other Administration leaders — including Transportation Secretary Pete Buttigieg, Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack, and representatives from the Department of Commerce and the White House — highlighted the importance of community colleges to a growing array of federal initiatives.

Pointing to the \$1.2 trillion Infrastructure and Investment Jobs Act as the beginning of an “infrastructure decade,” Buttigieg stressed the vital role community colleges are playing in “an extraordinary time for transformation in America.”

“The nature of the infrastructure law and the upgrades we’re doing are testing the productive capacity of the United States — the human capacity you are producing,” Buttigieg told attendees.

Community colleges, he added, can play a key role in improving transportation infrastructure by improving transit access to campuses and supporting careers in emerging fields. “You are leading one of the most important sectors in our country,” Buttigieg added. “In short, you are helping to pave the way toward the America we need.”

In similar fashion, Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack stressed multiple roles community colleges can play as part of partnerships to transform rural America and the 90 million people who live there. Along with improving student access to nutrition programs like SNAP and WIC, Vilsack pointed to the more than \$3 billion allocated to the Partnerships for Climate-Smart Commodities and the need for workforce development in food processing, agricultural inputs, and decarbonizing energy supplies.

“The opportunities are unlimited to transform, change, and revitalize the rural economy,” Vilsack said. “I think community colleges play a critical role in... supporting folks who work not just with their heads but their hands.”

Zoe Baird, senior counselor for technology and economic growth to Secretary of Commerce Gina Raimondo, pointed to another landmark bill passed into law — the CHIPS and Science Act — as an example of opportunities for community colleges to serve as partners in wide-ranging projects to reshape the American economy.

“We are really at a moment of transformation in our economy,” Baird said. “The rapid change we saw during COVID is not going to slow down... that means you have an entirely new business model.”

Even so, that new model has precedent, she added. “One hundred years ago, we invented the high school when we moved from an agricultural to industrialized economy. Now we’re at a very similar inflection point,” Baird said. “We need to invent the system that’s going to train workers and enable the growth of the economy. I’d encourage you to think of community colleges as the foundations for this kind of system.”

‘Career-Connected Learning’

Pointing to the need for “career-connected learning,” the First Lady urged community college leaders to “think about more ways you can partner with high schools, local businesses, and unions” — approaches including apprenticeships, new relationships with business, and dual enrollment that “bridge the gap between what students learn and the careers they will eventually find.”

“[These are] the kinds of hands-on learning that community colleges have been leaders on for so many years,” Biden said. New partnerships, she added, will “help us expand those tried and true approaches to more communities. It’s one of the best ways to make community college programs and workforce training free or affordable to everyone.”

Workforce partnerships enjoy bipartisan support, NLS speakers said. Rep. Lloyd Smucker (R-Pa.) stressed the importance of community colleges addressing both present-day workforce needs and long-term concerns about the direction of the country. “We need to do a better job of connecting our educational system to the jobs that are available,” he told NLS attendees. “That’s the heart of what community colleges are able to do.”

The federal government is poised to support partnerships in new ways, speakers said. Baird told attendees that the Commerce Department’s \$500 million Good Jobs Challenge grant program, which provides grants to local workforce systems, may serve as a model for greater investment.

“The heavy role of community colleges [in local workforce systems] is really changing what we think about what sectoral partnerships really mean,” Baird said. “We will apply what we’re learning to investments in other areas.”

White House officials also stressed the role community colleges can play in advancing historically disadvantaged Americans. “There are staff all



Clockwise from left: Phi Theta Kappa President Lynn Tincher-Ladner; Commerce Department's Zoe Baird; Student trustees; ACCT's Carrie Warwick-Smith and José Miranda with AACC's David Baime and James Hermes; ACCT President and CEO Jee Hang Lee

across all of our agencies are trying to think about how they might be able to work with you [to] open the doors to their agencies to their programs to make sure they're truly reaching and serving the community," said Melody Gonzales, executive director for the White House Initiative on Advancing Educational Equity, Excellence, and Economic Opportunity for Hispanics.

Challenges and Opportunities

This vision of a more expansive role was balanced by ever-present political realities. A divided Congress "will cause a shift in the conversation" over the next two years, Carrie Warwick-Smith, ACCT's vice president of public policy, said during a briefing on legislative priorities.

Following the 2022 elections and the change in control of the House, "there are a lot of retirements and a lot of new faces at the subcommittee level and generally in Congress," José Miranda, ACCT director of government relationships, told attendees. "We have our work cut out in building new relationships. Your conversations will be critical."

ACCT and American Association of Community College policy experts expressed optimism that workforce development remains an opportunity for bipartisan progress. "As ever, your institutions are ready to play a major role in the workforce needs of our country, but they need high-level federal support to expand those programs," said Jim Hermes, AACC associate vice president of government relations.

Short-Term Pell also continues to gain support from both sides of the aisle. Smucker, for one, told attendees that it remains a "priority" for the current Congress, adding that efforts to reauthorize the Higher Education Act (HEA) and the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) will continue.

"The environment is very ripe for getting this done," said David Baime, AACC senior vice president of government relations. "Keep pushing."

Reflecting the growing reach of the community college sector, the Farm Bill — which includes funding to support rural economic development and student access to food benefits — was added to the sector's legislative priorities for the first time. "It is a really good opportunity to make an impact on our campuses within a piece of legislation we do expect to pass," Warwick-Smith said.

Victoria DeFrancesco Soto, dean of the Clinton School of Public Services at the University of Arkansas, also identified opportunities for progress. The unsettled state of the economy, she said, is "something Democratic and Republican lawmakers can agree on and know their constituents hold them accountable for. There's no silver bullet, but community colleges provide a couple of very direct ways of addressing economic woes."

The DREAM Act also may finally come to fruition, DeFrancesco Soto added, noting that a recent poll found 80 percent of Americans support the legislation. "How many times do you get 80 percent of people to agree on anything?" she asked. "Americans want solutions, and they want folks to act responsibly."

DeFrancesco Soto also said that a result of COVID relief funding, "states are flush with cash ... Do not lose sight of your state and local lawmakers... You need to factor all three levels of government into your advocacy and lobbying."

Douglas Holtz-Eaken, president of the American Action Forum, stressed the importance of investment at all levels, even amid growing fiscal headwinds.

"We're underinvesting in the future because of large legacy programs," Holtz-Eaken told NLS attendees. "You sit at the crossroads of that... I think the country needs to get more serious about education... Sometimes we need to spend more money on things that are valuable."



Clockwise from left: Rep. Lloyd Smucker (R-Pa.); NLS attendees promoted their visits with elected officials on social media; Rep. Rosa DeLauro (D-Conn.)

‘Leading with a Human Face’

With health and security restrictions lifted for the first time since the COVID-19 pandemic, community college leaders roamed the halls of Congressional office buildings freely during the NLS.

“It is great to see everyone back here in person,” said Sen. Roger Marshall (R-Kan.).

One large delegation of community college trustees and presidents visited the office of Rep. Rose DeLauro (D-Conn.), the recipient of the 2023 Community College National Education Service Award. Others visited a wide range of veteran legislators and newcomers. A group of South Carolina trustees and presidents visited the office of longtime senator Lindsey Graham (R-S.C.), while a delegation representing the majority of Missouri’s community colleges spoke with that state’s newest senator, Eric Schmitt (R-Mo.).

More than 100 student trustees, including several international student trustees, helped represent community colleges during the NLS. One was Wilfried Tapsoba, student senate president of Madison Area Technical College, who discussed workforce apprenticeship programs during a meeting between Wisconsin trustees and Sen. Tami Baldwin (D-Wis.).

Lynn Tincher-Ladner, president and CEO of Phi Theta Kappa, urged student trustees to think of advocacy beyond legislative matters. Pointing to PTK’s CCsmart campaign, she stressed the importance of social media

in helping elevate perceptions of community colleges. “Students are a lot more visible now,” Tincher-Ladner told student trustees. “It’s up to all of us to let people know that community colleges aren’t just about accessibility and affordability. They’re all about quality.”

The importance of advocacy was repeated throughout the NLS. “The best advocates at their core are teachers. Lead with a human face... the human face of the workers who would otherwise be left behind,” DeFrancesco Soto urged attendees. “The answer is at your institutions.”

And speakers reminded NLS attendees that the work continues long after the conference ended. “The work we do in our community college sector is about our students, changing lives, and making lasting change for our communities,” said ACCT President & CEO Jee Hang Lee. “It’s about making the stories and building the advocacy we do every day.”



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