

SHARING THE STORY

At the Community College Congressional Forum on Capitol Hill, lawmakers shared personal connections – and urged community college leaders to do the same.

BY MARK TONER

A BIPARTISAN GROUP OF THREE U.S. SENATORS AND three members of the House of Representatives offered remarks during February’s Community College National Legislative Summit Congressional Forum on Capitol Hill – and two returned the favor during the State of the Union Address later the same day.

Both Rep. Suzanne Bonamici (D-Ore.) and Rep. Juan Ciscomani (R-Ariz.) chose community college leaders from their districts – Portland Community College (PCC) President Dr. Adrien Bennings and Pima Community College Chancellor Lee Lambert – to be their guests at the State of the Union Address. And all six lawmakers spoke of their own personal experiences as community college students or the impact that the colleges have had in their communities.

“I wouldn’t trade my community college days for anything,” Sen. Roger Marshall (R-Kan.) told Forum attendees.

‘We Need to Share that Story’

Marshall pointed to the workforce development efforts of the state’s community colleges across a variety of fields, including renewable energy, oil and gas, cybersecurity, and the construction of a community center in downtown Kansas City. “In Kansas, the number one problem is a lack of people for the jobs we have,” he said. “No one can respond more quickly to those job needs than a community college. We need to share that story.”

To that end, Marshall stressed building relationships with Congressional staff members—and getting to know them on a first-name basis. “I get what a community college does, but most of my staff doesn’t,” he said. “Go back to basics. Work on building those relationships.”

Marshall also stressed the importance of sharing student stories. “Be as

specific as possible,” he said. “Tell a story a member of Congress is going to remember.”

‘The Right Thing to Do’

Sen. Ben Ray Lujan (D-N.M.) credited the innovation of the community college sector – “taking the best of what we have developed worldwide and bringing it to small towns,” he said.

Lujan pointed to his state’s new tuition-free college plan, signed into law last year, as a model for federal policy. “There’s no reason we shouldn’t be able to do that at the federal level,” he said. “It’s the smart thing to do. It’s the right thing to do.”

He also urged community college leaders to continue their advocacy efforts. “If you don’t ask, the answer’s no. So ask,” Lujan said. “Even if someone tells you no, or they’re not with you right now, it matters. They’ll remember your stories.”

‘The Moment Has Come’

Sen. Tim Kaine (D-Va.) echoed a common refrain among lawmakers. “Everywhere I go, people tell me they can’t hire enough people,” he said. “There are a number of things we need to do to solve this issue, but community colleges are really at the nexus or hub of the things that need to be done.”

Pointing to Virginia Community Colleges’ Fast Forward short-term training program that has put 35,000 industry credentials into the workforce since its inception, Kaine called the lack of federal Pell Grant funding for similar short-term programs “a huge educational issue [and] a fundamental equity issue.”

With the JOBS Act reintroduced in the Senate and multiple bills



Clockwise from left: Rep. John James (R-Mich.); Sen. Roger Marshall (R-Kan.); Rep. Juan Ciscomani (R-Ariz.); Sen. Ben Ray Lujan (D-N.M.); Rep. Suzanne Bonamici (D-Ore.); Sen. Tim Kaine (D-Va.)

involving short term Pell introduced in the House, “I think the moment for this bill has come,” Kaine said, calling the community college leaders in the room “my key advocates as we have tried to make this bill a reality.”

Addressing concerns about the quality of career and technical education, Kaine offered a simple solution: “If you put community colleges at the center, you don’t have to worry about the quality of the programs.”

Community Colleges: ‘Aptly Named’

Rep. Bonamici credited community colleges for “serving people of different backgrounds and lived experiences and providing a pathway to a degree or credential or rewarding career.”

“Community colleges are aptly named,” she said. “There’s a true community there for students.”

Bonamici stressed the importance of advocating for policies that address food insecurity, work-study programs, increasing Pell Grants and making them more flexible, and passing the DREAM Act.

“The bottom line is clear: we have challenges, but we also have lots of opportunities to meet the workforce needs and challenges of today and tomorrow... and for community colleges to model what a safe, inclusive, diverse, and enriching learning environment can be,” Bonamici said.

‘Keeping the American Dream Alive’

The first Mexican immigrant to win a Congressional seat in Arizona, Rep. Ciscomani pointed to his own time at Pima Community College as a key to his success. “It wouldn’t have happened if I didn’t have the experience of running for student government at the community college,” he said. “These are the opportunities you’re building every day — you’re giving those opportunities and a shot for the American Dream.”

Ciscomani stressed the importance of community colleges in “keeping that American Dream alive for so many people.”

“You have in me a committed resource, a person who wants to make sure we listen, look for the opportunities, and light the torch of community colleges in our country,” Ciscomani said.

‘We Have Your Backs’

Rep. John James (R-Mich.) praised the community college sector’s ability to “unlock the talent in this nation” and support students who, like him, struggled in school. “I think we have failed so many generations of young people who are lost when they leave their K-12 experience and don’t know what they want to do with the rest of their lives,” he said. “We need to unlock the talent in this nation.”

James stressed the importance of increasing access to certification programs. “We talk a lot about supply chains. I am focused on... the link that ties our students to the right skills and how they’re going to be successful in the real world,” James said. “The community college is the link in that chain, the answer to that question.”

James also reiterated the potential for consensus. “I believe growing our way to prosperity is an idea we can get behind, and that you all are in the best position to do it,” he said. “We have your backs.”



Mark Toner is an editor for Trustee Quarterly.