

ALL TOGETHER NOW

ACCT's first in-person Congress in two years marked transition and a renewed commitment to equity.

By Mark Toner





Clockwise from left: Keynote speaker Nicholas Pinchuk, chairman and CEO, Snap-On Incorporated; keynote speaker Alberto “Beto” Vasquez, associate director of STEM engagement & institutional relations, University of California San Diego; 2021 ACCT Chair David Mathis (left) presents former ACCT President and CEO J. Noah Brown with Lifetime Membership; Maria Nieto Senour, president, San Diego Community College District Board of Trustees.

SAN DIEGO WAS THE SITE OF A REUNION OF SORTS, AS NEARLY 1,200 trustees, presidents, students, and other community college stakeholders came together for the one of the sector’s first national in-person events since the COVID-19 pandemic roiled campuses and the country in March 2020.

“It’s been 24 months since we’ve been together,” ACCT Board Chair David Mathis, trustee at Mohawk Valley Community College in New York, said during the opening session of the 2021 ACCT Leadership Congress. “I know the past year and a half has been a tremendous challenge for all of us, and I’m proud of how we’ve been able to continue serving our students and colleges during this difficult time.”

Aside from masks and color-coded lanyards which signaled attendees’ comfort levels with close contact, the day-to-day routine of the 2021 Congress was remarkably familiar. But the event also marked a time of transition — for then-ACCT President & CEO J. Noah Brown, who stepped down after a quarter century of service, and for the sector as a whole as it confronts a changed post-pandemic landscape. With the theme “Advancing Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion,” Congress speakers urged attendees to heed the calls for racial justice that intensified in 2020 and lead by example.

“Our community colleges should be models for the communities in which they happen to be located,” said Dr. William B. Harvey, who as rector of Danubius University in Romania is the first African American to lead a European institution of higher education. “Other social and private institutions follow our lead. We’re not just talking about this, we’re doing it, and we want [them] to follow so our society can be more equitable for everybody.”

The Equity Imperative

Congress sessions reinforced the event’s focus on diversity, equity, and inclusion, with trustees speaking frankly about longstanding disparities in the communities they serve.

“Those who were economically well off kept to themselves, while those who were not were pushed off to the side,” said Clint Kingsbery, a trustee at Alamo Colleges, which is focusing

on a “moonshot” to work with regional partners to “end poverty through education.”

“One of the things we had to overcome is that divide,” Kingsbery said. “Ultimately, many of our students were not achieving their goals. The board had to look inward.”

Making lasting changes requires explicit board goals, said Michael Brintnall, a trustee at Montgomery College in Maryland. “It isn’t short, quick, and dirty,” added Montgomery College Trustee and ACCT Board of Directors Member Marsha Suggs Smith. “It takes a lot of time, but you do see the results at the end.”

New strategies can help drive action. Monty Sullivan, system president of the Louisiana Community and Technical College System, called the initial conversations that led to a systemwide strategic plan driven by equity “one of the moments I was most proud of with our executive team.”

“When you take actions around a set of values we all aspire to, that’s when good things happen,” Sullivan said. “It has been an absolute game changer for us.”

In similar fashion, the California Community Colleges Women’s Caucus (CCCWC) was created in 2020 to build leadership and close the gender equity gap. In its inaugural year, the caucus grew to over 500 members.

Keynote speaker Nicole Lynn Lewis urged Congress attendees to extend equity efforts to a historically overlooked sector of higher education: the nearly 4 million students who are parents — including nearly half of all black female students and outsized proportions of other students of color.

“As you work to put action behind the racial equity statements, please know that student parent work is racial justice work, because the needs of parenting students are intertwined with the needs of various other groups,” said Lewis, the founder and CEO of Generation Hope. Generation Hope engages education and policy partners to drive systemic change and provides direct support to teen parents in college as well as their children through holistic, two-generation programming.

“The challenging road ahead requires us to get rid of the



Top left: Phi Theta Kappa President & CEO Lynn Tincher-Ladner; bottom left: San Diego Community College District Chancellor Carlos O. Turner Cortez; center: Dr. William B. Harvey, rector of Danibus University and president emeritus ex-officio, National Association of Diversity Officers; right: ACCT staff discuss advocacy with members at the ACCT marketplace.

old ways of doing things,” Lewis added. “It forces us to have uncomfortable conversations about why certain policies and procedures are in place.... Let’s look at our norms with a fresh eye, a new lens.”

Alberto “Beto” Vasquez, associate director of STEM engagement and institutional relations for the University of California San Diego, challenged Congress attendees to focus on their students’ identities and cultural expectations.

“We can’t just focus on the number of degrees and how people are passing without also taking into account how comfortable they feel on campus,” Vasquez said. “You have the opportunity to sit at tables that many other people don’t. How are you using that power?”

New Policy Conservations

Congress attendees celebrated the unprecedented funding made available to higher education during the pandemic — \$71 billion through late 2020. In multiple sessions, college leaders outlined how these funds were used to support students. At Cuyahoga Community College in Ohio, relief funds paid or reduced tuition balances for almost 3,100 students, of whom more than 15 percent re-enrolled in college, said Angela Johnson, vice president for access and completion.

Continued advocacy remains critical as Congress continues to deliberate further stimulus proposals and the federal budget. “We can’t do the work in Washington, D.C., without an engaged college administration,” current ACCT President and CEO Jee Hang Lee told attendees. “There’s a lot of work ahead of us... in the next couple of months.”

The inclusion of the Obama-era proposal to make community college tuition free in the Biden Administration’s \$7 trillion Build Back Better agenda was the most visible element of community college proposals. The administration also proposed funding for workforce training programs, increases to the Pell Grant maximum, and support for campus infrastructure needs, which were last addressed at the federal level in the 1990s.

While the administration’s proposals have since been pared down and the future of its agenda remains uncertain, the inclusion of community college priorities represents “the start of a really exciting conversation,” said Katie Brown, former ACCT director of government relations.

Daisy Gonzales, acting chancellor of California Community Colleges, urged community college leaders to continue to advocate for tuition-free community college.

“We know that community colleges are the economic engines of this country,” she said. “And we also know during the pandemic, all of you have been on the front lines of fighting poverty... Community college students need the America’s College Promise today. Their dreams are the future of this country.”

Meeting the Mission

Congress sessions highlighted how colleges are navigating the many challenges the past two years have posed. Missouri’s Metropolitan Community College, for example, faced a “metaphorical tsunami” when a ransomware attack was followed almost immediately by the pandemic.

Meeting community workforce needs has surfaced as an even greater imperative as the economy rebounds. Keynote speaker Nicholas Pinchuk called strengthening workforce skills “the seminal issue of the time,” telling community college leaders that it “depends on all of you.”

“If you want evidence that technical careers and upskilling and arming our workforce with technical capabilities, all you have to do is look back at the last 18 months,” said Pinchuk, president and CEO of Snap-On Tools Incorporated. “That’s why what you do... has never been so important.”

Federal relief funding has helped institutions develop new workforce programs. LCTCS used \$10 million in funding to create Reboot, which trained more than 5,200 residents for available jobs in five high-demand fields during fiscal year 2021. And California’s Oxnard College rapidly shifted its firefighting academy to a hybrid model during the pandemic to ensure a continuing pipeline



Clockwise from left: Community College League of California Board President Kenneth Brown; meeting of student trustees; ACCT marketplace; Mathis, ACCT President and CEO Jee Hang Lee, Brown; new ACCT Board of Directors members take oath of office.

of first responders, for which it was recognized with a 2021 Bellwether Award for workforce development.

Meeting the mission in a rapidly changing world requires effective policy governance. “How we as a board recognize things have changed and how we are going to support the change... that is the future of education,” said John Wyatt, board vice chair of Lakeshore Technical College in Wisconsin.

Changing of the Guard

The 2021 Congress saw two major leadership transitions — the annual passing of the gavel to the new ACCT chair and Brown’s farewell address as ACCT President & CEO.

Incoming ACCT Chair James Cooksey, a trustee at Moberly Area Community College in Missouri, outlined as priorities for the year continued research into the challenges faced by student parents and new efforts to understand the needs of teenagers and foster youth to determine “what community colleges can do to support this very vulnerable population,” he said.

Cooksey, who has served as a judge for more than two decades, drew parallels between the family cases he oversees and the lack of education that contributes to intergenerational poverty and family instability (see profile, p. 14). “We work with parents to try to break this terrible cycle. One of the best ways to succeed in this, and to give them a real opportunity to grow, is engaging them with our community colleges,” he said. “Most of the students who attend our colleges do not have the financial security or social power to get them where they want to go... Our students have the most to lose, and yet they have the most to gain.”

Brown reflected on his 16-year tenure at ACCT’s helm by recalling his original priorities. “What I said then, and what I have focused on every day since, was raising the profiles of community colleges as change agents, while emphasizing the potential of trustees to affect policymaking so profoundly that the sector would no longer be marginalized nor neglected,” Brown said. “As I hand the reins now to your new president and CEO, I do so with the confidence and evidence of an association that has

never been stronger... I have been privileged to serve you and the millions of students who rely on your colleges as gateways to the American dream.”

Brown’s impact was highlighted during a video presentation featuring conversations with President and Dr. Jill Biden, President Barack Obama, and Bill Gates, among others. Videotaped remarks from two former U.S. Education Secretaries recognized ACCT’s longest-serving president’s service to the community college sector. James Kvaal, the current Under Secretary of Education, noted Brown’s role as a “trusted advisor to President and Dr. Biden for more than a decade” — a role which continues as Brown has since taken a role as a senior advisor to the U.S. Department of Education.

“We are a better country because of Noah’s work,” Kvaal said.

Jee Hang Lee, who previously served as ACCT’s Senior Vice President, outlined his priorities for the organization as its new leader, including a series of member town halls to gather member suggestions and requests. Lee also pointed to the creation of a Center for Policy, Practice and Research, which will provide technical assistance, best practices, and support for colleges (see p. 18). Noting that the makeup of governing boards continues to evolve, Lee also announced plans for “modernizing” professional development on trusteeship, “utilizing technology to ensure access to a wide array of educational materials.”

“At ACCT, we will never lose sight of our commitment to all our students,” Lee said. “I am committed to building on ACCT’s stellar legacy to do even more for our institutions, and specifically our students.”



Mark Toner is an editor for Trustee Quarterly.