



## JEE HANG LEE

Get to know ACCT's new president and CEO –  
and his plans for the association.

BY DAVID CONNER WITH JACOB BRAY

*JEE HANG LEE BECAME THE FIFTH PRESIDENT AND CEO OF THE ASSOCIATION of Community College Trustees (ACCT) on November 1, 2021, after having served 15 years as the association's advocacy chief and executive in charge of membership, policy research, and other areas. The following is an excerpt of our interview with Jee Hang Lee for the In the Know with ACCT podcast. To hear our full interview, go to [www.acct.org/podcast](http://www.acct.org/podcast) or access the podcast through the Apple or Android podcast app.*



**Jacob Bray: Congratulations on your appointment to serve as ACCT's new president and CEO, Jee Hang. How did you become involved with community colleges?**

Jee Hang Lee: Not everybody knows my personal history going back to when I first immigrated to the United States at the age of four. To me, the hallmark of my journey toward my work at ACCT has always been my avid support for higher education. As an immigrant to the United States, I believe that public education is the most equalizing force that we have in our society. Joining ACCT in 2006 was a perfect opportunity to give back and also to support our neediest students every day. That has been my north star in terms of advocacy here at ACCT — ensuring that all of our students have the ability to succeed. That has pushed us to go into areas such as basic needs, mental health, student loans — all these policy issues because they confront many of our students. I'm excited to lead the next generation of policy work.

In that vein, one of my plans is to create a Center for Policy, Practice, and Research that will focus more on the issues we've talked about, but also on key issues that confront many of our colleges, such as enrollment declines, missing males on our campuses, and other issues that will help us succeed in the next generation of higher education.

**Bray: Policy is a substantial part of your background and a big part of ACCT's mission. What are some of the accomplishments — I know there have been many over the past 10 or 15 years — that you have been most excited about?**

Lee: We as an organization have increased our brand recognition in Washington, D.C. When we can pick up the phone and call the White House Domestic Policy Council, when we can call any of the authorizers and get meetings,

those are things that were a little bit different 10 to 15 years ago.

Substantially improving our brand recognition as an advocacy and policy organization has led to successful wins, such as the creation of the first tax grant and \$2.5 billion worth of funds that went out to our community colleges. Even this past year, you've seen the culmination of our advocacy in Washington, D.C. We were successful in changing the allocation formula that went out to our institutions in the first and second parts of the stimulus, where we changed from an FTE (full-time enrollment) model to a headcount model. That substantive change created almost \$20 billion of additional resources going toward institutions that we would not have been able to get if we had not changed that funding formula.

Also, the Emergency Broadband Benefit that Congress created in response to the pandemic allows Pell Grant recipients to qualify for subsidies to afford high-speed internet. And I think Congress realizes that when the pandemic ends, the need for internet access won't. Closing the digital divide remains a critical role for the federal government. That's why the President has called for an infrastructure investment to ensure broadband reaches 100 percent of Americans.

**Bray: How do you envision the new Center for Policy, Practice, and Research being able to take ACCT to the next level and being able to have an impact across the country?**

Lee: This center will have two focuses. One will be to provide thought leadership within Washington, D.C., and throughout the entire country on key issues — from doing a further look into how student loans affect students at community colleges to looking more deeply into how basic needs affect community college students.

There's also an opportunity through the center to provide professional development and technical assistance back to our member institutions such as the initiative being funded by the ECMC Foundation on credit and non-credit alignment (see p. 5).

For me, that's ultimately the most important thing: How do we give back to our membership for their continued support of ACCT so that they can succeed in serving their communities and their students?

The center will have two focuses that will run side by side, but to me the most exciting iteration is to go into the technical-assistance part so that we can give back to our membership. We're also doing that as part of our SNAP Employment and Training Grant through a subgrant from the Department of Agriculture. A cohort of institutions are participating in that project, and we're providing technical assistance. We're hoping to use those opportunities to give back to our institutions so that they can, if they desire, participate in these various programs. We must do better by them.

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**David Conner: Most people at ACCT know you through your work in public policy and advocacy. You personally created ACCT’s policy research division that has helped transform the community college sector. But I know that you’re also committed to our membership activities and you have some big plans. Can you talk about any of those plans, or are they top secret for now?**

Lee: [Laughs] None of it is really top secret *per se*. We’re hoping to announce something by springtime with a formal rollout. But I can tell our membership that board education, to me, is a primary part of our twofold mission of advocacy and education.

We’re going to be doing the following: Number one, board education is going to be front and center for our membership. Number two, it is going to be free to our membership. We have had significant changeover on our boards and their trustees throughout the country, both elected and appointed. When I first started working at ACCT in 2006, I was told “our trustees are older, they want paper, they don’t read emails, they won’t

do virtual.” What I can tell you now is that we have seen shifts. Trustees are getting younger, more women are joining boards, more diverse individuals are coming onto boards, so how does ACCT provide information these individuals need so that we can work in concert with our board members and their presidents? We’re going to be using technology as a driving force to support, guide, and educate trustees.

That being said, one of the things we learned this past October is that our membership really does need in-person meetings. They’re excited to see each other, and that’s a key component of being a human being, the social interactions. We’re going to continue doing in-person meetings, but one of the initiatives we will be implementing is the ubiquitous use of technology and modules and podcasts so that trustees can be self-paced and go through the process of learning all the particulars of trusteeship.

**Conner: Committees are a really important way of getting involved with ACCT. Members who have ideas for building out our advocacy and governance education get involved in our committees. That’s how they can get their thoughts to our board, who will work with Jee Hang to develop those thoughts into programs and services. But Jee Hang, as our new president and CEO, you also want to hear directly from our members. Tell us how you’re doing that.**

Lee: One of the things that I wanted to give our members the opportunity to do is the following. While I relish our events — such a great opportunity to shake hands, to hug, to talk with them — many of those in attendance are people who attend meetings regularly. One of the things that I wanted to do is to hear from our rank-and-file trustees, including those who don’t regularly attend events — to hear what they see and value, but most importantly, what they need from ACCT.

Hundreds of people have attended our first two town halls since November, and my team and I are busily taking notes and figuring out how we can meet some of the demands of our members to support their institutions.

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**Conner: During the first town hall, it was great to hear a lot of compliments about ACCT’s events, our advocacy initiatives, and support for our efforts responding to the COVID-19 pandemic. We also heard a lot of suggestions for additional supports — particularly relating to innovation. What rose to the top to you?**

Lee: One of the most important pieces of information for me and the team is enrollment. Enrollment concerns are driving institutions. The unemployment rate is under 5 percent. Low unemployment rates mean that our institutions will be suffering from lower-than-typical enrollments because enrollment patterns are counter-cyclical to the employment rate. So what are some of the avenues through which colleges can support their students and get them back into the classroom? That is by far the most important piece of the puzzle that we’ve heard.

One thing we heard in that vein is that while we use our conferences to showcase what is being done at college campuses, there is an opportunity to showcase such things on our website. College trustees don’t have to go to San Diego or to New York to read about some of these best practices. So we are going to embark on showcasing how to think creatively about solutions to enrollment patterns. Not all solutions will work for all colleges, but I’m hopeful that every college will find inspiration in at least a few.

**Bray: Is there anything else that you’re excited about?**

Lee: We’re excited to host our upcoming Community College National Legislative Summit (NLS) here in Washington, D.C. this February. We have exciting speakers lined up, including Secretary of Education Miguel Cardona and Secretary of Labor Martin Walsh, and of course we always hope that President and First Lady Biden’s schedules will allow them to attend. We remain an advocacy organization, and the Summit most importantly brings leaders together from throughout the

country to the nation’s capital to advocate to their legislators and agency officials.

The other thing I would note in conjunction with the National Legislative Summit is that on February 9, we’ll be hosting Rural Community Colleges Day in concert with the American Association of Community Colleges (AACC), our partner in the National Legislative Summit, and the Rural Community College Alliance. We will have speakers talking about rural funding opportunities and we’ll also have various agencies talk about various grant opportunities and technical assistance for rural institutions that may be having complications with regulations or other matters.

Lastly, we obviously would love to see all of our members in New York City for the 2022 ACCT Leadership Congress. Members should think about volunteering opportunities. David mentioned our committees. There are also opportunities on the State Coordinators Network to get information back to ACCT about what’s transpiring across states. It’s vitally important for our organization to know what’s going on in communities, and Coordinators serve a very specific role in providing feedback about legislative activities and other activities that may be of great influence to ACCT. We’re looking for Coordinators, and we’d love to welcome more people to the Network.

I want to thank all our members for their support and commitment. I hope to see more people in person and on my computer screen in the near future.



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