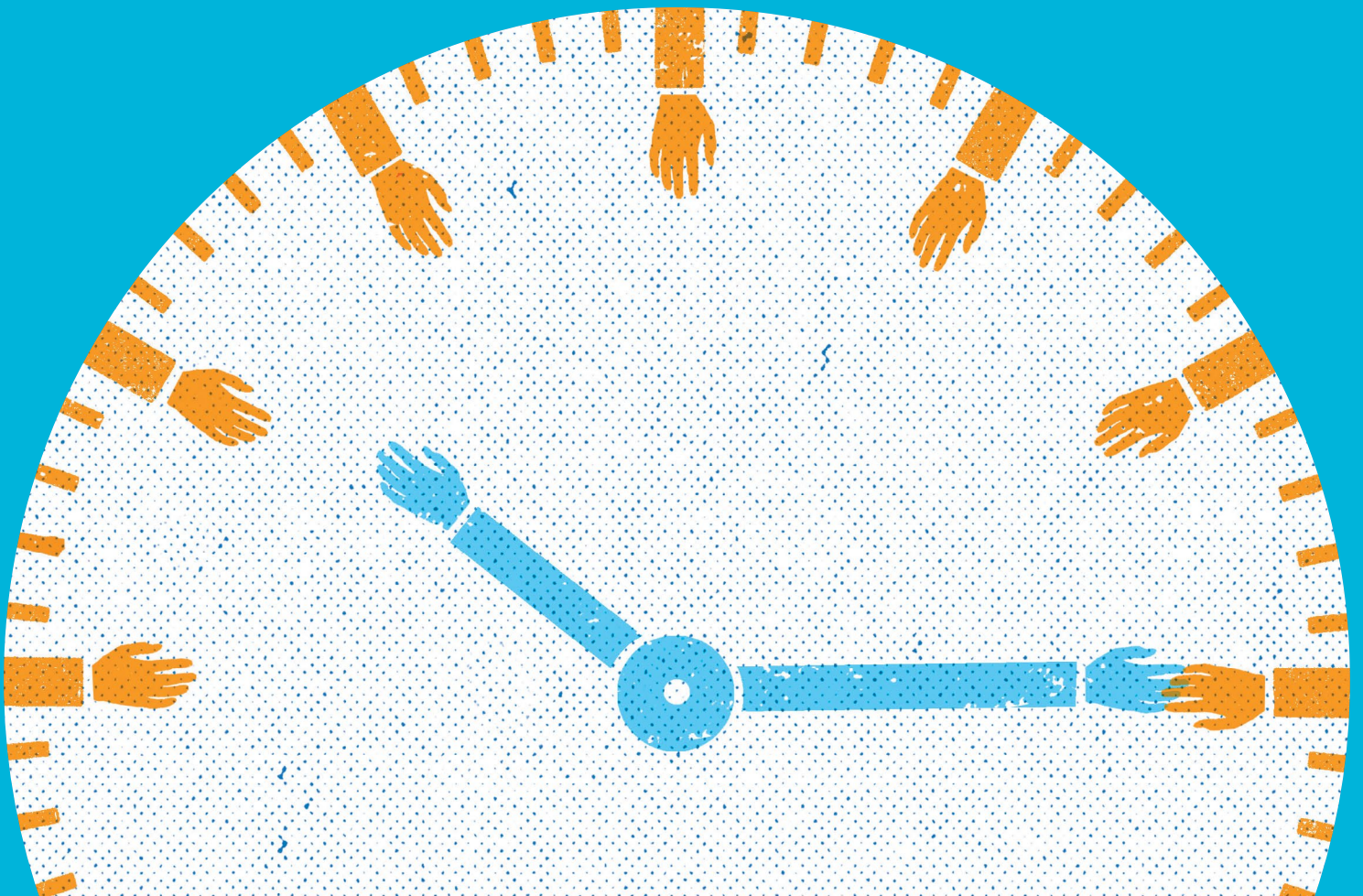


# TIME WELL SPENT

ACCT PRESIDENT AND CEO J. NOAH BROWN REFLECTS ON 25 YEARS AT THE ASSOCIATION.

BY J. NOAH BROWN



NEARLY 16 YEARS HAVE PASSED SINCE I ASSUMED THE presidency of ACCT, and 25 years since I joined the staff in October 1996. When I voluntarily turn over the reins to the next president and CEO later this year, I will do so as the longest-serving president since ACCT was incorporated in 1972 — an achievement farthest from my mind when the ACCT Board elected me president and CEO in July 2005. Over these many years, I have been blessed to serve you and the more than 100 servant leaders and 16 chairs on our board. As I reflect on my presidential tenure, I wanted to share some of the important changes and the evolution of the Association over the years I have been privileged to lead.

### New Leadership, New Priorities

I was asked by the selection committee about my vision for the organization during my interview for the ACCT presidency in the spring of 2005. What I said then, and what I have focused on every day since, was raising the profile of community colleges as change agents, while emphasizing the potential of trustees to effect policymaking so profoundly that the sector would no longer be marginalized nor neglected. To do this, the Association needed financial stability and greater outreach to and engagement with its member boards. I believe we have made significant progress together and continue to elevate ACCT not just in the nation's capital, but also throughout the country and world.

Thinking back on those heady days after I assumed the presidency in October 2005, the ACCT Board gave me a clear and unambiguous set of priorities — chief among them was to solidify staffing, address the budget, and most important, reengage the membership. Unlike most new presidents, I was fortunate to know and have working relationships with the team as the inside candidate. I was confident that we had the talent and experience to move the Association forward. The most important staff decision at the time was replacing myself as the policy and advocacy director, a position I had held for nine years. In the end, Jee Hang Lee, now senior vice president, joined ACCT as director of public policy, and together, we began to move our advocacy methodically to another level.

During my first two years, I made good on my promise to bring ACCT out to our membership. I visited every state association meeting, where I spoke about seven critical issues affecting the sector where ACCT and its members could leverage change and enhance advocacy.

The most important challenge was accountability and the need to address student outcomes. Community colleges needed to address and put a stop to the recurrent complaints lodged by lawmakers that the sector failed to graduate or

transfer enough of their students. Many policymakers had limited understanding of the role, mission, and student population that make up our colleges.

My big goal was to create an accountability system that I often described at the time as “built by the sector with a vocabulary that was robust enough to fully capture the nature of our colleges.” Several years later, and with much deliberate effort and financial support from Lumina Foundation and partners The College Board and the American Association of Community Colleges (AACCC), the Voluntary Framework of Accountability, or VFA, was born, with metrics that more accurately captured the real nature of our programs and our students.

The VFA is still being used today by member colleges and has provided ample opportunities to shift the conversation to data that matter, and that reflect who and what we truly are. As years have gone by, even as some longstanding criticisms of our colleges persist, lawmakers and the public have a greater understanding than ever before of the unique and vital role that community colleges play in educational access and equity, including identifying and meeting students' personal needs that always have been barriers to student success. I am proud of the progress we have made together.

### Addressing Finances

To be both effective and sustainable, the Association needed a more solid financial footing. ACCT Chair Ken Burke, then a trustee at St. Petersburg College, and I analyzed our budget in early 2006 and quickly discovered that membership dues fell significantly short of covering direct member services. At that time, the ACCT Board was adamant that members who chose to attend our meetings or purchase our search and retreat services not wind up subsidizing our overall direct member costs. In effect, rank-and-file members were paying less than the true costs of advocacy, publications, trustee education, and other non-fee-for-service benefits. The horrific events of 9/11 were still very much front and center in our minds at that time, and we were mindful that a single catastrophic event could severely harm the Association's finances and threaten our ability to provide basic member services. Not raising dues meant that we could find ourselves in a deficit due to events beyond our control, with cuts affecting our programs and services, and worse, failing to serve our members.

I knew that raising dues would be difficult but necessary. As a long-term staff member, I understood the threat of not being able to balance our budget and live within our means. Unable to close the gap between revenues and expenses, I and the senior team agreed to a salary freeze and curtailed some of our plans to expand services and staffing.

I was concerned that we could not bring our budget in line

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and as an employer lose competitive advantage as a well-financed organization. With much work and analysis, we launched an ambitious campaign to raise dues over a five-year period, culminating in dues income equaling direct member services. Between July 1, 2006, and ending June 30, 2011, membership dues were increased annually by 13.24 percent plus inflation, resulting in a doubling of dues income by the end of the fifth year. Communications and a carefully developed rationale were created and disseminated to the membership in advance of the increases, including a commitment to freeze registration fees for both the annual ACCT Leadership Congress and National Legislative Summit, both to soften the increase and to realign the budget. Over these five years, not a single board withdrew its membership because of the dues increase — an incredible vote of confidence by the membership to move ACCT forward.

I learned an invaluable lesson as an association CEO — that transparency and commitment to secure the future of an organization were values that could transcend and win the day.

With ACCT on a more solid financial footing, I committed to the board that over the years we would build the Association's financial reserves to desired non-profit standards (six months of operational budget). Not only did we succeed, but we ultimately created long-term operational ("rainy day"), opportunity (venture capital), and long-term reserves to allow the Association to weather economic cycles, and to incorporate risk management into the annual budgeting and forecasting models. This feat is one I am most proud to have delivered to the membership.

### Reexamining Trustee Education

With the financial situation improving, it was time to take a hard and critical look at our trustee education and event structure and programming. Specifically, I reviewed everything through the lens of whether we were doing the best we could at helping boards understand their roles and responsibilities, engage in effective advocacy, and use their "political" clout and legitimacy to move policy in favor of our students and communities.

In 2006, we held our very first Governance Leadership Institute, or GLI, designed to engage boards in two and a half days of intensive exploration of topics such as board roles, board/CEO relations, governing through policy, ethics, codes of conduct, and the role of the board in advocacy. Over the years,

the GLI has continued to evolve, allowing more of our members to participate and to access high-quality trustee development. More importantly, it filled a void in peer-to-peer networking after the elimination of ACCT Regional Seminars the year before I was selected for the presidency.

Beginning in 2010, we launched our signature series, the Governance Institute for Student Success, or GISS, with support from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. During its 10-year run, GISS assisted states and countless boards in understanding and using student outcome data to understand the dynamics of their institutions and how to make informed and strategic decisions to improve student persistence and success. Much of what we learned through GISS continues to inform how we talk to and work with boards to achieve greater institutional success and growth.

We also re-engineered the ACCT Leadership Congress — the premier national gathering of boards from across the nation and overseas. First, we made the decision to focus keynote sessions on critical topics for boards and to bring potential partner organizations both to showcase ACCT and expose those organizations to community college trustees. We have been able to bring a wide array of thought leaders and influencers to the Congress without paying speaker fees or honorariums, helping keep member costs down. We organized concurrent sessions around critical themes and integrated spotlight sessions and other formats to highlight special topical and cutting-edge issues. We engaged our corporate partners through sessions and roundtables, bringing key industry knowledge to trustees. And we revamped our pre-Congress academies to buttress our renewed focus around effective governance and programs for aspiring presidents. The resulting event remains an intensive educational experience with no "filler" programming and expenses as lean as we can make them so as many members as possible can participate every year.

### Expanding Advocacy and Research

One of the intriguing aspects of ACCT that led me to request an interview for the director of federal relations position during the summer of 1996 was the grassroots potential of trustee advocacy. Among the many enhanced roles of the association, none is closer and nearer to my heart than the progress we have made in policy analysis, research, and advocacy.

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I came to ACCT convinced that with the right tools and armed with fact-based research and policy recommendations, community college trustees could significantly increase not only their impacts on their own communities and colleges, but also their national impact on all community colleges through ACCT. Over the past several years, we have been fortunate to have received financial support from over a half-dozen foundations and policy organizations to focus trustees' attention on critical policy issues around student financial assistance, food insecurity, homelessness, mental health, K-12 connections, workforce issues, and most recently, the unique challenges and needs of our rural community colleges, including broadband Internet access.

ACCT has become an organization of record on behalf of the sector, a recognized authority and trusted source of information and policy analysis. As a result, we have been successful forging real relationships with Republican and Democratic administrations alike, and have commanded the attention of cabinet officials, governors, state legislatures, mayors, and other elected and appointed officials. We benefited from White House Summits on Community Colleges and opportunities to shape and lead federal policy initiatives like the Early Childhood Cognitive Development Summit, the American Graduation Initiative, and the College Promise, to name just a few. Our efforts have served to empower boards with the information and expertise they need to discharge their advocacy responsibilities more effectively, and to influence policymakers at all levels.

The crown jewel in our national advocacy efforts remains the National Legislative Summit, which we have convened every single year in Washington, D.C. since 1978 — and twice in 2010, when we refused to let a historic “Snowmageddon” force us to cancel our Washington advocacy event. The opportunity to bring thousands of community college leaders to the nation's capital to expose them to federal officials, journalists, pundits, analysts, and others has been invaluable to helping focus advocacy on specific and critically important topics and the pressing needs of our students and campuses.

I am unabashedly proud to say that we have grown into a respected leading authority on our membership and the community college movement during my tenure. We are the voice of community college leaders. And I will always remain proud of

that. This was my fundamental promise to the board that hired me to lead ACCT in 2005 — a promise I managed to keep.

### Looking to the Future

As with all things, change is coming, and organizations need to replenish themselves with new talent and new vision. When I accepted the presidency of ACCT, I did so with a clear focus on keeping the mission and membership always in my sights — to be myself and to serve unselfishly, openly, and transparently. But no one succeeds on their own. I have been blessed to have the consistent support of my wife Andra, my two daughters, and just as importantly, the team at ACCT. They say that behind every great leader, a team stands behind making it possible. This has been certainly true for me. The ACCT team has been both the catalyst and energy that inspired and kept me focused on my role and my job. I owe a tremendous debt of gratitude to my team, and I know they will rally behind my successor as they did me from day one. As someone from a prominent national research organization observed recently, ACCT “punches above its weight,” which is certainly true and really defines our culture as an organization.

I see tremendous opportunities for ACCT in the future. It has been my honor and my greatest professional joy to have served our trustees, our volunteer leaders, and most importantly, the incredibly talented team at ACCT. I have made countless friends along the way and have learned much from every person I have come into contact with over my journey. As I prepare for my new set of adventures later this year, I promise not to stray too far and to continue to champion our students and colleges. As the great American philosopher and storyteller Mark Twain observed, “find a job you enjoy doing, and you will never have to work a day in your life.” Thank you to ACCT for giving me my Mark Twain opportunity and then some.



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