



FILLING HIS SHOES

ACCT Chair Jay Nardini is focused on finding others who can step into leadership roles at ACCT and community colleges across the nation.



BY MARK TONER

FROM GRADE SCHOOL ON, HAWKEYE COMMUNITY College trustee Jay Nardini always knew one thing. “If I was involved in something, from school council to being the first person picked for sports, I wanted to be in leadership or on the path of leadership,” says the Hawkeye Community College trustee. “It’s ingrained in my personality.”

Now, after becoming the third ACCT chair from Iowa in the past 13 years, Nardini wants to ensure that others follow in his footsteps.

“Years ago, I sat where you are and pondered whether I had what it takes to be part of leadership for ACCT,” he told attendees of the 2023 ACCT Leadership Congress in Las Vegas last October. “Now I wonder who is going to step up to fill the shoes of the great leaders ACCT has had over the years, not just on the board of directors, but on our various committees, and our other volunteers who are so vitally important to the life of this organization.”

Nardini grew up with his three siblings in Bloomfield, Iowa, in an apartment over the family grocery store, called Nardini’s Model

Market. “It was great as a kid growing up,” he says. “If you saw an ad for a cereal, you’d just go downstairs and get it.”

The descendant of Italian immigrants, Nardini’s father had an eighth-grade education, and his mother was valedictorian of her high school class of 16 students. His family moved from Missouri to Bloomfield when Nardini was three years old, purchasing the grocery store on the town square, across from the county courthouse.

“All of us kids grew up working in the store,” he says. “We all learned to work hard, to be polite and helpful to our customers, to stock shelves, sack groceries, run a register, and make change in our heads.”

Nardini’s parents also stressed the value of education, and he and his siblings would all go on to college, earning advanced degrees. He graduated from high school in 1966, the same year community colleges were created by the legislature in Iowa. He majored in business in college and then went on to law school, serving for six years in the Iowa National Guard and United States Army Reserve.



Jay Nardini speaks at the 2023 ACCT Leadership Congress after receiving the gavel from Outgoing Chair Rose Benavidez.

After Nardini’s father died at 68 from a heart attack, his mother became one of the state’s first female mayors, a role she held for 20 years. “When she spoke, people listened,” Nardini says. “She really set the example for all of our family — not only the importance of education, but in being involved with our community.”

As an attorney, Nardini initially shied away from becoming involved in community organizations because of concerns about conflicts of interest. But more than a decade ago, he says he “started thinking about what my obituary would look like.” Consequently, he joined his community-minded wife of more than 42 years, Candy, and became involved in a wide range of service organizations, including the American Cancer Society, Habitat for Humanity, the local food bank, and their church, among others.

“That’s just the way we’ve led our lives,” Nardini says.

But it was cycling that got the wheels turning for what would become more than a decade of service on the Hawkeye Community College board of trustees. Nardini and his wife volunteered to help during RAGBRAI, an annual event during which thousands of cyclists ride across Iowa. Hawkeye Community College was one of the overnight camping sites for the event that year, and one of the college’s officials asked Candy if she knew someone who might want to consider running for a seat on the board of trustees that was coming open with a trustee’s retirement. “She said she would talk to me,” Nardini recalls. He ran for the open board seat in 2011.

Over his 13-year tenure as a trustee, Nardini says that he is most proud of his role helping to maintain the Hawkeye board’s norms around policy governance. “We try to fly at a higher level and not get involved in the day-to-day operations,” he says.

Nardini’s leadership journey moved beyond Iowa before he was

even sworn in as a Hawkeye trustee. Shortly after being elected, the college sent him to the 2011 ACCT Leadership Congress conference in Dallas, an experience that helped him get up to speed on community colleges and governance. “My background is in the law, not education,” he says. “Everything I learned about community colleges at that Congress was interesting to me. I was hooked.” In fact, it was at that Congress where he discovered one of his law school classmates was a trustee at another Iowa community college.

After being sworn in, Nardini volunteered to represent Hawkeye on the state board, serving with two of Iowa’s former ACCT chairs, Jean Torgeson and Connie Hornbeck. Once again, he decided to pursue a leadership path, working his way up to state chair. Another colleague on the state board, Moudy Nabulsi, encouraged him to get involved with ACCT, and Nardini was appointed to the member communications and education committee. Nabulsi later suggested he run for ACCT’s diversity committee, which he did, ultimately elected twice to the committee. He then ran for the ACCT board as an at-large director. He lost by one vote.

“With encouragement, I came back and got elected,” he recalls. During the pandemic year, Nardini was elected virtually as secretary-treasurer of a board he calls “the most diverse and knowledgeable one I have ever served on.” From there, he progressed through each executive committee role until he was named chair this fall in Las Vegas — fittingly following in the footsteps of yet another Iowa ACCT chair, Wayne Newton (no relation to the singer).

Nardini points to the appointment of Jee Hang Lee as ACCT President and CEO, the strength of the association’s membership, and the launch of ACCT Connect — which he calls “a game changer” — as the most significant events during his tenure on the ACCT executive committee. “I’m especially proud of the people who have



Nardini with former ACCT Chair and fellow Iowan Connie Hornbeck; at right, sharing a list of community college priorities.

been elected to the executive committee, the chairs who have been around since I was there and I've learned a lot from, and the support I've received," he says.

He stresses the importance of ACCT's two-pronged mission: to educate and advocate. "Our advocacy work proved its worth during COVID because of the work done to get relief funds out to community colleges, and we're starting to do more state-based Governance Leadership Institutes where we're actually taking our message out to various states and organizations instead of them having to come to us," he says. "You have to have a national organization if you want to have an impact nationally."

As ACCT chair, Nardini is focused on how community colleges can help address the nation's skills gap. He points to his home state, with an aging workforce and growing demands for a trained workforce, as an example of the challenges and opportunities. "We have 3 percent unemployment," he says. "If everyone on the unemployment rolls in Iowa filled a skilled position, we'd still be 25,000 skilled positions short. The question is, where are we going to get those people?"

As open-access institutions, community colleges provide an answer that no other sector can, Nardini says. "We're going to find those workers in our immigrant population, in our Second Chance Pell — which will also cut down on recidivism — and our senior citizens who are aging out of their careers but still willing to work." And even if these populations don't fill all of these open jobs, the growth of AI as a way to augment the workforce means that "community colleges will train the people who maintain it," he adds.

Iowa also presents an example of the power of a community college education, Nardini says. "You can make \$100,000 a year as a

plumber in Iowa, where the cost of living is really low," Nardini says. "You can grow wealth in a position like that."

Nardini sees ACCT's role as disseminating best practices in finding and training skilled workers across the nation, and helping promote the role community colleges play in their regional economy and the health of the nation as a whole.

"We are the economic engines that are driving our national economy and our local communities," Nardini says. "We are the ones that train and retrain our workforce, and as things change, we are the ones employers look to."

Having retired from practicing law after 50 years, Nardini is grateful for the opportunity to serve as ACCT chair — and for the chance to convince others to someday fill his own shoes.

"It's given me the opportunity to encourage others to step up," he says. "There's nothing special about me — a little drive and wanting to better an organization, that's all it takes. It takes time, but it's fulfilling, and it makes a difference."



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