

BUILDING A LEGACY

The 2023 Leadership Congress focused on how community college leaders can change lives for the better.

By Mark Toner





Clockwise: Outgoing ACCT Chair Benavidez passes the gavel to incoming Chair Jay Nardini; Lawrence Weekly; Keynote panel on business and industry; Phi Theta Kappa President Lynn Tincher-Ladner

WITH THE THEME “BUILDING A LEGACY: UPLIFTING Students and Transforming Communities,” the 2023 ACCT Leadership Congress prompted community college leaders to consider the role of their institutions during changing — and challenging — times.

“The legacy of community and technical colleges... is the legacy of the American Dream,” ACCT Chair Rose Benavidez, a trustee at South Texas College, said during the event’s opening session. “Everyone in this room understands the importance of our institutions to bridging the ever-expanding gap between those of means and those who can barely make ends meet.”

Reaching the ‘Missing Millions’

The glitz and glitter of Las Vegas served as the backdrop as the 1,900 Congress attendees were urged to focus on something far less visible — those absent from the workforce and their own institutions. Speakers stressed the need to reach out to hard-to-reach populations as a moral, economic, and national security imperative.

“It’s the fierce urgency of now,” said Michael Bond, director of community relations for Snap-on Incorporated. “We can’t wait any longer.”

It was a call echoed throughout the event. Dr. James L. Moore III, assistant director for the NSF’s Directorate for STEM Education, stressed the importance of reaching the “missing millions” in STEM education and careers. Dr. Roger Ramsammy, president of Hudson Valley Community College, outlined his institution’s work to find what he calls “the invisible workforce,” including disabled workers, dropouts, and refugees. “They are willing and able, but often overlooked,” he said.

More than 100 community college leaders and advocates gathered to address another overlooked population: the 300,000 Black learners who have disappeared from community college over the past two decades. The Leveling Up: Realizing Black Learner Excellence at Community Colleges Symposium (see p. 18) announced the launch of the Alliance for Black Learner Excellence at Community Colleges, a voluntary cohort

of institutions that will focus on building institutional capacity to better serve Black learners.

“We’re very intentional, and we’re very unapologetic, and we’re going to continue what we’re going to do,” said Dr. Keith Curry, president and CEO of Compton College and the initiative’s national chair. “But we have to do it together.”

Building a New Legacy

Changing economic conditions have given community colleges a chance to build an entirely new legacy: that of rebuilding the “middle of the country, the middle of the labor market, and people from all walks of life,” said Dr. Ben Armstrong, executive director and research scientist of MIT’s Industrial Performance Center.

Steady growth in manufacturing and recent wage increases for bottom and middle-income jobs are promising signs, Armstrong said, noting that many of the places seeing growth in middle-income jobs and upward mobility have strong community colleges and high proportions of workers with two-year degrees. But Armstrong cautioned that institutions must “expand the aperture of skills they provide” and play an even greater role as conveners and anchors of workforce partnerships.

Bond urged trustees to use their roles to engage with industry. “Look at your boards as a conduit to the community,” he said. “Connect with businesses and ask them exactly what they need.” And Karolyn Ellingson, head of industrial workforce development for Festo Didactic, stressed the importance of staying abreast of how those needs are evolving. “Think about what your programs need to offer now and how they can expand to meet the needs of the future workforce, because it’s changing — and changing fast.”

Throughout Congress, community college leaders shared their experiences developing partnerships. Anne Kress, president of Northern Virginia Community College, stressed the moral imperative for building partnerships that address labor market mismatches in sectors including IT, healthcare, and business management to create what NOVA calls “pathways that pay.”

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Left to Right: James L. Moore; student trustees and PTK awardees

“We’re definitely a community of haves and have nots, and part of our mission is to help the have nots find a better economic future,” she said.

The needs are growing. A panel of employers and community college leaders shared statistics about the nation’s staggering workforce needs: a 2.4 million gap between open positions and those available to take them, the 75 percent of corporate leaders who say the skills gap is among their top priorities, the \$15 trillion industry that the energy sector is growing into, and downstream supply chain issues with finding skilled workers that are imperiling even the world’s largest manufacturers.

“Community colleges are a fundamental part of [this] economic landscape,” said Roger Tadjewski, executive director of the National Coalition of Certification Centers (NC3).

New Opportunities

Despite an uncertain election year and the prospect of a potential government shutdown, public policy leaders from ACCT and the American Association of Community Colleges stressed that community colleges remain a key part of the federal policy landscape. Short-Term Pell, in particular, continues to enjoy bipartisan support, despite ongoing debates over criteria and how programs would demonstrate their value.

Demand from employers continues to grow. Ellingson summed up their asks: “We need it shorter, we need it faster, we don’t necessarily need the degree to go with it, but we need the competencies and skills.”

To address short-term training needs, Midlands Technical College has created a wide range of apprenticeship opportunities and short-term “QuickJobs” programs in a range of technical and skilled trades. More than half of the programs’ students come from employer referrals, and training is tailored to their needs, according to Commission Chair Sandra Jackson. “We’re here to help the individuals who slid off the road get back on the path,” she said.

The Biden Administration also continues to prioritize community colleges in workforce development, as evinced by Vice President Kamala Harris’ visit to Southern Nevada College during the final day of the Congress.

Moore likened the 2022 CHIPS and Science Act to the “Sputnik moment” that followed the creation of the NSF seven decades earlier, one which will require new investments in community colleges in rural and economically underserved regions to expand access to high-growth careers. While community colleges are not directly eligible for CHIPS Act funding, they can — and should — be involved in the workforce development funding included in the law, Carrie Warick-Smith, ACCT Vice President of Public Policy, said. “We want to make sure [manufacturers] are looking at community colleges to be partners,” she said, urging colleges to “be proactive with your partners and business communities.”

Speakers also pointed to opportunities sparked by the Inflation Reduction Act’s investments in modernizing infrastructure, climate, and sustainability. The incoming generation of workers “get excited that industry and business are striving to be more efficient and sustainable, and if they go into that world, they can make a difference,” said Michael Hines, Trane Technologies North American director of education initiatives and workforce.

To support these fast-growing fields, ACCT and the Education Strategy Group announced a partnership to launch the Non-Credit and Credit Alignment Lab, which will develop new and improved pathways between non-credit and credit programs and strengthen workforce partnerships like the ones highlighted throughout this year’s Congress.

“We have all the right stakeholders in the room to create a disruptive transformation across America,” Moore said.

Transformation Through Innovation

Presenters highlighted transformational strategies to address ever-present resource challenges, particularly in rural regions.

Finger Lakes Community College shared its work with augmented



Clockwise: Richard Fukutaki; ACCT Founding Trustee M. Dale Ensign; Jee Hang Lee; Central Region Caucus; Members display voting cards at Senate meeting; Dr. Mark Wherry

reality as a way to address training needs in courses ranging from healthcare and welding to advanced manufacturing across its large service area. “There are a lot of ways you can take this and make a huge difference, especially if you are a rural community college where distances make a big difference,” said President Robert K. Nye.

Presenters from Central Wyoming College discussed how the state’s eight community colleges are taking the lead on diversifying an economy primarily focused on exporting raw materials — and the state’s talent. The Wyoming Innovation Partnership is a pivotal part of the state’s economic development plan and focused on “place-based opportunities” such as incubating agriculture, equine, and food businesses, said President Brad Tyndall.

Other institutions are focused on approaching changing needs in new ways. At Hawkeye Community College, President Todd Holcomb recalled asking his board “not to build a building” shortly after becoming president. “It was not going to meet the needs of the college going forward,” Holcomb said, stressing the need to create data-informed systems to rethink facilities and programming. “The challenge we face is how to train students for the workforce of the future,” he said.

Colleges are also taking similar data-informed, institution-wide approaches to improve equitable outcomes. “The bottom line is what do your students need, and how can we focus the efforts of our boards to serve the students we have?” Nan Gomez-Heitzeberg, trustee for the Kern Community College District, said during a workshop featuring leaders from several California community college districts. “Organizations and cultures do not create themselves — individuals create cultures and institutions,” added Dr. Sharoni Little, a trustee at Compton College. “Each decision we make, each policy we create, each fiscal allocation has impacts and creates the outcomes.”

‘Step Up’ for Leadership

Those outcomes rely on active and engaged trustees, and speakers urged attendees to take what they had learned back to their institutions. “The reality is all the things you hear today don’t

mean much unless you advance them and bring them home to your community,” said ACCT President and CEO Jee Hang Lee.

Dr. Lawrence Weekly, chief of staff and director of diversity for the College of Southern Nevada, called on community college leaders to “step up,” drawing from his own experience as a student at the same college and community he now serves as a leader. “My challenge to you is to not be afraid to give someone a chance,” Weekly said.

One way for trustees to do so is by working nationally as well as locally, ACCT’s 2023-24 Chair told trustees. After accepting the gavel during the Congress closing session, Jay Nardini urged his fellow trustees to continue ACCT’s legacy through involvement with the association (see p. 14).

“Years ago, I sat where you are and pondered whether I had what it takes to [participate in] the leadership of ACCT,” said Nardini, trustee at Hawkeye Community College in Iowa. “Now I’m wondering who is going to step up and fill my shoes. Volunteers are so vital to the life of this organization... Everyone can contribute to the betterment of this organization. It takes time, but we make time for what matters most.”



Mark Toner is an editor for Trustee Quarterly.