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Reflections on Rocks

The diverse elements of our shared mission come together to advance economic vitality and uplift our communities.

BY ROBIN MATROSS HELMS

AT THE BEGINNING OF MARCH, I HAD THE GREAT privilege to attend ACCT's first Pacific Islands Governance Leadership Institute (GLI), which took place on Saipan, the capital and largest island of the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands. On our last day together, Charles Cepeda, chair of the board of regents at Northern Marianas College, graciously invited me, along with Cindy Lopez and Bruce Leslie, our talented ACCT consultants who facilitated the GLI, to visit Mount Tapochau, which if measured from its base at the bottom of the ocean to its peak, is the tallest mountain on Earth.

As we ascended to the peak, the terrain became rockier and rockier. I soon understood why Charles's pickup truck was the vehicle of choice for our excursion. Near the top, we parked and continued on foot up a gravel path, flanked by large boulders and other stones. The view from the





peak was breathtaking — the photo doesn't do it justice — certainly the ocean in the distance, but also the hills and valleys, composed primarily of rocks of all shapes and sizes, which came together to form a beautiful, strong, and enduring landscape.

Inspired by my visit to Mount Tapochau, big rocks and small rocks have been on my mind lately as I think about the fundamentals of good governance, the composition of ACCT's work and how we support our members, and the impact of our sector on individuals and our communities.

The Rocks of Good Governance

About a month after the Pacific Islands GLI, I moderated a session at the annual American Association of Community Colleges (AACCC) conference in Louisville, Kentucky, called "New Trustee Orientation: Building Knowledge, Establishing Trust." The panel, comprised of ACCT Board Chair Jay Nardini, Harper Community College President Avis Proctor, and ACCT expert consultant Debbie DiThomas, spoke about strategies to build trust and rapport among board members, as well as robust governance practices to support the institution.

Clarity of the roles and responsibilities of trustees, along with an in-depth knowledge of institutional policies, the panelists emphasized, are the major foundations for effective governance — the "big rocks" of effective board functioning. Equally important, however, and complementary to these cornerstones, are practices that establish and maintain trust among board members and with the CEO. Jay Nardini cited the example of board dinners prior to meetings, where trustees can spend time together and interact informally. For the session, he wore a bright blue button down with the Hawkeye Community College logo on it, which each trustee receives when they join the Hawkeye board as a way to feel connected to the college and demonstrate their affiliation and pride. These "small rocks" meaningfully add to and amplify the impact of governance "big rocks" and together serve as a foundation for effective boards, and ultimately, effective institutions.

The ACCT Landscape: Big, Medium, and Small Rocks

My "rock thinking" also extends to ACCT's approach to programs and services to support our members. Led by Christina Simons and Maggie Owens, our outstanding events team, our two annual conferences are the cornerstone "big rocks" of our programs and services, providing opportunities for us to tackle weighty issues of governance together, share good practices, and build our connections and networks on a large scale.

In the last year, as part of our efforts to meet our members where they are, we've also been focusing on the small- and medium-scale programs that complement the conferences. Our state-based GLIs and the regional Pacific Islands program are key examples, providing opportunities to focus more intently on state/region-specific issues and challenges, and to deepen ties among neighboring boards and institutions. And at the college level, our board services team — led by Colleen Allen and Maureen Ndoto — is continuing to build out tailored offerings, including board retreats and workshops, CEO evaluations, policy reviews, and customized consulting.

And of course, there's ACCT Connect! In my last *Trustee Quarterly* column, I referenced the "Great Content Build of 2024," which focuses on building out the platform's resource library and online course content piece by piece — or rock by rock, if you will — to provide articles, how-to guides, checklists, policy examples, and other resources with actionable information on key governance topics and broader issues impacting community colleges. Ultimately, these "small rocks" will serve as the basis for a microcredential or badging opportunity for our member trustees to engage in structured professional development — an additional "big rock" to be added to the ACCT landscape in the future.

Our hope is that this evolving combination of big, medium, and small program and services "rocks" will come together to form a solid structure to support our members and good governance across the sector — much as rocks of all sizes form the landscape at Mount Tapochau.

Big Picture Rocks

Following Saipan and Louisville, my most recent excursion this spring was to Wor-Wic College in Salisbury, Maryland, where I accompanied a delegation from the Indian Embassy in Washington to see one our community colleges in action and discuss potential global collaborations. With Wor-Wic President Deb Casey, we had the opportunity to attend a graduation ceremony for a cohort of eight students who had recently completed a 13-week powerline worker pre-apprenticeship program.

We heard from local industry leaders about the importance of the program for their operations and the state's economy — a striking example of a "big rock" impact of the college on its community. Equally impactful, however, was when graduates' family members in the audience were invited to make comments. A pre-teen boy raised his hand, and when called on, stated, "I just want to say how proud I am of my dad. He worked really hard, and I know he's going to do great in his job."

What I have come to appreciate most about our sector as I have gotten to know our members and our colleges in my almost two years at ACCT is the firm commitment and attention to both the big rocks (e.g., economic development) and small rocks (e.g., empowering individual students and families) that comprise our colleges' missions. These rocks of different shapes and sizes come together to advance economic vitality and uplift our communities. I'm proud of the role ACCT and our programs and services play in supporting our members to develop both the big and small rocks of good governance as a means to achieve these goals.

So let's keep rocking! We look forward to seeing you at ACCT programs, on your campus, and on ACCT Connect as we continue our work together.



Robin Matross Helms is ACCT's vice president for membership and educational services. She can be reached at rhelms@acct.org.