

# ‘An Inflection Point’

The 2024 National Legislative Summit looked ahead to the future of work — and the workforce.



BY MARK TONER



AS BEFITS AN ELECTION YEAR, ADMINISTRATION officials, analysts, and lawmakers speaking at the 2024 Community College National Legislative Summit discussed a nation — and an education system — at a crossroads. But the focus was far beyond November.

“We’re at this inflection point because we have an opportunity to not only make significant inroads in addressing the climate crisis, but in doing so to really rebuild the economy and... give students entry into the middle class and above,” U.S. Energy Secretary Jennifer Granholm told NLS attendees. “You all have got the keys to this future.”

A record 1,300 attendees, including more than 120 student trustees, helped amplify this message across Washington, D.C. “When community college advocates show up on Capitol Hill in numbers like today, it really says something about our collective vision and mission,” said ACCT President and CEO Jee Hang Lee. “It also says something to the members of Congress and their staffs.”

## ‘Stake Your Claim, Shoot Your Shot’

NLS speakers representing the Biden Administration were a combination of familiar and less familiar faces, as Labor and Education Department leaders were joined by their counterparts in the Departments of Commerce and Energy. The more expansive approach illustrates how these departments are “linking arms and holding hands to determine how we can position community colleges to take leads in workforce

ACCT Board Chair Jay Nardini; the 2024 Community College National Legislative Summit had record attendance.



Clockwise from left: *Cook Political Report* Editor Amy Walter; ACCT President and CEO Jee Hang Lee; ACCT's and AACC's public policy teams present the 2024 federal legislative priorities; U.S. Secretary of Energy Jennifer Granholm.



development,” said Luke Rhine, U.S. Department of Education deputy assistant secretary of the Office of Career, Technical, and Adult Education.

“I think of our workforce system as our infrastructure,” said Acting Secretary of Labor Julie A. Su. “Like our roads and bridges, the workforce system needs some work... Too many people have been left out of the promise of a good job. We say to that, not this time.”

Alejandra Y. Castillo, the U.S. Department of Commerce’s assistant secretary of commerce for economic development, stressed the importance of “consistent and long-term funding” for community colleges.

“Economic development is not episodic. It’s not a one-off,” Castillo said. “Our country cannot just start and stop and think we have the strength to compete with countries around the world.”

Granholm focused on the workforce needed to support the \$23 trillion clean energy sector. The former Michigan governor urged community college leaders to work with industry on creating workforce-training programs for the more than 400 factories that are opening or expanding throughout the country as a result of the clean energy provisions in the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law. She also urged the more than 120 student trustees and advocates attending the NLS to consider careers in the fast-growing sector: “Stake your claim, shoot your shot, and join the hundreds of thousands of Americans working in clean energy today,” she said.

### A Bipartisan Push for Short-Term Pell

Despite election-year dynamics and a Congress with a historically low number of bills passed into law, the role of community colleges in workforce development has been “the hot topic both at home and inside the Beltway,” Carrie Warick-Smith, ACCT vice president of public policy, told attendees during the annual legislative priorities briefing by ACCT and American Association of Community College (AACC) public policy leaders. Short-term Pell Grants for workforce programs remains the sector’s top priority: “We want to make sure it gets across the finish line this year,” Warick-Smith said.

Both workforce Pell and reauthorization of the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) won bipartisan support in the House Committee on Education and Workforce, whose two top members, Chairwoman Rep. Virginia Foxx (R-N.C.) and ranking committee member Rep. Bobby Scott (D-Va.), spoke during the NLS and the Congressional Forum (see p. 19).

Short-term Pell Grants “will be your path to upskilling and reskilling students quickly for in-demand jobs,” Foxx said, adding that without them, “you’ll be left tackling the skills gap with one hand tied behind your back.”

Foxx also urged attendees to support two other bills approved by the committee, the A Stronger Workforce for America Act, which would reauthorize the Workforce Opportunity and Innovation Act (WOIA) for the first time since 2014 and “improve and codify” the Strengthening



Clockwise from left: U.S. Assistant Secretary of Commerce for Economic Development Alejandra Y. Castillo; National Governors Association Executive Director Bill McBride; U.S. Acting Secretary of Labor Julie A. Su; and Congresswoman Virginia Foxx



Community Colleges Training Grants program to better support workforce education, and the College Cost Reduction Act, which has “created misplaced hesitancy” for its risk-sharing provisions, according to Foxx, who likened these measures to similar ones in Workforce Pell. “Both are aimed at maximizing student success, which is what you should be all about — ensuring that graduates receive positive value from their credential,” she said. “I urge you to be confident... because it’s high time your institutions are rewarded for their unique value.”

And while much of the focus of the NLS involved federal advocacy, National Governors Association Executive Director Bill McBride stressed the importance of state-level collaboration, particularly given governors’ bipartisan role in implementing the federal CHIPS and Science Act and infrastructure laws. He also pointed to governors’ efforts to eliminate the “paper ceiling” of four-year degree requirements in state jobs, as well as initiatives to address workforce needs through registered apprenticeship programs, digital literacy training, and business-education collaborations in high-demand fields such as electric vehicle manufacturing and healthcare.

“Governors have long understood that education is the key to opportunity and economic advancement,” McBride told attendees. “What’s become more clear is how essential it is that community colleges offer skill-based education that can transform communities and states.”

*Cook Political Report* Editor Amy Walter reminded NLS attendees that community colleges have a message that cuts across party

lines — and the record number of attendees provided another cause for optimism.

“When we have the numbers like we have this year, it makes all the difference in the world,” David Baime, AACC senior vice president for government relations, told attendees. “There are some headwinds for higher education, but in terms of community colleges, we’re still in a really good place.”

### New and Growing Partnerships

The NLS also provided opportunities to showcase collaborative efforts involving the community college sector. ACCT and the National Head Start Association (NHSA) launched Kids on Campus, a new initiative designed to bring more Head Start centers to more community college campuses throughout the country. The initiative is supported by the Annie E. Casey Foundation, Crimsonbridge Foundation, ECMC Foundation, Imaginable Futures, Lumina Foundation, Seldin/Haring-Smith Foundation, and Trellis Foundation (see p. 7).

Community college graduate Amber Angel, who spoke about her experience as a student parent during the 2021 NLS, stressed the importance of developing stronger campus-based childcare programs in her new role with ECMC. “Thirty percent of students on my campus were student parents, but I felt alone,” she said. After studying and working at Los Angeles Valley College, she went on to California State Northridge to study family and consumer sciences and now serves as a career-readiness program officer at ECMC Foundation.



A record number of student trustees and community college students participated in the 2024 Community College National Legislative Summit.



More than 100 college campuses already partner with Head Start centers, and their work can provide a model for new partnerships with the 17,000 Head Start sites nationwide, according to ACCT's Lee. "This demonstrates we can bring them together and reduce the burdens on college campuses while providing these benefits," he said.

Also during the NLS, community college leaders also were briefed on the results of the 2023-24 Digital Learning Pulse Survey, an ACCT-Cengage partnership that revealed growing concerns about the use of artificial intelligence that were echoed in many Hill visits (see p. 18).

Representatives from the Labor and Education departments also met with attendees to discuss transforming the traditional apprenticeship model to meet emerging career fields and changing demographics.

"Helping diversify the basis of what apprenticeships will be will change the future of work," said Bunker Hill Community College President Dr. Pam Eddinger, who chaired a Labor Department national advisory committee on apprenticeship programs. "The future of work is people, and it's about accommodating the diversity and talent of this new pool."

And the record number of student trustees in attendance attended a session on advocacy led by Phi Theta Kappa Honor Society (PTK) President and CEO Dr. Lynn Tincher-Ladner. "Community colleges serve a great purpose," she said. "All of us understand underfunded organizations cannot fulfill their purpose. You're here to fight."

"I applaud you all coming here in force, and being involved," Lee added. "Everything at this conference is about you. Full stop."

### A 'Historic Role'

The NLS concluded with a reminder that advocacy remains a year-round effort. "It is crucial we continue to advocate and work with our legislators to make sure community colleges receive the support we need to serve our students well," said ACCT Chair Jay Nardini, trustee of Hawkeye Community College.

And Foxx concluded what she said would be her last time addressing the NLS in her role as House Education and Workforce Committee chair by crediting the "historic and uniquely American role that community colleges play in society."

"The thousand-strong network of community colleges represented here today might be the single most American institution," she said.



Mark Toner is an editor for Trustee Quarterly.



Clockwise from left: Community college delegations visit Oregon Representatives Susan Bonamici and Lori Chavez-DeRemer; Illinois Senators Dick Durbin and Tammy Duckworth; and Georgia Representative Lucy McBath

# ON THE HILL

## AI, Workforce Needs Drive Member Visits

BY MARK TONER

AS COMMUNITY COLLEGE TRUSTEES, STUDENTS, AND presidents fanned out across Capitol Hill to meet with lawmakers, they often found the conversation turning to a topic not on the famed “green sheet” of legislative priorities: artificial intelligence.

Lawmakers and community college leaders alike expressed concern over the lack of clear policy for the fast-changing technology and greater retraining needs as AI impacts entire sectors of the workforce.

Meeting with Rep. Lori Chavez-DeRemer (R-Ore.), representatives of several Oregon community colleges discussed the disruption to livelihoods that could occur “unless we can be proactive in training people to be relevant in the world of AI,” as Mt. Hood Community College trustee Dana Stroud put it. In similar fashion, representatives from Augusta Technical College and the Technical College System of Georgia discussed the need to revamp curriculum with Rep. Lucy McBath (D-Ga.), who praised community and technical colleges for their flexibility in the face of fast-changing conditions.

Workforce issues dominated conversations across the Capitol. Meeting with Rep. Suzanne Bonamici (D-Ore.), Portland Community College President Adrien Bennings discussed the benefits of short-term Pell and

pointed to PCC’s new mobile welding unit as a way to both demonstrate careers to high school students and bring short-term training to rural areas. “We usually do a ribbon cutting. We did a chain cutting — with flames,” Bennings said.

PCC student trustee Nathaniel Kung discussed the importance of workforce-focused programs with Chavez-DeRemer, pointing to working students and those with families. “Short-term Pell helps support their education and impacts them,” he said. And student Rachel Biscone of Linn-Benton Community College told Rep. Val Hoyle (D-Ore.) about the importance of SNAP and other wraparound supports — and how getting a campus job dramatically reduced her benefits. “There are a lot of barriers to food access,” she said.

Members of the Illinois Community College Trustees Association (ICCTA) also discussed affordability and workforce programs with the state’s two senators, Senate Majority Whip Dick Durbin (D) and Sen. Tammy Duckworth (D). “We cannot stay on the sidelines as higher education keeps slipping further and further out of reach for so many people,” Duckworth said.

# A Seat at the Table

The Congressional Forum on Capitol Hill highlighted the continuing bipartisan consensus supporting community colleges.

By Mark Toner





Virginia Representative Bobby Scott



Florida Representative Gus Bilirakis

**W**HEN COMMUNITY COLLEGE LEADERS COME TO Washington, they're often told their institutions are the nation's best kept secret. Speaking during the annual Congressional Forum on Capitol Hill, Rep. Gus Bilirakis (R-Fla.) used even stronger language, calling his state's two-year colleges "a secret weapon."

"We must support our colleges," Bilirakis said during the February event, which brought community college trustees, presidents, and advocates to a packed conference room on Capitol Hill during the Community College National Legislative Summit (see p. 14).

### A 'Roadmap for Success'

Noting that 2021 and 2022 were the years with the greatest job growth in U.S. history, Rep. Bobby Scott (D-Va.) stressed the importance of ensuring that Americans have the skills needed to fill them.

"Job growth will be meaningless unless we can train people to take those good jobs," Scott told Forum attendees. "And that's where community colleges come in."

Scott pointed to "chronic disinvestment in higher education generally, and workforce systems specifically" as barriers to workers accessing needed training.

As ranking member of the House Committee on Education and the Workforce, Scott noted that the committee has made bipartisan efforts to address workforce needs, including the Workforce Innovation Opportunity Act and efforts to expand the Pell Grant program to short-term workforce programs.

Noting that studies show that many families can't come up with \$400 for emergency expenses, Scott said that short-term programs costing \$1,000 or more "that can transform the student's life" remain out of reach for too many.

Scott also touted the House Democrats' Roadmap for College Student Success, which he called "a comprehensive vision for updating our higher education system," including addressing affordability, student success, and incentives for states to invest in tuition-free community college.

### 'A Win-Win for All of Us'

Rep. Bilirakis stressed his longstanding connections to higher education, including teaching weekly at a Florida college and sponsoring legislation that created high school career academies and allowed the state's two-year institutions to award bachelor's degrees in selected majors while serving in Florida's legislature.

Attending two-year institutions "just makes so much sense," he said. "It gives so many people an opportunity, particularly if you have children [or] have to work a few jobs to make it through... You can be extremely successful and stay at home and get a four-year degree."

Bilirakis emphasized that short-term Pell grants represent a practical approach to workforce development. "It's a win-win for all of us," he said.

### 'The Sweet Spot'

Pointing to the nearly 9 million job openings in the U.S. economy, Rep. Joe Courtney (D-Conn.) stressed the challenges involved in "connecting people to these opportunities."

"When you look at what's the best strategy, community colleges fall exactly in the sweet spot in terms of how the country deals with this issue," he said.

Focusing on Connecticut's efforts to find and train thousands of workers to build submarines for the U.S. Navy, Courtney described a short-term manufacturing pipeline program co-designed by Three Rivers Community College, a shipyard, and trade unions with the



Connecticut Representative Joe Courtney



Illinois Representative Raja Krishnamoorthi

support of the U.S. Department of Labor. The program has graduated 4,000 students, all of whom are “hired immediately,” he said.

Courtney also described efforts to revitalize the bipartisan community college caucus, which he called “a really helpful mechanism” to communicate the needs of the sector. Courtney urged Forum attendees to encourage their state’s lawmakers to join the caucus, stressing its importance in amplifying advocacy efforts like the NLS.

“The size of this crowd speaks volumes about the passion you bring to this incredibly important issue for our country,” he said.

### ‘A Seat at the Table’

Rep. Raja Krishnamoorthi (D-Ill.) described bipartisan support for the 2018 reauthorization of the Perkins career and technical education program, which he co-authored with Rep. G.T. Thompson (R-Pa.) and was signed into law in 2017 by President Trump. “It made sure that resources were employed in a manner that would bring employers and community colleges and educators together to make sure that whatever curricula were developed and whatever those resources were invested in would end up training your students to get what I call access to the greatest social welfare program devised by human beings — a job,” he said.

Krishnamoorthi urged community college advocates to support two current bills. The first, the College Transparency Act, would publish student outcomes data for institutions, which he called “a no brainer.” The law would allow “parents and students to shop to be able to shop for their education,” he said. “And when they shop for their education, they find good values at your community colleges.”

The second bill, the Opportunity to Compete Act, would require employers to not screen out job candidates without four-year degrees, reflecting a growing trend in both the private and public sector. “Too many people without a four-year college degree get filtered out of

consideration by large employers... At the end of the day, it’s about acquiring skills and capabilities, not about degrees,” Krishnamoorthi said. “That’s the type of economy we’re moving towards, and that’s the one I believe you are training your students for as well.”

Krishnamoorthi also stressed the importance of continuing advocacy. “I’m so glad you are all here to advocate on behalf of your students and your communities,” he said. “There’s this old saying in Washington, D.C.: If you don’t have a seat at the table, you’re on the menu — and none of us or our students can afford to be on the menu.”

In the months following the forum, the Congressional Community College Caucus, Third Way, and ACCT held an event to celebrate Community College Month and learn about successful collaborations between community colleges and workforce partners. The April event was sponsored by Representatives Gus Bilirakis (R-Fla.) and Joe Courtney (D-Conn.), co-chairs of the Congressional Community College Caucus. Speakers from two community colleges in Florida and Maryland, and one from the Appalachian Regional Commission shared how they leverage partnerships with local industry and community colleges to create a skilled pipeline for workers in their communities.



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