



Following our Path: The ACCT Dou (道)

BY ROBIN MATROSS HELMS

JANUARY ALWAYS MAKES ME THINK OF JAPAN. AS 1999 DAWNED, I was packing my bags for Kyoto, Japan, where I spent the subsequent six months as a study abroad program director, helping shape the experience of an intrepid group of American students seeking to immerse themselves in a new language, culture, and educational setting.

As is so often the case, as a teacher I was learning right alongside my students. Having majored in East Asian Studies in college, I had a solid base knowledge of Japanese history and cultural concepts. But it was during my time in Kyoto that I came to understand the lived reality of what I had read about, and how longstanding foundational frameworks and knowledge continue to infuse daily life, practices, and approaches.



The idea of *dou*, often translated as “way” or “path,” is one of these core concepts that has stuck with me throughout my life and career. An often-cited example from Japan is *bushidou*, or “way of the samurai,” encapsulated in a code of conduct and set of guiding principles. *Dou*, however, is broader — if I were doing the translating, I would emphasize *dou* almost as a way of being, a mindset and feeling that underpins and drives all action.

As my team and our colleagues across the association have reflected on our work of the last year and what we are most proud of in how we’ve served our colleges and students, some distinct throughlines emerged in terms of our approaches and mindset. Whether in executive searches, trustee education, governance services, Center for Policy and Practice projects, or global education, it’s clear that there is a distinct “ACCT *dou*” guiding our work:

Members first. As an association in Washington, it’s important that we have a seat at the table for key policy discussions and that we serve as thought leaders by producing research and weighing in on big-picture issues that impact our sector. In allocating our staff’s time and efforts, however, the fundamental decision factor at ACCT is “how can we bring more value to our members?” A great example comes from our public policy team’s customized, interactive presentations for individual boards to work through the impacts of federal policy changes on their own campuses. Broad, theoretical discussion of policy impacts is certainly valuable, but is also relatively accessible in the news. As we’ve heard from our members, our team taking this analysis to the campus level is an extra step that has brought clarity and helped inform action.

High-touch, hands-on. At the start of new projects with higher education

institutions over the years, I’ve almost always heard something along the lines of, “Yeah, our college is really weird in that we...” Often whatever follows that phrase genuinely is unique, and perhaps a little weird — or at least quirky. But *every* college has characteristics and quirks that underpin how it works, how best to get things done, and how to serve its students. That’s culture. Culture is a collection of quirks. As part of the ACCT *dou*, we are committed to working closely with our members to understand those quirks and co-develop solutions that align with them. Our searches and governance services teams, with support from our amazing consultants, spend time getting to know the colleges they work with, co-develop processes and content, communicate continually, and troubleshoot in real-time as needed. In our cohort-based programs such as Kids on Campus and our global Partnership Labs, we go deep in the weeds on implementation of projects and provide hands-on support throughout.

Multimodal. Since taking the helm at ACCT four years ago, Jee Hang Lee has been committed to meeting our members where they are. We have operationalized this through our state-based Governance Leadership Institutes to bring live programs closer to our members, and through the ACCT Connect platform to provide trustee education to members anytime and anywhere. We have also added to our services offerings with policy reviews and CEO compensation benchmarking. Our goal is to engage with our members in a multitude of formats, providing a consistent baseline of support (e.g., trustee governance training pathways through the Excel badging program and ACCT Connect) and partnering to address specific in-the-moment needs (e.g., executive searches).

Wellness-wise. Our board chair Carol del Carlo eloquently articulates the importance

of wellness in this issue’s letter (see p. 1), urging all of us to approach our work from a human-first perspective, and from a starting point of compassion and caring. This aligns beautifully with our member-first, hands-on, multimodal approach that promotes wellness of our boards, students, colleges, workforce, communities, and the world as a component of the ACCT *dou*. With Carol’s leadership, you’ll see more from us on this theme throughout the coming year.

In articulating the characteristics of the ACCT *dou*, I’m struck by the parallels between our “way” and that of community colleges and our sector as a whole. Your students — like our members are for us — are at the heart of everything you do. You take a high-touch, hands-on approach to supporting them and their success, and prioritize their wellness in the broadest sense. The community college *dou* and the ACCT *dou* are not new — they are simply how we work, and who we are. At ACCT, we are excited to continue to walk our paths with you together in this important work — into 2026 and beyond.



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