



‘You could do anything with education; it doesn't matter what your background is... you can do anything that you want to do.’

Spotlighting Our Staff

Meet ACCT’s Beth Merga and discover what she learned from Hudson County Community College Chair Jeanette Peña.

IN THIS COLUMN, YOU’VE HAD A CHANCE TO GET TO know me and hear my take on ACCT’s Membership and Education Services division and our priorities. With our ongoing and deepening focus on member relationships and our chair Carol Del Carlo’s emphasis on wellbeing, over the next few installments of this column, you’ll have a chance to get to know the names behind the email addresses and the people who make it all happen.

In each “staff spotlight” profile, a Membership and Education Services staff member will tell you a bit about themselves, their work, and what they do outside of ACCT. And the “Robin’s Refrigerator” section will highlight an aspect of their work that I am particularly proud of — kind of akin to a special piece of artwork or an A+ assignment from one of your kids or grandkids you might post on your fridge.

This team does amazing work — I’m excited for you to get to know them a little better! Below is a bit about Beth, and on the next page is a profile she wrote about one of our amazing members.

— *Robin Matross Helms*

Beth Merga

Membership Services Associate

ACCT tenure: 1 year and 4 months

What she does: My role includes supporting member engagement, maintaining our member data, and coordinating our annual awards program.

Where you’ll see her: You will see me at our Award Gala directing regional award winners to their seats.

When she’s off the clock: I enjoy reading, watching docuseries, and sightseeing with friends. A fun fact about me is that I collect souvenir magnets from places I visit :)

Favorite ACCT member moment: I communicate via email with a lot of our members, so it’s always a delight to match emails to faces at our conferences.



Reshaping Lives: Chair Jeanette Peña of Hudson County Community College Reflects on Board Winning ACCT's Inaugural Impact and Success Award

BY BETH MERGA

Hudson County Community College (HCCC) in Hudson County, New Jersey, showcases what is possible when a governing board leads with a deep understanding of its students and the barriers they face. This commitment was recognized this past October at the 2025 ACCT Congress, when the college received ACCT's inaugural Impact and Success Award. This award honors a board that strengthens college enrollment and completion rates, expands basic needs support, and creates opportunities for adult and noncredit learners. To offer a closer look at the work being done by our winning board, I interviewed current Board Chair Jeanette Peña. After learning more about HCCC, it became clear its success stems from a leadership style that views education as a force capable of reshaping lives. Chair Peña's reflections highlight a board grounded in community insight and guided by policy choices that expand opportunity. Hudson County Community College cultivates an environment where students are not only welcomed but empowered to thrive.

"You could do anything with education; it doesn't matter what your background is... you can do anything that you want to do," Peña told me. This captures the true spirit of the Impact and Success Award, which is to celebrate those committed to improving the student experience no matter where a student begins. Her words articulate the carefully crafted partnerships and programs offered by the college. Among others, these partnerships range from apprenticeships and healthcare clinical placements to reentry education and the Justice-Involved Undergraduate Success and Training (JUSTice) Program for incarcerated learners. Furthermore, 90% of students are eligible for financial aid, and about half are first-generation college students. To support the success of students, HCCC has created the nationally recognized Hudson Scholars

Program, a three-part model that combines proactive advising, financial stipends, and early academic intervention. Through a range of initiatives tailored towards the demographics of its community, HCCC demonstrates its dedication to opening meaningful pathways for students and supporting them on their journey.

This commitment to opening meaningful pathways is seen in moments shared directly with the board. At HCCC board meetings, after agenda items are completed, President Christopher Reber introduces the meeting's "Special Event." This dedicated time gives members of the community an opportunity to share a presentation with the board. Chair Peña recalled one presentation that touched her: "We had JUSTice involved individuals who completed a welding program, and one gentleman that spoke. I don't think there was a dry eye in the room." This young man had received his welding certification and secured a job. On the stage, he spoke to his late mother and said, "You'd be so proud." Chair Peña echoed that same sentiment, sharing, "This is our mission. That is our job... that young man was able to turn his life around."

HCCC's board prides itself on supporting policies that "break down barriers and help more students cross the finish line." Chair Peña joked that students always show up to board meetings, but in truth, their enthusiasm illustrates the welcoming and supportive environment HCCC creates.

While students' stories highlight individual transformation, they also point to a broader reality that many, especially adult learners, face complex barriers that require support. HCCC serves a large population of adult learners and strives to improve their economic mobility by expanding credit for prior learning options, growing noncredit and workforce programs, and re-engaging those who previously stopped out. To further bolster retention, the college

addresses basic needs challenges through the Hudson Helps Resource Center. This center has provided more than 25,000 meals since the pandemic and offers mental health services, social work support, Chromebook lending, and a career clothing closet. HCCC also partners with New Jersey City University (NJCU) to offer affordable preschool and drop-in childcare through NJCU's Children's Learning Center. Programs like this emphasize the belief that adult learners deserve the same opportunity to succeed as any traditional student. Together, the support systems establish the conditions adult learners need to balance school, work, and family.

Chair Peña shared so many remarkable initiatives happening at the college, far more than I could capture here, but there was one moment I want to end on. As we bonded over our shared experiences as first-generation college students, she passed along a piece of wisdom from her grandmother: "Motivation is always fleeting. You need to have discipline." This shared wisdom speaks to the intentional and steady leadership she brings to her role. The same sense of discipline and care is evident across her board, whose decisions prioritize student needs. HCCC's motto is, "Hudson is Home," and that motto serves as more than a slogan. It is an ethic that shapes the college's culture and purpose.



Beth Merga is ACCT's membership services associate. Robin Matross Helms is ACCT's vice president for membership and educational services.

