

2009



COMMUNITY COLLEGE
NATIONAL
LEGISLATIVE SUMMIT

Community college leaders gathered in Washington for the National Legislative Summit at a time unlike any other in recent history.



Crises

& Challenge

BY MARK TONER



Talk about timing.

AS NEARLY 1,000 COMMUNITY COLLEGE LEADERS gathered in Washington for the Community College National Legislative Summit in early February, the fate of the \$787 billion economic stimulus package hung in the balance on Capitol Hill. At stake was not only billions of dollars in direct aid for community colleges as enrollments continue to rise and dark clouds loom over state budgets, but also the opportunity to ensure that community colleges remain in the vanguard of workforce education and retraining.



Top Left: Scott Lilly, a senior fellow at the Center for American Progress, talked about “Pumping Life Back into the U.S. Economy” in Monday’s opening session.
Bottom Left: NLS participants engaged in the opening general session.
Right: U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan.

PHOTOS BY KEITH WELLER

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“Even though we’re in the midst of an economic crisis that’s been compared to the Great Depression, we have the opportunity to define the next 100 years of the community college movement [and] solidify our institutions as the drivers of economic prosperity,” said ACCT President and CEO J. Noah Brown. “What you accomplish here in the next few days will define our institutions for more than a generation.”

As the economy continues to move into uncharted territory, speakers urged summit attendees to make the case for community colleges helping lead the way back to prosperity. “We are at a critical economic time,” said ACCT Chair Arthur C. Anthonisen of Orange County Community College in New York. “Community colleges must and will be a major driving force in getting our nation, students, and companies back up and working.”

The ongoing efforts to build the bipartisan Community College Caucuses, which now boast 34 Senate and 187 House members, paid off. Caucus co-chair Rep. David Wu (D-Ore.) and Rep. Gwen Moore (D-Wis.) circulated a “Dear Colleague” letter among their peers, urging them to support higher Pell Grant amounts and language giving community colleges a more direct role in workforce training programs in the final legislation. Both items ultimately survived the tense negotiations between the House and the Senate (see sidebar, p. 13).

“We are a country that has always planned for a brighter future in its darkest days,” Wu said during a Capitol Hill reception for members of the bipartisan caucuses, noting that the nation’s first land grant colleges were founded during the Civil War. “This is not just a stimulus here and now, but an investment in the future.”



While much of the focus was on the stimulus package and accompanying budgetary challenges, summit speakers urged attendees to be mindful of ongoing student needs. “As we focus on shovel-ready, we also have to be student-ready,” said former West Virginia Gov. Bob Wise, president of the Alliance for Excellent Education. Wise urged community colleges to work more closely with K-12 educators to help reduce the number of high school dropouts. “In an information-based economy, you’re the Federal Reserve,” he said.

That’s an opinion shared by the incoming administration. U.S. Education Secretary Arne Duncan called the economic crisis “a perfect storm for reform” with the potential for “a historic realignment of education.”

“The silver lining is that we’re having a national conversation about economic security—that’s a great conversation to have,” Duncan said. Pledging to make the Education Department an “engine of reform” instead of one “focused on compliance,” Duncan added that “the president understands we must educate our way to a better economy.”

Likewise, Jared Bernstein, executive director of President Barack Obama’s middle-class task force (chaired by Vice President Joe Biden), called education “a glue factory to reconnect the standard of living to the growing economy,” adding that many key issues “are right in your wheelhouse.”

“A lot of people in this town talk about human investment — you are on the front lines of the battle for human investment,” added Scott Lilly, senior fellow of the Center for American Progress. “You need to come to Washington more often and talk to people who are making policy and decisions about how we invest in the future.”

At the same time, reminders of the stark challenges to come were everywhere. David Nixon, president of Monroe County Community College in Michigan, pointed out that the loss of

infrastructure funding in the stimulus package would impact a “shovel-ready” project for a career education center focusing on green technology. Other communities “don’t even have shovels,” another attendee quipped.

David Shreve, staff director of the National Council of State Legislatures, pointed out that state funding of higher education “is usually near to legislators’ hearts, so it’s often protected — but only for an instant, because it’s a big target.”

During 2002-04, the last major budget crisis for many legislatures, more than 30 states cut higher education budgets, according to Shreve. Since state budgets tend to lag the national economy, he warned that “we are going to be back in as bad of shape this year, next year, and probably the following year — at least. Things aren’t good, and they’re not going to be good for a couple of years.”

Ironically, changes in last year’s reauthorization of the Higher Education Act will likely limit budget increases when the economy does rebound, thanks to “maintenance of effort” (MOE) provisions requiring state lawmakers to benchmark funding against previous years. “Legislators aren’t dumb,” Shreve says. “They know if they ratchet up spending too much, they’ll be held accountable.” Even worse, when states flaunt MOE rules, they lose access to federal grants for needy students — another “perverse result,” as Shreve put it.

Jack Scott, chancellor of the California Community College System and a former state legislator, knows the challenges firsthand. The state’s community colleges had planned for 2 percent growth in student enrollment this academic year — and saw a surge of 10 percent when classes began in the fall.

“Despite the gloomy news, I still believe it is a very propitious, important time for community colleges,” he said. “A crisis is a terrible thing to waste. It’s a time when community colleges can prioritize, look closely at our mission, and offer the curriculum that is most relevant and serves people the best.”



Left to Right: Bob Schieffer, anchor and moderator of *Face the Nation*, was keynote speaker at Monday's general session luncheon. Bob Wise, president of the Alliance of Excellent Education and former Governor of West Virginia, explains how to make "Every Child a Graduate." NLS participants listen attentively to Bob Schieffer at Monday's luncheon. U.S. Rep. Judy Biggert (R-Ill.) speaks about advocacy on Tuesday morning. U.S. Rep. Adam Schiff (D-Calif.) speaks to the California delegation.

Stimulus Scorecard

At \$787 billion, the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009 — appropriately numbered H.R. 1 — reflects a compromise between House and Senate versions of the bill. ACCT started working on the bill in the fall, when the associations began preparing a stimulus proposal for the upcoming administration. Among the highlights:

Pell Grant Increases. The bill allocates \$17 billion over the next two fiscal years to increase the Pell Grant maximum by \$500, to \$5,350 for the upcoming academic year. Given the growing numbers of displaced workers enrolling at community colleges and the fact that 70 percent of Pell Grant recipients come from families making below \$20,000 a year, the grants also serve as a job training program.

State Fiscal Stabilization Fund. With \$53.6 billion allocated to help fill gaps left by state budget cuts, the final bill split the difference between the \$79 billion in the House version and the \$39 billion in the Senate version. While \$40 billion of that amount is allocated for K-12 education, community colleges will receive a share of the remaining funding. A separate allocation for infrastructure improvements was eliminated from the final bill, but

money from the fiscal stabilization fund can be used for facilities at public institutions. ACCT had argued that overall facility and renovation needs on community colleges exceed \$100 billion nationwide.

Job training and workforce development. Of the \$3.95 billion for job training, nearly \$3 billion supports Workforce Investment Act programs. The program includes \$500 million for job training projects in fields such as energy efficiency and renewable energy through the auspices of the Green Jobs Act, and \$250 million for training in the health care sector. Wording in the legislation also allows local Workforce Investment Boards to contract directly with community colleges and other institutions, as opposed to awarding grants to individual students — a move which will help community colleges recoup the full costs of such programs.

American Opportunity Tax Credit. Championed by then-candidate Obama on the campaign trail, the new tax credit covers up to \$2,500 per year for tuition and related expenses over two years. It replaces the existing Hope Scholarships.

Broadband Technology Opportunities. The \$200 million program allows community colleges and other

organizations to apply for grants to expand public computer centers and other technology, particularly in poor and rural areas.

College Work Study. \$200 million was allocated for the program.

Trade Adjustment Act. The law was extended to 2010, and included language allowing workers to use TAA benefits to pursue a college degree.

But the work is far from over. Debate over the stimulus package pushed annual budget deliberations back to March and April. With the \$410 billion omnibus bill for FY2009 released in late February, community colleges continued to make their voices heard on issues including Pell Grants, Community Based Job Training Grants, and the Perkins Career and Technical Education Program. The focus now turns to work on the FY2010 appropriation bills. To learn more, go to www.acct.org/advocacy and sign up for the "Latest Action in Washington E-Alerts."

"Advocacy is not just coming to Washington and saying hello to members of Congress," says ACCT Director of Public Policy Jee Hang Lee. "What you do today is a drop in the bucket. It's about continuing the conversation throughout the year."



Left to Right: U.S. Rep. J. Gresham Barrett (R-S.C.) meets with South Carolina delegates in his Capitol Hill office. U.S. Rep. Rick Larsen (D-Wash.) visits with Washington State delegates. U.S. Sen. Tom Harkin (D-Iowa) meets with Iowa delegation during NLS. U.S. Rep. Brad Miller (D-N.C.) with North Carolina delegates. U.S. Rep. Tom Petri (R-Wis.) with Wisconsin delegates. Jared Bernstein, executive director of President Barack Obama's middle-class task force.

On the Hill

Community college leaders make their case to Congress

WHEN LEADERS FROM OHIO'S 23 COMMUNITY colleges came calling on Sen. Sherrod Brown (D-Ohio) during the National Legislative Summit, they didn't have to talk about the value of their programs to the state's workforce.

Instead, they brought Todd Sollar, a Centerville, Ohio, resident who had worked at a General Motors plant for 11 years when he enrolled part time at Sinclair Community College in Dayton this fall. Shortly after he began classes, he was laid off, and the plant closed for good several months later. Thanks to support from the Workforce Investment Act and a dislocated workers program, he was able to continue pursuing a degree in robotics at Sinclair full-time.

Sollar found the prospect of going back to school daunting, but was encouraged by the growing number of older students like him. "We're not average students — we have houses, we have kids," he said. "Because we've been in the workforce, we have to take a lot of [remedial] classes. It's discouraging." But, Sollar said, "I had this really great life, and now I'm just trying to figure out how to get back into it."

Given the state of the economy, faces like Sollar's are becoming far more common in community colleges in Ohio and across the country. "Every time there's a layoff in Ohio, those individuals have to be trained again," a member of the delegation told William Jawando, Brown's legislative assistant. "If education is going to be the mainstream of what we do, please don't play games with our students."

Similar stories could be heard across Capitol Hill, as community college leaders from many states made their case for funding. In Rep. Sandy Levin's (D-Mich.) office, a delegation from Oakland Community College discussed a worker transition hotline the college launched in the fall after learning that Chrysler was planning yet another round of downsizing. At the same time it supports dislocated workers from struggling industries, OCC is also working to attract new kinds of business to the state, including efforts to "bring the movie industry to Michigan and have the trained workers to staff it," Chancellor Timothy Meyer said.

As delegations went from office to office, they heard updates on the status of the stimulus bill, which during their two days on Capitol Hill went to the Senate for a vote, followed by hastily convened conference negotiations. "We're all here on a mission to tell a story we believe in very deeply — how community colleges can make a difference in economic stimulus," Jack Scott, chancellor of the California Community College System, told his state's delegation.

One person who didn't need to be told was Rep. Adam Schiff (D-Calif.), who bemoaned the decision to strip infrastructure funds from the stimulus package. "Why school construction would be deemed less important than roads is beyond me," he told his state's delegation. "We're building a road to this country's future."

In talking with lawmakers, community college leaders asked them to retain language allowing local workforce investment boards to contract directly with community colleges. Other delegations brought regional impact studies to share with their lawmakers, as well as information about projects that are more than shovel-ready.



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In Washington state, a delegation from Green River Community College discussed a replacement classroom building which has remained in the planning stages for six years. “We have contract documents ready to go,” said President Richard Rutowski, adding the site could be cleared in less than six weeks if funds became available.

“It’s not just for us, it’s also for those companies we work with,” Lakeshore Technical College District Board Trustee John Lukas said in describing a similar project to Rep. Tom Petri (R-Wis.) “We don’t want to work with any more laid-off workers.”

One point reiterated from state to state is that even in the face of widespread layoffs, employers’ workforce needs remain strong. In Oregon, there are “currently hundreds of jobs in the region that don’t get filled,” Mary F.T. Spilde,

president of Lane Community College and AACC chair-elect, said during a meeting in Sen. Ron Wyden’s (D-Ore.) office. “Our concern is that our students will be getting Pell Grants and not have any classes to get into,” she added. “If they can’t get into classes, they can’t qualify for federal aid and will sit at home being unproductive. State stabilization funds are just critical.”

While voting on the stimulus package largely followed party lines, the continuing growth of the bipartisan Community College Caucuses, which now count 34 Senators and 187 Representatives among their ranks, shows that support for community colleges extends across the aisle. “Community colleges, more than any specific educational component in this country, are equipped to address these difficult economic times,” said Rep. Mike Castle (R-Del.)