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# As ACCT's new chair, Dr. Arthur C. Anthonisen stresses the importance of interconnectedness and a global perspective. For him, it's personal.

BY MARK TONER

IT'S A BRILLIANT FALL DAY IN BROOKLYN, AND ARTHUR C. ANTHONISEN is strolling along the Brooklyn Heights Promenade, looking across the East River at Lower Manhattan. As similar glass-and-steel towers have cropped up throughout the world, the skyline “could be anywhere,” Anthonisen says, and in a way, he’s absolutely right. The financial crisis that began amid those buildings on Wall Street has since spread across the country and the globe — a jarring reminder of how interdependent the world has become.

“We sneezed and the world caught a cold,” he says. Earlier that day, at ACCT’s 39<sup>th</sup> Annual Leadership Congress, Anthonisen had given his first speech as chair, urging his fellow trustees to focus on unity. “The world is becoming more interconnected,” he told trustees. “The faces that make up every community have become a veritable United Nations. We must focus on making all of our voices heard.”

A member of the Orange County (N.Y.) Community College Board of Trustees for two decades, Anthonisen is himself a case study in global connections, having served as the president of an international business trade association in his rural corner of upstate New York. A civil engineer by trade, he’s just as likely to discuss archeology, quantum physics, or a work-study model used by Danish community colleges. He holds a Ph.D. from prestigious Cornell University, yet he says he felt disconnected from academia until becoming a community college trustee in 1989. And he believes that the global economic crisis comes at a critical time for community colleges, which offer a distinctly American model that has begun to take root elsewhere in the world.

“The key to a successful community college is an informed board,” he says. “The role of community colleges is changing because of technology and globalization, and we as trustees have to change with it.”

The son of German immigrants, Anthonisen grew up speaking German and living in a couple of small rooms in the back of the family's delicatessen in Queens, which shared a block with a Russian barber shop and an Italian grocery store. "Germans, Poles, Russians — we all played together," he says. "We didn't know we were poor. We just didn't have much."

When he was 11, Anthonisen's parents sold the delicatessen and moved upstate to start a poultry farm in Orange County, where he would ultimately spend most of his adult life. But the New York native also has lived in California, Korea, and Canada, among other places. After earning a master's degree at Clarkson and working at the state's transportation and environmental conservation agencies, Anthonisen spent a year at McGill University in Montreal before transferring to Cornell University, where he earned his doctorate and published numerous works on the biological treatment of concentrated agricultural waste.

"I wanted to work on producing energy from methane obtained from organic wastes — but energy was too cheap at the time to justify the research," he says. Instead, he studied nitrification and its role in processing municipal, agricultural and industrial wastes, and his doctoral research remains frequently

cited to this day. (A Google search for his name returns innumerable results, ranging from community college issues to citation of his research in a paper called "Oxygen Transfer at High Solids Concentrations.")

But Anthonisen wasn't comfortable in the academic world, so he returned to Orange County as an environmental engineer, at first working with poultry farms on organic waste issues, then consulting on commercial and industrial projects and becoming involved in real estate development. Those projects earned him seats on community organizations, including the local chamber of commerce and economic development corporation — a role that ultimately would lead him back to academia at the community college level.

"I got involved in workforce development because without an educated workforce we couldn't attract businesses," he says. He was appointed to the Orange County Community College Board of Trustees in 1989, at a time when the school was developing a master plan for needed facilities and technology.

"I would like to think we are at the cutting edge, but the truth is that technology is changing so fast we need additional resources just to keep up with the high schools," he says.



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During his two decades as a trustee, Anthonisen is proudest of his role in “bringing the college into the 21st century” by helping guide OCCC through leadership and technology changes. Borrowing from his experience as a businessperson and his work with the National Federation of Independent Businesses, he became active in New York Community College Trustees (NYCCT), ultimately serving as the state association’s president.

“I’m an engineer — I want to design my projects based on facts,” Anthonisen says. “I’m trying to learn everything I can, from quantum physics to history and the Bible and how archeology and anthropology and evolution are all interconnected. The challenge is to make your brain work and learn differently.”

When it comes to higher education on a global scale, Anthonisen argues that other countries, by and large, face the same challenges as in the United States. “We want to impact industry and workforce development. They’re dealing with the exact same issues,” he says. “The people may look different, speak different languages, but they want the same thing — jobs, and to be educated.”

Having visited community colleges in Asia and Europe during his travels, Anthonisen likens the burgeoning movement elsewhere in the world to the postwar period in the U.S. that led to the G.I. Bill and the growth of the community college system. “Just as we made education accessible in the United States in the 1940s, this is now happening globally,” he says.

Many countries are adopting the community college model as a proven way of expanding access to education. Thailand opened its first community college in 2000 and now has nearly 20. In Denmark, Anthonisen visited a college in Sonderborg near the German border that focused on six-week partnerships with local businesses, during which faculty work with employees to develop business plans. If they succeed, the company “takes the product and uses it,” he says.

One of Anthonisen’s major goals as ACCT Chair is to bring “an awareness to our trustees that we are in a global economy.” Beyond the roiling financial crisis that’s currently top-of-mind, Anthonisen points to the growing numbers of highly trained engineers and other professionals turned out across the world as a sign of the need for America’s higher education system to remain competitive and produce more highly skilled workers. At the same time, he urges community colleges to find ways to enroll more international students, who typically pay out-of-state tuition and bring their buying power to local communities.

In return, “we can destroy certain negative myths about what America is by showing people exactly what an American community is,” he says.

When considering his role as ACCT Chair, Anthonisen thinks of his own mentors in New York’s community college system, David L. Mathis from Mohawk Valley Community College in Utica and Donald M. Mawhinney Jr., a founding trustee of Onondaga Community College in 1961. “Between the three of us, we will have 100 years of trusteeship,” he says. “There’s a certain continuity.”

For that reason, Anthonisen wants to provide the same kind of continuity to issues addressed by past ACCT chairs, including poverty, economic impact, and diversity. “Now is the time to unite these issues,” he told Congress attendees as he began his term. “Not because they are any less pressing, but because they are more interconnected.”

And he emphasizes the need to look at these issues with a global perspective. A task force has been created to identify and provide recommendations to the ACCT Board on appropriate ways for the association to engage in global education, public diplomacy, and cultural exchange. “We need to explore new cultures, new industries, and new technologies,” he says.

Community colleges are uniquely poised to do just that, according to Anthonisen, and in the process they can help their communities through the current economic crisis. “We are so involved in workforce development, we have the opportunity not only to train but also create new jobs — and perhaps change the way we live,” he says. “It’s a wake-up call, and as we absorb all of this, the answer is through education and retraining of people at all levels.”

Anthonisen urges community colleges to conduct annual studies to show the unique benefits they bring their localities. “It’s an opportunity for community colleges to be recognized for what they are in higher education and what they add to the local economy,” he says. “We’re lifelong learners. I’ve been around long enough to recognize we lived a different way in the 1940s and 1950s than we live today.”

Anthonisen will turn 70 midway through his tenure as ACCT Chair, which ends with the 40th Congress in San Francisco — the gateway to Asia. “It’s a perfect setting,” he says. But once his time as Chair is over, Anthonisen plans to continue his own lifelong search for knowledge — most likely picking up a new language in the process — “to be sure my brain keeps working.”