



THOMAS M. BENNETT KNOWS FIRSHTHAND THE CHALLENGES COMMUNITY COLLEGE STUDENTS FACE. THAT'S WHY THE NEW ACCT CHAIR BELIEVES SO STRONGLY IN HELPING THEM FIND THEIR WAY.

Bridging the GAP

BY MARK TONER

STANDING IN FRONT OF MORE THAN A THOUSAND community college leaders in San Francisco this fall, Thomas M. Bennett became the new ACCT Chair. But back home in Gibson City, Ill., he's still one of Jake's Boys.

About a dozen years ago, Bennett was among those recruited to play singing roles in a community production of *Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat*. The show's run ended, but for eight of its cast members, the music never stopped. Forming a group called Jake's Boys, Bennett, a baritone singer, recruited his daughter Megan to play piano during weekly practices. Focusing on old-time gospel numbers, Jake's Boys has since performed for groups ranging from 15 to 600 at churches and fairs across the Midwest. The group still meets every Wednesday evening to practice — except for several months in the spring and fall to accommodate the schedules of its members, who include farmers, a dentist, an engineer, a farming implement parts manager, and employees of the large insurance company where Bennett works as a professional development manager in the corporate IT department.

"It's a lot of fun," says Bennett. Soft-spoken and unassuming, he downplays his contribution to the ensemble. "I have more of a group voice," he says.

As the voice of community college trustees, however, Bennett has no such qualms about sending a strong message about the need to support students. "Community colleges are one of the keys to the future success of our country," Bennett says. "We need to find ways to make access easier, and to support students better."

“WE NEED TO IDENTIFY THOSE BENCHMARKS THAT REFLECT OUR MULTIPLE MISSIONS, PURPOSES, AND STUDENT GOALS, AND THAT DEMONSTRATE OUR SUCCESSES, OUR EFFECTIVENESS, AND OUR IMPACT ON OUR LOCAL COMMUNITIES, STATES, AND NATION.”

Valuing Education

Bennett likes to point out that he became a community college trustee after spotting an ad in a weekly newspaper in 1995, but education has always been a central part of his life, starting with his upbringing on a family farm in east central Illinois. The fourth of five children, Bennett’s mother taught in a one-room country schoolhouse, and “the expectation was that we were going to go to college somehow,” Bennett says — an expectation all five children lived up to. “By the time they got to me, I didn’t have a choice,” he jokes.

Bennett attended Eastern Illinois University, where he majored in education in anticipation of a career in the ministry. After graduating in 1978, he became a high school science teacher, assuming he’d teach for a few years before going on to seminary. Instead, he discovered a different calling while taking a handful of classes at Parkland College related to what he was teaching. His younger brother Doug had already attended Parkland, using what he’d learned there to help save the family farm when it fell on hard times in the late 1970s, an era during which many such farms faltered. “Doug talked to the bankers, put together a plan, and gained their confidence,” Bennett says. “Through a lot of hard work, creativity, and initiative, he made it work. He really is my hero.”

The classes Bennett took at Parkland were eye-opening, he says. “I learned about community colleges, which helped me develop an appreciation that turned into a love and then a passion for what they do,” he says.

First, Bennett would become a leader in other educational settings, serving on a local preschool board before becoming a member of Gibson City’s elected K-12 school board. In 1997, he helped establish the Gibson City-Melvin-Sibley Education Foundation, where he served as president for a decade, earning a nomination as an Illinois Education Association Friends and Advocates honoree. Bennett left teaching full-time to pursue a career as a corporate computer software developer and trainer, earning a second bachelor’s degree in applied computer science, an MBA, and ultimately a doctorate of business administration in the process.

Bennett returned to school while working full-time and raising his two children with his wife, Kathy, who taught high school business for 33 years. “I knew if I quit at the end of a semester, I would not go back,” he says. “I was fortunate in that I had a good support group, but that is often not the case.”

It was with that experience in mind that Bennett noticed an ad in the local newspaper soliciting candidates to fill a vacant spot on Parkland College’s board of trustees. One of seven candidates for the position, he was appointed to fill a partial term, and

almost immediately had to begin campaigning for that fall’s board elections. Bennett won, and has been reelected twice since.

“Like community colleges themselves, trusteeship is a truly American experience,” he says. “They truly are at the grassroots level of education.”

The Illinois Experience

In his 14 years as a trustee, Bennett has helped guide Parkland College through many of the same challenges as its counterparts around the nation. Located in the shadow of the University of Illinois in Champaign, Parkland draws students from the diverse college town as well as the more rural agricultural communities that surround it. “I’m very proud of how we’ve kept in touch with our local communities,” he says. “We continually work with representatives from the district to figure out the needs in IT and agriculture, and develop a network of relationships to provide the right training for the right folks at the right time.” At the same time, Parkland’s sizable community of students from around the world help the community “understand what it’s like to be in a global economy,” he says. “We’re very proud of our diversity.”

Bennett points to innovative programs developed to support Parkland’s wide-ranging student population, including the Center for Academic Success, which offers peer and faculty tutoring, a writing lab, study skills classes, and advisers to help students with academic and personal planning. Identified as one of eight model community college programs for student retention and success by the U.S. Department of Education’s Office of Vocational and Adult Education, Parkland’s CAS also earned ACCT’s 2009 Regional Equity Award. To support faculty, the school’s Center for Excellence in Teaching and Learning provides staff-guided professional development focused on the quality of instruction. Parkland was also a pioneer in offering online courses, which found an early advocate in Dr. Tom Ramage, then chair of the college’s distance and virtual learning department. Ramage would ultimately be named president in 2008, and Parkland remains the community college with the largest number of online offerings in Illinois.

Bennett points to the stability of his board and its support staff, including assistant to the president Nancy Willamon — Parkland’s seven trustees have more than 100 years of combined experience — and its unwavering support of such programs. “There’s a strong chemistry between our faculty, our students, and our administration,” he says. “As a board, we lead by example, and the things we do hopefully align with these [initiatives] and make our students stronger.”

After joining the Parkland board, Bennett was introduced to the Illinois Community College Trustee Association (ICCTA) by fellow board members who played active roles in the state organization.

Parkland trustee Jim Ayers encouraged him to become involved, and Bennett ultimately became president of ICCTA in 2005.

Elgin Community College trustee John Duffy has known Bennett since he first “arrived on the scene” at ICCTA. “His unassuming presence and his genuine leadership skills have been a constant positive force in making ICCTA what it is today,” Duffy says of his friend.

Ayers and Dave Maguire, another ICCTA stalwart, also introduced Bennett to ACCT in 1998. Meeting trustees from across the country, Bennett was struck by how his colleagues volunteer to “come on their own time to make a difference,” he says. “I got hooked.”

Finding a Focus

In selecting areas of focus for his tenure as ACCT Chair, Bennett looked back to his own experience returning to school for a second bachelor’s degree and two advanced degrees. “I had a job and a family and was trying to study for tests and reading the materials at night [with] a three-year-old on one foot and a five-year-old on the other,” he says. “I understand what community college students are going through, and the sacrifice it takes. It takes a serious commitment and support from others to finish. You can’t do it alone. We’ve got to help students overcome these barriers.”

To Bennett, that imperative extends to accountability, a concept that’s increasingly becoming the expectation in public policy circles — and which was the watchword of the San Francisco Congress at which he accepted the chair’s gavel (see story, p. 26). “We don’t want to be told by others how to measure our success, yet many people do just that,” he told attendees. “We need to identify those benchmarks that reflect our multiple missions, purposes, and student goals, and that demonstrate our successes, our effectiveness, and our impact on our local communities, states, and nation.”

Bennett also continues the theme of educating for global competence advanced by his predecessor, former ACCT Chair Arthur C. Anthonisen. Along with helping students prepare for an increasingly global economy, Bennett intends to work with international organizations to help share the U.S. community college model globally. “We have to develop that trust and understanding with the rest of the world,” he says.

His final area of focus, membership engagement, has its roots in strengthening ACCT’s state, territory, and province coordinator network. With 33 coordinators representing 32 member states and one territory, the volunteer network is critical in maintaining two-way communication among ACCT members, according to Bennett. “The better the communication, the stronger the ties between ACCT and its members can be,” he says.

Now a grandparent, Bennett relishes the time he spends with family — his daughter, son-in-law Phil, and Kelsey, “the world’s most beautiful granddaughter,” live nearby, while his son Andy works for a civil engineering firm in South Carolina — as well as his broader family of community college trustees in Illinois and around the country. Following his election to the office of ACCT Chair, ECC’s board passed a resolution of appreciation in Tom’s honor, crediting his “vision and thoughtful deliberation.”

“Tom listens, Tom deliberates, and only then acts,” Duffy says. “I am confident that his year as ACCT Chair will be positive and productive.”

