MAINTAINING THE MOMENTUM

AS THE 2016 ELECTIONS APPROACH, COMMUNITY COLLEGE LEADERS CONVERGED ON WASHINGTON TO ENSURE CONTINUED PROGRESS.

BY MARK TONER
SECOND LADY JILL BIDEN STUNNED ATTENDEES OF THE
2016 Community College National Legislative Summit when
she appeared unannounced at a session during the first day of
the annual gathering to show support for the College Promise
Campaign. But the ongoing support for community colleges by
lawmakers of all political persuasions is far from a surprise.

“It’s a remarkable time for the community college movement,”
ACCT President & CEO J. Noah Brown told the nearly 1,000
trustees, presidents, and other community college leaders who
attended the NLS. “We have many challenges, but we have
great opportunities.”

This year’s NLS served as a bookend to the unprecedented focus
on community colleges throughout the Obama Administration.
Seven years ago, community college leaders converged on
Washington in the midst of deliberations over the then-new
president’s $787 billion economic stimulus package, which
represented the beginning of billions of dollars of support for
the community college sector as the president made increasing
the number of Americans with postsecondary credentials a
national priority. This year, Biden crashed the NLS session on
America’s College Promise to stress the importance of making
community college free for all — a priority that is already evolving
and expanding beyond the specific legislation proposed by
the president.

“Right now it’s a dream, but it’s got to become a reality,” Biden
told attendees.

Looking ahead, community college leaders face the challenge
of ensuring that the unprecedented focus of the past eight years
continues, particularly as the Higher Education Act and other key
legislation edge closer to reauthorization.

“Over the past year, we made a lot of progress,” said ACCT
Chair Roberto Zárate, a trustee at Alamo Colleges in Texas. “Key
policy decisions are being made as we gather… all of us must
use our voices to keep our elected officials focused on the issues
that affect our institutions and our students.”

Beyond the Promise
A year after President Obama first announced the America’s
College Promise initiative, momentum is growing at the local,
state, and national levels, speakers told community college
leaders attending the NLS.

Ranging from statewide initiatives to local and regional
partnerships, more than 140 college promise programs are now
in place across the country — a number expected to surpass
200 by year’s end, Martha J. Kanter, former U.S. Under Secretary
of Education and director of the bipartisan College Promise
Campaign, told attendees.

At least three states have passed promise laws, which are also
under consideration in 10 other states. A national Heads Up
America campaign has garnered more than 110,000 signatures
in its efforts to build public awareness for the idea. The Obama
Administration’s budget proposal for the upcoming fiscal year,
released during the first day of the NLS, also makes funding
the program at the national level a priority, supported by bills
introduced in the House and the Senate.

“If people had said last year after the State of the Union
address that we would have made this much progress, no one
would believe it,” said Kyle Lierman, White House associate
director of public engagement. Lierman urged community college
leaders to take the lead in creating local programs that “show
the benefit” of making college free to a much broader range of students.

“You need to be the ones digging in and pushing this in your communities,” Leirman said. “That progress and momentum will provide the framework for state programs to be passed across the country, and eventually national programs.”

That’s exactly what’s happening in California, where a half dozen community college presidents have formed a leadership team focused on making college tuition-free, which was the case in the state by the 1980s. Doing so will require a combination of philanthropic efforts, changes to state grants, and local promise efforts such as the ones taking root across the state, said Helen Benjamin, chancellor of the Contra Costa Community College District.

ACCT’s Brown urged community college leaders to “depoliticize” the proposal.

“This is the biggest opportunity we have had since the Truman Commission report in 1947, which paved the way for the development of the modern community college movement,” Brown said. “It is our job to… make people understand that we will not get to the 21st century in this country unless we go beyond the free high school movement that began the 20th century.”

While America’s College Promise carries a price tag between $60 and $90 billion, the original GI Bill cost roughly $190 billion in today’s dollars, according to Brown. “Don’t let anyone tell you we can’t afford it,” he said.

The bills supporting America’s College Promise introduced in the House and the Senate, while unlikely to become law in the near-term, serve as a “specific vehicle to talk about tuition-free community college on Capitol Hill,” said Jim Hermes, associate vice president of government relations for AACC.

“It’s a long-range effort by everyone’s estimates,” Hermes added. “It’s also a dual-track effort. While we’re focused here on the federal legislative aspect, there’s a lot of effort and initiative at the state and local levels.”

The Priorities

NLS attendees were briefed by ACCT and AACC staffers on other key legislative priorities for the year. “Having you here in Washington, D.C., advocating on behalf of your institution and your students is crucial,” Jee Hang Lee, ACCT vice president for public policy and external relations, told attendees.

Last October’s funding crisis resulted in an unanticipated increase in spending caps — and significant funding increases for a number of community college programs, including workforce development, Hispanic-serving institutions, adult basic education (ABE), and TRIO. With only small overall increases in nondiscretionary funding projected for FY17, the challenge for community college advocates is to call on lawmakers to preserve and build on that foundation, particularly in programs such as ABE and CTE which are still rebounding from earlier cuts.

The Pell Grant program, which serves 3 million community college students, topped the list of legislative priorities. A priority has been ensuring that excess funds from current surpluses are not diverted to other programs — something staved off in the FY16 budget, according to Jennifer Stiddard, ACCT’s director of government relations. Progress has been made in restoring Pell for ability to benefit (ATB) students, although work remains to be done to restore year-round Pell grants. “We need to reinforce that
community college students need flexibility — they have a lot of responsibilities in their lives,” Stiddard said. “They need to be able to go year-round, and this will help them do so.” To keep students from running out of funding after they transfer to four-year institutions, it’s also important to extend the maximum number of full-time semesters to from 12 to 14, she added.

With the K-12 focused Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) reauthorized in 2015 after lengthy delays, the legislative attention now shifts to the Higher Education Act (HEA), although it’s unlikely that reauthorization will be completed this year. “It’s important to go to offices and talk about our priorities in this area because the work they’re doing now will inform the next Congress when they are likely to get the reauthorization done,” said David Baime, AACC senior vice president for government relations and policy.

Democrats and Republicans remain far apart in their approach to the law, with Republicans focused on streamlining and simplifying programs and Democrats emphasizing affordability, addressing student debt, and encouraging increased state support, according to Baime.

Priorities for community colleges include ensuring that proposed rules involving student loans, including “risk-sharing” penalties for colleges with high default rates, take into account the unique populations community colleges serve. “The prospect of risk-sharing is very real,” Hermes cautioned, urging NLS attendees to communicate to lawmakers that the concept is in reality a “default tax” that disadvantages community colleges.

Other legislative priorities for community colleges include reauthorization of the CTE-supporting Perkins Act and tax provisions such as the American Opportunity Tax Credit (AOTC) and community college partnership tax credit. Other NLS speakers urged community college leaders to continue stressing the value of their institutions in their communities.

“You want to talk about value, and the best return on the dollar is a community college education,” said MSNBC political analyst Steve Schmidt, who led a roundtable with Washington Post columnist Eugene Robinson. “Emphasize vocational development and economic development.”

The Challenge

The recent momentum behind community colleges goes against the grain of the ongoing shift of higher education from public good to private responsibility. Washington Post columnist Catherine Rampell cited the demonstrated spillover effects of college attainment — it increases wages for all workers, it promotes economic mobility, and it reduces the need for other government services. In fact, the post-World War II GI Bill returned $6.90 for every dollar invested, she said. Since then, however, each economic downturn has led to ongoing declines in public support for higher ed.

“In every recession, state legislatures hack away funding for public institutions — temporarily, they say,” Rampell said. “But when the economy improves, they’re often loath to improve funding.” The result has been a “stepladder pattern,” in which state support rebounds to lower levels than the pre-recession peak each time. “All the while, enrollment is increasing,” Rampell said. “Public colleges have gone from state-funded to state-supported to just state-located.”

Even with tuition hikes, the numbers are daunting. According to the College Board, state appropriations per student fell by
$1,500, on average, following the Great Recession while tuition increased by $700 — an average $800 net loss per student. The results include larger classes, greater use of adjuncts, and deferred maintenance and construction projects, Rampell said.

“Students are paying more and getting a bit less for their money at a time when getting a degree is more important to a middle-class job than ever before,” Rampell said. The cash crunch also makes it more difficult for colleges to provide the kinds of support students need to persist and complete, she added.

The challenges are clear, but so are the needs. At a reception held on Capitol Hill, Zárate recognized the student trustees that were part of the delegations visiting lawmakers. “This is the reason you are advocating,” he said, pointing to the student trustees. “They have cemented why we are here.”

The ‘Capstone Year’

Bringing the NLS to a close, U.S. Secretary of Education John B. King Jr. outlined the Obama Administration’s priorities for its final year.

“As we move into…this capstone year of our work in education, we are as committed as ever that education can be the driver of opportunity in this country,” King told NLS attendees.

King, who was awaiting confirmation at the time of NLS, was accompanied by Under Secretary Ted Mitchell and Deputy Assistant Secretary for Community Colleges Mark Matsui. He said the department would focus on equity and excellence, “lifting up educators” at all levels, and a continued focus on access, affordability, and completion.

“We all understand that access and affordability alone aren’t enough,” King told attendees. “It’s not about getting to college, but through college and to a meaningful degree that creates opportunity in the 21st century.”

King spoke of the department’s emphasis on innovation over the past seven years, highlighting efforts to encourage short-term training, competency-based education, dual enrollment for high school students, and experimental work with “second-chance Pell,” which gives inmates the opportunity to receive financial aid for education in preparation for their return to society. King called second-chance Pell “an important statement not only about higher education, but also about our values as a community.”

King also pointed to President Obama’s budget proposal — released as the NLS began — which includes funding for the America’s College Promise initiative, the reinstatement of year-round Pell Grants, “on-track” bonuses for students enrolled in 15 credits or more, the reintroduction of the $100 million First in the World innovation grant as well as a similar program for minority-serving institutions, a $3.5 billion grant program for workforce development, and $2 billion for programs focused on disconnected youth.

The proposals, King said, all have “the same focus on the same north star goal that the president set out at the start of the administration, which is to ensure we are the first in the world in college graduation… To get back to first will require an all-hands-on-deck strategy, and it will require strong partnerships btw K-12, the community college system, four-year colleges and employers.”

It will also require ongoing advocacy to ensure the emphasis doesn’t shift as this “capstone year” comes to a close. “The spotlight on our sector must remain in place and must remain shining brightly now and in the future,” Brown said.