For several years, Bakari G. Lee walked along the campus of Hudson County Community College in Jersey City, New Jersey, every day on his way to work. But it was a chance connection with a client that ultimately led the public finance attorney to join the college’s governing board — at first, as a “quiet trustee,” but soon as a state and national leader, culminating last fall in his appointment as ACCT’s 2017 chair.

“Our mission is to ensure affordable, universal higher education for all,” Lee said after taking the gavel at the 2016 ACCT Leadership Congress in New Orleans in October. “My goal as your chair is to promote service to our country through the improvement of our nation’s community colleges.”
Lee credits his emphasis on service to his family, who raised him in suburban New Jersey. His parents — both educators — were heavily involved in the social justice movement of the 1960s and 1970s. His father, a director of guidance for a K-12 system, helped to assimilate incarcerated men back into society upon their release. His mother, a registered nurse who taught in nursing programs, remains actively involved in community service.

“That social action ethic was very much part of my upbringing,” says Lee. In fact, it inspired his name — which is Swahili for “Of Noble Promise,” based on a play about an African warrior who learned compassion and became king.

“I am the son of a man and a woman who believed in the dignity of my people,” Lee said during the 2016 ACCT Leadership Congress. “They bestowed upon me a sense of purpose and responsibility I carry with me every day.”

Equally importantly, Lee's parents bestowed another expectation on their only child. “They instilled in me at an early age that I would go to college,” he says. “It was as easy a decision to me as going from elementary school to middle school or high school. My upbringing was such that the table was set for me to be successful.”

Lee received a scholarship to Florida A&M University, where he majored in business and participated in a finance internship with Pfizer that would lead to a full-time job — and, ultimately, to law school at Rutgers University. Following a clerkship on the Virgin Islands, Lee became an attorney with McManimon, Scotland & Baumann, LLC, in 2003. With an emphasis on public finance, he has served as a bond counsel to state, county, and local governments, as well as focusing on affordable housing transactions and related programs involving public housing and redevelopment. In 2010, Lee became a limited partner of the Hudson County Community College board in 2006 at the behest of one of his firm's clients. Inspired by attending the institution's graduation ceremonies immediately after joining the board, Lee nonetheless found himself trying to understand his governance role.

“I was very quiet early on, trying to make heads or tails of what a trustee does,” Lee says. “I wasn’t offered any formal orientation.” But Lee didn’t stay quiet for long, his desire to become a more effective trustee leading him to the New Jersey Council of County Colleges (NJCCC) and ACCT. As Lee attended training and conferences offered by both organizations, “the clouds began to blow away,” he says. He currently serves as vice chair of the HCCC board, and he also has chaired its finance committee and served on its capital project advisory committee.

Lee points to the creation of a nationally ranked culinary arts center and a new, state-of-the-art library — recognized as the best of its kind in the nation — as highlights of his board tenure at HCCC. During his time on the board, HCCC opened a new campus in Union City, providing new opportunities for residents in the northern part of the county. Graduation rates have steadily increased, and HCCC and its leaders and board staff have been recognized at the state, regional, and national level, including for equity.

“We are now a college of choice,” Lee says proudly. Given his background in public finance and redevelopment, Lee is particularly proud of the college's role as the anchor of the Journal Square area of Jersey City, where he lives and which currently is undergoing significant revitalization.

“The college was always there, and it has been the anchor of a neighborhood that is dramatically turning around,” he says.

Based on his experience as a new trustee, Lee emphasizes the importance of trustee training. “It's like being placed in a pitch-
“We had unprecedented focus during the last eight years, particularly with Jill Biden being a public figure,” he says about the former Second Lady and career-long community college professor and advocate. It’s an important time in our history to keep community colleges prominent and not lose any of the ground we’ve gained over the past eight years.”

black room,” he says — you learn to navigate, “you learn the language over time.”

Lee also found friends and mentors in NJCCC and ACCT who encouraged him to take on leadership roles with both organizations, including outgoing ACCT Chair Roberto Zárate, who joined the ACCT Board of Directors at the same time as Lee.

Over the years, Lee took on progressively greater leadership roles at NJCCC, ultimately serving as chair from 2011-2014; he remains on the Council’s executive committee and serves as a trustee ambassador. Encouraged to run for the ACCT Board of Directors by a fellow Garden State trustee, Lee applied his public finance experience to his responsibilities with the association, culminating with his election as secretary-treasurer in 2013.

Much as mentorship helped him navigate his local board, Lee stresses the importance of making connections in trustee organizations. “When you first come to the ACCT Congress and there are 1,500 or 1,800 people and you’re there without any other members from your board…it was really pivotal for these folks to take me in and give me more exposure,” he says.

A quiet trustee no longer, Lee remains his board’s trustee liaison for commencement, and he has also been invited to give commencement addresses at several of the state’s other community colleges. During a commencement speech at Atlantic Cape Community College, Lee quoted a speech by Theodore Roosevelt that talked about the importance of being “the Man in the Arena.” It is better to occasionally fail than to be “a cold and timid soul who knows neither victory nor defeat,” Lee said, quoting the former president. Lee is also scheduled to deliver the commencement address at the Warren County Community College graduation ceremony this year.

As he prepared to take the gavel as ACCT Chair during the 2016 Leadership Congress in New Orleans, Lee had already decided to focus on at-risk students as one of his priorities. But attending the Symposium on Completion immediately before the Congress and hearing presentations on the challenges faced by minority males and single mothers who attend community colleges (see p. 10) provided a new sense of urgency to his platform as Chair.

“Sometimes you hear something that’s always had value to you but hasn’t completely been articulated,” he says.

To that end, Lee intends to help institutions better serve these at-risk populations of students. “I intend for our association to focus on bettering their community college experience and improving their success rates,” he says. “My desire and intent is for ACCT to provide a repository of information and best practices that community colleges have used to help institutions focus and provide better programs to serve at-risk groups.”

Lee also intends to spend considerable time helping ACCT ensure that there is a continued emphasis on community colleges as the solution to the nation’s higher education and workforce challenges.

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An avid boxing fan, Lee often shares a favorite quote from Muhammad Ali in speeches and presentations: “service to others is the rent you pay for your room here on earth.” For Lee, that means community college trustees must “commit to continue the agenda to promote student success, devotion, equity, and universal access.”

“I know I’m preaching to the choir,” he says, “but that quote really fits the ethics of those of us who serve.”