

# O & A

## A CHANGING LANDSCAPE

2022 ACCT Leadership Congress speakers discuss challenges and opportunities for community colleges, their leaders, and their students.

**T**HIS OCTOBER, MORE THAN 1,700 COMMUNITY COLLEGE leaders will gather in New York City for the 2022 ACCT Leadership Congress. The number of attendees marks a return to pre-pandemic participation, as college board members, CEOs, and others are eager to share ideas and discover new ways to address new challenges.

Before the event, we asked our keynote speakers to apply their expertise to some pressing questions.

## Higher Education Accreditors



**JO ALICE BLONDIN, Ph.D.**

### **What should board members be prepared to know and do during an accreditation process?**

First and foremost, boards need to assure they are kept informed by their CEOs of key accreditation timelines and issues that impact the college. It is absolutely critical that board members can articulate the importance of accreditation to all stakeholders: students, community members,

legislators, and faculty and staff at the institution. A commitment to the quality assurance process should start at the top of the organization, and the board plays an important role in carrying out the mission of the institution, developing and approving policies, and discussing and strategizing around the institution's student success measures and data.

### **What do you believe are the most pressing accreditation-related concerns faced by community colleges in your region?**

HLC has convened a number of thought leaders around two areas of institutional transparency that are key to community colleges: A "Student's Right to Know" guide that assists students and families in asking questions about the institutions' programs, financial aid, cost, transfer, discipline-specific accreditations, and other factors that should prepare a student for a successful postsecondary experience; and secondly, exploring the accreditor's role in the diverse landscape of credentials: certificates, badges, degrees, as well as the growth of non-degree credentials and the importance of a systematic approach to pathways, data, and integrated assessment.

### **What do you believe community college boards should be focusing their efforts on right now to ensure the well-being of their institutions in the coming years?**

It goes without saying that the financial health of the institution is paramount, but the board should work collectively to ensure that the institution is making strategic investments in student success. Another important focus for boards and presidents revolves around "student intent," or trying to capture and respond to a student's intended goal in attending community college. For example, not every student attends

full-time, nor is every student actually seeking a degree — and many of our students take non-credit programs. Many are reskilling or upskilling, and we have seen an increasing number of students who attend community colleges who have already attained a bachelor's or a master's degree. Board members should be asking the question, "Did the students meet their intended goals?" rather than measuring ourselves based solely on first-time, full-time data, which is a small percentage of our students.

*Jo Alice Blondin, Ph.D., has served as president of Clark State Community College since 2013. Prior to Clark State, Blondin served as Chancellor of Arkansas Tech University – Ozark Campus and Professor of English for seven years, as well as Chief Academic Officer, Chief Student Officer, Department Chair of English, Communication, and Social Sciences, and Instructor of English. Blondin is board chair of the Higher Learning Commission, and serves on the boards of the National Council for Workforce Education, the American Health Association COVID Vaccine Task Force, and Association of Community College Trustees Advisory Committee. She holds a Ph.D. in English from Arizona State University; Master of Arts in English from Arizona State University; and Bachelor of Arts from Purdue University, majoring in English with a minor in Spanish.*



**HEATHER F. PERFETTI, J.D., Ed.D.**

### **What should board members be prepared to know and do during an accreditation process?**

Board members should understand the accreditation review cycle for institutions, which spans across eight years for the Middle States Commission on Higher Education (MSCHE). This is a time for institutions to leverage honest self-

reflection and assess how well the institution is achieving its mission and goals. Board members should understand the expectations across all *Standards for Accreditation and Requirements of Affiliation* held by the Commission, but often we refer specifically to MSCHE's Standard VII on Governance, Leadership, and Administration as well as our requirements of affiliation that speak to board governance, which includes expectations for ensuring fiscal responsibility, disclosures, conflict of interest policy, quality and integrity of the institution, and mission achievement. Given the vital role of boards in exercising their oversight and fiduciary responsibilities, boards need to hold an understanding of the institutional data that inform and support board governance and decision-making, and how the work of the board lends to the accreditation process. Boards should look to their chief executive officer as having the authority and autonomy to direct the institution; however, boards remain responsible for balancing their oversight and fiduciary responsibilities with ensuring that neither the governing

The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated the challenges facing not just community colleges but the entire higher education community. Shifting student demographics, the movement towards more distance education and flexibility for student learners, changing expectations to meet more diverse student needs, and the overall financial health of institutions are among the pressing concerns impacting institutions.

—Heather F. Perfetti

body nor its individual members interfere in the day-to-day operations of the institution. Board members are expected to be engaged in the accreditation activities of the institution, as they have opportunities to contribute to the process as well as meet with peer evaluators at the time of the self-study visit.

**What do you believe are the most pressing accreditation-related concerns faced by community colleges in your region?**

The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated the challenges facing not just community colleges but the entire higher education community. Shifting student demographics, the movement towards more distance education and flexibility for student learners, changing expectations to meet more diverse student needs, and the overall financial health of institutions are among the pressing concerns impacting institutions. From an accreditation perspective, the changing regulatory environment reaches our institutions through MSCHE. Our staff works directly with our community colleges to ensure that institutional representatives understand those changes and how best to manage them, in particular with regulatory changes in areas of substantive change and pending shifts to prison education programs which are heavily supported by community colleges.

**What do you believe community college boards should be focusing their efforts on right now to ensure the well-being of their institutions in the coming years?**

MSCHE believes community college boards should be focusing efforts on the institution's mission and students, and leveraging accreditation practices to ensure constituents are being served well. This requires the intentional examination of data that speaks to institutional performance and the evaluation of mission-critical activities; ensuring quality in the student learning experience and evaluating the impact of services on students; adopting and assessing institutional policies and procedures; creating or enhancing opportunities to partner with other institutions for the benefit of students; ensuring appropriate financial modeling through realistic enrollment projections; and succession planning, as needed, for stability of the institution. Boards should be driven by the institutional mission in its decision-making and facing the realities of what may impact

the institution in the short- and long-term is critical for boards to position institutions for success.

*Heather F. Perfetti, Ed.D., J.D., became President of the Middle States Commission on Higher Education on July 1, 2020. She joined the Commission as a Vice President liaison to institutions in January 2015, served as Vice President for Legal Affairs and Chief of Staff in July 2017, and was then elevated to Senior Vice President in July 2018. Dr. Perfetti earned her Doctor of Education degree with specialization in Higher Education Leadership from Northcentral University (CA), the Juris Doctor degree from the University of Mississippi School of Law, the Master of Science degree in Criminal Justice from Troy University (AL), and a Bachelor of Arts degree in English from Frostburg State University (MD).*



**SONNY RAMASWAMY, Ph.D.**

**What should board members be prepared to know and do during an accreditation process?**

From my perspective, board members — elected, selected, or appointed — need to be deeply knowledgeable and conversant about higher education and accreditation. In addition, board members need to be fully engaged with the accreditation status and academic particulars of their institution.

The Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities' (NWCCU) Standards for Accreditation and Eligibility Requirements clearly identify the critical role governing boards play in ensuring the quality and integrity of the institution. Therefore, we have an expectation that our member institutions not only keep their board members informed, but also engage them in the accreditation process, including during the development of the institutional self-study, active engagement during the peer evaluation visit, participating in the exit report, appearances at the NWCCU Commission Meetings, being recipients of letters of action, and the post-visit actions on campus. Our peer evaluation teams meet with and ask probing questions of board members to determine their awareness of the institution's

mission, student success and closing equity gaps, governance, oversight of institutional leadership, budgets, expenditures, fundraising, and other relevant information. Similarly, during appearances, the NWCCU Board of Commissioners may engage board members in questions and discussions.

**What do you believe are the most pressing accreditation-related concerns faced by community colleges in your region?**

Community colleges have a critical role to play in meeting America's need for an educated and skilled workforce and an informed populace that is engaged in and supports the civic well-being of the communities in which they live and work.

The most pressing, existential threat impacting community colleges includes declining enrollment and the concomitant impact on budgets — it's a slippery slope: the declining enrollments result in declining resources, which then contribute to further declines in staff and services that contribute to declining enrollments and budgets, ad infinitum. Additional threats include competition from private/for-profit/predatory institutions that may or may not be accredited.

Potentially exacerbating the existential threat noted above are public and political skepticism, which are making higher education as a public good a hard sell.

From my perspective, the above situation with skepticism, declining enrollments, competition, and the concomitant fallout is the result of our institutions often failing to provide a compelling value proposition — i.e., of student success and closing equity gaps — by promoting ways to enhance graduation rates while reducing the cost of education.

Community colleges need to establish and achieve clearly defined, appropriate, and locally relevant educational objectives. This can come about by the development and application of effective, formative educational approaches, such as small class sizes and high impact practices, that contribute to tangible improvements in student performance and graduation or completion rates.

**What do you believe community college boards should be focusing their efforts on right now to ensure the well-being of their institutions in the coming years?**

As noted above, board members must take the time to know and understand higher education and accreditation, become fully engaged in the accreditation process, and set high expectations of their institutions for ensuring quality and integrity in achieving the mission, which is to promote the success of all students. Additionally, board members, being part of the community, can educate the public about the value of being an accredited institution.

*Sonny Ramaswamy currently serves as president of the Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities in Redmond, WA, which accredits institutions in Alaska, Idaho, Montana, Nevada, Oregon, Utah, Washington, and British Columbia. NWCCU focuses on supporting institutions to improve their student outcomes, while offering free space for innovations and experimentation on educational approaches. He served as dean of the College of Agricultural Sciences at Oregon State University, director of Purdue's Agricultural Research Programs, university distinguished professor and*

*head of entomology at Kansas State University, and professor of entomology at Mississippi State University. Ramaswamy's BSc (Agriculture) and MSc (Entomology) are from University of Agricultural Sciences, Bangalore, India; his PhD (Entomology) is from Rutgers University.*



**LAWRENCE SCHALL, J.D., Ed.D.**

**What should board members be prepared to know and do during an accreditation process?**

First, they should be briefed on the purposes of accreditation, that it represents a commitment to continuous improvement by the entire institution. They should understand and ensure that accreditation ought to be seen as an opportunity for the institution

to reflect on what it does well and as importantly, where there are opportunities to get better.

**What do you believe are the most pressing accreditation-related concerns faced by community colleges in your region?**

I would not say there are specific accreditation-related concerns that are substantially different from the challenges these colleges are facing, and those are many. There are severe demographic concerns, serious financial challenges to the funding model, concerns about equity, about retention and grad rates, and about the viability of sustaining a large number of standalone institutions (the consolidation movement is present in almost every one of our states).

**What do you believe community college boards should be focusing their efforts on right now to ensure the well-being of their institutions in the coming years?**

I'd focus on two areas: financial sustainability and student success. Those are certainly two areas that any accreditor will want to examine very deeply.

*Lawrence Schall, J.D., Ed.D., has served as president of the New England Commission of Higher Education since 2020. Previously, he served as President of Oglethorpe University in Atlanta, Georgia for 15 years. During his tenure, Schall led the transformation of Oglethorpe from an at-risk institution to a university boasting a doubled class size and rigorous spending safeguards, raised over one hundred million dollars, and secured a solid financial outlook for the institution. Schall currently serves on the Board of Spelman College, the highly ranked historically Black women's college also in Atlanta. Schall received his undergraduate degree from Swarthmore College and his J.D. and Ed.D from the University of Pennsylvania. After practicing law as a civil rights attorney in Philadelphia for a decade, he served as vice president of administration at Swarthmore for 15 years before assuming the presidency of Oglethorpe.*



**BELLE S. WHEELAN, Ph.D.**

**What should board members be prepared to know and do during an accreditation process?**

They should be familiar with the institution’s budget and strategic plan, know the difference between governance and administration, and be able to discuss the relationship between the board and the CEO.

**What do you believe are the most pressing accreditation-related concerns faced by community colleges in your region?**

The finances of an institution, qualifications of personnel — especially faculty — and identification and assessment of student learning outcomes.

**What do you believe community college boards should be focusing their efforts on right now to ensure the well-being of their institutions in the coming years?**

Completion rates of students, financing of the institution, and hiring the right CEO.

*Belle Wheelan, Ph.D., currently serves as president of the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges and is the first African American and the first woman to serve in this capacity. Her career spans over 40 years and includes the roles of faculty member, chief student services officer, campus provost, college president and Secretary of Education. In several of those roles she was the first African American and/or woman to serve in those capacities. Dr. Wheelan received her bachelor’s degree from Trinity University in Texas (1972) with a double major in psychology and sociology; her master’s from Louisiana State University (1974) in developmental educational psychology; and her doctorate from the University of Texas at Austin (1984) in educational administration with a special concentration in community college leadership.*



**DAISY GONZALES, Ph.D.**

**What should board members be prepared to know and do during an accreditation process?**

Board members have a primary role in the accreditation process. The governing board of an institution/district reviews the final report of the evaluation team and is ultimately responsible for ensuring that the college responds to the issues raised in the self-study, the recommendations of the

evaluation team, and the decisions of the accrediting body. How the board is engaged varies among institutions with different missions and needs,

but board members must have information and engage in dialogue about three key elements: 1) the history, purpose, and structure of accreditation, 2) board clarity on the connection between the institution’s mission, values, and resource allocations, and 3) the standards related to governing boards and the evidence to meet those standards. At the core of this dialogue is the board’s understanding of how student outcomes are a key measure of educational quality and at the center of the peer review process.

**What do you believe are the most pressing accreditation-related concerns faced by community colleges in your region?**

Currently, 115 out of 116 California Community Colleges are accredited by the Accrediting Commission for Community and Junior Colleges (ACCJC). ACCJC accredits institutions in the United States, its territories, and affiliates, with a primary mission of granting associate degrees. Two pressing accreditation-related concerns that ACCJC has been responsive to in our region are: 1) navigating the impacts of the pandemic and 2) the expansion of community colleges offering baccalaureate degrees. As higher education institutions navigate increased access to online education and re-opening, ACCJC has been a partner to ensure that regular and substantive contact with students is met and is a part of the institutions’ cycle of continuous improvement. Similarly, new legislation adopted in 2021 in California opened opportunities for all California Community Colleges to offer baccalaureate programs. ACCJC responded to this change by amending its institutional policies, engaging members, and ensuring that the addition of bachelor’s degrees are within the institution’s mission and authorized by their governmental authorities. These urgent partnerships between accreditors and institutions support higher education through a period of rapid transformation and strengthen the ability of institutions to advance educational quality and student learning and achievement.

**What do you believe community college boards should be focusing their efforts on right now to ensure the well-being of their institutions in the coming years?**

The impacts of this pandemic on higher education prove that we can respond rapidly and redesign in compressed timelines to ensure access to higher education. But to ensure that we remain relevant to local and state economies and the students we serve, we must continue to transform. Boards need to understand that the future of higher education requires structural transformations, not reforms. Our students want to experience a culture of belonging — where they feel safe, supported, and have the resources to succeed. In partnership with accrediting institutions, local communities and a diverse set of stakeholders, boards must engage in the future of higher education, which calls community colleges to advance institutional excellence and continuous improvement through innovation. Community college strategies like baccalaureate pathways, credit for prior learning, competency-based education, early college, and work-based learning are just the beginning. Alongside must be inquiry into historic structures that prevent community college students from achieving their dreams. Structures like remedial education sequences, the credit hour, academic years, fiscal formulas, and state/federal financial aid programs

should be a part of the institutional excellence and continuous improvement discussed by boards.

*Daisy Gonzales, Ph.D., serves as the interim chancellor of the California Community Colleges, the largest system of public higher education in the United States, and she serves as commissioner for the Accrediting Commission for Community and Junior Colleges. She leads the 116-community college system, which serves over 1.8 million students with a student-centered mindset and a goal of creating equitable and supportive ecosystems where students thrive. She is an experienced and unapologetic advocate for student success. Born into an immigrant family in Southern California and raised as a former foster youth, Gonzales was among the first in her family to attend college. She earned her bachelor's degree in public policy from Mills College and her master's and Ph.D. degrees in sociology from the University of California, Santa Barbara.*

## Community College Leader



**DANIEL J. PHELAN, Ph.D.**

**What do you believe are the most pressing accreditation-related concerns faced by community colleges nationally?**

The top three for me include: 1) remaining focused upon providing quality assurances of higher education institutions through the use of a well-trained, knowledgeable, effective, non-parochially-minded peer-review corps, as well as incorporating

relevant standards for accreditation; 2) facilitating the changing nature of accreditation resulting from notices of proposed rulemaking (NPRMs), board guidance, and experiences of the field; and finally, 3) adopting an innovative and future-focused approach to accreditation practice based upon an evolving higher education ecosystem.

**Your book, *The Community College Board 2.0: Covenant Governance*, was published last year. What is covenant governance, and how does version 2.0 of the community college board differ from the first model?**

Covenant Governance is not a new governance typology, but rather it is the means by which a board and their CEO make a deep and abiding commitment to each other, expressed, in part, through a selfless dedication to the service of others, a unified and dedicated board, and a long-serving CEO. The achievement of this optimized governance leadership practice is further realized through eight core research-based principles: 1) by looking to the future while committing as a board to the relentless discipline of process; 2) regular professional development as students of governance; 3) investment in the CEO and board relationship for the long-term; 4) relentlessly building and nurturing a high performance board culture; 5) demonstrating the discipline to remain in the governing role and not in an operational role; 6) clearly defining the board's true constituency; 7)

establishing a two-way, equally binding contract between the board and the CEO; and finally, 8) creating a new structure and process for the selection of the CEO.

**The book is described as “a fresh and comprehensive approach to both considering and implementing an effective governance practice that emphasizes a lasting, consequential, and sustaining relationship between the board and president.” If you had to distill the magic of an ideal college board and CEO relationship down to one or two practical ingredients, what would they be?**

Enduring trust in, and among, the board members, and with the CEO; and engaging fully in the selfless and honorable work that needs to be done, given to the love, care, and service of others.

*Daniel J. Phelan, Ph.D. has been president/CEO of Jackson College in Michigan since early 2001. He is the past chairman of the board of directors for the American Association of Community Colleges (AACC). Phelan is the author of *The Community College Board 2.0: Covenant Governance* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2021). He holds a Ph.D. in higher education administration from Iowa State University, an M.B.A. from St. Ambrose University, and both a B.A. in business administration and an A.A. degree in liberal arts from Mount St. Clare College.*

## Community College Alumnus



**TALA ALAHMAR**

**Congratulations on your recent graduation from Oakland Community College! What were the greatest challenges you faced when you were a student at Oakland? Was it worth all the hard work?**

I started attending Oakland Community College a month after arriving in the United States. It was difficult for me to adjust to a different higher education system. My first semester was hard, as I isolated myself from everyone, and the semester went by without making a single friend. It was hard building up my social circle from scratch, but student life made my experience so much better, giving me the best three years I could have asked for.

**You were born and raised in Syria and moved to the United States during the civil war. How did you feel coming here, and what were your expectations when you decided to pursue higher education in the U.S.? How did reality meet up with those expectations?**

I was very nervous about the move. After all, I was going to leave behind my family and friends and the place I grew up in and called home. I remember feeling overwhelmed, as I had to pick my classes each semester, unlike in Syria, where the classes are already picked for college students. I imagined walking into a big lecture hall and not being able to have conversations

Getting involved with student organizations was a life-changing experience. I was able to make new friends, get to know my administrators, and step outside my comfort zone.

—Tala Alahmar

with my professors. Luckily, my community college allowed me to develop strong relationships with them. When I started attending my community college, I had a stigma against them, thinking that I would be wasting my time. But if it weren't for that experience, I know I wouldn't have been able to grow and accomplish all the things that I have in the past few years.

**Many people have different impressions and experiences of student life at community colleges. What was your experience? Did you have many peers who were committed to academics and leadership the way you are, or how would you describe the campus environment?**

Getting involved with student organizations was a life-changing experience. I was able to make new friends, get to know my administrators, and step outside my comfort zone. There were days when I'd be on campus for 12 hours, and I wouldn't want to leave because I was having such a good time. I was involved with Student Government, the International Student Club, UptoUs, and Phi Theta Kappa Honor Society (PTK). Through PTK, I met many like-minded people who valued academics and fellowship. Being in such an environment made me even more determined to succeed in my classes and give my best effort. Before getting involved, I saw campus as very quiet and intimidating. However, immersing myself in student life made this place feel like a second home.

**You're still in the midst of your academic career, but you've accomplished a great deal already, including your service as the past international president of the Phi Theta Kappa Honor Society. What brought you to PTK in the first place, and how did you get involved in its leadership?**

I received my invitation to join PTK and ignored it, thinking it was a scam. I remember when I finally asked someone about it. I was at the Michigan Capitol building participating in Lobby Day with other community college students. During our lunch break, I received a final reminder to accept my invitation, and I remember asking my group if they were familiar with this organization. One of my friends' faces lit up as she raved about her experience and convinced me to join. She mentioned the benefit of making new friends, and that's when I knew I wanted to become a member. I went back home and paid my membership fees, then texted her asking about the next chapter meeting dates. I attended the next meeting and never missed one after. My first meeting, my chapter president asked if I wanted to run for an officer position, and I picked treasurer as I wasn't familiar with PTK's programs. I watched the work my chapter president did and shadowed her, knowing that I wanted to serve my chapter with the same passion she did. Then the following year,

I found myself running for both chapter and Michigan regional president and helping my friend campaign for international office. Watching her experience, I knew I wanted to try to campaign myself the following year, and I'm so glad I did. Serving an organization I love so dearly was such a rewarding experience that I wouldn't trade for anything.

**Another congratulations is in order — you've earned a Jack Kent Cooke Scholarship worth up to \$40,000 a year to complete your bachelor's degree at the University of Michigan! What are you studying, and do you have any idea what you might want to do once you complete your bachelor's degree?**

I'm an international studies major in my senior year. I want to work for the United Nations and get involved with nonprofit and humanitarian agencies to advocate for childhood education in countries experiencing war and conflict. Currently, I'm in the process of applying to graduate school, aiming to get both my master's and PhD in international relations and human rights.

**Higher education has been highly valued by most American people for well over a century — but recently, more and more people are questioning the value of going to college. If someone you knew expressed an interest in going to college but had doubts about affordability and the return on their investment, what would you say to them?**

Community college is a great way to start because it is more affordable than four-year universities, but it also offers the opportunity to apply to many different scholarships. What I like about community colleges is that they allow students the chance to explore their interests without getting indebted. I believe it's a great choice for everyone, even those interested in learning a skill or a trade.

*Tala Alahmar is an alumna of Oakland Community College in Michigan. She graduated in May of 2021 with her associate degree after having completed service to the Phi Theta Kappa Honor Society as the 2021-22 International President. During her time at OCC, Alahmar was involved with different student organizations such as UptoUs, the International Student Club, and student government. In 2021, Alahmar was awarded the Jack Kent Cooke Scholarship worth up to \$40,000 a year as she completes her bachelor's degree at the University of Michigan. Born and raised in Syria, Alahmar would have never imagined that in 2018, she would be pursuing her higher education in the USA. However, the Syrian civil war changed her reality and inspired her to pursue a degree in international studies, hoping to become an ambassador for the United Nations to advocate for childhood education in countries experiencing war and conflict.*