



OPENING DOORS

ACCT Chair David Mathis focuses on ensuring greater opportunities for all students.

BY MARK TONER

IT ALL STARTED WITH A PHONE CALL.

It was January 1977, and David Mathis was working for the Utica City School District when he got a call from the Oneida County Executive's office, asking him to fill an unexpired seat on the board of directors at Mohawk Valley Community College (MVCC), where he had graduated less than a decade before.

"I thought it was a great honor," he says, and with that, Mathis became the first person of color, the first alumnus, and the youngest person to serve on the board of the New York community college. For Mathis, many of these and other personal and professional firsts were the result of unexpected opportunities — he later learned he may have been appointed to the board as the result of disagreements among county leaders. Even so, he says, "you may not get appointed for the right reason, but you have an opportunity. That door was open. Sometimes you wind up at a place you never expected yourself to be."

Nearly a half-century later, Mathis remains on the MVCC board, having served multiple terms as its chair and vice chair. And as the nation faces a prolonged reckoning with racial injustice for the first time since he was a student, ACCT's new chair is emphasizing the importance of diversity, equity, and inclusion for boards to ensure the doors at their institutions are open for all students.

"I love what I've done, but that door had to be open with a college degree," he says.

When he graduated from high school in 1966, Mathis was already working in the mailroom of the local Bendix manufacturing plant and decided not to go on to college. However, he began taking courses at MVCC after the factory's professional staff encouraged him to take advantage of the company's tuition reimbursement program. "You don't want to spend your life working in the mailroom," one told him.

Two years after graduating from high school, Mathis opted to attend MVCC full-time, majoring in retail business management. That year was a tumultuous one in American history, with the assassinations of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and Bobby Kennedy and the subsequent civil unrest. "College students were taking over campuses, and students of color were demanding better treatment," he says. Against the backdrop of protests at colleges nationwide, MVCC students formed the college's first black student union (BSU). Mathis was elected its first president — because he was older than most of the other students, he says. "Now all these years later, that union is still meeting," he says. Equally importantly, his role organizing the BSU, including meeting with MVCC administrators, introduced



David Mathis has served on the ACCT Board of Directors for many years; pictured at right with former ACCT Chair Bakari Lee.

him to a new role. “I didn’t realize I had leadership qualities until that opportunity came,” Mathis says.

He graduated with an associate degree in winter 1969, ultimately earning a bachelor’s degree from Utica College while working full-time as a janitor in the evenings — “my day would start at 7:30 a.m., and I’d get home at 1 a.m.,” he says. “Without the college, that door that opened for me to have a job, to raise a family, and send my kids to college would never have happened. I’d still be in the mailroom, delivering mail 40 years later.”

Mathis’s first job after graduating was at the non-profit Manpower training program, which led him to the position at the Utica school district where he received the call that would place him on the MVCC board.

At first, the reaction from his fellow board members was less than encouraging, he says. Along with being the first person of color, first MVCC alumni, and youngest member of the board, he was the only board member who had actually attended a community college. “I didn’t fit the norm of a trustee,” he said. “Here I am, a 29-year-old black man showing up on the board. Why was I there?”

Mathis debated resigning, but ultimately decided to stick it out for the remainder of his term and then continue on the board, in large part because he felt he was the sole representative of the experience of the community college student.

“I brought a different perspective to the board, and in many ways, I still do,” he says. “It was an opportunity to represent my community as an alumnus and role model.”

He ultimately became MVCC board chair three times and vice chair twice. During his four-plus decade tenure on the board, Mathis helped select MVCC’s president as part of the college’s search committee two times. The first president’s tenure was nearly a quarter century, and the second — and current — CEO has been at MVCC for a dozen years. “In 43 years, we’ve had only three presidents,” he says, noting that the average tenure for college presidents nationwide is under five years.

Other accomplishments during his time on the MVCC board include converting an extension center in Rome to a full-fledged

campus during his first stint as board chair and adding additional dorm space and academic buildings. He also serves as the chair of the MVCC Dormitory Corporation board of directors and president of the MVCC Alumni Association board. Mostly, Mathis says, he “worked my butt off.”

“To really prove yourself, especially if you’re a person of color, you’ve got to be three to four times better than others,” he says. Despite his rocky start, Mathis credits the MVCC board members he has served with over the years. “It’s been important to have a solid and committed board, and it’s been great to work with them,” he says. “They saw my commitment, my work, my love of MVCC.”

Mathis’s trusteeship at MVCC dovetailed with his career in workforce development. He became director of the Oneida County Office of Workforce Development in 1986, a position he’s held ever since. In a newspaper interview, Oneida County Executive Anthony J. Picente Jr. called Mathis a “consummate professional whose dedication to the betterment of this community is without peer.”

He stresses the importance of community colleges in workforce development, particularly for populations who have typically faced challenges in higher ed. “If you have a job or don’t have a job, if you’re a veteran or someone coming out of prison or struggling with an addiction, the door is open at the college,” he says. “Community colleges are open door, and because that door is open, you should walk through it.”

In similar fashion, Mathis saw the New York Community College Trustees (NYCCT) as another open door — and another environment dominated by older, mostly white peers. “I took advantage of the opportunity to learn about being a trustee,” he says. In 1983, he chaired NYCCT’s first advocacy committee, ultimately serving on the NYCCT board from 1986 to 2018, with two stints as president. Over the years, NYCCT presented Mathis with the Anne M. Bushnell Memorial Award and the Marvin A. Rapp Award for Distinguished Service.

Mathis began attending ACCT meetings in 1982, and seven years later he was appointed to replace a board member with one year left on his term. The following year, he says, the nominating committee rejected his application to run for the open board seat.



Left: Mathis at a 2003 ACCT event; Right: Mathis (lower left) with ACCT Board member Rosaelena O'Neil (center) and the newly formed Student Trustees Advisory Committee.

The rationale given to him — that older trustees were in line and ready to serve and he was “too young” — felt discriminatory and unfair. But other trustees encouraged him to run with support from the floor — which he did, ultimately winning the seat.

He served as vice chair and chair of ACCT’s federal relations committee before stepping off the board in 1996. Mathis remained active with the association in the years that followed, serving as chair and vice chair of the minority affairs committee and ensuring it became part of the executive board structure. Ten years after stepping off the ACCT Board, he was encouraged to run again as a regional director, winning the seat in 2016 and serving as secretary-treasurer, vice chair, and chair elect before assuming his current role last fall. He has received both the ACCT Northeast Leadership Award and the ACCT M. Dale Ensign Leadership Award during his long tenure with ACCT governance.

Nearly a half-century later, though, Mathis still looks back to his willingness to persist after being appointed to the MVCC board as a key to his success in community college governance. “I’ve broken a lot of barriers, and diversity has been critical in opening those paths,” he says. “If I had dropped off the MVCC board, a lot of those firsts would never have happened.”

As ACCT Chair, Mathis has pledged to help his peer trustees make diversity, equity, and inclusion a “living promise” to “fulfill the vision of universal access.”

“We are called to change,” Mathis said during the 2020 ACCT Leadership Congress (see p. 10).

In announcing his priorities during the virtual event, Mathis drew from the year’s experiences, including the deaths of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and others at the hands of police. But he also looks back to his own experience as a college student — the pivotal historical events of 1968 he uses as a point of comparison to today’s challenges, but also more personal ones.

“From kindergarten all the way through my bachelor’s degree, I never had a person of color as a teacher, a counselor, or an advisor,” he says. “I’ve been fighting for racial and social justice my whole career. My commitment has been to open the door. We’ve made incredible changes, but in many ways, the challenges are still there.”

Mathis says ACCT is “walking the walk” on meaningful change, pointing to recent efforts including its newly released Diversity, Equity & Inclusion Checklist and Implementation Guide for Community College Boards and multiple statements pledging to support racial justice and DEI (see p. 14). He also points to the ACCT Board as a living example, with half of its membership women, members of color, or both. “That’s the kind of work I’d like to see board members advocate for at the local level,” he says. “We need to do more to educate the public and appointing authorities about the importance of diversity, equity, and inclusion at the board level, because it filters down.” And his own college is also walking the walk — MVCC just appointed its first-ever diversity officer, he says.

Continued advocacy for funding will also be critical as the nation recovers from the pandemic, Mathis says. “If we’re going to turn this country around and deal with the devastation of COVID-19, it’s going to happen with community colleges,” he says. “We’ve lost incredible amounts of funding at the state and local levels, and we need to make sure the federal and state governments are aware that if we as a nation are going to pull ourselves out of this downturn, the vehicle that will do that is community colleges.”

Mathis’ current role as ACCT Chair isn’t the only time he has found himself in the right place to make difficult decisions. In the 1980s, he became the first person of color elected to Utica’s K-12 school board and was ultimately named president of what he calls “my *Profiles in Courage* board.” That’s because the city board made the difficult decision to consolidate the city’s three high schools into one — a necessary but unpopular decision with parents and students, and he ultimately lost the next election.

“As I look at my career, I ended up in places I didn’t think I should be at the time, but maybe I was there for a reason,” he says. “I’ve lived in a challenging community, been involved in challenging boards, and I haven’t walked away. Maybe being chair at this time is walking through the right door.”