Advocacy and Action

By Margaret Lamb
San Diego Community College District, California

I DON'T KNOW ABOUT YOU, BUT IT SEEMS THAT TIME KEEPS going by faster and faster each year. 2018 started fast and furious at a frenzied pace. Now that we have settled into the year, at my college and I am sure at many of yours, attention has turned to promoting advocacy with our lawmakers. Advocacy is a priority at our college, and sharing our legislative priorities with elected officials is always important. Each of us plays an important role in this effort.

During the 2017 ACCT Leadership Congress held in Las Vegas, PBSN hosted a panel on legislative advocacy with key stakeholders from across the country. The panel featured Dr. Mark Mitsui, president of Portland Community College and former Deputy Assistant Secretary for Community Colleges in the U.S. Department of Education’s Office of Career, Technical, and Adult Education; Dr. William Serrata, president of El Paso Community College and member of the Texas Association of Community Colleges Legislative Committee; Tom Milligan, chairman of the board of trustees at Edison State Community College; and Jennifer Stiddard, ACCT’s director of government relations. The panel was moderated by Andrea Henderson, executive director of the Oregon Community College Association.

The panelists provided several examples of not only what college presidents and trustees can do to foster relationships with their legislators, but also the key role the executive assistant plays in helping to maintain those relationships. I encourage you to take a moment to identify ways you can involve your local legislators on your campus. For example, one thing that we started doing at my college in 2016 was inviting all of our state legislators to our campus for a luncheon and presentation at our culinary restaurant. The legislators were extremely engaged by our students’ culinary skills and our program. Our president provided a brief PowerPoint presentation detailing the college’s legislative priorities, and members of the board of trustees were on hand to talk with the legislators and provide additional information. The legislators walked away with a notebook of information in their hands and had a better understanding of the college district’s mission and goals.

This is only one example shared at the conference. We are planning another valuable session this fall, and we hope you will attend. The purpose of the PBSN meeting is to provide an opportunity to gather with your colleagues from across the nation to develop your own network of professionals who can share best practices. I hope that each of you has an opportunity to attend the 2018 Congress in New York City, participate in our workshops, and share your own best practices.
IN 1942, THE NATIONAL SECRETARIES ASSOCIATION WAS founded. Originally, its twofold purpose was to highlight the value of administrative personnel and to encourage more to enter the field by making it more appealing. In 1952, National Secretaries Week was instituted, along with National Secretaries Day. However, since the term “Secretaries Day” did not fully encompass the role of the profession, the name was changed in 1981 to “Professional Secretaries Day.”

Yet the word “secretary” still possessed a stigma. As CNN’s Megan Carpentier put it, “The word ‘secretary’ conjures up images of a bygone era, an era of pearls and sweater sets, sensible heels and knee-length skirts, and the right mixture of efficiency and humility to fade into the background while acting as a powerful man’s right hand.”

So because words do matter, in 2000 the terminology was once again changed to embrace the ever-expanding role and responsibilities of the administrative professional. As a result, every April, more than 4 million individuals, 98 percent of them women, observe “Administrative Professionals Day.” And professionals we are. Gone are the days of simply answering phones, taking dictation, and filing documents. Today, many us have the title of Executive Assistant or Administrative Assistant, but even these titles encompass many other responsibilities: Office Administrator/Manager, Budget Manager, Accountant, Purchaser, Presenter, and more.

The profession has evolved so much that the National Secretaries Association changed its name in 1998 to the International Association of Administrative Professionals (IAAP), whose main objective is to “provide education, certification, and leadership development to administrative professionals.”

A more recent example highlighting that words do matter is a joint resolution adopted by the Classified Senates within the San Diego Community College District. The resolution was presented to the district’s participatory governance council,
requesting that the district use the term “classified professionals” rather than “classified staff” due to the fact that these employees serve their colleges and districts in a number of professional and specialized positions.

Words also matter in our day-to-day communications. As technology continues to replace face-to-face communication, words are even more important in conveying our message in the absence of tone of voice, body language, and other contextual clues. As administrative professionals, we spend up to 80 percent of our day communicating (via email, over the phone, and in meetings). As anyone who has had to spend hours clarifying previous emails can tell you, there is a reason that “excellent oral and written communication skills” tops the list of desired qualifications for most administrative professional positions.

As administrative professionals, we represent not only our CEOs, but also the character and reputation of our respective colleges and districts. We are the spokespersons, often responsible for the first and most important impression that can be made. It is in this context that we have to ask ourselves if we are keeping up to date with proper word usage and terminology. Are the words we use professional and tactful? Or do our word choices put up barriers? For example, if we are dealing with a situation caused by another department, are we quick to criticize, or do we search for the right words to dignify and elevate the situation? Instead of stating “their department blew it,” can we rephrase to “perhaps there is something they are not understanding; they’ve never had a problem like this before”? Or shift from “she’s just not getting it!” to “are we explaining it to her the right way”? Every day we interact with dozens of individuals, each with unique issues and personalities, which is why we need seasoned emotional intelligence to use the words that will make a difference.

Another way we can show words do matter is by being reasonably sensitive to how people respond to certain phrases. Using the proper words can dignify the office we represent — for example, using terminology such as police officer and not policeman, or chair instead of chairman unless it’s the official title. Community colleges are incredibly diverse, serving students from a wide range of academic, socioeconomic, cultural, disability, gender identity, sexual orientation, and ethnic backgrounds. Words and descriptors that may have been acceptable in the past can now incite powerful reactions and devalue otherwise valuable advice and directions. Since we work in higher education, it is even more important to use correct academic terminology and grammar, as expectations are higher given the institutions we represent.

“Last year’s words belong to last year’s language. Next year’s words await another voice.” These words by the poet T.S. Elliot illustrate that words do matter. It reminds us that the words we use today will ultimately evolve and change in the future, so as administrative professionals, it is critical that we continue to stay current with trends in higher education and in our society. In that way, our words can make a difference in a positive way.

THE PROFESSIONAL BOARD STAFF NETWORK’S EXECUTIVE Committee has been hard at work planning the PBSN workshops that will take place in conjunction with the ACCT Leadership Congress in New York City this fall.

We will start with the traditional Meet-and-Greet on Wednesday, October 24, at a restaurant near the host hotel; followed by a three-hour workshop on Thursday, October 25, and a two-hour session, including the PBSN annual business meeting, the morning of Friday, October 26.

Early this summer, more information about the fall workshops will be sent via email and will be available on the PBSN Group Facebook Page (www.facebook.com/groups/ACCTPBSN). However, we encourage you to begin making your plans to attend soon, as we expect a great turnout. We hope to see you in New York!