I LOOKED OUT OF THE CONGRESSMAN’S OFFICE WINDOW to a perfectly centered three-quarter view of the pristine dome of the United States Capital Building against an almost cloudless blue sky and thought, “how did I get here?” Besides the obvious answers of through the side door, past security that made me take off my shoes and down a labyrinthian tunnel system filled with art labeled by state contributors, I came to be in that office because of the vision of the Alamo Colleges District Board of Trustees.

I am in the unique position of being the lone student trustee on the board of trustees of a Texas community college district. That’s right — even though there are 50 community colleges in Texas, only my district has chosen to create a position for student representation on its Board of Trustees. I was selected through a process where each of Alamo Colleges’ five individually accredited colleges elects a candidate and then sends that candidate to a panel interview during a special board meeting, where an immediate appointment is made for a one-year term. Even though I do not have a peer in my state with whom I can discuss common statewide educational issues or challenge legislative moves that fail to support the needs of community college students, I am fortunate that my district includes me in regional and national events and conventions, including the ACCT Governance Leadership Institute (GLI), Annual Congress, and National Legislative Summit (NLS), where I have met many other student trustees from around the country and with whom I serve on the first ACCT Student Trustee Advisory Committee. The conversations that I have had with these elected or appointed student trustees have become an important part of the information that shaped my discourse with my own student body, student governments, and Board of Trustees.
I am completing my second year of studies and will soon be transferring to a local four-year university, but at one time I wasn’t even sure that I was “college material.” I am not the traditional community college student. I am nearing 50 years old. I am a retired veteran of the United States Army. I am a first-time college student and a first-generation college-goer. My husband and I have four children of our own in college (and three in high and middle schools). Would I fit in? Would I find an outlet for the drive to serve others that drove me to select a career in public service? Could I even do the college thing? I mean, I hadn’t had a math class in almost 30 years! Yes, I was often mistaken for a faculty or staff member on campus. And then I had an epiphany…I am the new traditional community college student. I redefined “the traditional community college student.” And then I burned that label as unimportant and restrictive to all.

Back to the journey that brought me to the ACCT National Legislative Summit. I had been preparing for the possibility that I would be meeting senators and congressmen and pitching my story and the needs of the students in my district. I read and researched state and national educational issues and other things that contributed to students’ educational pitfalls, such as lack of transportation and childcare, campus security, and veterans support. I practiced my elevator speech but secretly feared that I would be a fixture, a mascot, a figurehead, a person to be trotted out to show the involvement or even the diversity of the student population of our colleges. Then, after several days of attending ACCT’s preparatory summit, where I was presented with concise information and messaging, I walked into the first office of the first Congressman that I had ever met.

We formed the obligatory reception line just like the entry into a wedding (or funeral), and I watched as he greeted each of the trustees with a handshake/arm squeeze combo (and peck on the cheek for the ladies) and exchanged words with the people that he had known and worked for and with for so many years. In front of me was our brand-new vice chancellor of public relations and governmental affairs, so he took a little extra time learning her professional history and exchanging lists of people that they both knew. Then he wearily reached the last person in line: me. As I introduced myself as the student trustee on the board and a student at Palo Alto College, he perked up and the handshake turned into a hand on my elbow leading me to be seated while he continued to ask probing questions about my position, my college experience, and how I had found myself in this place in my life. There was nobody else in the room. He was as engaged in finding out what we were there for from the student perspective as we were to give that information.

As the conversation started, and then continued longer than any of us were prepared for, each of the trustees interjected the points that we had come to discuss: extending Pell and maintaining the current overage balance for continued and year-round financial aid grants, more CTE support to train students who will be able to work in the fields needed to execute President Trump’s proposed infrastructure plan, the onus that the PROSPER Act, the House proposal for reauthorization of the Higher Ed Act (HEA), would place on community colleges and how its implementation would filter down to the student level by forcing colleges to operate in a manner that will continue to subjugate an already subjugated portion of our population and deny the social mobility so desperately needed, the protection of DACA and Dreamer students, and other federal (and local) priorities. But the Congressman continually came back to ask me questions about the topic at hand. I was able to give him concrete examples of student issues, from food insecurity keeping students from participating in classes to the cost of textbooks forcing students to choose part-time over full-time status, which negatively impacts completion and graduation rates.

In the end, and in the rest of our meetings that day, my fellow trustees remarked more than once that they had never seen our representatives so interested in our messages and so willing to listen and get involved. At the time of this writing, the Congressman that so graciously welcomed me asked to attend our Student District Council meeting, a bimonthly meeting of all of the student government officers who discuss district-wide issues to bring forward to administration or the board of trustees. So I urge you, instead of taking just the student message to the Hill, take a student. Your representatives know you and know what you want. Besides, who wants to hear a list of priorities “through a lens” when they can hear it from the source?

Alicia Moreno is a student at Palo Alto College and the student trustee on the board of the Alamo Colleges District in Texas.