

Second Chances

2018-19 ACCT Chair Connie Hornbeck is a believer in the transformative nature of community colleges.

BY MARK TONER

CONNIE HORNBECK LIKES TO SAY SHE STARTED COLLEGE YOUNG. Born in rural Iowa to itinerant farmers, the Iowa Western Community College trustee attended a one-room schoolhouse with no running water starting at the age of six. Its name? While it was known locally as Frog Pond School, its official name was “Swamp College.”

It's also safe to say that Hornbeck didn't particularly enjoy her initial experiences with education. “I ran away from school every day,” she says. “Every day, my dad brought me back to school, and every day my teacher took me back. Over a year, that was 100 chances for her to say, 'she's not ready,' but she never did.”

Today, that idea of second chances is a driving theme of Hornbeck's tenure as 2018-19 ACCT Chair. Along with an emphasis on strengthening engagement with the association and maintaining the focus on partnerships, Hornbeck is focused on providing new opportunities to the estimated 2.3 million incarcerated Americans seeking a return to society — and another chance.

“I became so impassioned with community colleges because of that transformative nature we have,” she says. “We give not one, not two, but I'll bet we give some people 100 chances.”

The first in her family to attend college, Hornbeck paid her way through a combination of scholarships, work study, and “tassel pulling” — overseeing workers who pulled tassels from corn stalks to prevent cross-pollination and create hybridized seed corn.



It was the early 1970s, when the nation was still roiling from the Vietnam War. Seeing veterans return to college sparked Hornbeck's interest in driving for change. "In the end, I realized what advocacy for a position can do," she says.

After graduating, Hornbeck began working as a planner and grant writer for criminal justice programs. Working with a restitution program for juvenile offenders provided an insight that led her to start her own business.

Recognizing it was hard to find companies willing to hire juveniles with criminal backgrounds, she created a business plan to start a lawn service in 1985. Called CJ Futures, the business grew to include lawn and landscape design, as well as a retail lawn and garden center. The company soon was joined by Senior Futures, a nonprofit entity that helps senior citizens stay in their homes by providing free lawn care — and, she says, something more.

"People give what they can — sometimes it's pennies or change," she says. "It's about dignity."

As the businesses grew from her garage to dedicated office, staging, and retail space, Hornbeck found herself needing to learn new skills.

"I took accounting courses at my community college and used the community college for all sorts of workforce development for my staff," she says. "They were my trainer of choice when I was trying to learn what I needed for my business."

Hornbeck made the shift from community college student to community college leader in 1995, when an outgoing Iowa Western Community College board member encouraged her to consider applying for her seat. Now the mother of four children and four grandchildren, Hornbeck and her husband Jim, a retired English teacher, still live in rural Iowa. She's since been elected to Iowa Western's board nine times.

During Hornbeck's tenure on the board, Iowa Western developed expanded student housing, a valuable option with no four-year college in its service area, which spans more than a dozen counties. The college also built an arts center, a new student center with a cyber library, and an advanced manufacturing and

robotics facility. A wellness center also is in the works. The board has taken six bond issues to voters, all of which were approved.

Hornbeck watched as student demographics in her rural region shifted, and she encouraged diversity, inclusion, and equity programs. The needs of the region's employers have shifted as well, and Iowa Western recently worked with Google and other local small businesses, entrepreneurs, and nonprofits to develop specifically identified skill sets and hands-on learning opportunities. The college's health sciences programs, in particular, also have expanded significantly in recent years.

"We're responding to community needs," she says. "That's so exciting for me — reinventing ourselves to reflect our community."

Still, Hornbeck attributes the college's success during her tenure to the collective action of the full board. "We learned to work together to meet the needs of our community, students, and employers, and in the end, move forward with one voice," she says. "That whole concept is critical, and I hope I have modeled that behavior."

Hornbeck soon became involved in state-level advocacy, ultimately serving as treasurer and chair of the Iowa Association of Community College Trustees (IACCT) and as a founding commissioner of the Midwestern Higher Education Compact (MHEC), which coordinates efforts among two- and four-year institutions across the region. In 2010, she received the John P. Kibbie Outstanding Trustee Award, the highest honor for Iowa board members. Again, Hornbeck sought ways to improve her skills, and fellow board members steered her to ACCT, where she ultimately was elected to the association's Board of Directors in 2013.

Hornbeck stresses the importance of ACCT's strategic plan, which she says will help the organization "focus our ability to take on things and say no to things." She also emphasizes the priorities undertaken by previous chairs, including 2017-18 ACCT Chair Emily Yim's focus on partnerships, which Hornbeck pledged to continue upon taking the gavel at the 2018 ACCT Congress in New York City last October.

"Nothing at the community college level is done alone,"

“We need workers, we need skilled workers, and we have folks that need jobs. That’s a perfect scenario for community colleges and how we can serve our communities. We offer what no one else can, and in many instances no other higher education system wants to.”

Hornbeck says. “If it weren’t for our board, or staff, or our education partners, it wouldn’t get done.”

Another priority for her tenure as chair, Hornbeck says, is improving ACCT’s engagement with member boards. “I know firsthand the resource constraints our community colleges face,” she says. “That is why I want to explore ways we can create greater value and connectivity for our association and all of you.”

Doing so, she says, will involve harnessing technology to boost engagement in new ways, such as ACCT’s new podcast series, in which Hornbeck was recently featured (see p. 6). An increased emphasis on policy and issue analysis and the development of policy templates for boards to help them focus on data and goal setting are among her other priorities.

“The goal is to make ACCT the highest and best investment” for member boards, she says.

But the impetus for Hornbeck’s last, and newest, priority goes way back — back, in fact, to her childhood.

After becoming a small-town policeman when she was still in primary school, Hornbeck’s father taught her two rules — don’t lie and don’t steal. But he also taught her something else. “He’d say, ‘I could put [someone] in jail tonight and take him out for coffee in the morning, and you’ve got to remember it’s always doable,’” she says. “As a police officer in a small town, he was not judging because of past mistakes.”

Through her work with criminal justice organizations and then her own business, Hornbeck met “so many people who just made a mistake,” she says. But today, she adds, there’s an important difference in their prospects.

“As I look at it now, the difference is when our incarcerated brothers and sisters get out, there’s nowhere to go without some postsecondary education,” she says. “Without that, you’re going to be back in.”

The statistics are sobering. The vast majority of today’s incarcerated population have no higher education background — only 6 percent have completed any education beyond high

school. Most leave with few marketable skills, making it all the more difficult to readjust upon release.

Conversely, incarcerated individuals who earn higher education credentials before they re-enter society are far more likely to succeed — one study says earning credentials reduces the odds of recidivism by 43 percent within three years of exiting prison.

Pell Grants once helped fund programs for incarcerated individuals by community colleges and other providers, but support was curtailed in the 1990s, a decision that has persisted for more than two decades. In 2016, however, the U.S. Department of Education launched a pilot Second Chance Pell Grant program. Through the program, nearly 30 community colleges have offered postsecondary programs inside correctional facilities, awarding more than 700 certificates and 230 associate degrees to date.

The results to date, Hornbeck says, are like “a bright light.”

“This is something community colleges can do — we’re transformative in nature,” she says. “If we can set up [programs] with Google, we can set up welding programs in our correctional facility.”

Along with advocating for Second Chance Pell to be included in the reauthorization of the Higher Education Act, Hornbeck says there also are opportunities to look at eligibility for other forms of federal financial aid and to seek additional funding sources through the Trump Administration’s efforts to champion “results-driven” education and training.

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Quoting songwriter Leonard Cohen, Hornbeck says, “there’s a crack in everything — that’s how the light gets in. Community colleges can bring the light and help repair the cracks in our communities by serving as the shining light for those who need a second chance to what access to education to education can bring.”