

AMPLIFYING THE MESSAGE

THE FIRST IN-PERSON NLS SINCE THE PANDEMIC
FOCUSED ON MAINTAINING MOMENTUM FOR
COMMUNITY COLLEGES AND THEIR STUDENTS.

BY MARK TONER



THE SECRET'S OUT.

Over the years, administration officials and lawmakers from both sides of the aisle often referred to community colleges as the nation's best-kept secret during the National Legislative Summit (NLS). This February, as community college leaders and advocates returned to Washington, D.C., for the first time in two years, the language had clearly shifted.

"Community colleges are one of the nation's best treasures, and people are recognizing that," U.S. Education Secretary Miguel Cardona told NLS attendees. "Now is the time we amplify that message."

Throughout the summit, leaders including Cardona, First Lady Jill Biden, and U.S. Labor Secretary Martin J. Walsh stressed the importance of the community college sector. That importance has been demonstrated by the billions of dollars allocated to institutions through the American Rescue Plan and the \$1 trillion infrastructure bill signed into law last year, and administration leaders stressed they would press forward despite legislative setbacks that have stalled tuition-free community college and other longstanding goals.

"We are not giving up," Biden declared on the summit's opening day (see p. 16). The president, she added, "is keeping his promise to rebuild our middle class, and he knows community colleges do just that."

First Lady Jill Biden (top) and ACCT Chair James Cooksey



Ricardo D. Torres



ACCT Chair-Elect Rose Benavidez with U.S. Education Secretary Miguel Cardona



Major Garrett

“We need you to be visible, active, and engaged.”

—ACCT President and CEO Jee Hang Lee

Biden spoke to her own experiences teaching at Northern Virginia Community College to emphasize the need to continue advocating for students.

“These aren’t just bills or budgets to me, or to you,” she said in remarks picked up by national media. “We know what they mean for real people, for our students.”

Changing Headwinds

The last time the community college sector convened in Washington, D.C., for the National Legislative Summit in early 2020, the pandemic was weeks away from closing campuses and roiling everyday life. “A lot has happened in the last two years,” said Ricardo D. Torres, CEO of the National Student Clearinghouse.

What hasn’t changed is the sector’s commitment to serving their communities during challenging times, ACCT Chair James Cooksey told attendees. “We all know our colleges can help create a stronger economy, bouncing back from the pandemic and creating better opportunities for all Americans,” said Cooksey, a trustee at Moberly Area Community College in Missouri. “All of us must use our voices to keep elected officials focused on the issues that affect our institutions and our students.”

Maintaining that focus remains critical. Many of the Biden Administration’s priorities, including its signature Build Back Better legislation, stalled in late 2021. For community colleges, the goal is to ensure that the sector’s needs are reflected in whatever legislation advances this year, according to Carrie Warick-Smith, ACCT vice president for public policy.

“Focus on the priorities and not the legislative vehicles,” Warick-Smith urged NLS attendees.

ACCT President & CEO Jee Hang Lee echoed the importance of pushing forward. “This is how the sausage is made in

Washington, D.C.,” he said. “And unfortunately, sometimes it’s arduous and difficult, but we will be sure to fight to get our own priorities, and that’s why we need you to be visible, active, and engaged.”

The sector’s priorities are evolving in the face of ever-changing education trends. Drawing from survey data, Torres noted the continuing trend of lower enrollment at public two-year colleges even as enrollments in other higher ed sectors have rebounded. He pointed to an “explosion of job-worthy credentials that have appeared in the marketplace” — badges, certificates, apprenticeships, and the like, many of which are offered by non-traditional providers.

Torres urged community college leaders to partner with the emerging ecosystem of short-term credential providers and join state efforts to define P-20 workforce pathways.

Pathways are a key part of the Biden Administration’s approach to ensuring an equitable economic recovery and community colleges have a critical role to play, Labor Secretary Walsh told attendees. “Investments have to happen in community colleges,” he said. “The task we have in front of us can’t be done without [them].”

With historic job growth — nearly 6.7 million new jobs since President Biden took office — “we need to make sure we create pathways and opportunities into those jobs, because historically people have been left out,” Walsh added. “We can’t let that happen this time.”

Walsh pointed to Boston’s Building Pathways pre-apprenticeship program, which has provided more than 600 people with careers in the building trades, as one model for the Department’s efforts, which are focusing on extending apprenticeship programs to a broader range of industries. Months before, he had appointed



Clockwise from left: Community college students and student trustees; Student Trustees Advisory Committee Member Elisabeth Neely; NLS participants ask questions during general session.

Pam Eddinger, president of Bunker Hill Community College in his native Boston, as chair of the department’s Advisory Committee on Apprenticeship.

Torres echoed the emphasis on creating innovative programs that serve more adult learners.

“There’s a demand, and... the community college sector is... a force for learner and worker enablement,” he said. “But you have to be proactive.”

Legislative Priorities

Support for one of the best ways to accelerate these kinds of worker-focused offerings — the ability to use Pell Grant funding for short-term programs — is gaining ground. Bipartisan efforts to include short-term Pell in legislation advanced just days before the NLS, ACCT and American Association of Community Colleges (AACC) policy experts told attendees.

“We’re within striking distance this year,” said David Baime, AACC senior vice president for government relations. Key areas which remain to be resolved include the extent to which private institutions will be eligible to participate. “How you define quality in the programs is something that Congress continues to negotiate,” said former ACCT staffer Jennifer Stiddard, now a senior fellow with the National Skills Coalition.

ACCT and AACC leaders stressed the importance of advancing another high-profile community college priority, the America’s College Promise plan first proposed during the Obama Administration that would make community college tuition-free and universal.

“It would represent a very big step forward for the country, and it’s important to keep the conversation alive,” Baime said. “We’re not sure of the vehicle, but we do know the administration remains committed to the concept.”

That sentiment was echoed throughout the NLS by Biden,

Cardona, Walsh, and Rep. Andy Levin (D-Mich.). “We are serious about it — we’re going to fight to pass this legislation in the future,” Levin said. “We’re going to get this done. It’s just too important.”

Another key priority also builds on an Obama-era program — a proposed community college-led job training program similar to the \$2 billion Trade Adjustment Assistance Community College and Career Training (TAACCCT) grant program. Speakers said such a program is critical to meeting the nation’s workforce needs.

“A prepared nation has a prepared workforce,” said José Miranda, ACCT director of government relations. “Our role is ensuring that skills needed for the 21st century are starting at our institutions.”

Other key legislative priorities included enacting the DREAM Act, boosting the Pell Grant maximum award, as was proposed in the Build Back Better Act, ending the taxation of Pell funding for students, and increasing funding for institutional aid programs supporting minority serving institutions, tribal colleges, and historically black colleges and universities (HBCUs).

To ensure these priorities have a future, Cardona urged NLS attendees to emphasize the impact of federal funding to date with lawmakers.

“Everyone in D.C. should know a personal story about how the American Rescue Plan helped community college students, because you’re going to tell them,” Cardona said. “If we don’t lift up the stories about the students, the families, the economy we’re benefitting, all we’re going to hear is the negative. I need you to drown it out.”

Advocates And Allies

To help support these priorities, Levin — a former state workforce leader — urged more community college leaders to run for Congress. He also stressed the importance of ongoing advocacy across the sector.



Clockwise from left: U.S. Secretary of Labor Martin J. Walsh; Secretary of Education Miguel Cardona; ACCT and AACC public policy staff leaders; Bunker Hill Community College President Pam Eddinger with Sec. Walsh

“Community colleges are the locus of opportunity for people in our country,” Levin said. “There is no way we will get these bills across the finish line without your advocacy and your help. Community colleges need to play a huge role here, and America needs to see the role you are playing.”

These advocacy efforts have been strengthened by the growing number of student trustees and leaders who attended NLS to advocate on behalf of their peers. Their personal experiences are telling: in a meeting during the NLS, almost all of the student advocates raised their hands when asked if they knew someone who couldn’t afford textbooks.

“Hearing the student experience is one of the most important components for policymakers they don’t get enough of,” said Rich Williams, chief of staff for the U.S. Education Department’s department of postsecondary education.

The NLS also recognized key allies during the National Capital Banquet. For his work on advancing several priorities, including tax-free Pell Grants and the community college job training program, Rep. Richard Neal (D-Mass.) was presented with the 2022 National Education Service Award. Bryce McKibben, senior director of policy and advocacy at the Hope Center and a former senior policy advisor for Sen. Patty Murray (D-Wash.) and ACCT staffer, was presented with the 2022 Government Relations Award for his work in ensuring passage of key community college priorities such as Year-Round Pell, Second Chance Pell, and ensuring that community colleges received a fair formula for federal stimulus funding (see p. 5).

Along with high-profile keynote speakers like Biden, Cardona, and Walsh, the administration signaled its support by sending representatives from the White House, the U.S. Departments of Education and Agriculture, and the Appalachian Regional Commission to a Rural Community College Day. Held concurrently with the NLS and co-sponsored by ACCT, AACC, and the Rural Community College Alliance (RCCA) with support

from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, the event focused on the potential of community colleges to serve as hubs and connectors to drive an equitable economic recovery in rural areas, speakers said (see p. 17).

“All of these people are vested in your success, but the biggest advocate for community colleges is in the White House,” added Michelle Asha Cooper, acting assistant secretary for postsecondary education at the U.S. Department of Education.

‘Hitting Reset’

As they left Washington, NLS attendees returned to campuses still grappling with the impacts of the pandemic and other longstanding challenges, including addressing equity issues and ensuring more students are successful in reaching their academic goals. Cardona urged them to continue pressing forward.

“Yes, it’s been a challenge, but you’re in a position of leadership at the most critical time in our country’s education history,” Cardona said. “We can hit reset on the things that don’t work, and we can imagine.”

One key reset could extend far beyond the community college sector. Biden urged NLS attendees to help break the zero-sum mindset of Washington politics, which she likened to coverage of football. “No one can tell that story better than you,” she said. “No one can help us push past that playbook and see the human heart that drives our work better than you.”



Mark Toner is an editor for Trustee Quarterly.

First Lady Jill Biden's

Remarks at the 2022 Community College National Legislative Summit

FEBRUARY 07, 2022

WITH US TODAY ARE SOME OF THE HARDEST WORKING AND determined advocates for community colleges.

But I want to especially acknowledge the students. I know that, with work and family obligations on top of your studies, it probably wasn't easy to get here today. But you came because you know that showing up matters. Thank you for using your voice on behalf of your community.

Some of you may know that I'm an enormous sports fan. I'm a First Lady for all Americans — but when it comes to teams, my heart belongs to the Philadelphia Eagles, 76ers, Phillies, and Flyers alone.

The competition, the crowds, the rivalries — I love it all.

But too often, we treat what happens in our nation's capital like a sports game too — wondering which team will score the most points with voters.

Legislation becomes a football to keep away from the other side, and Americans get lost in the playbook.

Governing isn't a game. There are no teams to root for or against, just people — Americans from all walks of life — who need help and hope.

There's no scoreboard — there's no "us" versus "them." If someone wins it doesn't mean someone else has to lose. And most of all, there are no spectators. All of us must do our part because the decisions that are made in the halls of Congress and the rooms of the White House affect us all.

You know that. It's why you're here today. You know what's at stake.

One year ago, I told this group that Joe was going to fight for community colleges. And since then, we've made some incredible progress.

The American Rescue Plan put billions into community colleges so they could support their students through financial aid, child care support, and other wraparound services.

The Bipartisan Infrastructure Law passed, creating millions of new jobs — along with potential opportunities to train for in-demand skills. But Joe has also had to make compromises.

We've seen how entire towns can be transformed when community colleges and private companies work together to train students for jobs that are desperately needed — with skills like manufacturing or modernizing our electrical grid.

We've seen how fragile that grasp on a middle-class life can be — how our students struggle to pay their bills and buy their books. We know that if we can make that path a little easier — with high-speed internet, or affordable prescriptions, or more Pell grants — they can actually cross that finish line.

We've all had that bright, engaged student — someone who has so much passion and potential — fade from our classes because they can't find a reliable babysitter. They start missing lectures, they fall behind and just can't catch up. Or the cost of childcare just gets to be too much, and they have to choose between extra shifts at work and pursuing the degree that will help them earn more money.

So, we know that affordable childcare and universal preschool would profoundly change people's lives.

Governing does have one thing in common with sports. When you get knocked down, you have to get back up. When you lose, you work harder, and you come back for more.

So, thank you for being here. This is how we move forward, step by step. We take the hard-won victories, and we keep pushing for the change we need. With work and persistence, we will win the progress our students deserve.

Joe and I are with you. We will continue to work as hard for your community as you do. We are not giving up.

This transcript was edited for length. To view First Lady Biden's full remarks, go to www.acct.org/article/watch-first-lady-jill-bidens-nls-remarks.