

# A WORLD IN THE MAKING

The 2022 ACCT Congress focused on supporting students and their families amid systemic change.

By Mark Toner





Clockwise from left: Aysha E. Schomburg; Arthur Levine; the 2022 ACCT Leadership Congress hosted 1,900 community college leaders; James Cooksey, M. Dale Ensign, and Jee Hang Lee

WITH NEARLY TWICE AS MANY ATTENDEES AS ACCT's first post-pandemic convening in San Diego, last October's Community College Leadership Congress signaled a much-welcomed return to normalcy. But speakers cautioned the nearly 2,000 community college trustees, leaders, and advocates who came to New York City that new challenges have changed the landscape for community colleges and their students forever.

The pandemic "revealed a world in the making," higher education scholar Arthur Levine told Congress attendees. Amid enrollments which have not bounced back from pandemic lows, new challenges including increased competition from online providers, demand for "just-in-time" on-demand learning, and the precedent of other industries "undone by digital technology" are increasing the risk of creating "two systems of higher education — one for the wealthy, one for the less wealthy, and a loss of all common learning in a country that's deeply divided," said Levine, author of *The Great Upheaval: Higher Education's Past, Present, and Uncertain Future*.

"We have a daunting challenge... We can't turn our backs on it, or the change will occur anyway," said Levine, a distinguished scholar of higher education at New York University. "The people in this room can shape the future of community colleges, or their future will be shaped in spite of this."

More than 100 sessions throughout the event focused on helping community college leaders navigate the changing landscape. "It's about setting a new bar for where we are headed in higher education," said Daisy Gonzales, Ph.D., interim chancellor of California Community Colleges and commissioner of the Accrediting Commission for Community and Junior Colleges (ACCJC). "It means that business as usual can no longer be the story."

## Improving the Lives of Entire Families

With the theme "Improving the Lives of Entire Families," the 2022 Congress focused on supporting students in new ways. Keynote speaker Aysha E. Schomburg, J.D., urged community college leaders not to shy away from one particular word.

"When you are doing the work we do of supporting vulnerable families, love is the most professional word," said Schomburg, associate commissioner of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Children's Bureau.

Schomburg focused on the nation's more than 400,000 foster children, of whom just 7 percent receive a degree or credential by the time they turn 21, but she and other speakers reinforced the importance of addressing the needs of all of community colleges' diverse student populations.

"As community college leaders, you know as well as I do what our institutions do for our communities," said 2022 ACCT Chair James Cooksey, trustee at Moberly Area Community College in Missouri.

Sessions focused on the needs of student parents, rural students, those facing housing and food insecurity and mental health challenges, and those returning to society after incarceration. The pandemic "finally gave us a moment to... actually be intentional about how to address these issues more systemically for all of our students," said Eileen Strempel, a professor at the UCLA School of Education who led a discussion with trustees from the Rancho Santiago Community College District. "[It] took away the shame for the students — everyone's struggling with the same things — and gave a really clear and moral challenge to our colleges."

Attendees also explored equity issues, including at the Improving Educational Outcomes for Men of Color Symposium sponsored by the Kresge Foundation (see box, p. 21) and sessions throughout the event. "The silver lining with the pandemic and national events and unrest is that it forced us to look at this. Our students and employees told us we needed to do this," said Rachel Desmarais, president of Vance-Granville Community College in North Carolina, whose board led a multi-year process to center the college's mission and vision in equity.

Trustees and staff from the Los Angeles Community College District discussed the district's student bill of rights for LGBTQIA+ students — the first of its kind on a community college campus. "We took a bold step in protecting our students' rights," said LACCD Trustee David Vela.



2021-22 Phi Theta Kappa International President Tala Alahmar, left; student trustees

## Bringing Students Back

Congress attendees also learned about several initiatives to bring students back to college following the pandemic enrollment dip. Lumina Foundation's Million Dollar Community College Challenge surfaced strategies to reach out to students who are increasingly not choosing between colleges, but between college and no college. "It's really important to lead with what's excellent about the campus, what's excellent about the students," said Lumina strategy officer Mary Laphen Pope.

In a similar vein, student leaders from Phi Theta Kappa showcased CCsmart (ccsmart.org), a campaign which has yielded 9.5 million impressions and a 30-second spot on ESPN, as a way of addressing the stigma that persists around community colleges. The goal is to "show the positive so everybody can make an informed choice," said Macomb Community College student Brooke Jankowsky, PTK Division III student vice president.

In North Carolina, the NC Reconnect statewide initiative is seeking to increase the number of 25-44 year olds with postsecondary credentials to 2 million by 2030. "We did not sit back as an institution and wait for students to come to us," said Laura Leatherwood, president of Blue Ridge Community College, which saw dramatic increases in adult learner enrollment after the college shifted outreach and support to adult learners and the region's growing Hispanic population. "That is an old model and that is not going to work."

In the light of the so-called "Great Resignation," community college leaders also were encouraged to focus on attracting and retaining employees. Education has emerged as one of the top fields affected by workplace departures, said CampusWorks Senior Vice President Keith Myers. With a potential recession looming, "we might find ourselves with a lot more students and a lot less staff to support them," he cautioned.

Trustees also were urged to focus on another growing need: building a bench of younger adults to serve on community college

boards, many of whom are socially aware and engaged but may not see the connection with trusteeship, Austin Folnagy, a trustee at Lane Community College in Oregon, told attendees. "The best way to ask someone is to understand what they value, why they value it, and then relate it to how higher education has a role in it," he said.

## Leadership Imperatives

A panel of higher education accreditors urged community college leaders to cut through a "cacophony of noise" to ensure "that community colleges are on the path to help America get to where it needs to be," said Sonny Ramaswamy, Ph.D., president of the Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities.

Nowhere will that be more important than in advocacy. With the Congress scheduled just weeks before November's midterm elections, public policy experts from ACCT and the American Association of Community Colleges (AACC) stressed that opportunities will emerge to seek bipartisan support in areas including workforce, taxation, human services, and rural areas in the years ahead (see p. 10).

"As we look at the agenda for the 118th Congress, we're looking for opportunities to creatively support our colleges and students," said Carrie Warick-Smith, ACCT vice president of public policy. "Community colleges have broad bipartisan support — the two parties don't always select the same topics, but everyone... understands they're very locally and regionally focused and support their constituents."

Levine added that leaders also must focus on what makes their institutions distinct. "Community colleges have to be inextricably entwined in their communities," he said. "I can't think of a better group of people than the people sitting in this room to make that new future a reality."

"Our time is really now," agreed State University of New York Vice Chancellor Johanna Duncan-Poitier. "Community colleges are being recognized as the leaders they have always been."



Clockwise from left: Accreditation panel; Rose Benavidez presents Cooksey with gavel; Lynn Tincher-Ladner; ACCT Vice Chair Tim Hardy, former ACCT board member Dennis Troy, and former ACCT Chair David Mathis; new ACCT Board members Nan Gomez-Heitzberg, Zaida Hernandez-Irrison, and Sheila Ireland take oath of office.

## Looking Ahead

As the 2022 Congress drew to a close, closing keynote speaker Tala Alahmar, 2021-22 PTK international president, shared her story of coming to the United States from war-torn Syria and finding purpose at Oakland Community College. “It’s because of people like you I am able to stand here today,” she said.

South Texas College trustee Rose Benavidez accepted the association’s leadership gavel, becoming the first Latina to serve as ACCT Chair. Benavidez credited her migrant-worker parents, the first in her family to receive college degrees, for setting her on a path towards both education and service (see p. 14). She called on her fellow trustees to focus on their roles “not for recognition, but realization.”

“It is a reminder that our responsibility in public service is simply

to effect change to make people’s lives better, make communities better, make this world better,” Benavidez said. “There is proof in the thousands who are attending and the thousands more who have graduated our institutions. In this room, we accept it is incumbent on us to ensure that opportunity is made available for everyone who needs or seeks it out.”



*Mark Toner is an editor for Trustee Quarterly.*

## Improving Educational Outcomes for Men of Color

During a special pre-Congress symposium, more than 100 community college leaders participated in an “intentional conversation” about men of color in community colleges and discussed strategies to increase enrollment, retention, and success.

“Our priority must be eliminating barriers in higher education and setting up students for success,” said ACCT Chair James Cooksey. “This has been on the minds of leaders with increasing urgency.”

Sponsored by the Kresge Foundation, the Improving Educational Outcomes for Men of Color Symposium featured a framework for college leaders to support men of color attending their institutions developed by Dr. Frank Harris III and Dr. J. Luke Wood, co-directors of the Community College Equity Assessment Lab at San Diego State University. ACCT also released a research brief detailing the framework, which is available at [www.acct.org/page/improving-educational-outcomes-men-color-symposium](http://www.acct.org/page/improving-educational-outcomes-men-color-symposium).

“I challenge each and every one of you as tough leaders and mentors to find solutions on how to support our young men along their educational journeys,” U.S. Rep. Adriano Espaillat (D-N.Y.), the first Dominican American to be elected to Congress, told attendees. “It is upon each and every one of us to ensure they succeed.”

The needs are great, particularly following the disproportionate

impact of the pandemic. Equity gaps across all student groups are highest for men of color, more than half of whom stop out of college, according to Wood. These results, he said, are the results of not “disparities in students, families, and communities, but our ability to serve them... [We] oftentimes find systemic barriers in place that are producing these systematic outcomes.”

Noting the impact of an institutional climate and culture in which students feel cared about in mitigating external barriers, Wood added that “we have more power in our hands than we realize to change the outcomes that we see.”

Three students shared their experiences at New York community colleges. Borough of Manhattan Community College Bilal Sani explained that the college’s motto – start here, go anywhere – spoke to him. “I wanted to go to a place where I knew I could receive a good education, but also where I could continue. I didn’t want to have a ceiling over my head. I wanted to make sure that I could do what I’ve truly wanted to do with my future.”

Harris stressed the importance of doing “a handful of things deeply, meaningfully, and institutionally than a lot in a shallow way,” and left attendees with a key takeaway: “Listen to the students,” he said. “They provide depth and context to things we know have always been important, but they help us to understand the why.”