

American Association of Community Colleges
91st Annual Convention
Opening Keynote Address by Dr. Walter G. Bumphus
April 9, 2011

Good evening ladies and gentlemen, I would like to join my colleagues in welcoming you here this evening, and thanks for being in New Orleans and at AACC tonight.

You know, it has been three months since I took over as president of the American Association of Community Colleges, and I can describe my experience as incoming president with the words of a song I like: “It’s a new dawn. It’s a new day. It’s a new life for me and I’m feeling **good!**”

I’m grateful for many things tonight. First and foremost, I am grateful to the AAAC Board for the confidence shown in me by selecting me for this position.

It is such a privilege and honor to serve this board and to work with our nation’s community colleges at this time. With one voice, the board has encouraged me to step out bravely during this new day for community colleges.

I want to thank the 60 dedicated staff working at AACC who have helped to make this transition smooth. They have tutored me on “inside the beltway” norms and acronyms so that I could

get up to speed quickly on how to communicate effectively in what I like to call D.C. - speak.

They've helped me cram for meetings on the hill and in the halls of state. Believe me; this fast-learning curve has been absolutely necessary, especially since I have already visited the White House three times, including just this past Tuesday to advocate for Pell grants for our students, and to lobby against the pending policy on state regulations that would impact many of our colleges and campuses.

I've had the pleasure of renewing many of the friendships I've made in my 37 years in community college work and, without exception, my colleagues have offered me valuable help and support. As I've traveled the country, I've also been warmly received by scores of new friends who have generously shared their time and expertise.

The introductory video you just saw suggests a very remarkable time in our history. Never in more than 100 years of service have we been more visible or more valued—by the Obama administration . . . in Congress and federal agencies . . . and among the nation's business leaders.

But that celebrity is a two-edged sword. I would like to draw a parallel from my own experience that I think underscores our collective situation. And I think it so aptly applies to the place we find ourselves—both physically and figuratively—this evening.

I like to say there are no accidents in life. Here I stand tonight in New Orleans, the city that in August 2005 took the brunt of Hurricane Katrina, with its 20-foot storm surge, that put 80 percent of the city under water and forced virtually all its people to higher ground. Over just a few days, 1,464 New Orleanians died. A proud and historic city was paralyzed.

I served as president of the Louisiana Community and Technical College System at that time and in a matter of hours found myself caught up in the greatest leadership challenge of my life.

As we began to understand Katrina's devastation, I remember thinking we needed to prepare for any and everything, and we needed to take care of survivors. The first thing I did was to contact my leadership team around the state. I reached all but one—Tommy Warner, chancellor of Nunez Community College, east of downtown New Orleans. He had been last seen helping his staff evacuate a campus building filling, floor by floor, with water. Six days later, I was in my car when I got the call. "Doc, I'm OK," Tommy said to me.

He, his wife, and members of his faculty and staff finally had been evacuated by helicopter from the top of that swamped building.

Each time I relive that moment and feel again its emotions, I think about what our leadership team did right.

We talked often. **We** planned well. **We** made **people**-based decisions. **We** decided to pay our staff even though we didn't know where they were. **We** leased office space in Baton Rouge for our New Orleans colleges before it was snapped up. **We** bought generators for back-up electricity. **We** built a system to keep financial aid flowing to our students. **We** got federal training grants so our students could help the state rebuild. In the midst of our tragedy, I saw heroism and creativity and great compassion. I saw us at our best.

As is the case today, there was no leadership book or blueprint for how to deal with losing 60 percent of the students in our system at that time, having your major colleges and campuses completely shut down for almost a year, and, as in the case of the Sidney Collier Campus, still not be open.

May I please ask Tommy Warner and the other chancellors and system staff from the Louisiana Community and Technical College System to stand and be recognized tonight for their great work during that very difficult period for this state, and quite frankly, for our country.

That experience was, thankfully, rare, but in some ways I think all of you can relate to what we went through. Like my team then, each day you see yourselves battling forces beyond your control that are almost overwhelming. You face a rising tide of demand against a storm of economic devastation.

I understand your difficult choices – more to do, incredible student need, and less with which to get it done.

And yet you persist. You persist because serving students and communities is hard-wired in our collective DNA. We do it because we must.

I am very early in my tenure at the helm of AACC, but I would like to paint for you tonight what I see as our new reality. As a result of the current recession, we have entered a new day. Over the past three years, states across the nation have faced shortfalls totaling \$430 billion. Next year, at least 44 states are projecting additional cuts totaling \$125 billion. For most, it's a scary picture.

It is all about renewing and returning to the pioneering spirit of our beginning days. How do we return to the founding pioneer spirit of the early community colleges, and how do we interpret the new frontiers? We will be providing leadership and advocacy for institutions that will be traveling new and unknown territories.

Each day now most of us confront a serious mismatch between what community colleges are asked to do and the resources they are provided. Last year we were awarded only 27percent of all government dollars expended on higher education while serving almost half the country's undergraduates.

Because money is short—and for many other good reasons—students are streaming through our doors. In the last 3 years, our enrollment increased nearly 20 percent. New census data vividly capture their growing diversity and help explain why our role is increasingly important. As President Obama and many others realize, young and diverse Americans are the nation's greatest natural asset—and it is our job to lead and even push them to success.

It's a day when our students could lose heart. Almost all of them are losing economic ground. Indeed, only the wealthiest 10 percent of the country is not losing ground at this time.

So while tuition inches upward, most of our 12 million economically fragile students are scrambling.

Congressional cost-cutters are likely to trim from the \$9 billion and 3 million students who secured Pell grants last year. State scholarship dollars are becoming as scarce as a hen's teeth. Most undocumented high school graduates have lost the chance to pay in-state tuition.

Returning veterans are coming home to community colleges—many of them traumatized both physically and emotionally—hoping the new GI Bill can sustain the promises made to them.

Perhaps most disconcerting, the majority of these scrambling students are destined to play academic catch-up when they reach

us. Did you know the single best predictor of graduation from **any** college is the academic skills of the entering student? It's more a factor than race, family income, or parent education.

When remediation delays some 60 percent of our students, that loss of momentum is often a game changer.

Of the 3,600 public and private institutions of higher education, over 1,200 are community colleges, and we serve nearly 44 percent, almost half, of the students in undergraduate education.

We must consider the areas of new knowledge development and how we translate them into curricula and programs for our students. We must be innovative, creative, and entrepreneurial.

At the same time, we must overcome barriers to growth and change in a culture of denial. We must instill openness and engagement and be comfortable with change.

But there is more to the picture. We are lately coming to terms with the national spotlight, along with the accountability that accompanies it.

Last October's White House Summit on Community Colleges was a remarkable, ground-breaking event for those of us who have spent our professional lives in the vineyards of this movement.

President Obama's administration, philanthropic groups such as the Bill & Melinda Gates and Lumina foundations, and groups such as the National Governors Association, the Brookings Institution, and the College Board have made us more visible players in the policy arena.

Last year when President Obama, through his American Graduation Initiative, put \$12 billion on the table, we were suddenly front page news. This year, albeit with fewer billions on the table, we remain high-profile players in workforce investment and college completion.

Thankfully, we also find ourselves generally in favor with the public, with recent polls suggesting that our communities see us as helpful partners who continue to offer a high quality, reasonably-priced education.

With each day's news, our interdependent world continues to surprise us, and there has never been a time when it is easier to see that problems at any level cannot be solved alone.

Challenges will be the changes that are brought about due to advanced technology and economic global competition. We must consider global interconnectedness from the economic, political and cultural aspects.

How can we enhance future awareness of the vital role that community colleges play? We are still a “best kept secret” in that our multiple roles are complex and little understood.

With all these issues swirling, my first big goal as AACC’s president has been to develop a way to LISTEN to you. With funding from the Gates and Kresge foundations, and with support from the American College Testing Program, better known as ACT, and the Educational Testing Service, we are well into a national Listening Tour, with visits to nine states and the District of Columbia. It’s been a powerful experience for me to hear from you.

If you are from the states of Florida, Illinois, Maryland, Michigan, New York, North Carolina, Ohio, Texas or Virginia, or from our nation’s capitol, Washington, D.C., please stand. I want to thank you for your very valuable input, suggestions, and ideas on the future for community colleges.

At our concluding plenary session on Tuesday, you’ll have a chance to hear more about the Listening Tour. You’ll also hear about a second major initiative that’s just getting started – the 21st Century Commission on the Future of Community Colleges. Modeled after the Truman and Futures Commissions’ work decades ago, its charge is to make recommendations regarding the future of our movement.

Let me introduce the co-chairs for this Commission and ask them to please stand Dr. Kay McClenney, Dr. Jerry Sue Thornton, and Mr. Augie Gallego.

With this much of a beginning on the job and this much of the Listening Tour under my belt, let me share several impressions that are already influencing my vision for AACC.

First, today's community colleges need to open two doors - access and completion. One is familiar territory, the other, less so.

The access door will not automatically stay open. We cannot afford to take our historic access gains for granted—not when tuition is growing faster than inflation, our students continue to bring multiple risk factors, college success for minorities is fragile, and a fair number of our colleges are closing or limiting enrollments—hopefully only temporarily.

The completion door ... the second door on the other hand, has never been open wide enough. Just under a million students leave us each year carrying a credential that gives them a better shot at the life they want. But that is only 8 percent of our students. I believe we are making headway with perennial stumbling blocks like remediation and, at the same time, are ramping up the right programs to meet workforce demands.

But to have the best chance to meet President Obama's goal of 5 million more completers with certificates or degrees by 2020, we will need to bring this work to scale.

One other thought. Completion is not as embedded in our community college culture as access is. That's something we need to change. Perhaps current discussions are too focused on numbers. Perhaps we need more visceral reminders of what completion offers our students.

Perhaps we need to better connect our long-standing focus on academic excellence to completion. After all, shouldn't our classroom quality offer the best possible motivation for students to complete their studies?

Personally I know the power of opening doors. There wasn't a community college in Princeton, Kentucky, where I grew up, but I had a mother and a grandmother who pushed me to leave a small town with few opportunities for African Americans and move an hour south to enter college at Murray State University.

With their force of will supporting me, I was able to walk through my access door, carrying the old suitcase and the \$5 bill my grandmother gave me to make the journey. Similarly, it was their breaths hot on the back of my neck that pushed me through the completion door and made me the first member of my family to graduate from college.

But that's not the end of the story.

After finishing my master's degree at Murray State, I moved to the Arkansas Delta at age 25 to help launch East Arkansas Community College as its first dean of students. Thinking this would only be a brief career stop, in a New York minute I found my professional home—my calling, my passion. This rural community college was like my mother. It changed lives.

I found a way to follow in her footsteps and to help others become the first in their families to graduate from college. It wasn't only fate; it was also preparation!

Here's another impression: **Community colleges need to build their big ideas and innovative solutions into systems for success.**

I have heard many big ideas and exciting innovations on the Listening Tour.

We are modularizing and fast-tracking developmental studies; we are moving more fluidly across institutional boundaries to **really** collaborate with high school, university, and business partners; we are setting aside traditional academic calendars and learning how to use social networking to keep pace with the Internet revolution.

We have any number of these vital sub-systems playing out in our student success efforts, but I do not yet see them as part of a **comprehensive system for success**.

So I like Broward Community College President David Armstrong's big idea offered during the Florida Listening Tour to get IBM's new smart computer named **Watson** to design an ideal learning management system.

I also like the idea of asking Uri Triesman to help us integrate the growing body of knowledge related to developmental math into a comprehensive learning system.

I want to take the vital lessons learned from Achieving the Dream and the new lessons to be learned from the Voluntary Framework of Accountability and incorporate them into the system.

Perhaps you know the work of Atul Gawande, the surgeon who in several recent books describes how different professions have built stellar systems.

For example, you can read in his book **Better** the amazing story of forward surgical teams in Afghanistan and Iraq. The army applied all their ingenuity to build a three-level response system to more rapidly serve the wounded.

It included 20-member teams traveling in six Humvees right behind troops entering combat. They are trained to assemble a

fully functioning hospital within 60 minutes . . . stabilize the wounded in under two hours. . . send these patients, on to a second level of care in modularized hospitals . . . and finally to regular military hospitals around the world.

Because the army's system reaches wounded soldiers quickly, with targeted levels of care, they have reduced mortality rates from 24 percent to 10 percent.

That level of innovative triage provides a vivid picture of what systems make possible.

Another impression I have is that **we need to reconnect to our core values.**

In the current economic and social vortex, it's not surprising that we sometimes lose touch with our roots. But we need them. They offer great encouragement and they connect us to our mission. Let me just mention two....

We are egalitarian. We are Democracy's Colleges. For more than 100 years, we have countered elitism, broadened citizen participation, offered a pathway—or better still, an on-ramp—to the middle class, and helped bridge the chasm between the haves and the have-nots.

The current erosion of financial support for us at all levels of government is willfully forgetful of the connection between a

college education and a healthy democracy. We need to remind policymakers, even as we remind ourselves, of our force as an equalizer.

We are also rooted in the local community. There are practical reasons to hold tight to this value. It keeps us organically connected to our constituents and helps us rally support from virtually every congressional district in the nation. But this value also connects us to an ideal of community—to our belief that our citizens deserve safe places to learn and grow, places of civility, respect, and fair play.

Our small and rural colleges show us the way. From the 1920s they have prospered by building symbiotic relationships with their communities, relationships that remain alive and well today.

Here's another related impression. **Our advocacy must better influence the decisions that affect us.**

AACC, the Association of Community College Trustees, and most of your state organizations are now at the policy table. But sometimes our voices are timid.

My grandmother used to say, “If you think small, you will be.” As public institutions we want to be trustworthy collaborators, but never pawns.

The Voluntary Framework of Accountability is a case in point. We are building the framework because we have so often suffered through wrong-headed accountability efforts. So we convened community college practitioners and experts to create an initiative of our own, one that promises to positively influence the national conversation.

In the days ahead, as budget cuts grow, many risks await and many players will try to exert their control.

Surely, at times decisions will be taken out of our hands. But I know this. Only if we courageously use the influence we have today will it grow stronger.

So, I want to say to you, it's all hands on deck.

On important matters, we need to speak with one voice. And we need to be both brave and bold in our efforts to influence decisions that affect us.

One final impression **We must build a leadership *community* – and I intentionally put the emphasis on *community*.**

I see strong leaders now.

On the Listening Tour, I have been impressed by the courage, commitment, and, yes, the optimism of our leaders.

I have a theory about this. I believe we have a strong cadre of seasoned presidents who are **clutch performers**, precisely because they have cut their teeth and honed their skills on a steady diet of challenges. Now, when forced to navigate unprecedented waters, our leaders are ready.

But there is more to the story.

Since many thousands of our leaders will be retiring soon, we need to build a stronger *community* of leaders, one structured to continually renew itself.

We need to nurture and encourage the growth of younger leaders, the “non-commissioned officers” of our organization, who are closest to our students and often need mentors.

We need to develop entrepreneurial leaders who have the know-how to attack and solve stubborn problems.

And we need to bring new potential leaders into the circle and tap their hidden reserves. We need to lend insights from our hard-earned experiences.

Across all levels of leadership, we need to support each other. I believe our presidents need buddy systems within their states.

I believe our national leaders need to stay close to leaders in the field.

I believe AACC needs to collaborate more often with partners like the League for Innovation, the Association of Community College Trustees, and the National Urban League in order to develop these new-day leaders.

Strengthening this community is a particular passion of mine, and it is an essential role for AACC.

In my description of the ways the Katrina challenge influenced my leadership, there is a parable.

On one side, the storms of economic challenge are raging. The waves of uncertainty threaten our safe passage. But on the other side, it's a new day. The vessel of our mission is sound and our cause is right.

In this challenging new day, I believe we will again be at our best. We have strength that we can draw on. We work in a movement that draws power from seemingly ordinary students who are, in fact, extraordinary.

With every one that walks through our doors, we see the possibility of a transformation that is simply magical. Each day we work to build and rebuild communities that we care about and, in the process, we become nation-builders.

I know we are up to the challenge.

I will bring my lifetime experience, my unswerving commitment, and my heartfelt conviction to serve as your

association president. I ask you to join me ... and I ask for your support in this new and exciting journey.