

2 BC3 administrators lobby U.S. reps

Feb. 13-16, 2017

(Washington, D.C.) Advocacy for the Pell grant program, investment in education and workforce training, reauthorization of the Higher Education and Perkins acts, and support of students and institutions through the tax code were among national legislative priorities at the 2017 Association of Community College Trustees summit, Butler County Community College President Dr. Nick Neupauer said.

Neupauer and Ruth Purcell, executive director of the BC3 Education Foundation Inc., and other representatives of the nation's 1,200 community colleges stressed the importance of the educational legislative issues to members of the 115th Congress.

Purcell also attended what The Chronicle of Higher Education reported to be Betsy DeVos' first speech on higher-education issues since DeVos was confirmed as U.S. secretary of education Feb. 7.

"She was well prepared for this, which I think was encouraging for those of us who were concerned during the (confirmation) hearings," Purcell was quoted in The Chronicle in a Feb. 16 report headlined "In First Higher-Ed Address as Education Secretary, DeVos Praises Community Colleges."

Neupauer, who attended a summit meeting at the time of DeVos' brief speech, said "It sounded as if (DeVos) understood the significance and importance of the country's community colleges."

Attendees lobbied for the reinstatement of year-round Pell grants, which the ACCT said would provide "invaluable aid to students seeking to stay in school and progress more rapidly to attainment of a credential."

"Higher education has changed"

Year-round Pell grants were cut in 2011 as part of an effort to curtail federal spending. Purcell met for 45 minutes with U.S. Rep. Mike Kelly, R-3, whose district includes Armstrong, Butler and Mercer counties, and part of Lawrence County.

"What resonated with him was the year-round Pell grant," Purcell said. "I think a lot of people, maybe even in the congressional delegation, don't realize how higher education has changed, particularly for the community college student."

Pell grants do not cover summer studies, Purcell said.

"Community college students don't go home to mom and dad," she said. "They are working. They are self-sufficient. They have families of their own. Taking that break in the summer, if

you don't have money to come to school, has a serious impact on a lot of students. That is when they drop out. So I think that message came through loud and clear."

According to the ACCT, a nonprofit educational organization of governing boards, "More than 3 million low- and moderate-income community college students receive Pell grants each year. The grants reach more than one-third of all community college credit students and help them pay for tuition, course materials, transportation and living expenses."

Message heard "loud and clear"

Summit participants urged legislators to refrain from raiding temporary Pell grant surpluses, which secure the program's fiscal health, according to the ACCT.

"Pell right now has something of a reserve built up," Neupauer said. "Whenever the federal government is looking to balance a budget or shift money around, we're asking officials not to do it at the expense of Pell."

"I think that message was heard loud and clear."

Congress in May restored the year-round Pell grant in a \$1 trillion spending bill.

"This policy change will ensure hundreds of thousands of college students have the resources needed to finish their coursework in a timeframe that meets their individual needs," the U.S. Department of Education said in a June 19 statement.

Community College Daily reported that "The provision is expected to provide an estimated 1 million students an additional Pell grant of, on average, \$1,650 during the 2017-18 school year.

In addition, starting July 1, the maximum Pell amount would increase by \$105 to \$5,920." Neupauer and Purcell also met with U.S. Rep. Keith Rothfus, R-12, whose district includes part of Lawrence County, and attended meetings with aides to Pennsylvania U.S. Sens. Robert Casey, a Democrat, and Pat Toomey, a Republican.

"There were a lot of questions by representatives of the 1,200 community colleges across the country," Neupauer said. "A lot of it had to do with the new administration."

Investing in human capital is essential for global competitiveness, according to the ACCT, which added that 65 percent of all jobs by 2020 will require postsecondary education or training.

The ACCT stressed the importance of investment in education and workforce training, saying that it is "imperative that Congress provide adequate funding" in areas that include community college programs such as the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act, federal supplemental educational opportunity grants and federal work study.

“It really is all about the student”

Community college priorities under a reauthorization of the Higher Education Act include limited loans, risk-sharing, transparency and measurements. The ACCT also advocated for the reauthorization of the Perkins Career and Technical Education Act and supports “highly effective programs by emphasizing connections between Perkins recipients and the businesses and industries that they serve.”

It also backs the reform of the American Opportunity Tax Credit “so that community college students who receive Pell grants are not precluded from receiving the tax credit.”

ACCT is a major voice of community college trustees to the presidential administration, U.S. Congress, the Departments of Education and Labor and more.

The summit, Neupauer said, provides the opportunity to “inundate myself with federal issues. Many times in local or state meetings I am asked about what is going on at the national level. It is a chance to learn and study the issues and hear from ACCT representatives, who give us an inside look into these issues.”

Purcell said she was impressed by the passion for the work she sensed in those at community colleges.

“I don’t think you work at a community college unless you really want to make a difference,” Purcell said. “We really have a strong advocacy for the students we serve. It really is all about the student.”