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Grass Roots Advocacy



By John McDowell

The other day a colleague said to me: “John, you picked a fine time to be president of FACCC.” Well, I love a good challenge, and I’ve got a great team to work with at FACCC. But she was right. We are facing a daunting reality with this ongoing crisis. We’re in a deep recession, unemployment is soaring, and home foreclosures are rampant. Income, sales and property tax revenues have tanked, wrecking the state budget. Next year could be even worse. Everything got slashed this year, from education to health care, human services, cities and counties, state services, and even prisons. By now all faculty are surely feeling the impact of the draconian state budget cuts at their colleges.

The essence of democracy, majority rule, is mocked in California by the two-thirds vote needed to pass and fund a budget. The “tyranny of the minority” in Sacramento politics results in increasing rancor and polarization. This is why, despite claims to the contrary, California hasn’t seen a truly balanced budget yet in this century. Every year that Sacramento fails to fix California’s structural budget deficit, the crisis deepens.

Advocates, including FACCC’s great team—Executive Director Jonathan Lightman, Director of Government Relations Andrea York, the rest of the outstanding FACCC staff, and a dedicated Board of Governors—in Sacramento can only do so much.

Knowing that, FACCC and its allies sponsored Prop 92 which would have funded student growth (eliminated this year), capped student fees, and ensured the community college share of Prop 98 funds. But, in the time it took to write the initiative, raise \$5 million to pay for collecting almost a million voter signatures and then run a statewide TV campaign, the state budget tanked as the economy melted down. Prop 92

became the poster child for unfunded initiatives, and that spelled its doom.

Yet, even as Prop 92 went down in flames, community colleges remain popular with voters. Perhaps the missing element in the Prop 92 campaign - and the key to the system’s future success - lies with mobilizing its members and students. Very little happened at the grass roots level on Prop 92, but now nothing is holding faculty and other concerned parties back.

As the founder and faculty director for 31 years of the Labor Center at Los Angeles Trade-Tech College, my colleagues and I educate workers on building power and the key is member involvement. The system has great potential power, given that its members are intelligent and dedicated, and the CCCs educate 2.9 million adults, most of whom vote or could vote.

This year, the FACCC Board of Governors launched an effort to help faculty begin to realize their potential. By organizing grass roots advocacy, faculty and students can tell legislators first-hand about how fee hikes and budget cuts harm students.

These students are the very reason community colleges exist, and they all have compelling stories. They are single moms, first in their family to go to college, laid off workers returning to retool, immigrants, and people of color. Most are low-income, educationally disadvantaged, and yet, they are the key to California’s economic future. While lobbying, I have personally witnessed how legislators have been moved by students’ telling their personal stories. Grass roots advocacy really works, but only if, united faculty greatly increase the scale of their involvement.

Consider this. There’s at least one community college, if not more, in every senate and assembly district. These

legislators decide the budget, laws, and everything else that affects faculty lives. Teachers can impact those decisions if they organize just two contacts a year with each legislator at every college - one in their district office, the other on campus.

These visits must be, in the words of State Chancellor Jack Scott, “well choreographed, and include a diverse and well trained delegation of faculty, students, and others.” FACCC staff can provide faculty fact sheets, talking points, lobbying tips, and help setting up the meetings. Legislators love to visit their local community college(s), and faculty can make that happen systematically and with a purpose.

Faculty are also needed in Sacramento for the FACCC Advocacy & Policy Conference scheduled February 28 – March 1. The conference includes training and staff support. And faculty sometimes are needed to testify for an important bill. But that just isn’t enough. There’s no substitute for grass roots mobilization, especially given the system’s size and statewide reach. Each person can help turn FACCC’s vision “Every faculty a member, every member an advocate” into a reality.

Recently, Academic Senate President Jane Patton told the Consultation Council: “We need to take charge and be proactive.” Faculty can no longer just sit around and hope for the best. The more of us who become engaged, the greater success we can achieve. It was axiomatic for those of us who came of age politically in the 1960s that: “If you are not part of the solution, you’re part of the problem.” It will take all of us, working together, to bring about the change we need and be part of the solution.