

THE CHRONICLE

of Higher Education

Government

[Home](#) [News](#) [Administration](#) [Government](#)

December 5, 2010

Community-College Association Turns to Old Pro at Crucial Juncture

By Jennifer Gonzalez

Washington

During Walter G. Bumphus's nearly four decades in higher education, he has helped open a college, steered a higher-education system through the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, and trained new generations of community-college leaders.

Now renewal is again a central theme for Mr. Bumphus, who in January will become president of the American Association of Community Colleges.

Two-year colleges have gained new prominence under President Obama, who held the first White House summit on the sector in October. But the sector's momentum has stalled, as the president's \$12-billion plan to improve community colleges collapsed during the legislative process.

Mr. Bumphus will need to find a way to move the sector's ambitious college-completion agenda forward despite that setback. He will work to refocus attention on two-year institutions as key to the country's prosperity.

The Washington-based association's first black leader, he has led groups through crucial moments before.

As a young administrator, Mr. Bumphus helped lead the creation of East Arkansas Community College in 1974, involving himself in every aspect, whether developing curriculum or hiring faculty. Many years later, as president of the Louisiana Community and Technical College system, he turned a program battered by Hurricane Katrina into an engine of growth. He secured a \$5-million grant from the U.S. Department of Labor to develop construction-trade centers that helped in a rebirth of hard-hit coastal areas.

Now Mr. Bumphus, 62, is poised to take over at the community-college association at a pivotal time for its member institutions.

While community colleges received a lot of positive attention after President Obama made them a centerpiece of his higher-education

agenda, the challenges they face are numerous. Cuts in state budgets have forced community colleges to offer fewer courses, increase class sizes, and lay off employees, even as demand for their job-training programs grows. The sector is often criticized for its low graduation rates, resulting in part from the fact that many of its students toil in remedial courses that they never complete.

Those who know Mr. Bumphus say he has the right mix of skills and personality to lead the large advocacy association, which represents almost 1,200 institutions, with a total enrollment of more than 11 million. Known for his collaborative and entrepreneurial style, as well as his buoyant enthusiasm, he brings to the position wide-ranging experience.

He is a professor in the Community College Leadership Program at the University of Texas at Austin and chair of the department of educational administration. He earned a doctoral degree in educational administration from the university there.

Mr. Bumphus, a Kentucky native who earned a bachelor's and master's degree from Murray State University, has worked in community-college positions ranging from system president to dean of students. He also had a stint in the private sector as president of the higher-education division of Voyager Expanded Learning, a Dallas-based provider of intervention programs in reading and math for schools.

That experience influenced his approach to leadership, he says. "Working in the corporate world shaped the way I look at running the business of a college. It helped me pay closer attention to not only the finances but meeting the needs of the customer."

Prominent National Exposure

As president of the community-college association, Mr. Bumphus's role will comprise equal parts administrator, politician, and advocate.

His day-to-day duties will focus on meeting the needs of the group's members, but the job is also to influence policy makers and serve as head cheerleader for community colleges, making sure their story is understood. It's a robust position, one with potential power in Washington's higher-education debates.

George R. Boggs, the departing president, has overseen the community-college sector during a period of rapid enrollment growth and high visibility. Gaining that exposure is one of the major achievements of Mr. Boggs's 10-year tenure. And it has contributed

to a cultural shift in the public's view of community colleges, which have become the first choice for ever more college-bound students.

Mr. Boggs has made the case for community colleges to lawmakers and to the public as an affordable collegegoing option that offers strong academic quality.

Like his predecessor, Mr. Bumphus will find himself working behind the scenes to make sure that policy is crafted in a way that is favorable to his college sector. And he will have to keep tabs on emerging trends, so that community colleges can work to best fulfill their academic and work-force-training roles.

Higher-education lobbyists expect Mr. Bumphus to be even more in the forefront of policy debates than Mr. Boggs, given the new leader's assertive personality.

The two-year sector is coming off its greatest national exposure in the wake of the White House summit. Despite the good vibrations of the event, community colleges have also encountered profound disappointment this year. President Obama's \$12-billion plan to improve them was retooled into the \$2-billion, four-year Community College and Career Training Grant Program.

The scaling back of the president's plan was a lost opportunity to make significant changes in two-year degree programs and campus facilities, although community-college leaders, including Mr. Bumphus, say they are grateful for the money they did receive. Their goal now will be to build on those dollars and the positive press the community colleges have received.

John E. Roueche, a professor of educational administration at Austin, says the two-year sector has historically not done a good job explaining to Congress or state legislatures the extent of community colleges' impact on the economy and the work force. But Mr. Bumphus is good at that, Mr. Roueche says of his Texas colleague. "He can tell that story better than anybody I know."

When he arrived at the Louisiana system, in 2001, Mr. Bumphus wanted it to play a stronger role in the region, and especially in the workplace. He persuaded governing-board members and key state legislators to take a trip with him to visit cutting-edge community colleges in other states that were creating partnerships with nearby businesses to meet work-force needs. As a result, the Louisiana system was able to set up job-training programs around the state to serve the health-care and construction industries.

"All of a sudden," Mr. Roueche says, "board members and legislators understood that community colleges were not just a cost item in the state budget, but an investment in economic-development renewal."

Emphasis on Completion

In Washington, Mr. Bumphus will have to do more than tell a good story, especially as politicians increase pressure on colleges to improve their performance. Republicans, who took control of the House of Representatives and gained seats in the Senate in November, have said they want to expand Democrats' inquiries into the performance of for-profit colleges to all of higher education. Graduation rates at two-year colleges are consistently low, with fewer than 25 percent of students who seek associate degrees earning them within three years.

Mr. Bumphus says one of his main priorities will be to steer a sector with a longtime focus on student access to instead turn its attention to student success.

President Obama has set a goal that by 2020, the United States will lead the world in producing college graduates. He has called on community colleges to help reach that goal by producing five million more graduates with degrees or certificates in the next 10 years.

The association has set its own goal, along with five other groups that represent two-year colleges, to increase student-completion rates by 50 percent over the next decade.

To that help reach that mark, Mr. Bumphus plans to embark on a national listening tour to learn what college and state leaders are doing to help students get through remedial education, a main stumbling block to degree completion. The association must do a better job of promoting promising practices that can be shared among community colleges, he says. He is especially fond of course formats that allow students to focus only on concepts they haven't mastered rather than require them to repeat an entire course.

Community colleges should also figure out how to do more to demonstrate their performance, he says. "We need to embrace accountability. It's important that we have a hand in determining the appropriate metrics. Should we be measured against the same metrics as a Harvard or the University of Maryland? Perhaps not. I know not. But are there appropriate metrics for us? Absolutely."

The community-college association is leading an effort, called the Voluntary Framework of Accountability, which Mr. Bumphus will continue to press. The project seeks to develop ways to measure

students' progress and success, along with two-year colleges' ability to meet work-force, economic, and community-development needs. It will include a tool for data collection and display that will allow institutions to compare their degree-completion data against those of peer colleges.

Community colleges face a lot of challenges, not least increasing the graduation rates of its students, says Mary Spilde, immediate past chair of the association's Board of Directors and president of Lane Community College, in Oregon.

The association wanted a leader who would capitalize on the sector's increased visibility to move its agenda forward. It was Mr. Bumphus's gumption, Ms. Spilde says, that led the board to choose him as the person for the job.

Copyright 2010. All rights reserved.

The Chronicle of Higher Education 1255 Twenty-Third St, N.W. Washington, D.C. 20037