



INNOVATION ABSTRACTS

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CONGRESS-TO-CAMPUS: BRINGING VITALITY TO THE CLASSROOM

Congress-to-Campus is a program of the Stennis Center for Public Service at Mississippi State University, in conjunction with the Association of Former Members of Congress. The purpose of the program is to encourage careers in public service while letting young people know what it is like to run for and serve in Congress.

The Stennis Center identifies two retired congressmen, one from each major political party, and pays their transportation to the college they are scheduled to visit. The college, in turn, provides accommodations and food during the visit, makes all other appropriate arrangements for a visit typically lasting for three days, beginning in the afternoon of day one through lunch on day three. Typical events the congressmen attend include classes in political science, economics, mass communication, and American history. They also meet with student leaders, as well as faculty and administrators, to increase general interest in government service.

Asheville-Buncombe Technical Community College in Asheville, North Carolina, first learned about the Congress-to-Campus program from the president of the North Carolina Community College System, Martin Lancaster, who served in the state's House of Representatives in the late 1980's and early 1990's. President Lancaster had served on a Congress-to-Campus visit to New Mexico State University and understood the program to be a worthwhile endeavor. With his encouragement, we decided to apply for a visit to our college. At about the same time, the president of A-B Tech and the chancellor of the University of North Carolina at Asheville were meeting about opportunities for collaboration between the two institutions. Congress-to-Campus seemed to be a perfect activity for collaboration. Collaboration would decrease the costs to both institutions, while increasing the opportunities for significant student contact. An outstanding visit, the first in the history of the program, was jointly sponsored

by a community college and a neighboring university. From October 16 to 18, 2002, retired Congressman Earl Hutto (D-FL) and Congressman Robert Daniel, Jr. (R-VA) brought the Congress-to-Campus program alive at A-B Tech and UNCA!

Over three days, the congressmen visited classes on both campuses. Each session followed the question-and-answer format, with the student participants coming prepared with a wide variety of questions relating to and far afield from the course. One particularly animated class in American history asked many questions concerning illegal immigration, as well as the actions taken by our government to stem the tide of cocaine from South America. The students were engaged and willing to question and assert their own opinions, particularly if they disagreed with the congressmen. The most common questions dealt with the timely issue of possible war with Iraq. By and large, questions were thoughtful and challenging. "Is war with Iraq really about our need for oil? Would it not be smarter to develop alternative sources of fuel?" one A-B Tech history student asked. "What is Saddam Hussein really after?" another asked. Then there were the age-old questions: "Does my vote really matter? Can a letter from me really make a difference?"

Two other sessions were noteworthy. The first was an interview of Congressman Hutto by a news writing class at UNCA. The entire class was dedicated to discussing the possibility of war with Iraq. Members of the class interviewed the congressman as if they were reporters and he were giving a press conference. The students then wrote their story from the interview. The second session involved 60 economics students from A-B Tech and over 150 ninth graders, American government students from Asheville High School located near campus. This session was attended by more than 250 people and was the largest of all the sessions. For 50 minutes, both groups of students vied for opportunities to ask questions of the honored guests. Questions ranged from personal ("What made you go into politics?"), to governmental ("How does a bill become a law?"), to international ("Should we attack Iraq?"), to philosophical ("Should women be drafted?"). It was



apparent that the students were prepared, engaged, and interested. There were more questions than there was time to ask them.

The visit also allowed for social occasions over meals and coffee, where invited participants had the opportunity to ask questions in a more intimate setting. Two such occasions allowed the community college to spotlight its award-winning culinary program. Hospitality students received practice preparing and serving classical meals. At the same time, the college hosted university faculty and administrators to two superb meals.

The College-to-Campus program gave A-B Tech the chance to share a curricular activity with UNCA, where many of our students aspire to transfer. It also allowed for similar networking with the local high school, perhaps planting thoughts in a few minds regarding plans after high school. Relationships were built through a positive, joint academic experience. For their parts, Congressmen Daniel and Hutto did excellent jobs of encouraging students to consider careers in public service—the principal goal of their visit. And most important, the college and the university had the unique opportunity to weave practical and anecdotal experiences in government and politics into the curriculum. Congress-to-Campus proved to be an outstanding opportunity for two institutions to collaborate and strengthen their relationships as they brought curriculum to life for both their own and a select group of local high school students.

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