



## Mesa college student government hosts 3-night legislature, congressional candidate forum

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By Michelle Peirano, Special to Tribune |

Arizona has been near the bottom of national education rankings for years. The National Education Association has Arizona ranked at 48th in spending per student, and according to a recent report by The Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, Arizona has had the largest drop among the 50 states in education funding since 2008.

“Arizona, it’s in a free fall,” said Andrew Kuhn, president of the Associated Students of Mesa Community College. “The only way it can be corrected is by starting from the ground up.”

To Kuhn and his classmates, the “ground up” includes creating a connection with those who make the laws and allocate funding — in this case, candidates running for state legislature or U.S. congressional offices.

In an effort to help students — potential young voters — learn more about candidates’ positions on education, Kuhn and the Associated Students are hosting a candidate forum spanning three nights this week (Oct. 1-3) at the East Valley Institute for Technology. At the event, candidates running to represent the region served by Mesa Community College will answer questions on higher education posed by students and local residents.

“With students there’s a lack of civic involvement, engagement,” Kuhn said. “If we give them the chance to ask politicians themselves they’ll be more engaged in their civic duties.”

Each day since the primary election ended, Kuhn, with help from Maricopa Community Colleges’ Center for Civic Participation and the associated students, said he has been inviting candidates to participate in the forum. He’s managed to get 20 candidates to participate, spanning the event’s three nights — Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday. Although some candidates like U.S. Senate hopefuls Jeff Flake and Richard Carmona were unable to attend, state races will be well represented, with Tempe and Mesa both having full attendance, Kuhn said.

The first night of the event will focus on U.S. Senate candidate Marc Victor, and U.S. Representative candidates Spencer Morgan and Powell Gammill. Candidates for Arizona State Senate will attend the second night (Tuesday) and candidates for Arizona House of Representatives will attend the third (Wednesday). Each night will start with a meet and greet between the candidates and audience, followed by a community discussion to get a feel for what the audience would like to know. Kuhn will then ask the candidates questions compiled by Mesa Community College’s student government.

“I hope they come with an open mind and show their true beliefs and true policies,” Kuhn said.

Democrat Scott Prior of Apache Junction, running for Arizona Senate in District 16, thinks that to be strong, informed voters, people need to hear from all candidates.

“I don’t think the politicians are listening to the people anymore,” he said.

Republican State Senator Rich Crandall of Mesa, who chairs the education committee, would like to hear more of what students expect from education and to share information about state resources with the audience, he said. Although university enrollment has been increasing in Arizona, there is still more to do and only a handful of Arizona legislators are passionate about education, he said.

“We still aren’t where we need to be to be competitive with other states in terms of percentage of people with a bachelor’s degree,” Crandall said.

A significant change for Arizona legislature will be the introduction of new standards, which are supposed to take effect in the next couple years, Crandall said.

Matthew Cerra of Mesa, a democratic candidate for Arizona House of Representatives, thinks that political and moral ideology has inhibited education in Arizona. The state should just be focusing on giving teachers the resources they need, he said.

Democrat Greg Gadek of Mesa has two children who recently graduated college and one currently enrolled. The family has experienced budget cuts and tuition increases over the last few years, he said.

“When legislators cut education, they are diverting those costs onto the parents and the students,” Gadek said. “It’s all about priorities. Higher education was funded at higher levels five or six years ago; We’ve gotten our priorities out of wack.”

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