

Commentary: Our community colleges are a national treasure by Dr. Jill Biden



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By Jill Biden

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On Tuesday in Michigan, President Barack Obama announced an important national goal of 5 million additional community college graduates by the year 2020, and a landmark federal investment in community colleges to make it possible. It's a plan that makes sense, as I know firsthand.

I have been an educator for 28 years and I have taught in the community college system for more than 16 years. I don't have to look any further than my classroom to see the power of community colleges to change lives. My students enter the classroom from many different educational, economic and cultural backgrounds, but the community college system puts them on the same path of opportunity: It gives them a sense of confidence that they can achieve what they set out to achieve, and a marketable skill set that will enable them to do it. By supporting community colleges and their students around the country, this administration is expanding the future for millions of Americans.

In the United States there are almost 1,200 community colleges among our 4,100 public and private institutions of higher education. All together, community colleges serve 11.5 million students. As their name suggests, community colleges are uniquely able to address the needs of their communities. They are flexible, offering specialized training programs to address workforce shortages, and often partnering with local businesses to meet the emerging needs of their regions. That is why community colleges have seen the fastest growth among U.S. higher education institutions over the last three decades. The grants that President Obama announced Tuesday will allow community colleges to meet the needs of this rapidly growing enrollment by funding innovative programs that will increase graduation rates, make courses more relevant to business needs, and strengthen ties to high schools and other colleges and universities.

Obama's goal is for the United States to once again have the highest proportion of students graduating from college in the world by 2020 - and he's counting on community colleges to help make good on that promise. I know America's community colleges are up to the task. The grants he announced Tuesday will help these institutions renovate, modernize and expand campus facilities to serve additional students.

I have seen how community colleges fill important gaps, granting two-year degrees, teaching English to immigrants, providing vocational skills training and certification, and teaching basic academic skills to those who may not yet be ready to pursue a four-year degree. It's also hard to ignore the financial advantages: In today's challenging economy, community colleges are an increasingly affordable way for

students from middle-class families to complete the first two years of a baccalaureate degree before moving on to a four-year university.

Community colleges typically have open admissions policies, providing training and learning opportunities for everyone who wants them. They are essential to our higher education mission, often providing access to a quality education for students who would otherwise not have that option.

Community colleges make so much sense for so many. From a policy perspective, they make sense; from an economic perspective, they make sense. But I am a teacher, and my experience with community colleges is personal. People sometimes ask me why I choose to teach at a community college, and why I have continued to teach since the presidential inauguration in January. There was never a doubt in my mind that I would keep teaching. The reason is simple: It's the students.

I have always said that my students are my heroes, and this is no exaggeration. I am profoundly moved by their determination to learn, and their quest to make a better life for themselves and their families. In my classes I find single parents who come to school in the evening, weary from a long day, yet eager to create a brighter future for their children. I find men and women who rush to class at the end of a busy work day. It's not easy - but they are determined to be the first in their family to attend college. I see recently unemployed workers who are looking for new skills in growing fields like health care, teaching, information technology and green technology. I see immigrants struggling to learn English who discover that America is indeed a land of opportunity; a place where education opens doors to what is possible.

And I am thrilled that this administration is investing in opening those doors even wider.

I have always said that community colleges are one of America's best-kept secrets - and we have a president who supports their contribution, bringing more students to community colleges so that they can gain the skills and the confidence they need to succeed in a new era. I can't think of a better investment.

ABOUT THE WRITER

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