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April 14, 2010

Community Colleges: Our Work Has Just Begun

By Jill Biden

I have been a teacher for almost three decades and a community-college instructor for the past 16 years. Last spring, President Obama asked me to increase awareness about one of the best-kept secrets of higher education: the very sizable and valuable contribution of community colleges. Since then I have been visiting colleges around the country and reporting back to the president about their challenges, innovations, and ideas. This issue is a priority for the Obama-Biden administration. We are committed to making community colleges better and more accessible to students across this nation.

The passage of the Health Care and Education Reconciliation Act of 2010 was a substantial victory for community colleges. The final legislation does not contain everything our administration had proposed, but it does include one of the most significant new federal investments in higher education, and in community colleges, since the GI Bill was introduced, over 60 years ago.

Pell Grants had been threatened with a 60-percent funding decrease, but we stabilized the Pell program and ensured that such grants would increase with inflation. The Pell Grant victory will put money in the pockets of millions of full- and part-time community-college students, helping them pay for tuition, books, supplies, and living expenses. This increase in financial aid is coupled with the recently expanded Opportunity Tax Credit, which provides students a tax credit of up to \$2,500 per year for up to four years to offset higher-education expenses, including a partial credit for those who owe no taxes. It also sets up income-based repayment of student loans, capping loan repayments at rates based on income and family size. As a lifelong teacher, I am particularly pleased that income-based repayment helps those who choose public-service careers. Graduates who work as teachers, nurses, or in other public-service professions—and those who serve in the military—can have their loans forgiven after 10 years.

The reconciliation bill also sets aside \$2-billion (\$500-million per year over four years) to develop and improve educational and training programs at community colleges. Throughout the nation, community colleges will receive funds to help them serve students more effectively, and to help form partnerships with regional industry clusters so that graduates will be prepared to excel in the local work force.

This administration's commitment to community colleges is a long-term one. The president has asked me to convene a national summit on community colleges in the fall. We will bring college presidents, instructors, and advocates together with business leaders and other stakeholders to share best practices and successful models for helping students gain the knowledge, training, certificates, and degrees needed to succeed. This will be a working summit, a setting where we

can shine a spotlight on community colleges, highlight their utility to families and communities across the nation, nurture more collaboration, and generate additional policy ideas and goals for student success. As a community-college instructor, I am thrilled to be leading this summit and truly pleased to have the support of the administration.

Over the past 16 years, I have seen firsthand the power of community colleges to change lives. And that is, in large part, why I never really considered the possibility of not teaching at a community college after we moved to Washington last year. Since then I have been privileged to teach students from more than 22 countries.

As an English teacher, I frequently use journals and exercises in our school's learning lab as a tool for my students to develop their writing and composition skills. One exercise that is always productive is to encourage my students to write about their core beliefs as inspired by National Public Radio's *This I Believe* program. In these sessions, students listen to radio segments as examples—and then I encourage them to write about their own core beliefs. I am constantly moved and humbled by the experiences my students share in this exercise and in their journals about their dreams, challenges, and values.

Each one of them has a story to tell—stories about dedication and sacrifice.

Every day, I see my students work hard to overcome obstacles just to be in the classroom. Many of them work full time, have aging parents in need of care and attention, or are parents themselves. Often they contend with difficult economic realities. They are eager to learn, and many of them are the first members of their families to attend college. They persevere because they understand that getting an education will change their lives for the better. It will improve their job prospects and enrich their understanding of the world around them.

Community colleges can also serve as a gateway from a high-school diploma to a baccalaureate degree. They offer an affordable option for middle-class high-school students who want to attend a four-year college but cannot afford the tuition. The numbers tell the story: The average cost of tuition at a private four-year university is over \$26,000 for the current academic year. At public four-year universities, the average is \$7,000. Community-college tuition averages \$2,500, presenting a far more affordable way to complete the first two years of a college education, especially when the credits earned on a community-college campus can often be transferred directly into four-year programs. It is not a coincidence that community colleges educate over 40 percent of all postsecondary students nationally.

For laid-off workers, community colleges offer job-certification programs that teach new skills and professions. Most people would be surprised to look at the catalog of an average community college today—they would find course work in a range of emerging health-care industries, training in cutting-edge technologies, offerings in architecture and green-building techniques, and classes in highly marketable job fields. For an immigrant or first-generation American, community college is often the place to begin a postsecondary education.

All of us have the opportunity to match the dedication of community-college students with a renewed commitment to ensuring their success. By working together, we can maximize the return on the new federal investment in students through Pell Grants, and in community colleges themselves, by modernizing the way classes are offered, ensuring easy transfer to four-year schools, and supporting other strategies for student success.

We know that education is the key to unlocking human potential. And we know that today, on community-college campuses across this country, millions of students are eager to build a more secure future for themselves, their families, and our country. We cannot—and we will not—let them down. As a member of the education community, I ask for your continued partnership in the months and years ahead as we continue to build support for community colleges and work to improve their offerings and outcomes. This is the moment for community colleges. Our work has just begun.

Jill Biden, a lifelong educator with a doctorate in education from the University of Delaware, teaches English at Northern Virginia Community College. She is the wife of Vice President Joe Biden.