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Community Colleges Are the Best Kept Secret in America! Really?

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America's so called best kept secret is already known by nearly 12 million people across the country, providing them with more affordable access to a better future.

On January 21, 2022, in an announcement on major television channels, U.S. President Joe Biden touted Intel's \$20 billion investment in a new computer chip facility in New Albany, Ohio, and talked about the progress of the American economy. In a throwaway line, he cited his wife's observation that "community colleges are the best kept secret in America." He repeated the remark in his first State of the Union speech on March 1, 2022. Jill Biden is a faculty member at Northern Virginia Community College and a strong advocate of the community college.

But this statement, meant to be a positive recognition of the importance of community colleges, needs to be shelved. It is an insult to the thousands of faculty and staff working in community colleges and the millions of students attending community colleges. Many community college presidents use this statement in their inauguration speeches to signal their intent to ensure their new college is no longer a secret in the community, the state or the nation. Faculty members in the audience who have been working for decades at the college squirm in embarrassment when the president cites this worn-out platitude.

The line about community colleges is as ridiculous as the statement politicians and other leaders make about some nefarious event. Such instances ranging from sexual abuse by a coach, priest, scout leader or physician to an insurrection by a mob at the Capitol are examples of when leaders piously promise they will "make sure this never happens again." Are they completely unaware that human nature will not be reined in by these absurd promises?

Community Colleges Are in Everyone's Back Yard

The absurdity of the "best kept secret" statement becomes clear when one examines what is known about the nation's community colleges. Here are some highlights:

- Community colleges have existed for 121 years. The first was established in Illinois in 1901 as Joliet Junior College.
- Two-year colleges, junior colleges, technical colleges and community colleges are various names given to these kinds of institutions; in the U. S., the term community college has become the most common.
- Every state in the Union has a community college.

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- From 1960 to 1970, the number of American community colleges doubled. Many of these new colleges doubled their enrollments every year throughout the decade. National, state and local newspapers peppered readers with headline stories during this period of great growth. In the 1970s, community colleges continued rapid enrollments, going from 1.6 million students to more than 4.5 million in 1980.
- The U.S. Office of Education reports that there are 1,462 community colleges in the U. S. The American Association of Community Colleges (AACC) reports that 1,044 hold membership in the Association.
- AACC reports that 11.8 million full- and part-time students attended community colleges in 2021.
- Representation of community college students among undergraduates in fall 2019:
 - 41% of all undergraduates
 - 56% of Native American students
 - 53% of Latinx students
 - 43% of Black students
 - 38% of Asian/Pacific Islander students
- American community colleges are funded by billions of dollars from the federal and state governments, corporations and foundations.
- Community colleges have spread around the world as a model of education that meets social and economic needs. All countries have multiple types of educational institutions, and almost every country has an institution equivalent to a community college.

So, who has been keeping the best secret in America from all of us? Is it the thousands of businesses and industries, both large and small, that hire tens of thousands of community college students every year? Is it the police departments, fire departments, first responder agencies and nursing units that hire the great majority of their workers from community colleges? Is it the universities that depend on their enrollments from students transferring from community colleges? Is it the nation's parents who pay an average of \$3,770 in tuition and fees a year for their students attending a community college instead of \$10,560 to attend a four-year college?

How could a secret be kept about the most egalitarian institution of higher education ever invented. The community college is democracy's college, often referred to as the people's college. The community college is an American social invention. It is an open-door college admitting students who never dreamed they could access higher education. It is an accessible college located within commuting distance of most of the nation's population. Florida's 28 community colleges are within a commuting distance of 30 miles for 99% of the population. It is a *community* college—located in every major community in the nation and hundreds of small communities designed to serve the area's local needs. It is a second-chance college, providing those who could not succeed in others with another opportunity to thrive.

So, for those who keep thinking the community college is the best kept secret in America—think again. The secret has been out for a very long time.



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