



## Jill Biden: Support leads to success in community college

By Mary Beth Marklein, USA TODAY

President Obama asked community college professor Jill Biden this month to help him raise awareness of the importance of two-year colleges. Biden, who earned a doctorate in education in 2007 and wrote her dissertation on student retention in community colleges, has been an educator for 28 years. She spent 15 years teaching English composition at Delaware Technical & Community College. After she and her husband, Vice President Biden, moved to Washington, she joined the adjunct faculty at [Northern Virginia Community College](#). This spring, she taught developmental English and English as a Second Language to students at the school's Alexandria campus. She shares some of her classroom experiences with USA TODAY.

### Q. You've taught in community colleges for 16 years. How do you define success?

A. Success is when my students have developed confidence and self-esteem that can help them achieve their goals. It's important that they can write a research paper, structure a logical argument in writing and determine when to use a comma versus a semicolon, but most important is that they emerge with a sense of confidence.

### Q. How can educators help?

A. It's hard to underestimate the power of a personal connection between the student and teachers, along with other faculty, staff and specialists. I discuss mentoring in my doctoral thesis. A support network at all levels — academic, psychological, social and physical — is critical, especially for students who are the first members of their families to enter college. They don't necessarily have a parent or sibling who can help them navigate all of the challenges of choosing courses, finding financial aid resources and making their way through the system. Programs that provide mental-health support and early-detection systems for struggling students are also important.

### Q. What should we tell students who just can't seem to get it?

A. Most of my students are juggling work, raising a family and putting themselves through school at the same time. If a student is making a genuine effort to learn, educators should make every effort to support that student. Too often, we write off students too soon when they could succeed with more help. But sometimes a program is simply not the right fit. When that has happened, I have helped some students find an environment better suited to their natural skills and abilities.

### Q. You taught a class for English-language learners for the first time this year. How did it go?

A. It was incredible. These are students from 22 countries, coming from entirely different cultures, different frames of reference and different continents, and all of them are trying to build a life here in America.

As a writing teacher, I often get insights into my students' lives that other teachers may not get. Writing about their experiences takes a lot of courage and guts on their part. We shared a lot of laughs in class as students opened themselves up and offered their own stories about their transitions to America. One student was shocked to open her door one night to be greeted by a devil, a bunny rabbit and a robber. Only later did she learn the meaning of Halloween.

### Q. How has the classroom changed over the years?

A. Students definitely expect their teachers to stay up-to-date with the technology. I started as a chalkboard teacher, and now I use a computer lab, e-mail, online communications and other tools. This summer, I will be working to learn more about the technology systems used at my community college so that I can stay up-to-date. But I strongly believe that my interaction, personal contact and building confidence in my students remains the most critical part of my teaching, and I think my students would agree.

### Q. What attracted you to community colleges in the first place?

A. So many aspects of community college appeal to me, but the main reason I love being a community college instructor is simple: It's the students themselves. I always say my students are my heroes.

I used to say that community colleges are one of the best kept secrets in America — but President Obama and this administration clearly recognize their value, and

that's why I was so thrilled when the president asked me to help raise awareness about the [financial aid available](#) to students and unemployed workers who might pursue a community college education.

**Q. You have participated in some of the vice president's task-force meetings about the middle class. Where do community colleges fit in this conversation?**

**A.** More and more middle-class families are finding themselves making tough decisions about how to cut expenses in order to make ends meet. A family should never have to choose between basic day-to-day necessities and pursuing a college education. Higher education accessibility is a priority for the president, and together we are raising awareness that community colleges are a quality, affordable option for middle-class families — and may be a more affordable gateway to a four-year school.

**Q. What are some of your plans for carrying out President Obama's request?**

**A.** I will continue to travel around the country visiting community college campuses, talking to students and workers, and engaging the media. My goal is to reach out to as many people as possible to explain how this administration is committed to supporting Americans who could benefit from community college educations.