

## VIEWPOINT

# Community colleges rock

By **JULEYKA LANTIGUA-WILLIAMS**

As an instructor at a community college, I'm delighted the White House is spotlighting the importance of institutions like mine.

On Tuesday, Jill Biden, Vice President Joe Biden's wife and a 17-year veteran professor at a community college, will convene the first White House Summit on Community Colleges to address their "critical role ... as part of America's economic vision for the future."

The future has always been very much in sight at community colleges, which diligently prepare millions of professionals for careers that have a tremendous impact on our lives.

For instance, close to 80 percent of our firefighters, law enforcement officers and emergency medical personnel are trained at our nation's 1,173 community colleges, according to the American Association of Community Colleges. Future accountants, actors and directors, computer software engineers, electricians, entrepreneurs, nurses, plumbers and teachers get degrees there.

Though our work usually goes unheralded, community colleges are booming. The number of students enrolled at community colleges last fall was 11.4 percent higher than in fall 2008, and 16.9 percent higher than in fall 2007.

I see this growth every day in my classroom. I welcome more eager new students every semester. Among them are young veterans just returning from serving our country, single mothers striving to improve their families' odds, immigrants who are the first to attend college, grandmothers who lost their longtime jobs and seek retraining and high school honor students who couldn't afford tuition at private schools.

My students humble and challenge me with their zeal, intelligence and drive:

like Alberta A., a middle-age student who worked the graveyard shift at a hospital, but still managed to arrive on time to our 8 a.m. class.

Like Helen V., mother of a 20-year-old college student, who got on the Dean's List before he did.

Or like Rosie B., a young widower from Brazil who is so determined to become a pharmacist she asked for extra work to improve her English.

Community colleges are successful because, unlike private colleges, they don't care where you've been — personally, socially or economically — but are focused on where you want to go, and in helping you get there.

They are also truly accessible, both geographically and financially.

Most are located in the hearts of the communities they serve. And going to community college costs only about \$2,500 a year.

The College Board reports that on average, in-state tuition for public four-year colleges is almost three times more expensive. Tuition at private four-year colleges is more than ten times as costly.

Because community colleges are relatively inexpensive, they attract a diverse student body: 42 percent are the first to attend college in their families; about 40 percent are students of color; 16 percent are 40 or older, as reported by the American Association of Community Colleges.

It's about time the national spotlight shone on community colleges.

But after all the fanfare and attention fade, we'll go back quietly about our business shaping the future of this country, one student at a time.

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