

#EndCCStigma Podcast Project / Episode Two

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[INTRO MUSIC – VOICE MONTAGE]

Tori Kopp: People usually think that when you go to a community college you might not be as smart or you might not have as many opportunities as you would with a bigger school, but from my experience being at a community college gave me more opportunities.

Katie Giordello: I think we have some pretty serious social problems in the US, and that only more accessible education, local and global collaborations can achieve, and I find that community colleges today are at the epicenter of all of these things and they deserve a more prominent place in our society and certainly in public opinion.

Doug Pontsler: As a company is looking at siting an operation within our community, the ability for the community to be able to respond with speed to what their needs are is critically important, and I think community colleges have demonstrated that swiftness, that fleetness of foot in many cases where you can develop a program that might be supportive of that particular sector.

Sarai Peterson: Community College gives you a fresh start. It helps you build yourself into the person that you want to become in order to become the person that you want to be.

[MUSIC FADES]

Steve Robinson Welcome to the #EndCCStigma podcast project. I'm Steve Robinson, President of Owens Community College in Ohio, and this is Episode Two of our podcast dedicated to ending the unfair stigma placed on America's community colleges. This is a four-part series of podcasts that is designed to amplify the voices of people from across the country who are using social media to create a more accurate view of community college and technical careers.

On today's episode we hear from a number of community college staff and administrators, and community college students, as well as researchers and economic development leaders. Guests on this episode include Desiree Polk-Bland, Mariena Moore, Melanie Hammer, Malik Burrell, Katie Giordello, Hanna Beene, Doug Pontsler, and Sarai Peterson.

We begin the episode with my conversation with Desiree Polk-Bland; if you have been listening from the beginning, you will remember Desiree from the

montage of voices that began episode one. I spoke with her on the telephone one evening early in the campaign.

Steve Robinson: I am delighted to be joined by Desiree Polk-Bland who's the Executive Dean of Student Affairs at Columbus State Community College here in Ohio. How are you, Desiree?

Desiree Polk-BI: I'm doing well tonight, Steve. How are you?

Steve Robinson: I'm great, I'm great. I'm so glad that I get to talk to you today and I'm really happy to have connected with you on Twitter. This social media campaign to push back against stigma against community colleges has resonated with a lot of people. What's your connection to it? Why does this matter to you?

Desiree Polk-BI: Columbus State is my fourth institution of higher education and my third community college. In my professional background, community colleges have just really spoken to me because of the open access nature and the fact that we give students an opportunity to really become who they are becoming from wherever they start. I think it resonated with me because this concept of community colleges somehow not being good enough is just, it is a stigma and we do need to get rid of it and really highlight all of the good that community colleges do and all of the populations that we serve.

Desiree Polk-BI: If we can get that message out as opposed to somehow this lesser than message, I think we do a better service to all of our students and in the process, we boost the economy because students are getting more training and able to compete in a job market. It is just, I just have strong feelings about my work in a community college.

Steve Robinson: I am nodding so vigorously that I think you could hear it through the microphone. That is wonderful. I couldn't agree more, so I'm delighted to add your voice to this great conversation because you said that so eloquently. This stigma, though, the lesser than that you talk about, do you have an anecdote or an example where you've encountered this in your work?

Desiree Polk-BI: In my work, when we recruit, when we go into high schools or we work with adults, there is this sense somehow that coming to a community college will disadvantage some students, especially students who want to go into professional programs. Because students have said to me, "Well, I was told by this four year institution that if I got this course from a community college, it might hurt my chances of getting into this professional program." That's not true.

Steve Robinson: No, no, it is not. It is not.

Desiree Polk-BI: [crosstalk 00:02:50]. Right, it is not true but that sense is still out there so that stigma of, somehow this belief that it's lesser than still exists. To get the

message out to students that our courses absolutely do transfer to four year institutions. We can help you map out the courses that do transfer and transfer into the programs that you want to get into. In action I've had that really told to me by students, that they were told by some source that if the courses were from a community college, that it would somehow impact their chances of getting into a program or impact the transferability of the courses into a program. That's how I've seen it in action and trying to eliminate that message and trying to really build up the comfort level in students and their parents, that that is not a true statement and to show them how we do transfer and articulate to other institutions.

Steve Robinson: It's fascinating, listening to you talk it's clear that a piece of information, a little nugget of misinformation we'll call it, it's such lore, right?

Desiree Polk-BI: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Steve Robinson: I mean it's not written down anywhere. Folks listening to the podcast who are from higher ed will get a chuckle of another piece of lore. It's like that oral rule that a lot of campuses have, "Well, if the professor is 15 minutes late you don't have to stay."

Desiree Polk-BI: Right, right, exactly.

Steve Robinson: It's not written down. If it's passed, it's passed on unknowingly, so that's a great example. Desiree, you have worked at a number of higher ed institutions, both community colleges and not community colleges. What makes you proud to work at a community college?

Desiree Polk-BI: It's really about the mission and the students. To work for an open access institution that really wraps its support around helping students succeed is so powerful for me. Community colleges to me are really at the core of understanding true equity. I think it's really important where I spend my time and where I put in my efforts and energy to continue the equity message for me. The mission of community colleges really is to serve your community, to figure out what programs are needed in that community to enhance the job market, to allow access to those programs to all students and to support them through the process.

Desiree Polk-BI: When I start thinking about why I do the work that I do, why I'm proud of the work I do, I know that we impact lives. Students come to the community college, come to college in general because they want better lives and I know that we provide them the support to help them achieve their goals. That's why I have pride in working for a community college.

Steve Robinson: I love that. All right. I've been, again, vigorously nodding my head. I couldn't agree more. I almost interrupted you to ask some follow up questions but you just hit all those great points. I guess I do have one follow up question. That is

you returned to this very important issue of equity. As a follow up, how are community colleges better or best positioned to handle an equity agenda for students?

Desiree Polk-BI: For me, from the equity lens, it's about, it's beyond access to opportunities. When we talk about, it's not about equal access to opportunities, it's about what support does a particular population of students need and where can they get that support? Where can we put our time and resources and energy in supporting groups to achieve their goals? From a community college standpoint, the fact that we don't have, there are test requirements for entry into and so if you happen to be from an under resourced high school or an under resourced environment and you may not perform well on a particular test which would just really make it impossible for you to attend some institutions that have requirements.

Desiree Polk-BI: When we say we open the door and we're going to support you and build up your skillset so that we will get you to that four year institution or we will get you into that job market, that's what I mean by equity. It's really of providing beyond just an opportunity, it is getting the actually holistic support around the student to get them to the next level. It's building confidence, it is working in spaces where you are working with even other students, the student supporters.

Desiree Polk-BI: Sometimes a student won't make a decision about going to college because it's just not something that their family thinks about. When you start working with families to say this is an opportunity for you, college is for you, this building your skillset and obtaining this credential is for you and you do that for all. Then you support the populations into obtaining those credentials. To me, that's where we really hit on the equity piece of making sure that all populations have access and the proper amounts of support to be successful.

Steve Robinson: I couldn't agree more and I think we are best positioned to respond in that way. That was so, so well put. In your role, I am sure you're in this situation that I'm going to describe to you on a fairly regular basis, but if you had an assembled group of people who you had the opportunity to deliver our value proposition, to make your best case about why community colleges are a valuable asset and shouldn't not be subjected to the stigma that they have, what would you tell that group?

Desiree Polk-BI: I would say that community colleges are probably better positioned than any higher education institution to change people's situations, to change a community, to change the economics of a community. Community colleges are positioned to do that because we are responsive to the community needs. When you look at our degree programs and you look at our relationships with high schools, our relationships with employers, our relationships with social service agencies, these relationships make it possible for our students to be successful. Once our students are successful, they change the economy of the community.

Desiree Polk-BI: Community colleges are the best positioned because we do allow, it's an open access institution. Everyone who wants to participate in this, we will find ways and avenues to support them, to build in holistic supports to allow them to be successful and to grow and to transition into whatever that four year institution might be or into the workplace where they're growing the economy. We are the college for the community and we support our communities in various ways. Our pitch around ending this stigma is community colleges are the future of education and where we're going as a country. We will continue to grow and develop and be able to be responsive to the future of education, the future of work.

Steve Robinson: We need to put you in front of lots of groups so you can say exactly that. That was fantastic. Desiree, I appreciate you taking some time to talk to me. This has been fantastic. It's been great to connect with you on Twitter and thanks for all that you're doing on trying to get a more accurate view about community colleges out there in the public sphere.

Desiree Polk-BI: Well Steve, thank you very much for coming up with that hashtag because it does resonate with a lot of people. It was great to connect via Twitter and I appreciate your efforts on this.

Steve Robinson: We'll just keep it going. Thank you so much, Desiree.

Desiree Polk-BI: Thank you.

Steve Robinson: I'm really happy to be talking to Marina Moore who is a business administration major and a community college student. Thanks for talking to me, Marina.

Marina Moore: Thank you.

Steve Robinson: What do you like about being a community college student?

Marina Moore: I like the fact that it gave me a chance to grow. Without this opportunity, I don't know what I would do. I'm just thankful the teachers are great, there's a lot of resources. Everybody moves at a different pace. For me, I got to learn more about myself and grow and playing basketball at the same time. School, it was hard but I got the hang of it with all the people around me helping. There's a lot of support.

Steve Robinson: You proved to yourself that you can do it.

Marina Moore: Exactly.

Steve Robinson: That is so cool. Have you heard anybody say anything negative about community colleges, like putting them down, saying bad things?

Marina Moore: I think the thing about what most people say is, they just think people that go to community colleges are dumb.

Steve Robinson: Really?

Marina Moore: Yeah. Like they're slow, like they can't learn at a faster pace, but I don't think it's about that. I think it's just the person individually doing what they have to do to make it.

Steve Robinson: Yeah. I couldn't agree more and that couldn't be any more wrong.

Marina Moore: There is a bunch of people that may not get the best grades but they might not try hard enough. There's people that might be smart and they could do everything but they just choose not to do it.

Steve Robinson: Right. If you had a group of people gathered around who were thinking about going to college, what would you say to them about attending a community college?

Marina Moore: I'd say go for it. I'd just say go for it. You can't really go wrong.

Steve Robinson: There you have it. Marina, thank you for talking to me.

Marina Moore: Thank you.

Steve Robinson: Okay, next I'm very happy to be talking to Melanie Hammer who is at Nassau Community College in Long Island in New York. In addition to being Dean of Arts and Humanities, she's also dev ed writing faculty which is something she and I have in common. Melanie, how are you doing tonight?

Melanie Hammer: I'm doing great, thank you. How are you?

Steve Robinson: I'm great. You just got out of class. I'm so jealous. You spent the evening with some basic writing students and that's great. What is it about this social media campaign about community college stigma that resonated with you?

Melanie Hammer: Well, this might sound kind of funny but I think the timing is perfect. There was that scandal recently, that's really current, about the parents cheating their children's way into these fancy schools. I just got so irritated because first of all, as we all know, it's not an even playing field in K to 12. Different districts have more resources than others, so my first reaction was it's not enough that you have money and you can send your children to really good schools and get them SAT tutors? You have to cheat their way into school and cheat their way into what they think of, these parents, as good schools.

Melanie Hammer: It just got me thinking about how meaningless a lot of this is in terms of, well, you have to go to a four year school, you have to go to a name school, when so

many, many people started at community college and you can go on and do anything from there.

Steve Robinson: Right. We see a lot of great research coming out about fit and engagement and excellent teaching being the real determinants of success in college. It sounds like you've had a career in the community college. How long have you been working in community college?

Melanie Hammer: 33 years and proud of it.

Steve Robinson: Fantastic. 33, that's a good number. I'm a vinyl record fanatic so 33 and a third is a great number. Do you have an example of this stigma in action? There's one you plucked from the headlines with the college admissions scandals but have you seen it up close and personal in a way that demonstrates what that stigma's all about?

Melanie Hammer: Locally certainly, and I suspect this is true for a lot of community colleges, the whole 13th grade idea. There's also the idea that I think because Nassau offers developmental ed for students who are under prepared, there's some sense that, they [inaudible 00:16:16] people don't know that we also have an honors program, that we also have amazing professors. One of the things that, one of many things that's great about Nassau is we have a theater department, a music department, a dance department, a fine arts department. You can get an amazing arts education from local practitioners at a fraction of what you would pay and it's for the community. The community has access to things that they might not otherwise have access to.

Steve Robinson: Yeah, and I want to ask you a follow up question about that because in your community, it sounds like if you have arts programs, if you have programs for high achieving students like honors programs, how aware is your local community about that aspect of your institution?

Melanie Hammer: I think, I have to say I don't think we've done the best job with outreach. I think that people don't, I think the community sees us as kind of a last chance, really.

Steve Robinson: Okay.

Melanie Hammer: Fewer and fewer people understand a generation ago we were really seen as a two year transfer institution. I think people don't understand or are less aware of how positive that transfer journey can be.

Steve Robinson: Right, right. Even when there's great data. We know that nationally our transfer students, they graduate at higher rates, they graduate with higher GPAs, but sometimes that doesn't just break through people's consciousness. You've spent a great career in community college. What makes you proud to teach and lead at a community college?

Melanie Hammer: I'm such a believer in the community college mission. It's actually partly what I was saying to my students today. One of my students who's, this class I had tonight, they're a really good class and of course they are because they're returning adults. They mostly worked all day and then they take a class and they make me be a better teacher because they've brought their tired selves and I have to bring my best self, but one of my students was saying today that he wasn't the kind of student he is today in high school. I said, "Of course you weren't, because you wouldn't be in this class."

Melanie Hammer: I said, "There's a number of ways students end up in this class. They are returning adults and they forgot what they learned, they had a really good time in high school and they never learned what they should have learned, or lots of times people had things going on. What I say about Nassau and any other community college is you weren't ready when you were 18, that's fine. You're ready now. We're here for you, we're ready. I have adult students say, "Oh well, I'm starting this so late." No they're not. They're starting it after they worked and after they've raised children and after they had other things they needed to take care of.

Melanie Hammer: I always say, "Look, it's not a race. You do things in the order in your life when you're ready to do them and you're doing them now. You're perfectly on time for you." That's hugely important. I don't think any other country has a community college system. I think everywhere else, if you miss the boat, if you weren't ready to go to college at 18, your chances of being able to come back and do it are limited. I think it's part of what's, there many flaws in the American education system but the community college system is not one of them.

Steve Robinson: I couldn't agree more. Your talking about that conversation makes me so nostalgic for basic writing, developmental writing. It sounds like you are delivering such an important message for those students, that when they do progress in their fields of study, you've made a big difference in helping them reframe and feel like that they belong at Nassau.

Melanie Hammer: That's really important. In fact, part of the conversation we had tonight was that conversation you sometimes have with students where the question is do you believe that intelligence is fixed or malleable. Oddly, they all said it was changeable. None of them had an idea that it was fixed even in math, which is for some of them their worst subject. We had this great conversation about what it means to be smart because they are all ready to come to school now, in my class they're all pretty darned smart. They listen to each other, they exchange ideas.

Melanie Hammer: I had a student in class the other night. She probably spoke for a minute and a half about something she felt passionate about and when she was done, the rest of the class applauded. They are so ready to contribute their ideas, to listen to the ideas of others, to embrace what we think of as the academic life. They weren't sure what it was going to be like when they walked in the door, but now they know they belong there.

Steve Robinson: I love it. It sounds like, it's funny, we are just catching up with them in growth mindset. Your students knew it. They came in knowing that. That's fantastic. Hey Melanie, I have one last question for you. If you had a group of people gathered around who knew you taught and worked at a community college and were ready to hear your best argument about why our institutions matter, what would you tell them?

Melanie Hammer: I would tell them, the group of people from the community, I would say to them ask at your places of work how many people went to Nassau. Ask in your neighborhood how many people went to Nassau. How many of their children went to Nassau. We have been an integral part of the county since we opened and we have helped 10s of thousands of people in the community achieve their goals.

Steve Robinson: Yeah, I love it. Then you can just drop the mic and you're done, right? You've been making an impact in your community. I just had a similar experience. The meeting I just came from was our alumni association and I said, you know what I'm telling alumni now? Put your community college experience on your resume.

Melanie Hammer: Yep.

Steve Robinson: Put it there.

Melanie Hammer: People should be, if they started asking they would realize that people [inaudible 00:23:42] say, "I went to Nassau, I went to Nassau." They don't realize that the fabric of the community is woven through with people who started at Nassau Community College. I don't know if you follow, if this is where, if I saw you on Twitter here or where but I follow this guy, Yashar Ali on Twitter.

Steve Robinson: Yeah, he made this great series of tweets.

Melanie Hammer: Right. He asked people to tweet back if they went to a community college. Sharice Davids tweeted in that she went to Johnson County Community. People tweeted, "I didn't know what to do after high school. I came to community college. I'm a lawyer, I'm a doctor, I'm a nurse. I'm so happy. I got what I wanted." People tweeted back, "I went to work after high school. I came back when I was an adult. My community college was there for me. I'm a teacher, I'm a musician, I'm a history teacher." People got everything they needed from the community college start.

Steve Robinson: That's what we're all about. We want to make sure that people hear that and know that and reframe the way people think about us. Melanie, thank you so much for spending some time talking to me. This was a fun conversation.

Melanie Hammer: Thank you. This is great.

Steve Robinson: Well, I'm really fortunate to be talking to Malik Burrell. Malik, how are you doing?

Malik Burrell: I'm doing well. How about yourself, Steve?

Steve Robinson: I'm great, I'm great. You are a community college student. What are you studying?

Malik Burrell: I'm a communications major.

Steve Robinson: Uh huh, communications.

Malik Burrell: Yes. I want to get a job in the broadcasting or communications field since they both go hand in hand.

Steve Robinson: Yeah. You're doing great with this microphone, you got a great communications voice, so that's good.

Malik Burrell: Thanks. I get that a lot, though.

Steve Robinson: You do? People tell you that?

Malik Burrell: Yeah, I heard throughout my life growing up. That's just, that was, like, okay.

Steve Robinson: Well, you just got to go with your talents and you have some good talents. What do you like about being a community college student, Malik?

Malik Burrell: Well, what I like about, okay, going into college, I didn't know what to expect because it was all new territory for me. I didn't start right after I graduated high school. I took a year off after I graduated high school to figure out if I still wanted to be a communications major. I just took that year off just to figure out if that's what I really want to do. Then I came here. Then at first, it took me a little while to get the hang of it because I didn't know where everything was that first, but after a while I got the hang of it. I met some really cool people throughout my time here. Overall, I like the experience, though. Interacting with different people, the different styles of how teachers teach in the classes. It's very diverse here, so that's one thing I really like, it's really diverse here on campus.

Steve Robinson: That's fantastic. Now before you came to a community college, had you heard anything negative or bad about community colleges?

Malik Burrell: No, not really. I didn't even know there was community colleges really.

Steve Robinson: Really?

Malik Burrell: Yeah. I knew there was universities but I didn't know that there was community colleges, though.

Steve Robinson: Okay, well I'm glad you found one. I'm glad you found one. If you were talking to folks who were thinking about going to college, what would you tell them about community colleges?

Malik Burrell: I would tell them, okay, if you're planning on going to a university at some point, look at community colleges that do a great job, have a great transfer program like community college does, like Owens does because they have a transfer program in place for students who want to transfer after they get their two years here done or eventually their associate's or however [inaudible 00:27:47] they want to do here. They set you up real nice when it's time, whenever you want to transfer out of here and they work with UT, Ohio State, et cetera, et cetera. Depending on whichever college you want to go to, they will help you figure out what credits you would need to transfer over to there.

Steve Robinson: That's a great answer. Hey, thank you so much for talking to me, Malik. A great conversation.

Malik Burrell: No problem. Anytime.

Steve Robinson: My next guest on the program is Katie Giordello who is a doctoral student at Western Michigan University in Michigan. Katie, thanks for talking to me.

Katie Giordello: Thanks for having me, Steve.

Steve Robinson: Absolutely, absolutely. This hashtag and social media campaign caught your eye. What resonated with you about our efforts to end the stigma against community colleges?

Katie Giordello: Sure. Well, first of all I'm just getting into Twitter and realizing the massive potential that it has in terms of connecting like minded individuals, so I love the idea of the social media campaign. Then the notion of NCC stigma, I'm a social justice and equity minded person. I've been in higher ed for about 15 years. The last eight of those have been in statewide transfer and articulation policy initiatives that of course involved community colleges. I always say once I got into the state policy arena, my career took a turn. I had been predominantly working at universities but being able to work more closely with community colleges and better understanding the impact of the democratic community college transfer pathway has become my calling in the last decade or so.

Katie Giordello: With that in mind, I chose to step away from a full time position. I continue to consult in the community college world but I enrolled full time in the doc program at Western Michigan where I'm studying and building a dissertation project around curricular articulation between community colleges and universities.

Steve Robinson: That's really important work. I have a follow up question for you. I'm sure you don't have any hard metrics on this but how would you rate our country's understanding, like collective understanding of the transfer pathways that exist from community colleges to four year schools?

Katie Giordello: Oh, that is a loaded question. I don't have hard metrics.

Steve Robinson: No, no, I wouldn't expect that you would.

Katie Giordello: More people are paying attention to this, though, in the research community and I think that's fantastic. I think we've already got the attention of policy makers but sometimes there seems to be a misunderstanding or perhaps just not a recognition of the true complexity of curricular articulation. Some of the policy work that's been done, in my opinion, has been shortsighted and it hasn't really focused on the curricular aspects that I think will ensure students' success. Because we do see that there's lagging student success for community college transfer students and that's a big problem, particularly for someone like myself interested in social justice because of the access mission of our colleges.

Steve Robinson: That's great. It sounds like a dissertation topic, right?

Katie Giordello: Right?

Steve Robinson: Who knew? On the subject of stigma and misconceptions about two year colleges, do you have an example or an anecdote that you've encountered out in the world of, some misconceptions that folks have had?

Katie Giordello: Yes, definitely. I have seen this or heard it in my transfer work in the last decade or so all the time. You hear loaded statements and questions from usually university faculty about concerns with the rigor of community college coursework. What I have found is this is largely based on misperceptions and what we're discussing today, unfounded stigma. Because when you start to unpack this, there's really no basis for the concern. Empirical studies have validated the success of community college students in coursework that has transferred by matching their outcomes with direct entry students and finding them to be equivalent or better than those students. When it boil it down to matching learning outcomes, there's really no basis for a differential in rigor at all between instructors, instructional styles or learning outcomes.

Steve Robinson: Well, that's good to know. Of course preaching to the choir to many of us, but back to the first question, I think that it's not just university professors. There is a general perception of lack of rigor in a two year college. Where do you think that comes from?

Katie Giordello: That's true. I think some of it is misperception and misunderstanding. I'll hear a lot, "Oh, they have different accreditation standards or different requirements," and that again is simply not true. I think that people misunderstand some of the

complex language that's used in accreditation and there's also a misunderstanding of how community colleges have to ascribe not only to regional accreditor standards but also many times occupational standards that are usually the same but sometimes can be different than those that bachelor's granting institutions are ascribing to.

Steve Robinson: I think that's insightful. I hadn't thought about that. On the gen ed piece, we're accountable to the same accreditors but you're right, on a program level there's some differentiation. Maybe that's a source of some of that. That's insightful.

Steve Robinson: Hey, I have another question for you. I imagine that the listeners of this podcast are probably disproportionately folks within higher ed, some of them going through doctoral programs and many of them having completed one. You've dedicated a bunch of your life to this enterprise of getting your doctorate. You could be doing it in just about anything. What made you decide to focus on community college issues, because you're going to have to live with this topic for a long time. Why did it speak to you to write about and study community college issues?

Katie Giordello: Sure. As I said earlier, I'm interested in the social justice impact of the community college sector at large. I think we have some pretty serious social problems in the US and abroad and that only more accessible education, certainly intellectual innovations and then local and global collaborations can achieve. I find that community colleges today are at the epicenter of all of these things and they deserve a more prominent place in our society and certainly in public opinion.

Steve Robinson: Amen. Can you talk a little bit more about that? What does that epicenter look like? What epicenter, I mean there are 1,200 of us out there, we're doing this important work. It seems like your bet's on us to be addressing some of these social concerns. How can we do that?

Katie Giordello: I think part of it is what we're already doing which is providing access to such a large and critical population in the country that hasn't always had the same access. Certainly we're talking about low income, racial minorities but also immigrants to the United States and rural Americans. For some rural Americans, community colleges are the only secondary option that they have in a geographic proximity. In my mind, that means that we're educating the most students in the country and certainly the organizational processes that I've seen, sorry about that.

Steve Robinson: It's okay.

Katie Giordello: Embody access, innovation and then of course collaboration, both with their local communities but also with the larger community.

Steve Robinson: You know, that's really insightful and you're the first person to mention rural pockets of the country that may really depend on their community college. Can you talk to me a little bit more? Your work has spanned looking at a variety of different institutions. What progressive or helpful role can you see a community college playing in a rural community?

Katie Giordello: Sure. I think a lot of people would see it as kind of a bridge. It could be a boat if we're going to take a maritime analogy, where that citizen in that rural location needs some job training so they want to go to the community college to get a certificate or an associate degree. It can also be that bridge that takes them to the next step and a lot of community colleges in rural areas are being created with collaborative efforts. They're doing the on site bachelor's degrees. They've got 3+1 completion transfer agreements, oftentimes organizing themselves amongst the state so that they can share resources and provide more access through online education or consortial agreements. I think all of those things are going to be helpful to students who, for whatever reason, are place bound and can't move out of their rural area or don't want to because they want to stay close by.

Steve Robinson: That's smart. Actually we were talking to some employers this morning. One of the things that businesses and industry likes about community colleges, our grads tend to stay in the region after they're finished with us.

Katie Giordello: That's right, they're embedded in the community.

Steve Robinson: Well look, you probably will be in this situation. You certainly will when you defend your dissertation, but if you had an assembled group of people to deliver an argument for the value of our institutions, for the value of community colleges, what would that argument be?

Katie Giordello: Sure. Well, as we've discussed throughout the program, I think that community colleges can be a bridge for everyone. Not just the underrepresented populations that we've already talked about but students from middle income families who can't afford the rising prices of a university, who might actually find a better fit in an education program at a community college by starting there or might decide to pursue that baccalaureate after they've gotten the associate degree.

Katie Giordello: Of course this is where I turn into a transfer evangelist because I typically have charts and data on my phone so that I can show graphically how much money, students and families that I know and that we're friends with in our community, how much money they can save by utilizing their local community college smartly, regardless of whether their goal is a career oriented or a transfer oriented program. I've actually been known to do that at parties, to pull out my phone and, "Look at how much you can save!"

Steve Robinson: That is fantastic. I'm only silent because I didn't want to interrupt you because that was great. No, it really, really was. Now I'm picturing you at parties pulling out your phone, doing some data presentations on our value proposition.

Katie Giordello: Absolutely. I'm just a riot at parties.

Steve Robinson: That's great. We need to get you a bigger screen because that sounds like it's very, very productive. Look, thank you so much for spending some time talking with us and I appreciate your engagement in the campaign on Twitter. We will see you out there.

Katie Giordello: That sounds great. Thanks so much for letting me be a part of it.

Steve Robinson: Absolutely, Katie. Thanks.

Steve Robinson: Well, I am really happy to be talking to Hannah Beene who is a community college student. How are you, Hannah?

Hannah Beene: I'm doing pretty well. What about you?

Steve Robinson: I am great, I am great, and I'm so glad you took some time to talk with me. What do you like about being a student at a community college?

Hannah Beene: I really like that it is in a local area for me. I live in Rossford so it's a really close commute for me. My twin brother actually attends here with me so I can actually take him to school and we both do our studying together. I really like the unique aspect of the building where it's easier for me to find my classes like it was in high school. I can go to the classrooms and I know that the professors are in there and it's more one on one based, almost, because the class sizes are smaller, so I really like that too.

Steve Robinson: That's great, that's great. Before you came to a community college, had you heard anything negative or bad about community colleges?

Hannah Beene: Yeah. Some students in my grade in high school would kind of talk down on it as if it was, "Oh, you're of a lower class if you attend community college," or, "Oh, you're not as smart if you attend a community college," which honestly I've found to be completely different of what they've said. Older adults who have gone to college, four year universities or community college, have always told me, when I tell them what I'm doing with my future they always tell me, "You're picking the smart path. You're choosing the wise path. You're saving lots more money." They're like, "Keep it up, you're doing great work." I'm proud of my decision and I really like it here.

Steve Robinson: Well, let me add my voice to the people who are telling you that because I agree. You have made the smart choice and you are doing great stuff. If you could go and talk to some of those students who had those misconceptions and

they were getting ready to make a choice of going to college, what would you tell them about community colleges?

Hannah Beene: I would say it's a really good transition between high school and college in general. I know four year university life, I know that that can be overwhelming for a lot of people. For me personally, I get anxious sometimes in big or unknown environments and I can get lost pretty easily so I really like community college for that aspect. I would want to tell those people that I went to high school with that it's a really good alternative and that they shouldn't knock it til they try it. A lot of people who are going to those four year universities I feel also don't really focus a lot on their studies as versus a community college where I'm actually solely focusing on my studies.

Steve Robinson: That's fantastic. Look, Hannah, thank you so much for talking with me.

Hannah Beene: Yeah, of course. Anytime.

Steve Robinson: Well now I am delighted to talk with someone from outside of the community college world, someone who is a great leader in the community where I get to work. I'm speaking with Doug Pontsler who is an economic developer and currently working with a wonderful initiative on visual literacy, but he's the retired Vice President of Environmental Health and Safety for Owens Corning. Doug, thank you for joining me on the program.

Doug Pontsler: My pleasure, Steve.

Steve Robinson: It's interesting. You reached out to me when we started telling positive stories about community colleges and even though you're not within higher education, this is an issue that matters to you and I'm really curious to know, what is it that resonates with you about the community college world?

Doug Pontsler: Steve, I think there's a couple of things that really come to my mind and a lot of that's been based on my experience in the economic development world. I spent about 12 years as an executive committee member of the Regional Growth Partnership in Northwest Ohio which is kind of the entry point for attraction and retention of businesses in our community. We also operate in this region for JobsOhio which is a statewide initiative around the same thing, attraction and retention of businesses resulting in job growth and investment in our community.

Doug Pontsler: It became apparent as we think about the economic development and growth in our communities and attracting companies and so forth, that workforce is such an important component of that.

Steve Robinson: Right.

Doug Pontsler: Organizations make decisions on where they're going to locate and where they're going to expand largely based upon their customers and what their customers need and where they're going to be positioned with respect to that. Right along with it is can the community deliver the workforce that's necessary for them to be able to be successful? It's that dimension that education plays such an important part. We all know that the community colleges play a role inside of the overall educational structure that is just absolutely critical.

Steve Robinson: I was really impressed that you dialed into this because we've worked together on economic development here in the Toledo region but I couldn't agree more about this workforce lens. It makes me think of something that I'd like to ask you about. A lot of the stories that we're telling about the impact of community colleges are on the level of the individual and that's so powerful. One person moving into a family sustaining wage, but what I heard you say is that the health of a community hinges upon a successful two year college. Can you talk to me about that a little bit?

Doug Pontsler: Yes, absolutely. If you think about the health of a community, it really all begins with jobs, it begins with income, it begins with supporting networks where people can live and work and be healthy. Some of the work that's gone on in our community for example by ProMedica has been focused on what they refer to and others as the social determinants of well being.

Steve Robinson: Right.

Doug Pontsler: Health being one of those. What's interesting about that work is that only 20% of health outcomes are really clinically oriented. The other 80% are really a function of social determinants of the community and that begins with education, it begins with jobs. It begins with how safe communities are, the family and social support that exists, and the income level that people have. We know that we're in an environment where our economy looks different than what it did 30, 40 years ago.

Steve Robinson: Yes.

Doug Pontsler: The needs of that economy are different and we have an aging workforce. The need to be able to upscale that workforce, to rescale that workforce for the needs that we have today are all part of that equation that will deliver a really healthy community.

Steve Robinson: Well, listening to you say that, I hear echos of some things that we talk about in the community college sector. I'll give you a little quote from Josh Wyner who's the president of the Aspen Institute. He says that effective community colleges really do two things and they do them really well. One is social mobility, moving individuals into family sustaining wages. The other is economic development, making sure that there is an attractive workforce for a healthy regional economy. What I love about the economic development work you're talking

about is there's a real recognition that the associate degree, the certificate level training that two year colleges do across the country can really move the needle on that big picture economic development goal.

Doug Pontsler: Yes, absolutely. I think one of the things that I would add to that is it can add to that equation with speed and flexibility. That's also so important because as a company is looking at siding an operation in our community, they're not talking about something they're going to do five years from now. They tend to be talking about something that they're going to do maybe within the year or within the next year. The ability for the community to be able to respond with speed to what their needs are is critically important.

Doug Pontsler: I think community colleges have demonstrated that swiftness, that fleetness of foot in many cases, where you can develop a program that might be supportive of that particular sector and be able to help them with their workforce needs.

Steve Robinson: I think that's really perceptive because that's one of the things that, you know, the 1,200 or so community colleges in the United States, we pride ourselves on being that smaller wheel that turns faster and is able to develop some customized training, whether it's non credit or credit. As you know here in town, we've developed associate degrees and certificates specific to certain employers. That's key to economic growth across the country.

Doug Pontsler: If you look at, most economic development organizations are somewhat sector focused. That is in a particular region, there's going to be assets within that region that create more opportunity for some organizations than what they do others. We like to think in Northwest Ohio and Ohio itself, that we're kind of at the crossroads of meaningful transportation options, both road and boat and air and everything else.

Steve Robinson: Right, intermodal.

Doug Pontsler: We're also central to a large portion of the population in the United States, so being able to think about what that means to particular sectors like distribution and logistics or advanced manufacturing or the other sectors that we interface with, being able to match programs to those sectors, in our case solar, can really be helpful in being able to continue to attract companies that are in that sector to a resource base that exists here within Northwest Ohio.

Steve Robinson: I couldn't agree more and I think that that's a story you would see repeated in different regions of the country all over the nation. I have a question for you to put you on the spot about this particular campaign. One of the things we're talking about is there exists in the minds of people, opinion leaders, I think some outdated or inaccurate assumptions about community colleges and I wonder if you've ever encountered this in your life and if you have an anecdote or a story about what that looks like when somebody has a prejudice or a preconception about community colleges.

Doug Pontsler: That's a really good question. I would tell you in my life, I can't really put my finger on anything that would be this explicit statement. I can tell you that I think the general sort of thought process around vocation education, community colleges, et cetera, is too often the individuals that may not either desire or they can't make it in the four year university system, that's an alternative for them.

Steve Robinson: Right.

Doug Pontsler: It's like at the higher level, people are going to go to the colleges. Those that don't seek that, maybe community college and vocational education is an opportunity for them. The more that you think about that in today's environment, it is just sad that we would simplistically think of it that way. I would say specifically to the community colleges, look at all the opportunities there are for kids who seek four year degrees to begin their college career in the community college and be able to do it perhaps locally, be able to do it less costly than what they would if they spent four years at another university.

Doug Pontsler: The community college opportunity is two fold. It can be gateway to further education for a lot of individuals, I don't know what the statistics are in terms of how many people go on but it can be a gateway for that and a very cost effective gateway in a space that can be very expensive today. Or it can be a point of learning a skill or a capability or a profession that becomes their vocation the rest of their lives, so a lot of flexibility there.

Steve Robinson: Well, I appreciate that. When I think about someone like yourself who is a thought leader in our community and nationally with the work you're doing on visual literacy, what people say about us matters. I love it that you were willing to have this conversation and thanks for that work and helping us tell our story. I really appreciate you spending some time talking with me, Doug.

Doug Pontsler: Well, I admire the initiative. I think the End Community College Stigma takes the issue right on and it stares you in the face. I think that is exactly what's needed and change processes, whatever we're talking about from a change perspective, we have to face reality and then we have to cause it to be different. I think this is one example of that and I admire you and the others that are involved in doing that.

Steve Robinson: Thanks a lot and I appreciate your time.

Doug Pontsler: Happy to do it.

Steve Robinson: All right, thanks a lot, Doug.

Steve Robinson: Well, I'm fortunate enough to be talking to Sarai Peterson who is studying engineering. You're a community college student.

Sarai Peterson: Yes.

Steve Robinson: Thanks for talking to me.

Sarai Peterson: Thank you for having me.

Steve Robinson: What do you like about being a student at a community college?

Sarai Peterson: It's a great opportunity for me to experience new things that I haven't, like clubs. I've never been in a club before. I'm currently in student government and Black Student Union and the Hands On sign language, so that's amazing.

Steve Robinson: That's a lot. You're in three clubs.

Sarai Peterson: Yes.

Steve Robinson: What does that do for you as a student? How does it help to be in those clubs?

Sarai Peterson: It helps me build relationships with other students. I've met a lot of amazing people and you can see them a lot on campus. Meeting people, making friends, networking and then building a resume for when I want to transfer, it's great.

Steve Robinson: It is great. I'm not sure if you're aware of this but a lot of the national research says that that kind of engagement is the number one thing that makes students successful, so you're doing the right thing.

Sarai Peterson: Thank you.

Steve Robinson: Have you heard anybody say anything negative or bad about community colleges?

Sarai Peterson: I think it's mainly because a lot of students don't understand. They think that community college is a place where people go because they didn't do good in high school and it's cheaper, but community college gives you a fresh start. It helps you build yourself into the person that you want to become in order to become the person that you want to be. It's great.

Steve Robinson: It is and that's an inspirational statement to me, what you just said, because isn't that what we all want to do?

Sarai Peterson: Yeah.

Steve Robinson: It's what we all want to do, is be the person that we want to be. It's very simple, right? If you had a group of prospective students who were thinking about either coming to a community college or going somewhere else, what would you tell them about community college?

Sarai Peterson: I would explain that community college is cheaper, it gives you an opportunity to get involved on campus, to meet your professors and have a relationship with our professors, to meet new students, have study groups. That's my favorite part. I know a lot of students just because of the fact that it's so small, everyone knows each other. It's really friendly. It's a place that, it feels like home. It feels like home.

Steve Robinson: I love that. This has been a great conversation. Thank you so much for talking to me.

Sarai Peterson: Thank you, thank you.

Steve Robinson: Yeah, great.

[MUSIC FADES]

Steve Robinson: Well, that's it for Episode Two of the #EndCCStigma podcast project. I hope you have enjoyed hearing the voices of our many allies who are working to end the stigma against community colleges through social media. If you missed Episode One, it can be easily found on our landing page at endccstigma.org. Stay tuned for future episodes, as we are producing three more segments with the same format during throughout community college month.

This podcast is produced, recorded, and engineered by Steve Robinson, president of Owens Community College in Ohio. My Twitter handle is @OCCPresident. The theme music is "Make Your Dream Reality" by Scott Holmes of scottholmesmusic.com, and is licensed through Creative Commons.

Until next time, please push back against inaccurate and unfair characterizations of community colleges and share this podcast with your friends and colleagues. Use the hashtag #EndCCStigma as we focus our efforts and attempt to change the conversation. Thanks for listening.