

## #EndCCStigma Podcast Project / Episode Three

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[INTRO MUSIC – VOICE MONTAGE]

Regina Garza Mi: I truly believe that community colleges are the paragon of democracy. You know, they are the only democratic approach to higher education that we have. They give people first, second, and third chances because we really don't turn anybody away.

William Serrata: Community colleges are convenient. We are by far the best value in higher education. We have to get more students into that pathway to the middle class and that's why I think community colleges play a key role, and that stigma is preventing some students from taking advantage of what we need to be looking at in higher education.

Emily Timmerman: I attended community college for about two years after I graduated high school. It was a really great option for my family at the time. A lot of my teachers at the community college were professors from other universities that were not community colleges or were considered prestigious universities.

MacKenzie Craig: It's a big part of a community college—that you're kind of like a family. You know most of the people that go there. And you're staying within a smaller community, a smaller, close knit family.

[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 Three of our podcast dedicated to ending the unfair stigma placed on America's community colleges. This is now a six-part series of podcasts due to the amazing response from people on social media using the hashtag #EndCCStigma. The podcast is designed to amplify the voices of people from across the country who are working to create a more accurate view of community college and technical careers.

On today's episode we hear from a number of community college students, a published author, a university faculty member from the area of higher education leadership, as well one of the country's leading community college presidents. Guests on this episode include MacKenzie Craig, William Serrata, Regina Garza Mitchell, Tori Kopp, Emily Timmerman, and Tara Zirkel.

We begin the episode with my conversation with MacKenzie Craig, a student athlete and community college student in Pennsylvania. Special thanks to the

Pennsylvania Commission for Community Colleges for connecting me with MacKenzie for this interview.

Steve Robinson: I am delighted to be talking to Mackenzie Craig, who is a student athlete at Butler community college, or as they call it there, BC3. Mackenzie, how you doing?

MacKenzie Craig: Good, Steve, how are you?

Steve Robinson: I'm great, I'm great. I'm really happy to be talking to you. By the way, the folks in Pennsylvania community colleges have been awesome to work with, and they hooked me up with you. I'm happy to be having this conversation. Before we talk about the social media campaign about community college stigma, tell me a little bit about your academic situation. What are you studying at BC3?

MacKenzie Craig: Right now I am currently a sophomore at BC3. I'm just finishing up my second year in the criminology program.

Steve Robinson: Very cool.

MacKenzie Craig: Yeah, so when I graduate I'll be getting my associate's degree. Then, going onto bigger and better.

Steve Robinson: That's what we do. That's what we do. So you're going on to study criminal justice, and then I think you shared with me you're going to go into the academy to become part of the state police.

MacKenzie Craig: Yeah. That's my plan.

Steve Robinson: That's awesome. I appreciate your dedication to that very important career. Now, you're also a student athlete, right?

MacKenzie Craig: I am, yeah.

Steve Robinson: Okay, all right, and I understand you've competed against our women at Owens. What sports do you play?

MacKenzie Craig: I play volleyball, basketball, and then this year I actually joined the softball team, so staying busy.

Steve Robinson: Wow. Yeah, definitely. Hopefully finding time to study.

MacKenzie Craig: Yes.

Steve Robinson: Very good. Very, very good. Look, I'm really happy to be talking to you. One question I want to ask, what do you like about being a community college student?

MacKenzie Craig: Well, you know, I think one of the main things that's pretty obvious about community college is that I'm saving money by going there. When I graduate from BC3 I will have no student loans, no student debt whatsoever, which is amazing to start out my first two years, but besides that, I also really love staying within the community and being with people that you know are from where you're from and are kind of just like you. It's really nice. It's just your own community within the community college. It just feels like home when you're there, which it is.

Steve Robinson: Yeah, it is, so BC3 must be close to where you grew up.

MacKenzie Craig: Yes, it's actually about 25 minutes from where I'm from, but I've always been within the Butler limits.

Steve Robinson: Okay, all right, and as you noted you saved money going there, and that's money that you're going to need when you go on to do this other training to get your bachelor's degree and go to the police academy, right?

MacKenzie Craig: Oh definitely, yeah, because the expenses for ... I'm planning on going to IUP, and the expenses there are probably almost quadruple what it is at BC3, which is crazy.

Steve Robinson: Mm-hmm (affirmative), but it's what your goal is, and you've conserved your resources so that you can go on and do that.

MacKenzie Craig: Exactly.

Steve Robinson: Well that's fantastic. So, another question I have for you is you obviously made a choice to attend a community college, a really good one, so have you heard people say negative or disrespectful things about community colleges? What have you heard like that?

MacKenzie Craig: I really heard it a lot, like, my senior year. People always seemed to talk down BC3 to me and make it sound like it was some ... oh, people only went there because they can't go to a four year. They're not ready. They're not ... maybe for some that's true, but in all honesty, I was ready to go to a four year, but I didn't, because I knew what I wanted to do. I wanted to save money, and kind of stay within the community for a little bit and then go on. I think really the reason why people talk down on a community college is just because, you know, they're not able to save money like we are.

Steve Robinson: Well yeah, there's that, and there might be ignorance too. I mean, it sounds-

MacKenzie Craig: Yes.

Steve Robinson: ... to me, and let me turn that into a question.

MacKenzie Craig: Definitely.

Steve Robinson: Since you've been a student at a good community college and have gotten a lot out of that experience what do you think you know that those people who put it down don't know?

MacKenzie Craig: I would say that they don't know that people that are at the community colleges that are working at the community colleges, because you know, my teachers and the faculty and everyone there are so welcoming and so kind, and they go out of their way to help all students there no matter who you are, and I don't think that you get that at other colleges honestly, because everyone else, your faculty and staff that are working there are from the community as well. So everyone is just like ... it's just a big family when you go to a community college.

Steve Robinson: Well that's very cool, and for you, so you're an athlete on the volleyball team, you're an athlete on the basketball team, you're an athlete now on the softball team, and that would not have happened at a university, would it?

MacKenzie Craig: Oh my gosh, no. I always say, you know, when I graduated from high school I didn't even plan on playing sports-

Steve Robinson: Really?

MacKenzie Craig: ... because I didn't really think that I could play at a college level, but when I was given the opportunity by my volleyball coach and then the basketball coach at BC3 to get to continue on and get to play college, it's opened so many doors for me just being able to start at community college, especially for athletics.

Steve Robinson: That's fantastic. I spent a lot of time in the classroom as a faculty member at a community college, and it wasn't until I became an administrator, a provost, to now a president that I spent a lot of time with athletes. I always had them in my classes, but you all as student athletes really impress me. I mean, really. You have to do so much, and you guys have study table time and everything. Academics is really important, so hats off to you for playing three sports for BC3. That's a big accomplishment.

MacKenzie Craig: Well thank you.

Steve Robinson: So, what makes you proud to be a community college student? You're going to be one for the rest of your life. You go to IUP, you're going to be a community college transfer. Why are you proud of that?

MacKenzie Craig: I would say that I'm proud of it because I'm able to show that, you know, I went to school with my community, and it was staying within my hometown and my home area, and I think having pride in where you're from and who you are is kind of what shows when you go to a community college.

Steve Robinson: That's fantastic. That's so cool. Then, you know, the other thing since you're headed toward ... it's the state academy, and I'm not incredibly familiar with what it's like in Pennsylvania, but nationally I don't know if you knew this, but most of the first responders, police, EMT, fire across the country receive their training at two years colleges, most of them.

MacKenzie Craig: Wow.

Steve Robinson: Like at our community college we have two police academies. We train EMTs and firefighters, so you're going to firefighter to the state academy, but that's wonderful.

MacKenzie Craig: I never knew that.

Steve Robinson: Yeah, it's another reason to be proud. When you're working with law enforcement you're going to be with a lot of people who spent time at the two year college and get it and understand it. One last question for you, Mackenzie. So, imagine that there is a group of people who don't know a lot about community colleges and you're kind of called upon as the person to speak up for community colleges and explain why they're good, what the value is. What would you tell a group of people how might be skeptical about community colleges or have some of the stigma? What would you say?

MacKenzie Craig: Well, first obviously I would say that you're saving money. You're saving yourself from all these student debt and student loans ,and people are continuously trying to crawl out of the hole of, but you're also kind of staying home in a good way. You're staying with people that you know and that kind of know you, and you're staying within a smaller community, smaller close knit family almost. I don't think many people realize that, you know? It's a big part of the community college is that you're kind of like a family. You know most of the people that go there.

Steve Robinson: That's fantastic. You know what's interesting, when I talk to folks across the country and when I'm talking to you now it's interesting how much of our community college experience is shared across the country. I think our students, where I get to work, would say similar things. So, it's really inspirational to hear you say that, and I really appreciate you spending some time talking to me.

MacKenzie Craig: Well thank you. I really appreciate talking to you too.

Steve Robinson: Okay, you have a great season, and unless we're playing you in softball ... what's your mascot? What's your team called?

MacKenzie Craig: We're the BC3 Pioneers.

Steve Robinson: Okay, go Pioneers.

MacKenzie Craig: Oh, well thank you.

Steve Robinson: Yeah, unless you're playing the Express.

MacKenzie Craig: Yeah.

Steve Robinson: Okay, so all right. Well thank you very much, Mackenzie. You take care.

MacKenzie Craig: Thanks, you too.

Steve Robinson: Yeah.

MacKenzie Craig: Bye.

Steve Robinson: All right.

Steve Robinson: Well, I am really happy to be joined on the telephone by Dr. William Serrata, who is the president of El Paso community college, and talking to me from the airport on the way back from the PTK conference. How are you, William?

William Serrata: I'm doing really well, Dr. Robinson. What an honor to be with you. I'm so proud that you've started this. It is long overdue. I'm excited that an Aspen fellow who's a sitting president now has really moved forward and really ending a community college stigma that has gone on for far too long.

Steve Robinson: Oh, it's so great to talk to you, and of course, we both have very busy schedules, so we've been playing phone tag, and this is the second time you and I have tried to talk while you're in an airport. You came back from the Phi Theta Kappa meeting, and you are telling me what an inspirational meeting it was. Before we have our conversation can you just share a little bit about honor students and PTK?

William Serrata: Absolutely. So Phi Theta Kappa is the most prestigious honor society for community college students, so each one of our respective institutions has a chapter, Phi Theta Kappa. My students are amazing, just like your students are, and all community college students are. But in addition to that, this is ... what an honor for me to have been nominated by our chapter, by our students, to receive the Shirley B. Gordon award that is bestowed on community college presidents, so as I tell my students, I'm only an honorary member of Phi Theta Kappa, because as an undergrad I did not have the grades to be an honor student, so I'm so proud of our students and thrilled to be part of this.

William Serrata: It was amazing, over 4,000 of our students from the 1100 community colleges here excited, ready to change the world and our nation.

Steve Robinson: Well, and that's exactly what we do, and kudos to you on behalf of your students for that recognition, PTK recognizing a very important leader in our

sector, so great honor for you and your institution and the sector, so thanks for that. This hashtag, #EndCCStigma, the whole topic of trying to push back on misconceptions about community colleges, what is it that resonated with you about that?

William Serrata: What resonated with me is just this ... we know that in today's society the only pathway to the middle class is through higher education, and yet what we see is they're not building more and more universities. We have a number of institutions that are not at capacity that we really need to look at. Then, what excites me is that we really are, as community colleges, we're the last bastion of democracy from my perspective. We take all students, very proud to be open admissions, with high expectations for the students that we serve. So, we know that the pathway to middle class ... higher education is the only pathway to the middle class, and therefore we got to get more students into higher education and community colleges are convenient. We are by far the best value in higher education, and we are that pathway, so we need to make sure that students understand that and that we end this stigma.

William Serrata: All higher education is college, community college, technical education, it's all college. We have to get more students into that pathway to the middle class. That's why I think community colleges play a key role, and that stigma is preventing, from my perspective, some students from taking advantage of what we need to be looking at in higher education.

Steve Robinson: Yeah, I couldn't agree more, and that was a very eloquent way of putting that. I mean, we are a real college. We are college for so many individuals in our country. Can you give me an example or an anecdote of that stigma and how, as you say, it's holding students back? What are some examples of the stigma in action?

William Serrata: So, I'll give you one that was really prominent. Before I came to El Paso, this is my seventh year in El Paso, very proud and love the community, love the institution, but I served for 16 years at South Texas College. We decided in 2004 to start pursuing offering bachelorette degrees, so at that time our accrediting agency said if we wanted to offer bachelorette degrees we had to change our name from South Texas community college to something else, so we couldn't be a community college any longer, so we really fretted over it, because we were so proud to be a community college, so we ended up changing our name to South Texas College, and the reaction we received from the community was dumbfounding. It was, "Oh, you're a real college now." And that stung.

William Serrata: We've always been a real college. We've always been a real college. We've always provided student with pathways. We've always helped students get to the next level and move up in social economic status, so that was really the one that I felt the most, and it's something that continues, and so excited again, Dr. Robinson, when you started this movement to really end the stigma.

Steve Robinson: Well, you know, it's funny. That's an interesting anecdote, because a number of community colleges have undergone a name change, and obviously that's a local decision, and there's a lot that goes into it, but that community reaction that you describe, you said it was a sting. It must have stung. It kind of like wow, you know, we always were this thing.

William Serrata: It sure did. It really did, and what we did is we took advantage of that and ran with it and said, "Here's all the wonderful things that we do as an institutions of higher education," but now I'm in El Paso and we're not going to be changing our name. I give a lot of credit to Dr. Bell Wheelin, who was from the community college sector who ended up becoming the president and CEO for the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges and has changed that, so community colleges now choose to start looking at a level change to offer bachelorettes, they no longer have to change their name. I think that's really important.

Steve Robinson: I'm happy you ended the good ending to that story. Sounds like you had a lot to do with that, so good for Texas, good for you. You know, I almost don't have to ask you this question, because it comes out in your voice. I can hear it in your energy, but what is it that makes you proud to serve a community college?

William Serrata: Again, I'm thrilled. This is the sector of higher education that I want to be in. I love the community college sector, again, as an open admissions institution with high expectations for the students that we serve. It truly is where I want to be. Again, I feel like community colleges are the last bastion of democracy in our nation to be able to educate the population, to understand their civic responsibilities while at the same time facilitating their dreams into moving up and to the next level of their respective educational journeys. To me, that is exciting. I'm very proud to work at a community college. I'm very proud of the students that we're fortunate to serve.

Steve Robinson: Well, and I feel the same way, and we're proud that you're doing that work, and I'm also very appreciative of you taking time for me during your layover at the airport to have this conversation. You're a very busy person, and this means a lot to me, so I am sure that you have an answer for this question at the ready. You probably have to deliver a speech like this on multiple occasions over the course of an academic year, but imagine for a minute that you had an audience that doesn't quite know a lot about community colleges or maybe even harbor some of these misconceptions or stigmas about them. What would your argument be to that group to be a proponent for community college?

William Serrata: You know, Dr. Robinson, it's a great question, and again, thrilled that you're leading this initiative and just honored to be a part of it. My pitch to anyone would be we are by far the best value in education. We have small class sizes, our faculty are focused on facilitating our student success. They do research, but that is not their primary function. Their primary function is teaching, and they are phenomenal at it, and here's what I'd say. Here I am at the PTK conference today, and our lunch keynote, who is the CEO for the Jack Kent Cooke

foundation, comes out with data that has been facilitated by the National Student Loan Clearinghouse, national clearinghouse, and what they show is that graduation rates at the most selective institutions, so think of the Ivy's plus two. Most selective institutions in our nation, community college transfer students, their graduation rate at those institutions is 75%.

William Serrata: The graduation rate for students who started at those institutions is 73%.

Steve Robinson: Wow.

William Serrata: Our community college students outperform the native students at the most selective institutions in the nation, so that is my pitch for any student that's willing to come to us that understands that the only pathway to the middle class is through higher education and may not be able to afford to go to another institution, or has choosing to look at a faculty that are completely focused on teaching in that classroom. Again, I'm just thrilled to work at a community college and really look forward to students understanding that it's all college, whether it be technical education, whether it be transfer institution, it is all college, and we need them all to go to college so they all have that opportunity to move to the middle class.

Steve Robinson: That is so inspirational. Dr. Serrata, I got to tell you, I would expect no less from someone who is such a proponent of student success and national leader that you would bring the freshest data to make this case to a group. It's a data case based on student success, so no one would be surprised that that would be your pitch to folks is that students succeed and here's the data to prove it.

William Serrata: Again, Dr. Robinson, can't thank you enough. We all understand. I'll give you one more piece.

Steve Robinson: Please do.

William Serrata: I present at different groups and organizations on a regular basis, and the question that always perplexes me is when people will say, "Not everyone has to go to college," and my question always is, "Are your children going?" Whose children don't have to go to college? In today's society again it is just an absolute must that all students must go to college. There's over 1100 of us throughout the nation, and each and every state we're all ready to serve our communities and to help our population, help them on that pathway to the middle class and beyond. Thank you for all that you've done for this particular cause. I am with you 100%, and anything I can do to help I am willing to do.

Steve Robinson: Well that is wonderful, and it's so great to talk with you. Hey, thanks for racking up all those frequent flyer miles getting across this country, doing the great work that you do, Dr. Serrata. You're one of the people that I look to in our movement, and it's so wonderful to have your voice in this conversation, and I hope your connection flight is on time and that you have a safe journey.

William Serrata: Again, thank you so much. I look forward to seeing you next week right back here in Orlando.

Steve Robinson: Yeah, we'll be there at the AAC meeting. Thank you so much. It was great to talk to you.

William Serrata: You as well.

Steve Robinson: Well I am very happy to be speaking with Regina Garza Mitchell, who is an associate professor of higher education leadership at Western Michigan University in Kalamazoo, Michigan. She's also associate editor of Community College Review. Regina, how are you?

Regina Garza Mi: I'm fine, thank you.

Steve Robinson: I am so happy-

Regina Garza Mi: Excited to be here.

Steve Robinson: Oh, I'm excited to be talking to you, and I really appreciate you taking some time with me. So you teach folks who enter community colleges. You're involved in research. You're a professor of higher education leadership. What is it about this social media campaign to fight community college stigma that has resonated with you?

Regina Garza Mi: There are actually a few reasons it resonated with me. I am a graduate of a community college. I am a former community college employee. I worked as an instructor, as a staff member, and as an administrator for community colleges. But I think the real reason it resonated with me is that I grew up in a home that stigmatized community colleges even though both of my parents attended them. My father earned an engineering degree from a community college, and I never knew that that was where he earned his degree from until I myself was in community college, because for some reason he thought it was lesser.

Regina Garza Mi: They did not seek community colleges even though it led to him getting a master's degree. Community colleges in my house were not viewed as real college. So, I was expected to go to a real college, which was not even a state school. I think it's because my father was a first generation person, and it was important to him, I think, to be seen in a certain light. So, I got pregnant my senior year of high school at the age of 16, and was told I would never go to college. In fact, they made me leave my high school and finish at the school aged parent center, which was housed in a community college.

Steve Robinson: Wow.

Regina Garza Mi: Yeah, very interesting. I don't think they do that anymore. But after working several years I did graduate, was married, had two kids, husband and I working

multiple jobs full time to make ends meet, and it was my coworkers at Kroger who said, "Why don't you go to college?" I said, "I can't. I work here. I work at JC Penny, I clean houses. I don't have time, and who would take me? I missed that boat," so they told me about the community college. I literally had no idea that I could go there. So, the hardest thing and the best thing I ever did was go into that college and say, "Can I actually come to school here?"

Steve Robinson: Wow, so you learned about the possibility of going to a community college from your coworkers at Kroger.

Regina Garza Mi: Yes.

Steve Robinson: That's fantastic. What community college did you attend?

Regina Garza Mi: I attended Mid-Michigan Community College.

Steve Robinson: Okay, so you went to Mid. I'm from Michigan, so I know it well. That's great. So, and you had an experience there and where did your education at Mid take you?

Regina Garza Mi: Oh my gosh, it took me straight through getting a doctorate. While I was at Mid I had a wonderful boss, Gladys Austin. She was dean and later vice president, and she was the one who first said ... she said, "Here, I'm getting my doctorate. This could be you one day." I was a student employee at the time, so that was huge, because I just wanted to make enough money not to have to work multiple jobs and to keep my kids in daycare. She was instrumental and really everybody there never made it seem like it was an end, and so because of Mid I earned a full ride scholarship when I transferred to Central Michigan, and that's where I earned my bachelor's degree. Then, I stayed for a master's and a doctorate.

Steve Robinson: Wow, you and I have that in common that we stayed at a state school in Michigan for three degrees. I did the same thing at Michigan State. So, well that's wonderful. So, obviously the community college was important to you as a young person, important to you in your academic career, propelled you to CMU, and now you're an associate professor at a state university, and from what I understand, you train leaders who go on to run community colleges.

Regina Garza Mi: Yes. Yes, I do. It's amazing to be able to do that. But I'm still finding that many of my students don't really have a good idea of what community colleges are or what they can do. So I'm actually teaching a course this summer called The Social Justice Mission of the Community College, and-

Steve Robinson: I want to take it. Can I audit that? That sounds like a wonderful class.

Regina Garza Mi: I'll actually invite you to be a guest speaker.

Steve Robinson: I'm there. Put me in, coach.

Regina Garza Mi: Great.

Steve Robinson: Well, one of the questions I've been asking folks is if they can come up with an example of this stigma in practice, and you touched on it in your own family. You had first gen college students as parents, and it sounds like at that time even though they used the community college as a gateway there was a big social pressure to put it in the rear view mirror. Did I get that right?

Regina Garza Mi: Yes, I think you worded it exactly correct. It wasn't until I ... let's see, I had already been a professor at the time, but when I went to work at Texas State Technical College as an administrator and my father and really a lot of people in my family were saying, "Why did you work at a junior college?" The way they said it was just like a junior college.

Steve Robinson: Right.

Regina Garza Mi: And when they started seeing what we were doing there and the changes that were being made when I talked to them about the students that we have and the programs we were doing, it finally clicked, and it actually changed the way that my family looked at community colleges.

Steve Robinson: Really?

Regina Garza Mi: I think it helped that, yes, both of my children and my husband, all of us have gone to a community college.

Steve Robinson: That's fantastic, so in that sense your father kind of through your career changed his mind about the preconceptions about our institutions.

Regina Garza Mi: Yes.

Steve Robinson: Wow.

Regina Garza Mi: In fact, he was even considering teaching at one.

Steve Robinson: That is so cool. You know, that's another thing we have in common. Not so much the ... I'll give you a quick example. Both of my parents attended two years colleges, and my late father started at Grand Rapids Community College, which he still called JC, right? That's what they call them, junior college. My career sort of had an impact on the way he talked about that experience, so that's something we have in common.

Steve Robinson: I've already gathered this from what you're talking about in your passion of dealing with your students, but what makes you proud to be associated with community colleges?

Regina Garza Mi: There are so many things, and I'm going to ... I think the proudest thing is not anything I've been able to do but what I've seen through working at and with community colleges. That's the way they change people. My former boss at TSTC, Adam Hutchison, used to say, "We don't change students. We change families." And that is so incredibly true, you know? Sitting there on graduation day and seeing the large families that would come out and support their students, you know, whether it was the mother, the father, the child, whoever it was that was graduating, and just seeing the way that all of them were changed through this. There's nothing else like that. Seeing the change that people see in themselves, I think, is the greatest thing. I saw it in my own husband when he realized that he could do this college thing.

Regina Garza Mi: Then, he graduated with a 4.0, which was something that he never thought he would see himself do.

Steve Robinson: Wow.

Regina Garza Mi: So seeing that confidence and not just the change in income or career, which is important, but just that confidence in self.

Steve Robinson: I love the way you put that, and I love your former boss talking about ... that's exactly right. We change people and we change families. If anybody's listening who has not been to a community college commencement ceremony, you should go to one. I mean, they are transformative experiences. So, I really appreciate you telling that part of the story. So, Regina, I have one other question for you, and you're probably in this situation a fair amount as an associate professor in a higher ed leadership program, but you know, imagine that you have an assembled group of folks who either don't know much about community colleges or maybe have some of these negative preconceptions that we've talked about and you're kind of called upon to be the spokesperson for community colleges and deliver kind of a value proposition for them. What would you tell that group of people?

Regina Garza Mi: I truly believe that community colleges are the paragon of democracy. You know, they're the only democratic approach to higher education that we have. They give people first, second, and third chances because we really don't turn anybody away. Community colleges serve the majority of minoritized students, including adults and women. Just about half of all students start at a community college, so chances are you already know somebody who's been to one. The best part, in my opinion, is that they help you achieve your goals, whether it's going into the workforce, earning a degree, or transferring, or all of the above. They're places for ... I'm stealing this from Mid from an old advertisement at Mid. They really are places for starting out or for starting over.

Steve Robinson: All right, next time we're in front of a group we're handing you the mic. That was awesome. That was really great. Well, Regina, I'm proud that folks like you are training our higher ed leaders to come into our institutions. It's great to

connect with you, and it must be so powerful for you to be, you know, working with doctoral students and have your own powerful community college story.

Regina Garza Mi: Yes. It is amazing. It's a real gift to work with these students, and a lot of them bring their own stories as well.

Steve Robinson: I'm sure they do. Well look, Regina, thank you so much for taking some time to talk with me, and I'll see you out on Twitter as we try to end the stigma against community colleges.

Regina Garza Mi: Sounds great. Thank you so much for having me.

Steve Robinson: Absolutely.

Steve Robinson: So, I'm really happy to be talking to Tori Kopp, who is a community college student. What are you studying, Tori?

Tori Kopp: Education.

Steve Robinson: Education. Great, great major. What do you like about being a community college student?

Tori Kopp: I like the class sizes a lot. Coming from a bigger high school it's nice to have that one on one with the teachers and professors. You get to know your classmates really well, so you make friends with everybody.

Steve Robinson: That's cool, and making friends is important. It's an important part of college. It's an important part of learning, so hey, before you came to a community college did you hear anything negative or bad about that as a choice?

Tori Kopp: Yeah, 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 it gave me more opportunities with playing basketball. It helps take that next step. Well, after your two years at Owens then you can think about going on and playing for a four year college, and when you're taking that process, the college coaches will look at that, and you have college experience. I mean, we went to the national championship. That's something that they look at, and that's a positive thing. I mean, if you're coming right out of high school you don't have that experience. You don't have that background.

Steve Robinson: That's true. So if there was a group of students who were considering community colleges, one of the options that they would do, what would you tell that group?

Tori Kopp: I would tell them to definitely go for it. I mean, if you're worried about what people are going to say and think of you when you go on it doesn't matter. I

mean, you're all going to different places anyways, so just do what's best for you.

Steve Robinson: That is perfect. Tori, thank you so much.

Tori Kopp: Thank you.

Steve Robinson: Yeah.

Steve Robinson: Well, I'm really happy to be talking with Emily Timmerman, who is an author from Missouri who connected with me on Twitter about this campaign to end the stigma against community colleges. Emily, how are you?

Emily Timmerman: Wonderful. Thank you so much for having me.

Steve Robinson: Well, it's great to talk with you. I really appreciated connecting with you on social media, because you're a writer. You're an author about this issue of community college stigma matters to you. Can you tell me why?

Emily Timmerman: Well, I attended community college for about two years after high school, and it was a really great option for my family at the time. I'm not sure if the state is still doing it, but Missouri used to offer two years of free community college for students who had had a certain GPA and had fulfilled other requirements, such as tutoring hours and things like that. So, I was able to go to community college and fulfill my general transfer studies for free under that program. Also, a lot of my teachers at the community college were professors from Washington University or St. Louis University, other universities that were not community colleges or were considered, like, prestigious universities, and I was able to have the same education from the same teacher that those students were able to receive except for at a fraction of the price.

Emily Timmerman: I had smaller class sizes, I was able to interact with my teachers more frequently and more personally than when I eventually transferred to a larger university.

Steve Robinson: Well, what an amazing thing for you to point out, because I've had a lot of conversations, and some of the things that I'm passionate about have not come up yet, and you put your finger on it. You're telling me that a lot of the professors that you had at your community college were also faculty at some of the area four year colleges.

Emily Timmerman: Yes, definitely, and I had the hardest class of my life, my english comp two class. I think it was my freshman or sophomore year of college was at community college, but it was a professor. I think she was from St. Louis University, and her husband was also an english professor and they studied poetry in their spare time. It was the most difficult class I had ever attended, but I learned a lot, and I had access to a lot of really, really great teachers, whether they were from different schools or not. Yeah, they came from all over.

Steve Robinson: That is some high quality myth busting right there, because that's an untold story about community colleges is geographically we often share faculty with some very prestigious four year universities, and for you to say that your hardest college class was at a community college, that also pushes back on this idea that community colleges aren't a place where there's rigor.

Emily Timmerman: Oh no, definitely. There definitely is, and I felt like in a lot of my classes I was treated with more of a challenge and the professors would kind of treat us more as adults with the assignments and the way they explained things to us, because they knew that some people had other commitments or responsibilities going on, and they knew that a lot of the people who were there really wanted to be there. So, it was a different experience for sure, and I felt like that I really learned a lot from the array of teachers that were there for sure.

Steve Robinson: Well that's wonderful to hear. Now, you told me that you had considered being an ambassador for your community college, so have you seen any examples of negative preconceptions or stigmas about community colleges out in your life? What examples can you give me of those kinds of outdated or outmoded conceptions of two year colleges?

Emily Timmerman: Oh sure. You know, and especially because I'm from St. Louis. Here people love to ask you what high school that you went to, so they love to try to categorize people by their socioeconomic background. People love to do that by asking you about also if you went to college and where you went to college, and if you say community college, many people here will turn up their noses or they've said to me that that's not a real school or you know, they just kind of have distanced themselves from me after I've said those things, but I know my experience attending that school and the advantages that it gave me. It's just kind of silly, so I kind of try to explain things to them sometimes, or other times I just don't care, because if they're going to judge me on their idea for what a community college is it doesn't really matter to me.

Steve Robinson: That's interesting. So you have kind of a fork in the road there. One is to engage and push back, and the other is to disengage. When you make the choice to engage, what do you say? What do you say to somebody who is turning up their nose or saying that's not a real college? How do you have that conversation?

Emily Timmerman: Well when I have that conversation I state a lot of those things that I mentioned to you about how difficult some of my classes were, that a lot of the faculty came from different universities, maybe a university that they had even attended. I explain to them the ... I had a class that I had difficulty with when I had transferred to a university and I had failed that class, and my parents were paying for my school at that time, and they told me they were not going to pay for me to retake it there, so I went to the community college and retook the class, I think, for a fourth for what it would have cost me at the university level. So that was something that was ... it's more easily available. It makes education more accessible for more than just a certain demographic or people who are a

legacy to someone else, or who have financial hardships. Also, the class times are different.

Emily Timmerman: It's just a little bit more available for people who have other responsibilities.

Steve Robinson: Wow, well you know, those are probably great data points when those conversations ... when you do make the decision to engage. And so, the fact that this is still part of your story, you know, you transferred. You went onto a four year school, you don't have to tell people where you started, but you do. So, what makes you proud to have started at a community college?

Emily Timmerman: You know, especially with recent news stories about higher education it's really honestly does not matter where you are going to school or what the name is on the school. Doesn't have anything to do with the value that you yourself choose to receive from the education that you're getting. So, if you have the opportunity to go to school or to be in the presence of a teacher, how much effort you put into learning about the concepts they're teaching you or presenting to you can depend on what you get out of it. You can go to an Ivy League university and graduate not knowing anything. You could go to a community college and learn a great foundation of two years that you want to put towards a four year degree, or you could learn a two year program that gives the skills for a different occupation.

Emily Timmerman: I really think they're a great resource, and it offered my family the ability who were paying for three children to go to college at once. It gave them the opportunity to ease the burden of one of us going for free for two years.

Steve Robinson: Right.

Emily Timmerman: I tell people all the time I went to community college, I went to a private university after that to finish my undergraduate degree, and then I went to graduate school, and I got the best education I ever received at St. Louis Community College.

Steve Robinson: Oh, I love hearing that. I bet the folks at St. Louis CC feel that way too.

Emily Timmerman: Yeah, I hope so.

Steve Robinson: Well, and you know, it is an interesting contrast, isn't it? Right? Because you talked about three types of higher ed institutions that you have direct personal experience with, and it sounds like the powerful classroom experiences happened in your community college journey.

Emily Timmerman: Yes.

Steve Robinson: Well that's great. Maybe it's because I'm talking to an author, but when you were talking I was thinking about the Frank Bruni book. He's got a great title to

encapsulate what you're talking about. It's Where You Go Is Not Who You Will Be.

Emily Timmerman: Exactly.

Steve Robinson: Yeah, and the other thing that I'm sure you're aware of is that all of the substance of research on thriving in college and post college success point to the factors that you described. It's what you do in a classroom. It's how you engage on a college campus, not the name out on the marquee. So, it's wonderful that you're telling that story of yours. So, you know, when you think about your role as a writer, as an author, you're often called upon to explain things to people. It's kind of your job, right? So, when you think about folks who don't understand what you understand about community colleges, if you were addressing an audience of folks who had some misconceptions or harbored some of these stigmas against community colleges, what would your short elevator pitch be to make the value proposition for community colleges?

Emily Timmerman: Well, I would say that community colleges offer the opportunity for more of the population to have accessibility to an education. Often times the same level of education that people are getting at maybe Ivy League universities or other universities in the area with a more recognizable name, is accessible in price, and it was really just ... it's a great option to have, and the name of the school is not going to get you a job when you graduate. There are people who like to hear that you went to the school that they went to, but more often than not people will be impressed with your journey from where you started to the end of it. So, you know, you said you're not where you start, but I'm not ashamed from where I started from, because I learned a lot. To me, I feel like I've come much further maybe than someone who has just graduated from Harvard because their father was a legacy.

Steve Robinson: Well that's fascinating. Spoken like a true author. You're thinking about the storyline, right? There's a narrative, right, and it has a beginning, it has a middle, it has a trajectory. I love that.

Emily Timmerman: Thanks.

Steve Robinson: Well look, Emily, it was really wonderful to connect with you. I appreciate your time, and it's great that even though you don't work in a community college it's clear that our institutions made a difference for you, and we really appreciate you telling your community college story when you're talking about yourself and you're engaging people out in the world.

Emily Timmerman: No problem.

Steve Robinson: Thanks for talking to me.

Emily Timmerman: Love to do it. Thank you.

Steve Robinson: Well, I am very happy to be joined by Dr. Tara Zirkel, who is the senior manager for community college partnerships at Raise Me. Tara, how are you tonight?

Tara Zirkel: I'm really well, thank you.

Steve Robinson: Yeah, well it's great to talk to you. I'm so happy we connected on Twitter, and before we get going though, why don't you tell folks what Raise Me is and what it does?

Tara Zirkel: Sure. So Raise Me is a free platform for community college students where we try to connect students with what we call micro-scholarships, which are incremental scholarships that students begin to earn in their very first semester of community college, and how they earn those scholarships are by logging incremental pragmatic achievements into an online portfolio. For an example, if a student gets an A in a class, or they do community service, or they meet with an advisor, they can actually earn these bit size scholarships that over time accumulate into a bigger scholarship, so when the students prepare to transfer, they already know how much scholarship is waiting for them potentially at a transfer institution.

Tara Zirkel: We're really trying to get students involved in proactive transfer planning and really trying to make a road map of the behaviors and habits that are going to allow them to be successful transfer candidates.

Steve Robinson: That sounds like awesome work. So, I appreciate you taking part in this great and important work of mapping out transfer for our students, and I'm guessing that's why this hashtag #EndCCStigma has connected with you. What is it that resonated with you about this social media work?

Tara Zirkel: You know, there's both personal and professional reasons, and on the personal side, I myself was a first gen low income student who went to college and felt very overwhelmed by the process, and felt my confidence was shaken when I arrived there. Eventually, I went on to work in the community college system in Pennsylvania for 10 years. When I came into that professional role, I saw that same fear and that same stigma and that same lack of confidence in my students. When I saw the stigma campaign I really thought about the stigmas that I saw my students face and how also those students often came to us with other stigmas, community colleges serve demographics of students that has been historically underrepresented who are carrying unfair stigmas sometimes.

Tara Zirkel: All those different layers of kind of lack of access or layers of things that impede students from really accessing education definitely speaks to me, and at Raise Me we speak with community college educators every day who over and over and over again describe obstacles that their students face that really resonate with the stigma campaign.

Steve Robinson: Well that's great. Well, it's not great that the stigma is still there, but that the awareness, that you have the awareness and all these connections through your work and your own personal story. That's really powerful, so have you seen an example or some kind of an anecdote of this stigma in action?

Tara Zirkel: Oh sure. There's really two that come to mind, and the first one being I worked for many years at the community college of Allegheny County, which is in the Pittsburgh metro region. For many years I was an admissions director, and one of the greatest things about our job is that we got to venture into the community and venture into high schools to talk to students and talk to community members about all the wonderful things we had to offer them. And often times when we went into a high school or went to a fair people were very receptive to us, but there were times where you would see a parent kind of guide their child away from our table or the time when you go into the high school and perhaps the guidance counselor gives you the spot in the corner, right, during the fair.

Tara Zirkel: Definitely saw times where folks perhaps didn't understand what we did or had a notion of what we did that was inaccurate. I think the second example of stigma that I see is actually one that speaks to our work at Raise Me as an admissions director students will come in my office, and one of their first questions was often about transfer. So, how do I know my credits will transfer, how do I know that this is a really correct step, you know, in my pathway to a bachelor's degree? One of the things that students would say repeatedly is, "When I get to x, y, z four year institution are they going to look at me differently? Is my degree going to be any different than a student who started there?"

Tara Zirkel: We really did a lot of work around trying to demystify that process to eliminate the idea that somehow that transition process was going to devalue their educational experience rather than add value to it.

Steve Robinson: What an interesting lens, because when I was listening to you talk I could picture families, students, parents kind of voting with their bodies as they walked around these tables, or as the colleges kind of put you in a less than desirable place at a fair. What a powerful example. So, even though you don't work at an institution anymore you're still a community college person and connected with the sector. What makes you proud to be doing community college work?

Tara Zirkel: It's been my life's work. I wrote a dissertation on it, and I really think for me access to quality education is a pillar of social equity, and working at an open access institution and continuing to work with those institutions really helps me feel like I'm starting, or I'm a piece of a reconciliation process around historically institutions maybe not making space for all demographics of students and not making space for students who don't fit into a certain mold, so really I just think working institutions that really provided access contributes to our democracy. It contributes to economic stability, and it makes our communities better when you have nurses and teachers and welders and folks that can really add value to

both the economic and social components of where you live. It's such a tremendous source of pride for me.

Steve Robinson: Wow. I know that a lot of us feel that same way. I can just hear the pride in your voice about that kind of important work, and it sounds like you're doing some additional interesting work to kind of resource students to make sure that they can take advantage of that access to community college, which is great. So you know, given that, given your experience, if you had a group of folks who were open to hearing about community colleges but maybe they held some of these misconceptions or stigmas and you had the opportunity to deliver an argument in favor of community colleges, what would that argument be?

Tara Zirkel: Oh, there's so many. I think a lot of people, the first argument is the affordability and the economic argument. I think my argument, my core argument, is that we serve, or community colleges serve, every single member of a community, whether it's the 14 year old student that wants dual enrollment credits, whether it's the mature adult that wants to advantage from non-credit courses, whether it's someone who wants to transfer. Every single member of the community can find a place in a community college regardless of where they've been, regardless of where they are in their lives. There's something there that's going to enrich them, and I think that would be truly, you know, the core of what community colleges do.

Steve Robinson: Oh, I couldn't agree more. One of my favorite phrases about our institutions is we have one of everybody. And it's good. It's what makes it good.

Tara Zirkel: It's what makes it great, yes.

Steve Robinson: Well, Tara, thank you so much for taking some time to talk with me. It's been great to connect with you on Twitter, and it's really cool to see organizations outside of brick and mortar community colleges advancing this agenda and also caring about how our sector is viewed, so thank you for continuing to take on that mantel of having a positive message about community colleges and the mission. I really appreciate it.

Tara Zirkel: Oh, we appreciate you so much. Thanks.

Steve Robinson: All right. Great, Tara. Thank you.

Tara Zirkel: Thank you.

[MUSIC FADES]

Steve Robinson: Well, that's it for Episode Three 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](http://endccstigma.org). Stay

tuned for future episodes, as we are producing a total of six 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.