

#EndCCStigma Podcast Project / Episode Four

2018-04-17

[INTRO MUSIC – VOICE MONTAGE]

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Taylor Works: I feel like going to a community college really prepares you, and it helps you grow, because for some people, school is hard... and it's challenging, and not everybody is book smart, so having people who are willing to help you be great is really fortunate, and community colleges really help you with that.

Bob Chikos: Well, my mom started at a community college and went on to earn a bachelor's and a master's degree. I started at a community college, and I ended up with five college degrees total. My wife went to two community colleges and has two certificates.

Jo Blondin: Community colleges deliver the highest quality education, for the most affordable price, to everybody. Everybody. Anyone who wants to come to the college can, and we will meet you where you are.

[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 Four of our podcast dedicated to ending the unfair stigma placed on America's community colleges. This is a six-part series of podcasts due to the incredible 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 community college students, proud alumni, and a pair of amazing college presidents from different areas of the country. Guests on this episode include Natalie Harder, Taylor Works, Bob Chikos, Shya Wheeler, Jo Blondin, and Richette Sweeney.

We begin the episode with my conversation with Natalie Harder, the Chancellor of South Louisiana Community College. As with most of these interviews, I spoke to Chancellor Harder on the telephone.

Steve: Well, I have the honor to be speaking with Natalie Harder who was the Chancellor of South Louisiana Community College. Natalie, how are you doing?

Natalie Harder: I'm great, Steve, how are you?

Steve: I'm excellent. I'm excellent. I'm happy to be talking with you and thanks for making some time to have this discussion. We've connected over Twitter, and you are interested in this effort to push back against stigma against community college. What is it that resonates with you about this effort?

Natalie Harder: Well, having almost 20 years in higher education and community colleges, it is just disappointing to me that we've decided that we still can't seem to get over the fact that someone chooses to go to a two year institution for whatever reason and somehow that makes them less in the eyes of achieving higher education. I don't understand it. I don't know why we peg institutions, and quite frankly, students with that kind of moniker when the fact is that we have so many students that come to community colleges for so many reasons. Isn't it awesome in an age where we need more education and training that they've chosen to do it at all?

Steve: Yes, it is. Yeah, I couldn't agree more. We share that view, and I agree completely. So, in your experience over your career, have you seen any examples of that kind of thinking, that kind of stigma in action where you could describe it? Where have you seen this?

Natalie Harder: Well, I unfortunately still see it very clearly to this day because I would say a month does not go by where I am not in a public venue where someone says, "Well, they can always go to South Louisiana Community College because they're not ready for real college or since not everybody's college bound, Natalie, they can go to your school." It's unbelievable to me that there's still that mindset that we are, first of all, we're not even a college. Some of that has to do with the history of how higher education came to be in Louisiana, but the fact is that somehow the spokes are less than. And you probably know Steve, you can't be a good welder unless you're good at math.

Steve: That's right.

Natalie Harder: There are a lot of the things that people talk about in terms of skills and education that are inherent in the vocational training that we do. I don't get it, but unfortunately I hear it all the time. And then I just gently remind people we have the word college in our name for a reason. We are a college. And the fact is that we meet students where they are and proud of the fact that we take everybody. We have from Valedictorians, quite frankly for our institution, where we do adult basic education, the high set, we have adults with third grade education. We hold that flag high every single day.

Steve: Well, you keep holding that flag high. When you were talking, I was thinking about conversations I've had that are very similar and it's about the same frequency, Natalie. I was recently at an event where another academic from kind of an elite four year school said, "I really wanted my nephew to go to your

college because he wasn't ready for regular college." I had the same experience and that was going to ask you what you do, and what I hear you saying is that you gently, but politely push back in real time, right?

Natalie Harder: Oh absolutely. And I tell them guys, this isn't an argument about a two year versus a four year. The point right now is we have got to get a culture where everybody understands you have to go to college. It doesn't mean you have to get a degree, but you have to go on beyond high school in order to be self sustaining and contribute back to your community. I'm very upfront about, I'm not sure where you got that understanding that we are not a college, but we are a college and then I go on to say the bigger issue is not delineating within colleges, the point is everybody's got to go to college.

Steve: Well, amen to that. That's a great way to handle it. You alluded to something that is a point of pride, access and taking folks who are high accomplished, academics, Valedictorians and folks who are coming from a long way back. But one question I'd have for you, clearly you've devoted your career to this. You're passionate about it. What makes you proud to lead a community college and to work at a community college?

Natalie Harder: I think my pride comes from the fact that we, my family, my SLCC team knows that they can make or break the future of the people they grocery shop with, that they sit next to in church who are their neighbors. And so, they work doubly hard to ensure that these students are successful. I have a doctorate and you have a doctorate. And I've only ever gone to four year institutions and to be at an institution now where it is all about the outcome of the student, it's all about taking the student from where they are to where they want to be are a set of conversations that probably wasn't my experience, at least in my undergraduate experience. And it's so to see folk just give it that extra elbow grease because they know the student that is struggling or they know the student that is hesitant or afraid or concerned or can't get to class because they can't find a sitter.

Natalie Harder: I have so much pride in how hard our folks work to better their community. It's just breathtaking sometimes.

Steve: Wow. That's very inspirational to hear you talk about the employees at your institution and your team because I can hear the passion in your voice. Those folks make a difference in the lives of the people that they share a community with, don't they?

Natalie Harder: They do. And you know, Steve, they don't just change one life. So many students stick with me. So, we have a nondestructive testing program and I met a man in his mid 30s with six kids. He job hopped, job hopped, job hopped. Now, he's on our nondestructive testing program. The average student graduates ... excuse me. A student graduates and their average first year income is \$56,000 a year. And you know what he said to me as we were talking? "You can be darn sure ...", that's how he said, "... that all of my kids are going to college. And he wasn't

mincing words about a real college, not a real college. All he knew is that the education and training he got at our college meant ... it was going to be different for his entire family.

Natalie Harder: And now, all of his expectations is all of his kids were gonna go to college even though nobody really had that expectation of him. And you know, Steve, you're there at graduation and you have multiple generations graduating at night, it's just the most ... you become so thankful you have the opportunity to help people when they want to better themselves.

Steve: Yeah. I'm just nodding vigorously listening to you describe that. Because those of us who work in America's community colleges, that's what keeps us going. That's the gas in our tank, right? We can see the difference it makes in people's lives and that is a special thing to be a part of. So let me ask you one more question, Natalie, and you're probably in this situation fairly frequently. You understand the value of our institutions. You're passionate about it, your team is passionate about it. Imagine that you have an audience of folks who may be harbor some misconceptions about community colleges or really don't understand the role that we play. What would be your value proposition, your elevator speech to that group to consider community college?

Natalie Harder: Right. I always talk about the access piece because I'm so proud of, of us not putting barriers up to success. I talk about the affordability piece. I talk about the ability to change your mind in terms of what you want to be and not having significant negative consequences because of either cost or time. So, our institution, we have a number of starts every year, so it's not like if you miss a class in the fall, you have to wait until the next fall. I talk about our connection to business and industry. Many of our programs, we have a strong advisory committees where we can connect you with employers.

Natalie Harder: I also talk about the fact that we have the ability to step you, to ladder you in a way that allows you to work and go to school at the same time, if that's what you need to do. You can talk about the transfer piece of it. There's just so many reasons why community college makes so much sense regardless of who you are and where are you are in your career or life trajectory. I probably would be hard pressed to do it in an elevator 'cause I get so excited about it but I think you can pick whatever it is that would float that person's boat and community colleges have it covered.

Steve: Yeah. Well, I think you hit a lot of our top points, right? I would imagine that that group would be really receptive to that message. So, you've been in Louisiana for a little while. Have you seen any kind of change in these viewpoints about our institutions over the years you've been there?

Natalie Harder: I think there's more recognition now for the work that community colleges do in a couple of very important ways. Number one, the number of partnerships we have with business and industry has exploded over the last few years. As business and industry are maybe saying, "You know what? I want a person with

this skill, not necessarily this degree." They turned to community colleges because we can demonstrate that with industry based certifications and I know you do a lot of that at your place. The other piece that I would say is that four year institutions as they are competing for, at least in our case, a smaller high school population class, they're saying, "Well, how can I fill the seats of juniors and seniors?" Hey, I need to improve my transfer agreements with community colleges because in Virginia, unfortunately you have to do it program by program and institution by institution. So, you can't do it across systems even, you have to do it.

Natalie Harder: I have to take my business program and have a two plus two with 20 other institutions.

Steve: Right. And then there's a big matrix. It's like an exponent factor of how many times you have to do that to get your students to where they want to go.

Natalie Harder: Yeah. Which is unbelievable to me because in my mind, if a student graduates from us, they've already proven themselves academically, they've already proven themselves to be committed and that they can finish something. I think the four years ought to be scholarship and our students are like crazy at that point, because they're gonna have the four year graduation in completion numbers. But I get a little biased.

Steve: Yeah, of course we are biased, but I think we're making progress. You put your finger on two things I think are really important. One is we do have a lot of great allies in industry and business because I think they get it. I think that they know that those skills matter. And then I also think that we can continue to do a better job on the transfer piece by treating four years as allies, that we are a great pipeline of well-prepared juniors who are gonna graduate.

Natalie Harder: Yeah.

Steve: Well, Natalie, thank you so much for talking with me. I really appreciate you adding your voice to this effort to end the stigma against community colleges and it was really great to connect with you.

Natalie Harder: Well, thank you so much Steven. I appreciate the energy you're putting into trying to help people have a certain negative mindset. I really appreciate that.

Steve: It's a lot of fun. Thanks a lot Natalie.

Natalie Harder: Bye.

Steve: Well, I'm super excited to be talking to Taylor Works who is a psychology major at community college. Taylor, thanks for talking to me.

Taylor Works: Thank you.

Steve: So, what do you like about being a community college student?

Taylor Works: Well, I like that it gave me a second chance because I've been to schools before this and they really work out for me. But I got a second chance here at Owens, and I think it's a great experience. I'm able to focus on my work more and it's not so costly. I'm able to make things work and have time management with school and basketball as well. So, it's pretty good for me. I like it. I love it.

Steve: That's great. So talk to me about second chance. What was different this time?

Taylor Works: Well, I wasn't as stressed out and I had way more help here. It's not a lot of help when teachers have a million students, they probably don't even know you by name. If you miss a class, they probably won't recognize it. As far as students, everybody is for themselves. They're like, if I'm passing, then I don't care. But when I came here, the teachers usually know you by name. They know you personally. You miss a class, they will more than likely reach out to you or one of the coaches. You have people who help you do everything as far as financial aid, getting homework done, getting tutoring. Even like if you are struggling at home or with rides or eating or anything, there's hope for everything, then I think that that's what's really great about it.

Steve: That's fantastic to hear. Have you heard people say anything negative or bad about community colleges?

Taylor Works: Yes, I heard a few things. Mostly because I'm an athlete and a lot of athletes around with a chip on their shoulder or their parents make them feel like they're too good to go to community college or their friends or teammates make them feel like they're too good to go to a community college. But I feel like going to community college really prepares you and it helps you grow. And not only in the sport, but in school as well because for some people school is hard and it's challenging. And not everybody is book smart. So, having the help and people who are willing to help you be great was really fortunate. And community colleges really help you with that.

Taylor Works: As an athlete, going to community college first, JUCO is really great. It was great for me. I feel like if I didn't come here I wouldn't be as great as an athlete or a student because it helped me grow and I think I got better as a person as well.

Steve: That's inspiring. So, if you had a group of people who are considering coming to a community college, what would you tell them?

Taylor Works: I would tell them that it'll be the greatest idea that they could ever have, honestly. Because not only would it help you take your first step, but it will also help you be prepared for the next level and for a four year, and also help you figure out if school is actually for you. 'Cause you go to a university and you fail, it's way harder to get yourself back together and get back on your feet. And it's

also a way more costly. But you go to community college, you figure out what you want to do, you figure out your niche and everything goes well. So, go for it.

Steve: Thank you so much, Taylor. Great conversation.

Taylor Works: Thank you.

Steve: Well, I am really happy to be connected to Bob Chikos who is a special education teacher in Crystal Lake in Illinois. How are you doing Bob?

Bob Chikos: I'm doing Great.

Steve: I am so glad you reached out to me because this hashtag we're using, end the CC stigma really resonates with you, and you reached out to me. It's great to be talking on the phone. What is it about this campaign that has he so energized and interested in working with us?

Bob Chikos: Well, I think I've always had a little bit of a chip on my shoulder way when it comes to community college stigma. I think a lot people, they feel the need to justify paying a lot more going away to college. By doing so, they put down community colleges because I think it's a way for them to justify it. But my own experiences have been fantastic and I have a couple of stories that can illustrate my experience.

Steve: Yeah, I'd love to hear them 'cause you have a lot of family members who have attended a community colleges. Tell me about this.

Bob Chikos: Sure. I'll start with my mom. So, my mom graduated from high school in the '60s and she was an honor student. She loved going to school and she wanted to go to college. But her parents are very traditional. They didn't have a whole lot of money either, but they were very traditional and believed that a woman's role with the find a husband and raise kids. So, she didn't start going to college until she was pregnant with me. And she went to Macomb Community College in Michigan and she really enjoyed it. She would take a class here and there. When I was old enough, she took me to the preschool and my first day I had terrible separation anxiety and I was screaming and screaming.

Bob Chikos: And the president of Macomb just happened to be there at the time. He just stopped by the preschool and he saw me and he got down on his hands and knees and he was trying to irritate me and cheer me up. I love that story 'cause it really speaks well of how community colleges are. It's like a family, and I thought that story was so endearing.

Steve: That's a great story. You've inspired me. We have a daycare in one of our campuses. I gotta go play with the kids. But that's a great story. So, it's like a family. You clearly have a real positive place in your heart for community colleges. Tell me something else.

Bob Chikos: Yeah. My mom she started at the community college and went on to earn a bachelors and a masters degree. I started at a community college and I ended up with five college degrees total. My wife went to two community colleges and has two certificates. I did the transfer options. She did the terminal degree where she got certificates. That's her career now is, she's a massage therapist. I'm a very lucky man.

Steve: Fantastic. Well, that's great.then

Bob Chikos: Then she got that certification at a Community College, Harper College in Illinois. That's her career now and she loves it.

Steve: Well, that's great. It sounds like that's had a huge impact on your family. It's interesting to hear you say you have a chip on your shoulder. I think a lot of us do about this stigma. Can you tell me about an example or some kind of a place in your life where you've noticed the stigma come out?

Bob Chikos: Yeah, there are a few that come to mind. The first one was when I was in high school, the kids were going away to college, and we'd call the community college, which is a college of Lake County. They called it the college of last chance. Ha, ha, ha. My family, we didn't have whole lot of money, but education is really important to us. I wasn't ashamed at all for going to community college, but that teasing early hurt. I sort of had the last laugh because a lot of those people who made fun of me, I would see them the spring semester after they had partied out of their four year college.

Steve: Yeah, there's some kind of tortoise and the hare story there, isn't there?

Bob Chikos: Yeah, exactly. More recently, there's an education historian, I really like his work. He has a lot of good stuff, but I kind of differ with him on one area. He demonizes community colleges, and he puts out statistics, and his statistical say things like, people who start at community college tend not to get a BA with high frequency as those who start at a four year. But to me, it's really an apples and oranges argument because first of all, he just take the over academic strength of people who start out at different places. Although, a lot of the people who start at four year colleges, they would be successful regardless of where they started, whether at a community college or a four year.

Bob Chikos: A lot of people at community colleges, they're there for different reasons. A lot of them are just trying college out to see if it's for them and if it's not for them, learn that at a low cost place. There are parents trying to get ahead in life. They have responsibilities like taking care of their family members. A lot of [inaudible 00:21:32] economic advantages where people go away that ... it's really an apples and oranges compared to [inaudible 00:21:38] compare the two.

Steve: I think so. Yeah, and Bob, the other piece there is that the numbers really shift once students transfer.

Bob Chikos: Right. Those who get to that point.

Steve: They actually outperform native students.

Bob Chikos: Exactly. That's what I've ever heard.

Steve: Well, that's too bad. In terms of the nickname that your local community college has or had, most of us do, most community colleges do have some kind of pejorative nickname. But I'm glad you rose above that. You obviously are proud of your association with all these great community colleges. Apart from having these great degrees, which is really important, what makes you proud to be a community college graduate?

Bob Chikos: Well, it is a college for the community. A lot of these four year colleges, they go crazy trying to recruit a diverse student body, but you just have it naturally as a community college. I went to a high school that was affluent, 90 plus percent white. And when I went to my community college, it was the opposite. I was in classes with people from different ethnicities, religions, people who are struggling financially, military veterans. There were parents trying to move off in their careers, senior citizens with a whole lot of life experiences. Kids who have been homeschooled in high school. Work with all these different kinds of people really changed my outlook on life.

Steve: I'll bet. It seems like it might have changed your career path 'cause you're a special education teacher. When did you discover that calling? Where were you in your college journey when you figured out that's what you wanted to do?

Bob Chikos: That was actually well both before and after my college journey. When I was in high school, I was a volunteer for a classroom of kids with special needs. I loved it, but I didn't pursue it in college. It wasn't until after college when I ... My first job out of college was at a facility for adults with disabilities. I liked it, but it was pretty hard to support a family on a nonprofit income. So, I went back to school and got my certification. What's interesting is the university where I went is it's assessed like a community college. It's Northeastern Illinois University, which up until about two years ago, didn't even have dorms. It's just very low cost, a place where a lot of people, they're just trying to move up in their life.

Steve: Well, and there's a lot to be said about that, isn't there?

Bob Chikos: Yeah.

Steve: Well, that's great, and first of all, thank you for that important work you're doing. Working with folks who are different abled in high school is so important and that's experience that you had as a student, I have a son who's doing that right now. He's an aide in a special ed classroom and getting a lot out of it. So, thanks for what you do. Just a last question, if you had an assembled audience who was open to hearing your viewpoint about community colleges and these

great experiences that you and your family have had with them, what would you say to this group to overcome the stigma? How would you represent community colleges to this group of folks?

Bob Chikos: Sure. I've actually been in some of these conversations. When you ask somebody where they went to college, they'll say where they got their bachelors degree. But I always say that I started out at the college of Lake County.

Steve: Good.

Bob Chikos: And more often than not, somebody from the group will say, "Hey, I started the community college too." And then, we'll get into conversation and you'll hear all the benefits. We'll talk about the low class sizes, the teachers who are committed to teaching rather than research, and the low cost. All essential in getting ahead in life. Then I'll also hear somebody who didn't go to community college a lot of times they'll say, "Yeah, I kind of wish I did. I would have saved a whole lot of money."

Bob Chikos: But just the experience I had, like I got involved with student activities, and I would also urge a lot of people who go to community colleges to get involved because you could go to college and just go to class, which a lot of people would need to do if they're working too, but to get involved in stuff. I was in student government, and I was asked to be a part of a search committee for a position they were hiring for. I learned how to work with a group. I learned how to build consensus. I never got that kind of experience when I went to a four year university, I was just a number there. But at my community college, they saw that I wanted to get involved, and they were, "Hey, let's develop some leadership skills in this guy."

Steve: Bob, that is fantastic advise about getting engaged to your school because as you mentioned, many of our campuses are commuter campuses, and so some folks don't have the ability get involved to the extent that they can. There are these rich experiences, there are these great real life opportunities. And so that's excellent advice. The other thing, I was just so inspired to hear you talk about how just by calling out your own community college experience in a conversation, it sounds like it has a bandwagon effect. And people pop up and say, "Oh yeah, I went there too. Or I wish I would have done that." That's fantastic.

Bob Chikos: Yeah, and I'll talk about my own son because a lot of people though, they'll say, "Well, it's ..." For me it was okay, but I wanted the best for my kid and I believed it is the best for my kid. My kid's a junior in high school. He's actually graduating at the end of this year. He's pretty advanced. He was 96 percentile on those PSATs. He's taken 90P classes over the past two years. He's a really bright kid and I don't fear at all for the quality of education because I've seen it for myself that the quality is just as good at the community college. When it comes to my own kid, yep, community college is great.

Steve: I love it because as you know, and you know it as a parent and you know as a student and a graduate, there are places for those high performing, high achieving students at community colleges. We have honors programs, we've got all kinds of great stuff and if you take that extra step and can be engaged, and look at you, you were on a search committee. That probably prepared you for all kinds of stuff later in your career.

Bob Chikos: Yeah. It helped me when I was interviewing for jobs too.

Steve: Absolutely. Well, Bob, your enthusiasm about community colleges is infectious. I'm always infected with that enthusiasm. So, if it rubs off on me, it must be intense. I really appreciate the goodwill that you have for America's community colleges and the impact they've had on your family. Anything else you'd want to share?

Bob Chikos: No, I think that's pretty much it. I've just kind of spurt off all things that was on my mind.

Steve: Well, I appreciate it. A lot of the folks that I've talked to have either worked at community colleges or they're currently a student there. The fact that our institutions made a lasting impression on you and led you to reach out to me really means a lot to us. So, thanks a lot. Keep having that cocktail party story where you'd tell your community college and put it on your resume and tell everybody else to put it on their resume.

Bob Chikos: Will do.

Steve: All right. Thanks a lot Bob.

Bob Chikos: Thanks.

Steve: I'm really happy to be talking to Shyah Wheeler who is a community college student. What are you studying, Shyah?

Shyah Wheeler: Psychology.

Steve: Psychology. Very, very cool. What do you like about being a community college student?

Shyah Wheeler: I like that it's not as stressful as a big college would be because there's not like hundreds of people in your class and there's only about 20 or so. You can just have that personal experience with your teacher like you can go to them whenever you need to and you'll get faster replies than you normally would at a bigger college.

Steve: When you were getting ready to come to a community college, did you ever hear anything negative or are bad about community colleges as a destination?

Shyah Wheeler: Yeah, because being like a big athlete at my school, a lot of people were like, "Oh, you're just going to community college." They downplayed her so much. But you don't necessarily have to go to a big college to be considered a good athlete. If I would've went to a big college, I probably would've just sat. I like coming here and being able to play and do what I needed to do.

Steve: And go to a national championship game.

Shyah Wheeler: Yeah, for two teams. It was a great experience.

Steve: Phenomenal. That's right. Twice for you.

Shyah Wheeler: Yeah.

Steve: Phenomenal. So, if there were a group of students, athletes or non athletes trying to decide whether they would go to community college or not, what would you tell them?

Shyah Wheeler: I would tell him it's a great stepping stone if you do want to go to that four year college because it prepares you mentally and physically for athletes and non athletes.

Steve: That's awesome. Shyah, thank you so much for all you've done this year and thanks for talking to me.

Shyah Wheeler: No problem. Thank you.

Steve: Well, I am really happy to be having a conversation with my great colleague, Dr. Jo Blondin who is the president of Clark State Community College. Joe, how are you?

Jo Blondin: I'm doing well. How are you doing?

Steve: Excellent. I'm doing great. I'm delighted to be talking with you because you've been doing Twitter for a lot longer than I have ... you're great on Twitter, but this social media campaign about community college stigma has resonated with you or what is it that you connect with on this hashtag?

Jo Blondin: I think the first thing I connected with was the simplicity of it and the honesty of it. For somebody to basically articulate we need to end community college stigma was revolutionary because in a lot of ways we talk about it or we talk around it and we say community colleges are awesome, community colleges are amazing. But then we find ourselves in the shadows and we find ourselves being diminished in some capacities. For example, when folks, particularly our peers at four year universities are speaking, it appears that we take a back seat and I thought ... Somebody finally had the courage to say, "We need to end the

stigma." It's something I've believed in for my 26 years as a worker being in higher education because I know how hard community college students work.

Jo Blondin: I know how hard community college faculty and staff work and I know that our quality is second to none. I think the simplicity of the message and frankly, the honesty of it, getting to the heart of what has been bothering us and just saying it was revolutionary.

Steve: Well, there are a lot of us revolutionaries out there, so that's great. I know this is something you've cared about through your career and I've heard you deliver impassioned speeches about the value of our institutions. I wonder, since you've encountered this in your career, you're a community college president, you teach a doctoral program, a lot of people listen to what you have to say, but you have seen a lot in our sector. Can you give me an example or an anecdote of this stigma in practice?

Jo Blondin: I can. I had a student many years ago when I worked at a two year college as I was the chief student officer. So, I was in charge of student affairs. And I'll never forget the student. I won't name her. I'm still in touch with her and mentor her. But she was an amazing human being who walked into the Student Affairs Office to meet with folks to get signed up for classes. She said she'd been working up to it for a number of years because she didn't feel that she would be accepted at a four year institution, but she wasn't sure if she had what it took to get a degree of any kind. But she had been told, as many of our students, this is nine out of 10 of our students had been told that they can't make it an education period, particularly at a four year university.

Jo Blondin: And she was one of these folks. She had been living the stigma for many years. And in fact, Steve, she had been living this stigma for so many years that, and she informed me of this later, that she was actually suicidal. It's an incredible story. So, she comes in, she registers, we get her registered, we pump her up. We say, this is before all of the focus on student success. Typically, college is a bit about student success forever. All right, and so we pumped her up. We said, "We can't wait for you to be here. We've got childcare for you. You've got a little girl. We've got this. You've got this. Just come back to school. We're excited."

Jo Blondin: She took her classes and would drop in from time to time. She came back to me after a year into her program and she said to me, "Dr. Blondin, and I want you to know something because I don't think that you knew it when I came in here." She said, "But I sat out in that parking lot listening to all the messages that I'd been told my whole life about how unworthy I was. And I walked in here, it was my last chance." She said this, "I was thinking about going home and committing suicide. This was my last chance. And you folks in Student Affairs pumped me up. You got me with the right faculty members. This has been a total turnaround." and she was, "And I want you to know that, that you changed somebody's life. You literally saved somebody's life." And I thought, and of course, that's a very emotional thing to say to somebody.

Jo Blondin: It was absolutely a life changing moment for me as well. You know what? That community college experience changed the course of her life. She remarried. Her husband worked at our college. I'll also say this about her, which was just incredible. She got her bachelor's degree and is working on a masters degree. So, we stopped that stigma in its tracks that every high school counselor or an ex husband ... countless people had told her that she wasn't worth it, period. And she would say to me frequently. I tell students my story because when they come in here, they don't feel worthy of education, but in particular, they feel that there is some type of stigma even in coming to a community college. She goes, but what I tell them is it saved my life and it will save yours.

Steve: That is so powerful.

Jo Blondin: It is. This is a powerful story. And I think about it, especially when I'm having a bad day. I don't have too many bad days, maybe one a year. When am I having a bad day, I think about her. She inspires me every day and she's still working. Also, is that not the ideal person to work at a community college? So, we have so many students here where ... sometimes when we're dealing with higher education will say things like, "Well, it's not a life and death. We're not dealing in life and death." You know what? In some situations we don't know that, but we are. We are intervening at a critical time, particularly for the adult learner. Like she was in her mid 30s. We are intervening in people's lives and in such a positive way. This is our story and it should not be stigmatized. It should be celebrated.

Steve: Wow, yeah, and boy, there's so much packed into that anecdote, a powerful moving anecdote, but you're exactly right. Our work is life and death when you look at the bigger picture of social determinants of health. And one other thought, we probably don't have enough time to go down this avenue, but one thing you raised when you think about a very important issue like the national crisis we have with suicide in the United States. That is an issue that is also stigmatized. And the folks who are researching and reading and writing about suicide, talk about the stigma of not being able to share the kinds of anecdotes you just did. So, we make a lot of difference in people's lives across the board, whether it's big issues like suicide or opioids or homelessness. What a great story. Thank you for sharing that. It comes out in the passion that you speak with Jo, but what is it that makes you so proud to be at a community college?

Jo Blondin: I'm proud for, of course, for the accomplishments of our students for working with such servant leaders among the faculty and staff. It really, and truly every day is a blessing to come to work with people who care deeply about moving individuals from out of poverty or into middle class lifestyle. I think that that is an absolutely critical to what we do every day, whether it's in workforce development or transfer, so that that's what I'm passionate about. But I'm also, I'm not sure I could work in any other field, and I'm not sure I could work in any other area besides the community college because of it's ... it does have a unique mission to meet people where they are, to absolutely accept 100% of many graduating class, like I always say.

Jo Blondin: I always ask that question in our faculty staff and community members and our board members and everybody, what is wrong with being inclusive? I don't understand why inclusion is stigmatized. So, in other words, the fact that we have ... I mean we have such diversity, I mean, such richness on campus, I would think people would be envious of working in such a well resourced environment for inclusivity. So, that is something that I cherish and can't imagine. There's nothing else that I could possibly do besides work in the two year sector because of that focus on, we want everybody in the pool.

Steve: Yes. I love that answer mostly because it sounded like I was interviewing myself. I feel the same way. I feel the exact same way. I guess that's what makes us cut out for the work that we do. So, one last question, Joe, and I'm sure that you're in this situation quite frequently as a college president and as a faculty member in a graduate program. But imagine for a moment that you've got an audience of folks who might harbor misconceptions or stigmas about community colleges and you've got the opportunity to deliver our value proposition. What would you say about community colleges to a group like that?

Jo Blondin: I would say that community colleges deliver the highest quality education for the most affordable price to everybody. I always say we accept 100% of any graduating class. Anyone who wants to come to the college can and we will meet you where you are. So, the value proposition is in both the quality and the affordability of what we do every day. I have people say to me on a regular basis, I can't believe doctor, let's say a Dr. Smith work at Clark State and delivers such high quality education. That individual should be somewhere else. And I'm like, "Of course they're here. They're here delivering the high ..." You should not be surprised hashtag NCC stigma that outstanding faculty in our ranks that feel downright evangelical about the work that they do because they are part of this.

Jo Blondin: They want to be part of the delivery of education and services to the least among us. So, I really do not ... I definitely highlight our quality everywhere we go. And I always say this too, our students could go anywhere. Our students could go anywhere. They succeed at Clark State because we wrap around them with services and provide a high quality of education. And then you watch them succeed at a four year university at levels greater than the first time full-time student at a four year institution because we have built around them, not just a support system, but academic excellence. Just a scaffolding of success. And so, it always really surprises me when people are surprised by the quality of education we deliver.

Jo Blondin: Because of course, our standards are high. Our standard is high as anybody's. And that's not because of accreditation. That's not because students need to transfer. And that's not because of the federal financial aid. Is because we do the right thing by our students every day. And we do it in an affordable way as well. And so, I think that the quality is something that I always highlight and I would also argue is part of the NCC stigma.

Steve: I agree. I love everything you said. And to that assembled group of people, it sounds like among all the things you hit, hitting that quality really hard and saying why would you be surprised that people who care about quality teaching would flock to an institution that's inclusive and that really kind of move the needle in their community? That's fantastic.

Jo Blondin: I'd never want once, Steve, gone to a restaurant and I'm really surprised your food is good.

Steve: That's funny.

Jo Blondin: I've chosen to go there, I expect a quality product and that's what, of course, Clark State's gonna deliver on. I'm not gonna cut corners as a leader. I'm gonna make sure that we have the absolute best. Do we make mistakes? Of course, every institution, every business does. But that doesn't mean that we're not totally focused on the highest quality that our students can get. And we've got great faculty and staff. As we all know, we had the best.

Steve: Yeah. We have the best that I can't imagine a better ending point then to have you saying we have the best. This has been a great conversation, Jo. Thanks for making time for me.

Jo Blondin: Yeah, thank you.

Steve: All right. Yup. Well, the next person I get to talk to his Richette Sweeney who is a student here. A community college student. How are you doing Richette?

Richette Sweeny: I'm doing fine. How are you?

Steve: I am great. I am great. So what are you studying here?

Richette Sweeny: I was studying social work concentration.

Steve: A very important field.

Richette Sweeny: Yes.

Steve: Very important fields. So, what do you like about being a community college student Richette?

Richette Sweeny: I liked the personal vibe of it. I like the smaller classes. I actually know all my teachers' names. I like the progress of them actually seeing the journey with me 'cause I do get teachers asking like, "How are you in this class?" "'Cause a lot of the classes here play off each other. So, a lot of times you may have the same teacher just for a different class and a lot of them tell you like, "This teacher really don't like this." They actually give you help to help you navigate because every teacher teaches different here.

Steve: That's right.

Richette Sweeny: So, it's like one person class may be different. Some people may not be fond of you showing up to class late while others may be like, "Just do your work." I like the realism of it. They take it seriously. And I think if you put in the hard work, you can succeed here.

Steve: So, what I hear you're saying is kind of a balance between realism, but high expectations, right?

Richette Sweeny: Yes, the expectation is there. They can only do so much for you. You have to do what you want to do to get what you want to get out of it. So, I noticed with teachers, if you basically, if you need help they will help you. But if you show no lack, the fault is really on you because the support is here. I had teachers email to me on a weekend, ask me, well, do this over, don't submit this because you can get a better grade by doing this. I've seen the problem here. So, I think the support system in Owens is very good, but I think it depends on the student.

Richette Sweeny: I like the fact that a lot of the students here are actually older. They have real life circumstances. Some of them are parents, divorced, single parents. The structures are on the journey which ... I think if you put in the effort, you can get definitely good positive vibe out of it. This is my first time in a college. I came here in 2016 and my lowest GPA has been 3.7.

Steve: Phenomenal. You're knocking it out.

Richette Sweeny: Yeah. I know I'm a first generation college students, so I've been breaking down barriers here. I've about a year left and then I'll be on my way to UT, and I've been taking all the general education classes I need. That way when I transfer to UT I will be saving a lot more money and I will be able to take all the classes that will transfer to them. So, I'm saving time and money at Owens. But it's definitely a type of atmosphere like if you put in the work, you will have support behind you.

Steve: That's phenomenal. I love that. So, before you came here, before you came to a community college, did you hear anything negative or bad about community colleges?

Richette Sweeny: Well, no. I didn't even know anybody here. I was working in retail. I was a single mom, and I'm like, I just wanted to change. I'm glad I came to Owens because I really didn't know nobody. I didn't have a negative influence to have me fail. I was like a fish out of water. I didn't really know anything, and I came in at 25, so basically being an older student, so my focus was you have to be disciplined, you have to take it seriously. I think every semester I really broke down barriers because the odds was against me. I had people, it was like, it was too late, but it really, it's not too late. I'm glad I came and I'm glad that I was in an atmosphere where I had to get to know people and I had to let them get to know me that

way they can help because I think a lot of time with students, especially with barriers, they don't wanna ask for help because they feel like they are defeated.

Richette Sweeny: But I think you can only grow, and when you don't know something that is a room where you could be challenged. And when you are a challenge, you can actually better yourself. So sometimes I think some students are just scared. They don't want to fail. You won't always get that A in that class, but if you do your hard work, I think you can pass a class. So, I look at it like that. Don't try to over cheat because sometimes it's just about retaining the information and going forward. Every class is not meant to master because every instructor teaches differently. So, I think once you have a realistic expectation, you can really go far here.

Steve: Well, and you are breaking down barriers. I just gotta say, I find what you're saying so inspirational. I'm really proud of you.

Richette Sweeny: Thank you.

Steve: I really am. I'm so glad that you're here. So, if there were students who are considering community college or going off to college, thinking about community college as an option, what would you tell them?

Richette Sweeny: I would tell to take a visit, talk to advisors. Actually talks to students because you will catch people, students in a hallway and most of them will talk to you and they'll give you their experience. But I think you have to look for what do you really want out of this? Do you really want to stay here a semester or are you will be here for a year? Because some students will come just to pass a course and go on. Others were like me transfer students, so you're gonna have to say, "I'm going to have to put myself in a mindset." Because the real stuff happens outside these doors. So you have to be like, "If this is going to be a longterm thing or at least above a year, I have to take it seriously. I have to get a support system around you because if you do not ..." It's one thing if you don't have a support system outside these walls, but if you don't have a support system in these walls, you will have a more odd of not being as successful.

Richette Sweeny: So, you have to come up with a realistic expectation that you have to have a support system and there our support system here, and some people may not need as much support as others. Some people may just need someone to talk to them, ask them how their day going, or some people may need more of an academic team. So it really is just, you come to terms that it's okay that you don't know something. I think me talking and being honest, I was able to go every semester and being able to see, and I think some semesters were harder after I get out of ... in my major classes, they have been getting harder. But I think when you're a challenge, you know you're supposed to be here.

Steve: Yeah. Well, listening to you talk, you say something, I think that is so important. And that is when you're shopping for a college, you're not just shopping for a

name, you're shopping for a set of support structures. That's what I heard you say. I also heard you say that you found them at a community college.

Richette Sweeny: Oh yes, definitely. I don't know. I think I remember seeing an ad on TV and I was like, I always want to go to Owens. 'Cause at first, when I did graduate high school, I'm like, this college is just not for me. I had people in my family to go to college, but I didn't really see that. People, they just went to work. So I felt like I had to put the notion in my head that I can do it. So, it's for like when you really don't have a lot of people in that type of situation, you get a biased view. But I had to come and see it for myself. It's not that bad. You can do it.

Richette Sweeny: I feel like, these realistic barriers I had behind me, you're just kind of scared, so I had to feel like you have to just jump into it. I feel like the fact is I jumped into it with realistic expectations. I didn't take more classes than I should have. I started with two, then the next semester I started with three and now I'm at four. So, I always try to manage my time because I think time management is really important here and every semester I was able to succeed, but it was not without the help and support that Owens offered because it gets stressful. This is like at the halfway point. This determines whether you pass or fail a class.

Richette Sweeny: So, I think having a support system and being realistic of what you want to get out of here. If you want to be a D student, then you could be a D student. If you want to be an A student, you could be an A student. But if you want a person that really want to actually pass a class and actually really putting an effort, it really wouldn't matter because the grades will show. I would just tell someone, just be realistic of what you want and don't go off of a negative view. Go off the fact that you can succeed if you want to. Life is about lessons. And I think over the time, when I started here, I didn't even have a job. I lost my job. Now, I just got another job and it helped me in communication.

Richette Sweeny: I had to take an interpersonal communication class and basically that's about dialogue with people, being able to talk and navigate conversation. I think that class helped me because I do work in currently retail, and I deal with a diverse type of customers and you have to know body language and culture does matter. Like about Owens, I see a lot of diversity. I think had students from Africa, Lebanon, and I just think people, even regardless of your barriers or not, when you're in a classroom, you're all on an equal playing field. No matter your social economic status when you're in a classroom. That's how I feel like the instructors teach. Everybody's on the same playing field. You either want to get the education or you don't.

Steve: Well, and it's clear that you do and you threw yourself in there. Richette, thank you so much for this conversation. It was fantastic.

Richette Sweeny: Thank you for having me.

Steve: Absolutely.

Steve:

Well, that's it for Episode Four 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 the previous three episodes, they can be easily found on our landing page at 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.