

#EndCCStigma Podcast Project / Episode Six

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[INTRO MUSIC – VOICE MONTAGE]

Alex Johnson: While the modern day community college is about sixty years old, we began two-year education in this country more than a hundred years ago, and quite honestly I think this is where some of the stigma started—probably a hundred years ago. I think we have done an outstanding job in promoting ourselves, and we know that there’s a lot more work to be done.

Jenny Shanker: Community colleges do enroll half or more of the college students in our state, and to remember that those colleges are the engines of democracy, because the half of students who enroll at a community college are those students who do not have opportunities, and are getting the opportunity to have a high quality post-secondary educational experience in their communities.

Isaac Morrison: The affordability, the flexibility, all of that made it possible for me to work my way through an associate’s degree while figuring out where I wanted to go with my degree. The community college is a really important, useful, and helpful starting point, and it’s nothing to be ashamed of, and in fact it’s often times the best choice you can make.

[MUSIC FADES]

Steve Robinson: Welcome to the #EndCCStigma podcast project. I’m Steve Robinson, President of Owens Community College in Ohio, and this is the sixth and final episode in our first series of podcasts. The podcast is designed to amplify the voices of people from across the country who are using the hashtag #EndCCStigma to create a more accurate view of community college and technical careers. During this series, our podcast has featured 40 guests, representing 27 organizations in 15 states. What was planned as a short series of 4 35-minute episodes blossomed into 6 hour-long podcasts due to the incredible interest in this important topic

On this final episode we hear from a pair of leaders from the Michigan Community College Association’s student success center, community college alumni from Texas, Maryland, Ohio and Oklahoma, and we conclude this final episode of community college month by hearing from the incoming Board Chair of the American Association of Community Colleges. Guests on this episode include Erica Orians, Jenny Shanker, Faisal Amin, Maddie Cumpsten, Isaac Morrison, Lesa Humphrey, and Dr. Alex Johnson.

We start the episode with a conversation I had with the leadership of one of the many student success centers that are operated by community college associations across the country.

Steve Robinson: Well I'm very excited to be joined by some former colleagues back in Michigan from the Michigan Community College Association. Joined with me today is Erica Orians, who is the executive director of the Michigan Center for Student Success, and Jenny Shanker who is the Director for Research and Institutional Practice at the Michigan Center for Student Success. How are you guys doing?

Erica Orians: Doing well. Thanks.

Jenny Shanker: Very good. Thank you.

Erica Orians: Thanks for having us on.

Steve Robinson: Absolutely. Well, you're doing great work in Michigan and student success centers across the country are moving the needle for community college students, so I want to thank you for that work right up front. But why don't I ask first, this issue of community college stigma and the social media campaign to combat it, what is it about that that has resonated with you up in Michigan?

Erica Orians: Thanks, Steve. This is Erica. I think that Jenny and I have the great opportunity to work with 28 very diverse community colleges in Michigan that span all the way across the state, and we know that they're proud of what they do and we know that they work very hard every day on their efforts to improve student success. When we meet with people across the state, whether that be presidents or chief academic officers or faculty or staff, one thing that we consistently see is that they are proud of what they do, they're proud of being part of a community college, and everyone I talk to who has come from another sector of higher education or from another industry, always says that the community college is the place for them. They wouldn't consider going anywhere else.

Erica Orians: And so I think that what you're doing with the social media campaign and #EndCCStigma really, you have a lot of fans out there. It really reinforces what people that work at our colleges and universities already think.

Steve Robinson: Well, that's really cool to hear and I can vouch for it firsthand having spent 23 years in Michigan community colleges. And you guys are doing great work up there, I really appreciate talking to you because that's true, the people in our institutions just love it. They don't want to be anywhere else. So given that, though, that's a lot of strong, positive energy that people within the sector have. I know you encounter some of this negativity, some of these misconceptions. Can either one of you give me an example of this stigma in practice the way you've seen it out in the world?

Jenny Shanker: Sure, Steve. This is Jenny. Community colleges have, for the past several number of years, gotten a pretty bad rap in the press and kind of some, in the national conversation for what are termed low completion rates. When you look at the number of students who actually graduate from our institutions versus the number of students, the percentage of students who are graduating from, say, a four-year residential university, you see a big difference. And that's true, and community colleges do, we own that issue, but we also ... Also, I think people don't understand how different our community college population is in terms of how many students are pursuing education part-time at community college, how many of them are adults and coming back to college after a number of years to pursue education, how many come to upskill their, upskill themselves to move up in their work. And that really kind of contributes to those low traditional completion rates.

Jenny Shanker: And we also have a lot of students who transfer from a community college to a four-year university without earning an associate's degree, which also contributes to sort of what looks like a very low completion rate. When you aggregate in all of these other types of outcomes, actually the success that students are experiencing at community colleges is far greater than those traditional outcomes would suggest.

Steve Robinson: Well, that's a great observation because what I hear you saying is two things. First of all, we in community colleges own the fact that we do have some indicators, some success indicators, that need to improve dramatically. So that's one thing, we own that. But at the same time, what you've kind of called out is an education problem. The folks don't understand our mission, our student demographics, and the patterns of the transfer pipeline, right? So it's our job to teach folks that. So I appreciate what you're doing in that regard.

Steve Robinson: And I can hear it in both of your voices. You love working on behalf of Michigan community college students, that's wonderful. What is it specifically that makes you proud to work in the area of community colleges?

Jenny Shanker: So this is Jenny again. I would say the opportunity to help community colleges improve and to observe both nationally and the college in Michigan how hard the people who work in those colleges from the leadership to the front line staff are working on initiatives like guided pathways, trying to smooth those pathways for students and help that pipeline become clearer, help students clarify their objectives, and help practitioners move students better through the pipeline and into those educational goals, whether it's transfer directly into the workplace. Community college people are some of the hardest-working people in higher education, I would say, and they're committed to increasing equity, closing achievement gaps in success rates, and making sure that that high-quality post-secondary education is available to everybody in every community where there's a community college located.

Steve Robinson: That's awesome. How about-

Erica Orians: Yeah, and I would-

Steve Robinson: Go ahead, Erica.

Erica Orians: Yeah, I would just add to that I think Jenny hit on the work that we do every day, helping colleges in Michigan focus on completion and improving transfer student outcomes, but I'll just say personally one of my favorite things about the reason that I'm proud to work with community colleges is all those other things that community colleges do. The role that they play in the community.

Erica Orians: We go, Jenny and I travel all over the state to various different campuses, and we see fitness centers that are open to the public, swimming pools. Our campuses have beautiful artwork on display. There are plays and musicals and community events and family events all over campus, not to mention the college courses they offer, the training that they offer, the continuing ed, just the courses maybe even on Michigan history that they offer on campus. And even though we focus every day on completion and transfer and other sort of academic aspects of our colleges, I think one of my favorite things about community colleges is just seeing that, how much they are a hub of the community, and I think that's especially true at our rural community colleges where two-thirds of community colleges in this country are in rural communities, and in some ways, they may be the only place that's offering those services in the community. So I'm very proud that our colleges embrace that part of their mission in a way that you don't necessarily see anywhere else.

Steve Robinson: Oh, I couldn't ... That's a great observation, particularly about our rural colleges, because they are, in many ways, the cultural hubs of some of the communities that they serve. You gave some great examples there, so wonderful reason to be proud. I have a final question for both of you. I've asked everyone this because I want everybody to get their elevator speech really in top shape, and I know you have one, so I'd like each of you to give a crack at this, kind of a thought experiment. Imagine that you've got an assembled group who don't understand or aren't really clear about the things that you know and that your member colleges know, and maybe even harbor some of these misconceptions about community colleges. What would your argument be in favor of our institutions?

Erica Orians: Well, see, this is Erica, I'll go back, I guess, and continue with what I was talking about a little bit earlier. You know very well the history of community colleges in Michigan, and many of our colleges were created in the 1960s when they were granted, communities were granted the authority to assess a local property tax to support that community college. And if I were making a value proposition to, especially to policymakers today ...

Steve Robinson: Right.

Erica Orians: I think I would think back to 50 years ago when those communities voted to pay more property tax to have a community college in their community. And 50

years later, how lucky are those communities that their, the generation before them in the 1960s, was willing to support that college knowing that it was an open-access institution. Knowing that that meant all the things that that would provide to the community, that's why there's value in community colleges.

Steve Robinson: That's fantastic, and you need to keep telling that story, right? In Lansing? It's an important story. How about you, Jenny?

Jenny Shanker: I would say that kind of similar to what Erica has said, but also kind of amplify the message around the fact that community colleges do enroll half or more of the college students in our state and in many other states, as well, I can imagine, where there are robust community college presence. And to remember that those colleges are the engines of democracy because the half of students that are enrolled at a community college are those students who may not have opportunities elsewhere, may not have had the opportunity to attend a four-year residential school, and are getting the opportunity to have a high-quality post-secondary educational experience in their communities, embedded in their communities that they can do as a commuter, that they can do part-time. And that they're having the opportunity to be educated by top-quality faculty and supported by student services people who are passionate about making opportunities available to those students whether it be emergency loans or whether it be advising on what to take next semester or career advising.

Jenny Shanker: And I would like to urge policymakers to remember that when you support community colleges with the tools that you have available as a policymaker, like enabling legislation that might allow community colleges to provide more services to students, or whether it is of course through the appropriations process and providing more financial support to community colleges, you are supporting students who may, for whom those colleges may be their best bet for upward social mobility and a great life and a crack at the American dream. So that's what I would say.

Steve Robinson: That's mic drop right there. That's what we need to say. So look, guys, thank you so much, and keep telling that great story in Lansing. Keep adding the Michigan voice to this national conversation. It's really special to talk to you because obviously I grew up in Michigan, I love all 28 of your member colleges. I had a great time my career there, and please say hello to everybody there and keep doing the great work you're doing for Michigan community college students.

Erica Orians: Well thank you so much.

Jenny Shanker: Thank you, Steve, and you keep up the good work, as well.

Steve Robinson: All right, great. Bye.

Jenny Shanker: Bye bye.

Steve Robinson: Well, I'm here at the annual meeting of the American Association of Community Colleges, and I bumped into Faisal Amin, who wrote a great article on LinkedIn about the #EndCCStigma campaign. Faisal, how you doing?

Faisal Amin: I'm doing well. Good to be here.

Steve Robinson: Well, great. What made you want to write about what's happening with this? And you inspired me to get on LinkedIn. What is it that made you think to write that?

Faisal Amin: Well, first of all, Dr. Robinson, any time I can inspire you to do anything, that's in my honor and privilege. So thank you for getting inspired by me. I'm going to quote you on that, because my wife and children won't believe me when I tell them this.

Steve Robinson: They should.

Faisal Amin: Okay, thank you. Well, I just happened to come across the hashtag that you helped start as I do in my normal research. On occasion, I do spend time seeing what are some of the up-and-coming trends, what are some of the things that are emerging, people are talking about, not only online but especially on the social media. And the hashtag, quite frankly, resonated with me because as a product of the community college system myself, whatever limited success I've had, I do attribute that to the community colleges and I do find that a lot of times we tend to be very shy about acknowledging the fact that we're part of the community college system or more importantly, we feel a sense of stigma that by putting that on the front burner that that may lead to people thinking less of us, for lack of better term. So that's what resonated with me.

Steve Robinson: Well, and you told that story so well. Have you had much reaction to what you wrote on LinkedIn?

Faisal Amin: Surprisingly so. If anything, it's almost like that unspoken thing that everyone is passionate about. They want to be able to vocalize it, and this gives them an opportunity to either like it or comment on it. But it has been one of those LinkedIn posts that I've gotten good traction on, and to my surprise, quite frankly. I was writing straight from the heart. I had no intention of capitalizing on this, and if that's a term I can use.

Steve Robinson: Yeah.

Faisal Amin: But to my surprise, I think we've tapped into something, there.

Steve Robinson: Yeah, we have. And it was a fun piece, and I thank you for taking it to another social media outlet. And Faisal, it's so great to see you here at AACCC, and thanks for connecting with me, and thanks for writing about this campaign on LinkedIn.

Faisel Amin: It's my pleasure, and thank you for, again, for taking on this challenge, embracing this, and more importantly, anything that we can do to help support you and others in this great initiative, at least I speak on my behalf, consider me a resource.

Steve Robinson: Excellent. Well, just keep telling your story because it's a good one.

Faisel Amin: Amen.

Steve Robinson: Thanks, Faisel.

Faisel Amin: Thank you.

Steve Robinson: Well, it's my real pleasure to be talking to Maddi Cumpston, who is a grad student at the University of Oklahoma. She currently works with collegiate athletics doing work with the football team at University of Oklahoma. Maddi, how you doing?

Maddi Cumpston: Good, good.

Steve Robinson: I am so happy to be talking to you. You reached out to me with this wonderful story that begins at a community college, so I'm so happy that we're talking. What is it about this social media movement to push back on community college stigma that has resonated with you so much?

Maddi Cumpston: I started at Hutchinson Community College, which is in Hutchinson, Kansas, in 2014. I played volleyball there for two years, so I was a student athlete. We were a pretty successful team, we were 31-1 the two years I was there in conference. Went to nationals both years, so I had a pretty good experience athletic-wise. But the just experience overall, that school, is amazing. I go back there all the time, it's what I call my home. It's where I have met my forever friends, and from there I actually transferred to Oklahoma State, which I knew I was always going to go there but they just didn't have a volleyball team. So that kind of changed my decision on where I wanted to go to school.

Maddi Cumpston: Majored in Sports Management and Marketing the two years I was at Oklahoma State. Worked in athletics there with student development and, student athlete development and marketing, and then graduated from there in May of 2018 and then went straight to grad school. So I started in August of 2018 and I'll graduate in May of 2020 with my Master's of Education in Adult and Higher Education with an emphasis in Intercollegiate Athletics Administration.

Steve Robinson: Well that's fantastic. So it's clear that collegiate athletics has made a big impact on you, specifically in the NJCAA. What can you tell me about being a student athlete at the community college level?

Maddi Cumpston: I was extremely lucky to be at Hutch. We have an amazing staff, we have an amazing gym. We have one of the, we do have the biggest arena for juco athletics. I played volleyball at Hutchinson Sports Arena, and it was just ... It's crazy, because when I was there, volleyball we were very successful, but we also were, had our locker room was pretty much like a smaller closet because they were current, they were trying to pass something so they could redo the sports arena. So I was actually there during that time that we got that passed in order to build the more gyms and everything. So that was kind of cool to be there at that time, but just overall, that's where I met my mentor, my current mentor, Mark Patrick. He is assistant to the commissioner for the KJCCC and he's kind of who took me under his wing, and it's almost six years later and I still talk to him at least once a month about what's going on. He made my love for athletics realize that I could actually take it a step further and do a career in it. I had no idea as a freshman in college I could work in athletics.

Maddi Cumpston: So volleyball was taken away from me, but athletics will always be a part of me. I know I want to work for the NJCAA when I graduate. I want to provide that opportunity for student like that I had, even to make it better because I know sometimes the transfer process isn't the best. That's what I've kind of done my educational philosophy on for my Master's program, is the transfer process and how that can affect student athletes. I was one of the lucky ones to graduate quote unquote on time in the two years at juco, two years at a university, and that was just because I had my plan set out before I even started at Hutch. Some students don't have that opportunity to know what school they're going to transfer to, because they do want to go on and play athletics.

Steve Robinson: Right, right.

Maddi Cumpston: Some of my friends are in two years of extra school possibly because they weren't able to look at the, at what would transfer and what wouldn't. A big thing for me was I was enrolled in a simple geology class, and I was looking up my classes to make sure they transferred and my geology class wouldn't even transfer. A lot of it also has to do because I was out of state, so I ended up changing it to a different class, another science class, and it transferred. That was me being aware of what was going to be my next step, and some students aren't lucky enough to have that support system, like my sister who had gone to Oklahoma State before me, to know exactly what I needed to be looking for.

Steve Robinson: Wow, so it sounds like you're finding ways to leverage your own experience to help student athletes in the future as they make that jump from two-year college to four-year college.

Maddi Cumpston: A hundred percent. I think it's definitely something that's missing right now.

Steve Robinson: Interesting. Well that's great. Well, I recently got a real appreciation for two-year college athletics. As you probably know, I'm at a volleyball school, too.

Maddi Cumpston: Yes.

Steve Robinston: Yes, yes. And we're very proud of our volleyball program, and I'm really inspired by how you've internalized this as your own career path. One of the things that I'm interested in, though, is as you've made that transition from Hutch to OU, have you encountered any negative or bad preconceptions or misconceptions about community colleges?

Maddi Cumpston: I've thought about this one, and I can't think of an exact situation, but it's just the reactions that I remember that I would get from people when they were like, "Oh, where did you go to school before this?" Because they realized I transferred, and I would tell [inaudible 00:22:06], "Oh, I went to a community college," and they would just kind of have these stunned looks on their face like, "Do you not have a high enough ACT score to get into Oklahoma State?" [inaudible 00:22:16] because that is the first thing they think, is, "Oh, you weren't good enough to come here at first, so you had to go somewhere lower or second-class," as they would say.

Steve Robinston: Right.

Maddi Cumpston: Like I wasn't worthy enough.

Steve Robinston: Interesting.

Maddi Cumpston: Which I don't believe at all. I get very defensive when we talked about community colleges during class, because I know how much of a positive impact it had on me and all of my friends that I was with.

Steve Robinston: Well wonderful. Keep doing that.

Maddi Cumpston: Yeah, I mean, it's all about sharing your story. I talked to the head of the NJCAA about the stigma of community colleges so I could write one of my papers, and I was like, "What do I need to be doing personally?" And he was like, "Just keep sharing your story." And I'm like, "I am." Every class I feel like I'm talking about where I came from and how much an impact that Hutch made on me.

Steve Robinston: That's the right answer, too. Keep telling that story. And the other thing, some of your new classmates at OU need to come watch a community college volleyball game. That's incredible level of play. I've been really impressed.

Maddi Cumpston: It is.

Steve Robinston: Yeah. It is. Obviously your time at Hutch has stuck with you, and it's made an imprint on what you want to do with your life. What is it that makes you proud to be the product of a community college?

Maddi Cumpston: Literally everything. My boyfriend got me my jersey framed for Christmas with a couple of pictures, and with our, my stats on it. That brought tears to my eyes because it's just my community college jersey, and yes, that was three years ago, but that jersey means the world to me, to know that that's where I come from. That's the first place, when somebody asks me where I'm from I want to say Hutch. I don't want to say Wichita. My first thing is Hutch because that's where I kind of blossomed as a person.

Steve Robinson: That is so cool. That thing's going to be in your office, whatever you do in your career, Maddi. I love it.

Maddi Cumpston: Oh, I have my Hutch diploma hanging up in my office in my house. Even here, a lot of people kind of, they may get there associate's degree and not even talk about it, and I'm like, "No, I earned that. I spent two years, I worked my butt off. I'm keeping it. I'm hanging it up." I don't know where I would be without my time at Hutch, because like I said, being a student athlete made things even better. I had my coaches there that provided me with a lot of structure that I don't think I would have had going straight to a four-year. We were held to a higher standard to keep our good grades, that was a big thing, so I never really had grade slippage. Some students are having to retake classes. When I got to Oklahoma State, some of my friends were retaking classes because they failed them their freshman year, and I was like, "That would have never been an option for me." Our coaches, we were in study hall every single day if our grades were slipping.

Steve Robinson: Right.

Maddi Cumpston: We were going to extra study hall, and I was never against that because I knew how much academics meant to me, too. Community colleges, they're just vital in the academic development of college students. They provide us with the smaller class sizes. At Oklahoma State, the first class I walked into my junior year, had 400+ students in it.

Steve Robinson: Wow.

Maddi Cumpston: I was in complete shock. I kind of had a mini panic attack since I didn't know this was going to happen. I came from Hutch where I had 30 people tops in my class, I had a good relationship with all my teachers, a good relationship with all my peers in the class. My teachers knew me by name, and in those class settings, those teachers did not know you by name because they have 399 other students that they got to worry about also.

Steve Robinson: That's right. That's right. Well you know, Maddi, wow, what an incredible observation, and one that I think a lot of people don't pay attention to. If you're at a research university, you're obviously going to be in these big sections with recitations with grad students. But you touched on this earlier, but I'd love you to talk about it more. Imagine, like in your classes, your classmates at OU, what

would you tell them about community colleges if you thought they harbored some of these negative stereotypes about them? What would you say to try to give them a more accurate view of what community colleges are?

Maddi Cumpston: Well, I'd first tell them to stop it, because that's more of an uneducated outlook that they have. Again, it's just that stigma that they have towards community colleges that they think that they're just lesser than a four-year university when they're not. Like I said, we have the smaller class sizes, they're cost-effective, especially when you go in as a student athlete, they're covering some of those big costs for you. And that was huge, I'm coming out of college without any debt because I started off two years at a community college.

Steve Robinson: Right.

Maddi Cumpston: And I still, I whole-heartedly believe that I learned a lot more at Hutch than I could have at my two years at Oklahoma State because of that one-on-one time I could have with my teachers. We had unlimited tutors for anyone, not just student athletes. So we had that opportunity given to us that I could just go in there any day of the week and get help with my accounting, because I know I really struggled, that was one of my classes I really struggled with. And I don't think I would have been able to have the time to do that at a four-year university.

Maddi Cumpston: And it kind of just gives you a chance to ease into the college life instead of diving right in. I think that's where a lot of problems happen. And again, like I said, it was very structured from a student athlete standpoint. They get us on the ball right away. My sport was fall, so I was there a month before school even started and I was locked in. I mean, you just got to tell them that it's okay to go to a community college. It is nothing against you, you are not stupid. That's my biggest thing, is people thinking that you're not smart enough to go to a four-year university. Because what also people don't realize is you know, someone might not have the best ACT score, and especially this happens in athletics, they go to a junior college. Well, guess what? They're playing, they're starting for their first two years. They're starting playing. They're getting that experience. And then they're getting their grades up and being able to transfer to a four-year university and then being an immediate-impact player for the next two years that they're there. So that provided them with the opportunity that then they're playing four years of college athletics instead of maybe playing one or two because they probably sat the bench behind a junior or senior.

Steve Robinson: Yeah, I've heard that from a lot of two-year college athletes, that you get to be a starter and all of those life lessons that come from competition at that level. And again, I've seen that level of play with our athletes, so wow. Well I think that's a very compelling case that you'd make. And Maddi, I want to compliment you. The way you've internalized your story and turned it into a career path for yourself is inspiring to me, and I wish you all the best as you pursue this goal of yours. And I really appreciate you taking time to talk with me.

Maddi Cumpston: Anytime I can sit here and talk about how much I loved my junior college experience, I want to do it. I want to end this stigma just as much as the next person, and I'm going to do whatever I can to end it.

Steve Robinson: Well, you get out there and do it. Thank you, Maddi. Well I am very fortunate to be talking to Isaac Morrison, who is a contractor with USAID, but was connected with us through a tweet that he made in connection to his community college experience. Isaac, how are you doing?

Isaac Morrison: I'm doing really well.

Steve Robinson: Hey, thank you for reaching out to me, and it's really cool that your former community college kind of put us in touch with one another. Where did you attend community college?

Isaac Morrison: I went to Harrisburg Area Community College in Pennsylvania.

Steve Robinson: Well great. And obviously, since you were involved in a tweet or a reply to a tweet, this issue of community college stigma resonated with you. What was the connection? What interests you in this topic?

Isaac Morrison: Well, I mean, first of all, I really enjoyed and appreciated my time at the community college. I had the freedom to work my way through classes, figure out what direction I wanted to go in, and really think about where I wanted to take my education. And that was really important to me at the time. And also the affordability, the flexibility, all of that made it possible for me to work my way through an associate's degree while figuring out where I wanted to go with my degree.

Isaac Morrison: But then also, after I finished my associate's degree at the community college, I went on to get a bachelor's degree at a state university, I got a master's degree from a private university, and then after that I even had the chance to go back and teach at a community college, one here in Maryland where I'm based now, Montgomery College. And I got to see the reactions of the students I was teaching, and I saw that many of them were almost ashamed to be going to a community college. They would downplay that aspect of it. I was able to bring my own experiences to the table as somebody who had worked my way essentially up from a community college all the way to a respected private institution, and let them know that the community colleges is an important and really helpful, useful starting point. And it's nothing to be ashamed of, and in fact, it's oftentimes the best choice you can make under some circumstances.

Steve Robinson: Right. And what a cool story. So you had a community college experience and went on to achieve a master's degree, and it sounds like when you notice that, well, you used the word ashamed with your students at Montgomery, you were able to show yourself as an example of somebody who moved from the community college up into graduate work and was now a professor.

Isaac Morrison: Yeah, yeah. And sometimes they would be maybe joking about it, and maybe self-effacing, trying to put a good face on the situation, but just sort of mocking themselves and each other. But I could really tell that behind that, there was an insecurity.

Steve Robinson: Right.

Isaac Morrison: About being a community college student.

Steve Robinson: Interesting, interesting. What's interesting to me about that, and I'm having a lot of conversations like this, is our institutions are doing great work. I mean, you were teaching at a very prominent community college, Montgomery is an excellent school, but you even detected that even if they were partially joking, there was a self-effacing nature to the way the students were viewing themselves.

Isaac Morrison: Yeah. And it's not necessary. I mean, sure, you should never take yourself too seriously.

Steve Robinson: Right.

Isaac Morrison: But they'll tell you, the quality of the education was outstanding. The programs were great, the school itself was tremendously supportive, and I could see that many of the students I was working with had obviously very bright futures ahead of them.

Steve Robinson: Interesting. I have a question. So you obviously work in the greater D.C. area in Maryland, and your work connects you with the federal government. Have you bumped into other folks, colleagues, in either who are contractors or working in federal agencies, who have community college in their background?

Isaac Morrison: That's an interesting question. I don't think it's really come up. And I think it's maybe something people are hesitant to put on their CVs or their resumes when they apply for positions. They'll put the school that they finished their bachelor's degree at, but maybe not where they started their academic career.

Steve Robinson: I think you're right about that. So you've gone to get a master's degree at a great place like GW, but folks in your situation might not list that Montgomery degree on their CV.

Isaac Morrison: Yeah, yeah.

Steve Robinson: Interesting, interesting. What's clear to me about the conversation that you and I are having is that your connection to Harrisburg and your experience in the community college stuck with you, and it's a point of pride. What is it that makes you proud to have attended a community college?

Isaac Morrison: Well, I would say above everything else, I also met my wife at the community college.

Steve Robinson: Well there you go.

Isaac Morrison: So that's kind of a big deal.

Steve Robinson: It's a very big deal.

Isaac Morrison: We both finished community college with associate's degrees. I finished my bachelor's in Maryland at the University of Maryland in College Park. She went on to finish hers at Towson, also in the University of Maryland system. I went on to get my master's, she went on to get her master's. So it's actually, we followed a very close track post-community college, and that's ... The community college part of it was such an important element, both for our budding first friendship and then a relationship, but also as a starting-off point for two, I think relatively stable and successful careers now.

Steve Robinson: That's romantic. I love it. And when you think about it, that is the community college fulfilling its mission, right? I mean, we're connecting people and then opening that door for future learning. So that's fantastic. Clearly you had an opportunity to do this with your students at Montgomery, but imagine that you had a group of people assembled who had some misconceptions or some of these self-effacing stigmas about community colleges. Knowing what you know and you having your experience, what would you tell that group about community colleges?

Isaac Morrison: I think I would emphasize one of the things I mentioned before, which is the ability to be flexible in your field of study. To take the time to take a few extra classes that maybe you wouldn't ordinarily take because you're maybe stressed about a rapid graduation timeline or the cost of school, which is understandably severe. Having those opportunities, and then also the other thing about the community college program is oftentimes you get more access to sort of applied skills that would be more common than maybe a trade school. For example, I got to take classes in ceramics, both art ceramics, but also industrial ceramics. Not that it's anything I do with my life now, but having that opportunity to really learn an applied skill just by taking a couple extra classes while I was doing all of my other coursework was tremendously rewarding to me.

Steve Robinson: Well, that's fantastic to hear because sometimes people's assumptions about two-year colleges is that it's, as a commuter school, it's all business and you only take the classes that you need, and there's no opportunity for exploring. But what I hear you say is you were able to have some hands-on experiences in some things that maybe don't directly impact the job that you have now, but added to your experience as a human being.

Isaac Morrison: Exactly, exactly. I came away from it really I think feeling like a more rounded person, rather than simply pursuing abstract intellectual pursuits, which of course I love, that's one of the great things about higher education is having the opportunity to stretch your mind, but also to go beyond that and to learn some very pragmatic, very applicable skills in other areas that maybe are not as cerebral.

Steve Robinson: Well that's fantastic. Well, Isaac, I want to thank you for taking some time to talk to me and thanks also to, it sounds like community college has a place in your family's story because it's kind of the origin story of your marriage.

Isaac Morrison: Yeah, absolutely.

Steve Robinson: Well, great. I appreciate your time and thank you for connecting with me and telling your story about being a community college graduate.

Isaac Morrison: Thank you, Steve.

Steve Robinson: Well, it is a beautiful day on campus today, and I took a trip across campus to the Center for Fine and Performing Arts to sit down with Lesa Humphrey, who is the secretary here in the Department of Fine and Performing Arts. How are you, Lesa?

Lesla Humphrey: I'm good.

Steve Robinson: Hey, thank you so much for agreeing to talk to me about this, because this #EndCCStigma campaign has kind of spoken to you. What is it about this that has resonated with you?

Lesla Humphrey: Well, a lot actually because I'm a graduate of Owens, I work here now at Owens. I actually left for several years when I was not working here, and I am now back again, so and I just think that community colleges are a great place to start people's education for higher learning.

Steve Robinson: Well, I couldn't agree more and I'm so glad you came back. And one of the things, because we're sitting here in our beautiful theater in fine and performing arts, that's something that not everybody probably associates with a community college. Could you talk a little bit about some of the great arts programming that we have here at the CFPA?

Lesla Humphrey: Oh yeah. Actually, this week is a big week for us because we have our She Kills Monsters production, our student spring production.

Steve Robinson: So that's a play?

Lesla Humphrey: Yeah, a play. In our theater. And that runs Thursday through Sunday. And then we also have our opening reception for our student art show that will be

happening down in the Terhune Art Gallery on Friday. And then we also have Vinyl Hour, which is our broadcast media students that will be happening on Saturday, so there's always lots and lots and lots of stuff going on.

Steve Robinson: This is a great sort of pocket of culture of campus over here.

Lesa Humphrey: Yeah.

Steve Robinson: The CFPA. And yeah, I'm looking forward to Vinylthon obviously, that'll be fun on record store day. One of the things we're talking about with this social media campaign is some of the unfair or inaccurate preconceptions that folks have about community colleges. Have you encountered any of this out in the world?

Lesa Humphrey: Yeah, I just think that a lot of times people think a community college, you won't get the same education or maybe have the same teachers or just anything that the big four-year colleges can offer, and I feel that that's totally not true. I think that your education is amazing here because your classes are smaller, the teachers might be even a little bit more dedicated to one-on-one interaction with students and I don't know, I just love it here.

Steve Robinson: Well, we love having you here and it's kind of cool that your real connection to this community college is your story. You went to school here and now you're back working here, so that's great. And because of that, I can tell that you're really proud to be associated with this community college. What makes you proud to be a community college graduate?

Lesa Humphrey: Just that I got my education here and I just, I love the teachers and the students. I don't know, it's a great atmosphere for students, for faculty, for staff. It's like a family.

Steve Robinson: I agree. That's what it feels like to me. So if you, speaking of family, if you had some families come to campus and they were thinking about all the options for college for everyone in their family, whether it's mom or dad going back to college or a high school-aged student, and they were considering community colleges but maybe had some of these negative preconceptions, what would you tell those families about community college?

Lesa Humphrey: I would definitely tell them to do research on different colleges, but as far as Owens goes, I just think it's the best place for students to experience the college atmosphere and just it's, I don't know, it's just everything good. Trying to think of even my own kids because they're getting older and I'm just trying to decide, what are they going to want to do? And whatever, but I don't know, it's just a great place. And even if they do want to go to a four-year, we have the opportunity for them to transfer their credits, and it's a great start. And especially if they're really unsure of what they want to do. I don't want to bring up the, it's cheaper, but it is cheaper to go to community college, and to save your parents money, why not?

Steve Robinson: Yeah, and conserve those resources for something later, right?

Lesa Humphrey: Yeah.

Steve Robinson: Yeah, excellent.

Lesa Humphrey: For sure.

Steve Robinson: I think that's a really great argument to be made to families. It sounds like a conversation maybe you're having with your own kids, or in the future.

Lesa Humphrey: Sure.

Steve Robinson: Well, Lesa, thank you so much for taking some time to talk to me.

Lesa Humphrey: Yeah, thank you so much.

Steve Robinson: All right, cool. That was great. Well, it is my real honor to be joined by my great colleague Dr. Alex Johnson, who is the president of Cuyahoga Community College in Ohio. Alex, how are you this evening?

Alex Johnson: Doing very well, Dr. Robinson, and you?

Steve Robinson: I am great, and I'm so happy to be talking to you because in addition to your amazing leadership nationally and in the state of Ohio, you and your colleagues at Tri-C have really championed this effort to change people's minds about community college. So I'm really happy to be having this conversation, and I wonder, what is it about this topic that resonates with you as one of our great national community college leaders?

Alex Johnson: Well, thank you very much Dr. Robinson, first of all, for allowing me to be part of this very important conversation. Like to extend my sincere thanks and appreciation to you for bringing it to our attention and to light and for your continued leadership of Owens Community College, which is another great two-year institution in Ohio. I think among the things that really excited us about this endeavor is the fact that this resonates with individuals on a national scale. All too often we find ourselves, I'm talking about community college leaders now, in the position where we have to defend some of the things that are said about community colleges historically. That they are extensions of high school and designed for individuals who can't get into four-year institutions, and that the primary focus is on technical and vocational training.

Alex Johnson: Despite the fact that community colleges, the modern community college is 60 years old, and fact that they've been around that long, more than half of a century, we still find ourselves needing to defend them, and this is unfortunate, quite honestly, for an institution that is a true community college invention. And while the modern day community college is about 60 years old, we began two-

year education in this country more than a hundred years ago with junior colleges. And they were designed for individuals whose ultimate goal was to get into four-year institutions but could not do it at that particular point in time. And quite honestly, I think this is where some of the stigma started probably a hundred years ago, when these institutions were founded to enable individuals who could not get in some of the more prestigious institutions to see this as a pathway. But I think we have done an outstanding job in promoting ourselves and we know that there's a lot more work to be done.

Steve Robinson: Yes there is, and I sure appreciate that history lesson. You know, we haven't gone there yet and that's really important for you to provide that historical context. So thanks for doing that, because I think you're exactly right. The origins of those misconceptions, they go a long way back. So I really appreciate that. Now, speaking of those stigmas or misconceptions, can you think of an example or an anecdote from your important work where you've seen that stigma up close and personal?

Alex Johnson: Oh, I see it nearly at least once or twice a week, and it has to do with, quite honestly, individuals who want to extol the virtues of community colleges and want to really position them as institutions that promote workforce development primarily. But they don't distinguish that community colleges are indeed post-secondary institutions, so you hear such phrases as, "Not everybody can go to college," or ...

Steve Robinson: Right.

Alex Johnson: They differentiate between two-years and four-year institutions, and they talk about workforce training as opposed to the liberal education opportunities that are provided at community colleges that allow individuals to transfer seamlessly to four-year institutions. So I find myself each and every day correcting individuals, quite honestly, who have a desire to ensure that community colleges really contribute to the economic and growth of our country.

Alex Johnson: Then I get individuals, and these are students, who ask me, for example, will my courses transfer to a four-year institution? Is the quality of the experience that I'm getting here on par with four-year institutions? I really wanted to go to a four-year institution, but because I didn't have my act together, because I didn't know what I wanted to do, I decided to go to a two-year institution. Now, all of that's valid, but I'm just suggesting to you there's still a lot of work that we have to do, Dr. Robinson, to ensure that individuals who even want to represent the interests of community colleges are knowledgeable and understanding about what it is we do. And I believe very strongly that we need to really provide a more, a greater foundation to promote student understanding and then also within the school setting, we've got make sure that counselors and other advisors know our value and worth, as well.

Steve Robinson: Well, that's such an astute observation, because you made me think of something, and that is that not everyone who perpetuates these

misconceptions or stigmas are trying to oppose us, right? Sometimes it's our friends ...

Alex Johnson: Oh, absolutely.

Steve Robinson: And so I guess I have a follow-up question for you, is that when you have someone who is kind of friendly to our institutions but not being helpful in the way that you mentioned, what's your approach to a redirection there? I mean, you're so diplomatic, I've interacted with you in person. I would love to have some tips, I bet a lot of us would. When somebody's deploying those misconceptions and, but they're a friend, how do we redirect?

Alex Johnson: Well, quite honestly it's easier to correct those individuals as opposed to those whose knowledge about community colleges is entrenched.

Steve Robinson: Ah, I see.

Alex Johnson: So my thing is, when we talk to that latter audience about their misconceptions, we can be blamed of, that that's a responsibility that we have to defend. So our defense is that not credible. But what we've got to do is get more people understanding about community colleges so that, and knowledgeable, so that they can share, they can convey a more positive message about us. And I think that's part of our responsibility as well, to educate the general public about who and what we are. And you know, we do that every day.

Steve Robinson: That's right.

Alex Johnson: Both in terms of our programs, our outreach, our connection to the larger community, and the list goes on and on and on.

Steve Robinson: Yes, it-

Alex Johnson: But it's still a work in progress, as you can imagine.

Steve Robinson: It sure is, and that is an important role of the college president, right? You're still a teacher. I mean, I saw you on the news in Cleveland with this very topic about stigma and you were teaching your community what Tri-C is all about and why they need you.

Alex Johnson: Yes, yes, yes. And I'm pretty sure that you do the same in your community.

Steve Robinson: Yes.

Alex Johnson: Other colleagues that we have throughout Ohio and the nation have to engage in the same thing.

Steve Robinson: Agreed. Well, you are a very prominent community college CEO, someone who's a great proponent of the sector, so this might seem like a silly question to you, but what is it that makes you proud to serve a community college?

Alex Johnson: Wow. That's a really good question, and the only answer that I have is that community colleges, I believe, are more connected to my personal values and beliefs. This is my 26th year as a community college president somewhere, and I came from the four-year sector previously, before that, where I served as a vice president for academic affairs. And I made the move to community colleges fairly reluctantly because a friend of mine asked me would I consider a two-year college presidency? And while I had a general understanding about what they did, that understanding certainly was not as extensive as it is today.

Alex Johnson: But when I set foot the first time at Cuyahoga Community College some 25 years ago when I became president of the Metropolitan campus and noted the tremendous engagement in the community and the people that they serve and the impact that it was having on not only greater Cleveland but beyond, those things resonated with me. And when I took this presidency, I think I had a greater understanding of the, essentially appreciation that individuals had for community colleges over four-year institutions, and the fact that people could really benefit and thrive and ultimately be contributing individuals of society.

Alex Johnson: So when I had that chance, it was important to me. And since then, I've had three other college presidencies including the one back here at Cuyahoga Community College as the college president. I think that was a better fit for me on a personal level, and all of the professional stuff, the technical stuff, could be applied at the same time. So I just believe very, very strongly in these institutions, and I think they represent the best interest of individuals and the communities that we serve.

Steve Robinson: Well, we're so fortunate that you came to our sector and stayed. I also really love what you said about the institution's values matching your own. I think that's something that a lot of us in the community college movement have in common, so that's inspirational to me to hear you say that. Now, you are often in this situation I would imagine, but if you could have an opportunity to address a group that may harbor some of these misconceptions that you described, putting too much focus on either/or workforce focus or not understanding the transfer mission, what would your primary argument be to that group to try to give them a more accurate view of community colleges?

Alex Johnson: Well, I think what I'd do is just take advantage of their pride in America, and then help them understand that community colleges, as I said before, are unique American inventions. That they were established foremost to give individuals a chance to enter ultimately a four-year institution, and then in the 40s as a result of the Truman report, there was a recommendation that a network of community colleges, two-year institutions, be established nationwide. So we have a rich and robust history in American higher education as the singular institution that was designed specifically for Americans. And

initially, our mission was around a transfer, but it then began focusing more specifically on workforce and talent development because we had a lot of soldiers returning from Vietnam who needed to develop their crafts and become really acclimated to their cities.

Alex Johnson: And more recently, that liberal arts education, the technical training, have been really important for community colleges and then ultimately the graduates who go on and make an impact on their communities. So when I think about our mission and think about the history, we're more in line with schools like Ohio State. The flagship or land-grant institutions that focus on not only liberal learning and general education, but also a technical mission. So that's where we position ourselves, and I think what we have to do is take pride in our unique position as community colleges. It's something that is not reflective of any of the other sectors in American higher education.

Steve Robinson: Well, I love that strategy because what I hear you saying is that you would leverage the patriotism of that audience, the fact that they have pride in their country, and teach them what a uniquely American invention the community college is. And that makes me reflect, one of the great things about community colleges is in this very divided time, we have the ability to really be everyone's ally, right? Everybody needs us.

Alex Johnson: Community colleges are at the forefront, and at the end of the day, there's a lot of faith and investment in them so that America can become more competitive in terms of its workforce and also in terms of degree attainment. Now, everybody knows that at one point in time, we were among the world's leaders in terms of the production of college graduates.

Steve Robinson: Right.

Alex Johnson: Now we're ranked 14th among the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development countries, which are the 38 most productive countries in the world. And we just need to do a better job with degree attainment and workforce development and talent development.

Steve Robinson: I could not agree more, Dr. Johnson, and it's so great for you to not only give a national perspective and a historical perspective politically, but also to end on that global note, because we are in competition with other countries, and I think that America really needs to value its community colleges if we're going to regain our footing, don't you agree?

Alex Johnson: I agree. I agree. And we, under President Obama when there was the American Graduation Initiative announced, we promised that we would produce 50% more graduates between 2010 and 2020. And we're well on our way to doing that, so community colleges are important to America's resurgence, particularly as it relates to degree completion.

Steve Robinson: Well, Dr. Johnson, I can't think of a more uplifting note to end the conversation. That was a great way to explain our value and I really want to thank you for taking some time to talk to me.

Alex Johnson: Oh, it is not a problem. Thank you so very much for having me.

Steve Robinson: Well, that's it for Episode Six 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 episodes, all of them can be easily found on our landing page at endccstigma.org. Based on comments and encouragement, I will be creating more podcasts in the near future.

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.

As we conclude series one, I want to thank you for listening to the many voices who are working to advance the image of America's community and technical colleges. Please push back against inaccurate and unfair characterizations of our colleges and share this podcast with your friends and colleagues. Continue to use the hashtag #EndCCStigma as we focus our efforts and attempt to change the conversation.

Thanks very much for listening.