

## We Have to Challenge the Community College Stigma

Dr. Ryan Bradshaw



Sharing and telling stories are fundamental cornerstones of education that date back to antiquity. I tell my students: 'People do not care until it affects them personally. When you make that connection, then people start to care.'

When I was getting close to graduating from high school, I remember many of my friends having plans to go off to a four-year institution. One of them asked me about my plans, and I confidently replied, 'I'll probably start at our local community college,' which was five miles from my house at the time. I had won a few local scholarships, and attending the community college meant I could get a year or two of education for free (or close to it).

My friend sneered. They made fun of me, but it really didn't bother me that much. I knew what I was doing. I was going to get a low-cost, high-quality, local education. While at the community college, I enjoyed small classroom sizes, engaging faculty, and great customer service. I ended up attending five different institutions throughout my academic career, but I truly enjoyed and appreciated the start I got at my local community college.

It's been 25 years since I was a student at that college, and the same stigmas that were present then are still present today. For decades, our society pushed the narrative of, 'Everyone must get a four-year degree,' and parents—on the whole—didn't take community colleges seriously. 'Community colleges are for other people's kids. My kid is going to a four-year college.'

But one thing has changed in those 25 years. We find ourselves in an environment where higher

education has become prohibitively expensive and a burden on students and families. Student loan debt is a real factor that changes how individuals live their lives, including, in some cases, delaying marriage, having children, purchasing a home, and a list of other considerations. Additionally, we live in a time where we need skilled technicians and workers to perform a host of tasks, whether it be nursing, welding, cybersecurity, HVAC, truck driving, accounting, law enforcement, or a host of other skilled trades; the community college is the definitive resource.

Rising higher education costs, coupled with the need for skilled technicians, make the value proposition for the community college higher than ever. However, we still have that stubborn stigma about community colleges that has existed since before I was a student. I tell my prospective students: 'If your goal is to be at a four-year institution, you can still have that goal. You are just making the sensible and smart decision to start at the community college, where you will save money and likely have a life-changing experience.'

I believe that every student should start their higher educational journey at a community college. The late teens to early twenties (and sometimes later) timeframe in someone's life is filled with tremendous pressure to make what seem to be life-time-impacting decisions: 'What's your major? What type of job are you looking to get? Where will you live? Have you thought about retirement? Because even though you are just getting started, it will be here before you know it.'

The community college setting allows for low-

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cost career exploration in the convenience of students' local community. It gives the students more time to discern what careers they may or may not like. As a parent of three, I am encouraging all of my children to get their start at a community college.

So, how do we change the stigma, though? The answer starts with you. You have to help me and all the other advocates for the community college to spread the word about the good works we do in the community college system. Word of mouth is the best validation for what we have to offer, and we need to share with our friends, family, and neighbors that the community college is the best-kept secret throughout our state. I encourage you to freely share the good work that you and your institutions are doing and tell the story of why the community college should matter to those around you. Or, we can wait 25 more years...

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### **Author's Note**

The author has no known conflicts of interest to disclose. Correspondence concerning this article may be addressed to Dr. Ryan Bradshaw, Johnston Community College, 245 College Rd, Smithfield, NC 27577 . Email: karobol1@johnstoncc.edu