

## **Dr Jill Biden**

Thank you for that warm introduction. I am delighted to be here with you today to discuss the ability of education to transform lives and communities.

- Thank you **Director-General Matsuura** for your hard work and leadership.
- I would also like to thank **Deputy Director-General Barbosa**, and **Assistant Director-General Burnett**.
- And, thank you to my **distinguished**

**colleagues on this panel** for appearing here today.

UNESCO was formed almost 65 years ago on the simple but powerful proposition that education is essential to a better and more peaceful world.

Education, in the words of Nelson Mandela, “is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world.”

I have seen this first-hand. I’ve been an educator for the past 28 years. I teach English as a Second Language at a community college just outside Washington, DC, and last semester I was privileged to teach students from 22 different countries. Every day in my classroom I see the power of education to break down barriers and to open students’ eyes to the possibilities around them.

I know that many of you have also seen students transformed by new ideas. But as important as these individual success stories are, we all know that the responsibility for educating a young person is not the student's responsibility alone, nor is it the job of the teacher alone, nor is it the obligation of the parents alone.

It is a responsibility that belongs to all of us.

Because we all reap the benefits when our citizens are well educated.

It means that our economies are more vibrant, our streets are safer, and the future is brighter.

As we gather here today, we can point to signs of progress... and signs that tell us how far we have to go.

Worldwide literacy rates are improving, yet more than 750 million people – two-thirds of whom are women – still lack basic literacy skills. And 75 million children of primary school age – over half of them girls – are not even enrolled in school.

These statistics remind us that UNESCO's critical commitment to "Education for All" is as important as ever.

Look at all of our shared challenges today:

How can we achieve greater understanding between nations and cultures?

How can we reduce poverty, famine, and disease?

How can we confront climate change, reduce energy use, protect the environment, and strengthen our economies?

These are very different problems. But they share a solution: education.

Often, when we talk about education, we focus on the two ends of the educational spectrum – at one end, we focus on how we can get more young people enrolled in elementary and secondary school. On the other, we focus on how we can graduate more people from college with advanced professional and technical degrees.

However, I've focused my passion for teaching at a type of institution that is less well known.

Chances are many of you have not heard of San Diego City College or Northern Virginia Community College – but community colleges are a critical part of America's university system.

They are – as the name suggests – higher education institutions that are uniquely able to address the needs of their communities.

In the United States there are almost 1,200 community colleges among our 4,100 public and private institutions of higher education. All together, community colleges serve almost 12 million students, or nearly half of all U.S undergraduate students.

Community colleges typically have open admissions policies, providing training and learning opportunities for everyone who wants to learn. I have always said that community colleges are one of America's best-kept secrets. But they are essential to our higher education mission, often providing an education to students who would not otherwise enroll in a four-year college or university.

Community colleges fill an important gap:

- they grant 2-year degrees;
- they teach English to immigrants learning the skills to join the U.S. work force;
- they provide vocational skills training and certification for those entering the workplace or for those seeking new skills mid-career;
- they teach basic academic skills to students who may not yet be ready to pursue a 4-year degree;
- they are often the best option for students of limited financial means; and

-- more and more often in these difficult financial times, community colleges are an affordable way for students from middle-class families to complete the first two years of a baccalaureate degree before moving on to a 4-year university.

Three out of four community college students – and some of my best students – work while attending school.

Community colleges lead the way in preparing graduates in the fields of green technology, healthcare, teaching, and information technology – some of the fastest growing fields in America and the rest of the world. In fact, half of the nurses in America are trained in community colleges.

It's easy to see why community colleges have seen the fastest growth among U.S. higher education institutions over the past three decades.

Community colleges are flexible – offering specialized training programs to address workforce shortages, and often partnering with local businesses to meet the emerging needs of their regions.

American community colleges also help meet the needs of developing countries. The U.S. State Department is awarding community college scholarships to students and faculty from developing countries in fields that will advance economic development in these countries.

For example, a community college in Washington State helped a university in Egypt establish a sustainable agriculture program.

And government ministers from all over the world have traveled to my home state of Delaware to see state of the art wastewater management training programs at a community college there.

These are just two examples of community colleges training students for the workforce throughout the country and the world.

President Obama sees higher education as critical to the administration's plans to revitalize the American economy, and he has moved quickly to support students and their families. In just his first few months in office, the President has increased financial aid available to students and unemployed workers, increased tuition tax credits, and streamlined the financial aid process.

The President wants the United States to once again have the highest proportion of college graduates in the world by the year 2020 – a global competition that if we all enter... we will all win.

And he wants every young adult to have at least one year of college or training after high school – a goal that community colleges will play a vital role in reaching.

I am grateful for the opportunity to spread the word about the valuable contribution community colleges make in the United States. But I am not a politician. I am not a researcher or an education policy expert.

*I am a teacher.* My experience with community colleges is personal. People sometimes ask why I choose to teach at a community college. The answer is simple: It's the students.

In my classes, I find single parents who come to school in the evening, weary from a long day, yet eager to create a brighter future for their children. I find men and women who rush to class at the end of a busy work-day. It is not easy, but they are determined to be the first in their families to attend college. I see immigrants struggling to learn English who discover that America is indeed a land of opportunity; a place where education opens the door to what is possible.

Many of my students have doubts when they first arrive at college. They are unsure of their future, unaware of the abilities they possess. And then two years later, those same students proudly accept their diplomas, knowing that they have achieved something that can never be taken away from them. It's a feeling you can get at most universities, but it's especially strong at community colleges – where the gap between what is imagined at the beginning and what is achieved at the end can be so wide.

I can honestly say that my students are my heroes. I am profoundly moved by their determination to learn, and their quest to make a better life for themselves and their families.

It is a great honor to be here at UNESCO on behalf of the United States. I am here because I see in my classroom the power of education to open doors. Horace Mann, a famous American educator, once described education as “the great equalizer of the conditions of men, the balance-wheel of the social machinery.” He was right. Regardless of personal wealth, gender, race, religion or ethnicity, each and every one of us is entitled to the opportunity that education provides. That is the message that I want to promote in every nation, in every state, and every village of the world.

I’m hopeful that here, in the City of Lights, we will take another step toward creating that more enlightened world. Thank you.

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