

# Community Colleges is How We Bridge the Gap

## Cascade Connections

by Dr. Karin Edwards



When I was a little girl growing up in the Bronx, in New York City, my borough may have well as been a million miles away from the glittering skyscrapers and townhouses of Manhattan. The people there, by virtue of their position and privilege, were able to make choices, to exert a level of control over their lives that seemed beyond what was possible for most folks in my neighborhood. There was even a physical barrier -- the Harlem River -- that seemed to emphasize the difference between us.

Things changed for me, though, in middle school, when I received a scholarship to attend Columbia Grammar and Preparatory School, a prestigious institution across the river in midtown Manhattan. Suddenly, I was studying side-by-side with the sons and daughters of privilege, people whose career goals and aspirations were limited only by their ambition and the choices they made.

I was grateful for the opportunity afforded to me, and determined not to let it go to waste. But more importantly, I realized that education was the key to opening up one's future, to exerting control over one's life. This realization was so profound that I decided to make education my career.

But I also realized that not everybody gets a chance to go to a Columbia Prep. When my career path took me to a job at a community college, the pieces fell into place and I understood: This -- community college -- is how people everywhere can live the lives they want.

The fact is, if we didn't already have community colleges, we would need to invent them. They are the best way we have to connect people

with fulfilling careers, with living-wage incomes, with the next stage in their educational journeys, if that's the way they want to go. Community colleges are how we bridge the gap between people's current circumstances and their life goals.

The reason that community colleges are so successful at this is because they're the segment of the higher educational continuum with the fewest barriers to entry. Tuition and fees are very low in comparison with virtually any four-year institution. There are no standardized test requirements for admission, no expensive fees; we take people as they are, where they are, in good faith and without judgment. And -- as the name suggests -- community colleges are, for most people, located close to home.

Simply stepping foot onto a community college campus, though, will not magically install you in the career or your dreams, or instantly grant you the life you want. Make no mistake -- anything worth having is worth working for; and if you go to college, you have to do the work. Fortunately, community college has you covered there, too.

For example -- at the Cascade Campus of Portland Community College, where I am the campus president, there is a whole range of services and programs designed to help you make the right decisions to reach your educational goals, and to support you along the way. There are advisors to help you plan your choice of classes. There are tutors, both students and faculty, who can help you to master your coursework. There is cutting-edge technology in our workforce training programs

to ensure you're ready to hit the ground running in your new career. There are opportunities to serve your community and develop your skills as a leader. And when times are challenging, there are counselors to help you find your way.

There's another reason, too, that community colleges are an essential component of American life. Earlier, I mentioned another barrier, the Harlem River, and how it came to symbolize far more than just the physical separation between my neighborhood and midtown Manhattan -- and between me, a young black girl, and the life I wanted for myself.

Here it is: Community colleges are the engine that can lift people of color and members of other underserved populations from the cycle of intergenerational poverty that has kept too many of us down for too long. Community colleges are how you can cross that river.

Students from underrepresented backgrounds can often be the first members of their families to go to college, and are thus unfamiliar with campus life and all that it entails. Many may never have considered college to be a possibility, and as a result can feel like an impostor, like they don't belong. Many aren't aware of the support systems available to them, and are vulnerable to dropping out during times of stress.

So let me be very clear: If you're a person of color, if you're a first-generation student, if you're queer or an immigrant or differently abled -- you are not an impostor. You do belong at community college. You do deserve the career and the life that you want. There are people at community college who look like you, who have shared experiences similar to yours, who have struggled with that same feeling of being on the outside looking in -- and they are waiting to welcome you and help you succeed.

What are you waiting for?

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