



DR. MIGUEL A. CARDONA

The U.S. Secretary of Education discusses the vital role community colleges play – and what he’s learned from visiting their campuses.

BY DAVID CONNER



“WE CAN’T AFFORD NOT TO INVEST IN COMMUNITY COLLEGES,” Dr. Miguel A. Cardona, who is the nation’s 12th Secretary of Education, said in March. In our exclusive interview, the former public school educator and administrator talks about where community colleges fit in the overall education landscape, how the federal government can help to close the digital divide, states’ divestments in community colleges, and much more.

“THE DEVASTATING EFFECTS OF STATE DISINVESTMENT IN HIGHER EDUCATION DURING THE GREAT RECESSION ARE STILL WITH US, DRIVING UP PRICES AND HOLDING BACK COLLEGE AFFORDABILITY.”

Tell us a little bit about your background. What experiences ultimately led you to your current office as U.S. Secretary of Education?

It has been a privilege to devote my professional life to education, and my calling was shaped first by my family. My grandfather, who cut sugar cane in Puerto Rico, came to the mainland United States to provide additional opportunities for his children and future generations. While my parents didn't have the chance to attend college, they deeply valued education and taught us the importance of continuous learning and community service. My brother became a police officer. My sister is a social worker. I became a fourth-grade teacher, an elementary school principal, a school district administrator, and then had the honor of serving as Connecticut's commissioner of education. In every role, I cared most about ensuring that all students had opportunities to be successful and reach their potential.

Great teachers and schools set me on this path. One of those teachers was Mr. O'Neil, who taught art classes. He was a dynamic educator, a rare man of color leading a diverse classroom of second graders. I now know he was a pioneer: we have so few male educators of color teaching in our public schools.

As a nation, we must do everything possible to ensure that our children can be taught by diverse teachers. Teachers like Mr. O'Neil change students' lives, and those students then change the world. As Secretary, I'm laser-focused on ensuring that educators and students, especially those historically furthest from educational opportunity and those most affected by COVID-19, receive the resources and support they need to succeed. This means making equity the core of everything we do at the Education Department, and ensuring that the unprecedented funding available through President Biden's Build Back Better plan is used to recover from the pandemic, reinvest in our students, and reimagine our education system so it truly, and finally, serves all students well.

How do you think community colleges fit within the higher education sector and within public education in the United States overall?

Community colleges serve vital roles as entrances to higher education and points of return for lifelong learning. I've seen firsthand how community colleges transform lives and help people achieve their goals — from short-term credentials that give students a quick, powerful boost back into the labor market, to

associate degrees that launch students in careers or on trajectories towards a bachelor's degree and beyond.

Students of all ages and from all walks of life, seeking all kinds of careers and opportunities, enroll in community colleges. Many are balancing work, family, and school, and community colleges also connect them with childcare, food pantries, and other resources that help them keep going. Community colleges are true workhorses of higher education.

The pandemic changed how community and technical colleges serve their students, with distance and hybrid learning expected to become a mainstay due to popular demand and being able to serve many students more conveniently. However, many community college students continue to be at a disadvantage due to a lack of access to the technology needed for distance learning. What role can the federal government play in resolving the digital divide?

Before the pandemic, millions of Americans lacked access to reliable, high-speed internet and technology. When community colleges shifted online nearly overnight, those disparities were magnified. Some students resorted to extraordinary measures — driving to an area with better connectivity to take classes in their cars or submitting homework from their phones — to keep learning.

We must do better by them. A great first step was the Emergency Broadband Benefit that Congress created in response to the pandemic, which allows Pell Grant recipients to qualify for subsidies to afford high-speed internet. And I think Congress realizes that when the pandemic ends, the need for internet access won't. Closing the digital divide remains a critical role for the federal government. That's why the President has called for an infrastructure investment to ensure broadband reaches 100 percent of Americans.

In addition to the pandemic, the past year has brought not only increased national attention but also actions toward improving diversity, equity, and inclusion throughout the United States. We at ACCT see every day how vitally important open-access community colleges are to leveling the educational playing field that leads to better-paying jobs and economic mobility. What more do you think federal agencies can do to support community college-based programs and services that advance social and economic equity?

Community colleges do incredible work in opening their doors to students from all walks of life and all backgrounds, and providing them with the skills to thrive in college and careers. At the Department, we are working to make sure those high-quality programs that lead to good jobs can serve students effectively. That means making sure students can afford to enroll, through our proposal to provide two years of free tuition for all community college students. But we also need to make sure those students are supported all the way through earning their degrees and finding well-paid jobs. For instance, we proposed a landmark \$62 billion program designed to take strategies we know help low-income students succeed and expand the use of those practices.

In a June 16 statement on the Department of Education's budget request, you emphasized supports for community colleges as a means by which to make higher education more affordable and accessible. What programs merit additional investments, and why are they important?

Supporting students is essential, and the Biden Administration has a wide range of proposals to do that. We also need to support institutions so they can better serve students, so we've proposed an increase of nearly \$250 million in programs that support Minority-Serving Institutions and other under-resourced institutions serving low-income students.

With additional funds for institutional capacity building, community colleges can do more to promote student success. We've also proposed investing \$12 billion over five years in community college infrastructure and technology to update existing campuses and expand access to community colleges in hard-to-reach areas of the country.

You've expressed support for the College Promise movement to make community college tuition free for all students. Do you think the College Promise movement can become as much a part of our national culture as free public K-12 schools? How do you think universal access to two years of higher education would change communities and the country as a whole?

The College Promise movement is taking hold in our nation's culture. At community colleges across the country, I've heard how transformative it would be for *them*, as well as life-changing for millions more students, to have free tuition available nationally. Students enrolling today would be far more likely to afford the experience, and better able to stay in school to earn their degree or credential. But think of this investment's impact on equity for those who *aren't* enrolling today — those who currently feel higher education is out of reach. This is how we build back better — with a more inclusive economy and a stronger workforce than ever before.

Since taking office as Secretary of Education, you've visited a number of community college campuses. What do you hear from people on these campuses, and what stands

out to you most from the visits you've made so far? Has anything you've heard significantly influenced any of the work being done by the Department of Education?

Community colleges are doing incredible things at one of the most challenging times imaginable for school administrators, faculty, and staff. I've visited campuses that are combining hands-on training in automotive repair with a high-quality childcare center that helps student parents attend classes and complete their studies. I've seen institutions wiping clean the balances students owed them, establishing effective pathways into well-paying jobs in their communities, and preparing the essential workers who are carrying our nation through this pandemic.

I was honored to visit a Tribal college, chartered by the Tohono O'odham Nation to meet the education and career needs of its students and also strengthen and advance Native students' grounding in culture, language, values, and traditions. I carry all these stories with me, and these students' voices inform everything we're doing to help colleges to access pandemic relief funds, students to graduate with the help of Pell Grants and other aid, and borrowers to manage their loans through a time of economic crisis.

Many states divested in community and technical colleges during the Great Recession and have not restored funding in the decade that has passed. Do you think that states should invest greater resources in community and technical colleges? If so, what do you think is the most compelling and convincing case for doing so?

The devastating effects of state disinvestment in higher education during the Great Recession are still with us, driving up prices and holding back college affordability. While it's good news to see 18 states have recovered their investments in higher education from pre-recession levels, too many others haven't.

As many states face continued budget uncertainty, we must be on alert for another round of budget cuts. State funding for community colleges matters for the entire state and its residents, not just those who are enrolled. A well-educated workforce drives a stronger economy. Community colleges produce the workers who take care of our children, take our vital signs at an annual check-up, fix our computers, and nurse our elderly parents. They enroll our high schoolers to offer college credit, and their graduates go on to four-year colleges and beyond. We can't afford not to invest in community colleges.



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