

# Ending The Community College Stigma: A Response to Dr. Williams

*The NCCFT Executive Committee*

If you live in Nassau County, if you grew up and went to school here, if you've raised or are raising children here, or even if your only connection is that you work at Nassau Community College, you know what Dr. Williams was talking about [when he said during his first report to the Board of Trustees back in September](#) that one of our goals as a campus needs to be “decreasing the community college stigma.” We've all heard NCC referred to as “13th grade” or “Turnpike Tech,” or some other label meant to disparage as second-rate (at best) not only the students who come here to claim an education, but also the degrees they earn, and the faculty, staff, and administration who work here. Yet despite the persistence with which this stigma has been applied to NCC, Dr. Williams is, in our memory, the first of this campus' presidents to state explicitly that fighting the stigma should be one of our institution's goals.

Calling this goal “the national piece,” Dr. Williams connected it to what has indeed become a national effort to set the record straight on what community colleges are, what they are not, and why understanding that difference is so important. Spearheaded by [Steve Robinson](#), President of [Owens Community College](#) (OCC) in Toledo, Ohio, this effort has its own hashtag, [#EndCCStigma](#), its own [website](#), and even its own [podcast](#), on which Robinson interviews an impressive and inclusive range of people connected to community colleges, including our own Dean Melanie Hammer, who appears in [Episode 2](#).

Robinson has also put a lot of energy into making the fight against the community college stigma central to conversations where it may previously have been overlooked. He has, for example, put out [a joint statement](#) with Dr. Christopher Parker, President & CEO of the [National Junior College Athletic Association](#). As well, he has made a point of speaking about the issue at conferences like [this one](#), held by [The National Council for Marketing & Public Relations](#) (an organization representing community and technical college marketing and PR professionals), and in forums like the Regional Economic Development Alliance Study Committee, a legislative committee in his state, before which he [testified](#) earlier this year.

Robinson's enthusiasm and commitment are infectious and even inspiring—indeed, we encourage you to check out the [podcast](#) and follow the [hashtag](#)—and we are glad to know that Dr. Williams has taken the [#EndCCStigma](#) message to heart. The national

conversation about the role community colleges do, can, and should play in higher education will have an impact on everyone connected to our campus—witness our [recent colloquium on dual enrollment](#) and our ongoing discussions about [Guided Pathways](#)—and so it is important that we as a campus and *we*, as a full-time faculty union, have a voice in that conversation.

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At a recent Academic Affairs meeting, Dr. John Osae-Kwapong, Associate Vice President for Institutional Effectiveness and Strategic Planning ([OIESP](#)), presented data from the [SUNY Student Opinion Survey - 2019 Form B](#). We would like to draw your attention to items 2 and 3 from page one of the summary:

Item		Very high	High	Average	Low	Very low	Blank	Total	Avg / Std Dev
2. Before you enrolled, what was your impression of the quality of education at this college?	<i>N</i>	70	217	396	75	19	3	780	3.31 / 0.86
	% w Blanks	9.0	27.8	50.8	9.6	2.4	0.4	100.0	
	% w/o Blanks	9.0	27.9	51.0	9.7	2.4	--	100.0	
3. Since you enrolled, what is your impression of the quality of education at this college?	<i>N</i>	191	364	174	36	15	0	780	3.87 / 0.90
	% w Blanks	24.5	46.7	22.3	4.6	1.9	0.0	100.0	
	% w/o Blanks	24.5	46.7	22.3	4.6	1.9	--	100.0	

Out of the 780 students surveyed, only 70 (less than 10%) answered item 2 by saying they thought the quality of education offered at NCC was “very high” before they enrolled. In response to item 3, however, that number more than doubled, to 191 (almost 25%). Inversely, while 396 students (more than 50%) rated NCC’s quality of education as merely “average” before they enrolled, that number dropped to 174 (less than 25%), when students gave their post-enrollment assessments.

Those numbers should make every single one of us on this campus—faculty, staff, and administration—proud of the work we do here on a daily basis. *We*, however, the Nassau Community College Federation of Teachers, would be remiss—and, frankly, a crucially important part of the whole #EndCCStigma conversation would be left out—if we did not point out that the people on the front lines of making the difference in those numbers are *our* members, classroom and non-classroom, as well as the classroom and non-classroom members of the Adjunct Faculty Association (AFA). OCC’s President Robinson makes a point of acknowledging the central role faculty play, as do many of the people he speaks with on his podcast. Yet, despite the enthusiasm they express for the transformative nature of the faculty-student relationship—and we look forward to hearing how Dr. Williams addresses this in the vision statement he has promised to

deliver later this academic year—the #EndCCStigma campaign itself tends to skim the surface when discussing the faculty-related issues that confronting the stigma inevitably raises.

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One way of describing the hierarchy that obtains within higher education goes something like this: Four year colleges and research universities are the institutions where knowledge is created; community colleges are the institutions where it is (merely) taught. The implication, of course, one among many, is that—just like community college students were not able to make the cut at four-year institutions (which we know is often not the case)—community college faculty simply don't measure up as researchers and scholars, and so teaching is basically all we are truly qualified to do. Indeed, many of us at NCC who do research, present at conferences, and/or publish, perform, or otherwise produce our own creative work have experienced the consequences of this implication firsthand. Condescension, rejection, dismissiveness, even outright derision are in some places still the response we get when we dare to claim we have something worthwhile, and perhaps even original, to contribute to our fields. In fact, we know of colleagues in several departments across campus who list their affiliation as “SUNY Nassau” rather than “Nassau Community College” in order to avoid the taint that the phrase “community college” is understood to carry.

Thankfully, professional associations within the academy have begun to take notice. Organizations as disparate as the [Association of Writers and Writing Programs](#) (AWP), the [Modern Language Association](#) (MLA), the [American Sociological Association](#) (ASA), the [American Society for Cell Biology](#) (ASCB), the [American Chemical Society](#) (ACS), and the [American Historical Association](#) (AHS) have taken steps to recognize community college faculty both as scholars in our own right and as academics who offer a kind of pedagogical experience and expertise from which our disciplines as a whole, not to mention our four-year colleagues in particular, could benefit.

Ironically, this movement towards greater integration of community college faculty into the intellectual, scholarly, and pedagogical lives of our various disciplines is at odds with certain national trends in higher education, perhaps especially the ever-increasing reliance on [adjunct and contingent academic labor](#), faculty who possess neither the [protections of tenure](#) nor the [stability](#) and [benefits](#) of [full-time employment](#). In her article, “[The Politics of Contingent Academic Labor](#),” Claire Goldstene argues that, because this shift to a contingent workforce eliminates tenure as a safeguard of academic

freedom, what has come to be known as [the adjunctification](#) of our profession is in fact antithetical to the spirit of inquiry and discovery that informs the best research, scholarship, and teaching. As a consequence, she argues further, it undermines the democratizing and progressive potential of the work higher education, and particularly public higher education does, if by “progressive” we understand not this or that left-leaning policy, but rather making possible the increased participation of more and more different kinds of people at all levels of socioeconomic, political, cultural, and civic life.

Goldstene roots the beginning of this trend in a strategy developed for the national Chamber of Commerce in 1971 by then-future Supreme Court Justice Lewis Powell, who was responding to what he saw (in Goldstene’s paraphrase) as “a ‘broad attack’ directed against ‘the American economic system’ at universities across the country...

jeopardiz[ing] the ‘strength and prosperity of America and the freedom of its people.’”

While Powell was careful in that memo not to call for measures directly attacking academic freedom, the measures he did call for, like threats to university funding, often amounted to such an attack nonetheless. Contemporary [examples](#) of such threats, along with [the ideological battles that swirl around them](#), are not hard to find. There is, however, one contemporary threat to the funding of public higher education that is presented not as a threat at all, but rather as an unavoidable consequence of the economic times in which we live. As Ronald Brownstein [reported last year in \*The Atlantic\*](#), “public colleges and universities in most states [now receive] most of their revenue from tuition rather than government appropriations.”

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Politics aside for the moment, this shift from government (public) funds to student (private) funds as the primary source of public higher education’s budget is something to which institutions like ours have no choice but to respond. It’s one reason why OCC’s President Robinson so enthusiastically promotes the “value proposition” offered by community colleges over and against the one offered by four-year institutions. “Value proposition,” of course, is the language of the marketplace, framing students as paying customers and institutions of higher education as businesses that must compete for their dollars by offering the best return on investment—i.e., the most efficient/cost-effective path to graduation and a degree that will lead to increasingly profitable employment.

As educators, many of us do not like thinking about the work we do in these terms. Yet we do ourselves a grave disservice if we pretend that these terms are not how this country has been defining for some time now the field on which institutions like ours

must operate. That's why we, as a union, are committed to doing our part to see that initiatives like [dual enrollment](#) and [Guided Pathways](#) are implemented with the academic integrity necessary for them to succeed, both as sound business decisions and effective educational practice. At the same time, though, we should not lose sight of the fact that this particular way of understanding students as our customers has a history, and that this history is not one of economic downturn and the need for austerity measures. Rather, it is the history of an ideological battle, in which the public value of public education itself is at stake.

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As Nancy McClean tells it in Chapter 7 of her recent book, [Democracy in Chains](#), this history begins with the response crafted by political economist [James Buchanan](#) to the campus unrest of the late 1960s. Buchanan recognized that, regardless of the merits of any particular group's demands, it was the economic structure of the public university itself that enabled both students and faculty so easily to disrupt the institution's functioning. As Buchanan understood it, the problem with public higher education was that neither students nor faculty were in any meaningful financial way accountable to the institutions of which they were a part or to the taxpayers who funded those institutions. This is McClean quoting Buchanan:

- 1) *those who consume [the university's] product [students] do not purchase it [at full-cost];*
- 2) *those who produce it [faculty] do not sell it; and*
- 3) *those who finance it [taxpayers] do not control it.*

Buchanan's solution was "to stop considering colleges and universities as public resources" and to see them instead as an industry. "The cure," McClean goes on, "flowed from the diagnosis. Students should pay full-cost prices, and universities should compete for them as customers...." (104-5). Buchanan's goal was to implement a new socioeconomics of higher education that would immunize colleges and universities, and by extension society at large, from the disruption of campus protests and the intellectual work by which those protests were fueled. Essentially, his reasoning went, "if you stop making college free and charge a hefty tuition, ideally enough to cover the entire cost of each education...students will have a strong economic incentive to focus on their studies and nothing else—certainly not on trying to alter the university or wider society" (105).

The inevitable consequence of understanding higher education as an industry, of course,

is that once the market the industry serves begins to exert this kind of pressure, the industry itself will have no choice but to reorganize themselves in response. Indeed, you can see that reorganization taking place at institutions all over the country, as higher ed boards and administrations move to eliminate, or at least seriously weaken, those fields of study where the potential return on a student's investment is not so obviously a profitable one.

Perhaps the most egregious example of this came in 2018. In the aftermath of then-Governor Scott Walker's [Wisconsin Act 10](#), the University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point [proposed](#) eliminating 13 humanities and social science majors in favor of programs "in areas with high-demand career paths." Other examples are not hard to find. *The Chronicle of Higher Education* recently [reported](#) that colleges nationwide lost 651 foreign-language programs over three years. In other places, there have been discussions about eliminating programs like [Anthropology](#), [Women's Studies](#), [Africana Studies](#) (also [here](#) and [here](#)), [Philosophy](#) (and Theater at the same link), and [English](#).

While this kind of reorganization obviously limits the academic choices available to students—in that it both removes certain majors from consideration and restricts the scope of the elective interests students might pursue—it also fundamentally delegitimizes the research and scholarship done by faculty in the eliminated or "reorganized" departments. Indeed, it calls into question the inherent value of the disciplines those departments represent. Take a step back from the economic realities to which this kind of reorganization is ostensibly a necessary response, and it's hard not to see Buchanan's strategy at work. Those departments and disciplines most likely to be targeted, after all, the humanities and social sciences, are also those that most often and most explicitly, as [Goldstene puts it](#), "challenge accepted norms [and] help shape national dialogue underlying political, social, and economic policy."

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It's hard to overstate just how thoroughly racist and elitist Buchanan's strategy was, how passionately he opposed the defining values of the community college mission: access, responsiveness to community need, and equity. Indeed, it's worth reading McClean to understand more fully just how happy Buchanan would have been for the overwhelming majority of the students we serve at NCC to remain excluded from the national dialogue Goldstene talks about. In fact, the community college stigma is in some ways nothing more than a Buchanan-like response to the fact that we dare to say no to that exclusivity. As Matt Reed put it in [a column](#) that he wrote for *Inside Higher Ed*, however, rejecting

exclusivity needs to be about more than a community college's value proposition. It also needs to address "the much larger set of issues" with which our society continues to struggle "around race, class, [we would add gender and sexual orientation] and the conflation of privilege with prestige."

Implicit in asking what it means for community colleges to address these larger issues is the question of the faculty's role within the institution, both as those charged with the pedagogical, scholarly, and creative work that is at the heart of the academic enterprise and as those who, in and out of the classroom, most directly interact with students on a daily basis. Indeed, as higher education has come to rely more and more on adjunct faculty—who have for some time now been doing most of the teaching at community colleges nationwide—the question of the role faculty play in the academic lives of their students has itself become the subject of scholarly inquiry. It's worth examining what some of that research has found.

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Rationales for relying so heavily on adjunct faculty range from the need to keep the lights on and the doors open—ie, the challenge posed by the ever-shrinking budgets with which community colleges have no choice but to deal—to the claim that tenure, because of the job security it provides, makes full-time professors lazy and complacent. The research, however, does not bear this latter reasoning out. Indeed, [at least one study has shown](#) that the tenure system actually increases faculty commitment to and productivity within an institution—assuming that the institution is also organized to foster that kind of commitment and productivity. To put this another way, if only because we are not scrambling to cobble together a living by teaching at multiple institutions, often taking on more classes than we do as full-timers, we are better positioned than adjuncts to contribute to campus life in ways that directly and positively impact students.

Research has shown, for example, that full-time faculty are [more involved with student learning](#), devoting more out-of-class hours to working with students than adjuncts do. Moreover, in a related example, in 2009, the [Community College Survey of Student Engagement](#) asked full- and part-time faculty with the same teaching loads how many hours per week they spent involved in various non-classroom activities (18-19). It's a little confusing, because the survey reports the number of faculty who indicated they spent no time at all, but if you turn those numbers around, the results look like this:

- 85% of full-time faculty (FT) vs. 60% of part-time faculty (PT) spend at least some time doing student advisement;

- 50% FT vs. 18% PT spend some time with students on activities other than coursework; and
- 78% FT vs. 53% PT are otherwise involved with students outside the classroom.

The disparity in these numbers is also borne out in [\*Contingent Commitments: Bringing Part-Time Faculty Into a Focus\*](#), a 2014 special report put out by the Center for Community College Student Engagement, the same organization that performed the survey cited above.

Simple common sense tells us that any sustained and substantive faculty-student interaction is more likely than not to contribute to student success. Research suggests, however, that students actually do less well when most of their interactions are with adjuncts. In at least two studies, for example, [an over-reliance on adjunct faculty](#) was shown to [harm community college graduation rates](#); other studies have found that [increased exposure to adjunct faculty](#) made community college students [significantly less likely to transfer to a four-year school](#). Still [other studies](#) suggest that, when the majority of instruction is provided by adjuncts, [student grades and certain kinds of student persistence can suffer](#) as well.

All of these studies, we hasten to add, are careful to point out, as are we, that the deficits they identify reflect not on the disciplinary or pedagogical competence of adjunct faculty, but rather on the systemic inequities—[low pay, lack of institutional support, and the absence of job security](#)—inherent in an [adjunct faculty position](#). Moreover, except for their shared conviction that sustained interaction with faculty is central to student success, none of the researchers whose work we have linked to present their findings as in any way conclusive. As good scholars must, they hedge and qualify, detailing the limitations of their studies and pointing out where further research is needed.

Nonetheless, the work these researchers have done should at the very least motivate us to reflect on whether the values driving community colleges' reliance on adjuncts align with the educational values we say we hold. How, for example, is it not an inherent contradiction for community colleges to claim equity as one of our core values, while at the same time relying for the lion's share of their teaching on the fundamentally inequitable treatment of adjunct faculty? Doesn't behaving like a business that creates value for its customers by decreasing for its employees the value of working there demonstrate a fundamental commitment not to higher education as a public good, but rather to the exigencies and vicissitudes of the bottom line?



We have already acknowledged the socioeconomic and political realities with which institutions like ours must contend, and we recognize that questions like those above neither alter those realities nor provide practical strategies for dealing with them. Nonetheless, such questions do help highlight why it is problematic to conceive of the community college stigma primarily as a misunderstanding of the value proposition we offer: it accepts the premise of the bottom line as the defining value of the education our students come to us to claim.

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We are proud to be community college educators; we are proud to serve students who bring to us not only a wide range of needs, desires, and goals, but also an often bewildering range of obstacles to overcome; and we are proud of the way our classrooms and the services we offer so often become laboratories of innovation, pedagogical and otherwise, to help students address those obstacles so they can achieve what they come to us to achieve. Both in the lives they bring to us when they choose to attend NCC, in other words, and in the lives for which it is our job to help prepare them, our students are more than customers. Granted, they pay for and deserve an education that prepares them for the world of work they will eventually inhabit, but they also deserve an education that prepares them for their lives as citizens, in all the various ways that citizenship manifests itself.

To give them that education we need to help them learn that making and acquiring knowledge are neither entirely separable nor merely transactional activities; that the discipline through which intellectual curiosity becomes substantive, meaningful, and potentially transformative inquiry is a life skill, not one that is useful only to scholars at four-year institutions or of real value only in pursuit of a good grade or a job; and we need to help them see—to use a phrase that figures in our mission statement—that being a lifelong learner is not merely a matter of personal enrichment. It is also the foundation for informed participation in every aspect of their lives.

Whatever else it may be, in other words, a college education is also a kind of intellectual apprenticeship—a framing that, if we take it seriously, requires us not only to see our students as more than customers, but also our faculty as more than customer-service oriented facilitators of graduation/completion rates. After all, the masters from whom apprentices learn their trade do far more than teach the mechanics of that trade. They also provide the role models on which apprentices base their future lives in that trade. Getting a liberal arts education may not be precisely the same thing, but learning what it

means to engage critically and proactively with the world around you is also not something you can do simply by taking tests and passing classes. You need role models, and that means having access to faculty whose work lives are organized such that they can provide the kind of sustained and substantive engagement that makes a strong role model strong.

Nassau Community College has always operated on the belief that students deserve that kind of education and that kind of faculty. We may not yet know the specifics of the vision Dr. Williams plans to lay out for us, we believe that he agrees. The challenge before us is to make sure it is the kind of education we continue to deliver. We look forward to working with Dr. Williams to meet that challenge head on.