Higher Education’s Role in Shaping the 21st Century American Dream
Tim Danos
Urban Affairs and Public Policy PhD Student
School of Public Policy and Administration
University of Delaware

“We know that universities do more than educate students. They serve as powerful platforms for solving real problems.” Vice President Joe Biden

Vice President Biden, as well as presenters at the Biden Challenge conference, made it clear that institutions of higher education have played- and will to continue to play- a consequential role in efforts to strengthen the middle class.

At vital times in US history, access to higher education has opened doors economically, politically, and socially for many Americans. In 1960, only 7.7% of the US population had graduated from college; yet, as of last year, 34.2% of the US population are now college graduates. In many ways, a college education has been a key that opens economic doors, as the average college graduate will earn nearly $1 million more over their lifetime than another worker without the same education. In addition, as colleges and universities promote critical-thinking skills and community engagement, graduating from college increases the likelihood that one will be engaged in civic affairs and be involved in their communities. Most importantly, especially for students who would be the first in their families to graduate from college, a college education has the potential to change the trajectory of a family for generations. These families will no longer ask if a student can go to college, but where they will go to college.

Yet, rapidly changing economic landscapes are reshaping society, accelerating the need for increased access to higher education. During the Biden Challenge conference, Dr. Leland Ware of the University of Delaware highlighted significant shifts in domestic labor markets, from
manufacturing to technical and service occupations. Dr. Ware posited that, in an increasingly de-industrialized world, people can no longer graduate from high school, work at a local factory, and earn a middle-class income. As nearly two-thirds of future jobs will require a college degree, it is paramount that investments are made to increase college and career readiness for future generations, as well as increasing educational opportunities for displaced workers affected by economic changes.

While college degrees and postsecondary credentials are vital to socioeconomic mobility, the cost of college can limit opportunities for those interested in pursuing a college degree and recent graduates from college. Dr. Laura Perna from the University of Pennsylvania noted financial factors as a significant barrier to promoting higher education opportunities and outcomes. Although the number of college graduates has increased nationally since 1960, only 55 percent of students with high school diplomas enroll at a postsecondary institution. Dr. Perna noted several bold policies, like free-college and college promise programs, that would drastically increase public investment in higher education. These ideas, as well as ones shared at my table during the conference, have the potential to address socioeconomic challenges and increase access to postsecondary educational opportunities; yet, these policy aims will only be achieved through visionary leadership, strong public will, and vigorous implementation.

During the conference, Vice President Biden mentioned that a strong middle class cannot only be measured by statistics, but also by the empowerment that people feel when they have more control over their destiny. Having a college degree increases the likelihood that one will join the middle class and be able to achieve important tenets of the American Dream including owning a home, living in a safe and vibrant community, having time for leisure activities, and building upon the success of their parents.

In order to protect the idea of the middle class and to increase opportunities for more people, to achieve the American dream, especially those from marginalized communities, public policies must be reimagined. These ideas should be bold and prepare people for an increasingly diverse, interconnected, and technologically-advanced world through powerful platforms like higher education institutions.
DISCLAIMER
The views expressed in this publication do not necessarily reflect the views of Vice President Biden, the Biden Institute or the University of Delaware.