

The Biden Challenge

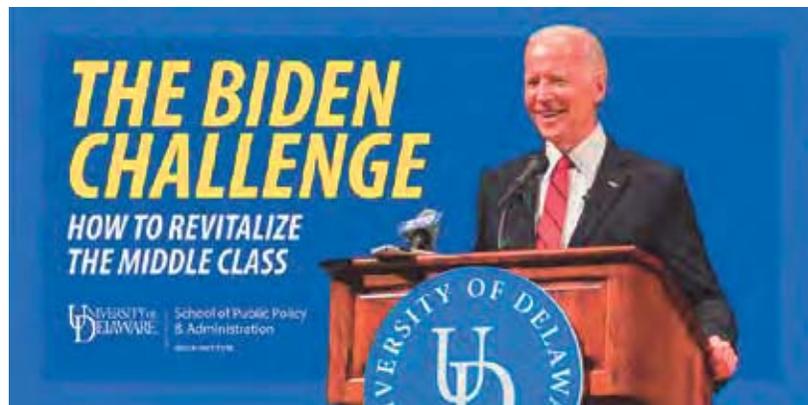
Vice President Joseph Biden hosted The Biden Challenge, an ideas exchange to look at policy solutions to grow America's middle class, at the University of Delaware this September. In advance of the event, PA TIMES spoke with Biden Institute Managing Director Mike Donilon about the Challenge's goals and desired outcomes.

Where does the concept of revitalizing the middle class come from? Why is this initiative so important to Vice President Biden and what does he hope will come from it? What does "revitalizing the middle class" mean?

Vice President Biden has focused on the middle class his whole career. He believes a wide array of forces from technology to globalization to Moore's Law to artificial intelligence—as well as critical changes that have led to workers having less and less power in the workplace—have put incredible stress on the middle class in America. By "revitalizing," the vice president means providing the tools and opportunity for working families to raise a family, buy a home, send a child to college, plan for retirement, and hopefully not be a burden to their children as they age—what many historically would call "the American Dream." It is both a matter of aspiration as well as economics. And, he believes that revitalizing the middle class is essential not only to the economy of our nation in the years ahead, but also to America's future.

What was the genesis of the idea to use students and academics to generate new policy ideas, as opposed to using think tanks and other methods?

The genesis came out of a conversation with Maria Aristigueta, director of the School of Public Policy and Administration at the University of Delaware. Maria approached Cathy McLaughlin, executive director of the Biden Institute, and me and asked if the vice president would be willing to speak to the national conference of NASPAA, which gathered in Washington, DC last fall. She thought it would be a great opportunity for the vice president to represent the University of Delaware, and for him to issue a challenge to public policy schools across the nation to address an issue of his choosing. When we heard that, we knew the vice president would be excited at the prospect of engaging the incredible brainpower and innovating thinking at so many great public policy schools.



The Challenge is exploring the intersections between societal mobility and factors like financial inclusion, infrastructure, education, employment and tuition remission. How does Vice President Biden see the connection among these issues? In which areas does he hope and expect to make the most progress to revitalize the middle class?

The vice president knows how complex the problem is, and that there is no simple solution limited to one area or another. Reestablishing that ladder up for people—for those in the middle class *and* those striving to get into it—is central to America's future. He talks about restoring the bargain that once existed in America, where the workers who helped create the success of an enterprise got to share in the profits and benefits of that enterprise, because he believes America works best when everyone is in on the deal. Infrastructure is a place where the long-term benefits from investing and the near-term job creation clearly make it a win-win proposition. Education has long been the key to success in America and he sees it as the key to success in the future. He often quotes his wife, Dr. Jill Biden, a community college professor, who says that any country that out-educates America will out-compete America. So, the vice president does not approach this challenge with a narrow—or, by the way, pre-determined—point of view. He wants a 360-degree look at the problem; the more innovative, the better.

What are some outcomes that the Institute hopes will come from the Biden Challenge and its related events? What is your timeline for next steps?

We hope to add specific ideas and proposals to the debate about how to revitalize the middle class. But, more than that, we hope that by convening some of the best minds in the country and providing a forum for the exchange of ideas, we will serve as a

catalyst for more thinking and work in this area. We hope people will leave the conference excited and energized.

What kind of long-term trajectory does Vice President Biden and the Institute have in mind as you continue to examine revitalizing the middle class? How much effort and dedication are needed to make the vision a reality?

The vice president is an optimist. And, while we all know this is a tough problem—and one that has confronted the nation for a while—we believe there are big steps we can take to revitalize the middle class. Investing in education. Investing in infrastructure. Investing in job training. Just to name a few. We also believe the prospects for success grow dramatically by bringing the best minds in the nation together to focus on it.

Programs of this nature require funding, buy-in and hopefully support from public sector entities. How has Vice President Biden's concept been received and what kind of organizations have partnered with him and the Institute in these efforts?

The concept of the Challenge has been well received by the academic community. The idea of gathering academics to think about the middle class in this way is different from most academic conferences. This event will be the first academic conference hosted as a collaboration between the Biden Institute and the School of Public Policy. Following the conference, we will develop a strategy on how best to harness the ideas and energy from those gathered to impact the future of the middle class.

Can public administrators, public administration educators and others support the Biden Institute and these efforts, even if they are not in attendance, and contribute to new policy ideas?

Yes. We are going to make available all the submissions that came to us, as well as the full dialogue from the conference. And, there is now a website where we hope people will submit thoughts, ideas, papers or proposals they want to add to the debate. The goal is not simply to have a one conference, but to have an ongoing resource that grows and develops as we move forward.

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