

## Dr. Jill Biden deserves her title. Saying otherwise demeans teachers and community colleges.

Education is often belittled as a profession and – more insidiously – as an academic discipline, implying that how we instruct future generations doesn't merit intellectual respect.



— Dr. Jill Biden takes part in the Stolen Childhood Report Launch at United Nations Headquarters on May 31, 2017, in New York.

Michael Loccisano / Getty Images file

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**By Tonya Russell, culture and wellness writer**

What do an aeronautical engineer, a psychiatrist and a lawyer all have in common? The obvious answers are advanced degrees and exorbitant student loans, but at the heart of their success is a solid education, dating to before they could even complete math equations. Those degrees didn't appear out of nowhere, and educators can take some credit for inspiring and training these professionals along the way.

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*Instead of rolling our eyes at Biden for exploring how to keep community college students in school, maybe we can try to build on her research.*

If we don't take much else from 2020, we can take with us a better understanding of the role of teachers and how their jobs aren't child's play. Because of the pandemic, they've been **criticized this year by parents**, as well as by **political talking heads**, most of them men, as they **fought for their own safety** while trying to ensure that children received pedagogically sound instruction.

Suddenly, nonteachers have become experts on what students need, spouting platitudes about children's development without having played active roles in it themselves. Many parents have become lax about the structure of their children's virtual school days, but teachers have had to figure out how to

manage their instructional schedules while thinking of every way to engage, educate and inspire students from behind computer screens.

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Yet teaching is still often belittled both as a profession and – perhaps more insidiously – as an academic discipline, as if the way we prepare our future engineers and doctors to absorb information, think critically and process the world around them doesn't merit the same intellectual respect and scholastic prestige as other advanced fields. Nothing demonstrates this condescension better than a recent op-ed in The Wall Street Journal calling on [first lady-to-be Jill Biden to drop "Dr."](#) as her title.

"'Dr. Jill Biden' sounds and feels fraudulent, not to say a touch comic," wrote Joseph Epstein, a longtime contributor to The Journal. "Your degree is, I believe, an Ed.D., a doctor of education, earned at the University of Delaware through a dissertation with the unpromising title 'Student Retention at the Community College Level: Meeting Students' Needs.'"

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His coup de grâce: "A wise man once said that no one should call himself 'Dr.' unless he has delivered a child. Think about it, Dr. Jill, and forthwith drop the doc." Except people with far less education than Biden have delivered babies. It takes longer to get a doctorate in education than to become a registered nurse or a doula. Not to mention the many cabdrivers who've been emergency fill-ins.

More important, why don't we want to honor and recognize a woman who has devoted her career to investigating how students learn – and could learn better – as epitomizing academic excellence and achievement? Her thesis sounds like the definition of promising to me: an empirically valuable inquiry that could help students enter the world of higher education through community colleges, a cornerstone of [lifting Americans out of poverty](#) and [providing greater opportunity](#).

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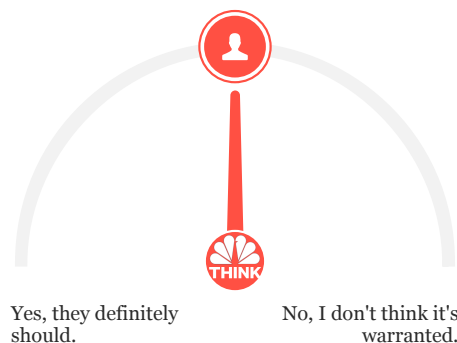
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Instead of rolling our eyes at Biden for exploring how to keep community college students in school, maybe we can try to build on her research. Community colleges provide equity for those who can't afford to spend \$35,000 or more a year on an education. To insinuate that attending one is a reflection on one's intelligence is not only elitist, but also harmful to those who rely on them. In 2017 to 2018, **44 percent** of undergraduate students were enrolled at two-year community colleges, and over 50 percent of those students were considered low-income.

Because Epstein disparages community colleges and holds an honorary doctorate, it's perhaps no surprise that he also looks down on people who have to use sweat equity to get their educations – like Biden.

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OPINARY. 

The future first lady grew up in my neck of the woods. She was **born in South Jersey**, like me, and was raised and educated in the Philly suburbs. Hammonton, New Jersey, has always been more rural than urban, with blueberry farms, blue-collar jobs and not much else. The median income for **Hammonton** is about \$70,000, and the majority of children who grow up there don't get any **higher education**. It's no wonder Biden chose to teach at a community college and write her dissertation on retention.

Obtaining her Ed.D. in 2007, Biden saw how hard it could be for others, with less help and lacking the prestige of being a senator's wife, to start careers. Once she entered the White House as second lady, she also could have sought to teach at a more prestigious institution, but she instead carried a full-time class load at a **community college in Virginia**.

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As I'm sure Biden knows, a better way to describe teaching than as soft or feminine would be to say it's tactical. Observe a classroom and you'll notice that teachers are skilled at crisis management and negotiations. Sometimes they play referee, and sometimes they are therapists or social workers. Sometimes they are demeaned by students *and* their parents. All while trying to improve our children – many children, all with different learning needs and handicaps.

The only structure some children with troubled home lives get is in a classroom. Teachers have to provide this stable and absorbing environment, and fulfill all of the other responsibilities that come with it, while leading school shooting drills, purchasing their own learning materials and, often, being severely underpaid. This year we've added the crime of watching **educators die** of Covid-19 when working in high-risk school environments.

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There has been a shift in education this year unlike in any other time in modern history. Instead of disparaging educators, we could just as easily praise those who have the cojones to take on the job – most of whom are women; the profession at the grade school level is **76 percent** female.

Still, here we are, degrading working women who fought hard for their degrees in education, whether at the community college level or higher, and chose to grow in their roles by obtaining Ph.D.s or Ed.D.s. Instead of mocking those who've gotten the highest education that a teacher can get, let's honor them for being patron saints of patience and innovation, whether or not they can deliver a baby.

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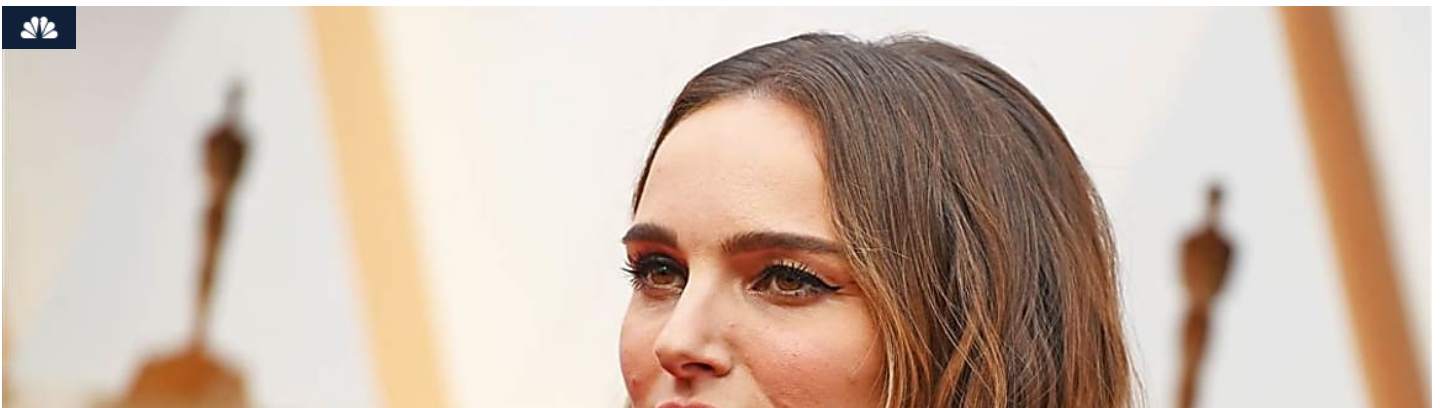
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