

There is an old Chinese curse – “May you come to the attention of those in authority.” It sounds nice, doesn’t it, to get recognized by higher ups. But sometimes that notice comes not from good things but from bad. Getting called out in class usually isn’t all that good.

Recently President Obama recognized America’s community colleges in his State of the Union address and offered a plan to provide free education for students who work for it. Only broad strokes have been offered so far in this plan and I want to see the details and any attached strings before I get too excited about it.

But a really good thing that has happened as a result of the announcement is that people around the country have been writing about how much they like community colleges and the work they do. [USA Today](#) did a great editorial about this sector of higher education, as did the [Washington Post](#). The actor Tom Hanks wrote a [New York Times](#) column that was a love letter to his experience as a community college student, giving credit to an institution for helping him become the man he is today.

For years community colleges have been the punchline of jokes about higher education. For the longest time I knew what it must feel like to be a lawyer, the all-time favorite group to ridicule. Of course lawyers have no feelings to insult as they are soulless creatures of the night, bent on the destruction of mankind, so it’s okay to pick on them. That’s a joke by the way.

So it is wonderful to see this new positive emphasis in community colleges. I thought that I would follow Mr. Hanks’ lead and tell you about my experience in community colleges and what they mean to me.

First off, you should know that I never attended a community college as a student. It’s true. I was a 17 year old freshmen at Oklahoma State University. All my friends were going to OSU and I followed. Neither one of my parents attended college. In fact, my father tried to dissuade me from going for my degree. I recall him saying, “A real man gets a job.” He’s mellowed a bit since then and he’s proud of me now, but it was not a great conversation then. There are a lot of families that do everything they can to help a student be successful in college, and there are those who perhaps do the opposite.

My first year was tough at OSU, but I made it through. It was expensive too and I had to borrow everything. I got no financial help from my family to pay for my tuition, books, housing, and fees. Mom slipped me some gas money when she could and I have a family member who sent me some money to help, but I paid for everything with loans. It took 10 years to pay it all back and those first years out of college were very difficult for me financially as a result.

I got a job with Northeastern Oklahoma A & M College in Miami, OK teaching mass communications. That was my first experience with two-year schools, as a faculty member. It was an eye-opening experience for me. In my class were kids who were the top of their graduating class, sitting next to developmental students who could not read well, and next to them a dad in his 40s coming back to make a new life for his family. I had to teach them all despite the wide differences in skills, motivation, and preparedness.

I still say the greatest teachers in the world do not work at Harvard or Yale, they are working at America’s community colleges. Harvard students need a book and an exam date to be successful. Community college students, with their very wide range of college preparedness and motivation, NEED their instructors to meet them where they are and PULL them through their degrees.

It was just a job for me at first. I loved teaching. If you know me you know I love to perform and I felt lecturing was like doing 3-5 shows a day to a captive audience. I had fun with the students while they learned. It was a good job, but just a job.

It became a lot more as I got to know the students better. I learned about their home situation, about the poverty they were battling every day, about their hopes to have something better for themselves and their families. I learned of students whose parents were in jail, or dead, or who sometimes, like me, were not supportive of them being in school. Often they were the first in their family to go to college. Sometimes my young students were parents themselves already, trying to balance, work, kids and school all while being unprepared for college-level classes. They worked so hard. They struggled and struggled but in the end they made it (with a lot of help from a lot of employees).

I came to realize that community college was their only real hope of breaking a cycle. It was a college degree or a life in low paying jobs, or on government assistance, or jail. And not only for them, but for their kids too.

I had offers to move on to a university and teach there. It would have been a lot more money than I was making as a community college teacher that was for sure. And while I greatly respect the university mission of teaching mixed with adding to the knowledge base through research, my heart was elsewhere. It is here, at the community college, where I could make the biggest difference. With our open admission and low cost, it was here I could help those who needed it the most.

I know we, the employees of Neosho County Community College, are making a difference in the lives of over 2,200 students every semester. We are winning the war on poverty one student at a time, at least for those who come to us for help. We turn people on assistance into Registered Nurses making \$40,000+ a year. We turn tax spenders into taxpayers. But more importantly, we enrich lives for the better every day.

So I get a little sensitive when a comedian cracks a joke at our expense. And I still get teary at graduation watching the students change to become graduates. That's why after 23 years at the community college level, I know I have found my place, my personal mission, and my calling.

And that's what community colleges mean to me.

If you have any questions or comments about this column or anything else, please contact me at [binbody@neosho.edu](mailto:binbody@neosho.edu).