

Invited Perspective

Amplifying Community College Voices Through Podcast Journalism

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*Community college is
great if you want to
save money or never
amount to anything.
It's a great affordable
option, but so is the
Dollar Tree.*

Comedian Taylor Tomlinson told this joke, and more like it, in a stand-up routine from 2019. It serves as just one example of the many jokes at the expense of community college that are pervasive in the United States. A study by Krista Tucciarone in 2007 found that community college is often portrayed in the media as an “institution of higher learning that values low achievement, open enrollment, poor instruction, inferior knowledge, and vocational/technical training.” This portrayal in the media creates and sustains a stigma around attending these open access educational institutions. With 41% of all undergraduate students in the U.S. attending community college as of 2021 (Community College Research Center, 2024), we need to do better.

One reason the stigma around community college continues, I would argue, is because it is not covered appropriately in national news. Joshua Benton of the Nieman Lab found that in The New York Times, which is considered one of the most important news organizations in the U.S., “Harvard” is mentioned 7.4 times as often as it has mentioned “community college”, the ratio is 4× for “Stanford,” 3.5× for “Yale,” and

2× for both “Cornell” and “Princeton.” Why is community college barely reported on in The New York Times? It is likely because, according to Benton, a quarter of the staffers at The New York Times graduated from an Ivy League school. With the Ivy League enrolling 16,000 new freshmen every year compared to 4.5 million community college freshmen, community college is incredibly underrepresented and unfairly left out of the conversation around higher education.

With the understanding that community college voices are practically non-existent in the media, my current focus is to help to amplify community college voices through podcast journalism. With support from a Mellon/ACLS Community College Fellowship in 2020, I started a podcast production house and began this work with students. In March 2023, a group of about 25 Community College of Baltimore County (CCBC) students and I launched an investigative journalistic podcast called [Good School](#). The launch was the culmination of about two and a half years of working with a rotating crew of students. Students were the producers, writers, editors, audio engineers, marketing managers, project managers, and hosts of the podcast. Good School is a 5-part series investigating higher education that delves into topics like the admissions process, the faculty hierarchy, college rankings, the choice to go to college, and the history of higher education. While these topics have been reported on extensively in the news, they have never been covered from the perspective of community college students.

The launch of Good School earned 4 articles in Inside Higher Ed, 1 article in Best Colleges, 2 guest appearances on the podcast Higher Ed Matters, an invitation for the students to speak at Achieving the Dream, and a keynote address at the National Scholarship Providers Association conference. Episode 4, The Faculty, won 3rd place at the College Media Association's Audio & Film Festival, and the whole podcast won [Innovation of the Year from the League for Innovation in the Community College](#). This is just the start, but it is a strong start, and a win for community colleges across the country. Good School serves as an example of the competencies, intelligence, and thoughtfulness of community college students.

The future of Good School is up in the air; however, I am still dedicated to amplifying community college voices. My project as the Marc McColloch Endowed Teaching Chair is a new podcast called [Know-It-All](#). This new show will have episodes created and hosted by CCBC students

that will teach the listener something new in 3-5 minutes. Episodes will cover everything from film history to marketing, philosophy, physics, and any other subject students are learning at CCBC. The podcast begins as a high-impact assignment that works well as a final project in any class. Students research, write, and record a 3-5 minute solo-commentary style episode about a topic they found most interesting during the semester. Projects will be vetted by their professors for national publication. Know-It-All will begin with CCBC students, then spread to include community colleges across the country. With national publication, this podcast has the potential to amplify the voices of community college students and begin to create a more accurate narrative about who they are. Moreover, a new understanding of the high-quality academic instruction taking place in community colleges will also be evident.

The first season of Know-It-All will launch in Fall 2024. While it will not make it to The New York Times quite yet, it will be available on all major podcast platforms, as well as [The Connection](#), CCBC's student online newspaper. One place it will never be found, however...is at the Dollar Tree!