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### **Private-sector colleges need a seat at the table of national higher-ed summits**

By Harris N. Miller - 10/13/10 12:09 PM ET

We applaud Dr. Jill Biden's decision to convene the nation's first Community College Summit last week in Washington, D.C. Her deep commitment to higher education is clear and her leadership gives those of us who work in higher education confidence that our future workforce is in caring hands.

From business leaders, to lawmakers, to community college administrators and students, Dr. Biden's Summit brought together a diverse and impressive array of stakeholders – all of whom are committed to improving and enhancing higher education.

But one group was not represented: the 3.2 million students and the more than 250,000 employees at private sector universities and colleges. We are sorry about this missed opportunity but we stand ready to support President Obama and Vice President Biden and to help attain the goal of the highest percentage of college graduates in the world by 2020.

Our institutions provide paths forward for students who in many cases have no other options. Most students at our schools do not conform to the profile of a traditional student. For example, 76 percent are financially independent of their parents; 47 percent have dependent children; 28 percent work full time; and 63 percent are age 24 or older. We should remember the faces and stories of aspiring students, rather than base all our judgments about this issue on abstractions. There are countless examples of people who were unable to find success within the traditional educational system, then turned to private sector colleges and universities -- and flourished as a result.

Our schools work closely with employers to ensure that their faculty, curricula and facilities are preparing students for meaningful careers. Last year, 54 percent of all new allied health workers and 10 percent of nurses received their degrees, diplomas, or certificates from private sector colleges and universities. Although in 2008 our sector represented only 8 percent of higher education students (we have now climbed to 12 percent), 15 percent of all degrees and certificates were awarded by our institutions. This positive outcome is because our schools focus so intently on practical outcomes for their students—getting the degree and getting the job.

On September 29, 2010, over 2,000 students rallied on Capitol Hill with lawmakers from both parties to tell their inspiring stories of their experience at private sector colleges and universities. Progressive Democrats and Conservative Republicans—at a time of election-year partisanship—joined hands and stood with these students. We must build on this momentum and find a way forward together.

The millions of students in private sector schools deserve the same attention and encouragement as those students in other postsecondary institutions. So here is our message to Washington, D.C. Please don't forget to include our students in future discussions of how best to prepare our future workforce for the 21st Century. Only by joining forces will we help our country regain its global leadership in higher education and allow many more Americans to achieve their dreams.

*Miller is President of the Association of Private Sector Colleges and Universities.*

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