

Opinion

Commentary - NHCC faculty shares, learns about community colleges' roles locally, nationally

By John O'Brien - Guest Columnist

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Too often, happenings at our nation's capitol seem distant events, to say the least, but on Oct. 5, the White House got a lot closer.

Personally invited by President Obama to participate in the White House Summit on Community Colleges, North Hennepin Community College faculty member Dr. Eugenia Paulus was one of 150 invitees from across the country, one of a handful of faculty and the only attendee from Minnesota.

From her seat in the front row, about 10 feet away from Obama, she heard about the critical role that community colleges play in helping students reach their educational goals. Paulus heard that community colleges are considered by the President as key to the economic future of the United States.

Obama asked Dr. Jill Biden (wife of Vice President Joe Biden and professor at Delaware Technical Community College) to convene this event to bring together community colleges, business, philanthropy, federal and state policy leaders and students to discuss how community colleges can help meet the job training and education needs of the nation's evolving workforce.

After Obama and others greeted the attendees, Jill Biden broke the audience into discussion groups to talk about what is working, what is not working and what we should be doing to improve our country's community college system. Community colleges educate more than eight million students each year and the President wants to lead the world in the proportion of college graduates by 2020.

Paulus participated in the Community Colleges in the 21st Century breakout moderated by Melody Barnes, Director of the Domestic Policy Council and led by Melinda Gates of the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation.

Paulus spoke about the major challenge of preparing today's students for a tomorrow that has not yet been envisioned or created.

"It is not enough for students to know the material between the pages of a book - students must learn to think for themselves, be able to plan and participate in the

creation of the future and acquire skills that will enable them to be life-long learners. Curriculum must be dynamic, constantly changing to meet the needs of potential employers, of professional program requirements and of academic careers," Paulus said.

In later conversations with Vice President Biden, Jill Biden and Melinda Gates, Paulus shared her views on the importance of empowered educators. These educators have a passion for student success, for teaching, learning and their subjects. She suggested more emphasis on having mentors among educators, among recent graduates who could mentor new students and from the community. Paulus also talked about how the profile of community college students is constantly changing - many now with two-year, four-year and master's degrees who return for skill development, career change and advancement opportunity.

"The summit offered me the chance to share the magic of community colleges," Paulus said. "Community colleges are where ordinary people get the chance to make their story extraordinary."

As president of North Hennepin Community College, I am proud to have had Paulus sitting in the front row at the White House to advocate for our students and for the college - to elevate national awareness of the value and importance of community colleges.

O'Brien is president of North Hennepin Community College.