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Politics

Technical Job Openings Could Be Filled by Young People, First Lady Jill Biden Says

“You don’t need a four-year degree to get a good-paying job.”

BY RACHEL JANFAZA

APRIL 4, 2023

Lilly Hernandez didn't always want to go to college. As one of six siblings, she feared the steep cost would send her parents into debt, **a reality for many Americans**. But after graduating high school and entering the workforce, where she had a hard time earning a livable wage, Hernandez decided to look into affordable pathways to college that could lead to a good-paying job.

Now a sophomore at Mesa Community College, Hernandez is pursuing a degree in construction management, on track to become the first woman in her family to enter the male-dominated trade — following in the footsteps of her father, older brother, uncles, cousins, and grandfather.

In recent months, Hernandez and dozens of other community college and high school students have met First Lady Dr. Jill Biden — herself an educator at a community college, which she's often described as **"America's best kept secret"** — as she promotes what the **Biden administration calls** "career-connected learning" programs, a **priority** meant to help bridge the gaps between K-12 education, post-secondary education, and workforce programs.

It's not a panacea, but the first lady's work on career-connected learning illustrates one way the White House is **working to connect Biden administration policy to young people's lives**, going deeper than click-baity TikToks with the president, high-profile celebrities, and influencers. Beyond investing in education and professional futures for young people, the administration is trying to address workforce development at a time when the United States is **sounding the alarm** about a "massive shortage of skilled workers."

Hernandez — who is enrolled in the Mesa College Promise program, a statewide initiative that grants the 21-year-old two years of tuition-and-fees-free education — introduced Dr. Biden when she **visited Mesa Community College** with Education Secretary Miguel Cardona earlier this year.

Known to most as First Lady Dr. Jill Biden, to her students, she's just "Dr. B," and in her 38 years of teaching, she's spent more than half at community colleges. "Through my teaching there, I've always said it's all about jobs," Dr.

Biden tells *Teen Vogue*. “You don’t need a four-year degree to get a good-paying job.”

Brighton Benzien, a 17-year-old welding student Biden met at Bates Technical High School in Tacoma, Washington, says that before switching to a career and technical-education pathway, he was “really unhappy.” Now he spends half the day working (earning \$25 an hour) and half the day in class.

“When you find what you want to do — instead of seven other classes a day that you have to go to and sit in — when you really care about it, you’ll drive to be better and more efficient,” he explains. “I’ll be graduating with an associates degree, high school diploma, and no debt.”



First Lady Dr. Jill Biden visits Bates Technical College on Friday, October 7, 2022, in Tacoma, Washington. ERIN SCOTT

The logo for Teen Vogue, with "teen" in red and "VOGUE" in black.

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Despite how it's been advertised, a four-year college or traditional high school experience **isn't for everyone**. And, according to many students in these programs, there are myriad reasons to consider pursuing other pre-professional paths.

Says Benzien, he's always recommending the technical-studies pathway to his friends, but he also understands these paths deviate from the status quo, so they're often met with resistance. "Something my teacher told me that has stuck with me for a little while now is that we need to destigmatize blue-collar work," he says. "There is a huge stigma around it. It took me a while to really understand what he was talking about, but it's how some people look down on trades. They say, 'I gotta go to college to be successful, earn a masters degree and be a teacher or doctor.'"

“That’s why I was very excited about the first lady’s visit here,” Benzien adds. “We got a chance to shed light on the subject and show that not everybody who’s higher up thinks that the middle or working class is lower than everybody else.”

Shifting that paradigm is a priority, Dr. Biden tells *Teen Vogue*. “I’m trying to change the narrative,” she says, referencing work she’s pioneered since she served as second lady, when she **partnered with President Barack Obama** to create awareness about and destigmatize community colleges. As first lady, her work with community college students is still paramount, but she’s focused on how career-connected learning programs in high schools and post-secondary community colleges can help grow the middle class.

The initiative has been touted by different Biden administration agencies, including the departments of education, labor, and commerce. In March, the Labor Department **launched** its own Youth Employment Works strategy to boost career opportunities for young people.

As part of this push, Acting Labor Secretary Julie Su traveled with the first lady to visit Ivy Tech Community College in Valparaiso, Indiana. “This administration knows that to build and sustain a strong workforce, we need to invest in the training and education of people who have been shut out of good jobs for too long,” Su tells *Teen Vogue* in a statement. “It’s exciting to have our own first lady leading the charge. Dr. Biden understands how community colleges connect education to a career like no other institution can.”

The administration’s efforts come as **recent reporting** shows that Gen Z is increasingly less interested in trade jobs. Data from **Handshake**, a platform that connects students to jobs, showed a 49% drop in the application rate for young people looking for careers in fields such as plumbing, building, and electrical work between 2020 and 2022.

Though these jobs may have previously sparked less allure than shiny careers in the tech and financial spheres, as economic winds change and companies like Meta **lay off thousands of employees**, there’s an opportunity to reignite

interest. Dr. Biden says she's committed to advocating for the benefits of essential, well-paying trade jobs, and is focused on community college and technical training to get students there.

President Biden's **2024 budget proposal** includes allocating \$200 million to career-connected training programs. This is partly in response to all of the new jobs resulting from the **Bipartisan Infrastructure Law, CHIPS and Science Act**, and the **Inflation Reduction Act**, legislation meant to boost domestic energy production and manufacturing. The new legislation supports job creation in fields like offshore wind technology, home energy efficiency, electrical vehicle charger installation, and construction management.

"We have a unique time in history. These jobs are new," the first lady tells *Teen Vogue*. "So this is a perfect time, I think, for someone who's in high school or early college to look at this path, this new path, to think about community colleges. I think that community colleges provide the best career training in America."

Asked what the Biden administration could do in an ideal world to improve the accessibility of career-connected education for students, Dr. Biden says she's still pushing for free community college — a Biden administration wish-list item that's fallen victim to a political tug-of-war in recent years. Though the **president dropped free community college** from his Build Back Better agenda last year (which later morphed into the **Inflation Reduction Act**), his proposed **2024 budget** does include a revived version of a subsidized community college commitment.

Dr. Biden is trying to keep her work with students front and center, including at the State of the Union. Sitting next to the first lady on one of the highest-profile political nights of the year was **Kate Foley**, a 10th grade student at Rolling Meadows, a public high school in Illinois that prepares students for careers via work-based learning opportunities and career-advising programs.

"I love the hands-on activities," Foley, a computer-integrated manufacturing student who is enrolled in Rolling Meadows' **three-year engineering pathway**, tells *Teen Vogue*. This year, her engineering class focuses on manufacturing. "In the class, we do activities. Like right now, we're making a puzzle piece — a little board of puzzle pieces. We just made a desk plate in the last class, where we used drills to drill into metal and create our names with

slot holes and pencil holders,” she explains, adding that the course includes a mix of machine learning and hands-on-building.

Of her experience at the State of the Union, Foley says she especially appreciated that the president highlighted programs like hers: “Hearing him talk during the address about the new jobs and career pathways that he would like to focus on showed me how important [the first lady’s] visit to Meadows in the fall actually was.”

Dr. Biden says her trips have helped her better understand the needs and wants of young people across the country, which she then relays back to the White House. “What I’m hearing when I’m traveling to see different programs is that, really, what the students want is stability,” she says. “They want an affordable college education and they want to have an impact on the world.”

Dr. Biden points to Laine Seibert, a 22-year-old Ivy Tech student, as an example of someone who is looking to drive change through skilled work. Like many young Americans, Seibert’s **world was turned upside down by the pandemic**. Though she had started her college education in pursuit of a four-year degree, after taking two years off from school during the pandemic, she’s now on her way to receiving a technical certificate.

Seibert is passionate about renewable energy, and she’s hoping to start out as a solar energy installer, before becoming an energy auditor. This would enable her to “implement home energy plans that involve renewable energy for homeowners,” she says. “I wanted an education really fast, and I wanted quality, and I wanted to get the training I needed so I could get into the workforce for a career I’m passionate about.”

While reflecting on meeting Seibert, Dr. Biden recalls, “She said, ‘I want to make a difference in my lifetime,’ and that’s what she’s doing.”

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