

#114 Where Communities Go to College

Jennifer Berkshire Welcome to Have You Heard. I'm Jennifer Berkshire.

Jack Schneider And I'm Jack Schneider

And I would just like to give a shout out to our new listeners, Jack, we have got a number of new listeners. They're finding the podcast and they're also finding us on Patreon and supporting the show, which we are very thankful for.

Schneider Wow. You are now even doing this at the beginning of the show, as well as at the end. Nice book ending there. Jennifer

Berkshire Moving right along. I thought it would be really fun. Jack's already making a face... Really fun to give new listeners a sense of what the podcast is about with a little historical reenactment. Are you ready?

Schneider Am I ready? I guess I'm ready. I'm not ready.

Berkshire Okay. So Jack, so you type feverishly and I will, I'll write a communication to you.

Schneider Okay. I'm doing it because I do what I'm told, but why am I typing fever? What am I, oh, I see. I'm reenacting. I'm writing something. I'm working and you're interrupting me.

Berkshire We got a great suggestion from a listener for an episode. What would you think if we did something about blank?

Schneider Yeah. And then what happens? So before I can finish reading that, Gmail says, you know, there's a new message here. Would you like to update? And so I click. Yes. And now there's another one that says

Berkshire Too late. I already said yes, besides I do all the work anyway.

Schneider And I respond with something friendly and nice, like, sure. That sounds good. And then I don't hear anything from you until it's time to do the episode. And then you say, Jack, I'm going to put you on the spot here and ask you to come up with something smart and insightful and fact filled to say about insert, surprising topic there.

Berkshire I think listeners just got a really vivid sense of our process.

Schneider Yeah, that's exactly right. Yeah.

[Music]

Berkshire Well as it happens this episode was inspired by a listener. Her name is Sarah Bigham and she's a professor at Frederick Community College in Frederick, Maryland. It's about an hour from DC and Baltimore.

Sarah grew up on the other side of the Mason Dixon line, in Gettysburg, Pennsylvania. She ended up moving to Frederick because her sister lived there. And in 2002 she started teaching at FCC as an adjunct. Once a semester she taught a couple of sections of an evening class and right away she noticed something about the people who were showing up to learn about career communications.

Sarah Bigham I had some incredible students, I would teach at both five o'clock and then I would have a seven 45 to 10 20 evening class. If you want to look for dedicated students, you will find them in the seven 45 to 10, 20 evening time slot.

Berkshire Eventually Sarah joined the Department of Social Sciences and Education in 2008 and that's where this episode picks up. Sarah has been on sabbatical and for her research project she decided that she wanted to learn more about a couple of worrying trends within the teaching profession. #1: a drop in the number of students enrolling in teacher preparation programs including hers. And #2: a looming teaching shortage across all 50 states.

Sarah If you look at those two things, you realize that if they continue, we're not going to have any teachers or at least not enough to staff our schools. So I thought it would be important to look at what the teacher experience was and a great way to do that might be through the eyes of those people who had been through our education courses.

Berkshire So that's exactly what she did. Sarah started talking to FCC grads who are now teaching. And what she heard really concerned her. Teachers were struggling, especially new teachers who hadn't found their footing yet when the pandemic hit. And yet she didn't hear their stories being represented in the media.

Sarah But I was really taken aback by the number of people who mentioned mental health concerns. And they just had so many stories about seeking counseling or talking to their doctors about stress or needing anti-anxiety medication. And on one hand, I was really proud of the fact that people were reaching out for the help that they need. I think that's wonderful. I'm a huge proponent of, of mental health and self care and making sure that we get the resources we need, but I was really taken aback and alarmed by the number of stories I was hearing about that. And I felt as if what I was hearing is not what I was seeing in news and updates about education. I was seeing a lot about students and obviously we want to pay attention to students, but I felt as if the teacher's voices and their experiences were really not being represented in the same way in the media.

Berkshire And so Sarah reached out to the co-host of a certain education podcast. That would be me. She told me about her research and the stories she was hearing and, this will not surprise you, I asked if I could talk to some of these teachers too.

Brianna Napoles was one of them. She's a brand new special education teacher in the Frederick County Public Schools and when I asked what it had been like to start her teaching career during the pandemic, she didn't mince words

Brianna Napoles So I was teaching from my dining room table. I had just moved out of my parents' house with my fiance. And here I am trying to gather all of my necessary materials and avoid coming into the building, just contact tracing and things like that. And it was, it was difficult. I miss those interactions. I missed bonding with my team. I really just missed seeing my kids in person. And luckily I had known them from my internship the year before, but it's, it's been really difficult. It's been really hard.

Berkshire For Kimberly Nelson, who started teaching 3rd grade math just three months prior to the pandemic, the constant schedule changes and technology overload were overwhelming.

Kimberly Nelson We're switching to Schoology. We were using Google classroom before in third grade. So I was like, I don't know what Schoology is. We had to do Schoology training. We had to learn all these other online tools. This is what your Google meet code is like. This is the time we have to get on. And this is how you're communicating with parents. You know, back to school night is virtual, get out this email, get out that email. It was just like a technology overload. And I'm, you know, young. I'm used to technology, but still I was like, you're asking me to do all these things that I don't know how to do them.

Berkshire Even worse was the feeling that so many people were angry with teachers.

Kimberly You know, so many people were angry at teachers for things that we did not have any control over at that time. Like I was really struggling cause I was like, I feel so hated and I'm doing nothing but teaching children how to add, you know, how to do multiplication. But it felt like even though obviously it wasn't directed at me personally, that it was just like a hatred for the whole profession on top of the fact that everybody knows we don't make a lot of money when half the people say that we shouldn't even be making as much as we do, which is not a lot. And you know, some of us do, some people do support us, but it's, it's a bigger toll that I think people realize. And sometimes it becomes a lot. But then days like today, like I had a good day today, days like today and my kids were great. We did math outside. They did such a good job. Days like today, I'm like, you know what? It is worth it. And I'm home before 5:00 PM. And so how can I complain about that?

Berkshire Tiffany Flowers was doing her student teaching when the pandemic hit. And there were times when she wondered whether she even wanted to be a middle school math teacher anymore.

Tiffany Flowers There were a lot of times when I felt like I made the wrong career choice because teaching in the building is so different from teaching online because in front of the students, you can see their facial expressions, you can interact with them. And I like human

connection and that's one of the reasons I wanted to go into the education field. So when that was missing, I just felt like, oh, I picked the wrong pathway because I don't know how long this is going to go on for. So I just found unique ways every day. I would start by just talking about their lives and some of their struggles. And that's how we kind of connected. Like, how are you dealing with this? This is time dealing with that. Okay. Let's learn now,

Berkshire By now you're getting a taste of the sorts of stories that concerned Sarah Bigham - or Dr. B as her students refer to her. But that's not all she heard. Students like Tiffany also talked a lot about the experience of attending Frederick Community College. And what they had to say was really affirming.

Tiffany It was amazing. I, one of my first professors was Dr. Bigham, Sarah Bigham, and the education team there, they're just amazing. And they were just really supportive. They knew my story. They wanted me to be successful. So they worked with me. They knew I was a non-traditional student and they just really pushed me to keep going. So that was by far one of the best education programs I went to.

Sarah They really appreciated the educational experience that they had at FCC. As a professor, it was really heartwarming to hear people talk about things that they remembered from my classes, in some cases they are doing with their students, the kinds of things that I did with them as college students. And that really made me smile.

Berkshire Okay. So Jack, in all of our, roughly now 115 episodes, we've done exactly one that had anything to do with community colleges. And I'm going to put you on the spot. Do you remember which one that was? Yeah.

Schneider We talked with Mike Rose about, I, yeah, I forget what we called that, but it was an interesting piece where he talked about how sort of elitist some of the framing around higher education is. And we talked about the purpose and value of higher ed, including community colleges

Berkshire Working on this episode reminded me of how little I know about community colleges and I'm guessing that I'm not alone. And so I am going to put you on the spot again and ask you to kind of fill us in on where they came from. And the goal is to keep you from running on for say, two years.

Schneider Well, then I could get my associate's degree. So all right, I'll try to be quick here. The idea is hatched, you know, as, as to my understanding, out of the University of Chicago. So their famous president William Raney Harper had this household name, I'm guessing. Well, I mean, if you're taking like an intro to the history of higher education, it would be like one of five names you came away knowing. But Harper's vision. There was informed quite a bit by, oh my God, I'm like setting up a long answer. I was going to talk about like how it is informed by the idea of the German research university, which also shaped the origins of Johns Hopkins university.

Okay. I'll cut to the chase. The idea was essentially that the first two years of college were kind of a waste of the faculty's time. I'm obviously oversimplifying here, but not by much, and that really, it should be treated as an extension of secondary education. And if you flash forward across the first few decades of the 20th century, that really is the conversation is you know, if we're talking about expanding access to higher education, do all of these people really need to be going to what was then conceived of as the research university, right, where you're receiving a kind of elite training, or could you just go to a place where you're doing sort of the freshmen sophomore style intro to you know, insert the field one oh one level courses, could that happen without bringing you to the campus of the research university? And so over those decades, and number of two year institutions begin popping up the Truman Commission weighs in on this.

There are some implications related to the GI bill, which is of course bringing lots more people to campus who ordinarily wouldn't have been seeking degrees in higher education. Another classic president James Conant, who was president of Harvard University in the mid 20th century weighs in and advocates for essentially creating these people's colleges. Again, there was a kind of elitism here thinking about you know, who really belonged on the campus of a university like Harvard. And so, you know, I think we can think of it two ways. As on the one hand being this really beautiful democratic expansion of higher education envisioning these two year schools as people's colleges that would be rooted in communities and which would have really broad and expansive missions. And then on the other hand, thinking of it as an elitist attempt to segregate and separate people who were perceived as being socially inferior to those who had traditionally pursued degrees in higher education,

Berkshire Congratulations listeners, you've just completed an initial course in the history of the community college.

Schneider It's a micro credential that you can add. And you can just go on the, have you heard website for your badge?

Berkshire Thank you Jack for that history lesson. Now back to the present. So when I had the opportunity to talk to these community college grads one thing that leaped out at me was just how complicated so many of their own education stories were. Sure they were new teachers starting their careers in a pandemic but just getting to that point had often taken years. New special education teacher Brianna NAPoless graduated from high school in 2012 and went off to college. Eight years, two different community colleges, and a university in Maryland later, she finally got her bachelor's degree and is now certified to teach.

Brianna I was 17. I was super young and I was in my mind ready to conquer the world, but did not realize what would come with that. So at the time I was living in North Carolina and I really wanted to be a teacher, but North Carolina does not pay enough to sustain a lifestyle. My parents are my biggest supporters, but my dad was kind of like, oh, he goes, why don't you go to business school? And I'm like, there's nothing about me that says business. Absolutely not finally, as a family, we just decided to move. So then I started going to community college in

Frederick. And as soon as everything was kind of settled and I then transferred, it was the long I had to retake a couple of classes. I had to halt and take off a semester because the testing program to become a teacher is so rigorous that the mental stress was just, I felt as though it was just unbearable at that time. So I had just taken a little bit of a leave of absence until I was able to pass everything.

Berkshire Then there's Hank Walker, who was in his second year teaching remedial math in western Maryland when the pandemic hit. He spent the spring worrying about missing students and students who just weren't connecting. Hank isn't his real name by the way - he chose to go by a pseudonym for this episode. He first started on the path to becoming a teacher fourteen years ago.

Hank Walker I graduated high school in 2007 and I immediately wanted to get out of, out of town and go to a college down in, down by the beach in South Carolina. I wanted to be a, originally want to be a secondary ed teacher anyway, but I wanted to be high school, social studies. And when I got to orientation, they said, Hey, we don't have a secondary ed anymore. So right then and there at a favorite thing of something new. So I chose physical education due to the fact that I was very misguided and I became the school mascot and I couldn't pass anatomy and physiology to save my life. I ended up not doing very well in school. So at about the fall of 2011 I dropped out and society to focus on bartending to make some money while I was there. And, you know, just having a job and bartending turned into doing that for many years, which I had to do through college. When I was at community college, I was bartending, you know, 50 hours week and still going to class.

Berkshire It wasn't until he ended up at FCC that something finally stuck. And a big part of that was that he didn't have to choose between working and going to school to become a teacher.

Hank I think, going and getting, being able to do both at the same time, I think that was really helpful. You know, they didn't see me as some, some guy bartender who wants to try something different. They saw me as somebody who's eager to learn. So I'm proud of myself for being able to be a teacher. You know, it was a struggle, but that also helps me as a teacher. I can, I can. I know when a student's struggling where they won't say it or not, because I've been there. I, I would go to the bathroom just to avoid class for a while. I would, I would make up excuses.

Berkshire I heard a lot of stories like this - education journeys that started and stopped then picked up again - students finally finding success after multiple attempts and multiple schools. Tyler Ingram has one of these tales. Like roughly one third of students who graduate from the Frederick Public Schools, he went to FCC. After two years, he transferred to Towson University to study journalism and well, I'll let Tyler describe what happened next.

Tyler Ingram My second year at Towson and they terminated the major. Journalism is in a way a dying field as we are doing a podcast now. So they switched it to like creative writing and it was very broad. And I didn't know if I really wanted to do it anyways. And I was partying really hard and being social and all of those kid things. And so I dropped out when I was 21. I came

home, I worked I served tables. I bartended, I bounced, I landscaped. Anything I could do to make money. Mom and dad cut me off. I guess for like, yeah, about seven years. I just worked.

Berkshire By the time Tyler found himself back at FCC he had a much better sense of what he wanted to do. That whole time that he was working pretty much any job he could find? Well he was also volunteering with kids - at his church, through local sports groups and youth clubs. As his mother pointed out, he was working with kids seven days a week - why not try to make a career of it? So Tyler goes back to FCC, and starts with a single education class taught by none other than Dr. B herself. He loved the class but he still wasn't ready to commit - to school or to education as a career.

Tyler And I remember like a year later I was at Chipotle and I'm like in line minding, my own business. And I look up and Dr. B's sitting there with her wife eating lunch and she stands up and she walks over to me and she says, where you been? And I was like I've just been working. And she was like, you told me you were going to come back this semester and you're not there. And I was like yeah, it was like, I don't know if it's for me. She's like, no education is for you. She's like, I'm telling you, it's for you. And she's like, I expect to see you very soon.

So I think like a year or two later is when I finally then contacted her to go back full-time and I was like, look, all right, I need to do this. Can we look at my GPA though? So between her and another lady, Heather Hinkle, who's wonderful to me and FCC, we went through all my transcripts, which are very dismal for my years at Towson and planned out what do I need to do? What do I need to retake to get me to the next institution?

Berkshire This time something clicked and as Tyler puts it, going back to FCC and studying education ignited the fire in him for working with kids. Fast forward to the present and Tyler is now at Shepard University in West Virginia working on his masters degree en route to becoming a K-12 PE teacher. And when I say fast forward, I mean it. Tyler finally figured out what he wanted to do but he still barely got there. For one thing, his disastrous experience at Towson back in his first college attempt was still dragging his GPA down, nearly derailing his plan to become a teacher. Now that he's almost there Tyler says that his rocky education experience will be an asset as he works with kids who need the most help.

Tyler Ideally as an educator, my, you know, as a future educator, my main goal is to reach underrepresented students, to be the voice for them, to help advise students that don't have it at home. That's my, like my heart and my passion is to, for those students that don't have the parental dynamic that is positive. And I want to be, you know, that teacher that's like, 'Hey, this is what you need to do to get into school. Hey, this is what you need to do to get in this trade.' Even though, you know, I'll be PE, I view PE as not only physical health and well-being lifestyle skills, but it's the most, one of the most social subjects that students have in a K through 12. So I want to use that to my advantage. Being able to get into some of these kids' lives and you know, help them. So yeah, definitely my story. I would definitely use my story.

Berkshire A few quick facts about Frederick Community College. 96% of the students here are from Frederick County. And more than 1/3 of graduates from the Frederick County Public Schools attend FCC at some point. Soon-to-be special education teacher Jody Eccard was one of them. She went to FCC right after high school, largely because she didn't yet know what she wanted to do.

Jody Eccard I was kind of on the fence about my major. I went through wildlife biologist, natural resources police, and all these different things. And I couldn't decide. And my sister is a teacher and my whole family is in education. And I thought, I've kind of grown up around this. I kind of feel like this is where I'm being led to go. Let's go to FCC where I can try it out. You know, it's not quite as expensive as a university. I can feel the waters and decide if this is truly where I want to be. And so I started FCC, which is where my sister started and it was a fabulous experience.

Berkshire And a big part of what Jody liked about FCC was who else was there.

Jody You have people like me who are traditional college students right out of high school. And then you have people who are nontraditional. They've come back after having kids. They're in their forties, fifties. We even had a student in his seventies who just wanted to come back to learn more about his grandchildren's education process. And I learned so much from not only my amazing professors, but the students, because we all came from different walks of life and came in with different experiences and goals and opinions and ideas. And that was just really fun for somebody who grew up in a rural area to kind of see that and all these different opinions and diversity. And it it was just really a great experience.

Berkshire Jody got her associates degree - so did her 70 year old classmate by the way. And as of a few weeks ago, Jody has a BA from Hood University, also in Frederick. She also has a job lined up as a special education teacher in the district that she attended.

Jody I do! I was offered an open contract initially for my first interview, which was a huge weight lifted off my shoulders because I didn't know where I was going to be, but I was guaranteed a job. And then I guess about two weeks ago, I was offered a position in a program that we have in my county. It's all for students with autism, but the main goal is communication because they all have profound communication needs. 90% of my students use communication devices. And I, it was actually my internship right now. So I've been in that program for the last semester. So I get to stay with my kids and my team. And I'm so excited.

Berkshire I heard a similar story from 4th grade teacher Erica Hawkins. She's in her fourth year of teaching and training to be a teacher in the place where she grew up was really important to her.

Erica Hawkins This is where I grew up. So I've only ever known Frederick County and it is a super great place to, I mean, I was raised here and the teachers I had were an incredible. Going to FCC, going to community college, really put me back in the community where I got to do

observations and see the people that taught me. Now that I'm an adult. I get to see all the magic that they create for their students every day. So seeing it as an adult is so different, but I knew that this county was where I was supposed to be.

Berkshire When Dr. B started her research project, her goal was to interview 16 former students. She ended up talking to 66. And I was starting to understand why. These FCC grads were frankly blowing my mind, forcing me to interrogate all kinds of beliefs about education and place, about what kinds of backgrounds we want teachers to have, and how we define smart. When I asked Sarah about this she had a lot to say.

Sarah Jennifer, I have so many thoughts about this. Yes, yes, yes, yes. To all of those things. I got my master's degree at Cornell, an Ivy league institution. And I certainly met smart people there. I met smart people at all of the institutions that I attended or where I worked, but I think people oftentimes in society in general, don't realize the smart that we have at the community college and the skills that those students can bring to teaching or to any number of other careers. I try to start every semester by saying to the class, I don't care if you're a brand new college student, this the first time you've ever taken a college class, or this is the second college you've tried, or maybe this is the seventh or eighth or ninth time. You've tried. We're all in this together. I know you can be successful. And I look forward to working with you this semester.

Berkshire There was one other theme that emerged from my conversations with these community college grads. They told me that they think that community colleges get a rap that they don't deserve. Kimberly Nelson, who we met way back at the beginning of this episode, says that she often hears people say that community colleges are just like high school.

Kimberly A lot of people from my high school did go to FCC, but most people I know said, you know, SCC or any community college in general is just like high school. Like you're not getting that education. Like it may be cheaper, but, you know, I have, which is true. Like I have a high school professor that teaches at a community college, which I mean great for them, because that means that they know their stuff, in my opinion. And you know, you still have to have the knowledge to teach, even though it's a community college. So I think it definitely does. And for no reason, because I know people that went through the traditional school and they are at the same exact job making the same amount of money as me with the same knowledge. And I saved a lot of money. So...

Berkshire And remedial math teacher Hank Walker says that he's hopeful that the Biden Administration's push to invest more in community colleges is a sign that they're finally going to get the respect they deserve.

Hank 100 percent. I wish there was no more stigma against community colleges. I had better professors locally than I did, you know, 10 hours away at a four year university. And that's just a personal experience, but I support investing in local community colleges, investing in communities in general. That's what we need to do all across the board, I think.

Berkshire A huge thanks to Sarah Bigham for suggesting this episode and to all of the Frederick Community College grads who shared their stories. And Jack and I will be right back to talk about some of our assumptions about community colleges that have now been upended thanks to this episode. And of course we'll be revealing the topic of our In the Weeds segment for our Patreon subscribers. Here's a two word hint: dumpster fire. If that intrigues you, just head over to Patreon.com/HaveYouHeardPodcast and become a supporter.

[Music]

Berkshire So Jack, I had such a good time working on this episode. I could not stop interviewing graduates of Frederick community college because I really felt like every time I talked to them, I just felt better about the world. And, and it challenged a lot of my assumptions assumptions that I didn't even realize that I necessarily held. It was such a, it was such a refreshing opportunity to hear people talk really passionately about staying, remaining rooted in a place.

It made me think of an episode we did way back in 2016 after the election with Joan Williams and how, you know, she challenged this assumption that, you know, you have to leave your community in order to succeed. And so hearing grads talk about how, like getting to go to school in a place where they were surrounded by people who were also from that place and then knowing that they were going to stay in the place. Was it just made me realize how many of these kind of assumptions about, about social capital that I've adopted along the way?

Schneider Yeah, I think you're exactly right there, Jennifer. And one of the things that it's making me think about is the hand-wringing about, you know, how we're going to get teachers to move to let's say, rural areas or to live in urban neighborhoods where they are teachers and to become really a part of those communities, rather than just dropping in to teach or better yet to get people who are from those communities to become teachers. And it just seems so obvious that community colleges have a role to play there, but because of the elitism that dominates the way we view colleges and universities, you know, I think there would be a lot of pushback against this notion that community college grads can be teachers. And you know, maybe we do want to think about continuing to insist that all teachers have four year degrees, but I think it's also possible to envision ways of leveraging to your schools, to, you know, keep people in communities as teachers that, you know, there's a role to play there. And there's obviously a lot of powerful learning that happens at these two year schools.

Berkshire Well, that concludes the feel good portion of the episode. Now it's time to pivot to the fuel bad portion and we're going to be digging in, in depth in our, In the Weeds segment that we do for our Patreon subscribers. Jack, you probably have noticed that, well, things are on fire right now.

Schneider Yeah. Yeah. I've noticed. It's not, it's not wildfire season. It's dumpster fire season here in America. And particularly with regard to how we are talking about our schools and the people who teach in them, you're exactly right.

Berkshire And we just did an episode about the K-12 culture wars. I'm still thinking about it and how we seem to have ended up right back in the 1980s. So that's where, where we are headed In the Weeds. If this interests you, all you have to do is go to patreon.com/haveyouheard podcasts? And we're going to be talking about the sort of unraveling of this bipartisan consensus, this glue that held Republicans and Democrats together for so long and it's gone. And as a result, we have a dumpster fire as Jack put it. So just go to Patreon.com/HaveYouHeardPodcast, and you can see all the cool extras you can get. Of course, that's not the only way to support the show,

Schneider Right? If becoming a Patreon subscriber in order to access that material sounds expensive and boring to you, then there are other ways to support the show. You know, I love when I hear that people have shared either the latest episode or their favorite episode with friends or coworkers, or, you know, even sometimes a friend of who just needs to be corrected on something. We love knowing that you are listening. However, you can convey that to us. So the show's Twitter handle is [@HaveYouHeardPod](https://twitter.com/HaveYouHeardPod). Have You Heard mailbag is always full of goodies. And go on and write us a review wherever you get your podcasts, make sure to throw us some stars and make sure that you are a subscriber so that you get the latest episodes when they drop

Berkshire Expensive and dull. Words, I will not recover from soon...On that note. I'm Jennifer Berkshire. This is, Have You Heard.