

**MESA**

# 'Follow Mesa's lead': Jill Biden meets with Arizona leaders to talk higher education

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First lady Jill Biden was in Mesa to highlight a city scholarship program that offers some local high school students two tuition-free years at Mesa Community College.

Biden was joined by U.S. Secretary of Education Miguel Cardona, U.S. Rep. Greg Stanton, Gov. Katie Hobbs and Mesa Mayor John Giles to make remarks alongside students on the importance of higher education.

Visiting Mesa Community College is one of Biden's first steps in relaunching her husband's campaign promise to provide students with two years of tuition-free community college education. President Biden reiterated that pledge last week during his State of the Union speech.

"We're not giving up despite challenges," Jill Biden said in Mesa.

Biden, the event's final speaker, remarked on the growing number of jobs that will require an educated workforce. She said it's necessary to build a pipeline for students to access education and employment.

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She praised Giles and the city for starting to build that pipeline on their own. "We need more communities to follow Mesa's lead," she said.

Biden said a program like Mesa's isn't a Republican or Democratic idea but an American idea. She pointed to Giles as an example of Republican support for broader access to higher education.

Arizona has been in the limelight for its job growth in advanced manufacturing, including the construction of the TSMC semiconductor plant in Phoenix and electric car company ElectraMeccanica's move to Mesa.

Education has been a top priority for the first lady. She has been a teacher for more than 30 years and continues to teach English and writing at Northern Virginia Community College.

## **Mesa student introduces Biden**

The success of the Mesa College Promise was exemplified on Monday by Lilly Hernandez, who was tasked to introduce Biden.

Hernandez is a Mesa resident and beneficiary of the city's tuition-free community college offer. Following high school graduation, she didn't pursue college, fearing higher education would put her and her parents in debt.

"The fact that I don't have to pay for tuition is the only reason I am able to stand here today," she said.

The Mesa College Promise assures Mesa residents who graduate from high school with a 2.0 GPA or higher and have demonstrated financial need that they won't have to pay tuition or fees at Mesa Community College for two years. The promise program makes up the difference after other financial aid and scholarships are applied. Similar programs exist at the state level and in Phoenix.

After trying out different programs, Hernandez landed on construction management. She was inspired by her dad, who works in construction. She said her father saw her succeeding in the program and then started to follow in her steps. He advanced his education by taking the same classes. "Now we're both learning together as first-generation students," she said.

## **Mesa makes higher education a priority**

Mesa trails behind its neighboring cities in terms of higher education attainment among residents.

The city has made strides in expanding educational opportunities close to home by welcoming a new Arizona State University campus downtown and embracing the expansion of the university's polytechnic campus in southeast Mesa. A \$200 million investment by ASU at the polytechnic campus will focus on advanced manufacturing research.

The Mesa City Council began addressing their higher education concerns by approving the Mesa College Promise in 2020. Giles told The Arizona Republic fundraising for the program has been the easiest part of his job.

Donors include Apple, AT&T and Meta. The city invests \$100,000 yearly in the program and has a goal of raising at least \$100,000 annually from other sources.

What has been difficult is making people aware of the program and “changing their hearts,” Giles said. Making higher education a priority for students has been a challenge for Mesa.

Mesa Community College has seen a dip in enrollment of full-time students by 26% from 2018, according to the school's data.

Mesa Community College President Tammy Robinson said the institution is working to normalize going to community college as the next step for students. Community college is cost-effective, she said.

In addition to tuition, the Mesa College Promise provides students with the support they need to succeed after two years at Mesa Community College. That support includes mentorship and access to workshops, tutoring and counseling. For the fall 2023 semester, Mesa high school graduates can start applying for the program on March 1.

“Our goal is to remove the barriers, and the obstacles students face,” Robinson said.

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