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Interviews with Influencers: Dr. Yolanda Watson Spiva

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On this episode of Interviews with Influencers: College Completion Day Edition, Michelle Dimino (Director of Education) spoke with Dr. Yolanda Watson Spiva, President of Complete College America, about what it really takes to help students reach graduation. They unpack the myth of the traditional college path, examine how outdated systems often hinder student success, and explore the evidence-based reforms helping states and institutions better support today's learners.

Video Transcript

Michelle Dimino: Welcome back to Interviews with Influencers. I'm Michelle Dimino. I'm the Director of Education at Third Way, and I'll be your host for this special edition of Interviews with Influencers.

So as College Completion Day 2025 is approaching on May 19th, we're featuring experts that are helping students get not only into college, but all the way through to a degree. And today I'm delighted to be joined by Dr. Yolanda Watson Spiva. Dr. Watson Spiva is President of Complete College America, a

leading organization driving reforms that bolster student success. She and her team work with states, colleges, and partners to implement proven strategies that remove barriers and keep more students on the path towards graduation. Thank you so much for being here.

Dr. Watson Spiva: Thanks for having me.

Michelle Dimino: So I'd like to dive in with a bit of myth busting. A lot of Americans think of college as a pretty straightforward path. You choose a school, you pick a major, take all your classes, and then you graduate on time. But of course, we know that's not the case for so many students. In fact, colleges and universities today are failing to graduate about 40% of the students that they enroll in six years. What are some of those common barriers that students can face on the road between acceptance and graduation?

Dr. Watson Spiva: Thank you for the question. First of all, I'm glad you're myth busting because we certainly don't want to propagate a myth that college is easy to get into and easy to finish. And as we know, especially as we're approaching College Completion Day, it's really important for us to ground ourselves in some central truths. And the one truth, of course, I want to make sure we talk about is that when students don't complete college, the fault does not lie with the student, him or herself.

It lies with the systems that were never really designed for who they are and the lives that they lead. And so it was designed for a time when college was seen as a leisurely endeavor and it was about personal benefit and not necessarily about the public good that it also contributes to. We really have to shift the narrative that college completion isn't about student willpower or ability and that it's about institutional responsibility and system design. That's why CCA does the work that it does, because we know that nearly four in 10 students who start college will leave without a credential. And we know that this statistic does not reflect a lack of talent on behalf of students. It actually just reflects an outdated set of systems that are built around outdated assumptions about who the students are.

So in this country, we see systems failing too many for too far too long, and we don't want to blame the people. Instead, we want to change the system. Our higher education model was really built for a different time—a time when the traditional student was 18 years old, living on campus, and attending full time. And that's just not today's reality. Today's students are older. They're working. Many of them are parents or caregivers. Many are the first in their families to go to college. These students are determined, resilient, and ready.

And yet, we ask them to navigate what is essentially an outdated system: placement tests, courses that don't lead to degrees, rigid schedules, and fragmented advising. As a result, we've created systems that act as barriers. They slow students down, trip them up, and too often, push them out. So if we want better outcomes, we need better systems. Systems that are built for the students we have, not the ones we used to imagine or used to have. So I think once we get rid of that myth, we can really get down to

brass tacks about why students attend and why sometimes they don't finish, and we can help some of those students get across the finish line of college completion.

Michelle Dimino: I appreciate that, and I think you hit on such an important point that these systems and institutions are often slow to change. And we've seen that compound over time and create these escalating barriers for a lot of students. That's part of what I find so inspiring about Complete College America and the alliance that you've built of more than 50 states and territories, systems, and institutions that are all working together towards this goal of improving college completion rates. Can you tell us kind of how partnerships and how the collaborations that you've established at CCA have helped your work to improve student success?

Dr. Watson Spiva: Yeah, absolutely. So our Alliance of State Systems and Consortia is really the bedrock and the foundation for how we do our work at CCA. And we know that when states and institutions take ownership of the completion challenge, and they act with urgency, those students who are enrolled in those institutions within those states will actually succeed. So whether it's ensuring equitable AI adoption to advocating for alternatives to traditional remediation, our CCA Alliance team has really seen tremendous progress in mobilizing states and driving results for these students. For example, Tennessee is one of the first states to really pioneer the effort to champion co-requisite support over traditional remediation.

That means placing students in a course while also providing support through what would traditionally be a remedial course, helping them succeed in a class they might find challenging. So that co-requisite support work in Tennessee actually saw gateway course pass rates go from 12% to 60% within one year of adoption. So we know that the data tells us these reforms and these strategies actually work. A similar thing happened in the state of Georgia, where CCA helped the university system move all of the two-year colleges to co-requisite English and math, and we nearly doubled the completion rates together in gateway courses.

Last example I'll give you is New Jersey, where they were a newer member of the alliance recently. And they're utilizing data and coaching to help those students who have stopped out of college to re-enroll and get across the finish line. These are not just anecdotes, though. There are countless more. They represent all of the students who are in those numbers that I mentioned, and there is evidence that when reform is done right, it actually works.

Michelle Dimino: As you touched on, there is this growing body of research around what works in higher education. And as we see that to be evaluated in different contexts, we can continue to build that understanding of effective practices. You shared a few in terms of the co-requisite education space. Are there other evidence-based practices you're seeing that are making really strong impacts on improving graduation rates that folks should be aware of?

Dr. Watson Spiva: Yeah, so as I mentioned, co-requisite student supports are the ones that we know sort of boost the gateway course success. Then we have an initiative called Purpose First, which is a planning tool, which really is around connecting academic pathways to career goals.

We also have momentum strategies. Those are the ones that really encourage students to build early credit momentum so that they really feel like they are students who are enrolled in college not taking the 13th and 14th grades of high school, but they're actually on the pathway to completing credits that will count toward their college graduation. And then, of course, data tools that help us target the right interventions at the right time.

So when we have early warning indicators and guideposts that will help the faculty and advisors to advise the students on the best ways to complete their credits on time. These are just a few of the examples of the types of strategies that CCA encourages and partners with states and institutions to implement. We know these are successful for students. It isn't about guesswork. It's based on a growing body of practice and evidence that's driven by a lot of courageous leaders across this country, and it's supported by data.

Michelle Dimino: Wonderful. I know a lot of this work and a lot of CCA's alliance building has involved state and local and institution level actors who are all collaborating towards these goals. I'm curious about that work where you see opportunities for federal policy to play a role to support those local and state-based efforts to accelerate college completion.

Dr. Watson Spiva: In theory, federal policy can really be a powerful accelerant to supporting college completion and helping states reach their attainment goals. So it can advance the college completion movement and help us to achieve our national objectives. I know a lot of the federal education policy right now is under assault. So we're really trying to make sure that we are advocating and helping the federal administration understand what works and provide data to them so that they understand what may seem like bloat in terms of the federal budget. These are actual dollars that are going toward investing in programs that we know work.

Because the reality is that for much of the last 15 years, it's been more of a barrier than an enabler to supporting today's students when we don't provide them with the support that they need. For example, we have not seen a comprehensive reauthorization of the Higher Education Act since 2008. And I always know the exact date because I gave birth to my second daughter in 2008. Now she's approaching the path to going to college and will be going off to college next year.

We can't let another generation of students go to and through college without fixing some of the underlying problems within our system. So that's one way that we can really accelerate what can happen in higher ed through federal reforms. More broadly, we've seen higher ed become the object of a lot of political scrutiny and division. As higher ed continues to come under political fire, not just

individual institutions, but the enterprise in and of itself, is more important than ever that we focus on what unites us.

Rather than what divides us, what unites us is the shared goal of helping all students complete what they start. When a student applies to college, they don't go there intending to stop out or drop out. They go there intending to get a degree or credential that will help themselves and their families and successive generations to achieve the American Dream. There are some really bright spots of progress in that regard that we've seen over the past 15-20 years. Those are indicators that change is possible if we unite together around that common purpose.

Michelle Dimino: Thank you. You mentioned bloat in the context of either funding bloat or administrative bloat, and I feel like that's a common critique that we hear a lot in our federal policy work as well about these questions about how resources are being spent and staffing and the cost and investment in that. I'm wondering if you can speak a bit more to how Complete College America thinks about this question of return on investment and effective use of dollars that are invested in these programs.

But also recognizing that these are labor intensive tasks, that they involve dedicated staff that are providing support to students and creating these pathways and opportunities and support structures for them. How do you all think about that at CCA?

Dr. Watson Spiva: Yeah, so first of all, we recognize that not every institution is the same. Some serve students who may have fewer financial, social, or other needs when it comes to persisting and completing college. On the other hand, more open-access institutions enroll a wide range of students and are more likely to reflect our national population. And when serving those students, we have to consider the resources we know many people need—things like food security, housing stability, and access to healthcare. The students in our institutions need those supports too.

Those needs don't drop off once they reach the door of a college or a university or any other sort of academic enterprise. So being really clear about that means that we have to have the attendant support. Some of them are human resource support. Some of them are financial support. And as I mentioned, some of them are technological or tech-enabled support. But all of those things require resources, typically fiscal resources. So as I think about these programs, I'm very realistic.

A lot of the advocacy work we do at CCA focuses on helping policymakers, whether they're in state legislatures or on Capitol Hill, understand the full picture of college affordability. That includes the actual cost of attending college for students and what it takes for colleges and universities to educate a population with diverse responsibilities and life circumstances. I should also mention that, beyond the many things that make each of us unique, students bring a range of abilities. While the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act offers some protections, we want to make sure students with learning

or physical disabilities get the support they need to succeed and so that they're able to navigate, physically and academically, the higher education setting.

Being able to put those sorts of supports in place for individuals also costs money. As we think about what it takes to educate an individual or a group of individuals with a variety of needs, we want to make sure that we don't throw out the baby with the bathwater. While we're trying to make administrative cuts, we can always look for reforms that need to take place. But we don't want to be so draconian in how we make those cuts that we end up eliminating really powerful, strong programs just for the sake of making cuts or reducing certain dollar amounts in the budget.

So being able to do both things is a tightrope act, but it's something that can be done if we work together toward this common solution.

Michelle Dimino: Yeah, I think it's such an important conversation to have and there's so much nuance on it. So I appreciate your insights into how you all are thinking and approaching that.

I want to close with one kind of big picture question.

If there's something that you'd like for policymakers to really understand better about what it takes to get students through college across the graduation stage, what would that be?

Dr. Watson Spiva: Well, beyond the fact we already talked about money, I think it's being clear about how students experience college. At CCA, we talk about it in four buckets: purpose, momentum, structure, and support. First, we need to ensure students are attending college with a clear sense of purpose and a defined path toward graduation. The structures in place must help them stay on track without veering off course. We also need to make sure there are guardrails to maintain their momentum, ensuring they're enrolled in college and have the support they need to stay engaged and attend regularly.

If we do this, students will be more likely to achieve the outcomes they desire. College completion is not just an education issue; it's also an economic issue. In a knowledge-driven economy, the difference between opportunity and stagnation for many students often comes down to whether or not they earn a credential. Our students aren't asking for guarantees about their college experience, they're simply asking for a fair shot. They want systems that work as hard as they do to help them reach their goals.

Institutions that don't just open the door, but also help students walk through it, are the ones that will be the most successful. Lastly, I believe this is a solvable problem, but it will take all of us—educators, policymakers, business leaders, and our communities—working together with courage, collaboration, and moral clarity about why we're doing this: to put students at the center. We must live up to the promise of higher education, not just as a ticket to the middle class, but as a true engine of social and economic mobility. If we all work toward that common goal, I truly believe we can accomplish it.

Michelle Dimino: Thank you. That is a perfect note to close this conversation on. I'm so grateful for your time in joining this conversation and also for all of the work that you and the team at CCA are doing to advance that opportunity for students across the country. So Dr. Yolanda Watson Spiva, thank you so much for joining us for this conversation and happy early College Completion Day.

Dr. Watson Spiva: Thank you for having me.