

# A speech. A party fundraiser. In Florida. Clinton? Sanders? No, Joe Biden.

By **Ed O'Keefe** September 2 at 5:05 PM

MIAMI -- Rarely has a speech on the importance of community colleges been more closely scrutinized.

That was the central theme of remarks delivered by Vice President Biden on Wednesday at one of the nation's largest universities -- at least, the stated theme. The other, which he only hinted at, was the political subtext: Still grieving from the death of his oldest son, Biden is weighing a presidential bid. And until he makes his 2016 decision, everything he says and does will be viewed through a campaign prism.

His remarks, which lasted half an hour, had the ring of a potential presidential candidate. There were references to "My Jill" -- his wife, a community college professor, who is reportedly undecided about a presidential run. He paid homage to the American Dream. He cheered the merits of immigration and middle class values. And he talked about his favorite poet, William Butler Yeats.

"Look at all the press you've attracted," he joked to the crowd packed into a sweltering classroom at Miami Dade College. "Their interest in community colleges has impressed me. I hope that's what they're going to write about."

The speech was the first stop on an itinerary that marks the vice president's most active political trek since his son Beau Biden, the 46-year old former Delaware attorney general, died of brain cancer in May. Close friends and aides say the vice president is still undecided about making a late entrance into the Democratic race dominated by Hillary Rodham Clinton, who is slipping in polls, and Vermont Sen. Bernie Sanders, who is enjoying a summer surge.

A final decision isn't expected until later this month, and family considerations -- including whether they can sustain the demands of a grueling campaign -- remain his most pressing concern, according to people familiar with his thinking.

[\*\[Family issues weigh heaviest on Biden as he considers a 2016 campaign\]\*](#)

Rep. Frederica Wilson (D-Fla.), who attended the speech, said that she didn't ask, and Biden didn't mention, any possibility of a presidential run during a private meeting.

"I know what it feel likes to lose a child, and I think that he has to feel it in his gut," she said. "And I also know how

hard it is to run an election -- because I have to run so often -- and you have to really have the passion for it."

Mostly, Biden focused on the Obama administration's push to offer free community college to eligible students.

"The middle class in America is no longer the wealthiest middle class in the world," he said.

"Middle class in America means you're able to own your home, not have to rent it," he added later. "It means you can send your kid to a park in the neighborhood and know that they'll come home safely. It means that the school in the neighborhood is good enough so that if your child does well, they can get to college and if they make it, you can get them there financially."

After the speech, Biden ignored two shouted questions from reporters about his possible presidential ambitions before aides began blasting Bruce Springsteen's "Land of Hope and Dreams" over the speaker system.

On Wednesday night, Biden planned to mingle with top party donors at a South Florida fundraiser for Democratic senators. On Thursday, he is poised to defend the Obama administration's nuclear deal with Iran in the congressional district of Rep. Debbie Wasserman Schultz (D-Fla.), the chairwoman of the Democratic National Committee who has yet to say what she thinks of the agreement. Biden will meet with skeptics at a Jewish community center in Davie, Fla., marking his most high-profile attempt to date to explain and defend the diplomatic deal.

[\*\[Obama secures votes to protect Iran nuclear deal\]\*](#)

The Florida leg of Biden's travels coincided with encouraging news for his potential campaign.

Draft Biden, the super PAC actively encouraging a campaign, announced a new wave of hires Wednesday in the early primary state of South Carolina, where the vice president enjoys deep ties to party elders. Two prominent South Carolina Democrats, state senator Gerald Malloy and Inez Tenenbaum, the former state education superintendent, plan to co-chair Draft Biden's South Carolina chapter. The PAC also announced the hiring of a political director, outreach director and field director.

Steve Schale, a Tallahassee-based lobbyist and adviser to Draft Biden, said that the vice president's entrance into the race "would be healthy for the process."

Dismissing concerns that a protracted race between Clinton, Biden and others would damage the party, Schale, who served as Florida director for President Obama's 2008 campaign, noted that Democrats registered hundreds of thousands of new voters in Florida during the epic Obama-Clinton battle.

"We could only have done that because you had both the Clinton folks and the Obama folks who had been organizing

themselves for a year," he said. "We were able to tap in to all of that strength and go out and do some really amazing things."

A new poll released on Wednesday suggested that Biden would be the preferred candidate of Democrats if Clinton begins running into trouble against potential Republican opponents. The Reuters/Ipsos poll said that 38 percent of Democrats would back Biden as a Clinton alternative; 30 percent would support Sanders, who places first or a close second in recent surveys.

[A new Washington Post/ABC News poll](#), however, delivered mixed results for Biden: He has higher favorability ratings than Clinton among all voters, but among fellow Democrats, she enjoys a higher favorability rating of 80 percent to Biden's 70 percent.

On Thursday night, Biden travels to Atlanta to speak with Jewish leaders about the Iran agreement. On Monday, he will march in a Labor Day parade in Pittsburgh alongside AFL-CIO President Richard Trumka, who said this week that Biden should be given time to mull a campaign.

Along the way, Biden will have plenty of time to demonstrate his natural aplomb with retail campaigning -- even if he hesitated slightly on Wednesday. During a tour of a biotechnology lab on the college campus, student Lilliam Hernandez Guerrero asked if he wanted to help with her experiment. The normally gregarious Biden -- perhaps sensitive to the extra scrutiny from a larger-than-normal press pack -- demurred.

"I'm going to watch," he told Guerrero. "I can see the press headline: 'Biden Screws Up Experiment.'"

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Ed O'Keefe is covering the 2016 presidential campaign, with a focus on Jeb Bush and other Republican candidates. He's covered presidential and congressional politics since 2008. Off the trail, he's covered Capitol Hill, federal agencies and the federal workforce, and spent a brief time covering the war in Iraq.

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