

Community College Week

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Report Details Growing Higher Education Inequities

By Paul Bradley

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"The system," he said at a news conference, "is totally out of whack."

Padrón, who heads the nation's largest non-profit institution of higher education, was referring to "Bridging the Education Divide," a report produced by the Century Foundation Task Force on Community Colleges. The paper documented in stark terms what college leaders knew anecdotally: the country is headed toward a two-tiered higher education system, separate and unequal, with two-year schools on the wrong side of the equation.

"Two-year colleges are asked to educate those students with the greatest needs, using the least funds, and in increasingly separate and unequal institutions," the report said. "Our higher education system, like the larger society, is growing more and more unequal."

The proof is in the numbers, the report said. Community colleges spent about \$5,000 per student on instructional costs in 2009, compared to \$10,000 at public research universities and \$20,000 at private research universities.

Community colleges received \$8,594 per student in 2009 from federal, state and local government sources, the report said; public research institutions received \$16,966. Between 1999 and 2009, per-pupil operating expenditures at private research universities grew by an average of \$14,000 per student while those of community colleges grew by just \$1.

At the same time, racial and ethnic divides are also increasing. White students' share of overall community college enrollment decreased to 58 percent from 73 percent in the 12 years before 2006. At four-year colleges, the shift, which is due in part to the nation's changing demographics, was only three percent at more selective four-year colleges.

The report's said community colleges' meager resources contribute to the sector's poor graduation rates. Fewer than 12 percent of community college students earn a bachelor's degree within six years of enrolling, the report said, while 81 percent of incoming students said they wanted to eventually earn at least a bachelor's degree, the report said.

Padrón and former Amherst College President Anthony Marx headed the task force which included policy recommendations for reversing a trend with some potentially significant ramifications.

"The increasing economic and racial stratification of colleges and universities is troubling because largely separate educational systems for mostly rich and white students, and for mostly poor and minority students, are rarely equal," the report said. "Racial and economic stratification is connected to unequal financial resources as well as to unequal curricula, expectations, and school cultures. Low-income and working-class people generally wield less power in our political system, and institutions serving them are often short-changed on resources."

The report makes a radical recommendation: adoption of a state and federal funding system modeled after the federal Title I program, which since 1965 has directed billions of dollars to high-poverty elementary and secondary schools.

But the scheme should come with an accountability twist.

The report said a new funding plan should be "coupled with considerations of student outcomes, such as job placements, degrees earned, and transfers to four- year institutions. In order to promote equity and avoid incentives for 'creaming' the most well-prepared students, funding should be tied to distance traveled and progress made — that is to say, consideration of where students start as well as where they end up. In addition, the number of nontraditional, minority and low-income students who achieve each of these outcomes should be monitored. Accountability, coupled with adequate funding, should encourage a necessary redesign of the way in which community colleges deliver education."

Most importantly, the report seeks to change and broaden the national conversation about community colleges.

"Community colleges are in great danger of becoming indelibly separate and unequal institutions in the higher education landscape," the report said.

"Today it is time to address — head on — abiding racial and economic inequalities in our system of American higher education. To date, community college reform is mostly about sharing best practices, an important but overly narrow discussion. It is time to take bold action to enhance the role of community colleges in strengthening American competitiveness, bolstering American democracy, and reviving the American Dream."

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