

Leave Institutions to their Task: The Value of Remedial Programming to a Strong Society

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In the early days of the republic, Thomas Jefferson made clear the primacy of education in a democratic society. He believed an educated citizenry was the vital requisite for the success of a free society, and he envisioned “education that shall reach every description of our citizens from the richest to the poorest.”

More than 200 years after Jefferson asserted those principles, postsecondary enrollment in the United States totals approximately 21 million students in colleges and universities across the country.

It's an accomplishment that honors Jefferson's hopes and continues to lead the world today. But we are not without our challenges and, if we're honest, our failures seriously compromise the principles that form the foundation of our democracy.

While the likes of Harvard, Yale and Stanford Universities (among others) remain the most respected in the world, we have entered a period of pronounced economic stratification in the nation's higher education system. Today, at the nation's most selective universities, students from upper-income families outnumber those from the lowest income strata by two to one. But in the nation's community colleges, low-income students are more than the norm, outnumbering high-income students by 14 to one. Across the country, funding to universities — public and especially private — far outstrips the resources provided to the open-door institutions that confront the most difficult challenges.

Community colleges are home to 45 percent of American undergraduates, or close to 13 million students. In addition to coming from low-income homes, upwards of 70 percent of these students arrive underprepared for college-level courses. Most are the first in their families to attend college, and strain to find a comfort level in an academic environment far more rigorous than their previous experience.

Contrary to the sink-or-swim mentality that has characterized much of higher education historically, these open-door institutions provide an unprecedented level of support for these students. If our communities are to thrive in a volatile economic environment, we cannot afford to lose these students to lives of poverty. The reality is clear: the jobs in the 21st-century knowledge economy demand college-level learning. The respected Georgetown University's Center on Education and the Workforce projects that 63 percent of jobs in the United States will require some degree of college learning, whether professional certification, associate or baccalaureate degree, by the year 2018. Income data is similar, demonstrating that poverty beckons without college attainment, placing enormous strain on families and the public coffers to provide support.

Despite a growing body of data and experience, the support that open-door institutions provide is being severely compromised. The best example is recent legislation in Florida that allows entering students to opt into college-level courses despite glaring evidence of deficits in basic skills of math, reading and writing. The legislation prevents the entry assessments that triggered the academic supports, enabling countless students to gain momentum and succeed in their studies. Seems that we're back to sink or swim.

At Miami Dade College, our advisement process begins with new students scheduled to arrive in the fall, continues through comprehensive orientation and case management throughout a student's tenure at the College. These are important conversations, establishing partnerships with students to determine their path toward graduation. If that path includes early developmental support, we're committed to help them through those classes as quickly and effectively as possible.



Without being able to ensure students who need developmental support enroll in remedial programming, many students will struggle to earn their all-important postsecondary credential.

Democracy is an ideal but also a practical, living environment. Jefferson made clear that education would be the constant and essential energy that could transform ideal into real. The Florida legislation threatens to short-circuit that energy for countless students, turning a blind eye to the challenges they confront. It invents a shortcut where one doesn't exist, and it deprives students of the real opportunity to succeed in college. Moreover, it reinforces the stratification of higher education by denying the necessary resources to institutions that have taken on the most difficult teaching and learning challenges. Jefferson's "education that shall reach every description of our citizens" is a creed at risk, but no less vital today to the success of our democratic society.