

Supporting More College Graduates through More College Options

It is encouraging that President Obama and Dr. Jill Biden are recognizing the critical role that community colleges play in higher education with today's White House Summit on Community Colleges. This event highlights how essential community colleges are in helping to reach the president's goal of producing an additional eight million college graduates in our country by 2020.

However, community colleges cannot meet that goal alone. According to the American Association of Community Colleges, enrollment in the sector increased 16.9 percent in just two years from fall 2007 to fall 2009 (<http://www.aacc.nche.edu/newsevents/News/articles/Documents/ccenrollmentsurge2009.pdf>), placing a heavy burden on these institutions. To produce more successful college graduates, we need every segment of the diverse higher education community to contribute. The American Council on Education recognizes that fact: "This collective diversity among institutions is one of the great strengths of America's higher education system and has helped make it the best in the world. Preserving that diversity is essential if we hope to serve the needs of our democratic society." (viewed online at www.acenet.edu/bookstore/descriptions/making_the_case/works/importance.cfm)

These diverse options are unlike those offered by any other nation and include small liberal arts colleges, community colleges, large public universities, online universities, for-profit schools and research institutions. Each sector serves a slightly different niche of students and provides quality programs leading to degrees ranging from an associate to a doctorate. And each will contribute significantly to achieving President Obama's goal.

In light of this need to pull together, it is disheartening that some in Washington are working to stifle some educational alternatives, such as for-profit institutions. Like all other sectors of higher education, there are some for-profit schools that are not performing up to par academically. And that must be addressed in the form of good policy. That being said, painting the entire sector with too broad a brush may harm those good actors that are quality for-profit schools. And no one can reasonably argue that those quality for-profit schools are not essential in helping us meet President Obama's ambitious goals.

For-profit institutions play a critical role alongside their community college peers. Today's community colleges and for-profit institutions are filled with students who, for one reason or another, cannot or will not attend a traditional four-year, brick-and-mortar institution. Both sectors provide working adults with educational options that allow them to attend college while working full time to support their families. The National Center for Education Statistics predicts that between now and 2017, the number of college students older than 25 will increase by 19 percent—nearly twice the predicted growth rate of younger students.

Both sectors also share similar missions of giving underserved student populations—including minorities, international students, and nontraditional learners—greater access to quality higher education. And quality programs prepare graduates for successful careers.

This alignment of missions and goals underscores the fact that, contrary to the perception that the sectors compete with one another, community colleges and for-profit universities often work in close collaboration. While community colleges are meeting an enormous and growing need, they also face the real possibility of not being able to accommodate the overflow of students

who will be looking to earn their degrees. Many community college graduates who are working full time go on to receive their bachelor's degrees at for-profit institutions, online or in the evening.

It is also worth noting that a number of graduate institutions—including for-profit universities—help prepare the next generation of community college administrators and faculty who teach those very students. Many of the administrators and instructors at community colleges have earned their credentials at online universities—not just because of the convenience these institutions afford but also because of the high-quality educational opportunities offered. A study by Weisman and Vaughan in 2006 predicted that 85 percent of community college presidents would retire in ten years.

<http://www.aacc.nche.edu/Publications/Briefs/Documents/09142007presidentbrief.pdf>).

To help address that need, we founded a community college leadership doctoral program at Walden in 2003. We worked with some of the nation's most outstanding community college leaders and Walden faculty, creating one of the most rigorous and substantive Ph.D. programs of this type in the country. More than 100 educators are currently enrolled in this program working with a dozen national community college leaders as their mentors (including one of this essay's co-authors). Program graduates are beginning to fill top leadership positions in community colleges all across the nation.

On a day when we are appropriately celebrating the remarkable role that community colleges play in American higher education, it is essential that we also recognize the degree of interdependence and collaboration that exists across all sectors of the higher ed spectrum.

Community colleges and for-profit universities offer educational alternatives to nontraditional students on where and how to earn their degrees. Continuing to provide more educational options—options that provide innovative and quality programs addressing our social and economic needs—is the only way America will be able to produce more successful college graduates and reach President Obama's goal for closing the education gap.

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