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Scaling Education

Much has been made about the accessibility of higher education in the United States. Recently, Martha Kanter, U.S. Under Secretary of Education, issued a call to action: Make Higher Education Available to 100 percent of Americans. I could not agree with Dr. Kanter more. The pursuit of and access to higher education should be a right for all.

Touted by President Obama as "the unsung heroes of American education," community colleges offer a viable education solution to the problem of escalating college costs, and are a key ingredient in strengthening access to education. As Dr. Kanter points out, they are excellent options for many, but even they cannot reach all of the masses.

There are many channels to help drive us towards this goal, but the change needs to come at an institutional level, with the burden not only falling to community colleges to provide the alternative.

In order to make this change, we must first physically have enough seats for all students who desire the opportunity to learn. The ability of the brick and mortar institution to grow more than 50 percent in order to accommodate a growing student body isn't realistic. Even if they wish to do so -- which is doubtful given their culture -- we cannot expect these universities to have the money. Universities are not built to be market driven, changing constantly to meet student needs. Their ability to grow is extremely limited.

The investment needed to accommodate more students in a traditional classroom is way beyond the universities capabilities, and, even if the government wanted to give aid, it is unlikely that they could afford it.

If we really want to accommodate everyone, especially working adults, we need to follow and build upon what the online universities have started. These universities were designed to be flexible, meeting the needs of the students and the marketplace. Both their schedules and their offered programs are built around these parameters. Additionally, online universities allow a greater number of students to enroll, given that there are no physical space restrictions. Therefore, the investments

these institutions make are directly related to the number of students, not the number of buildings.

We should very closely follow the online model for closing the education gap. Arguing about the misuse of public funding by for-profit universities diverts from the more important conversation about their educational contributions to higher education reform.