

Higher education: Not a one size fits all solution

By Dario A. Cortes, Ph.D. - 10/22/10 12:07 PM ET

To meet his ambitious goal of sending five million more Americans to college over the next 10 years, President Obama has perhaps unrealistically pinned his hopes on the nation's community colleges. That's why next week you will see community colleges gathering for a first-ever summit at the White House, where they will collect \$2 billion in commitments from the administration and Congress.

The president is right in recognizing that to meet his goal, he will need community colleges. But he is wrong in assuming that community colleges can do it alone. Instead of fair and inclusive policies to truly help more Americans pursue a college degree, what has emerged in Washington is a game of political favoritism, where once again business is on the losing end of the equation.

Here's what is happening. As President Obama is championing the role of community colleges in educating Americans — particularly lower-income, minority Americans — his Department of Education is punishing another type of academic institution, which serve similar students. The Department of Education has proposed a rule to limit which for-profit programs can receive federal funding, based on a complex calculation of graduate repayment levels. The result will be the elimination of many for-profit college programs, forcing as many as 400,000 students to search elsewhere for post-secondary programs. Oddly, community colleges, which have comparable or lower student loan repayment rates as for-profit colleges, will be exempt from this rule. The net effect? While one sector of higher education is favored with \$2 billion in additional taxpayer subsidies, another, equally necessary sector is being cut back and the number of its programs curtailed. And the reality is the success rates at for-profit schools are actually better than at community colleges. Two-year for-profit institutions report graduation rates that are 50 percent higher than their public counterparts. And the income gains of for-profit graduates are almost 20 percent higher.

At its core, this is an issue of favoritism. But heading down this road could also be an operational and financial nightmare for the nation. Community colleges are now at their maximum capacity. Without significant, new financial resources — like the \$12 billion the president has asked for but Congress is hesitant to approve — community colleges will not be able to accommodate this overflow of students from for-profit schools. The likely outcome will be that not every student who wants to go to college will be able to do so. From a financial perspective, it is far more economical for taxpayers to send five million more students to college using a combination of for-profit and not-for-profit schools. In fact, it's estimated that it would cost \$33 billion more without for-profit schools, because for-profit institution students normally pay for more of their education.

Lastly — but perhaps most important of all — there is the matter of student choice. If we are truly going to encourage five million more Americans to go to college, we can't assume that one type of institution alone will meet the requirements of millions of students. We need a multitude of programs that afford students opportunities to sharpen existing skills and learn new ones. This week the White House celebrates the valuable contribution of the nation's community colleges. It's unfortunate that the celebration isn't bigger to include the contributions of all institutions of higher learning. To reach this administration's goal, we're going to need public and private, for-profit and non-profit colleges to help lift the educational attainment level of deserving students from across the income and demographic spectrum.

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