

# Affordable education enriches graduates, nation

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As our nation wrestles with its great economic reckoning, the debate in Congress, state houses and coffee houses nationwide heats up with each passing day. This financial crisis isn't playing favorites; wealthy or low income, industries across the board, government and community institutions — we are all vulnerable as this most inscrutable dilemma plays out.

There is a grain of truth to the maxim that big crises beget bold opportunities. Everyone agrees that the economic stimulus package, regardless of the final dollar amount, will earn the label "huge." But beyond the size and scope of the stimulus, we are, in effect, reestablishing national priorities.

The stimulus includes an education component that would support K-12 needs, increase federal need-based Pell grants for college tuition and send money to the states to address the needs of higher education, with specific attention to community colleges. The congressional debate revealed serious resistance to these elements, suggesting that education spending was not among the more immediate and pressing needs of the nation.

## Stronger economy

As the new chair of the Association of American Colleges and Universities, I am reminded daily by my colleagues across the nation that such a mind-set is dreadfully lacking in perspective. Education is the underlying pillar that, if neglected, is sure to diminish any hope of a resurgent American economy. When people are ill-prepared to compete, they will be consigned to the lower rungs of society, and that society will suffer.

These are the signs of our suffering: Between 1985 and 2005, the cost of attending a four-year college rose 439 percent. Incomes have risen less than a quarter of that percentage, and that was before the stock market plunged and two million jobs were lost. It is no surprise that more than two million qualified low-income students are unable to attend college because they cannot pay for it, and that is a conservative tally prior to the recent crisis.

Just 30 years ago, no country came close to the United States in granting bachelor's degrees;

now, we barely crack the top 10.

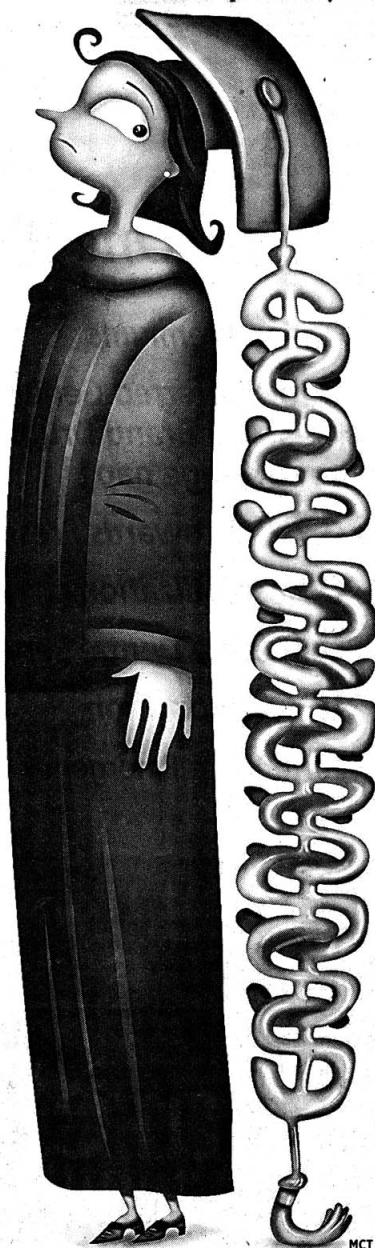
It follows that the same fall from grace is apparent with our K-12 system. In 1970, based on percentages, the United States graduated more than double the runner-up nation in Europe, but since then, our graduation rate has fallen considerably. Nationwide, barely 70 percent graduate from high school, with only 58 percent of Hispanics and 55 percent of African Americans gaining a diploma. One million kids drop out each year. In the nation's 50 largest cities, the graduation rate is barely 50 percent. We are losing half our young people to a devouring cycle of poverty.

Too many young people don't even see college as a possibility. But when more than 80 percent of the new jobs in our economy require higher education, this is a crisis well beyond funding. This is a deficit of understanding.

In Florida, we are under extraordinary financial pressures that are tearing at the effectiveness of our entire public education system. Miami Dade College is struggling with a reduction in funding of more than \$21 million, and forecasts for the coming year are dire. But enrollment is soaring, up 15 percent in two years. That translates to more than 12,000 new, unfunded students — greater than the entire enrollment of many colleges. Funding is also nonexistent to hire new faculty, expand support labs and provide tutors, and least of all, upgrade vital classroom technology. We are faced with an untenable choice: limit enrollment and break an inviolable contract with the community; or allow the lack of funding to expand class size, diminish student support and flirt with mediocrity.

## Productive workers

The stimulus funding is just one step, but an essential one. At the very least it recognizes the obvious: that education is at the heart of preserving jobs and fueling a new American workforce. We reassure ourselves that we are still the greatest country on Earth, with the most creative and productive workers. It's an empty declaration unless we back it up. Our task is to reverse the momentum of recent years and value education as it was intended to be valued in the United States. A country that devalues education is a country that will not thrive.



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