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# Community Colleges: Separate and Unequal

Community colleges are being asked to do way more with less

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When you think of higher education in America, you likely picture places such as Harvard or Stanford with ivy-covered brick libraries or the large state universities with passionate alumni and impressive sports programs. But in fact, many more students – almost half of those in post-secondary schooling – attend our nation's community colleges; low-cost two-year institutions that seek to serve large numbers of the aspiring middle-class.

Because we know that education is the single biggest factor in determining employment prospects and moving up the economic ladder, how we view, fund and run our community colleges matters. Not just for the more than 11 million students currently attending public community colleges but for our collective future. Not long ago, we were the world leader in producing secondary degrees from four- and two-year colleges. Today we are 14th among developed nations.

According to a [report released this week](#) by a task force assembled by the non-partisan think tank The Century Foundation, our community colleges are becoming a disconnected system of separate and unequal higher education. Even though they are vitally important, they are increasingly being asked to do more with the same funding they received 15 or 20 years ago. Between 1999 and 2009, community college funding increased just one dollar per student, while per-student funding at private research universities jumped almost \$14,000.

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Unlike exclusive and public four-year schools, community colleges accept all who apply. And they spend an estimated \$2 billion every year just catching students up on basic skills such as math and reading. The economic strains on our community colleges have forced many to cut student support services and rely on less expensive part-time faculty. Meanwhile, transfer policies between community and four-year schools remain uneven and complex.

As a result, despite their missions and the best efforts of college administrators, the open doors increasingly lead to dead ends. While 81 percent of students entering community college for the first time say they eventually want to transfer and earn at least a bachelor's degree, just 12 percent do so within six years.

Adding to the challenges, according to the Century Foundation report, the nation's most selective 193 colleges and universities have seen almost no improvement in terms of racial and economic diversity, despite major demographic and economic shifts in the nation since 1994. At the same time,



our two-year schools have welcomed record numbers of poor and racially diverse students. The struggles of our community colleges to keep pace is a very bad sign for national economic and social progress.

For lessons on how to educate a mass student population, we can look to the public K–12 system, where the high school dropout rate is much lower than in America's colleges. For years, we have followed an approach where federal and state policies seek to offset local inequalities in spending by providing the most help to schools with the greatest challenges. It's accepted and popular policy to spend more federal and state funds on schools with the most disadvantaged students or in the poorest social and neighborhood environments – factors which we know suppress learning.

It's time to take this approach to our community colleges and invest more in the schools that need the most help. American community colleges where 80 percent or more of students are poor or lack the proper academic foundations are funded no differently than the most advantaged and affluent ones. They are just expected to make do. It's a policy we would not accept in an elementary school, so there is no reason we should accept it elsewhere.

Similarly, just as high poverty K–12 schools added attractive magnet programs to integrate their student populations, our community colleges can add honors programs and offer bachelor's degrees, as has been successfully done at Miami–Dade College in Florida.

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Four-year schools also have a role to play in bolstering our community colleges. One of the recommendations in the Century Foundation report is that America's elite and other four-year schools target just 5 percent of their junior-level student body for community college transfers. Four-year schools can also work with community colleges to streamline transfers from two- to four-year schools.

Closer coordination and goals for community college transfers will also help the four-year schools. When Amherst College in Massachusetts opened more transfer spots for community college graduates, it found that they had higher GPA and completion rates than those who entered as freshmen.

Keeping the doors open to higher education takes effort and investment. If we expect our higher education system to continue to be the best path to economic mobility, a system of separate and unequal community colleges cannot continue.