

How America's 2-Tiered Education System Is Perpetuating Inequality

By Emily Chertoff



President Obama, with Eduardo Padrón (left), receives an honorary Associates of Science degree from Miami-Dade College in 2011. (Larry Downing/Reuters)

In 2006, Amherst College made a decision that administrators at some other schools considered radical. The critics said it would dent the value of the school's degree, or force it to "lower its standards." The school's then-president pushed back by saying that Amherst needed to reach a broader group of students.

What was the decision? Today's readers might be forgiven for guessing it must have had to do with online courses, also known as MOOCs. But Amherst wasn't debating online courses. (That would have been quite early for the online course debate. In fact, this April the Amherst faculty voted down a proposal to join the nonprofit MOOC coordinator EdX.) Rather, in 2006, Amherst decided to reserve the majority of its transfer slots for students coming from community college. In some ways, the decision represented potentially a more radical commitment to underprivileged students than online courses -- as it came at an actual cost to the school, while online courses are highly profitable.

Seven years later, Amherst president emeritus Anthony Marx argues claims the program has worked brilliantly, just as his administration had expected. Broadening its search for transfers to the roughly one million students who graduate from community college every year, "we could find amazing jewels that no one else is looking for," he told an audience at a panel hosted by The Century Foundation on Thursday.

If other top-tier schools reached out to such students the way Amherst does, maybe more students would be able to transfer. Instead, Marx said, many have restrictive transfer policies that heavily weight factors like SAT scores. Coupled with a lack of funding for community colleges, the consequences of the transfer policies have been dire. The report The Century Foundation released this week found that while 81.4 percent of students enter community college plan to transfer and complete a four-year degree, just 11.6 percent are able to do so within six years.

And so, because community colleges overwhelmingly serve low-income people and minorities, the higher education system remains two-tiered -- an arrangement those invited to the think tank to discuss the report called "separate but equal." "You basically cannot join the middle class without a postsecondary credential at this point," said Eduardo Padrón, the president of Miami-Dade College, America's largest community college.

The students who enter his school, like those at all community colleges, face the challenge of chronic underfunding. A lot of the U.S.'s money for higher education flows to elite research universities, not the community colleges and state schools that do the day-to-day work of educating large numbers of Americans. (TCF's report notes that 44 percent of Americans who are in college attend a community college.) If you add up the value of the direct and indirect help it receives, including tax breaks, Princeton gets about \$54,000 a year per student in federal subsidies. The College of New Jersey, a public institution 12 miles away, receives a total of about \$1,600 a year per student in federal and state subsidies.

Students like Padrón's then find themselves deflected by politics at some four-year schools, as Marx noted. Public schools tend to have broader transfer programs, but they struggle to meet the demand from community college students on their own.

The overriding message of the TCF report -- that America needs to buttress its existing brick-and-mortar education system, not tear it down and build a more efficient alternative -- was a little jarring coming at a moment when every elementary-school superintendent in America seems to be tossing around words like "disruption." But listening to Padrón talk about the challenges students at Miami-Dade face, it became clearer why some teachers find the vogue for online education reckless. The students at Miami-Dade need a lot of support -- not just academic support, but personal support. Community colleges "serve a population that the university doesn't even want to deal with," Padrón said, among them older students and mothers who are raising kids.

Yet the community college system as it's currently funded can't really provide the services these students need. Padrón noted that despite repeat attempts to restructure for the sake of efficiency, Miami-Dade's counselors are struggling with a burden of about 2,000 students per advisor.

At least as Padrón and Marx see it, the only solution will come from reforms to the existing higher-education system. But that doesn't just mean better funding for community schools like Padrón's. It

also means cultural changes for more four-year schools like Marx's.

Copyright © 2013 by The Atlantic Monthly Group. All Rights Reserved.