

Obama's higher ed proposal rings a bell

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KURT STRAZDINS;KURT STRAZDINS / TNS

In his State of the Union address, President Obama proposed to make community college “free and universal” for all. It’s undoubtedly one of the most ambitious ideas he championed in a speech filled with bold plans. It’s also a proposal that resonates with me personally and one that could better the lives of thousands of Miami residents.

Like most parents, my mother and father told me I could grow up to be anything I wanted to be. As long as I was proud of my work, they would be accepting of whatever occupation I chose for myself. I could be a doctor, lawyer or even a janitor if that’s what made me happy, they said. But there was one thing they were firm about: I needed to get a college degree.

As a naive know-it-all school kid who thought I could charm my way into gainful employment, I was reluctant at first. But eventually I came to understand their reasoning — my family is a case study for how higher education can help lift families into the middle class.

My parents both had to rebuild their lives when their families moved to Miami. Like many families who migrated to this city, they worked tirelessly to help lay the foundation that would allow their children to live better than they did. Many, like my parents, were able to carve out their place in the middle class by obtaining college degrees.

Obtaining a college education was not easy for them. They had to juggle the responsibilities of work and family on top of finding the time to complete the requirements necessary for their diplomas. They also had to pay their own way through school, as many working-class families do if they wish to earn a degree.

How my parents managed to earn a living, raise a family and seek higher education is beyond my comprehension. But as the cost of living and education continues to soar, it's becoming even more difficult for Miami-Dade County residents who want to earn a college degree to do so, particularly those who already struggle to make ends meet.

However, there has never been a time when a college degree has been more necessary to find a job with a livable wage. According to Georgetown University's Recovery 2020 study, nearly two-thirds of job openings will require some form of higher education by 2020.

Miami-Dade County is far behind where it needs to be with regard to higher education if it hopes to keep up with the demands of the job market. According to the U.S. Census, only about a third of county residents over the age of 25 have an associate's degree or higher.

While Miami-Dade County has a large college student population, there will still likely not be enough educated workers for companies to fill positions with local candidates, meaning they will have to reach outside for recruits – or even possibly move elsewhere to find the candidates they need.

If President Obama's proposal for free community college comes to fruition, Miami-Dade County will be among the communities that will be affected the most. More than 170,000 students are enrolled in Miami Dade College, which is the largest college in the country, and among the most respected. It has educated many of our city's top leaders in business, government, nonprofits and the arts.

According to the New York Times, MDC produces more Latino and black graduates than any other college in the country; many of those attending MDC are working-class and poor residents hoping to reshape their lives. Free community college would help make the college even more

accessible, help more individuals in the most underrepresented populations in higher education to pursue a degree in our community.

Among those who will be deciding the fate of free college education are U.S. Sen. Marco Rubio and U.S. Rep. Ileana Ros-Lehtinen, both of whom have attended Miami Dade College.

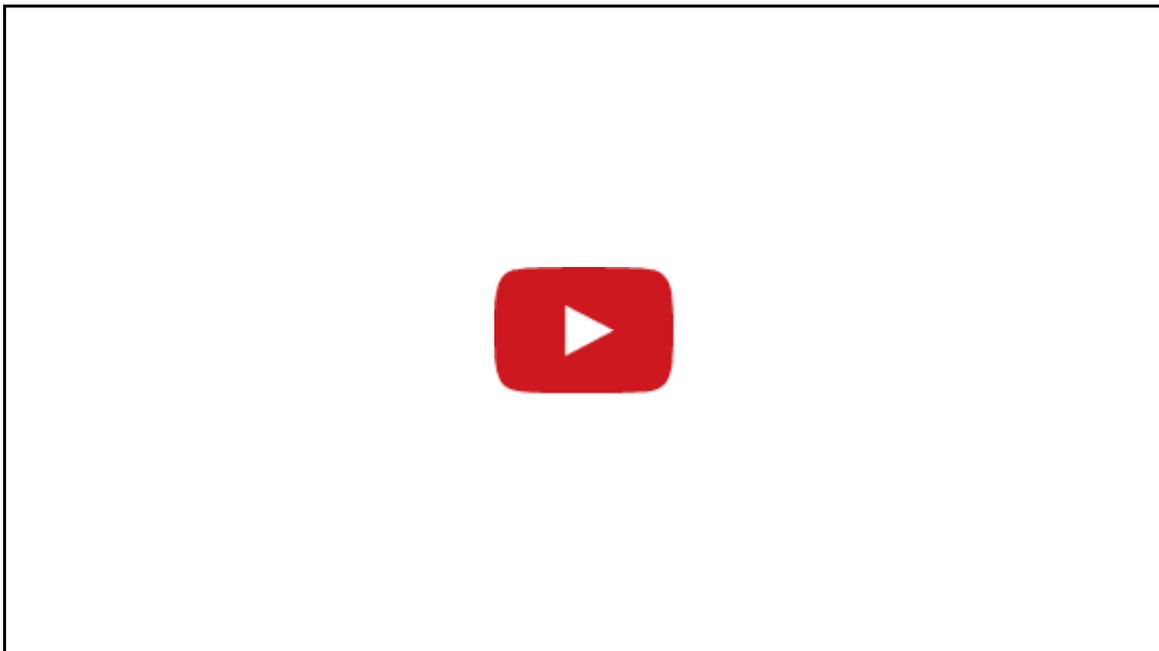
Having benefited from a community-college education in Miami, they should reflect on how it influenced their lives personally and reflect on how free college education could have a transformative impact on thousands in South Florida.

Miami has many hardworking and intelligent people ready to take the next step toward earning a degree but do not have the means to do so. Free community college could unlock untapped potential in our city's population, allowing for a new group of workers to make their way up the income ladder and build fulfilling careers.

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