

Pell grants for poor students can change lives so let's fix the system not dynamite it

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We read a great deal lately about the high cost of education, and as sequestration goes into effect the discussion often turns to eliminating taxpayers' dollars from education.

Education pundit Michael Petrelli wrote a column exploring a disturbing fact: many students graduating high school are not ready for college. It's an important issue that needs to be discussed, but he went on to assert that the current support these students receive through Pell grants should be terminated. In his eyes, the dollars we spend on remedial education programs designed to bring struggling students up to speed are wasted.

This approach would ask an institution like Miami Dade to turn its back on a large portion of our current student body. Petrelli's plan not only ignores the needs of countless students, but it's also bad policy. This faulty plan, and others like it, essentially suggests dynamite as a useful tool for rebuilding a necessary structure.

If Pell funding was cut from struggling students, many members of our society would suddenly lose any chance of moving into the middle class by earning a post-secondary degree or credential. This would be a very poor policy decision, creating problems that would not only affect those students but also the larger community. With no credential, these students would have few if any avenues to become viable members of the workforce or contributors to their communities.

We need solutions that advance our remedial programs to new levels of success and provide supports for the current, vast needs of our students. While I am equally against any taxpayer money being wasted, cutting funding with a hatchet is not the answer.

Instead of giving up on struggling students, we should use funds to encourage innovation in the way remedial programs are conducted.

The Doing Better For More Students report developed by a group of thoughtful higher education experts (and advisors to the American Dream 2.0 coalition, of which I am a part) suggests conducting a “Pell-ready” demonstration program for a willing group of states, remedial education providers and students. The program would introduce an evidence-based system that tests students’ learning and raises the bar for remedial education across the board. It would reward programs that produce strong results for students with funding, and exact penalties where students are not being prepared to excel.

Innovative ideas like these that seek to protect education opportunities for everyone are important. They will help students who are not yet prepared for college and will make sure we are using our dollars wisely. But there is a larger economic argument here as well. Programs like these will help strengthen our ability to educate, which has a direct effect on the ability of Miami and the United States to compete in a changing world economy. As we look for ways to meet the growing skills gap and prepare a workforce that is educated and can compete in a global economy, we must commit ourselves to seeking smart policy that will meet the needs of our students, our businesses and our community.

Turning our backs on our students is never the answer. That kind of approach hurts all of us.

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