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2-Year Colleges Are at Risk of 'Separate and Unequal' Future, Report Says

By Goldie Blumenstyk
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Community colleges "are in great danger of becoming indelibly separate and unequal institutions in the higher-education landscape," a Century Foundation task force warns in a report being released here on Thursday. To deal with what it calls "the increasing economic and racial isolation of students" at community colleges, the group also calls for major changes in how two-year colleges are financed and operated.

Among its recommendations, the group urges states and the federal government to provide additional funds to two-year colleges that serve the neediest students, much in the way the federal Title I program works for elementary and secondary schools. In states where constitutional guarantees of education might extend to higher education, the report suggests that advocates even consider filing lawsuits to require such "adequate funding" of community colleges.

To "bring greater clarity to all types of public support for higher education," the report also asks the U.S. Departments of Education and of the Treasury to jointly study how tax exemptions for donations to colleges and for institutions' endowment earnings indirectly subsidize colleges—an effort that would highlight how such policies disproportionately benefit wealthier four-year institutions.

Radical Change Needed

The report is premised on the notion that community colleges, which enroll about 44 percent of the nation's college population, are in many cases not serving students well now and will be ill equipped to handle future demands without radical change.

Along with the financial recommendations, the report, "[Bridging the Higher Education Divide: Strengthening Community Colleges and Restoring the American Dream](#)," outlines a series of educational proposals. The proposals are aimed at shifting the patterns that result in four-year colleges' enrolling disproportionately more wealthy and white students while two-year colleges enroll a higher proportion of needy and minority students.

Research undertaken for the report found that, at some community colleges, almost two-thirds of the students are black, Hispanic, or members of other groups typically considered underrepresented in higher education.

The proposals include the creation of financial incentives to four-year institutions that enroll financially needy students who transfer from community colleges, as well as a call for more two-year-college honors programs, which could raise the colleges' academic stature and create a culture of success that would attract more middle-class students.

Showering the Wealthy

Richard D. Kahlenberg, a senior fellow at the foundation, who in an essay published in *The Chronicle* questions how "we shower the most resources on the wealthiest college students and the least on the neediest," said the idea of reducing stratification by enhancing community colleges is an important focus in the report.

In policy discussions people talk a lot about the underrepresentation of minority students in four-year colleges, said Mr. Kahlenberg, executive director of the task force, in an interview. But "we tend not to talk about the flip side"—the overrepresentation of minority and needy students in community colleges, he said.

The approach outlined in the report could not only create more-affordable college pathways for middle-class families and improve educational outcomes at community colleges—the report cites a body of research on "peer effects" and the value of school cultures with high expectations. It could also give community colleges more political clout.

"That's Political Science 101," Mr. Kahlenberg said.

The 22-member task force was led by Anthony W. Marx, the former president of Amherst College who now heads the New York Public Library, and Eduardo Padrón, president of Miami Dade College.

One Panelist Says No

But one member, Arthur J. Rothkopf, a former president of Lafayette College and later an executive at the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, did not sign the 54-page report, largely because he disagrees with the idea of a Title I-style program for community colleges.

He did endorse several of the other proposals, including policies to encourage easier transfers to public and private four-year colleges. (Mr. Rothkopf acknowledged in an interview that, when he was at Lafayette, "we didn't do very well" on that front; the report urges highly selective colleges to pledge to accept community-college transfers for 5 percent of their junior class.)

Mr. Rothkopf, a self-proclaimed "budget hawk," said he couldn't support the report's call for increased federal financing without also proposing how it would be paid for, and added that the evidence was not clear that Title I has been effective.

At the same time, he said, he wished the task force had taken an even harder line on calling for an end to the indirect tax subsidies. His targets: a tuition tax credit that benefits families with annual incomes up to \$180,000, which he called "a bad idea from the start and a sop for middle-class votes," and the tax break for donations to college-athletics programs.

"Let people pay for it with hard dollars," he said.

Mr. Kahlenberg said he was sorry Mr. Rothkopf didn't sign on, but asserted that his doubts about Title I were overblown.

Recent research shows that, "when used effectively, federal and state money can have an impact," said Mr. Kahlenberg. "Careful spending can made a big difference." He cited in particular a new book on schools in Union City, N.J., by the University of California at Berkeley professor David L. Kirp, *Improbable Scholars: The*

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Rebirth of a Great American School System and a Strategy for America's Schools (Oxford University Press).

Mr. Rothkopf said he was also uneasy about the task force's use of a "race prism" in defining the issues.

Mr. Kahlenberg said the report focuses not only on racial divides but also on socioeconomic ones, and in many cases they are intertwined and crucial pieces of "the larger structural issues that are setting community colleges up for failure."