



OPINION

Challenging times are ripe for two-year colleges

BY EDUARDO J. PADRÓN

At the heart of our democratic ethic is the notion of opportunity. And no institution in American society better meets that ideal than the nation's community colleges. What's more, in an era of profound upheaval—from international affairs and cultural dissonance to the basic ways in which we communicate and spend our working day—the chance to learn has become a lifeline amidst the momentum of events.

President Bush's commencement address at Miami Dade College on April 28 will place a spotlight on community colleges across the nation. It seems a poignant moment to review many of the overarching challenges our communities and our nation face, and the essential role that our colleges play.

In a recent *New York Times Magazine* article, Thomas Friedman cites three major issues facing every American today: jobs, temperature and terrorism. You may have your own list and priorities, but these three are a reasonable starting point. Each is demanding a sea change in the way we view the world we inhabit and the progress needed to sustain our way of life. Dramatic pronouncements, but who can argue that we have not come to a bend in history that demands our utmost attention.

This is not the first hairpin turn that human beings have been compelled to navigate. We have proven our adaptability but we have also demonstrated an unnerving intractability in the face of overwhelming evidence. The New Commission on the Skills of the American Workforce has published a persuasive report, entitled *Tough Choices or Tough Times*. It echoes Friedman's counsel, demanding a deeper understanding of the digital revolution's impact on not only the American workforce, but also workers throughout the developing worlds of Asia, Africa and South America. Fiber optic cable plays no favorites; if an engineer in India

can capably review architectural plans at one-seventh the cost for an American engineer, as is the case, the button will be pushed.

We should not delude ourselves, either, that genuine capability is the sole domain of American higher education. *Tough Choices or Tough Times* reports that the U.S. was home to 30 percent of the world's college students just 30 years ago. Today, that proportion registers at 14 percent and falling. Among the world's advanced industrial nations, our students have fallen to the middle and lower ranks for achievement in math, science and general literacy. Game on. The most intense competition this nation's workforce has ever encountered is stirring in places like Mumbai and Hyderabad, Shanghai and Quingdao, and yes, in Senegal and Togo.

It may be the greatest of illusions, however, to think that we are competing with each other. The well-being of the planet would certainly suggest a common enterprise, if only we could agree that a genuine dilemma exists. Our partisan willfulness is nowhere more apparent. And how profound a turnabout is required to unhinge our economic destiny from those ventures that squander the vital elements of air, water and earth? More profound than the new learning we will undoubtedly uncover is the unlearning that must precede it.

The third great challenge, of course, is the most fundamental of all. We no longer seem capable, on a grand scale, of listening to each other. The richness of our cultures and religions and social contracts has transmogrified into a bludgeon. Instead of discerning the exquisite variation of human affairs, we shield ourselves and create distance. The best we can do from a distance is categorize and generalize. We become lost in our separation with no hope of discerning a common thread of existence. All the astonishing progress of the ages is marginalized by this one resistant strain of ignorance.

I doubt that even our wondrous community learning

institutions can serve as cure for these maladies. Neither should we underestimate what is offered. Access and affordability may pale against the earth and its new fiber optic grid, but our institutions are an essential starting place for an American transformation. President Bush will soon learn that Miami Dade College (MDC) is home to students from 192 countries who speak 93 languages. The dialogue begins here. With more than 50 percent of MDC students and close to 40 percent nationally as the first in their families to attend college, poverty's dispirited rant is being replaced by a new conversation about learning.

A new collaboration between higher education and the workforce is in the making, too. *Tough Choices or Tough Times* stresses that 21st century workers will be asked to master a broader capacity. The line worker who contributes to the design of products, the software engineer who is fluent in additional languages and cultures, the facilities worker who is facile with architectural software—these workers represent the new marriage of occupational and liberal knowledge that is the underpinning of the emerging world economy. This is our curriculum, the learning platform for the years ahead.

Our colleges are the anchors of our communities because that is the natural station for the place of learning. Everything emanates from that point. Ambitious? Yes, but the transformation of understanding that this moment in time requires will not abide the hesitant reach. Small steps perhaps, but within an unavoidably broad vision of possibility.

Padrón is president of Miami Dade College (Florida).

