

Community colleges are on the front lines of battling inequality

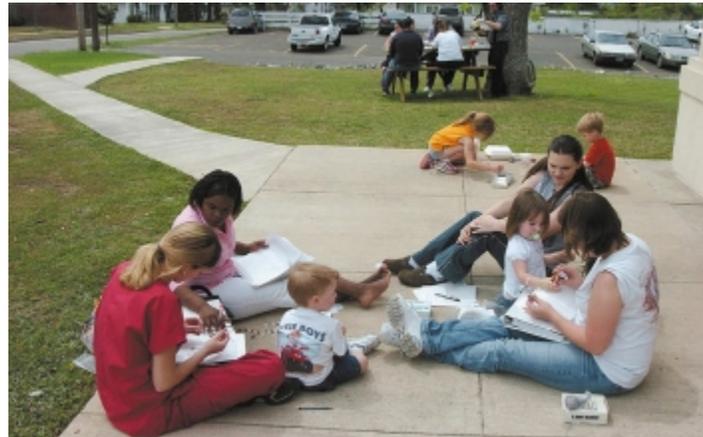
If America is serious about expanding opportunity, it should invest more in access to quality higher education

Eduardo J. Padron

December 3, 2013

Topics: Education

Completing a college education is essential to competing in today's knowledge economy. America's community colleges are doing their part to provide access to almost 50 percent of all undergraduates in the United States — about 13 million students — who want a shot at a middle-class life or



better. Many of these students come from low-income households, living beneath the federal poverty level.

Students at SouthArk Community College enjoy the nice outdoor weather during chemistry class in front of the computer tech building on campus Friday, April 15, 2005, in El Dorado, Ark.

Income disparity has been growing for decades in this country, but the latest figures show it has reached levels (http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2010/10/22/income-inequality-america_n_772687.html) not seen since the Great Depression. At a time when the cost of a college education is out of reach for many students, the open door of community colleges is a vital avenue of opportunity for low-income students.

I spend my days as president of a community college that remains committed to open access. Nearly 50 percent of the students at Miami Dade College, a state-supported institution in Miami, live in poverty, and 67 percent are low income. In addition to academic challenges, low-income students are often confronted by everyday challenges such as child care, transportation, health crises and a lack of family precedent in higher education. These are the students who must rise out of poverty if communities across the country are to prosper.

The success of community colleges is based on accessibility, affordability, nimbleness and high-quality instruction. Since 1960, MDC has given more than 2 million students a chance at a better life. These students give back to the local economy by providing the skills that respond to the needs of the job market.

Community colleges are critical to economic growth and have the innovation and adaptability necessary to bridge inequalities. MDC prepares students from underprivileged backgrounds to become part of a highly trained workforce in lucrative fields that are essential to economic health, including nursing, information technology, engineering and biotechnology. Yet funding for community colleges remains significantly lower than for state and private universities.

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Supporting these students requires adequate resources. However, our community colleges are not only underfunded but also overcrowded. As the Century Foundation, a New York-based think tank, recently reported (<http://www.tcf.org/work/education/detail/task-force-community-colleges-on-path-to-separate-and-unequal/>), two-year colleges are being asked to educate, with the least funding, students with the greatest needs. This shows that our higher-education system, like our larger society, is becoming increasingly unequal.

Even in the face of these challenges, Miami Dade College has developed programs specifically designed to bring higher education within the reach of low-income students. In an effort to assist students in completing college, for example, MDC's Single Stop program (<http://www.mdc.edu/main/singlestop/>) has connected students to a crucial range of existing public and community resources, such as tax credits, food stamps and financial and legal services. Since its inception in 2010, MDC's Single Stop program has screened more than 13,000 families and directed them to more than \$17 million in benefits, tax refunds and services. Programs like Single Stop help bridge the wealth gap that plagues our nation, but a problem this large requires a larger-scale solution.

Bridging the opportunity gap between privileged and underprivileged students will take the commitment of the entire nation, but most immediately, it requires partnership among institutions at all levels of the U.S. education system. MDC is committed to further opening the door of opportunity through partnerships with the K–12 school system and our nation's most competitive colleges and universities. This will not only expose students early to a range of available educational opportunities but also provide them with the necessary support to complete their studies. With increased awareness, access and support, it is my hope that students, regardless of their socioeconomic status, will lead more rewarding and prosperous lives.

The United States' higher-education system, contrary to its proclaimed goals, is failing to equalize opportunities among low- and high-income students. When measured in terms of income and wealth, our nation's current process of admission, enrollment and graduation contributes to glaring economic inequality. At four-year institutions, students from high socioeconomic backgrounds outnumber their low counterparts 14 to 1, according to a Century Foundation report (<http://www.tcf.org/bookstore/detail/bridging-the-higher-education-divide>). At community colleges, by contrast, students from low socioeconomic backgrounds outnumber their high counterparts nearly 2 to 1. Our education system is, in essence, reinforcing the growing disparity between the rich and poor.

Although college attendance rates are rising across the board, graduation rates, especially among low-income students, are not growing commensurately. This trend is mirrored across other overcrowded and underfunded open-access institutions. If we do not make a concerted effort to reverse this trend, our higher-education system will continue to contribute to our country's growing economic inequality, and this inequality will only magnify for future generations.

Given the irrefutable connection between educational achievement and economic prosperity, we must make college a reality for all students. If we do not invest resources in reversing the inequality of our higher-education system, we will see the continuation of a generation unnecessarily relegated to poverty. A college degree has become the degree of division between those who prosper and those who struggle for a better life in America. As our nation's great equalizers, community colleges play a pivotal role in bridging this gap.

Eduardo J. Padrón is president of Miami Dade College, the largest institution of higher education in the U.S. with more than 175,000 students. His writings have been published in The Christian Science Monitor, U.S. News & World Report, The Chronicle of Higher Education, Hispanic Magazine and other publications.

The views expressed in this article are the author's own and do not necessarily reflect Al Jazeera America's editorial policy.