

Department of Education regulations shut out Hispanic students

9:39 AM 08/11/2010

President Obama recently spoke to students, faculty and staff at the University of Texas at Austin. The speech, which focused on [college](#) access and completion, reiterated the point that President Obama has championed since taking office – that the U.S. would once again have the highest rate of college graduates by 2020. Ironically, at the same time the president is encouraging access, the Department of [Education](#) has proposed a rule known as “gainful employment” that will limit educational options for Hispanic students and decrease their ability to complete a college education.

Students go to college for different reasons. Some take courses and pursue degrees that may have little use away from a university campus. On the other hand, some people take courses and pursue degrees that have specific and tremendous value in the real world – to themselves, their communities, and the economy.

Especially in recent decades, different schools cater to different kinds of students. Increasingly, the latter group of students – those who go to college to pick up a specific degree and the specific skills and jobs that go with it – have been going to non-traditional colleges that operate in the private sector, just like their students. These career colleges have filled a gap left in America’s overburdened education system and provided opportunities to hundreds of thousands of young men and women studying everything from accounting to homeland security,

What these schools lack in ivy-walled quadrangles, they make up for in the real-world experience of their faculties and the accessibility and effectiveness of their programs.

That is why it is such a shame that the federal Department of Education has proposed the new “gainful employment” regulations aimed at career colleges, discriminating against “career students” by restricting their access to student loans. The great tragedy of this, of course, is that career colleges educate and graduate underserved, minority communities at much higher levels than traditional four-year universities.

In particular, these schools provide unique opportunities to Hispanic Americans in cities around the country, opportunities that traditional colleges simply do not afford. Young Hispanic students face educational challenges many of us cannot appreciate. There are language barriers, underperforming elementary and [secondary schools](#), and a need for a paying job earlier in life than other more affluent individuals. Most Hispanics – like more and more people from every background in America these days – simply cannot take four

years off to find their place in society: they have to *support* themselves while seeking to further their education. For many Hispanic and underserved communities, career colleges are the only colleges that can meet their educational needs while they continue being a part of the workforce.

Career colleges offer [classes](#) where their students are, and at times when their students can fit them in around their work schedules. That is only one of the reasons as to why career colleges are doing better at graduating underserved communities. Over the course of their lives, college graduates earn hundreds of thousands more in compensation and benefits than high school graduates. Traditional schools have left too many minority students behind; career colleges can give them a real chance for success at significantly higher levels.

One must ask, why, then, are they being threatened by federal policy changes? Why are career [college students](#) being singled out, denied access to the same federal student aid programs as everyone else? Why are loan programs being reconfigured to set different standards of eligibility? Washington may think it is protecting students, but all it is doing is slamming shut the door to college and opportunity. Not every student can afford to attend a Harvard or University of Texas but every student should have the opportunity to get an education that enables him or her to compete in today's tough work environment.

If Washington establishes two tiers of colleges, what they are really establishing are two tiers of college *students*, relegating the underserved minority students at career colleges to “second-class” status.

Hundreds of thousands of futures hang in the balance. This is not opposition to the traditional institutions of higher education. It is a statement that there is a need and room for more than one type of college to help increase the worker's capacity and national goal of gainful employment. Following President Obama's speech on students access to college, it is my hope that the Department of Education will realize that the “gainful employment” rule will severely decrease college access for Hispanic and other minority and low income American students. Without access to career colleges, thousands of students will miss out on an education that can lead to better jobs and more successful futures.

Students who make time to invest in their future while working full time and taking care of their families – as many career college students do – are the kind of students that student loan programs should be designed to help. An individual who is willing and able to juggle a job, family and education deserves more than a chance, he or she deserves our support. If our ultimate goal is to have optimum performance then we must take responsibility for helping provide the tools to do so. The Department of Education should reconsider what it has put forth in the “gainful employment” rule – the students of career colleges deserve the same chance as everyone else, and it's in our power to provide the opportunity to them.

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