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November 6, 2010; 11:26am

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Career Colleges are the path for many to achieve their dreams; education policy makers' attacks misguided

Now a successful chef and business owner, I would not be where I am today if it wasn't for my career college education. I am deeply concerned that Washington policy makers currently attacking career colleges fail to understand that limiting the educational options available to those who oftentimes come from modest backgrounds will only serve to punish those they claim to want to assist.

Education is the foundation required to achieve success in today's world. But no one specific system of post-secondary education will ever have the wherewithal to accommodate everyone's educational needs, which means there must be a wide choice of systems.

For me, a career college was the perfect fit. It allowed me the opportunity to pursue my dream of becoming a chef. Today, I am the Executive Sous Chef for My Secret Chef, a personal chef service in Tallahassee, Florida. It is a growing business founded by the graduate of a career university. We provide our clients with in-home gourmet meals.

We also provide individual cooking lessons, cooking demonstrations, meal preparation for small in-home dinner parties, and are able to design menus for clients with special nutritional needs.

At My Secret Chef, all our chefs have received their degrees from accredited culinary school programs, which were taught at career universities. The reality is that public universities simply don't offer the same type of culinary programs. The opportunities offered to me and my colleagues through a career college have allowed us to build a successful business that employs people and generates revenue for the state of Florida and Federal government. We would not had been in this position if not for the existence of career colleges and universities where we learned the skills we are employing today.

Whatever the industry, specialized skills and expertise make the difference. And with students interested in pursuing many different kinds of careers, institutions of higher learning in our nation play a central role ensuring there are academic choices for everyone and anyone interested in furthering their knowledge base.

For some students, traditional universities may make the most sense. For others, community colleges offer the best opportunities. And others choose to study at career colleges and universities, which provide skills to students pursuing specialized

professions or seeking to gain specific vocational skills in a flexible learning environment.

These different options are a great strength in our educational system as they allow people like me to learn specific disciplines after high school that we might not be able to study anywhere else. My experience is that career colleges and universities fulfill a number of functions, including filling educational gaps that would otherwise leave students from underserved communities without real access to post-secondary education. They also prepare students for skilled professions in fast-growing fields, such as culinary, healthcare and information technology, which are essential to America's economic future.

Yet the existence of employment-oriented programs and convenient locations for hundreds of thousands of students at career colleges and universities is being threatened by burdensome and onerous rules being put in place administratively by unelected bureaucrats at the Department of Education. For instance, "gainful employment," a new misnamed rule intends to limit federal funding for schools whose students have an unduly high ratio of debt to post-graduation income, which is not uncommon for institutions whose students enter school from low income families or as independents and are simply seeking skills and training as a means to move forward. But the actual effect of the "gainful employment" rule as it is currently constructed would be to directly target career colleges and universities with draconian standards, which would result in the elimination of financial aid for hundreds of thousands of students many of whom work full time, are single parents, returning veterans and their families.

As our country continues to confront stagnant economic growth and record deficits, I don't believe it makes a lot of sense to place so many burdens on colleges that they can no longer afford to provide educational options to those from diverse backgrounds looking for opportunities to obtain their dream jobs and provide for their families.

By Carolyn Maison