US: Bush education proposals target community college students

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The US Congress is presently considering the ultimate form of the Higher Education Reauthorization Act for 2004, which will likely establish federal priorities for colleges and universities for the next decade. As was the case with the first version of this act in 1965, which was aimed at defusing the deepening social crisis created by the Vietnam War and social inequalities at home, the majority of issues are concerned with increasing access to and completion of higher education programs and degrees.

Through its various reauthorizations, the act has attained a degree of success by creating Educational Opportunity Grants, the Special Services for the Disadvantaged program (which provided tutoring, counseling and remedial instruction to low-income students) and Pell Grants (financial awards, based on demonstrated needs, to help undergraduate students pay for their education). However, several proposals for the 2004 version of the Reauthorization Act threaten to take it in a new and dangerous direction, especially for community colleges and their working class students.

In the past, only those higher education institutions whose accreditation was recognized by the Department of Education were eligible to offer financial aid to their students. If the Bush administration and its congressional voices have their way, however, the 2004 version will essentially separate accreditation from financial aid eligibility by tying public funding to an institution’s ability to retain students and graduate them as rapidly as possible. The introduction of free market methods into higher education will most severely harm community colleges and their working class students.

Supporters of the Higher Education Reauthorization Act for 2004 are claiming to be responding to the needs of low-income students and their parents’ calls for “accountability.” John Boehner, chairman of the Committee on Education and the Workforce, applauded Bush’s fiscal year Education Budget for “major increases” in funding for Pell Grants and “minority-serving institutions of higher learning.”

In fact, the 2004 Reauthorization Act would increase spending for Pell Grants by $1.9 billion (Committee on Education and the Workforce Press Release, February 2003). However, the same press release admits to working under the assumption that “the significant surge in the Pell Grant applicant growth rate over the past few years will begin to level off,” and that if this leveling doesn’t occur, “Pell Grant program costs would significantly increase above the budget estimates.”

Anyone who has applied for a job recently or followed the news knows that the committee’s assumption does not stand up to scrutiny: the economic conditions that have resulted in the record-setting increase in Pell Grant applications are only worsening, and many states have already announced even more cuts in funding for higher education in 2004. While more students undoubtedly will be forced to apply for Pell Grants, the commission offers no contingency plan for this eventuality.

More threatening to the community college mission of offering a higher education for everyone is the act’s proposed interpretation of accountability. While the Education Department has indicated that the Bush administration is “six to eight months away from unveiling its recommendation for reauthorization,” the administration did, in March 2002, release a five-year strategic plan for the Education Department that defined accountability in terms of a postsecondary institution’s ability to retain students and graduate them in a “timely fashion” (“Bush’s Next Target?”

The Chronicle of Higher Education, July 11, 2003).

More specifically, according to the June 2003 issue of *MEA Voice*, the monthly publication of the Michigan Education Association, some members of Congress have “talked about linking federal aid to minimum graduation rates at two- and four-year colleges, or those institutions could lose some federal funding.”

This proposal’s unstated assumption is that colleges and universities should compete with each other in a market atmosphere and that, to take market-driven logic a step further, all colleges and universities are playing on a level playing field. But how could a community college compete for funding with a private school or even a selective state university?

More than any other institution of higher learning, community colleges are democratic. The community or “junior” college movement began in the late 19th century as a means of offering higher education to young people who had graduated from public high schools but who could neither afford the cost nor meet the requirements of exclusive four-year colleges and universities. Today, there are 1,166 community colleges in the United States operating under an open-door admissions policy. They are also required to meet multiple needs: preparing students for four-year colleges and universities; offering program and certificate degrees in specific disciplines (e.g., industrial positions, computer programming and the health care field) and providing the opportunity for adults to take a class or two for the sake of career advancement or simple enjoyment.

While the student profile at a community college will of course vary depending upon location, at the great majority of community colleges the average student is “non-traditional.” Barry Stearns, current president of the National Council for Higher Education and an instructor at Lansing [Michigan] Community College, reports that “We have many so-called non-traditional students who are raising families, or who have full- or part-time jobs and may be taking a class that will help them in their jobs” (*MEA Voice*, June 2003).

Because so many community college students do hold down jobs while raising families, they can only take classes part-time. At Monroe County Community College (also in Michigan), certainly not an atypical example, 2,431 part-time students were enrolled for the fall 2002 semester compared to 1,397 full-time students. To be considered a full-time student, one must take at least 12 credit hours per semester. If we multiply this number by four (the number of semesters making up a two-year sequence), and consider that many associate’s degrees now require the successful completion of 60+ credit hours, we find that even full-time students, let alone part-time students, are hard pressed to graduate in two years.

With this mission and student population, community colleges will, if forced to compete for funding with more selective colleges and universities, have little choice but to dilute their coursework so that more students complete their associate’s degrees and certificates in the required amount of time. Unfortunately, students who earn these diluted degrees and certificates will be at a decided disadvantage when they enter a four-year school or enter the job market.

Tying federal funding to graduation rates could have the effect of channeling public resources to private universities. This no doubt is one aim of the Bush administration. Its ultimate goal, however, is to turn higher learning into a private, profit-driven industry. As with the assault on other publicly run institutions, privatizing community colleges will have the most adverse effect on the working class, depriving the majority of young people of the right to higher education.