

Obama pushes community colleges to serve corporate America

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As part of its effort to tailor higher education more closely to the needs of corporate America, the Obama administration and state governments are pushing four-year universities and colleges to drop remedial or developmental education. Instead these courses, which are chiefly used by working class students, are being shunted almost exclusively onto community colleges.

One way this is occurring is by restricting state and federal funding to four-year institutions. Over a dozen states have cut funding for remedial education at four-year universities and colleges.

Oklahoma and Nevada have taken the additional step of simply denying state funding for remediation at four-year institutions, while Colorado and South Carolina shifted remediation to community colleges several years ago.

This policy is not being implemented to improve access to remedial courses. Rather, it is being done with the intent of creating an even more unequal system of higher education in which working class students will have little or no access to a university-level education. Either working class youth will be denied a college education altogether, or they will be relegated to the community college system, which the Obama administration wants to transform into little more than training centers for low-wage jobs in manufacturing and the service industry.

Professor Hunter R. Boylan, director of the National Center for Developmental Education, told *US News and World Report* that the removal of remedial education from four-year institutions, “may contribute to a higher education caste system where higher income students go to universities and lower income students go to community colleges.”

College remedial courses were originally designed as refresher courses for non-traditional students, i.e., those

who return to school after being away for some period of time or recent high school graduates who had difficulties in school.

However, because of such factors as nutritional deficiencies, underfunded, lower-performing K-12 systems, and the destruction of the social safety net, the disadvantaged category now often includes students with severe cognitive and behavioral problems who come to community colleges because there is nowhere else for them to.

At the same time, community colleges are not equipped to meet the needs of these students. Community college courses are most often taught by adjunct or part-time faculty, with little or no training to help such students. In 2010, for example, 79 percent of the remedial courses were taught by part-time faculty, according to hechingerreporting.org.

Furthermore, part-time instructors, with the least amount of teaching experience, are often hired shortly before the semester begins as community college administrators wait to see which classes will prove “profitable,” i.e., which classes will be retained or dropped depending on whether they have filled enough seats.

Finally, teaching remedial courses requires a thorough knowledge of the deep and complex relationship between cognition and the basic skills of reading, writing, and mathematics, a capacity that may be lacking among full-time faculty, let alone part-time instructors hired at the last minute.

The Obama administration is also seeking to fundamentally transform the role of community colleges, which have traditionally expanded the scope of higher education to far wider layers of the population. In many cases community colleges have been a low-cost alternative for students who then move

on to a four-year institution. Instead these schools are to be reshaped to serve the labor needs of corporate America.

This is made clear in the 2011 Year-End Report from the President's Council on Jobs and Competitiveness, released in mid-January. The report insists, "postsecondary education is frequently decoupled from employer needs" and proposes the formation of "partnerships between businesses and education institution."

It says that colleges should discourage students from taking liberal arts courses by using "data-driven transparency" that will warn them of the lack of jobs in fields such as art and the humanities. Instead they should be encouraged to develop "employable" skills, such as science, engineering and technology.

Thus, the goal is no longer the informed, educated population that Thomas Jefferson and John Dewey found necessary if democracy were to thrive. Instead the goal is now, according to the Job Council's report, to "align labor demand with supply." Community colleges in particular are to provide the modicum of skills necessary for a life of low-wage service and production jobs.

In his State of the Union address, Obama singled out the partnership between Siemens Corporation and Central Piedmont Community College in North Carolina for training workers at the company's turbine factory in Charlotte, North Carolina. He failed to mention that the company shut its Hamilton, Ontario plant and moved to North Carolina to exploit lower wages.

President Obama's proposal to provide schools financial incentives for lowering tuition and increasing graduation rates, also called the "completion agenda," will actually serve to undermine community colleges.

Among institutes of higher learning, tuition hikes were greatest at community colleges (8.7 percent) in 2011, in large measure because of falling tax revenue from the worsening economy and state and local budget cuts. However, because state and local taxpayers often subsidize tuition and the federal taxpayers provide some financial aid for low and moderate income students, only 13 percent of community college students go into debt.

Jonathan Gibralter, president of Frostburg State University in Maryland, complained in the context of

Obama's call to do more with less that "Out of necessity, the leaders of non-elite universities and community colleges have the practice of doing more with fewer dollars down to a science" (*US News and World Report*, 12/12/11).

Linking financial funding to degree completion rate hurts because a higher percentage of community college students (59 percent) attend part-time while working and often raising children, and less than 8 percent finish an associate's degree within four years, let alone within the traditional two-year time period.

The result will be federal funding cuts to community colleges, further forcing them to seek corporate "partners" to fund their operations. The outcome, as the president's job council advocates, is that schools will implement "curricula and assessments that meets the needs of regional employers."

Colleges, particularly community colleges, will thus cede decisions regarding course work and assessments—the means by which students and teachers are evaluated—to their corporate partner's needs. The great majority of working-class community college students, remedial or otherwise, will therefore find transferring to a four-year institution and gaining a degree a near impossibility.

Turning community colleges into training facilities will greatly lessen the cost of "educating" working class students while creating a trained workforce to fill low-paying jobs, which will in turn create even more profits for corporate America.



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