



Make college affordable to keep America strong: Opinion

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As New Jersey's leaders finalize higher education appropriations for 2013-14 and consider new performance and accountability standards for colleges, they should sustain existing college opportunity and student financial aid programs — and not reduce operating support for the state's colleges and universities.

The expansion of college opportunity since World War II has been a major contributor toward America's prosperity, global economic competitiveness and world leadership. While most Americans recognize that access to an affordable college is central to fulfilling the American dream, the outlook for more public investment in higher education is "negative," according to Moody's Investors Service and other analysts.

It's paradoxical that colleges, so successful in advancing social and economic mobility, are under heavy scrutiny for their cost and pricing, as well as accountability for their results. Given rising college costs, citizens question the value of the investment, while public funding stagnates and families and students pay a bigger share of the funding burden.

Policymakers and educators raise legitimate questions about higher education's business model. The demand for savings is accelerated by the availability of new educational technology. Consumers, who are upset about growing personal debt to finance college, want to finish college faster, with assurance that degrees are tied directly to work and career development.

As we search for policy reform, good ideas, as well as some bad ones, crop up. One such bad idea is former U.S. Education Secretary Bill Bennett's recent book, "Is College Worth It?" Bennett writes that the value of a college degree is not worth the cost, unless a student attends one of 150 elite colleges. He reaches his conclusion by misapplying a simplistic "return on investment" analysis — what students pay compared with what they earn after college.

Bennett's assertion offers no real policy remedy for the college cost/price dilemma, other than: Don't go. I suspect the former secretary's purpose, besides selling his book, is to support even less public investment in college and to lower aspirations for attending.



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Even though a college graduate earns up to 80 percent more in a lifetime than those who don't go to college, the value of a degree far exceeds projected earnings. Studies on the value of a college degree, regardless of the field studied, find that college graduates do better throughout life than those without college experience.

Research by the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development indicates that, globally, college

graduates earn more, produce more, are healthier, stay married longer, commit fewer crimes and are more engaged in communities than those who don't attend college. Every developed and emerging country in the world seeks to invest in creating more college graduates, not fewer, to improve the lives of its citizens.

Given the American democratic experience, it is preposterous to assert that America would be a freer, fairer, more open or prosperous society without more Americans acquiring higher learning.

Richard Stockton College of New Jersey has identified 10 "essential learning outcomes" to help assure its degrees have lifetime value. The ELOs include: adaptability, communication skills, creativity/innovation, critical thinking, ethical reasoning, global awareness, information and research skills, expert knowledge, quantitative reasoning and teamwork/collaboration. These attributes make college worthwhile far beyond what a college graduate might earn.

New Jerseyans want greater college opportunity, not less, and at an affordable price. Citizens want college courses and degrees that relate to jobs and career development. But most of all, they understand that higher learning leads not just to higher earnings, but also to the opportunity to create a foundation to learn for a lifetime, to take thoughtful risks, to fulfill dreams and aspirations, to compete, to contemplate and to understand a broader world, to innovate and to achieve, and to contribute to the greater good.

This is why college is important, and why higher learning in a free society always will be.

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