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# Local College Presidents: Poor, Minority Students 'Overlooked' in Senate Higher Ed Agenda

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*Presidents of the community colleges in Miami-Dade, Broward and Palm Beach counties argue against a major Senate higher education bill during a meeting with the Miami Herald editorial board.*

EMILY MICHOT / MIAMI HERALD

South Florida's community college presidents are fighting a legislative proposal they argue would especially hurt low-income people and minorities – who make up the majority of their student bodies.

The leaders of Miami Dade College, Broward College and Palm Beach State College – whose schools enroll about half of all community college students in Florida – are teaming up to oppose Senate Bill 540 (<https://www.flsenate.gov/Session/Bill/2018/540/BillText/c1/PDF>), a chief priority of Republican Senate President Joe Negron.



The 247-page bill is a resurrected and revised version of Negron's priority higher education legislation that was vetoed last year by Gov. Rick Scott. In part to address Scott's concerns that the bill unnecessarily punished community colleges, Negron eased some of the provisions that the schools found most problematic. Apparently the changes weren't enough to appease the schools' leaders, who warn it would lead to unintended consequences if enacted.

"The low-income, working class people that are at our institutions sometimes ... are just overlooked," Broward College President David Armstrong told the Miami Herald editorial board on Thursday afternoon.

"Those people don't have lobbyists in Tallahassee, do they?" he said. "And so, if we're not standing up for them, there's nobody there to take care of their concerns and issues."

Negron identified strengthening public universities as the primary goal for his two-year term as president of the Senate. But during the first year, critics argued he boosted the state's dozen universities at the direct expense of community colleges. Notably, while universities got a windfall in the current state budget, colleges endured a \$30 million cut.

However, Negron also influenced the Legislature to dramatically increase funding for student financial aid programs last year, a spokeswoman for the Senate president pointed out in a response to the college presidents' criticisms.

During the editorial board meeting on Thursday, the leaders repeatedly returned to the fact that the University of Florida was able to hire 500 new faculty members recently as a result of Negron's push.

“And here I am scrambling to see how I hire five — I’m desperate to hire five new faculty,” Miami Dade College President Eduardo Padrón said during the meeting. “It doesn’t seem to be a very fair and equitable situation.”

But Negron’s strategy for remaking Florida’s nationally renowned community colleges goes beyond reducing their budgets. He also hopes to refocus the system on its primary mission of meeting workforce needs by delivering certificates and associate’s degrees in fields where skilled workers are in high demand. He has denounced colleges’ proliferation of bachelor’s degrees, which he argues are the domain of universities.

Negron’s proposal last year included strict limits on colleges’ ability to add new bachelor’s degree programs and grow enrollment in their existing ones. The new bill still addresses the issue, but in a less aggressive way.

Under the new plan, an individual college’s number of upper-level undergraduates — students in their junior or senior years of four-year programs — could not exceed 20 percent of the school’s overall enrollment. At the local colleges, about 4 to 5 percent of the students bodies are upperclassmen, the presidents said.

Further, under the bill, juniors and seniors couldn’t account for more than 10 percent of the system’s overall student body.

College leaders argue this would hurt low-income students because four-year programs at colleges are cheaper and more accessible than those at universities.

They also worry caps on the growth of four-year degrees could mean they’re not able to respond quickly to the changing needs of the economy and address shortages, like for nurses.

“That’s something that should be market-driven,” Palm Beach State College President Ava Parker said. “We kind of find it fascinating that in a Republican Legislature that we would not want to rely upon the market to make determinations about what types of programs we should offer.”

Senate Bill 540 would also change the performance metrics that determine some of community colleges’ funding so there’s greater emphasis on on-time graduation. In recent years, an increasing share of public colleges’ and universities’ funding has been doled out based on their performance on metrics such as graduation and retention rates.

Colleges have decried the provision as unfair and inconsistent with their missions, since most of their students work while they go to school. Parker said 86 percent of her students have jobs, making it more difficult for them to graduate on time.

However, only full-time students who are in college for the first time would be included in the evaluation.

“If a student is working and only attending part time or has to take a semester off to work or deal with a family or health issue, they would not count against the metric,” Katie Betta, the spokeswoman for Negrón, said in an email.

Parker advocated instead for evaluating colleges on whether all students graduate from two-year programs in three or four years, since nearly three quarters of students at her school are enrolled part-time.

Further, the legislation would change the name of the Florida College System back to the Florida Community College System. (Most of the individual colleges dropped “community” from their titles after they started offering four-year degrees, but this bill wouldn’t require them to change the names back. Florida Keys Community College is currently in the process of trying to re-brand.)

The bill would also re-establish the State Board of Community Colleges to govern the system; the panel would be made up of gubernatorial appointees. Currently, colleges are governed by the State Board of Education, whose members also oversee K-12 public schools and are appointed by the governor.

The college presidents described this move as an attempt by lawmakers to wrest more control from local leaders. They said it was an inconsistent position for Republicans.

“Local control is such a basic Republican concept,” Padrón said. “They are trying not only to micromanage ... but also to take local control from local communities. ... They want to take control ... and take it to Tallahassee.”

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