



EDITORIALS

Punishing community colleges — but why?

MIAMI HERALD EDITORIAL BOARD

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Many public-service institutions struggle to succeed, but Florida’s community college system is an exception. Its schools deliver a strong hand up to minority, low-income, first-generation and older students.

Our own Miami Dade College leads the nation in the number of degrees awarded, and Broward College has the second highest graduation rates for African Americans. Overall, the entire Florida College System, with 28 community colleges, serves a whopping 800,000 students.

So why — once again — does the state Legislature think the Florida College System needs to be fixed? Nothing is broken. In fact, nothing is wrong with the system that full funding wouldn’t help. Unfortunately, some lawmakers want to punish community colleges, cutting their budgets and wresting away local control.

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We wonder: Could the demographics that community colleges serve play a role in these punitive measures? As we said, the colleges are lifesavers for minority, low-income, first-generation and older students — not necessarily high priorities for this Republican-controlled Legislature. Three South Florida community college presidents who recently met with the Miami Herald Editorial Board say these students would be the victims of the “unintended consequences” of this unnecessary overhaul.

“What is the problem they’re looking to fix?” Broward College President J. David Armstrong Jr. asked the board last week, where he was joined by Miami Dade College President Eduardo Padrón and Palm Beach State College President Ava Parker. “This is the finest community college system in the country.”

Senate Bill 540 and its House companion seek to change the organization’s name from the Florida College System to the Florida Community College System. It’s a slap to remind them that they are two-year institutions and should not forget their place. Some community colleges offer four-year degrees, not to compete with four-year state universities, but in response to what local business communities request. Republican lawmakers should appreciate that community colleges respond quickly to the free market in providing degrees, for instance, in nursing, teacher ed or applied sciences. And they do it at a lower cost to students — and to taxpayers.

But it’s no secret that this beat-down is a priority for Senate President Joe Negron, R-Stuart, who has long favored the four-year institutions.

The bills would create a statewide board to oversee community colleges. The Senate bill, sponsored by Sen. Dorothy Hukill, R-Port Orange, would take away local control and give it to a 13-member State Board of Community Colleges, which makes no sense.

How to meet students’ needs would be decided not at the local level with the help of a board of trustees, but in Tallahassee. The bills also propose a limit on four-year degrees community colleges can offer and a stricter performance measure for graduation.

Hukill, chairwoman of the education panel, has indicated she’s unhappy with what she says are low graduation rates.

In 2015, the graduation rate — students graduating within three years — was 34 percent for Miami Dade College, 36 percent for Broward College and 39 percent at Palm Beach State College. The college presidents understand the numbers and work hard not to be penalized financially for them.

MDC’s Padrón sees the bill as a power grab. “We have not heard what is wrong with our governance — yet they’re trying to create another bureaucracy that’s going to cost millions of taxpayer dollars,” he said.

Palm Beach State College President Ava Parker said, “The local nature and local control is what makes us unique and has made us successful.” She’s right. In fact, community college grads have a higher job placement rate than those from the four-year schools, and at higher starting salaries. Gov. Rick Scott, the “jobs governor,” needs to weigh in and defend the two-year colleges. And when the 2018 legislative session gets under way Tuesday, legislators should direct their interventions where they’re truly needed.

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Miami-Dade College President Eduaro Padrón speaks to the Miami Herald Editorial Board. **Emily Michot** - MIAMI HERALD