



New Task for Colleges: Educating ‘First-Gens’

First-generation college students, an academically diverse group, need information and support to find and succeed in colleges that fit their academic needs. Interventions are helping high-performing, low-income students—many of whom are first-generation collegians—avoid attending less selective or lower quality schools. But currently, most first-generation students attend community colleges with open admissions and where spending on instruction and student support is lower than at other types of public or private institutions. In fact, 40 percent of all students enrolled in community colleges are first-generation.

It's ironic that the students with the greatest needs are attending colleges that not only spend less to educate them but have also been forced to cut their spending disproportionately in recent years. AIR's Delta Cost Project, which documents spending trends among not-for-profit higher education institutions, consistently finds that instruction-related spending per student in community colleges lags spending in all other types of institutions. Between 2000 and 2010, community colleges experienced a 50 percent increase in full-time equivalent enrollment and an 11 percent drop in spending on instruction.

What if higher education funding focused on the needs of students rather than the needs of institutions and their faculty? The world of K-12 finance talks about adequacy of funding, focusing on the amount of money needed to achieve goals and to provide a sufficient education. The conversation centers on how much money is needed to actually educate an individual. But this concept rarely if ever makes its way into higher education conversations. Even the performance funding models that some states use emphasize outcomes over student needs.

Achieving the ultimate desired outcome—academic success—particularly in community colleges, just might require shifting more resources to the students who need the most support. And with their fair share, first-generation students might stand a better chance of succeeding.

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