

Debate: Why Is Obama Administration Targeting Career Colleges?

(April 21) — The report last week that initial claims for unemployment benefits rose again for the second straight week shows that the economy has a long, long way to go before it turns the corner on jobs. Indeed, more than 7 million Americans have lost their jobs since the recession began. And for many, their old jobs are never coming back.

That has put a huge premium on retaining jobs, a role that career-oriented colleges can help fill, unless the Obama administration pushes through a rule that will severely hamper these schools.

OPPOSING VIEW

We are expanding access to college, but along with that comes a greater need to make sure taxpayer funds aren't being wasted, says Education Secretary Arne Duncan.

Career-oriented colleges — like The Art Institutes and DeVry University — focus on providing students with postsecondary degrees that will advance their careers. And they are increasingly meeting a need in the higher-education marketplace, growing to 7 percent of the market from 1 percent a decade ago.

Not only are these schools more nimble in meeting the needs of current and potential students, they've also shown themselves to be more adaptable in working with students who are older, who have families, who must continue to work or who have difficult financial circumstances that must be met and overcome.

In contrast, public, nonprofit schools face massive budget cuts from state governments, diminished endowments and dwindling gifts. At the same time, traditional schools are raising tuition and pricing themselves out of the market for far too many otherwise qualified students. And, for better or worse, traditional liberal arts programs are not meeting the needs for

many of today's students and employers.

The growth of career colleges is a positive development. Competition is healthy, even in education. Given the surge in demand for higher education, more choices means good news for students and their families.

So why has the Department of Education proposed a "gainful employment" rule that could close the door to many students hoping to attend a career-oriented college?

The rule would set absolute limits on the amount of debt students can carry based on their earnings at the beginning of their careers. The rule is meant to reduce student debt, but it would actually limit students in some careers from being able to get federal loans and grants that come from Title IV federal funding.

Many students need financial aid in order to go back to school; the gainful employment rule, if adopted, would consequently limit them from attending career colleges that prepare them to get a job. Americans will either be unable to attend the schools of their choice or they will be forced to use more costly and restrictive lending.

According to a recent study by the National Center for Education Statistics, students who attend career colleges are "likely to be older, a racial minority and/or a military veteran, less academically prepared, and working or juggling other responsibilities." These are the very types of students who are most at risk in our society.

And the gainful employment rule would have the greatest impact on the most at-risk portion of the working population — students who are in the most need of education and who are limited from attending career-oriented colleges.

President Barack Obama has outlined his goal to increase the percentage of college

graduates over the next decade. "We will," he said, "provide the support necessary for you to complete college and meet a new goal: By 2020 America will, once again, have the highest proportion of college graduates in the world."

Career-oriented colleges and universities are helping to fulfill that goal. They have earned a seat at the table of postsecondary education in America. They are providing real education for a huge number of students who are seeking a degree with a specific career path in mind.

The Department of Education should be very careful in promulgating a gainful employment rule that will have the unintended consequence of destroying educational opportunities for those who need them most.

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