

by Angel B. Pérez

Higher Education for the Public Good

Response to “Minority Access to Higher Education” on page 56

Twenty-four years after Nathaniel Jackson inspired us to become leaders in minority student success, it’s exciting to note that NACAC continues to cultivate Jackson’s vision by providing a national platform whose ultimate goal is equity and access. If you look at the recent work of our association—the Commission on the Use of Standardized Testing, the work of the Current Trends and Future Issues Committee on increased transparency in financial aid and the national advocacy of the Inclusion, Access and Success Committee—there is clearly a powerful movement to ensure that young people in America have an opportunity to achieve higher education, regardless of life circumstance.

Yet our work is not done. Although educational statisticians predict the largest segment of the American population in 2025 to be minority, they are still the least represented in higher education, graduate at lower rates and face higher student loan debt than other students. The recent downturn in the economy and the threat of a double-dip recession is forcing colleges and universities to rethink their admission and financial aid policies. The students who suffer most today are the ones with the least. Cutting back on the budget usually means admitting more students who can pay full price and, although I firmly believe schools have the best of intentions, when faced with pressures like these, immediate institutional needs outweigh those of the public good. We are at risk of falling backwards and losing the momentum of the great strides we have made in minority student access. I argue that if we don’t heed Jackson’s challenge now more than ever, our great work over the past few decades will be undone.

In his 1988 article, Jackson inspired NACAC with four objectives to meet the challenge of leading the charge in minority students



access. I leave you with three more that I believe will challenge us in the decades ahead.

Focus on the Public Good: Increased competition, marketing and an obsession with allowing professional practices to influence rankings simply hurts students. Imagine what we could do with our budgets if instead of focusing on marketing and keeping up with the Joneses, we reallocate those resources to best educate the public about American higher education? When colleges spend time trying to increase their rankings, chasing prestige and dedicating resources to goals that don’t focus on student access and success, they no longer serve the public good. Who loses? Our students. Who suffers the most? Those with the least: our underrepresented student populations. It is up to NACAC to establish a vision of enrollment and counseling in the decades ahead.

Honor Transparency: Let’s create a system that honors transparency in college admission and financial aid. Although colleges must employ business practices to survive, our industry has a higher calling. We serve young people and change lives. The students most affected by the unethical practices

of colleges today are minorities and first-generation college students. The fact that the highest number of students dropping out of for-profit colleges with inordinate amounts of debt are low-income, first-generation students of color is shameful. The fact that thousands of students enroll in colleges with a clear misunderstanding of their financial aid packages (thus creating incredible loan debt) should be illegal. There are schools in our industry that prey on young minority students who end up indebted for life. How did we allow the pendulum to swing so far away from serving the public good?

Measure Collective Success: Can you imagine a day when members of NACAC base their success on how many students attend college, receive aid and graduate with little debt? What if we ranked colleges based on how many underrepresented students they enrolled and most importantly, retained? NACAC can lead a national movement that inspires American higher education to measure success based on what we do as an industry, not as individual institutions.

If we are to cultivate an educated nation inclusive of the talents of all its members, we must guarantee access and opportunity for our underrepresented populations. Those of us in enrollment and leadership positions today must remember that the true measure of our professional success will not be how we enroll an individual class, but how we shape a future generation.



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