

# Shutting the College Doors on Poor Youth

By Karen Pittman, February 2005

Google Alerts are wonderful, a free personalized online clipping service. At the top of my clips for the New Year was this editorial from the Desert Sun (January 2, 2005) in Palm Springs, California: “Fund your college education — apply now for financial aid: Application deadlines are looming — don’t delay any longer.”

The editorial read like an upbeat infomercial on college funding: “...money is waiting to be found...big time money available through the state and federal government...but you have to act fast...start filling out those applications...take hold of your future today.”

To its credit, the piece offered useful information on grants, work-study programs and loans available, and how to apply. Part of me was pleased to see a local newspaper aggressively urging parents and youths to consider college attendance an attainable goal. Knowing nothing about Palm Springs, I checked out its demographics from the 2000 Census. Number of colleges within 60 miles: eight. Total population: 42,807. Population based on race: White 66.5 percent, Hispanic 23.4 percent, and African-American 4.4 percent. Foreign-born citizens: 21 percent. The number of households headed by single parent females was 27 percent. The child poverty rate was 28.2 percent, while the median household income was \$35,973, which is below the national average income of \$42,148.

Part of me, however, was skeptical. Information is important. Many youth-serving organizations spend a lot of time increasing young people’s awareness of academic requirements, application processes and financial aid for college. But that’s only one piece of the puzzle. The Indianapolis-based Lumina Foundation — a private, independent institution that works to expand educational opportunities to youth and adults — suggests that there are four parts to the higher education access and success equation: preparation, awareness, financing and institutional responsibility.

Awareness is a critical issue, but compared with the three other ingredients, it is also the cheapest, easiest and frequently the most inadequate response. Print some fliers, run some articles, hold some support sessions, then blame the victims if application and attendance rates don’t go up.

Students and families need to know about financial aid options and receive coaching through the process. Many youth-serving organization do this as well. But information doesn’t pay the bills — and neither can most nonprofits.

Since the mid-1980s, college tuitions have increased at hyper-inflationary rates, while both the availability and the purchasing power of need-based grants have declined, as the federal government and private institutions have replaced grant awards with loan offers. The tuition burden has shifted more onto students and families, and the costs are driving less affluent students away.

The equity goal delineated in the Higher Education Act of 1965 (currently up for reauthorization) created an opportunity for enrollment equity that was achieved, albeit briefly, a decade after its enactment, in large part because of the

introduction of Pell Grants in 1973. The consequences of our long-term failure to keep pace with inflation and rising tuition costs can be seen in the ebbs and flows in minority enrollment rates.

In 1965, only about one-third of all African-American high school graduates went on to college, while about half of white graduates did. In 1976, three years after the Pell Grants were created, the gap had almost closed.

By 1982, however, double-digit inflation and unemployment had taken their toll. The African-American rates plummeted to 36 percent, 17 points below the rate for white students, who are less dependent on public financial aid. By 1998, a robust economy had caused all boats to rise: White enrollment rates stood at 69 percent, and the racial gap had narrowed to 7 points. The beginning of this decade has seen more challenging economic times and further increasing college tuitions, and as a result, both white enrollment (66.1 percent), and black enrollment (58.3) have dipped again.

The link between college financing and college enrollment for low-income and minority students, many of whom are first generation college-goers, is clear. Rather than increasing funding to get the grants program on a track back to its intended levels, the Bush administration is proposing changes in federal financial aid that would result in a \$300 million cut. This cut, according to the New York Times (Nov. 25), could reduce grant amounts for as many as 1.2 million low-income students and eliminate them for as many as 100,000.

Education is a nonpartisan issue that needs strong bi-partisan support. It makes no sense to make sure no child is left behind in high school, just to shut the door on them in college.

**Read More:**

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Karen Pittman is executive director of the Forum for Youth Investment.

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