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OP-ED COLUMNIST

No Size Fits All

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If you visit a four-year college, you can predict what sort of student you are going to bump into. If you visit a community college, you have no idea. You might see an immigrant kid hoping eventually to get a Ph.D., or another kid who messed up in high school and is looking for a second chance. You might meet a 35-year-old former meth addict trying to get some job training or a 50-year-old taking classes for fun.

These students may not realize it, but they're tackling some of the country's biggest problems. Over the past 35 years, college completion rates have been flat. Income growth has stagnated. America has squandered its human capital advantage. Students at these places are on self-directed missions to reverse that, one person at a time.

Community college enrollment has been increasing at more than three times the rate of four-year colleges. This year, in the middle of the recession, many schools are seeing enrollment surges of 10 percent to 15 percent. And the investment seems to pay off. According to one study, students who earn a certificate experience a 15 percent increase in earnings. Students earning an associate degree registered an 11 percent gain.

And yet funding lags. Most people in government, think tanks and the news media didn't go to community college, and they don't send their children to them. It's a blind spot in their consciousness. As a result, four-year colleges receive three times as much federal money per student as community colleges. According to a Brookings Institution report, federal spending for community colleges fell six percent between 2002 and 2005, while spending on four-year colleges increased.

Which is why what President Obama announced this week is so important. He announced a \$12 billion plan to produce 5 million more community college grads by 2020.

If the plan were just \$12 billion for buildings and student aid, it wouldn't be worth getting excited about. The money devoted to new construction amounts to about \$2 million per campus. With new facilities costing in the tens of millions, that's not a big deal.

Nor is increased student aid fundamentally important. I've had this discussion with my liberal friends a thousand times, and I have come to accept that they will never wrap their minds around the truth: lack of student aid is not the major reason students drop out of college. They drop out because they are academically unprepared or emotionally disengaged or because they lack self-discipline or because bad

things are happening at home.

Affordability is way down the list. You can increase student aid a ton and you still won't have a huge effect on college completion.

What's important about the Obama initiative is that it doesn't throw money at the problem. It ties money to reform and has the potential — the potential — to spur a wave of innovation.

People who work at community colleges deserve all the love we can give them, since they get so little prestige day to day. But the fact is many community colleges do a poor job of getting students through. About half drop out before getting a degree.

Most schools have poor accountability systems and inadequately track student outcomes. They have little information about what works. They have trouble engaging students on campus. Many remedial classes (60 percent of students need them) are a joke, often because expectations are too low.

The Obama initiative is designed to go right at these deeper problems. It sets up a significant innovation fund, which, if administered properly, could set in motion a spiral of change. It has specific provisions for remedial education, outcome tracking and online education. It links public sector training with specific private sector employers.

Real reform takes advantage of community colleges' most elemental feature. These colleges educate students with wildly divergent interests, goals and abilities. They host students with radically different learning styles, many of whom have floundered in traditional classrooms.

Therefore, successful reform has to blow up the standard model. You can't measure progress by how many hours a student spends with her butt in a classroom chair. You have to incorporate online tutoring, as the military does. You have to experiment with programs like [Digital Bridge Academy](#) that are tailored to individual learning styles. You have to track student outcomes, as [the Lumina Foundation](#) is doing. You have to build in accountability measures for teachers and administrators.

Maybe this proposal, too, will be captured by the interest groups. But its key architects, Rahm Emanuel in the White House and Representative George Miller, have created a program that is intelligently designed and boldly presented.

It's a reminder that the Obama administration can produce hope and change — when the White House is the engine of policy creation and not the caboose.