

Guest column: 'Tennessee Promise' is not that promising

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Memphis is in the midst of a jobs crisis. We have one of the most persistently high municipal unemployment rates in the state, even as thousands of quality manufacturing and logistics positions remain unfilled due to the lack of qualified applicants.

Few institutions are better positioned to recognize the true extent of this crisis — or its causes and pernicious long-term effects on our regional economy — than local colleges and universities. Education, training, and economic development strategies must work in sync if we are to have any hope of reversing the economic declines of the last decade and creating sustainable economic prosperity for all of our community's citizens.

Fortunately, many forces throughout the public and private sectors are working hard to change these trends. Efforts like Governor Haslam's "Drive to 55" initiative, of which all local colleges are proud participants, and recent philanthropic investments in college completion are especially commendable.

President Barack Obama recently made an announcement that he was expanding a version of the "Tennessee Promise," a government program to provide qualified students with free or deeply discounted tuition to the two-year community college of their choice. Community colleges fill a vital role in our local higher education landscape, providing useful skills and job training for citizens who may otherwise have no ability to acquire them. Often, a community college degree or certificate is all that stands between an individual and the long-term stability that comes with a good-paying job.

We are concerned, however, that these kinds of programs, designed with the best of intentions, may inadvertently do more harm than good to some students by unfairly and inappropriately distorting the landscape of higher education options available to them.

When "free" community college is available, high school guidance counselors are inadvertently, but invariably, pressured to direct graduating seniors to these options and away from traditional four-year institutions.

Students and counselors are not always necessarily operating with all of the information they need to make the best choices for themselves and their futures.

For instance, the notion that students from community colleges successfully matriculate at four-year institutions has not been substantiated by any readily available evidence.

Currently, the rate of graduation from Tennessee community colleges is 13.9 percent. Of that, only 14 percent move on to four-year institutions.

Such students often have a very difficult social and academic transition from two-year programs into four-year institutions, sometimes having to retake prerequisite classes to be prepared for the academic rigor of their new schools. As such, the promise that "free community college" will give students a vital head start on a bachelor's degree is questionable at best.

While each of the local four-year peer institutions is very different in our missions, philosophies, strategies, and course offerings, we are united in our belief in the value of a four-year degree.

At all local colleges and universities, creating a strong link between service and learning is only realized through a carefully crafted four-year curriculum, in which our students are immersed in their community and given practical opportunities to use their knowledge and skills.

Liberal arts, engineering, athletics, student life, and all of the other parts of our experience work best when they work together.

CBU's motto, "Enter to Learn, Leave to Serve," not only describes our commitment to our students and our community, but is a challenge that we choose to renew and honor every day.

That is why we take issue with any proposal, however well-meaning, that would privilege a community college degree and prematurely remove a four-year degree from consideration. High school graduates should know that one size does not necessarily fit all when making arguably the most important financial decision of their young lives.

Students and their families owe it to themselves to be as thoughtful and informed as possible in selecting the academic path that suits them best, judging each option on its own merits and with consideration of their own individual needs.

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