



Community College

DARE TO DO MORE

Office of the President

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**Testimony of Dr. Gail O. Mellow, President of LaGuardia Community College
for the
Subcommittee on Labor, Health and Human Services, Education and Related Agencies
of the House Appropriations Committee
on
Closing the Achievement Gap in Higher Education
March 18, 2015
Washington, D.C.**

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I want to thank Chairman Cole and Congresswoman DeLauro, and the Committee members and their staff, for giving me the opportunity to testify before the Committee and discuss strategies that our nation's colleges, in partnership with government, can take to address the pressing need to ensure that more Americans can attend college, earn a degree and achieve a better life for themselves and their families.

I am Dr. Gail O. Mellow, President of LaGuardia Community College located in Queens, New York. Part of the City University of New York, the nation's largest urban public college system, LaGuardia serves over 20,000 students annually in over 50 credit-bearing degree programs. We also educate another 30,000 students in a range of non-credit programs that span from helping adults earn a high school equivalency degree to training entrepreneurs to grow their businesses and create jobs.

Our college reflects the changing face of America and who attends college. Approximately 50% of our students are foreign-born, representing over 160 countries and speaking 111 different native languages. Our students defy what "traditional" college students look like—they are older (more than one-third of our students are over the age of 30), most work at least part-time and many are working full-time jobs. Our students struggle financially—more than two-thirds of students report family income of \$25,000 or less. In many ways, these poor students are the model of who goes to college in America—attending community colleges while working and supporting families.

Today's hearing is critically important, because we know that college completion changes students' life trajectories. Our economy rewards those with a college degree—with higher income, more stable employment, better health and more civic participation. The future of the United States will rise or fall on our ability to help low-income students, students from under-represented minorities and first generation students, persist in college and earn a degree. To do so, America should focus her attention on the community college system.

The inclusive, democratic and meritocratic impulses of community colleges have kept alive a promise of advancement and opportunity unlike any other institution in the U.S. It is why Lloyd Blankfein, the head of Goldman Sachs, as his company invested funds in LaGuardia and other community colleges stated, "Community colleges are the most powerful tools we have in the United States to move people into the middle class."

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Studies show that lifetime earnings increase more than \$400,000 for those students with an associate's degree. But, the investment goes beyond that, as a highly educated populace, in turn, advances communities and collectively the country. Community colleges are as essential to our democratic and economic ecosystem as clean air and water are to our environment.

But we must remember that community colleges educate the most challenged students—those who live in poverty, must balance complex lives of work, school and family and often come from high schools that offered compromised academics—and do so with the fewest resources. Community colleges educate nearly half of all undergraduates, and yet receive two-thirds fewer public dollars than four year colleges. Our private research institutions spend 350% more than public community colleges in teaching students. And we receive pitifully few philanthropic dollars.

In my testimony today, I want to outline what we know are the strategies that work for community college students, to offer an “on-the-ground” perspective. What I won't do in my testimony is address important policy issues surrounding financial aid and workforce development that deeply impact our students and are currently under discussion here in Congress. I'd be happy to elaborate on them in any follow-up questions.

Let's begin by more closely examining where students go to college. We are in the midst of an increasing stratification of who attends college and where they attend. Four-year college students are getting whiter and more affluent, while two-year college students are becoming blacker, browner and increasingly low-income. Georgetown's Center on Education and the Workforce looked at enrollment and found that since 1995, 85 percent of incoming white students attended selective four-year schools, while 72 percent of incoming Latino students and 68 percent of their black peers instead went to two-year colleges. Fifty-eight percent of students attending community colleges are from the bottom 50 percent of income levels in the United States, compared to 15 percent at highly selective colleges. Sixty-two percent of community college students attend part-time, and more than 56 percent work more than 20 hours a week. This compares with four-year colleges, where less than 22 percent are part-time and only 24 percent work more than 20 hours. Low-income, black and Latino students do not complete college at rates anywhere near white students. The achievement gap is a pernicious one and its roots run deep.

While the responsibility of community colleges to graduate students is welcomed, it is formidable. We educate the hardest to serve with the least funding. While increasing graduation rates is essential, we must not ignore the multiple barriers our students face and the severe constraints we have in getting students to the finish line. In many ways, every student that earns a degree is one that defies the odds. Our common challenge is to improve those odds.

Ginia Bellafante, a columnist for *The New York Times*, recently wrote a series of three major articles about community colleges. By telling personal stories of students, faculty and student affairs professionals, she highlights, as does reams of other research, the major factors needed to help students graduate: Great faculty, effective curriculum, intensive advising and sufficient financial resources. I review each of these below:

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High-Quality Teaching by Great Faculty: What makes for higher learning is great faculty. We all know that it is an inspired, talented and knowledgeable faculty member that makes material come alive, whether it is introductory biology or advanced computing. Today's students are vastly different from the students who attended college even 20 years ago. And the variation in the students that attend LaGuardia, compared to those that attend prestigious colleges, such as NYU or Columbia, contributes to vastly different teaching contexts for faculty, which in turn makes the preparation that faculty need and the assessment of teaching quality even more complex.

As noted earlier, our students face multiple challenges. Most are poor. Some are homeless or have been previously incarcerated. Others, like the population at large, live with mental illness, learning disabilities or are in poor health. These students raise issues for administrators and present challenges for faculty. Faculty often describe how diverse, complex, and challenging teaching in higher education is today.

College faculty are invested in teaching and most take great pride and care in their practice. Faculty are committed to professional development that would help them to improve their teaching so more students learn and succeed. However, often they don't have opportunities for such development. Adjuncts, as part-time employees, are often disconnected from other faculty and their institutions, and they don't yet have experience dealing with at-risk students.

With over \$3 million in philanthropic support—first from the Gates Foundation and now from the Kresge Foundation—LaGuardia has launched an important project, *Taking College Teaching Seriously*, in which we are working with 150 faculty from three large community colleges to use technology to support improvements in teaching practices, reaching over 9,000 students this year, with the potential to scale to every college in the U.S. We work from the premise that hundreds of research studies have examined the profound impact of good teaching on elementary and high school students, but almost none look at the impact of good teaching on college students. We must support college faculty as professionals who educate a group of students with extraordinary diversity. Early research into this kind of faculty development shows promise; we know that if we helped each faculty member better reach just two more students in each class, our graduation rates could go up by 7 percent without any additional financial support.

Excellent faculty make a difference. We see that in numerous programs, including programs that help adult students returning to LaGuardia to get their high school equivalency degree. At LaGuardia, a randomized controlled study followed our “Bridge to Careers and College” program and found that rates for passing the high school equivalency exam, then known as the G.E.D., doubled, and enrollment in post-secondary education tripled when there were full-time faculty teaching these adults in a special program that contextualized the learning to future careers in business or health. We were recently awarded a U.S. Department of Education “First in the World” grant and one major component of our grant will support expanded efforts to make that path from our high school equivalency programs to our credit programs a more seamless transition.

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Effective & Engaged Curriculum: College curriculum, to be effective, must be linked to the emerging issues facing organizations and businesses. To educate students to solve the unscripted problems of the future in science, international relations, and technology, we have to both teach students to learn general competencies like writing, oral communication and critical thinking, as well as job-specific competencies. Specific occupational skills result in immediate changes in income, while more general skills serve students over the long-term.

Community colleges have an ability to move quickly to adapt curriculum to meet emerging demands, but we need active partners in business and industry to give us dedicated time and focused guidance on the development of curriculum. For example, LaGuardia Community College's work with Weill Cornell Hospital allowed us to customize a training program for front office staff for their private practice physicians. Their previous strategy of hiring highly accomplished bachelor's degree graduates failed as these employees frequently left for higher-paying positions. The graduates of LaGuardia's training program want these middle-level skill jobs, have the specific occupational skills to do them well, and may qualify for tuition reimbursement to continue their education while they are working. However to achieve these mutually beneficial results, Weill Cornell staff had to work hand-in-hand with the college to launch the project.

U.S. corporations now spend over \$165 billion annually to train their workforce. There is enormous untapped opportunity for those companies to partner more effectively with community colleges. By creating economic incentives, through tax credits for example, employers could be motivated to partner with community colleges to address their employment needs, aid in developing curricula specific to those needs and enhance employee skills, ultimately to their benefit.

Enhancing Student Learning through Experiential Education: We need to think differently about what our students need to persist in college and the skills they need to succeed when they graduate. For many of our students their understanding of a career in their desired career is a vague one. They haven't had the real-life exposure because their social networks don't open those doors. Very simply, many of our low-income students live busy, but professionally shallow lives. They infrequently have opportunities to interact with professionals in the corporate world.

These students lack the real-life experiences that allow them to apply their learning and motivate them to continue their studies. Internships are essential. But without paid internships, particularly challenging for small businesses to provide, low-income students must forego what their wealthier peers can access. We need businesses to put money toward their complaints that students do not graduate from college prepared to be effective, and we need the federal government to make investments in creating true apprenticeship programs that give students the necessary on-the-job training by augmenting the real costs that businesses and organizations incur in operating these programs.

Building Support Systems that Help Students Graduate: Intrusive advising, where advisors "insert" themselves into students' lives; case management, where advisors help students navigate social services and family and medical and transportation issues; peer academic tutoring and child

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care are a few of the proven strategies that help students graduate. Yet these are the very services that are most challenging to deliver at systemically underfunded community colleges, and unlikely to be allowed in federal and state job training grants. And funding has sadly declined: from 2000 to 2010, spending at community colleges for student services declined five percent and spending for academic supports, 13 percent. In that period, private universities' spending increased by nearly one-third.

In his State of the Union address, President Obama highlighted the highly successful ASAP (Accelerated Study for Academic Progress) program, one offered at LaGuardia Community College and several other community colleges in the City University of New York. A random control trial evaluation conducted by MDRC found that it is the most effective program yet documented in the U.S.—doubling the graduation rates of the students. For students who agree to attend college full-time, this program combines intrusive advising and financial supports, such as providing students with transportation assistance, free books and tuition waivers for those students ineligible for financial aid. The necessary ingredient for providing these support mechanisms is a significant financial investment. The program costs approximately \$4,000 additional dollars per student annually, bringing the cost of graduating an ASAP student to \$16,500. The results are impressive, and the investment pays off: because graduation rates double, the money ultimately spent on each degree actually decreases. But it takes a combination of smart programs and significant investment to achieve our lofty goals.

What is absolutely clear is that we've starved community colleges of adequate funding for far too long. Philanthropy is highly focused on those colleges that already have the largest endowments. Community colleges receive less than 3% of all private financial support. Policies that increase tax incentives for donations to colleges serving more low-income students might make a huge impact. Hopefully, more individual and corporate donors will make this type of investment, but the role of the federal government is essential.

Unfortunately, we are heading in the wrong direction. The Center for American Progress recently reported that community colleges in 45 states have experienced a decrease in funding, all this while enrollments have grown. We need a robust role for the federal government that includes investing federal money in community colleges in ways that leverage state support. President Obama's America College Promise is an important step; it appropriately sets us on a course that recognizes that a high school degree is just not enough to build a middle class life. It also proposes a significant increase in federal funding. I understand the objections that many might have, but I urge this Committee to not ignore the pressing need to begin investing in our nation's community colleges—providing the financial support our students need to stay in school and enabling colleges to hire and retain great faculty, improve teaching, strengthen our curriculum and allow all of our students to have the enriching education that made it possible for all of us to be in this room today.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify, and I look forward to your questions.

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