

## **Mark Rosenberg: Don't Cut Pell Grants**

Every time the conversation turns to reducing the federal budget, somehow the Pell Grant program is among the predictable items on the chopping block. We must stop looking at Pell as an expendable luxury because slashing Pell Grant funding is equivalent to cutting our own chances for success in the future.

One of the best cases for the value of Pell Grants is our own U.S. Sen. Marco Rubio, who attended one of our state universities aided by Pell Grants. There are 17,117 students like Marco Rubio at FIU and thousands more at Miami Dade College, and other South Florida institutions. These are young people with aspirations of getting a real chance to live the American Dream. If South Florida were an institution, we would be the second-largest recipient of Pell Grants in the nation.

FIU is one of the biggest public universities in the state and among the 10 largest in the country, and awards the most bachelor's and master's degrees in South Florida. At FIU we have always had a significant population of students who must work in order to support themselves and their family and go to school part time. Our students tend to organize their studies around their work and do not have the luxury or privilege of dedicating themselves exclusively to full time study. A reduction or restriction of Pell funding is going to further curtail the options for so many of our students and will push their graduation date further into the future. Pell is essential to their attendance and timely completion.

At FIU we are doing our best to meet accountability measures, which include improving our graduation rates. As the state focuses less on funding enrollment and more on funding outcomes, a reduction in Pell funding could result in even fewer state dollars flowing into FIU if that reduction lowers our six-year graduation rate.

As we look to control Pell Grant expenditures, we must not lose track of those who need Pell the most, including minorities. Because so many of our students are local, summer at FIU is no less popular than the fall and spring semesters. Our working students need access to financial aid year-round so that they can continue to make progress toward graduation. This will likely incentivize students to study year-round and make it possible for them to the graduate and get on with the business of earning a living in a timely manner.

"If they cut Pell, people like me will be dead in the water," said Kieron Williams, 20, a native of North Miami, who is on track to complete his bachelor's

degree in four years. Kieron has financed his studies with a combination of loans and Pell Grants. “Pell grants are essential for people like me who are working hard and want to make a life for themselves. If it weren’t for Pell I would not be in college.”

Less funding for FIU and fewer students graduating on a yearly basis is exactly the opposite of what South Florida needs to compete in the Global economy. The Beacon Council’s One Community One Goal (OCOG) initiative has identified target industries of growth for our economy and all of them require a well-educated work force.

At FIU we have aligned many of our efforts with these community-wide goals and we are making great strides in educating minorities for careers we believe will present ample opportunity in the future. For example, we graduate more Hispanics in science, technology, engineering and math disciplines than any other university in the country.

Our students are working hard and our university is more efficient today than at any point in the past. But we are counting on continued federal support for our most economically needy students, for their benefit and that of our entire community. As the chair of the OCOG Academic Leader’s Council, I am calling for our congressional delegation to fight to protect Pell Grants. They are central to the future of South Florida.

**-MARK B. ROSENBERG**

**President, Florida International University**