

## **Pell Grants make America 'exceptional'**

U.S. Sen. Marco Rubio is a gleaming example of success that has been fueled, in part, by the Pell Grants he received as a college student. Yet today, Congress is flirting with the possibility of having that critical financial support pulled from so many of our most needy students.

The very idea of cutting Pell Grant funding threatens our nation's ability to compete, the economic future of our community and the American dream itself.

In Miami-Dade County alone, more than 60,000 students attending public and private colleges and universities currently receive Pell Grants. At FIU, the number of Pell Grant recipients has climbed to more than 16,000 this year — a quarter of them are transfer students from Miami Dade College. Some 8,000 of FIU's Pell Grant recipients are in the category of highest need. These are our poorest students, the ones who likely will be denied an opportunity to write their own ticket out of poverty if Pell Grants are reduced, as is being proposed in Congress.

In the last two years with more people out of work and the unemployed looking to higher education to gain new skills, the federal government's expenditure in Pell Grants has increased and in the process become a target in the effort to control the growing national deficit.

However, limiting Pell Grants is exactly the wrong approach if our goal as a nation is to continue to lead in the global marketplace. We don't build a better America by disinvesting in education.

On the table is a congressional proposal to lower the yearly funding cap for each student by 15 percent. Alternatively, President Barack Obama has suggested eliminating summer funding as a way to hold the line on the cost of Pell Grants.

For FIU students — and many others in South Florida, including several thousand at Miami Dade College — either of these options will have a devastating impact.

Pell Grants are calculated based on a family's ability to contribute to a student's education. Half of FIU's Pell Grant recipients' families are not at all able to contribute to their education and are, therefore, receiving full Pell Grants. They will see their awards reduced to an amount that no longer will cover FIU tuition, which is among the lowest in the country. These are the students most likely to drop out or enroll in fewer classes, thus postponing graduation.

Take for example psychology student Leticia Salazar, 21, whose Pell Grant currently covers tuition, while she works part-time to cover her other expenses, including books. Leticia is determined to continue her studies and pursue a master's degree in clinical psychology, but she's worried she will have to work full time and take fewer classes if Pell Grants are pulled back.

Research by CEO's for Cities shows that a change of one percent in the number of college graduates in South Florida would have an economic impact of \$1.7 billion on our region. Clearly, we need to be looking at ways to increase rather than curtail our college graduation rates.

If President Obama's proposal is adopted and summer funding is pulled, many of our students will not be able to take classes year-round and thus their ability to be fully engaged members of our community and contribute to our economic growth will be unnecessarily delayed.

At FIU we have a large number of Pell Grant recipients –we came in fourth among large universities in the nation according to the Federal Student Aid Data Center – and we will be disproportionately affected by the proposed reductions in a program with an unparalleled record of success.

As a community we need to rally behind this national issue and send a clear message to Washington this week when proposals are due to come up in the House and Senate. We must let our senators and representatives know that this approach to deficit reduction is shortsighted and counter to the idea of investing in education as a way to fuel economic growth and foster the American spirit of innovation.

Students like Leticia deserve the same opportunities Sen. Rubio had.

**-MARK B. ROSENBERG**

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