



PAUL LACHINE ILLUSTRATION

Quiet crisis in our colleges

U.S. slips to 10th place among industrial nations for post-high-school degrees



Clarence Page

President Barack Obama's new community college initiative brought to mind an old Chris Rock comedy monologue that went something like this: "You know why they call it community college? Because that's who you see when you go there: the community!"

I think he was referring to the black "community," judging by the howls of laughter from his mostly black audience. It was a funny line drawn from the tradition of African-American sarcasm, based on impressions that actually were not true. In fact, the 900,000 African-Americans enrolled in two-year schools make up only 14 percent of total enrollments at two-year community colleges, according to the Journal of Blacks in Higher Education. That's compared with 11 percent of the total enrollments at four-year colleges and universities. Overall the nation's two-year colleges look like a mulligan stew of diverse races, goals, interests, ethnicities and abilities.

You can find a diversity at community colleges. You can find ambitious youngsters who often are the first in their family to go to college, immigrants seeking the American Dream, ambivalent youths looking for a second chance after less-than-stellar high school years and working folks of all ages looking for new skills in a struggling job market.

And there's another big reason for all of us to look more seriously at community colleges: The United States has slipped to 10th place among industrial nations in the percentage of

25- to 34-year-olds who have received a post-high-school degree, according to a report released in February by the Lumina Foundation. Because adults ages 55 to 64 still lead the world in the percentage of college grads, the study found, younger Americans appear to have slipped not only behind their peers overseas but also behind their elders here.

"It's not so much that we've dropped behind other countries," Education Secretary Arne Duncan told me in an interview in his Washington office. "Actually we have flat-lined, ... stagnated. The rest of the world has passed us by. So we have to educate ourselves to a better economy." The former chief executive officer of Chicago Public Schools agreed to an interview a few days after Obama announced one of the biggest federal college spending initiatives since the GI Bill of Rights.

Why community colleges? Because that's where the growth is. While four-year-college enrollment has flattened since the mid-1970s, community college enrollment has been growing at three times the rate of four-year schools, according to the Department of Education. And the recession has only boosted demand for community colleges as youngsters seek affordable education and older workers seek new skills. Among other goals, Obama's proposed American Graduation Initiative would pump \$12 billion into community colleges and add 5 million new graduates by 2020. "We used to lead the world," Duncan said. "This is where Barack has challenged us. He says by 2020 we have to lead the world again."

Yet community college students are the forgotten cousins in the education community. A new report from the Institute for College Access and Success finds they are the least

likely to receive adequate financial aid. Eighty percent of full-time community college students who need financial aid do not receive enough aid to cover the costs of their education. Only slightly more than half of the students on need-based scholarships at private four-year colleges have unmet financial needs.

Community colleges may well be the key to our recovery, if we can find a way to keep more students enrolled. At present, about half drop out before they receive a degree.

Duncan's prescription: Comb the nation's colleges for "best practices," those that are getting results through innovative curricula and teaching methods, then replicate those lessons elsewhere.

Students don't drop out just because of a lack of money. Self-discipline, academic preparation and home life often play bigger roles. But financial help can do a lot to ease tensions at home and provide incentives that produce better work ethics.

At CPS, Duncan engaged in campaigns that included sports tickets and even a car lottery to improve first-day school attendance. In his national role, Duncan is promoting the Obama plan, which provides incentives for effective local innovations that can be replicated across the country to improve school attendance and performance. "We used to lead the world," Duncan said. "We know what the right thing is to do. The question is, do we have the political courage to do it?"

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Don't cry for me, Chicago

By Frank Schell

The populists are back in force.

We see them whining about the renaming of Sears Tower—now Willis Tower and owned by a British insurance company. Perhaps the populists will proceed as emissaries by the thousands to London to protest against the steely vested interests in Britain that have taken away our identity. Possibly they will perform a one-week vigil at Buckingham Palace in a protest against the British not seen since the Boston Tea Party.

This is the same mentality that mourned when Marshall Field's shuttered its Frango mints production facility in its State Street flagship store in 1999, the mints then to be made out of state. It was a horrifying thought, and the xenophobic outrage was all-consuming, though there were far more significant global events that year, such as the launch of the euro, the assumption of power by Hugo Chavez in Venezuela and the coup d'etat in Pakistan that put Pervez Musharraf in power. In retrospect, it's a wonder that the Frango mint wasn't on the cover of Time as its Thing of the Year.

Why should we care so much about Willis Tower? It's really not all that attractive—neither svelte like the John Hancock Center nor cool, smooth and stiletto-looking like the Aon

Center. Some may see Willis Tower as a rude intrusion of steel and glass in a Chicago skyline that reflects generations of classical revival, minimalist and modern architecture. Most of the buildings are elegant and quite compatible. The odd one out is Willis Tower. And if it takes a gigantic, ugly building to reassure us that we have big shoulders, then perhaps we should engage in some civic introspection about the importance of such bold anatomy.

It turns out that not even Sears, Roebuck and Co. was so attached to the tower. In 1992, the mighty Sears relocated its corporate headquarters to Hoffman Estates. If Sears would not defend its tower, why should we? If the custodians of capital would not exert custody, why should we? If a giant retailer no longer wished to look like a giant, why should we?

These are the tough questions that economic historians will grapple with for centuries. But the real issue is why Chicago, once teeming with corporate headquarters, is no longer a city of major names.

A number of brand icons have been acquired or have left Chicago: Sara Lee, Quaker Oats, Amoco, Waste Management, Continental Bank, Marshall Field's, First Chicago and Sears come to mind. Texas now leads the nation in corporate headquarters of the Fortune 1000.



The new name of Sears Tower is Willis Tower. CHRIS WALKER/TRIBUNE PHOTO

This, too, shall stand. We need to get over it and accept globalization—the integration of buying, selling and producing goods, assets and ideas. Borders are increasingly meaningless. The freedom of commerce and economic endeavor has given the United States access to world markets and the ability to source cheaply in an unprecedented way. It has given us an empire without imperialists. And maybe with the exception of the Eiffel Tower, we can pretty much buy and name buildings most anywhere we want.

Frank Schell is a Chicago-based business consultant and former banking executive.

The call of the highway (from a cell phone)

It's good to hear that the Federal Communications Commission is back in business, thinking about the Internet and wireless telecommunications and not so much about assessing huge fines to broadcasters who say "poop" on the air: The new chairman, Julius Genachowski, is a 46-year-old



Garrison Keillor

venture capitalist who is more interested in technological advances and bringing high-speed access to all Americans, and so the world moves on. Thank you, sir. How a guy so young came to be named Julius is a question for another time.

Cell phones are more crucial than cracking down on vulgarity, as I found out last week when mine went missing, and when I found it in the washing machine. I said several vulgar things. It had drowned. I pressed # and * and ghi and mno—nothing—out of commission for an hour while I trucked on down to the cell phone store.

Here's how crucial cell phones are. In Minnesota it's illegal to text-message while driving—trying to type on a tiny keypad at 70 m.p.h. is crazy ("On my way. Be there in 20 minu—O NO NO NO aiiiiiiiiiiiiii")—but it's legal to make calls while driving, which in my case means removing my glasses so I can see to scroll down the directory while steering with my knees at 70 m.p.h. I call up my mother while driving, which is exciting for her because she is 94 and remembers when phones were attached to the wall and you talked on them while standing still. "Is that safe?" she says.

No, it's not, but neither is life itself. Animal fats, ultraviolet rays, unknown people trying to get you to carry things aboard an aircraft, Argentinian women trying to lure you down to Buenos Aires—it's a minefield out there.

My hero Barry Halper died in his white convertible on Highway 12 east of St. Paul in spring 1961 when he was 20. He was excited to start a new job as a newsman at a radio station and crashed into the rear end of a school bus.

Back then, the highway meant freedom. We were crazy about cars and wary of the cops who lay in wait for us.

But there is a little legislator inside me that wants to crack down on speeders and cell-phone users and there is also a teenager looking for open highway. Not so unusual. We want contradictory things. A person can love opera and leave the Met walking on air, and yet k.d. lang singing "Crying" is opera too.

So we should tread lightly, be smart, listen to the opposition. They are speaking to our own contradictions. The censors have their day, and then we move on. All that noise that Judge Sonia Sotomayor listened to so patiently about the danger of empathy—respect it for what it is, a gentle pushback, and then move her into her new chambers. And then take up health insurance. We have an expensive, inefficient, treacherous, Kafkaesque system that is a drag on business and preys on the vulnerable, but something in us is leery of reform, the opposition clusters like a flock of ravens on the highway shouting "No," and we should slow down a little, and then they will fly up in a cloud and we'll go on.

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QUESTION OF THE DAY

Is Obama on the right track for health care?

26.9% YES (370)

73.1% NO (1,005)

Results based on responses to a Tribune online question. For tomorrow's question, go to chicagotribune.com.



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