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EQUALITY NEEDS MORE THAN FREE TUITION

By Thomas F. 'Mack' McLarty
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As a public school student in Arkansas during the civil-rights era, I learned first-hand that the road to equality runs through the classroom. It's a bedrock American principle that educational opportunity unlocks the door to mobility, political participation and economic success.

Yet today we are seeing a growing, pernicious form of segregation: between those who have the knowledge and skills to secure well-paying jobs and those who don't. A clear dividing line in this two-tier system is education.

The income gap between young Americans with college degrees and those without has never been larger, according to a study last year by the Pew Research Center. Millennials with only a high-school diploma can expect to earn 62% of what their peers with college degrees make, much less than a generation ago. More than 20% of young adults with no college live in poverty.

Several states and local governments are expanding access to training and teaching that will prepare students for the more specialized jobs in today's economy. And President Obama has proposed to make community college free for eligible students.

These efforts deserve support, but more is needed. Private businesses and civic organizations have a vital role to play in providing mentoring, training and apprenticeships. These tools help students complete their college educations and enter the workforce ready to succeed.

America's opportunity deficit is reflected in rising disparities of wealth, sinking median incomes and growing poverty. A generation ago, more than half of Americans earned middle-class incomes, according to figures from the U.S. Census, a percentage that has been declining. For millions once in the middle class, the bottom has dropped out. Too many workers can't find good jobs and too many good jobs can't find qualified workers.

Millions of well-paying jobs are projected to open up over the next decade in health care, the automotive industry, electrical engineering and building trades, mining, oil and gas, and other fields. Almost all will require technical training and education beyond high school. Workers without these skills are trying to climb a ladder with broken rungs.

The country's 1,100 community colleges are rightly looked to as a bridge to four-year institutions or a training ground for higher-skilled jobs. According to an estimate from Georgetown University, about 30% of job openings by 2020 will require less than a bachelor's degree but the kind of experience found at a community college. For many students, a two-year associate degree program is an affordable option to a four-year college.

Some states are acting on this potential. In Tennessee, Republican Gov. Bill Haslam has pioneered a program that enables high-school seniors to go tuition-free to a community college or college of applied technology; 58,000 students have applied to Tennessee

Promise, far more than expected. Texas, Indiana and Minnesota may follow. Mayor Rahm Emanuel, a Democrat, announced a similar program in Chicago.

Unfortunately, access to higher education is no guarantee of graduation. Only about 20% of students at public community colleges finish the two-year program within three years. A study released this month by the University of Pennsylvania and the Pell Institute found that while college graduation rates for wealthy students has nearly doubled in 40 years, it remains almost unchanged for poor students. Just 9% of adults from the lowest income bracket have completed college. About one in five of poor students who start college finish a degree by the age of 24.

It should be a priority to increase the number of young Americans in higher education and to keep them on track toward degrees. Tuition relief is part of the equation. But there is an untapped role for private businesses.

Apprenticeship programs that combine classroom work and on-the-job training are popular in Europe but are under-used in the U.S. Employers should endorse vocational training and certification that meet the healthy demand for medical lab technicians, electricians, digital designers, welders, automotive technicians and other skilled jobs. More businesses should sponsor training programs and options for continuing education.

As "Teach for America" has created one service model for improving K-12 education, it might be time for similar outreach to low-income college students. Tennessee Promise has recruited 9,200 volunteer mentors to guide students through the transition to college. Closing the opportunity gap is a civic project, strengthening the bonds of family and community.

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