

Private colleges an option for low-income students

In your story on the Lumina Foundation's college accessibility study, you missed an opportunity to highlight concerns about serious flaws in the research ("Study says public colleges still expensive for many," Jan. 7). Rather than improving accessibility, the report, "Unequal Opportunity," could well have the opposite effect, leading middle- and lower-income families to believe college is out of reach and that independent colleges and universities are particularly unaffordable.

Nothing could be further from the truth. Higher-education institutions nationwide, and particularly private ones, are increasing institutional student aid and have designed a vast array of academic and personal support programs that ensure that median- and low-income students not only enter college, but complete their degrees.

The average family income of students at private colleges and universities is lower than that of students at state institutions — the exact opposite of what the report's findings might indicate.

Private institutions enroll fewer than one-quarter of all undergraduates but account for nearly one-third of all graduates; however, the authors only weighed data for how students accomplished entry into postsecondary institutions on a state-by-state basis. They stopped short of explaining the significance of the outcomes of the students' entry. Access is only part of the struggle. More than six of every 10 students at private colleges graduate to the workplace in five years, while attrition rates are higher at taxpayer-supported public institutions — no matter how selective or affluent the institution.

Many private institutions would be able to serve more middle- and low-income students if state governments would establish appropriate student financial aid policies and create a more level playing field through their investments in higher education. State policymakers continue to encourage existing large institutions with dismal attrition rates to grow even larger. Meanwhile, they ignore the underused capacity of private institutions, which the state could help fill at a marginal cost. Given the burdens on today's taxpayers already, you would think the report's authors would have put forward a much wider and wiser range of policy recommendations.

RICHARD EKMAN
President
Council of Independent Colleges
Washington