

How community colleges can help close the graduation gap

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TRANSCRIPT

GWEN IFILL: Next, we continue our series Rethinking College: Closing the Graduation Gap. Tonight, Hari Sreenivasan looks at an effort in Florida to redefine the mission of community college.

HARI SREENIVASAN: For years, college students like Shanae Mullings have had the odds stacked against them. As a first-generation American from a low-income family with no college experience, Mullings is a statistical long shot to graduate from a four-year university.

SHANAE MULLINGS, University of Central Florida Student: I really just want to make sure I get a stable living, so I can support myself, support my family, this — just be that difference.

HARI SREENIVASAN: But a unique agreement on two campuses in her hometown of Orlando may dramatically improve her chances.

This January, Mullings was able to transfer from community college to the University of Central Florida. The agreement, called DirectConnect, guarantees these Valencia Community College students who earn a two-year associate's degree to admission to UCF

University of Central Florida's president John Hitt:

JOHN HITT, President, University of Central Florida: Their success in earning that degree convinces us that they're a good bet for admission to UCF. So, we take all of them.

HARI SREENIVASAN: DirectConnect tackles a tough problem in higher education. While the majority of college freshmen in America today begin at two-year community colleges, their credits often don't transfer to four-year institutions. In fact, nearly one in seven community college students lose 90 percent of their credits when they transfer to a four-year institution.

SANDY SHUGART, President, Valencia College: It houses our partnership with the University of Central Florida.

HARI SREENIVASAN: The idea of DirectConnect came from Sandy Shugart, president of Valencia, who says community colleges should be seen as a stepping-stone.

SANDY SHUGART: We are not a destination. Most colleges want to think of themselves as a destination, come here, and we will make you happy and we will be your alma mater forever. We're not a destination. We're a bridge. I want to be the best bridge we can be.

HARI SREENIVASAN: UCF president John Hitt says universities need to open their doors to more community college graduates.

JOHN HITT: There is some still something of an abiding prejudice against the graduates of many community colleges.

HARI SREENIVASAN: Both men were motivated by a desire to diversify Orlando's economy. Much of the region's labor force works in low-wage tourism and hospitality jobs.

JOHN HITT: If you ask the question how is social mobility attained in the U.S., it is predominantly through gaining higher education. We have got to do a better job of making education available to people from all income groups.

HARI SREENIVASAN: A dream of a better life brought student Alexandria Castro to Valencia's community college campus.

ALEXANDREA CASTRO, Valencia College Student: It's right here on a silver platter for me. Why not — why wouldn't I take it, because, in the end, I'm only benefiting myself?

SANDY SHUGART: A third of our economy here is fairly low-wage and service-oriented. Part of our mission is to find those people, equip them and let them move on. There is nothing wrong with a \$9- or \$10-an-hour job in the service industries, if it's your first job. If it's your last job, there is a problem, because you can't sustain a family on it.

WOMAN: Everybody understand how to upload a file?

HARI SREENIVASAN: Other states have similar programs, but what makes DirectConnect so valuable is the guarantee of a university not far from home. That's important to community college students, the majority of whom are commuters.

In Alexandria Castro's case, she lives at home to help with younger siblings while her mother works.

ALEXANDREA CASTRO: I take morning classes, so that even with — even when I'm on the bus, I come home to them on time. And then, you know, I make them lunch or dinner. I will check their homework. I will take them to baths. Then I have time to do my homework. And then I go to sleep. And it's just — so, like, I'm helping her out.

HARI SREENIVASAN: Using DirectConnect, community college students pay thousands of dollars less than students who start the University of Central Florida as freshmen. So, what does UCF get out of the DirectConnect deal? Diversity.

In the past five years, the number of Hispanic students earning bachelor's degrees has jumped 134 percent. The number of graduating black students has nearly doubled.

JOHN HITT: If they're the first in their family to get a degree, it not only changes their life, but then the chance that their children will go to college and graduate goes up enormously.

HARI SREENIVASAN: Shanae Mullings believes a bachelor's degree will protect her from the financial insecurities she faced growing up.

SHANAE MULLINGS: We lived in an apartment. It was very frugal living. Like, sometimes, you know, maybe like something might get cut off, the electricity cut off. I don't want to live my life like that, like having to borrow. I want to be able to support myself.

HARI SREENIVASAN: But should community college students feel compelled to pursue a four-year degree?

MICHELLE WEISE, Clayton Christensen Institute: We have the sort of mantra that says college is the gateway to social mobility. And I think, in the past, you were able to enter into the middle class more assuredly. Now it's just not the case.

HARI SREENIVASAN: Michelle Weise, who tracks higher education issues for the Clayton Christensen Institute, says the push for bachelor's degrees may be an expensive and unnecessary pursuit.

MICHELLE WEISE: There is stuff in between the two-year and four-year degree. Those are things that we should think about in terms of leaders for social mobility. In terms of wage earnings, it's actually probably a better idea for those students to get a professional certification or certificate instead.

HARI SREENIVASAN: Weise says certificates, many sponsored by employers, can lead to good-paying jobs.

MICHELLE WEISE: Web development, logistics, and supply chain management, big data and data analytics, these are all things where they're trying to create this pipeline of students who can immediately get recruited into jobs, once they finish, sometimes a six- to 12-week program.

HARI SREENIVASAN: Nationally, 80 percent of students entering community college say they want a four-year degree. But only 17 percent actually succeed. For their part, Valencia Community College transfers are earning degrees at four times the national rate.

SANDY SHUGART: Our transfer students represent almost a fourth of all the graduates at the second largest public university in America. At the point of graduation, they're graduating with virtually the same GPA.

HARI SREENIVASAN: Shanae Mullings plans to be one of those graduates.

SHANAE MULLINGS: My parents like knowing that I can support myself, that I have — went and got higher education. So they're very proud of me.

HARI SREENIVASAN: From Orlando, Florida, I'm Hari Sreenivasan for the PBS NewsHour.

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