How NCGAP measure actually would restrict access to UNC colleges

The North Carolina Guaranteed Admissions Program threatens to widen the already large gap in access and achievement for North Carolina’s least privileged, and her most advantaged, population groups.

By David A. Green

Buried deep in last year’s state appropriations bill is one of the most potentially significant, and potentially destructive, proposals in the history of public higher education in this state. Working under the seemingly innocuous title of “The North Carolina Guaranteed Admissions Program,” this legislation would in reality threaten to widen the already large gap in access and achievement for North Carolina’s least privileged, and her most advantaged, population groups.

This would be an enormous loss to the people of this state, as young men and women of great talent, great promise and great commitment would have their ambitions and dreams – and with
them, our prosperity and progress – diminished. This legislation jeopardizes predominantly minority-serving institutions like N.C. Central University and hinders access to higher education for minority students.

According to the bill’s sponsors in the legislature, the ostensible purpose is to raise completion rates and reduce student debt. The plan tentatively calls for redirecting a percentage of students admitted to each UNC school – those who are assumed to be most “at risk” – to one of the community colleges, with admission to UNC campus guaranteed only if they first complete an associate’s degree. The higher the percentage of such students redirected to the community college system, the less the cost to the state and the lower the student debt in attaining a baccalaureate degree.

While this sounds good in the abstract, an intensive and rigorous feasibility analysis by the UNC and community college systems, vetted by an internationally renowned consulting firm, found that the program would:

▪ Fail to increase, and would more likely reduce, the number of baccalaureate degrees awarded in the state. In fact, for students who entered a community college in 2009 with a high school GPA between 2.5-2.7 and transferred to a UNC school, the six-year baccalaureate graduation rate was 11 percent, compared with 36 percent for students who directly entered into a UNC institution.

▪ Perpetuate if not exacerbate the adverse economic effects of lower levels of educational attainment in North Carolina.

▪ Require implementation procedures that would inequitably burden rural, low-income and minority students, especially the student cohorts served by the university’s minority institutions. In fact, of the 500 in-state students who enrolled in fall 2014 and would have been targeted by the legislation, the UNC/NCCCS report found that “83 percent are non-white (Black/African American - 69 percent, Hispanic - 4 percent, American Indian/Alaskan - 2 percent, and other - 8 percent); and 86 percent enroll at UNC’s HBCUs and UNCP, a minority serving institution.”

The UNC/NCCCS report also found that the graduation rates of the UNC system exceed the national average by a large margin and that is without taking into account recent changes to admissions standards and transfer articulation agreements that will not be measurable until 2018.

As faculty members privileged to work at one of North Carolina’s great minority institutions, N.C. Central University, we see firsthand, every day, the remarkable benefits that higher education access and achievement bring to our students and to the residents of this state. It should be troubling to every resident that the university may be required to offer less access, less economic opportunity and less opportunity for social mobility. While educational institutions and systems across the country are engaged in innovative and creative methods of identifying talent everywhere it is found, encouraging talent in all of its variety and raising the educational attainment of the citizenry, NCGAP would undo much of the progress we have made, tie the hands of UNC educators in their efforts to find and encourage the talents of our residents and diminish our communities.
Imagine the disappointment of the hundreds of students and thousands of parents – most of them minorities – who would, because of NCGAP, receive a college acceptance letter like this: “Because of your hard work, North Carolina Central University is excited to offer you admission to this great institution, but you will have to defer your dream of being part of the Eagle Excellence community until you finish your community college degree.” That would confirm that North Carolina values the hopes, the promise, the abilities of only the few and cares little for the aspirations of the many.

Martin Luther King once said that, “Our lives begin to end the day we become silent about things that matter.” NCGAP will be one of those things that matter if it isn’t changed. Every thoughtful North Carolinian knows that we are all better when each of us is at our best, and that in a vibrant democracy, educational opportunity is the key to being our best. This is not the day to become silent.

David A. Green, professor of law at N.C. Central University, wrote this on behalf of the NCCU Faculty Senate.

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