

Rising to Your Full Potential

Community colleges offer a path

BY ALGIE C. GATEWOOD

"During the last eight years, the poverty gap in America has widened," writes Marcus Mundy, president of the Urban League of Portland, in the introduction to the League's recent report on The State of Black Oregon.

"It has been said that when America gets a cold, African Americans get pneumonia. If there's a poverty gap for Americans generally, the African American poverty gap widens to chasm proportions."

Sage words from Mr. Mundy, and sobering words as well. The hard fact of the matter is that despite the many and manifest strides our society has made in the direction of equality -- not the least of which is the election of the first African American

president of the United States -- a substantial gap persists between the relative positions of communities of color and the mainstream population.

Whether it's in educational attainment, economic status, health, representation in the criminal justice system, even quality of the local environment -- people of color consistently come out on the losing end in comparisons with the majority.

Consider the following findings from the Urban League's report:

- Median income for African American-headed households in Oregon is \$30,000, compared

with \$46,800 for mainstream households.

- By the time they reach the 10th grade, 60 percent African American students in Oregon do not meet reading standards. Seventy-five percent do not meet math standards, and 63 percent do not meet writing standards.

- 37 percent of African American-headed families own their homes, compared to 68 percent of mainstream families.

the more likely he or she is to attain professional success, own a home, maintain good health, stay out of prison, and -- perhaps most importantly -- pass on the importance of education to his or her children, thus ensuring that future generations can share in the American dream.

Again, there are a host of reasons why the American educational system produces a different set of outcomes for dif-

underrepresented students enrolled in community colleges are the first people in their families to seek higher education, community colleges offer an accessible, less-intimidating environment than many four-year institutions.

For example, at Portland Community College's Cascade Campus, where I am campus president, minority students are represented at a higher rate in the student body than they are in the general population. This is due in part to demographics -- the campus lies in one of the most diverse neighborhoods in Oregon -- but also because costs are reasonable and systems are in place to support underrepresented and first-generation students.

My intention here is not to suggest that the deck isn't stacked against some students -- the Urban League's report is full of examples of the pernicious persistence of inequality. Rather, my objective is to show that the pieces are in place at community colleges for students of all backgrounds to rise to their full potential.

Over the course of my career, I have seen too many examples to count of the transformative power of higher education. The road may at times be difficult, but the opportunities exist. It only remains for one to rise up and seize them.

Algie C. Gatewood, Ed.D., is president of Portland Community College's Cascade Campus. You can read the Urban League of Portland's report on The State of Black Oregon at ulpdx.org/StateofBlackOregon.



Regardless of background, one's economic security is a direct function of one's level of educational attainment.

- African Americans are six times more likely to be incarcerated in Oregon than members of the mainstream population.

Much ink has been spilled over the decades in an attempt to explain the root causes of these disparities, as well as their stubborn persistence even in an age that has been described by some as "post-racial." I won't re-cross that well-traveled ground; most people, in any event, can come up with their own, quite accurate, explanations for the lingering social and economic divides between Americans of different backgrounds. Rather, I would propose a simple, elegant solution -- education.

The common denominator that undergirds the statistics above is education. Regardless of background, one's economic security is a direct function of one's level of educational attainment. The more educated a person is,

ferent segments of the population, and again, I'll leave it to others to spell out those reasons. As much as the educational system needs reforms to improve access and quality for minority students, these same students are faced with the reality of the moment -- they need education and job training now, not at some far-off point in a rosier future.

There are many barriers between traditionally underrepresented students and higher education, most notably cost and availability of coursework. So in many cases, a great option for minority students is community college, where these barriers are significantly reduced if not eliminated entirely.

Community colleges offer the most affordable tuition, and the greatest variety of scheduling opportunities. And given that a significant proportion of

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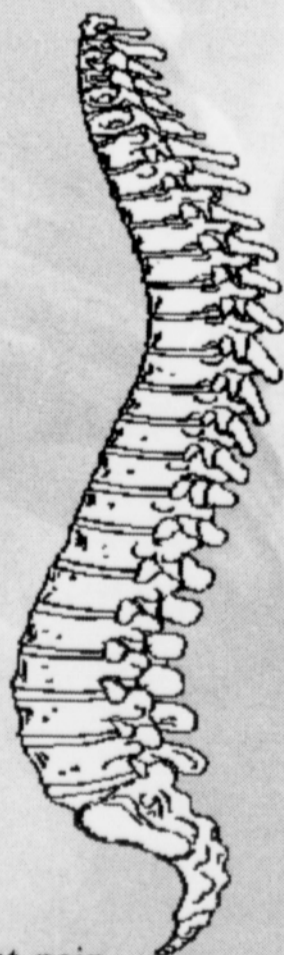
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Letter to the Editor

Marines in Haiti

The Marines have landed. Not a new experience for Haiti.

While Americans are focused on the natural disaster, many of us are unaware that much of Haiti's disaster is manmade. Made in the USA.

From the early days of the republic, when the U.S. imposed a trade embargo for 60 years (fearing a spread of the slave revolt), Haiti has been economically crippled by American imperialism. U.S. corporate interests in Haitian sugar and coffee plantations were enforced by a Ma-

rine occupation from 1915 to 1934.

More recently, subsidized U.S. agribusiness products have flooded Haitian food markets, driving small farmers off the land to work in American-owned industrial sweatshops.

In 2004, the U.S. military removed the elected president, Jean Bertrand Aristide, who had dared to raise the minimum wage in those sweatshops.

Beware whose interests are served by the "humanitarian" Marines.

Jamie Partridge
Northeast Portland