

Struggling college students left behind



DURING THE 2000 presidential election, Republican candidate George W. Bush fash-

ioned himself as the next "education president" with his "No Child Left Behind" initiative. Four years later, however, Mr. Bush has proven that he is willing to leave "many children behind" in their hopes of securing a college education.

The primary goal of Mr. Bush's educational initiative was to make education at all levels more accessible to children, particularly those from low-income families. In higher education, the key to achieving greater accessibility is the Pell Grant, a tax subsidy that currently pays \$400 to \$4,050 a year, depending on family income, size and ability of the student to find other funding sources.

A family that earns so little that it doesn't pay taxes would probably receive a \$4,050 Pell Grant. At the other extreme, a family of four with an income of \$40,000 usually qualifies for the \$400 minimum. Based on that formula, the federal gov-

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ernment spent \$11.4 billion on Pell Grants last year for 4.9 million college students, nearly one-third of all undergraduates in the country.

Despite his last campaign promise to raise the Pell Grant to \$5,100, Mr. Bush, for the third straight year, froze the maximum grant award at \$4,050 per student in his fiscal year 2005 budget.

What's the big deal when the difference is only \$1,050? Consider that the purchasing power of the maximum grant has decreased from 84 percent of the cost of a public university in 1976 to 40 percent of the average fixed costs (i.e., tuition and fees, room and board) at four-year public colleges today. Only a \$7,000 grant would restore that purchasing power to the 1976 level.

Although Mr. Bush insists that restoring the purchasing power of the Pell Grant won't stop rising college costs, he continues to ignore the tuition problem at a time when four-year colleges and universities

are raising their tuitions at significant rates to make up for rising costs and cuts in state aid over the last two years.

Worse, Pell Grants may dry up altogether for thousands of families nationwide because of eligibility changes in the tax tables used by federal officials to determine how much tuition a family can afford to pay on its own.

According to the American Council on Education, which represents nearly half of the nation's colleges and universities, the revision could save the federal government as much as \$270 million. It will also bump up the share families are expected to pay and eliminate as many as 84,000 students from the Pell program.

In short, Mr. Bush's program to make higher education more accessible to low- and middle-income students has been a disaster. Only by electing a new "education president" will this country be able to restore the American Dream's promise of a college education for all of its children.

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