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Op-ed piece

By Deborah J. Curtis, Ph.D., President of Indiana State University

A “radical transformation” in higher education

60 Minutes recently aired a segment describing a “radical transformation” in higher education circles taking place where low-income students are being added to the enrollment mix at selective institutions such as Princeton which were once reserved only for the elite. We are grateful to see that Princeton and other elite institutions are taking steps to create programs that make education at their universities accessible and affordable to a portion of low-income and first generation college students.

While this movement among selective research institutions is fairly recent, it is important for *60 Minutes* and the general public to realize that state colleges and universities have been doing this for around 150 years with significantly less resources and fanfare. It is our mission, and it is our passion.

As I was inaugurated last month as the twelfth president of Indiana State University, it seemed appropriate for me to share some thoughts on this issue. Although recent to this leadership role at Indiana State University, this is year thirty-two for me in the higher education setting. Having earned my Ph.D. here at Indiana State, returning as its twelfth president was both a thrill and a calling. State colleges and universities serve a critical role in providing accessible, affordable, and quality post-secondary opportunities for students across this nation, and this is the setting in which I have chosen to serve three outstanding institutions over my thirty-two years in higher education.

Accredited by the same accrediting organizations as its more selective sister institutions, Indiana State provides programs beyond the classroom that support the 50 percent of our students who are first-generation and the 55 percent who are Pell-eligible. It is also important to note that around 85 percent of our graduates stay in Indiana to work, live, raise their families, and contribute to the economy of this state. This is the mission of many other state colleges and universities across that country and has been the mission for more than 100 years for most.

In the *60 Minutes* episode, Melinda Gates talked about the financial barrier that low-income students face when it comes to college and how the Gates scholarship program eliminates that burden, allowing students to earn degrees. We have experienced this first-hand with a couple of Gates Millennium Scholars who have attended Indiana State and are appreciative of all the Gates Foundation has done to support access to education. With that said, we believe more of these students should be encouraged to choose institutions like Indiana State. The Gates Foundation dollars would have a much greater impact if that were to be the case.

The struggles are real – not just for low-income students but for middle-income students as well. In addition to paying for college, many of these first-generation students are working to help support their struggling families. Frequently, they must stop out of school for a semester or a year to earn the funds needed to return. As the *60 Minutes* episode reflected, additional support services are often needed. These programs -- including intensive or “intrusive” advising, bridge programs, soft-skill development and others – are costly but essential to student success. Indiana State is fortunate to have received

critical line-item funding from the state to help pay for these additional services that allow it to continue this important mission, but the cost is extensive.

As we look to the future, educational leaders must continue to seek ways to close the gap between financial aid and the cost of attendance. We must increase degree attainment in order to provide the skilled workforce needed for our national, state and local economies to thrive. Post-secondary education has become a necessity in today's world, and it must be available to individuals regardless of gender, race, religion, socio-economic background, etc.

While this may be a recent movement at the elite schools, it has and will remain the mission of America's public comprehensive universities as it has been for 150 years at Indiana State University.

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