

# IDEAS & VOICES

ON YOUR MIND

## An equal opportunity path to dreams

By **David R. Hopkins**  
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Guest columnists

Every day we hear their stories. The young woman who wants to prove wrong all of the doubters who said she would become just another statistic from the drug-infested, crime-ridden neighborhood where she grew up. The former college dropout who has returned to school, more determined than ever to become an engineer. The young lady who moved from a homeless shelter to a college residence hall.

At first glance, the odds of achieving success don't seem to be in their favor. And yet, each is now thriving as a student at Wright State University. But where would they be had they not recognized that higher education put them on one of the safest paths to the American dream? Another life claimed by collateral damage from crime? A young person floundering with no goals or purpose? An involuntary victim of the grinding cycle of poverty?

Instead, each of these



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students has grasped the life-changing opportunity of a college education. They also have within themselves a steely determination to succeed. Americans cheer for underdogs because their successes give us all hope that we can do better. But underdogs need a level playing field on which to compete. And all of us need to reject the lie that education is for the privileged few; it has to be for anyone willing to work hard enough to achieve their dreams.

Unfortunately, we are living in a society where a college diploma is increasingly eluding the reach of students from low- and middle-income families, minorities and other underrepresented populations. First-generation college students comprise only 30 percent of incoming freshman classes at universities nationwide – a decrease from 43

percent in 1989-90. Given that 69 percent of U.S. adults have not earned college degrees, the decrease is not a result of diminished ranks of potential first-generation college students. Rather, public universities need to be reminded of and rewarded for adhering to their founding principle – accessibility.

Students who do well in high school make great college students – and they typically have at least one parent who is a college graduate. As a society, we have been seduced by the easy approach of measuring and rewarding our universities by the quality of the students that come into them. That trap is taking us in the direction of a caste system where the only people who graduate from college are children of college graduates themselves.

Everyone should have a realistic opportunity to pursue a college education. We need to be mindful that first-generation college students are more than four times as likely to drop out and to accept that it is worth it to them and to our communities to give them the support they need to

overcome that obstacle. Community colleges and so-called “open access” state universities play a vital role in providing the key that lets students unlock their potential to be better. We will surely see the end of the American dream if this fundamental building block to a productive, successful life is out of reach to those whose parents have not gone to college before them.

Like 44 percent of our students at Wright State, we were first-generation college students. Education was a key determining factor of who we are today.

We were fortunate to have parents who instilled in each of us the importance of education. They were passionate believers in the American dream. Today we take pride in sharing that dream with our children – and we appreciate how important it is to share it with all Ohioans.

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