

Opening doors to degrees

How can we get more students into college?

Tim Simmons, Staff Writer

For most parents, the issue of college access boils down to a couple of very personal questions: Can my kid get into a decent college somewhere? Is there a job waiting after graduation?

But to those in higher education, the issue of access is about the very future and direction of their schools. Last week, more than 200 people from throughout the country gathered at UNC-Chapel Hill looking for ways to keep college affordable and more accessible to all.

Social mobility -- a polite term for whether you are better off than your parents -- has stagnated in the United States. Educators are the ones who are supposed to fuel that mobility. Last week, Harvard announced it would end its early- acceptance program because it tends to favor the affluent.

But middle class families are justifiably complaining of how college costs outpace wages year after year. At the same time, the situation is even worse for poor families, where the numbers show many are simply giving up on the idea of college.

Ironically, an increasing demand for a



Staff Illustration by Tim Lee

quality college degree is one reason costs have increased so rapidly. At the same time, universities have clung to habits and traditions that often inflate costs further.

It isn't clear, according to those who gathered in Chapel Hill last week, how much longer universities can function like this if they still hope to be the vehicle for social mobility.

America's economy in the coming decade is in no position to give up on capable students. It will take more college graduates -- not fewer -- just to replace the huge number of baby boomers who are reaching retirement.

Though North Carolina has increased spending to \$80 million a year in grants for the neediest students, federal grants for poor families have not kept pace with rising costs. And the children of illegal immigrants -- a growing percentage of high school grads -- have triggered a sometimes rancorous debate about their rights to any college degree at in-state rates.

Those who gathered in Chapel Hill spent three days breaking down the questions while looking for answers. The framework of their debate is presented here.

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