

Higher Education: Interrupting the Cycle of Poverty

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Despite the months and years by which we chart our lives, the quiet reality is that our lives unfold in far-smaller increments—in moments. Along the way, there are moments that seem to stop time, leaving a lasting imprint.

For Fabienne Joseph, one of those moments arrived with a massive jolt—the 2010 earthquake that hit her homeland of Haiti and took the life of her son's father. For Ashley Cooks, it was the moment she heard that her husband had been incarcerated. Two months later, another time-stopping moment brought her son into the world. For Natasha Delisme, the stop-cold moment came with questions: Would there be enough money for college? Could she go? Who would care for her two children?

These three women are among more than 106 million people in our country with incomes below 200 percent of the federal poverty level. About 42 million of them are the women and 28 million are the children we are reading about in this report.¹ In the United States, more than one in three women live in poverty or on the brink of it, and just over 4 out of every 10 children living in poverty or on the brink are in families headed by women.² Too many of these women face terrible choices: rent or utilities, child care or health care, groceries or graduation.

One casualty women face when confronting moment-to-moment crises and challenges that too often trap them in an endless cycle of poverty: their aspirations. Dreams are put on hold—sometimes permanently—and human potential is too often wasted. That means incalculable losses reverberating across families, communities, and a nation that can ill afford to lose its most valuable resource: the dreams of its people, the American Dream.

But Fabienne, Ashley, and Natasha share another bond. All three go to Miami Dade College, or MDC, where most of our students are women and where the challenges they confront are met and solved in an environment of support that extends beyond the classroom. With 70 percent of our students low-income (including the 46 percent of the student body that lives below the poverty line) we at MDC understand that their success in college is more than an academic pursuit. More than half of our students are the very first members of their families to go to college.³ They need real support to help them attend in the first place and even more support to help them stick with it and finish.

That is why we go beyond teaching and training. We have helped thousands of students such as Fabienne, Ashley, and Natasha gain access to federal and state programs that give women who are both breadwinners and caregivers the support and breathing space they need to be students too. These are programs such as Medicaid for children and other family members, the

Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, or SNAP (formerly known as food stamps), energy assistance, Head Start, and pregnancy support. Access to these benefits, as well as financial and legal counseling, are made available through our partnership with Single Stop USA, a national nonprofit organization that helps low-income individuals and families become economically secure.⁴

We also help them through other MDC partnerships with national leaders, such as the Ascend Fellowship at the Aspen Institute, which is introducing creative two-generation support models. Support for mothers who want to go to college, for example, does not mean much if they do not also have access to effective child care. Additional partnerships with great organizations such as iMentor and Year Up provide our students with access to invaluable internship opportunities, career planning, peer-engagement programs, and connections to experienced mentors out in the workplace.⁵

All of these life supports are integrated into their ongoing college lives, from orientation to graduation, with the goal of helping them get into careers that produce economic security and stability.

We provide onramps to the current job market with short-term industry certification programs that provide well-paying entry-level jobs in high-demand areas of the regional economy. MDC engages nearly 500 business leaders on advisory teams, helping us design curricula and programs in areas such as nursing, information technology, public safety, biological sciences, film, TV and digital technology, and much more. MDC has developed more than 80 new certificate, associate, and baccalaureate degrees that directly feed the emerging economy of South Florida.⁶

As the two-generation projects suggest, all of this is not just about the students themselves. Some years ago, a study of college-going mothers from poor, working-class backgrounds demonstrated the intergenerational impact of attending college. The educational expectations for their children immediately went up.⁷ These women became more involved in their children's schools, as well as community and religious groups. They took their children to museums, theaters, and other forms of cultural enrichment, and the children's school performance improved.⁸ In effect, these college-educated mothers interrupted the cycle of poverty.

We watch the promise unfold every day at Miami Dade College. In the not-too-distant future, Fabienne and Ashley will become nurses, and Natasha will become a radiologist. Their fellow students at MDC will fulfill every imaginable role in the nation's workforce. They will get themselves out of poverty and ensure that their children never rejoin those ranks.

Which makes me wonder: Why are we still having the conversation about equity and opportunity for women in our society? That is a question without a good answer. But if we are having the conversation, then we should talk about and celebrate solutions that we know are working, as we are doing in this report.

Higher education is one of those solutions that can help fulfill the potential of the women on the brink in our country—their potential for productivity and self-sufficiency. Combined with a safety net of support, higher education can produce not only those shining life moments filled

with hope and inspiration, but also moments of real confidence and pride in accomplishment.

But it's not just moments. Higher education generates the momentum that wipes out inequity for generations to come.

ENDNOTES

¹ Center for American Progress tabulation of data from Current Population Survey, 2013 Annual Social and Economic Supplement using Census Bureau CPS Table Creator.

² Ibid.

³ Miami Dade College and Single Stop USA, "2-year Report" (2013), p. 1, available at http://www.singlestopusa.org/wpcontent/uploads/2013/01/FINAL_MDC_2_YR.pdf.

⁴ Single Stop USA, "Programs," available at <http://www.singlestopusa.org/program/> (last accessed September 2013).

⁵ iMentor, "Mission and Work," available at <http://www.imentor.org/mission-and-work> (last accessed September 2013); Year Up, "About Year Up," available at <http://www.yearup.org/about/main.php?page=aboutus> (last accessed September 2013).

⁶ Miami Dade College, "General Information," available at <https://www.mdc.edu/hr/employeehandbook/generalinformation.asp> (last accessed September 2013).

⁷ Paul A. Attewell and David E. Lavin, "Passing the Torch: Does Higher Education for the Disadvantaged Pay Off Across Generations?" (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 2007), p. 103.

⁸ Ibid., p. 82.