

STRONGER by DEGREES



MEETING AGENDA

Committee on Equal Opportunities

Monday, January 25, 2016

Conference Room A

Members of the Committee



W. Bruce Ayers
Kim Barber
JoAnne Bland
Jerome Bowles
Juan Castro
Dennis Jackson (*chair*)
John Johnson

Arthur Lucas
Elizabeth Ruwe (*student member*)
Robert Staat (*faculty member*)
Wendell C. Thomas
David Welch
Glenn D. Denton (*ex officio, nonvoting*)

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AGENDA

Committee on Equal Opportunities

Council on Postsecondary Education

Monday, January 25, 2016

9:00 AM

Conference Room A

1. Roll Call
2. Approval of Minutes, October 20, 2015 3
3. Comments
 - a. Executive Vice President, Dr. Aaron Thompson
 - b. Vice President for Academic Affairs, Dr. Jay Morgan
4. Status Report: New Postsecondary Education Funding Model 8
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6. Institutional Diversity Plan Assessment Reports 11
 - a. Eastern Kentucky University: Chief Diversity Officer, Dr. Sherwood Thompson
 - b. Kentucky State University: Assistant Vice President for Academic Affairs, Dr. Deneia Thomas
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9. Other Business
 - a. General Information and News Articles 15
 - b. Other Business

Next Meeting: March 21, 2016, 9 a.m. (EST) Frankfort, Kentucky

***Discussion of Strategic Agenda/Diversity Policy immediately following CEO Meeting. Lunch provided.**

Minutes
Council on Postsecondary Education
Committee on Equal Opportunities
October 20, 2015

The Committee on Equal Opportunities met October 20, 2015, at the Council office in Frankfort, Kentucky. Chair Dennis Jackson presided over the meeting.

ROLL CALL

Members present: Kim Barber, JoAnne Bland, Jerome Bowles, Juan Castro, Dennis Jackson, Robert Staat, Wendell Thomas and David Welch.

Members absent: Arthur Lucas and John Johnson did not attend the October meeting.

CEO Chair, Mr. Dennis Jackson, provided opening remarks, followed by CPE Executive Vice President, Dr. Aaron Thompson.

CEO Chair Jackson asked Council staff to call roll. Council staff called the roll.

APPROVAL OF MINUTES

The minutes from the May 2015 meeting were reviewed.

A motion was made by Mr. Robert Staat to accept the minutes. Mr. David Welch seconded the motion.

VOTE: The motion passed and was approved.

**ACTION: 2016 CEO
MEETING CALENDAR**

Recommendation: The Council staff recommends that the CEO approve the 2016 meeting calendar: January 25, March 21, May 16, and October 17. Other meetings are to be established as needed.

MOTION: Mr. David Welch moved to adopt the meeting

calendar. Mr. Wendell Thomas seconded the motion.

VOTE: The motion passed and was approved.

GMSCPP UPDATE:
UNIVERSITY OF
KENTUCKY

Dr. Rana Johnson introduced the first item on the October 2015 agenda. Ms. Mildred Bailey, of the University of Kentucky's Governor's Minority College Awareness Program, introduced several guests associated with the program, including a student participant, a parent of a program graduate, and the current principal investigator of the program. She also discussed partnerships developed in support of the program, educational activities implemented to promote learning initiatives to prepare students to successfully transition from middle to high school so that students may become college and career ready.

Several CEO members inquired about collaborations in Lexington. Ms. Bailey responded to the questions posed by CEO members.

KENTUCKY PUBLIC
POSTSECONDARY
EDUCATION
INSTITUTIONAL
ASSESSMENT REPORTS

The diversity plan assessment reports included a discussion of progress made between 2012 and 2013, with a focus on four areas:

- Student Body Diversity
- Student Success
- Workforce Diversity
- Campus Climate

Two institutions: Kentucky Community and Technical College System office and Northern Kentucky University reported on the progress at their institutions since the last reporting period. The administrators discussed diverse student enrollment at the undergraduate and graduate level (NKU), student retention, degrees and credentials conferred, STEM-H enrollment and degrees conferred, transfer from 2-year KCTCS institutions to 4-year

universities, best practices, workforce diversity, and minority representation on the boards. The reports also included a discussion of the institutions' campus climate and campus environment teams.

CEO members raised relevant questions at the conclusion of each presentation. Both administrators responded to the questions.

Ms. Natalie Gibson discussed progress made by the sixteen KCTCS institutions, as well as areas that require additional attention. Dr. Kathleen Roberts, Senior Advisor for Inclusive Excellence, reported on the accomplishments and discussed the areas that require improvement to meet the NKU goals.

SPECIAL GUEST

CPE Staff Ron Carson introduced a special guest: Representative Dennis Horlander.

UPDATE ON STATEWIDE DIVERSITY POLICY

CPE legal counsel, Mr. Travis Powell, presented a draft document of the Statewide Diversity Policy as a topic of discussion. Mr. Powell explained that the revised statewide policy will align with the state's Strategic Agenda. Dr. Aaron Thompson indicated that the strategic planning efforts were coming to a close, and the amount of input from across the state was very beneficial- diversity is intended to be present throughout the Strategic Agenda. A small working group, led by CPE legal counsel Travis Powell, has been meeting to discuss the diversity policy. Mr. Powell indicated that the working draft is not a final product. The degree program eligibility and the policy will be combined into one document. Mr. Powell stated that the institutions will submit a plan and report on progress towards their goals.

Mr. Powell discussed the Goals/Strategies section and explained that additional diverse populations should be considered in the broad definition of diversity. He stated that the last section of the policy- Impact- will focus on cultural competency.

Mr. Wendell Thomas raised concerns regarding the draft document.

Mr. Powell also explained that campuses could speak qualitatively regarding how they will reach their goals, and reiterated that the draft document is a collaborative process. The institutional final plan will be adopted by the CEO.

Mr. Powell stated that one year after the plan is approved, an institutional report is due, however, it will not be evaluated. He explained that institutions will require a few years to determine what is effective and what is not. Additionally, there may be a site visit if an institution does not meet their goals. Mr. Powell stated that there would be a 5 point rubric.

One of the CEO members asked whether meetings will be arranged to discuss the Diversity Policy. Mr. Ayers inquired about the members of the evaluation team and how the team functions. Mr. Powell responded the team consisted of CEO members and Council staff.

CEO member JoAnne Bland indicated that she is in support of the plan and was especially excited about the focus on cultural competency. Mr. Welch stated that he has seen the policy go through this process before and watched various constituencies involved. He noted that the legal counsels were involved from every university and KCTCS, and asked Mr. Powell if he had any thoughts. Mr. Powell responded that he made it a point to engage all the legal counsels.

Dr. Thompson noted that individuals do not like change and EEO representatives would need assistance in ensuring change occurs—the CAO members were engaged early.

EEO representatives stated that they were engaged in conference calls and they had not been involved in the process. They also mentioned a need to bring all parties

together to discuss the process because each institution has its own culture—there are concerns that still need to be worked out –according to several EEO representatives.

WAIVERS OF KRS
164.020(19)

No waiver requests were made as of October 2015.

STATEWIDE DIVERSITY
PLANNING AND
SUPPORT PROGRAMS

Dr. Johnson provided an update on the Governor’s Minority Student College Preparation Program for program year 2014-2015.

The University of Kentucky will host the GMSCPP Annual Conference, June, 2016, at the Lexington Campus. Approximately 200 middle and junior high school students, from across the state, will participate in the day and a half event.

The 2015 SREB Institute for Teaching and Mentoring will be held October 29-November 1, 2015, in Arlington, Virginia. The majority of Kentucky’s public postsecondary institutions are scheduled to participate in the faculty recruitment fair.

NEXT MEETING

The next regularly scheduled meeting will take place Monday, January 25, 2016, 9:00 a.m. (ET) in Frankfort, KY.

ADJOURNMENT

The meeting adjourned at approximately 12:45 p.m.

**Council on Postsecondary Education
Committee on Equal Opportunities
January 25, 2016**

Budget and Funding Model Update

The Council met November 12, 2015 and discussed the 2016-18 biennium budget for postsecondary education. Dr. Bill Payne, Assistant Vice President for Finance, will provide a summary of the Council action, as well as the proposed funding model, at the January 25, 2016 CEO, meeting.

Staff preparation by Rana Johnson

**Council on Postsecondary Education
Committee on Equal Opportunities
January 25, 2016**

Southern Regional Education Board (SREB) Doctoral Scholars

The Southern Regional Education Board (SREB) Doctoral Scholars Program is a cooperative interstate venture that seeks to address the under representation of and encourage students from diverse backgrounds to pursue doctoral degrees and careers as college educators. The SREB, the New England Board of Higher Education, and the Western Interstate Commission on Higher Education established the program in 1994, as part of the Compact for Faculty Diversity, a national initiative funded by the Pew Charitable Trust and the Ford Foundation. The program seeks to expand the number of diverse faculty members employed as college faculty and executives by increasing the available pool of diverse candidates. The program is a part of a national effort; similar programs exist in the northeast and the west.

The Council on Postsecondary Education, the University of Kentucky, and the University of Louisville jointly implement the program in the Commonwealth. The specific areas of concentration supported by the program are science, technology, mathematics, education (math or science), and engineering. The program has proven to be an unqualified success. In its 22ND year, attendance at the Teaching and Mentoring Institute exceeded 1,200 participants. As of January 2016, of the over 814 graduates, 80 percent are employed in education, and 92 percent employed in higher education; 112 of the graduates have earned tenure.

Status of Kentucky Scholars

- The program has served 125 scholars as of January 2016, produced 82 graduates, and has 27 students currently matriculating.
- There are 112 African American, six Hispanic American, four American Indian/Alaskan Natives, one Asian American, and two scholars identified as other. There are 83 female and 42 male served by the program.
- Fields of study are science & technology (20 percent) social and behavioral sciences, (31 percent) health professions (5 percent) business and management (6 percent) mathematics (2 percent) engineering (5 percent) education (9 percent) and humanities (22 percent).
- The University of Kentucky has served 67 scholars, the University of

- Louisville 57 scholars, and one scholar has been served by a non-Kentucky institution.
- Time to degree from program entrance averaged 2.0 years for scholars entering the program to complete the dissertation and 4.6 years for doctoral scholars (students having to complete the entire Ph. D. program including the dissertation).
 - Of the 82 graduates, 69 are currently employed, with 84 percent in education, 93 percent in postsecondary education.
 - Kentucky postsecondary education employs 22 SREB Doctoral Scholar graduates.

Kentucky's Doctoral Scholars Program

The University of Kentucky's most recent SREB Dissertation Year Scholar, Mr. Marcus Bernard, will attend the January 25, 2016 CEO meeting to share his impressions regarding the value of the 2015 SREB Institute on Teaching and Mentoring

The SREB Dissertation Year Doctoral Scholar will respond to questions posed by the CEO members.

Staff preparation by Rana Johnson

**Council on Postsecondary Education
Committee on Equal Opportunities
January 25, 2015**

**Kentucky Public Postsecondary Education Diversity Policy
Performance Presentations: Institutional Diversity Plan Assessments**

The Committee on Equal Opportunities will receive an update by two institutional EEO representatives regarding their efforts to implement the objectives of their institutional diversity plans. The plans were developed in response to the Kentucky Public Postsecondary Education Diversity Policy and Framework for Institution Diversity Plan Development.

The institutional presentations parallel to the Student Success focus area identified in the Council's Strategic Agenda, Stronger by Degrees. The Statewide Diversity Policy advances one of the main policy objectives that guide the work of the postsecondary system in the area of Student Success.

The presentations will introduce 2012-13 data, in comparison to 2013-14, and identify areas where progress was made, as well as areas that will require improvement to reach their 2015 goals. Four focus areas will be highlighted:

- Student Body Diversity
- Student Success/Closing the Achievement Gap
- Workforce Diversity
- Campus Climate

The following EEO representatives are scheduled to present:

- Eastern Kentucky University: Dr. Sherwood Thompson
- Kentucky State University: Dr. Deneia Thomas

Eastern Kentucky University and Kentucky State University will answer questions at the conclusion of their presentation.

Staff preparation by Rana Johnson

Committee on Equal Opportunities
Council on Postsecondary Education
January 25, 2016

Waivers of KRS 164.020(19)

The CEO asked for regular reports regarding institutions that choose to adopt a waiver of the standards of KRS 164.020(19) in order to implement new degree programs. The statutes establish the Council's responsibility to approve the offering of new degree programs (KRS 164.020(14)) and also limit an institution's eligibility for new degree programs (KRS 164.020(19)) by the requirement that an institution meet its equal opportunity objectives.

The Council has authority to grant a temporary waiver of the requirements of KRS 164.020(19). Administrative Regulation 13 KAR 2:060 establishes criteria for determining an institution's compliance with equal opportunity objectives and for the granting of a temporary waiver to a state-supported postsecondary education institution that has not met its objectives.

No institutions requested a waiver as of January 2016.

Staff preparation by Rana Johnson

Council on Postsecondary Education
Committee on Equal Opportunities
January 25, 2016

Status: Statewide Diversity Planning and Support Programs

The following information focuses on diversity activities and initiatives since the Committee on Equal Opportunities met October, 2015.

Diversity Summit: The Council's Committee on Equal Opportunities hosted a Diversity Summit at the Kentucky Community and Technical College System Central Office, in Versailles, Kentucky, November 9, 2015. Educational administrators and staff from across the state participated. Sessions included: Closing the achievement gap, best practices for the recruitment, retention, and graduation of diverse students, and the significance of campus diversity at colleges/universities in KY. The summit also featured a student panel consisting of high school students to college/university graduates. Dr. Robert Belle, Associate Director of the SREB Doctoral Scholars Program, served as the keynote speaker.

Governor's Minority Student College Preparation Program: The Annual GMSCPP Statewide Conference will be hosted by the University of Kentucky, June 27-28, 2016; middle and junior high school students from across the Commonwealth are expected to participate in STEM-H activities and laboratory experiments during the day and a half event.

Conference planning is underway to recruit students to attend the 29TH Annual Academically Proficient High School Junior and Senior Diversity Conference, June 2016. Kentucky State University will host the event. Students, parents, and college representatives from across the Commonwealth are expected to participate.

SREB Doctoral Scholars Program: Planning for the fall 2016 Teaching and Mentoring Institute took place during a meeting of the state Doctoral Scholars Regional Advisory Committee, January 21- 22, 2016. The Teaching and Mentoring Institute was held October 28 - November 1, 2015, in Arlington, Virginia. Kentucky's public institutions were also invited to participate in the recruitment fair to assist with increasing the

number of diverse faculty members at their respective institutions. Six of the nine public institutions in the Commonwealth participated in the recruitment fair.

The 2016 Institute on Teaching and Mentoring will be held at the Tampa Marriott Waterside Hotel and Marina, October 26 – 30, 2016.

Staff preparation by Rana Johnson



Category: Current News 1, Political Issues, Subfeature |

Donald Trump: An 'Angry Voice' or 'Great for African-Americans'?

January 18, 2016 | :

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by Emil Guillermo

Just in time for Martin Luther King Jr. Day, Donald Trump has a message for all Americans. The presidential candidate, who was unnamed in criticism in President Obama's State of the Union and then implied as an "angry voice" in the official Republican response, turned his attention to civil rights on the ABC Sunday show *This Week*.

Host George Stephanopoulos asked Trump this question: "Martin Luther King Day this week, what do you say to Americans, African-Americans especially, who believe his dream has not been achieved in this country?"

There was no hesitancy from Trump.

"Oh, I agree with that and especially under President Obama," Trump said. "We have an African-American president and the Black youth, the African-American youth, has essentially, almost never done worse.

"You look at the unemployment in the '50s, you look at African-American people that are 30 and 35 and 40 at the height of their strength and lives, and they're doing horribly. President Obama, an African-American, has done a terrible job for African-Americans.

"Donald Trump will do a great job for African-Americans. I'll bring back jobs to this country from China and many other places. And I'll have people work and make a great living. I will be great for African-Americans."

Obviously, a self-serving campaign interview in which Stephanopoulos didn't challenge him and the candidate was allowed to heave criticism on the president.

If you saw the State of the Union, you know Obama tended to downplay his accomplishments. Remember Wall Street in 2009 when Obama took over. There was a sense of impending doom. More than 14 million new jobs later, unemployment cut in half and the country is better off. And that means African-Americans.



Donald Trump

Related: [Commentary: Falling Through the Cracks](#)

Back then, we just didn't trusts banks.

Now, after 9/11, we don't trust each other, especially people different than us.

And that's Trump's real blind spot — diversity.

You can't just comb it over.

Trump's company is privately held, and most private companies deal with diversity as an afterthought.

They "get around to it," if they feel it, if they do at all. Public companies have some accountability to the public and shareholders that go beyond dollars and sense.

It's one of the reasons business and politics don't necessarily mix.

Last year, CNN/Money analyzed how many jobs Trump may be responsible for. Based on an analysis by Privco, which tracks privately held companies, the estimate was around 34,000.

But that's mostly at the bottom ranks.

CNN pointed out Ricardo Ara, the 24-year-old who works in the Koi Soho restaurant in the Trump SoHo Hotel. But Ara is an illegal immigrant from Mexico who has the right to work at the restaurant in Trump's hotel because of Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals, a program Trump wants to end.

For Ara, Trump wants to build a wall.

But is he building a wall between successful African-Americans and Latinos? Or just driving a wedge between us all?

How about jobs further up the food chain?

With more than a generation of increasing opportunities for people of color in higher ed, how many people of color with Wharton degrees has Trump, a Wharton alum, given a chance? How about people of color from anywhere?

A quick online glance at The Trump Organization LLC's very top execs shows no apparent people of color.

█

Related: New Jindal Regents Appointee to Miss SUNO/UNO Board Meeting

Based upon the things he says about the highest-achieving African-American ever in American politics, I would doubt The Donald would be as great for people of color in general, and African-Americans in particular, as he thinks.

Better had he just said, "Happy MLK Day."

And the dream continues.

Emil Guillermo is an award-winning journalist and commentator who writes at <http://www.aaldef.org/blog>.

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The college admissions process is “rigged” against high-achieving poor students, and the way to solve the problem is to institute a “poverty preference” in the college admissions process.

So argued former New York City Schools chancellor Harold O. Levy, executive director of the Jack Kent Cooke Foundation, as the foundation released a new report that shows only a paltry portion of the student population at elite colleges are high-achieving, low-income students.

The report, titled “True Merit: Ensuring Our Brightest Students Have Access to Our Best Colleges and Universities,” says so-called “need-blind” policies have failed. As evidence, the report notes that 72 percent of the students at the nation’s most competitive universities are from the country’s top income quartile, while only 3 percent hail from the nation’s poorest families.

It also found that high-achieving students from the top income quartile enroll in highly competitive universities at three times the rate of their high-achieving peers in the lowest income quartile—24 percent versus 8 percent—and at similarly disparate rates in very competitive or competitive institutions of higher learning.

Further, the report shows that the percent of first-time, full-time freshmen receiving Pell grants has risen at all but the most highly competitive colleges and universities since 2000. For instance, the percentage of such students has risen from 24 to 30 percent at very competitive universities but has remained virtually flat—rising only from 16 to 17 percent—at the most competitive universities, from 2000 through 2013, the report states.

Levy, whose foundation offers scholarships of up to \$40,000 to high-achieving students with economic need, noted two reasons why high-achieving low-income students are so woefully underrepresented at elite institutions.

Related: [Protesters Damage Calif. University Leader’s Home](#)

First, many don’t apply to top colleges and universities because they get inadequate counseling in high school—a problem that he said occasionally affects even Cooke scholars.

Second, Levy said, the college admissions process is “rigged” against high-achieving, low-income students because it gives undue deference to factors that favor wealthier students. Those factors, he said, include high scores on college entrance exams for which poorer students cannot afford to prepare as well as wealthier students, “legacy” preferences for children of alumni, and athletic preferences for students who play sports that are not popular among or easily accessible to students of lesser means, such as squash, sailing and polo.

“The individual practices may be innocent on their face, but when examined as part of the entire admissions system, there are important unforeseen impacts that actively discriminate” in admission to the elite schools, Levy said.

Levy conceded that the report does not quantify whether the low numbers of high-achieving, low-income students at elite schools are due primarily to the fact that few apply in the first place or whether it is due more so to the ways the admissions process favors wealthier students.

Still, there is little disagreement that better counseling at the high school level could help alleviate the situation.

“It is an unfortunate reality that there are systemic barriers to access for many under-represented populations in the U.S.,” said David Hawkins, executive director for Educational Content and Policy at the National Association for College Admission Counseling.

Among those barriers, Hawkins said, are high caseloads for counselors, limited resources and information for college advising in high school counseling offices, and limited funding and other support for professional development.

Related: [A Prescription for Diversity among Medical Doctors](#)

"When those three factors are combined, what results is a scarce and under-supported resource that creates a barrier to under-represented students on top of the existing barriers they face," Hawkins said.

But not everyone is convinced that a "poverty preference" is the solution.

"It is no better policy to give some students preferences on account of their family income than to give preferences based on the happenstance of their ancestry," said George Leef, director of research for the John William Pope Center for Higher Education Policy.

"The weakness in this approach is the assumption that it is necessarily a big advantage for a student to attend a prestige college or university," Leef said. "In fact, such schools are often less beneficial for many students because the faculty is more immersed in their research than in working with the undergraduates."

The Cooke report maintains that high-achieving, low-income students fare better at more competitive colleges.

For instance, one chart shows that lower-income, high-achieving students graduate at a rate of 90 percent at the most highly competitive institutions—just one percentage point lower than higher-income, high-achieving students.

The less competitive the institution, the lower the graduation rate for low-income, high-achieving students, the chart shows.

"Part of it is making sure high-achieving students are surrounded by other high-achieving students," said Jennifer Giancola, a co-author of the report. "You're surrounded by other students where dropping out is not something that you're talking about."

While the report paints a dismal picture of what elite institutions are doing to attract more low-income students—at one point the report says "they are just being ignored"—the reality is many institutions are actively engaged in new and ongoing efforts to tackle the problem.

Related: [U of Ill. Chancellor Quits Amid Admissions Scandal](#)

For instance, the newly-formed Coalition for Access, Affordability, and Success—made up of 80 colleges and universities, including all eight of the Ivy League schools—was developed recently to improve the college application process for all students, including those who are under-resourced.

"Solving this problem and sending a message that these students are desired by leading universities is one reason why the Coalition is creating new tools," said James G. Nondorf, Vice President for Enrollment and Student Advancement and Dean of Admissions and Financial Aid at the University of Chicago, which is a coalition member.

And as the U.S. Supreme Court reconsiders the use of race-conscious affirmative action, some schools, such as Yale University, have already taken the lead in implementing "race-neutral" ways to reach out to low-income students.

Levy conceded he wasn't sure what the target number should be in terms of the percentage of high-achieving, low-income students at elite institutions but added that the status quo is unacceptable.

"Poor kids are capable and they're not getting in, and rich kids are getting in at such a disproportionate number you have to be able to justify that," Levy said.

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ACE Strives for More Female Presidents

January 13, 2016

Can you imagine a world in which half of all college and university presidents are women?

The American Council on Education can, and it is hoping higher education can reach this goal by 2030. Despite their prevalence in higher education, women are very much in the minority among chief executives. In 2011, according to ACE, 26 percent of college and university presidencies were held by women, up three percentage points since 2006.

On Tuesday ACE launched the Moving the Needle initiative, a national [campaign \(http://www.acenet.edu/news-room/Pages/Moving-the-Needle-Advancing-Women-Leaders-in-Higher-Education.aspx?utm_source=WhatCounts%2c+Publicaster+Edition&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=ACE+Launches+Moving+the+Needle+Campaign+to+Achieve+Higher+Education+Lea](http://www.acenet.edu/news-room/Pages/Moving-the-Needle-Advancing-Women-Leaders-in-Higher-Education.aspx?utm_source=WhatCounts%2c+Publicaster+Edition&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=ACE+Launches+Moving+the+Needle+Campaign+to+Achieve+Higher+Education+Lea) that asks presidents of colleges, universities and related associations to commit to helping achieve its goal, in part by helping advance the careers of female administrators. So far 109 presidents and chancellors have signed on.



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Welcome, Aaron | St

Renew Now

Comments (7)

THE CHRONICLE OF HIGHER EDUCATION

ADMINISTRATION

Poor Kids, Limited Horizons

The support they need to overcome barriers to aspirational careers comes too little, too late

By Scott Carlson | JANUARY 17, 2016



John Burcham for The Chronicle

Darrius Sloan (right)

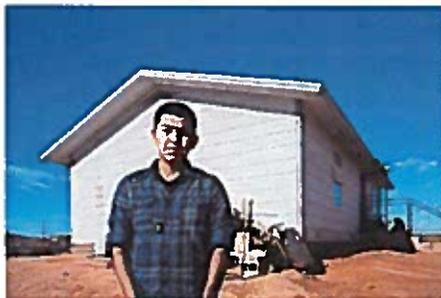
Darrius Sloan, 17, talks about his dreams — about himself — in the past tense. He hoped to go to the University of Arizona. "I wanted to be a civil engineer," he says. "I really loved math, I really did. I really *do*, I mean."

Raised on Navajo land in Tuba City, Ariz., in a trailer with 13 other family members, Mr. Sloan got good grades and earned a spot in a boardinghouse for Native Americans to attend high school in Flagstaff, about 80 miles from the broken schools of home. He blossomed there — the kid who carried around a journal full of quotations from famous thinkers, who knocked out a year's worth of credits at the local community college, who toured the University of Arizona as a sophomore and bought a gray jacket emblazoned with its name.

But his grandparents and siblings, back on the reservation with no electricity or hot water, subsisting on little more than potatoes, tugged at his heart until he made a weighty decision late last year.

"I

Does Higher Education Perpetuate Inequality?



Colleges are seen broadly as engines of opportunity, as economic equalizers. Is that reputation deserved?

This is part of an occasional series exploring that question. Read stories from the series:

Engine of Inequality

[Poor Kids, Limited Horizons](#)

realized what my point is in life: It's to take care of the people who took care of me," he says. A job in civil engineering might pay six

figures years from now, he figures, but in the military, he could earn money right out of boot camp and start sending some home. He plans to join the Marines next month.

"Doing school," he says, "is no longer for me."

People who advise low-income students or study their paths to careers may see a familiar pattern here: students with limited horizons who can't bridge the gap between their aspirations and reality. In that gap lie financial insecurity, family pressure, bad schools, a fear of debt, a lack of social or cultural capital, discrimination. Those factors often push poor students to aim low, to go for what seems like a sure thing rather than take risks pursuing an eminent occupation.

Some might regard that pattern with a shrug. After all, few people work in dream jobs, and many muddle through, college or not, to jobs that simply pay the bills. But the fact is that affluent, generally white people are more likely to reach aspirational careers than are low-income, often minority people, despite their talents, intelligence, or ambitions. And so the positions that set policy, influence public opinion, and guide the business world continue to be held by those who have money, connections, or both.

'A lot of things can happen in four years. That ain't gonna do it. They need money now.'

"I find that there are two Americas: people who are working for survival and people who work for self-determination," says David L. Blustein, who studies careers as a professor of psychology at Boston College. Those with "career-choice privilege" often draw on family wealth, social connections, or cultural capital to ascend to plum jobs. Meanwhile, students from poor families look for steady, familiar work that seems attainable. Researching a book on employment in an age of uncertainty, Mr. Blustein has found that in poor families, hit hardest by the recession, children were traumatized watching parents lose jobs and scramble for money. "The situation," he says, "is actually getting worse."

The trends disproportionately affect blacks, Latinos, and Native Americans, whose poverty rates are two to three times that of whites. Consider a study of the representation of women and minorities in a range of careers, based on five decades of census data, through 2010. While white women and Asians made significant gains in well-paying white-collar jobs — as doctors, lawyers, scientists, engineers, economists — the share of African-Americans, Latinos, and Native Americans in those jobs hardly budged. Certainly, the college pathways and outcomes for minority students are different: Even when their grades and test scores match those of their white peers, they are more likely to attend less-selective colleges and to drop out before earning a credential, according to Georgetown University's Center on Education and the Workforce. The difference in college graduation rate between the top and bottom income quartiles is 37 percentage points, according to the most recent federal data.

The trends don't stem from a lack of desire. Research indicates that members of racial and ethnic minorities start off with the same aspirations as their white peers, but that over time they see barriers, and their perceptions of what's possible for their careers begin to change.

Colleges claim to care about this. Their mission statements and public images celebrate the notion of pulling people up the socioeconomic ladder. Some institutions follow race- and class-conscious admissions policies, accept students without considering their financial need, and offer scholarships and support programs. Increasingly colleges are judged on whether students land viable jobs. And yet, for kids trying to clamber out of poverty, college may stand as yet another barrier.

Many institutions, in the race for prestige, have become less accessible to disadvantaged students. College representatives visit their schools less often, if at all. And institutions often promote to low-income populations professional programs — accounting, nursing, hospitality management — more than they do squishier liberal-arts degrees, which may be more of a pipeline to graduate school and influential careers.

A number of nonprofit groups, like Say Yes to Education, the College Advising Corps, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, and the Lumina Foundation, try to advance the prospects for low-income students. They point to some progress, but most of the energy in higher education goes toward getting kids to and through college. What happens after that — do they wind up working in high-end consulting or in retail sales, burdened with debt? — gets less attention.

For a low-income kid from rural Arizona or from Chicago, the hurdles come early, formed by the examples, expectations, and crises around them. That influence is deeply rooted and difficult to change.

As a junior in high school, Mr. Sloan saw his college plans evaporate. His grandfather, the family's main breadwinner, was in the hospital with blocked arteries. The teenager sat by his bed thinking about what would happen if the old man died. His parents, he says, were unreliable.

Mr. Sloan's grandfather was a military veteran, and like many Navajos, he was a welder who worked in construction, among the few steady jobs the boy saw growing up. One way out of that is to do well enough in school to go to college, but the reservation schools make that hard. "Everybody knows that they are not equipped to teach anybody," Mr. Sloan says. He was lucky to get to Flagstaff High School, the last kid admitted to the boardinghouse the year before. A teacher there persuaded him to enroll at the local community college, and encouraged him to go on to a four-year university. Go back to the reservation with a degree, she told him, and help your family.

As Mr. Sloan considered his options, the bit about helping his family stuck. But even if he got scholarships, he figured, he might still rack up debt, and he wouldn't be able to send money home for as long as he was in college. "A lot of things can happen in four years," he says. "That ain't gonna do it. They need money now."

When he told the school's guidance counselor, Katherine Pastor, that he was going to join the Marines, she was floored. "There was a disconnect," she says. "Here is a kid who is engaged, who is going to community college part of the day, but who feels that enlisting in a branch of the military would be a better option for him."

She tried to tell him that he would get substantial financial aid for college, that he might be able to work while he was enrolled and still send money home. But Mr. Sloan had made up his mind. He plans to enlist next month, when he turns 18, and graduate from high school this spring. He gave his University of Arizona jacket to his little sister.

His story is not unusual. "I see it all the time," Ms. Pastor says. Teachers, counselors, or family members can sometimes guide a student past the limits they see for themselves, but often not. "We should be talking to students when they are young — as fourth and fifth graders," she says. But there are scant resources for that. She has a caseload of 500 students, roughly the national average. In Arizona the average counselor-to-student ratio is 800 to 1.

As a counselor at Brighton High School outside Boston, Mandy Savitz-Romer would watch her former students drop out of college after a year or two. Frustrated, she quit to study the profession and try to understand what derails students in poor, urban districts. Now she trains school counselors as a senior lecturer at Harvard University's Graduate School of Education. Talking with students right before they're supposed to apply to college, she argues, is too little, too late.

"We can't just work with seniors," she says. "We also have to realize that there are groups of students that are ruling out college, ruling out careers, well before someone shows up to help them fill out an application."

Career aspirations, she says, are all about students' immediate influences. As another expert puts it, You have to see it to be it. Mr. Sloan wanted to be a civil engineer in part because that's what an uncle, one of the only people in his extended family to go to college, had become. Otherwise he saw what many low-income kids do: adults working low-level service or blue-collar jobs, if they're employed at all.

Self-esteem and **'The only scientist I knew,' growing up in San Diego, 'was Bill Nye the Science Guy.'**

optimism also play important roles. Affluent kids can aspire to be lawyers, doctors, professors, and politicians because they see that's been possible for their parents and other adults around them. Poor kids don't often know people in such jobs. And because of bad schools, the pernicious effects of discrimination, and financial constraints, they may think they aren't smart or wealthy enough to strive for those things.

"If students don't see that as a possibility for themselves," says Ms. Savitz-Romer, "they might have the highest GPA, test scores, and

promise, and they won't choose a major that will get them there."

Low-income students tend to grapple with decisions about majors before deciding to go to college, says Karen Arnold, an associate professor of higher education at Boston College who studies the transition from college to career. The choice of a certain major can be a justification for applying or enrolling. That's because many low-income students believe there's a direct line between a major and a career, she says, "to the point that they might not even be going to college if they don't know what they want to do."

She has also found that many low-income students and their families are skeptical of general-education requirements, which they see as part of a college "scam" to charge more for a degree. "It's hard enough for upper-class students to see how comparative literature is going to work into a career," Ms. Arnold says. "It's virtually impossible for people who don't know a whole bunch of people — or even anyone — who has gone to college."

That's where guidance and career counselors are supposed to come in, to help students imagine possibilities, chart a course. But many schools put their limited resources toward raising test scores and managing students' special needs.

"There is almost no career development going on in schools, particularly at schools that serve low-income communities," Ms. Savitz-Romer says. "Schools don't see this as part of their mission. And even if counselors want to do it, they are not given the time or space."

When financially poor students are prompted to consider dream careers, the message may not resonate. "On more than one occasion," Ms. Arnold recalls, "I have heard students say, 'All this find-your-passion stuff is great, but I can't do that. I need to get my mom out of the Bronx.'"

But a pitch for college in purely financial terms isn't necessarily helpful either, says Ms. Savitz-Romer. Counselors should emphasize to students not just earnings, but influence, she says. "We don't sell them enough on the ways that they can be part of a change in their community and their world."



Anai Novoa

Sandy Huffaker for The Chronicle

A

nai Novoa met scientists for the first time in ninth grade, when a nonprofit group took students to Baja California, in Mexico, to study marine ecosystems. Before that, science in her San Diego high school consisted of watching movies like *Jurassic Park*.

"The only scientist I knew," she says, "was Bill Nye the Science Guy."

She spent five weeks studying interactions between gulf nutrients and islands. And she decided then and there that she would become a marine biologist.

There were few precedents for that kind of ambition in her community. Most of the kids at school, if they graduated, went straight to work. Her parents, immigrants from Mexico, didn't get past second grade. When Ms. Novoa was 3, her father was killed in a car accident. Her mother, who worked as a seamstress and in a factory, was later crippled in another car accident. Not speaking English, she couldn't do much else for work.

Ms. Novoa's two oldest sisters had pursued careers in photography and psychology, but when the family needed money, each one quit college to work. A third sister wanted to be a chemist, but a counselor told her that it might be too hard. Instead she studied criminal justice at San Diego State University and now works at Kaiser Permanente, enrolling people in health-insurance programs.

Buoyed by her dream of marine biology, Ms. Novoa got into the University of California at Santa Barbara. She struggled at first, not having taken rigorous science courses in high school. "It's really fast-paced, and if you don't have the foundation, it's already too late," she says. She watched many low-income and minority classmates drop out, one by one.

She was doing fine in the research courses in her biology major but struggled in the "weed out" courses, like organic chemistry. Because some of her grades were weak, a counselor at the university suggested that she switch majors and give her spot in the research program to a student doing better.

"I was devastated," she says.

'There are groups of students that are ruling out college, ruling out careers, well before someone shows up to help them fill out an application.'

Those are the kind of roadblocks that make low-income students believe they don't have as many choices of career, says Ryan D. Duffy, an associate professor of psychology at the University of Florida. He studies "work volition," people's sense of control in making career decisions.

People from lower-income backgrounds tend to have lower volition, he says. Like Ms. Novoa, they may feel underprepared. They face discrimination, or fear they will, in part because they don't encounter mentors with similar backgrounds. In college Ms. Novoa had only one minority female instructor: a physics professor from India.

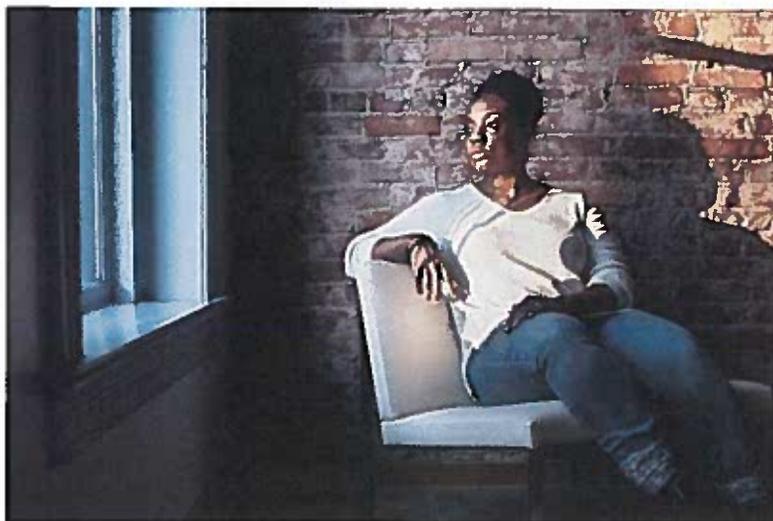
For low-income and minority students, success "is all about having a role model," Mr. Duffy says. White students can find them in abundance. Minority students, notably on campuses like the University of Missouri at Columbia, are asking for more. "They want to have someone who is like them," he says, "to help them go through the process."

A mentor can also help a student manage family doubts. Ms. Novoa says her mother was proud that she was in college but never fully grasped the significance. For example, if Ms. Novoa was up late studying for a test, her mother would demand that she go to bed. Her mother would beg her to come home on weekends, despite the seven-hour bus ride.

After meeting with that counselor, Ms. Novoa did not give up. She switched to the university's College of Creative Studies, where she found a mentor in a prominent parasitologist. He helped her create her own biology major, focusing on ecology, which meant she wouldn't have to take some of the most intimidating science courses.

Her grades improved, and the nonprofit group that had taken her on that ninth-grade trip sent her to Washington to accept a science-education award from President Obama on its behalf. She graduated from Santa Barbara, earned a master's degree at the University of San Diego, and is now applying to marine-biology Ph.D. programs throughout California, planning to study the effects of climate change on marine habitats.

The sister who'd been discouraged from pursuing chemistry inspired her to keep going. "She listened to their advice, and she regrets that," Ms. Novoa says. "I really wanted to continue on this path, so that I could be a mentor for students who faced the same obstacles I did."



Lexey Swall for The Chronicle

Rhiana Gunn-Wright

Rhiana Gunn-Wright has gone about as far professionally as any 26-year-old could hope for, and yet her struggle is hardly over.

She grew up on the South Side of Chicago, money a constant pressure, even though her mother had a college education and ran a nonprofit organization. "Scholarship," her mother would whisper to her, starting when she was 7. "Baby needs a scholarship."

The girl responded. She studied all the time and tested into gifted programs; her mother got her into the best schools she could find. As a teenager, Ms. Gunn-Wright won a scholarship from the Jack Kent Cooke Foundation, which supports high-achieving, low-income students. Her mother wanted her to be a doctor, but when she headed off to Yale University, she thought she might become a lawyer. Feeling no connection to English and political science, however, she switched to a double major in African-American studies and women's, gender, and sexuality studies.

When she went home and told her mother, it led to the biggest fight of their lives, an all-night blowout. "We didn't raise you to go into these subjects that don't seem like real subjects," she recalls her mother saying. "You want to pay your bills one day, don't you?"

But Ms. Gunn-Wright's new majors energized her. Her senior thesis, on welfare reform, won awards, and she became a Rhodes Scholar. After studying at the University of Oxford, she interned at a Washington think tank, focusing on women's policy issues, and recently she went to work for a research arm of the Education Credit Management Corporation, a guaranty agency for student loans.

How to Help Low-Income Students Strive

Colleges and nonprofit groups offer advice to colleagues as well as students:

More advising, sooner: Talking with high-school seniors for the first time about what they want to do next is far too late. Counselors should start earlier, but their offices are often understaffed. The College Advising Corps has placed recent college graduates at 531 high schools in 14 states to meet with students as early as ninth grade. That provides a "longer runway" for conversations about college and career, says Nicole Hurd, the group's founder and chief executive. The counselors come from more than 20 college partners, which help provide salaries and training.

Setting an example: Low-income students can benefit from early contact with people in aspirational careers, beyond those they see in their families and communities. The Ocean Discovery Institute, for example, introduces low-income youth in San Diego to topics in science and conservation. Nearly all of the students who participate in the program go to college, and 70 percent wind up majoring in science. The nonprofit group, which is considering how to replicate its model in other coastal cities, has won support from the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration to start a program in Norfolk, Va.

Support starting out: Internships have become all but essential, but they often pay little, if at all. To get all students in the game, Colgate University raised \$1.1 million last year to provide as much as \$6,500 per student for a summer internship or community-service project. For its first-generation students, Hamilton College offers support for networking, résumé and cover-letter writing, and interviewing.

By many measures, Ms. Gunn-Wright has made it. And yet, sitting in a board room at her office, she says the specter of poverty still

haunts her. "Once you have that fear of not having money, it never leaves you."

It's sometimes in subtle ways that her low-income background still limits her, she says. When her Washington colleagues talk about the hottest new restaurant or bar, she feels out of place. She has avoided going out for \$10 drinks when she could be saving for a house, wedding, or unforeseen emergency. She worked two jobs in college, against her mother's wishes, because she didn't want to ask for money. She's certainly not going to now.

But her peers get plenty of help, their parents covering rent, occasional bills, or car insurance. For many affluent twenty-somethings who were encouraged to figure things out in college, a safety net remains in place well after graduation. Building an impressive career, especially in cities like New York and Washington, usually requires extensive cultural and financial scaffolding.

Ms. Gunn-Wright can live without having tried the latest artisanal spirits. "I don't think I will ever have a taste for hipster nonsense," she says. But by not socializing with colleagues, she knows she has missed out on valuable networking opportunities. "If everyone is talking about going to a particular restaurant, and you've never been, what do you say? It's definitely a barrier. There is feeling that you don't belong here."

That pattern often begins in college, says Ms. Arnold, of Boston College, and can become a significant barrier to low-income students' pursuit of aspirational careers. Immersive, enriching experiences like internships, study-abroad programs, and social outings broaden students' connections with peers and provide practical experience for the workplace. But low-income students tend to participate in such activities at lower rates — because of the costs, because they don't live on campus, or because they're busy working.

Elissa Chin Lu, a former student of Ms. Arnold's who now works in institutional research at Wellesley College, has found that low-income students, worried about accumulating debt, choose to work during college, often in retail positions. Wealthier students fret less about debt and spend more time making connections with people and potential jobs in high-status professions. As a result, they are better positioned after graduation.

"The pathways from college to career are increasingly nonstandardized, and need to be negotiated with a good deal of social and cultural capital," Ms. Arnold says. "If you are outside an elite institution, or inside it but not of it, you are not getting those connections in friendships and extracurriculars that lead to these high-profile jobs."

Where administrators have realized this, colleges have introduced programs to support lower-income students' career development. Some provide stipends to subsidize internships, connections to alumni, and lessons in professional etiquette. A fund at Boston College gives low-income students tickets to football games or money for a night out.

And yet "career funneling," the socialization process that pulls affluent students into prominent, high-paying careers, remains strong.

Many elite-college graduates wrestle with the choice between pursuing wealth or a meaningful vocation. But for Ms. Gunn-Wright, that decision is a special conundrum. Lately she's been thinking a lot about Laquan McDonald, a black teenager who was shot 16 times by a Chicago police officer not far from where she grew up. Maybe she'll get a law degree after all, or go to graduate school for sociology or public health and work on gun-violence policy.

Or should she join a top-flight law or consulting firm? "Is it more of a political act to make money so that my children never need anything," she wonders, "or more of a political act to work in government?" She constantly considers her wage trajectory and the "psychic cost" of worrying about money or being around people she can't identify with.

"You have these gifts, and you know that if you don't use them, people in leadership positions won't look like you, and they might not care about the people that you care about," she says. "At the same time, you have real responsibilities to everyone else."

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President Obama at Louisiana town hall meeting

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Has Obama Let Down Historically Black Colleges?

President's answer to a question from a Southern University student frustrates some HBCU advocates and sets off debate on the administration's priorities.

January 18, 2016

By [Scott Jaschik](#)

The last question President Obama took at [a town hall meeting at a Louisiana high school \(https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2016/01/14/remarks-president-state-union-rollout-town-hall\)](https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2016/01/14/remarks-president-state-union-rollout-town-hall) Thursday came from a student at Southern University in Baton Rouge. The president's answer has set off a debate over how his administration has treated historically black colleges -- a sore point for some black educators who took great pride in the election of the first black president of the United States.

The student's comment to President Obama: "Most times, when I go recruit off of high schools, most of the time a lot of them say, 'oh, I don't want to go to an HBCU college; I feel like if I go to an HBCU, I won't get as many opportunities as a student at ... LSU or Tulane.' So what is your ... advice to students like me, thousands of students like me who go to HBCUs, and us finishing the course in order to be great leaders in this society?"

President Obama responded by affirming the "powerful" tradition of historically black colleges in training many leaders, and said he believed that employers and others would respect those "making the kind of presentation you make or a Morehouse man makes or a Spelman young lady makes," name-checking two of the more prestigious historically black colleges.

He then went on to say that "there's a range of challenges that HBCUs face. Some are doing great; some are having more difficulty. And some of that's good. Look -- or some of it is the result of good things. We don't live in a society where African-Americans are restricted in what colleges they can go to. And I want them to be able to go to an LSU or a Tulane as well as a Southern, as well as a Morehouse, as well as a Howard or a Spelman. So more opportunities open up -- that's good." Obama also said that "some HBCUs are having trouble with graduation rates. And that is a source of concern. And what we've said to those HBCUs is we want to work with you, but we don't want a situation in which young people are taking out loans, getting in debt, thinking that they're going to get a great education and then halfway through they're dropping out."

The president acknowledged that one reason some black colleges have lower graduation rates than other institutions is that "HBCUs may be taking chances on some kids that other schools might not. And that's a positive thing, and that has to be taken into account." But Obama added that "we also have to make sure that colleges -- any college, HBCU or non-HBCU -- take seriously the need to graduate that student and not load them up with debt."

And he added, "I don't want you taking out a Pell Grant or a bunch of -- not a Pell Grant -- like a federal loan or a private loan, and you walk out with \$50,000, \$60,000, \$100,000 worth of debt, and you didn't get your degree."

The president's remarks didn't attract much attention in the national press. But they generated quite a bit of attention from some leaders and supporters of black colleges, some of whom thought the president was too quick to link historically black colleges with large debt levels and low graduation rates -- while only briefly alluding to their track record of educating many low-income students. On social media, there have been highly critical remarks.

President Obama, as an Ivy League-educated man, brings a lot of privilege into any HBCU conversation he has and doesn't recognize it.

— Terrell J. Starr (@Russian_Starr) [January 16, 2016](https://twitter.com/Russian_Starr/status/688410360676757505)
(https://twitter.com/Russian_Starr/status/688410360676757505)

Johnny C. Taylor Jr., president of the Thurgood Marshall College Fund, which raises money and advocates for public historically black colleges, said in an interview that when the Southern student asked his question, "you could sense the pride in his school that young man felt as he spoke to the president."

Taylor added, "Mr. Obama took a moment that should have been focused on encouragement to vent his frustrations. It was insulting to hear our first black president perpetuate the same misconceptions about black colleges held by high school kids. Our community deserves better."

Comparing the graduation rates and debt levels of historically black colleges to other institutions raises difficult questions of context. For example, at Southern University, the student's college, the average debt level among borrowers who graduate is just over \$32,000, several thousand dollars above the national average. The six-year graduation rate is 30 percent, well below the national average of 44 percent. And only 48 percent of graduates, subsequent to college, were earning more than those with just a high school diploma, according to data from the U.S. Education Department.

But nearly two-thirds of students (63 percent) come from families with incomes of less than \$40,000, a much larger share than is the case at most colleges -- and coming from families without much money affects of course the students' need to borrow, the high probability that they will have attended underfinanced high schools and the low probability that they came from families with old-boy-network connections to help them land high-paying jobs right after graduation.

In contrast, at Tulane University, a predominantly white institution compared by the president and the Southern student, only 16 percent of students come from families with incomes of less than \$40,000.

Walter Kimbrough, president of Dillard University, said he understood the frustrations over the president's answer. Kimbrough said that the Obama administration, particularly early on, supported significant increases in federal funds for black colleges. But he said that the emphasis on graduation rates of late has not shown an understanding of the role of black colleges.

"The people around [Obama], I don't think they value historically black colleges," Kimbrough said. "They keep making these arguments about graduation rates and they don't talk [enough] about how HBCUs have a disproportionate share of low-income students."

Responding to the exchange with the Southern student, the editor of *HBCU Digest*, Jarrett Carter Sr., [wrote \(http://hbcudigest.com/blog/hbcus-and-obama-strangers-passing-in-the-silhouette-of-blackness\)](http://hbcudigest.com/blog/hbcus-and-obama-strangers-passing-in-the-silhouette-of-blackness) that he was frustrated by Obama's "arm-length engagement with black colleges and the black people they serve." While Obama gives the commencement addresses at prominent black colleges, his administration has seen less well-known black colleges, such as Saint Paul's College, go under, while others are at least temporarily shut down, Carter wrote.

Wrote Carter: "Obama can deal with black struggle and black excellence -- but very little in between. HBCUs, by their nature, live at the margins of both realities. They operate on the verges of financial crisis and cultural breakthrough every single day, empowering students and faculty to do and to give more in spite of society's push for them to disappear into a post-racial oblivion. And to their credit, students and faculty deliver in spite of the emerging social norms which make their commitment and productivity seem anonymous, racially tinged and socially irrelevant."

The anger that Thursday's comments drew reflects not just what the president said on Thursday, but concerns about policy during the administration.

[A change in Education Department rules in 2011 \(https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2012/10/12/standards-tightening-federal-plus-loans\)](https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2012/10/12/standards-tightening-federal-plus-loans) made it more difficult for many people to take out PLUS loans to finance their children's college education. While the shift affected all kinds of families and many types of colleges, many black colleges said that the impact was

particularly felt by their students' families -- and that sharp increases in PLUS loan denials to the parents of their students were followed by students dropping out.

The Education Department made subsequent adjustments, but many black college leaders said the administration was too slow to respond to the problem -- and that it still has not gone far enough in reversing the changes.

Many black college leaders were also not thrilled by President Obama's push in the last year to create a federal-state program to make community college free for new high school graduates.

After lobbying from black colleges, members of Congress who introduced a bill to enact the free community college idea [included a new program that sends grants to historically black colleges and other minority-serving institutions \(https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2015/07/13/free-community-college-plan-expanded-include-black-colleges-and-minority-serving\)](https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2015/07/13/free-community-college-plan-expanded-include-black-colleges-and-minority-serving) -- both public and private -- that eliminate or reduce tuition for low-income students pursuing a bachelor's degree. The grants would cover two years' worth of an institution's tuition and fees, capped at the average public four-year college's in-state tuition, which was about \$9,000 last year.

This discussion of the Obama record also comes at a time when the Democratic presidential candidates have been drawing attention to historically black colleges. Post-New Hampshire, the nomination race shifts to South Carolina and, after that, to many Southern states, where black voters are crucial in Democratic primaries and many of those voters care deeply about historically black colleges.

Hillary Clinton has been talking about how [her college affordability plan has specific provisions for black colleges \(https://www.hillaryclinton.com/briefing/factsheets/2015/08/12/college-compact-hbcu/\)](https://www.hillaryclinton.com/briefing/factsheets/2015/08/12/college-compact-hbcu/) -- public and private. Bernie Sanders last week launched an [HBCU tour \(https://berniesanders.com/press-release/13084/\)](https://berniesanders.com/press-release/13084/) that will take him to numerous black colleges for campaign events.

Symbolic Choices

The exchange in New Orleans also drew new attention to symbolic choices made by President Obama with regard to black colleges. Taylor of the Thurgood Marshall Fund published [an essay \(https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/grade-point/wp/2016/01/15/do-black-colleges-matter-to-obama/\)](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/grade-point/wp/2016/01/15/do-black-colleges-matter-to-obama/) in *The Washington Post* in which he contrasted the efforts of the Obama presidential campaigns to turn out the vote among historically black college students and the lack of students from black colleges among those selected each year to join First Lady Michelle Obama for the State of the Union address. Taylor wrote that he found himself wondering if black colleges "matter" to the president.

Melissa Wooten, associate professor of sociology at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst and author of *In the Face of Inequality: How Black Colleges Adapt* (State University of New York Press), said that she thought Taylor offered an interesting critique in that it mirrors a larger one aimed at President Obama throughout his tenure. While he has been willing to touch upon race, especially as it relates to his biography, he's been less willing to legitimate causes and institutions integral to the black community in public forums such as the SOTU."

While Taylor received a lot of praise on social media for drawing attention to black colleges, not everyone was impressed with his focus on the State of the Union guests.

All the things POTUS has to worry about and Johnny Taylor is pissed HBCUs don't get more play. Infuriating article.

<https://t.co/xHMHJOLIAM> (<https://t.co/xHMHJOLIAM>)

— Bill DeBaun (@BillDeBaun) [January 15, 2016 \(https://twitter.com/BillDeBaun/status/688044120913383424\)](https://twitter.com/BillDeBaun/status/688044120913383424)

It's also the case that the president and Michelle Obama have visited historically black colleges for commencement speeches -- the president at Morehouse and at Hampton University, and the first lady at Bowie State University, Dillard and Tuskegee University.

Kimbrough, the Dillard president, said that Michelle Obama's speech there had a major impact on the institution's visibility. He said he wasn't worried about whom the administration invites to watch the State of the Union. "If I had a Dillard student in the first lady's box, I'm not sure anyone would remember," he said.

Money and Messages From President Obama

Via email, John Silvanus Wilson Jr., president of Morehouse, and during President Obama's first term director of the White House Initiative on Historically Black Colleges and Universities, said via email that the president's track record for black colleges was a good one, and that his answers to the Southern student were appropriate.

"Johnny Taylor is the smartest and most effective leader in the HBCU arena, so when he speaks, it matters," Wilson said. "In the last seven years, could the Obama administration have been more thoughtful about the optics and symbolism of the SOTU guest list? I say, yes. But even if some may call that a blind spot, it is worth asking whether the educational backgrounds of those who make it on the SOTU guest list is a meaningful indicator of whether HBCUs matter to the president and to his administration? I say, absolutely not."

Wilson said that "a more compelling indicator of whether HBCUs matter to this administration is the annual federal funding to HBCUs." He said that "it is a fact that just before President Obama took office, total annual federal funding to HBCUs was under \$4 billion. During his first term, that figure climbed to nearly \$5.2 billion, largely based on a very intentional boost in federal grants and loans to HBCU students. To this day, HBCUs are getting nearly \$1 billion more per year than they were getting when Obama took office. That is not the behavior of a leader who thinks these institutions do not matter."

As for the response to the Southern student, Wilson said that "the president's response to the student included three very important messages -- he said: 1) HBCUs have a powerful tradition and current practice of producing leaders in many fields and people need to know the HBCU story; 2) There is plenty of evidence that if you do well at an HBCU and you present well in the job marketplace, you will do fine in life, and; 3) Like many other institutions, some HBCUs are having trouble with their graduation rates, and when we ultimately judge their productivity, we are going to take into account the choice made by some HBCUs to enroll students who may not have been given a chance elsewhere. Given that the student's question was about whether HBCU students will get relatively fewer opportunities after graduation, these three important messages from President Obama are a welcome endorsement of the HBCU value proposition."

Communication and Context

Marybeth Gasman, professor of higher education and director of the Center for Minority Serving Institutions at the University of Pennsylvania, said that the current debate reflects a lot of history -- from the Obama administration and well before. She said that some leaders of black colleges have been "frustrated" with the Obama administration from its beginning. Gasman called the problems with PLUS loans and also the loss of summer Pell Grants "missteps" by the administration that did hurt black colleges.

But she also noted that the administration has supported large increases in student aid that have benefited students at black colleges. When factoring in aid, she said that the Obama administration has done an "incredible amount" for minority-serving institutions.

Gasman said that it is important to recognize that black colleges serve so many low-income students. But she said via email that President Obama has political pressures on him that are also part of the equation.

"In some sense, I think that HBCU leadership (as I have watched from a distance) has pushed against rather than working with Obama," Gasman said. "He is highly scrutinized whenever he supports anything pertaining to African-Americans because that's how racism works in the United States. If you are a white president and support efforts that benefit whites, no one notices or cares, but when you are black and support efforts to benefit blacks, you are held under immense scrutiny. This isn't right or fair, but it's a fact and how American racism works. It is also a reason why President Obama has to hold HBCUs accountable as he supports them and allots money to them. Please understand, I think all colleges and universities should be held accountable for student success."



[//print/news/2016/01/18/obama-comments-southern-u-student-set-debate-president-and-black-colleges?width=775&height=500&iframe=true\)](#)

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