



**Attorney Lezli Baskerville, President & CEO of NAFEO, the Membership & Advocacy Association of the Nation's HBCUs & PBIs, Responds to the President's "America's College Promise" Initiative**

The National Association for Equal Opportunity in Higher Education (NAFEO), applauds President Obama's proposal to make community college tuition free, and views it as the commencement of an important dialogue with the states, college and university stakeholders, that could help as many as 9 million "would be" students move from the margins to the mainstream of American education and commerce; and move others from a service plateau to the pinnacle of their workforce or entrepreneurship dreams.

The proposal would provide additional federal dollars to states that make key reforms that include strengthening the community college experience to move more students to completion, continuing to invest in community colleges, and making tuition at community colleges free. The federal dollars to the states would cover three quarters of the tuition, and the states would pay one quarter. Students who attend at least halftime, maintain a 2.5 GPA while in college, and demonstrate steady progress toward completing on time, would have the cost of their tuition covered.

The benefits of the initiative to students are apparent. Forty percent (40%) of American college students are enrolled in community colleges. Fifty-one percent (51%) of African Americans in college are in a two-year institution. Students who are eligible for and receiving the maximum Pell Grant award may already be receiving "free community college tuition/fees" because the maximum Pell Award is currently \$5,730, but the major costs associated with attending a community college are cost of living expenses: housing, transportation, food, books, extra-learning opportunities, child care, healthcare, and the like. While the details of the proposal will ultimately be fleshed out among those in the Administration, the states, policy makers and policy shapers, the proposal would afford students an additional opportunity to cobble together the costs of attaining a two-year certificate or degree and move the nation closer to realizing its 2020 goal of 60% of Americans having a 2- or 4-year certificate or degree.

This initiative would not only benefit the targeted students but also the community colleges. It would benefit our nation's fifteen HBCU two-year institutions<sup>1</sup>, many of

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<sup>1</sup> Bishop State Community College, Clinton Junior College, Coahoma Community College, Concordia College, Denmark Technical College, Gadson State Community College, Hinds Community College Utica, J.F. Drake State Technical College, Lawson State Community College, St. Philip's College, Shelton State Community College, Shorter College, Southern University Shreveport, Trenholm (H. Council) State Technical College, University of the District of Columbia Community College.

which are exemplars of retaining and moving students, members of the workforce, entrepreneurs, servicemen and women, including our veterans, to completion of certificate and degree programs in growth, critical-and high-need disciplines. The initiative will be a boon to our nation's nearly 80 Predominantly Black Institutions (PBIs) and their service communities. Roughly seventy-five percent (75%) of PBIs are two-year institutions. PBI student bodies are 40% or more African American 50% or more Pell Grant eligible. They, too have models of excellence in containing college costs and preparing diverse students for the workforce or assisting those in the workforce to retool.

The four-year, richly diverse Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) could benefit by America's College Promise as well. Known for containing costs when compared with their historically White college counterparts (HWCUs), HBCUs are doing even better today at expanding student access and increasing success in innovative ways including offering an increasing variety of degree and certificate programs, transfer, online, GED, high school partnership, 2+2, and continuing education options. They are exploring competency-based education options as well. For the last decade, many HBCUs have been developing and piloting models of 2-4-year collaborations that can be replicated or taken to scale. NAFEO has worked with various partners to position its members as leaders in the new higher education landscape. For the past 15 years, NAFEO has been working in a collaborative, the Alliance for Equity in Higher Education, whose members include the Hispanic Association of Colleges and Universities (HACU), the American Indian Higher Education Consortium (AIHEC) and the Asian Pacific Islander Association of Colleges and Universities (APIACU) to identify promising practices of retention at MSIs. In recent years, working with the Links Incorporated, 4 HBCUs and 4 community colleges, NAFEO and its partners have developed promising practices of 2-4-year linkages that should prove useful as the debate advances about how best to shape America's College Promise.

America's College Promise could have an added benefit for 4-year HBCUs: For more than a decade, sometimes working in tandem with broad groups of stakeholders and associations and sometimes alone, NAFEO has urged and encouraged the Administration to use the power of the federal purse to prod the states that maintain public HBCUs and public HWCUs to comply with a Supreme Court mandate to invest in HBCUs such that they are quantifiably "comparable to and competitive with" the public HWCUs relative to their missions. Despite years of education, legislation, litigation and administrative fiats, the states have not done this. America's College Promise evidences this Administration's understanding of how to leverage the federal purse to prevent states from disengaging in higher education and to strengthen their public higher education systems. I am confident that when the debate regarding America's College Promise is completed, we will not only have a new option for college affordability in which states will have a "free community college" system, but that we will also have a new option for college excellence in which more public HBCUs are funded by the states such that they are "comparable to and competitive with" their HWCU counterparts.

For those concerned that the America's College Promise Initiative will result in a loss of students to HBCUs, particularly the smaller independent 4-year HBCUs that struggle to

provide an excellent, competitive education in smaller, rigorous environments while containing costs, **I argue that we must be vigilant and weigh in in the federal and state deliberative processes to ensure that is not the case.** The students who attend Twenty-first Century HBCUs do so for many reasons among them their excellent education and disproportionate affirmative results in graduating diverse students in growth and high need disciplines, in mostly smaller environments. Most students who attend an HBCU go also for what has become known as the “HBCU experience” in which the campus culture is grounded in the best of African American traditions of family, fortitude and faith, independence and interdependence. They want to attend a college in which the values and mores of their parents or guardians are undergirded and where, as in Cheers, “everybody knows your name, and they're always glad you came.”

A limited pilot initiative in targeted states with public and private HBCUs could test for a loss of students attending HBCUs and other four-year institutions concomitant with increased enrollment of America’s College Promise students in community colleges and other unintended adverse impacts before the initiative is fully rolled out.

America’s College Promise Initiative is a welcome affirmative step toward making a 2- or 4-year college certificate or degree within the grasp of more who are prepared and desirous of attaining one. It must not, however, be viewed as a substitute for the national efforts to increase the Pell Grant maximum award to cover the average costs of a public 4-year education. The devil, of course, is in the details. NAFEO will be at the table assisting in hammering out the details.

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