NAFEO Views Highly Touted Senate HBCU PARTNERS Act as Good Opening Salvo into Concretizing Years of Presidents’ Executive Orders on HBCUs, That Must Be Strengthened in the United States House of Representatives to Realize Its Intent.

CBC Leaders Controlling the House Committees to Which the Companion Bill Was Assigned, Have an Opportunity to Shape the Bill to Realize Its Intent.

The highly touted “HBCUs Propelling Agency Relationships Toward a New Era of Results for Students Act, (HBCU PARTNERS Act) introduced and moved through passage in the Senate by Senators Tim Scott (R-SC) and Chris Coons (D-DE), focused national attention on the need to codify the nearly four decades of President’s Executive Orders on HBCUs, the White House Initiatives on HBCUs, and the Presidents’ Boards of Advisors on HBCUs, in legislation, and to provide structure, meaning, action steps, outcomes and incentives for federal departments and agencies to invest in HBCUs commensurate with their missions of educating and graduating disproportionate percentages of the growing populations, especially in the growth and high need disciplines. It is a good opening salvo, into an important discussion, however, the bill omitted some elements essential for its success, including a requirement that, “each federal agency…report their work with HBCUs.”

Congresswoman Alma Adams (D-NC) and Congressman Mark Walker (R-NC) introduced the House companion legislation to the Senate HBCU PARTNERS Act. It has been assigned to the House Committee on Education & Labor, Chaired by Congressman Bobby Scott (VA), and the House Committee on Oversight & Reform, Chaired by Congressman Elijah Cummings (MD).

There is a tremendous opportunity in the House for the Members to engage in a deliberative process that should build on the Senate bill, and strengthen the legislation. For example, (1) all federal departments and agencies are not covered by the Senate bill, just those the Secretary deems to be “regularly interacting with HBCUs.” Those found not to be regularly interacting with HBCUs or investing in them only nominally, are not required to take stock of the extent to which they are investing in HBCUs “…to bolster and facilitate productive interactions between HBCUs and federal agencies; and to encourage HBCU participation in and benefit from federal programs, grants, contracts, cooperative agreements, [MOUs, capital financing of colleges, universities, laboratories, implements].” (2) The Senate Bill calls for formalizing the Presidents Board of Advisors on HBCUs as a 23-Member Board, but provides no guidance as to the make-up of the Board. History has taught that in the absence of such guidance, the Boards may not be reflective of the richness of the diversity of the HBCUs or the partners, partnerships and interactions the bill is designed to forge. (3) Nor does the Senate bill include definitions essential for a common understanding of which departments and agencies are covered and when the Secretary of
Education should take action to require agency/department plans. For example, there are several key words and phrases used in the bill, like, “underrepresented,” and “well-represented,” that should be defined in the House bill. Provisions are also not included in the bill specifying the actions that must be taken by the Department and may be taken by the Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions, and the House Committee on Education and Labor if the federal departments and agencies do not submit the requisite agency plans describing efforts to strengthen the capacity of HBCUs to participate in federal programs and initiatives, and/or do not demonstrate progress toward realizing their HBCU goals.

If the House HBCUs PARTNERS Act makes adjustments to the Senate Act, and remedies some of what must have been inadvertent oversights, the HBCU PARTNERS Act will be an important new tool for supporting the Executive and Legislative Branches in providing structure, meaning, action steps, outcomes and incentives for federal departments and agencies to invest in HBCUs in furtherance of their excellence and equal educational opportunity missions, and commensurate with their outcomes of educating and graduating disproportionate percentages of the growing populations of the states and the Nation, especially in the growth and high need disciplines. If the House does NOT modify the Senate bill, the bill should be laid aside for another time.

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NAFEO is the 501(c) (3)-membership association of the nation’s 105 HBCUs and roughly 80 PBIs. NAFEO serves as “the voice for blacks in higher education.” NAFEO members represent more than 700,000 students, 72,000 faculty, and 7 million alumni worldwide. HBCUs have a $15 billion short-term economic impact. They graduate 50% of African American public school teaching professionals; in excess of 40% of African Americans who receive advanced degrees in the sciences, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM); 60% of African American health professionals; and growing percentages of African Americans in sustainability and Homeland Security professions, the arts, and humanities. Learn more at www.nafeo.org.