

HBCUs Divided Over Free Community College Plan

By **Freddie Allen**
NNPA Correspondent

WASHINGTON (NNPA) – Black college educators and supporters are sharply split over whether President Obama's proposal to offer a free two-year community college education to students making progress toward earning an associate or bachelor's degree would hurt are harm Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs).

Lezli Baskerville, president and CEO of the National Association for Equal Opportunity in Higher Education (NAFEO), a nonprofit network of HBCUs and Predominantly Black Institutions (PBIs), including community colleges, said that for students who have a gap in funding or choose to go to a two-year institution and don't have adequate funding, America's College Promise would create another opportunity for them.

"We are trying to make sure that students that want to go and get a technical certification or some training to get their foot in the door, can do that," said Baskerville. "We also want to incentivize and facilitate students who want to get a four-year degree doing that, especially low-income students for whom options are very, very limited."

Baskerville said that the jury is still out on whether a student would opt to go to a two-year college for free instead of going to an HBCU.

"If they're going to a two-year institution, they're going to get a certificate or a two-year degree, something to get them

market-ready or entrepreneurship-ready," explained Baskerville. "If they're going to a four-year HBCU they're going because they appreciate the ethos of historic Black colleges that are built on the traditions of the African American community of family, faith, fellowship, service and social justice."

However, Lester C. Newman, president of Jarvis Christian College in Hawkins, Texas, believes HBCUs will pay a price.

"They are going to suffer," he said. "Not too many schools can operate with just the third and fourth level, especially four-year institutions that don't have graduate programs. You don't get the research dollars that can help sustain you. You rely on students being there from their freshman to their senior year. But if you are going to lose a great portion of those students for the first two years, you really will have to change your model, your business plan."

Johnny Taylor, president and CEO of the Thurgood Marshall College Fund, an education advocacy group that represents about 300,000 students and 47 member colleges and universities, agrees.

"My fear is a real one and that this is going to significantly, negatively impact private HBCUs and I think it's going to have some negative impact on public HBCUs," he said. "Mama and Daddy are going to say, 'If you can go to community college for free, that's where you are going the first two years.' So, what you have essentially done is cut in half the revenue for private



Jarvis Christian College President Lester C. Newman is concerned that free community college could hurt private HBCUs.

HBCUs. Private HBCUs are going to feel this in a way you can't even imagine."

Taylor said he supports President Obama's overall goal of providing free college assistance, but thinks it should be done in a manner that would be less harmful to HBCUs.

The United Negro College Fund (UNCF), which represents private HBCUs, has not issued a statement on the community college proposal.

As educators and HBCU advocates debate whether the program will have a disparate impact on Black schools, Toldson argued that enrollment at HBCUs has already taken a hit, because of state-level policy choices.

Toldson used Southern University in Baton Rouge, La., as an example. Toldson said that when he taught at the school in 2005, there were 10,000 students enrolled and over the last decade that number has dwindled to 6,000. Over the same period, Toldson said that community college attendance increased to about 9,000 students.

But Toldson said that the fall in enrollment at Southern University had more to do with changes in admission requirements that affected all state universities in Louisiana than direct competition from community colleges in the region. Toldson said that new guidelines barred Southern University from admitting students that scored less than 20 on their

ACT exams.

"The average ACT score is 16 in Louisiana, so you could imagine how many Black students could not go to Southern because of that change," said Toldson. "So, they had to go to a community college or whatever college would accept them."

According to data collected by the ACT program, Black graduating high school seniors scored an average of 17 on the exam in 2014, compared to White students who scored 22.3 on average.

"By 2020, an estimated 35 percent of job openings will require at least a bachelor's degree and 30 percent will require some college or an associate's degree," White House officials said. "Forty percent of college students are enrolled at one of America's more than 1,100 community colleges, which offer students affordable tuition, open admission policies, and convenient locations."

Seventy-five percent of the funding for the proposal, called "America's College Promise" will come from the federal government with participating states contributing the rest of the money needed to cover tuition costs. White House officials estimate that the program will cost the federal government \$60 billion over 10 years, if all states participate.

Nearly all of the HBCUs are in states where Republicans control the legislature and the

governor's mansion. Getting them – or the Republican majority in the House and Senate – to buy into President Obama's vision will likely be an uphill battle.

As President Newman noted, spending on higher education is already being cut by most states.

"Of course, you support any opportunity where people can go to school for free," he said. "The details are what I am concerned about. I don't see them adding any money to higher education, just redirecting funds. This program will take away funds from private schools. Any proposal that does that is going to hurt us tremendously."

Baskerville also noted that going to a two-year institution is not the most direct route for anyone who wants to get a four-year bachelor's degree.

According to federal statistics, only 7.5 percent of Black students who pursue a two-year associate degree full-time finish within three years and about 40 percent of Black students who earn bachelor's degrees finish in six years. Those rates plummet when a student is only able to attend part-time, often burdened by work or family obligations.

Ivory Toldson, the deputy director of the White House Initiative on Historically Black Colleges and Universities, said that community colleges currently educate more Black students than any other single sector, partly because of limited financial resources.

"Having a program that allows them to cut that financial barrier altogether to go into an institution that can help prepare them for an associate's degree or to transfer to a four-year college, I think is a worthwhile program," said Toldson.

The Journal for Blacks in Higher Education reported that, "Only 34 percent of Black students who took the ACT test were deemed ready for college-level English courses. This is less than half the rate for White students who took the ACT. Only 14 percent of

Black ACT test takers were deemed college ready in mathematics compared to 52 percent of White ACT test takers."

Whether community college students will be less likely to enroll in an HBCU after the first two years in another setting is being hotly debated. Regardless of the outcome, Black colleges are looking at a new reality.

Newman said that even before President Obama's announcement, Jarvis was studying whether to award students associate degrees upon satisfactory completion of the first two years. Now that examination will be accelerated.

"We're going to have to change our model," he explained. "I don't know if we have to play the associate degree game. We will have a need for greater articulation agreements with those community colleges that get those students."

Other approaches will also be needed.

Baskerville said NAFEO is already working with The Links Inc., an international professional women's group, to pair HBCUs with two-year community colleges in their service area in an effort to provide students with the experience of attending a four-year institution as they earn college credits at the local community college.

White House officials hope that taking the costs of tuition off the table for two-years will help to ease some of those burdens, possibly improving graduation rates in the process.

If the president's plan results in fewer students attending HBCUs, that could have a ripple effect. For example, physicians, dentists and other professionals who attend HBCUs are much more likely to return to Black communities to practice than graduates of non-Black colleges.

Referring to the Obama community college proposal, Newman said, "It's going to change how we operate in higher education. Whether that's good or bad, we don't know yet."

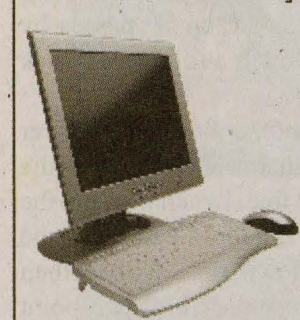
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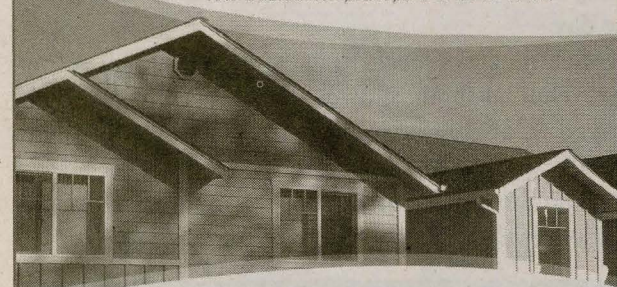
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Continued From Front Page

than Black America, according to a recent Pew Report.

In the 1960's, we had 60 Black-owned banks. Today, that number has dwindled to only 30. What is insane about this tragic loss is this: The bank is the only institution in our community that can leverage or multiply dollars 7, 8, 9 or 10 times. That means for every \$1,000,000 dollars of invested capital in these banks, they are able to loan out 7, 8, 9 or \$10 million for economic development, business growth and job creation.

Grant said African-Americans lost significant ground in business ownership after integration, largely because African-Americans were no longer forced to support each other.

"As long as we were forced to trade with each other and barter with each other, our businesses (small as they were) thrived. But in our minds, we were never quite good enough.

We had internalized the lie about our lack of inherent worth," he said. "When the doors of integration gave us the long - awaited pass to wine and dine with our former oppressors, we enthusiastically abandoned our own in search of an elusive White acceptance. We believed then - and many of us still do - that association would bring on assimilation."

Dr. King concluded on April 3, 1968, the eve of his assassination: "We've got to stay together and maintain unity. You know, whenever Pharaoh wanted to prolong the period of slavery in Egypt, he had a favorite, favorite formula for doing it. What was that? He kept the slaves fighting among themselves. But whenever the slaves get together, something happens in Pharaoh's court, and he cannot hold the slaves in slavery. When the slaves get together, that's the beginning of getting out of slavery. Now let us maintain unity."

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