

Obama's Reform Plan 'Misplaced' for HBCUs

Written by Freddie Allen NNPA Washington Correspondent
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WASHINGTON (NNPA) – President Obama's proposal to make colleges more affordable has some good points, but could disproportionately harm Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs), many of whom are already reeling from changes in the college student loan program that is causing fewer students to remain enrolled in Black colleges, according to education experts.

President Obama recently outlined his college affordability plan during a two-day tour of Buffalo, Syracuse, and Binghamton, N.Y.

The president wants to send more student financial aid to colleges that make efforts to lower costs while raising graduation rates. The college ratings system will track a number of metrics, including tuition costs, graduation rates, student debt and earnings of recent graduates. The information will be readily available for parents and students online.

According to the White House, the average tuition at a public four-year college has recently increased by 250 percent, eclipsing the rise in median family income that only increased 16 percent.

"The average student who borrows for college now graduates owing more than \$26,000," Obama said in Buffalo. "Some owe a lot more than that."

Lezli Baskerville, president of the National Association for Equal Opportunity in Higher education, a non-profit umbrella organization of the nation's Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) and Predominantly Black Institutions (PBIs), said: "Measuring dollars as some indication of success of a college or university would be terribly misplaced."

Julianne Malveaux, an economist and immediate past president of Bennett College for Women in Greensboro, N.C., agrees, saying because HBCUs service a different population than predominately White institutions (PWIs), it would be difficult to design a national ratings system that would be fair and equitable to those distinct bodies.

"We have a culture of service in the Black community," said Malveaux. "What if you want to go work as a social worker, but you would make more money as a corporate lawyer? Some of those metrics are counter-cultural."

Higher education groups agree that providing families with transparent and accurate information that will assist them in making critical decisions about which college to choose, while pushing colleges to control costs and admit more low-income students are crucial steps in the right

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direction.

"The obvious goal of the program is something you can't argue with," said Johnny C. Taylor, Jr., president and CEO of the Thurgood Marshall College Fund. "Objective good solid information can only be good for the community."

But for Taylor and many other higher education advocates, the devil is in the details. He

argues that the higher education landscape is too complicated for a solution that doesn't take into account the diversity of the student population that it serves.

Taylor also said that in order to be effective, the ratings system must recognize the heavy-lifting that HBCUs undertake in educating many students who are ill-prepared for the rigors of college courses.

"Schools that take students with an 8th, 9th or 10th grade reading level and get those kids to and through college should be rewarded more than a school that brings in a student that has a good chance of making it through college," Taylor explained.

A study conducted by the Center on Education and the Workforce at the Georgetown Public Policy Institute, in Washington, D.C., found that, "Many African Americans and Hispanics are unprepared for college, but whites who are equally unprepared still get more postsecondary opportunities."

The study also reported that Blacks and Latinos who are college-ready are steered into "crowded and underfunded two-year colleges and open-access four-year colleges" at higher rates than their White peers.

"To say schools that graduate 70 percent of their students should get a higher [ratings] number than schools that have a lower graduation rate is going to hurt schools that have a less prepared population of entering students," said Taylor. "It's no surprise to me that Harvard University is going to have a higher graduation rate than [Florida A & M University]."

If the graduation rate is coupled with a factor that accounts for the effort that is required to graduate a certain type of student, that measurement could actually help HBCUs and community colleges, Taylor believes.

Of particular concern to Taylor was a system that might compare graduate earnings for a school that does a phenomenal job graduating K-12 classroom teachers versus a school that does a phenomenal job graduating engineers.

"Well, guess which graduates are going to have higher salaries and better jobs?" he said. "I want to make sure that the Department of Education looks at the impact that different majors and careers have on society and a broad classification of people. If they do that, we'll be okay."

Measuring the earnings of graduates in a labor market with lingering issues of race and gender

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discrimination offers yet another challenge.

"It can't just be about how fast you can grow a dollar," said Baskerville. "Many HBCUs are founded on ecumenical principles. We encourage students to go into public service, we encourage students to volunteer and to give their time, and if they're entrepreneurs, we encourage them to be good entrepreneurs. We encourage our male college graduates to be mentors to young Black boys. How do you quantify those things?"

Malveaux said that the Department of Education needs to acknowledge that Black graduates experience unique challenges in the labor market.

According to the Economic Policy Institute, a Washington, D.C. based think tank that studies low- and middle-income families, "The unemployment rate of young black college graduates was 8.5 percent in 2007, rose to 21.9 percent by 2010, and improved to 11.9 percent over the last year (March 2012–February 2013)."

The unemployment rate for young, White college graduates was 8 percent during the same time period.

Even as the president moves to pressure colleges and universities to curb runaway tuition costs, the Department of Education ignored pleas from education groups that represent historically Black colleges and Universities to reverse measures that sidelined thousands of Black students that were eligible for Parent PLUS Loans a few semesters ago.

William R. Harvey, president of Hampton University and the chair of President Obama's Board of Advisors on HBCUs, said that the changes in the Parent PLUS program resulted in a loss of 28,000 HBCU students and \$154 million in revenue to HBCUs.

Harvey said that the president's goal to have the highest college graduation rates in the world coupled with changes to the PLUS program were "irreconcilable."

Harvey added that the Department of Education should immediately return to the pre-2011 interpretation of "adverse credit history. This could be done by the Department of Education issuing a guidance document which states that 'adverse credit history' is to be interpreted and defined just as it was prior to 2011," said Harvey.

Malveaux called for an effective HBCU lobbying group, comprised of parents, students and policy people that could work to mitigate any potential damage caused by the president's college affordability plan.

Taylor remains optimistic about the president's goals and recent proposal for a college ratings system. He said that the ratings system needs to compare schools that have similar missions and similar student populations and look at which schools have the greatest impact on the largest number of students.

"If they do that, I think HBCU's are going to be fine, other minority-serving institutions are going

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to be fine," said Taylor. "But if they take an overly-simplified kind of approach to a very complex problem, then this is going to be a disaster."