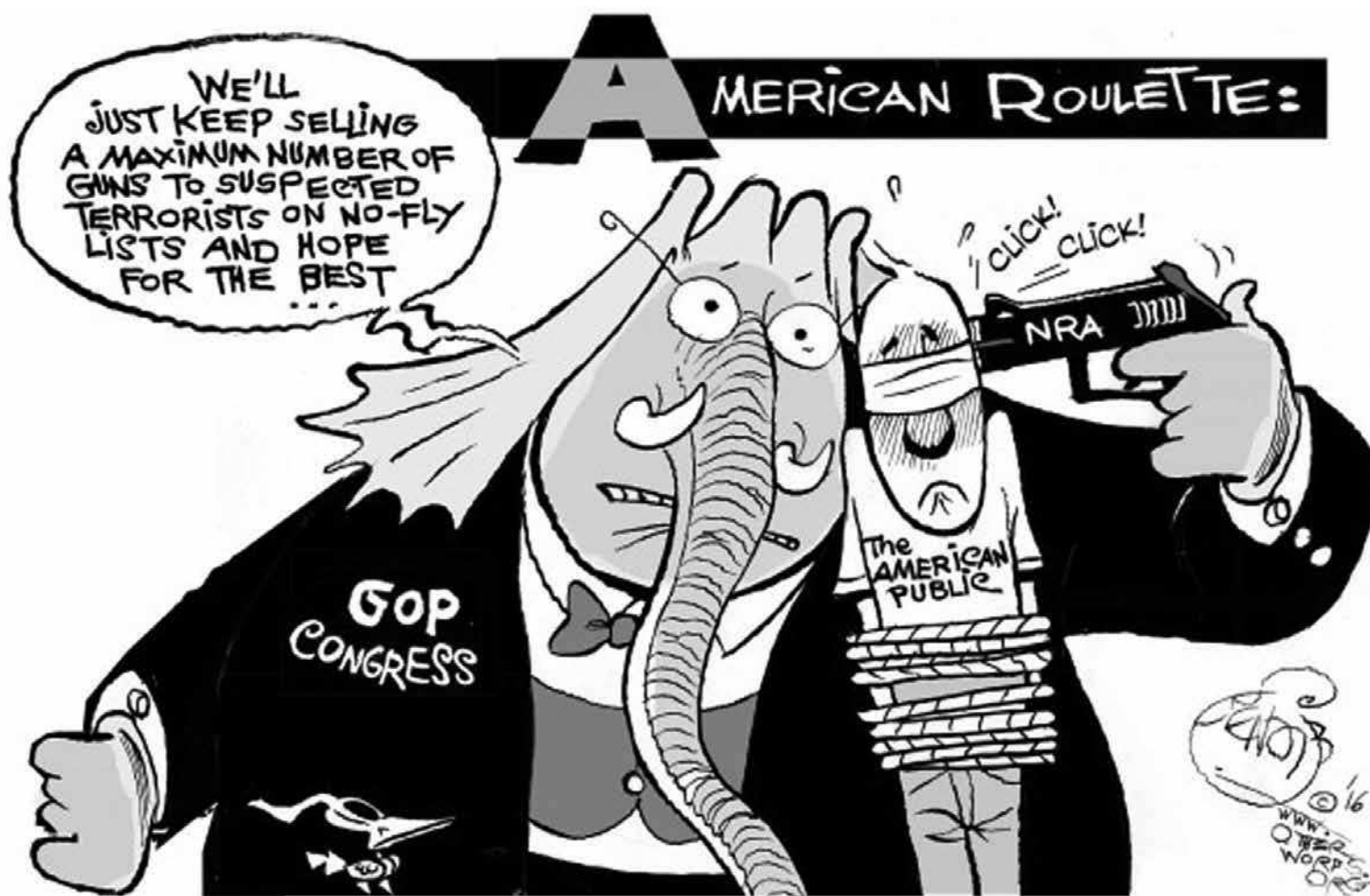


OPINION



Breaking Barriers to Earn a College Degree

Congratulations Class of 2016

BY MARC H. MORIAL

Congratulations, graduates. Whether you've walked across a stage to receive your high school diploma and begin your journey into a new world of independence, or you finally have your college diploma and are ready to step out into a world outside of lecture halls and dorms, you deserve much congratulations on your achievement.

Today, you are set to begin a new chapter in your life. Celebrate and bask in your well-deserved feeling of accomplishment now, because tomorrow is a new day and there is much work to be done.

Two years from now, it is projected that over 60 percent of all jobs will require some college education. As you prepare to become a part of the American workforce with your degree securely in hand, our nation faces a looming crisis because we are not producing enough men and women like you: graduates.

College enrollment and attainment rates have been steadily increasing in our country across racial and ethnic groups, but the problem is not that there are not enough people enrolling in college. The problem is that there are not enough people finishing col-

lege. And from among those who do attain that now vital postsecondary degree, large racial divides in degree attainment persist.

If we, as a nation, do not commit to figuring out what it takes to graduate from college, we risk diminishing the lives of our citizens, who are more likely to find better and better-paying work with a de-

dream and work hard to one day be in your shoes may see their dream deferred or discontinued because of financial need, academic unpreparedness and perhaps even coming from a non-college-going culture.

When you translate those barriers to obtaining a college degree into hard numbers, the statistics

of financial aid that doesn't drown students in future debt, the lack of high-quality teachers in K-12 in communities of color and the lack of guidance from professionals about the college experience is a recipe for disaster that will continue to trap our nation's future into poverty. You see, when a young man or woman is denied access to opportunity through education, we all lose.

The solutions to college attainment and completion will be both economic and social—from providing students with grants and low-interest loans, to providing better teachers in our grade schools and middle schools and providing academic remediation for students who need support with college courses. A college educated populace and workforce is a national imperative that requires the across-the-board support and collaboration of all stakeholders, from families to education professionals, employers and politicians.

Despite whatever obstacles you may have faced, you have earned a degree that is promised to reward you with a life you may not have had without that diploma. You have worked hard to be given access to jobs and opportunities that your degree merits. You have beat the odds. Now go out and change the world!

Marc H. Morial is president and chief executive officer of the National Urban League.

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gree. We risk the loss of critical skills and training that will keep our national economy prosperous and thriving. And we risk our country's ability to remain competitive in the global, 21st century workforce.

At the National Higher Education Summit hosted by the National Urban League and USA Funds, a nonprofit corporation that enhances preparation for, access to and success in postsecondary education, panelists addressed many of the obstacles that derail college completion for students of color. Many young men and women who

are sobering. Over the period from 1990 to 2014, the gap between whites and blacks attaining a bachelor's or higher degree widened from 13 to 18 percentage points, and the gap between whites and Hispanics widened from 18 to 26 percentage points, according to a study by the National Center for Education Statistics.

As long as large numbers of students of color remain ill prepared to navigate and succeed in our postsecondary system of education, we will continue to have an urgent, national conversation about income inequality. The lack



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