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OPINION



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April 1, 2017**

What You Really Need to Thrive in College

What no one told me about being 'first'

BY BRANDON TERRELL

I was reared and schooled in Detroit, where poverty and oppression eloquently danced while violence and crime serenaded the communities.

The crime and oppression in my neighborhood drove me to submit a college application that changed my life's trajectory. I wasn't going to college to become an adult; I faced mature challenges and struggles long before filling out my college applications. For me, higher education represented an escape from adult struggles.

But, I couldn't escape the financial challenges. For first-generation college students like me, the responsibilities designed for mature adults were often delegated to us adolescents. Now that I'm in graduate school, I have some distance and perspective on what first-gens really



need to thrive at a four-year college.

And, despite some model programs at universities, I fear the current political climate and threatened budget cuts will only make it harder for first-gens to obtain a four-year degree.

I know from experience my journey as a first-gen and non-traditional undergraduate college student is devastatingly common.

No one in high school or college spoke to me about the financial realities of being a student who couldn't rely on family for support. FASFA, Pell Grants and loans were foreign concepts. The conversations I had growing up rarely involved college. We talked about who was buying dinner that night or who needed to get a job to help pay bills.

Survival was the goal. By the time I applied to college, I had already tangled with life and boxed with oppression, discrimination, stereotypical beliefs, and negative ideologies, all while juggling school, plus a job or two.

Life had prepared me for college. But the challenges never stopped

coming.

Even as I struggled to pay tuition and buy meals when the food courts closed for the weekends, I often got calls from relatives who needed help buying groceries. Relief started with me. I had no safety net - I WAS the safety net.

Completing college required a survival balancing act-maintaining my GPA, bridging gaps back at home, and navigating collegiate bureaucracies while carefully responding to microaggressions and prejudice in majority white spaces.

Spectators would classify the underlying factor of our motivation as "grit" or "determination," but for many first gens, our motivation is simply survival. We have no choice.

Missing an assignment, being too tired to attend a bio lecture after working more than 30 hours a week, failing a 300 level course, or even missing a tuition payment created a slippery slope back to the environment that suffocated dreams.

But we are a population colleges cannot afford to lose, as we represented 36 percent of students seeking a four-year degree nationwide in 2012.

Politicians, educators, social workers, counselors, and administrators must address the intersecting social and cultural challenges that precede our applications, accompany us to college, and follow us even after securing a degree.

Access to college and financial aid is not enough to secure a better quality of life for students coming from low-income backgrounds. The gap is widening with only 14 percent of the most economically disadvantaged students earning a bachelor's degree, according to a 2015 federal study.

We need a different support system to thrive in college-mentors, help with living expenses, travel costs, tutors, flexible schedules, and emotional support from other students who feel isolated, but are coping with similar struggles.

We need to stop talking about college attainment in simplistic ways. It takes so much more than grit.

Brandon Terrell is currently attending graduate school at Eastern Michigan University, after graduating there in 2015 with a bachelor's in psychology.

The Connection between Racial and Economic Justice

Dr. King's legacy honored with new campaign

BY LEE SAUNDERS

Today's economy is rigged against working families and in favor of the wealthy and the powerful. That's not by accident. CEOs and the politicians who do their bidding have written the rules that way, advancing their own interests at the expense of everyone else.

Now, they're trying to get the rigged system affirmed by the United States Supreme Court. In a few months, the justices will hear a case called Janus v. AFSCME Council 31, which would make so-called "right-to-work" the law of the land in the public sector, threatening the freedom of working people to join together in strong unions.

The powerful backers in this case have made no secret about their true agenda. They have publicly said that they want to "defund and defang" unions like the one I lead. They know that unions level the economic playing field. They know that unions give working people the power in numbers to improve their lives and communities, to negotiate a fair return on their work while keeping the greed of corporate special interests in check.



Union membership is especially important for communities of color, historically providing a ladder to the middle class, helping them earn their fair share of the wealth and the value they generate. More than half of African-Americans make less than \$15 per hour. But belonging to a union is likely to lead to a substantial pay raise and superior benefits. African-American union mem-

bers earn 14.7 percent more than their non-union peers. The union advantage for Latinos is even greater: 21.8 percent.

When unions thrive, everyone benefits. Wages, protections and labor standards for all working people rise. In New Jersey, my union has set up a training fund that provides young people a pathway to high-demand nursing careers. The result is not just good jobs, but a better health care system. In Minnesota, teachers' unions speak up together

to make sure their students get the resources they need to succeed.

Meanwhile, right to work isn't just anti-union; it actually has its roots in the racial brutality of the Jim Crow South. The misleading term was coined by a Texas oil lobbyist named Vance Muse, an unapologetic white supremacist who thrived on pitting workers of different races against each and feared that they would find solidarity with one another. "From now on," Muse

there are no civil rights." It was during a labor struggle - a strike by AFSCME sanitation workers in Memphis, Tennessee - that Dr. King was assassinated in April, 1968. To mark the 50th anniversary, AFSCME has launched a grass roots education and mobilization campaign initiative called I AM 2018 - to honor the courage and carry on the legacy of both Dr. King and the sanitation workers.

The Janus case and the pursuit of

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once said of unionization and workplace integration, "white women and white men will be forced into organization with black African apes whom they will have to call brother or lose their jobs."

By contrast, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., who made the connection between racial and economic justice central to his philosophy, saw through the "false slogan" of right to work. "Wherever these laws have passed," he said, "wages are lower, job opportunities are fewer and

right to work is all about people with substantial money and power hoarding even more money and power for themselves. It is strong unions that create greater freedom and opportunity for everyone, helping working people of all races get a fair shake, a strong voice and a chance to achieve the American Dream.

Lee Saunders is president of the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees, a union of 1.6 million public service workers.

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