

HBCUs Divided over Free Community College Plan

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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 or 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 Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) and Predominantly Black Institutions (PBIs), including community colleges, said that for students who have a gap in funding or choose to

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, 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 HBCUs. Private HBCUs are going to feel

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.

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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

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

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