

Remarks on Expanding College Opportunity

January 16, 2014

Thank you, everybody. Everybody, please have a seat. Have a seat. Welcome to the White House, everybody. And let me begin by thanking Troy and sharing his remarkable story. I could not be more inspired by what he's accomplished and can't wait to see what he's going to accomplish in the future.

My wife, it's hard to speak after her. [Laughter] The—we were in the back, and Gene Sperling, who did extraordinary work putting this whole summit together, said, "Everybody is so excited that Michelle is here." [Laughter] I said, well, what about me? [Laughter] But you should be excited, her being here, because she brings a passion and a body of experience and a passion to this issue that is extraordinary. And I couldn't be prouder of the work she's already done and the work, I know, that she's going to keep on doing around these issues.

She did leave one thing out of her speech, and that is, it's her birthday tomorrow. [Applause] So I want everybody to just keep that in mind.

Now, we are here for one purpose: We want to make sure more young people have the chance to earn a higher education. And in the 21st-century economy, we all understand it's never been more important.

The good news is, is that our economy is steadily growing and strengthening after the worst recession in a generation. So we've created more than 8 million new jobs. Manufacturing is growing, led by a booming auto industry. Thanks to some key public investments in advances like affordable energy and research and development, what we've seen is not only an energy revolution in this country that bodes well for our future, but in areas like health care, for example, we've slowed the growth of health care costs in ways that a lot of people wouldn't have anticipated as recently as 5 or 10 years ago.

So there are a lot of good things going on in the economy. And businesses are starting to invest. In fact, what we're seeing are businesses overseas starting to say, instead of outsourcing, let's insource back into the U.S.

All that bodes well for our future. Here's the thing though: We don't grow just for the sake of growth. We grow so that it translates into a growing middle class, people getting jobs, people being able to support their families, and people being able to pass something on to the next generation. We want to restore the essential promise of opportunity and upward mobility that's at the heart of America, the notion that if you work hard, you can get ahead, you can improve your situation in life, you can make something of yourself, the same essential story that Troy so eloquently told about himself.

And the fact is, it's been getting harder to do that for a lot of people. It is harder for folks to start in one place and move up that ladder, and that was true long before the recession hit. And that's why I've said that in 2014, we have to consider this a year of action, not just to grow the economy, not just to increase GDP, not just to make sure that corporations are profitable and the stock market's doing well and the financial system is stable. We've also got to make sure that that growth is broad based and that everybody has a chance to access that growth and take advantage of it. We've got to make sure that we're creating new jobs and that the wages and benefits that go along with those jobs can support a family. We have to make sure that

there are new ladders of opportunity into the middle class and that those ladders—the rungs on those ladders are solid and accessible for more people.

Now, I'm going to be working with Congress where I can to accomplish this, but I'm also going to act on my own if Congress is deadlocked. I've got a pen to take executive actions where Congress won't, and I've got a telephone to rally folks around the country on this mission.

And today is a great example of how, without a whole bunch of new legislation, we can advance this agenda. We've got philanthropists and business leaders here. We've got leaders of innovative non-for-profits. We've got college presidents, from State universities and historically Black colleges to Ivy League universities and community colleges. And today more than 100 colleges and 40 organizations are announcing new commitments to help more young people not only go to, but graduate from college. And that's an extraordinary accomplishment, and we didn't pass a bill to do it.

Everybody here is participating, I believe, because you know that college graduation has never been more valuable than it is today. Unemployment for Americans with a college degree is more than a third lower than the national average; incomes, twice as high as those without a high school diploma. College is not the only path to success. We've got to make sure that more Americans of all age are getting the skills that they need to access the jobs that are out there right now. But more than ever, a college degree is the surest path to a stable, middle class life.

And higher education speaks to something more than that. The premise that we're all created equal is the opening line in our American story. And we don't promise equal outcomes; we've strived to deliver equal opportunity: the idea that success does not depend on being born into wealth or privilege, it depends on effort and merit. You can be born into nothing and work your way into something extraordinary. And to a kid that goes to college, maybe like Michelle, the first in his or her family, that means everything.

And the fact is, is if we hadn't made a commitment as a country to send more of our people to college, Michelle, me, maybe a few of you would not be here today. My grandfather wasn't rich, but when he came home from the war he got the chance to study on the GI bill. I grew up with a single mom. She had me when she was 18 years old. There are a lot of circumstances where that might have waylaid her education for good. But there were structures in place that allowed her then to go on and get a Ph.D. Michelle's dad was a shift worker at the city waterplant; mom worked as a secretary. They didn't go to college. But there were structures in place that allowed Michelle to take advantage of those opportunities.

Now, as Michelle mentioned, our parents and grandparents made sure we knew that we'd have to work for it, that nobody was going to hand us something, that education was not a passive enterprise, it's—you just tip your head over and somebody pours education into your ear. You've got to work for it. And I've told the story of my mother: When I was living overseas, she'd wake me up before dawn to do correspondence courses in English before I went to the other school. I wasn't that happy about it. But with that hard work—but also with scholarships, also with student loans, and with support programs in place—we were able to go to some of the best colleges in the country even though we didn't have a lot of money. Every child in America should have the same chance.

So over the last 5 years, we've worked hard in a variety of ways to improve these mechanisms to get young people where they need to be and to knock down barriers that are preventing them from getting better prepared for the economies that they're going to face.

We've called for clearer, higher standards in our schools, and 45 States and the District of Columbia have answered that call so far. We've set a goal of training 100,000 new math and science teachers over the next 10 years, and the private sector has already committed to help train 40,000. We've taken new steps to help students stay in school, and today, the high school dropout rate is the lowest it has been in 40 years, something that's rarely advertised. The dropout rate among Hispanic students, by the way, has been cut in half over the last decade.

But we still have to hire more good teachers and pay them better. We still have to do more training and development and ensure that the curriculums are ones that maximize the chances for student success. When young people are properly prepared in high school, we've got to make sure that they can afford to go to college. So we took on a student loan system that was giving billions of dollars of taxpayer dollars to big banks, and we said, let's give that money directly to students. As a consequence, we were able to double the grant aid that goes to millions of students. And today, more young people are earning college degrees than ever before.

So we've made progress there, but as I've discussed with some of you, we're still going to have to make sure that rising tuition doesn't price the middle class out of a college education. The Government is not going to be able to continually subsidize a system in which higher education inflation is going up faster than health care inflation. So I've laid out a plan to bring down costs and make sure that students are not saddled with debt before they even start out in life.

Even after all these steps that we've taken over the last 5 years, we still have a long way to go to unlock the doors of higher education to more Americans and especially lower income Americans. We're going to have to make sure they're ready to walk through those doors. The added value of a college diploma has nearly doubled since Michelle and I were undergraduates. Unfortunately, today, only 30 percent of low-income students enroll in college right after high school, and far worse, by their midtwenties, only 9 percent earn a bachelor's degree.

So if we as a nation can expand opportunity and reach out to those young people and help them not just go to college, but graduate from college or university, it could have a transformative effect. There is this huge cohort of talent that we're not tapping.

Now, what this meeting today tells me is we've got dedicated citizens across the country who are ready to stand up and meet this challenge. And what I want to really do is highlight some of the commitments that have been made here today. So we know that not enough low-income students are taking the steps required to prepare for college. That's why I'm glad the University of Chicago, my neighbor, and the place where Michelle and I both worked in the past, is announcing a \$10 million College Success Initiative that will reach 10,000 high schools over the next 5 years. It's why iMentor, a mentoring program that began 15 years ago with just 49 students in the South Bronx, has committed to matching 20,000 new students with mentoring in more than 20 States over the next 5 years.

We also know that too many students don't apply to the schools that are right for them. They may sometimes underestimate where they could succeed, where they could go. There may be a mismatch in terms of what their aspirations are and the nature of what's offered at the school that's close by. And they kind of assume, well, that's my only option. So UVA, for example, is going to experiment with new ways to contact high-achieving, low-income students directly, encourage them to apply. Organizations like the College Board are going to work with colleges to make it easier for students to apply to more schools for free.

I know sometimes for those of you in university administrations, the perception may be that a hundred-dollar application fee is not a big deal. But for a lot of these students, that's enough of a barrier that they just don't end up applying.

Number three, we know that when it comes to college advising and preparing for tests like the ACT and the SAT, low-income kids are not on a level playing field. We call these standardized tests; they're not standardized. Malia and Sasha, by the time they're in seventh grade at Sidwell School here, are already getting all kinds of advice and this and that and the other. The degree of preparation that many of the—our kids here are getting in advance of actually taking this test tilts the playing field. It's not fair. And it's gotten worse.

I was telling Michelle, when I was taking the SAT, I just barely remembered to bring a pencil. I mean, that's how much preparation I did. *[Laughter]* But the truth of the matter is, is that we don't have a level playing field when it comes to so-called standardized tests. So we've got a young man here today named Lawrence Harris who knows this better than most. Lawrence went to the University of Georgia, and like a lot of first-generation college students, it wasn't easy for him. He had to take remedial classes. He had to work two part-time jobs to make ends meet. At one point, he had to leave school for a year while he helped support his mom and his baby brother. Those are the kinds of just day-to-day challenges that a lot of these young people with enormous talent are having to overcome. Now, he stuck with it. He graduated.

But now he's giving back. He's made it his mission to help other young people like him graduate, as a college adviser at Clarke Central High School in Athens, Georgia. And today the National College Advising Corps, the program that placed Lawrence in Clarke Central, is announcing plans to add 129 more advisers who will serve more than 80,000 students over the next 3 years.

Finally, we know that once low-income students arrive on campus—Michelle, I think, spoke eloquently to her own personal experience on this—they often learn that even if they were at the top of their high school class, they still have a lot of catching up to do with respect to some of their peers in the classroom. Bunker Hill Community College is addressing this by giving more incoming students the chance to start catching up over the summer before their freshman year. And we've got 22 States and the District of Columbia who have joined together in a commitment to dramatically increase the number of students who complete college-level math and English their first year.

So these are just a sampling of the more than 100 commitments that your organizations and colleges are making here today. And that's an extraordinary first step. But we've got more colleges and universities than this around the country. We've got more business leaders around the country and philanthropies around the country. And so we have to think of this as just the beginning; we want to do something like this again, and we want even more colleges and universities and businesses and non-for-profits to take part.

For folks who are watching this who were not able be here today, we want you here next time. Start thinking about your commitments now. We want you to join us. For those who were able to make commitments today, I want to thank you for doing your part to make better the life of our country. Because what you're doing here today means that there are a bunch of young people, like Troy and like Michelle and like me, who suddenly may be able to see a whole new world open up before—that they didn't realize was there.

So I'll end with a great story that, I think, speaks to this. There's a former teacher here today named Nick Ehrmann. Where's Nick? All right, so here's Nick right here. Five years ago, Nick founded a New York City nonprofit called Blue Engine, and they recruit recent college graduates to work as teaching assistants in public high schools that serve low-income communities, teaming up to help students build the skills they need to enter college ready for college.

The first group of students to work with those teaching assistants are seniors now. One of them, Estiven Rodriguez, where—who also is here today. Where is he? There he is, good-looking young guy right here. [Laughter] Could not speak a word of English when he moved to the United States from the Dominican Republic at age of 9. Didn't speak much more English by the time he entered sixth grade.

Today, with the support of a tightly knit school community, he's one of the top students in his senior class at Washington Heights Expeditionary Learning Schools, or WHEELS. Last month, he and his classmates put on their WHEELS sweatshirts, unfurled a banner, waved flags and marched down the streets of Washington Heights in New York City through cheering crowds. You would have thought it was the Macy's parade. [Laughter] But the crowds on the sidewalk were parents and teachers and neighbors. The flags were college pennants. The march was to the post office, where they mailed in their college applications. And Estiven just heard back. This son of a factory worker who didn't speak much English just 6 years ago won a competitive scholarship to attend Dickinson College this fall.

So everywhere you go, you've got stories like Estiven's, and you've got stories like Troy's. But we don't want these to be the exceptions, we want these to be the rule. That's what we owe our young people, and that's what we owe this country. We all have a stake in restoring that fundamental American idea that says: It doesn't matter where you start, what matters is where you end up. And as parents and as teachers and as business and philanthropic and political leaders—and as citizens—we've all got a role to play.

So I'm going to spend the next 3 years as President playing mine. And I look forward to working with you on the same team to make this happen. Thank you very much, everybody.

NOTE: The President spoke at approximately 11:50 a.m. in the South Court Auditorium of the Dwight D. Eisenhower Executive Office Building. In his remarks, he referred to Troy Simon, student, Bard College, who introduced the First Lady. He also referred to his mother-in-law Marian Robinson. The transcript released by the Office of the Press Secretary also included the remarks of the First Lady, who introduced the President.

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