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How Can More Black People Finish College?

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Ask Dr. Lomax: It's not just about getting in but about getting that degree. These programs help.

(*Special to The Root*) --

"What is being done to help black college students actually finish college?" --Ellis Anthony Sutton Jr.

You are asking exactly the right question. For a long time, people defined our national education goal as going to college. Now I think everybody is coming to understand that our goal has to be finishing college and earning a degree. In an economy in which people are likely, over the course of a working life, not only to change jobs frequently but to change careers, completing a four-year education and receiving a degree provide a broad education that helps you gain skills that translate to many jobs, as well as the credentials that define you as someone with the ability to learn and apply new concepts. That's what the economy needs and the job market demands.

It's useful to divide the answer to your question in two, because the challenges to staying in college are different for freshmen and sophomores than for juniors and seniors.

Getting on the Right Track Early

Students, especially students of color from low- and moderate-income families, who drop out during their first two years of college generally do so because of lack of academic readiness and social-adjustment issues. [Government](#) and [achievement-test](#) statistics (pdf) show that African-American students are persistently shortchanged in their K-12 years. And while most freshmen are living away from home for the first time, many students of color are the first in their family to go to college and don't have parents and siblings with knowledge and experience who can help them make the adjustment.

United Negro College Fund, of which I am president and CEO, is acting aggressively on both of these fronts. Along with education-reform activists and charter school networks across the country, we are advocating for reforms that would guarantee that every high school graduate is prepared for college coursework and college success. In the meantime, UNCF-member HBCUs have active developmental education programs, helping their students catch up to where they should be.

We are also addressing social challenges to staying in school and graduating. Our UNCF Gates Millennium Scholars Program, a partnership with the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, gives scholarship recipients not only a check to pay expenses but also a suite of supports, including mentoring, leadership training and academic and social support. The fact that the Gates program retains 97 percent of its freshmen into sophomore year and has a 90 percent six-year graduation rate

speaks to the effectiveness of its approach.

Many of our member HBCUs are following the same approach on their campuses. [Clafin University in Orangeburg, S.C.](#) (pdf), for example, has made retention a top priority. Its Academic Success and Achievement Program gives at-risk students access to a broad range of programs -- learning communities, tutoring, mentoring and much more. The result has been an increase in retention from 70 percent to 78 percent in one year, a substantial improvement. Other UNCF institutions, like Morehouse and Spelman colleges in Atlanta, also have a range of programs to support their students, and retention rates of 87 percent and 89 percent respectively.

Seeing It Through to the End

After sophomore year, the big obstacle to staying in college is financial: Money runs out. Federal and state governments provide a wide range of student financial aid, including grants and loans, by far the largest of which is the federal Pell Grant program, which will provide more than 9 million students with more than \$36 billion in financial aid during the current fiscal year. UNCF itself awards more than 13,000 scholarships a year, worth more than \$100 million. In fact, research by UNCF's Patterson Research Institute found that for every \$5,000 in scholarship support awarded by UNCF to a freshman student, the likelihood of that student graduating increases by 8 percentage points.

Student loans must be an option for the foreseeable future. But we have to be careful, as individuals and as advocates, not to shift so much of the financial-aid burden from grants -- like Pell Grants and scholarship programs -- to loans, saddling families and students with debt they may never be able to repay.

Scholarship providers are starting to come to grips with financial shortfalls that occur midsemester, out of the normal scholarship cycle. In recent years, UNCF has addressed this challenge through two multimillion-dollar "just-in-time" scholarship programs. We started our Campaign for Emergency Student Aid four years ago to help students whose education was threatened by recession-connected economic misfortunes like layoffs and pay cuts. CESA has awarded more than \$12 million in scholarships to more than 5,500 students.

And last year we established our \$5 million "A Mind Is" Scholarship Award Program, its name echoing our famous motto, "A mind is a terrible thing to waste." "A Mind Is" awarded \$2,000 scholarships to 2,500 students at our member institutions, targeting students with midterm needs whom other programs may have overlooked.

Like all our scholarship programs, CESA and "A Mind Is" are funded by corporations, foundations and individuals and must be replenished periodically to keep up with the needs of the students we serve. Much of UNCF's work is reaching out to people who care about education and asking them to invest in these programs, as well as in the students who depend on them.

The scope of these remedies underscores how important it is to help students who are already in college stay in college. Making our schools better will help a lot -- in the long term.

But in the short term -- the time frame that we have to live in -- government policymakers and private philanthropy must not lose track of the students who are in college right now. They will be our next generation of teachers, doctors, scientists and businessmen and businesswomen. If we want them to be there for us when we need them, we have to invest today in better futures for them -- because better futures for them are better futures for us all.

Michael Lomax is president and CEO of United Negro College Fund. He is a contributing editor for The Root.

If you have any questions about the college experience, whether you are a student or a parent, please send them to Dr. Lomax at therootstaff@theroot.com.

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