

Administration of Barack Obama, 2014

Remarks at the White House College Opportunity Summit

December 4, 2014

The President. Thank you! Please, please have a seat. Thank you so much.

First of all, can everybody please give Chionque a big round of applause for her great story? We are proud of what she has achieved and the spirit that she represents. When it comes to higher education, we spend a lot of time crunching numbers and statistics. But ultimately, what matters—and what has so many of you here today, many of you who have made this your life work—is making sure that bright, motivated young people like Chionque, and all the students who are here, have the chance to go as far as their talents and their work ethic and their dreams can take them.

And that's why we're here today. In January, we held our first College Opportunity Summit with about 140 higher education leaders and organizations over in the White House. This time, we've got so many folks, we had to move to a different building. That is a good sign. [*Laughter*] You would have been a fire hazard over in EEOB. [*Laughter*]

And all we did was ask a simple question: What can we do, collectively, to create more success stories like Chionque's? And you, collectively, have responded in a big way, with commitments to give more of our young people that chance. Private and community colleges, philanthropists and business leaders, heads of nonprofits and heads of school districts. This did not require a single piece of legislation, a single new stream of funding. What it required was a sense of urgency and a sense of focus and a recognition, this should not be a Democratic issue or a Republican issue. Making sure more of our young people have access to higher education and can succeed and complete their work and get their degree, that has to be an American issue. [*Applause*] An American issue.

And this is especially important at a time when we face multiple challenges, both internationally and domestically, challenges that are entirely solvable, but so often don't get solved because rather than having a sense of common good, we focus on our differences. Rather than having a sense of national purpose, a common sense of opportunity, we give in to those forces that drive us apart.

We think about what's happened over the last year, 2 years, 6 years, our economy keeps improving. More Americans are working. More Americans have health care. Manufacturing has grown. The deficit has shrunk. Foreign oil is down. Crime is down. Graduation rates are up. Clean energy is up. So, objectively speaking, America is outpacing most of the world. And when I travel overseas, people look at us with envy and are puzzled as to why there seems to be so much anxiety and frustration inside America.

And my response is that when it comes to our economy, yes, our economy is growing, but we find an increasing divergence between those who have the skills that today's jobs require and those who don't. So the economy becomes more stratified. When it comes to the cost of college, there's a frustration in a middle class that feels like folks at the top can afford it, folks at the bottom get help, there's nobody who's looking out for folks in the middle. And given accelerating costs and the recognition that this is going to be the key ticket to the middle class, that elicits great frustration.

When it comes, as we've seen, unfortunately, in recent days, to our criminal justice system, too many Americans feel deep unfairness when it comes to the gap between our professed ideals and how laws are applied on a day-to-day basis.

I should mention, before I came here I had a chance to speak with Mayor de Blasio in New York, and I commended him for his words yesterday and for the way New Yorkers have been engaging in peaceful protests and being constructive. He was just in the White House with us on Monday, as we started taking some concrete steps to strengthen the relationship between law enforcement and communities of color, and I intend to take more steps with leaders like him in the months ahead. But beyond the specific issue that has to be addressed—making sure that people have confidence that police and law enforcement and prosecutors are serving everybody equally—there's the larger question of restoring a sense of common purpose.

And at the heart of the American ideal is this sense that we're in it together; that nobody is guaranteed success, but everybody has got access to the possibilities of success; and that we are willing to work not just to make sure our own children have pathways to success, but that everybody does; that at some level, everybody is our kid, everybody is our responsibility. We are going to give back to everybody.

And we do that because it's the right thing to do, and we do it because, selfishly, that's how this country is going to advance and everybody is going to be better off. And big challenges like these should galvanize our country. Big challenges like these should unite us around an opportunity agenda that brings us together, rather than pulling us apart.

We are at our best when we rise to what the moment demands, whether it's putting more people back to work, making sure those jobs pay a decent wage so that incomes and wages go up; whether it's educating more of our kids for the 21st century; whether it's fixing our broken immigration system; and to do what many of you have done and made as the cause of your life, and that is, opening the doors of higher education to more of our fellow Americans. These are big challenges, but they are solvable as long as we feel a sense of urgency and we work together.

And that's why I was so heartened by the January meeting, and that's why I'm even more encouraged by this meeting.

Our higher education system is one of the things that makes America exceptional. There's no place else that has the assets we do when it comes to higher education. People from all over the world aspire to come here and study here. And that is a good thing.

America thrived in the 20th century because we made high school free. We sent a generation to college. We cultivated the most educated workforce in the world. Along with our innovation mentality, our risk taking, our entrepreneurial spirit, it was that foundation that we laid—broad-based, mass education—that drove our economy and separated us from the rest of the world. Nothing was more important—the skills of our people, the investment we made in human capital. We were ahead of the curve.

But what's happened is, other countries figured it out. They took a look at our policies, and they figured out the secret sauce. [*Laughter*] They set out to educate their own kids so they could outcompete ours, understanding that in today's knowledge economy, jobs and businesses will go wherever you can find the most skilled, educated workers. Now, I don't want them—I don't want businesses to have to look anywhere other than the United States of America. I want to make sure we lead the world in education once again, not just because it's

right to help more young people chase their dreams, but because it's critical to our economic future.

Now, the reason we're here is because we understand that although at the top end, our universities are doing unbelievable work and are still the envy of the world, for a lot of working families, for a lot of middle class kids, a lot of folks who are trying to join that middle class, higher education increasingly feels out of reach. You—a lot of college quads may not look like they've changed much over the last century. The people who attended them have. There are more minorities. There are more first-generation college goers. Working adults are returning to get degrees so that they can reach for opportunities that right now are foreclosed to them. Students are more likely than in the past to study part time. They hold full-time jobs. They have families. We used to think of these as atypical students; today, they're increasingly the norm.

But too many students who take the crucial step of enrolling in college don't actually finish, which means they leave with the burden of debt, without the earnings and the job benefits of a degree. So we've got to change that. All of us have a stake in changing that.

On the one hand, we've got good news, which is, 20, 30, 40, 50 years ago, college was still seen as a luxury; now everybody understands some form of higher education is a necessity. And that's a good thing, which means more folks are enrolling and more folks are seeking the skills that they'll need to compete. But if they're simply enrolling and not graduating, if they're enrolling and not getting the skills that they need, then we're not delivering on the promise. In fact, we're adding another burden to these folks.

And I get letters all the time seeing what that burden means, heartbreaking letters that I'll get sometimes from kids who thought they were doing the right thing, have \$50,000, \$60,000, \$70,000 worth of debt, now feel as if they made a bad mistake trying to get a higher education. Now, as a nation, we don't promise equal outcomes, but we were founded on the idea everybody should have an equal opportunity to succeed. No matter who you are, what you look like, where you come from, you can make it. That's an essential promise of America. Where you start should not determine where you end up. And so I'm glad that everybody wants to go to college. You are too. But I want to make sure that it actually works for them.

And what that means is that we're going to have to make sure that more students can make it all the way across the graduation stage, not with debt that might limit their choices, but with the skills that will prepare them for the workforce. That's going to be critical.

It's why we're going to have to help more college—more families afford college. And that's why we've offered grants and tax credits that go farther than before. We've helped over 700 community college partners with over 1,000 employers to provide training for good jobs that need to be filled. We've reformed student loans so that more money goes to students rather than banks. And I took executive actions to—[applause]—took an executive action to give Americans the chance to cap their direct student loan payments at 10 percent of their monthly income so people can pursue careers that may not be wildly lucrative, but are critically important to our society.

One thing we certainly shouldn't be doing is making it harder for more striving young kids to finish their education and depriving America of their talents and discoveries. And I bring this up because there's a bill that Republican leadership in the House are voting—have brought up that would force talented young people and productive workers and community leaders to leave our country. The immigration issue is, I recognize, one that generates a lot of

passion, but it does not make sense for us to want to push talent out rather than make sure that they're staying here and contributing to society. So—[*applause*].

Rather than deport students and separate families and make it harder for law enforcement to do its job, I just want Congress to work with us to pass a commonsense law to fix that broken immigration system. And there's a lot that Congress could do to help more young people access and afford higher education. I'd like to see us spend more time on that.

But in the meantime, there's a lot that you and I can do together even if Congress doesn't act. So that's why we convened the College Opportunity Summit in January, calling for action. We've already seen a lot of progress. More than 2,000 colleges are waiving application fees for low-income students. That's a big deal. Georgia State University, just to cite one example, is developing a new system to give small grants to students who might be a little behind on their bills. You've got the Posse Foundation planning to provide over 500 STEM scholarships over the next 5 years.

And what we heard from you is that in order to meet our goal of producing many more college graduates, we've got to draw on all of higher education, which means community colleges, big public universities, small liberal arts colleges. Everybody has got to be a part of the solution. And so that's what we did. Now hundreds of you have announced new commitments. I'm going to highlight a few of them in four different areas that we know are critical to student success. So you guys can pat yourselves on the back—[*laughter*—as I mention some of the work that's been done as a consequence of this convening.

First, you told us that colleges and universities want to work together on these challenges. So rather than settle for islands of excellence, we asked you to collaborate and build networks where you can share best practices, test them out, and get a greater collective impact.

The National Association of System Heads, for example, has organized 11 State systems of colleges and universities behind one big goal, and that is to produce 350,000 more graduates by 2025. The University Innovation Alliance, which is a group of 11 public research universities from all over the country, has committed to producing 68,000 more college graduates by 2025.

And so what's happening is, these groups are partnering to develop and test new ideas like improving remedial math classes for underprepared students, using data and technology to figure out when a student may not have chosen the right major or is having trouble making it to class regularly so that they can intervene early, guide that student back on track. Maybe they need text messages reminding them to go to class—[*laughter*—not a bad idea. [*Laughter*] Maybe they need to be paired up with a peer tutor.

My mom had an analog version of this. [*Laughter*] She used to wake me up when I was living overseas before dawn, and she'd make me study every morning and make sure I was keeping up with my English lessons. And it worked. And so nagging works. [*Laughter*] It does. Michelle and I are big believers in nagging. [*Laughter*]

Second, we know that the path to college begins long before students set on campus. We need our school leaders working with college presidents to make sure students are on track for college, that they're taking the right courses, filling out the right financial aid forms, applying to more schools, making sure they're prepared. That's what drives many of your promising tutoring and mentoring organizations. And that's why school districts and community organizations are partnering with colleges and universities to make sure that the pipeline is working, that low-income students are better prepared to succeed in college. So the Riverside County Education Collaboration in California has set a goal of increasing FAFSA completion

by 30 percent, and they're working to ensure that fewer students need remedial classes when they get to college.

Third, we know that a lot of young people, especially low-income students, need a little more support and guidance as they prepare for and apply to college. This is something that Michelle is passionate about, because she knows firsthand the difference a good counselor can make for a kid who may be the first in her family to go to college. So Michelle is going to talk more about this and her Reach Higher initiative later today. I know that you will enjoy hearing her more than me. *[Laughter]* That's what happens. *[Laughter]* But both of us—just to give you a little preview—want to make sure that every child gets the kind of support that Malia and Sasha get.

And finally, we know that many of the high-tech, high-wage jobs of the future are going to be in STEM: science, technology, engineering, math. Many of you have committed to increasing the number of women and underrepresented minorities who pursue STEM studies. Some of you have pledged to prepare more K-through-12 teachers in STEM so they can inspire our future innovators. Others are engaging middle, high school, and college students in hands-on math and science learning to spark an interest in STEM careers.

So these are just a few examples, a small sample of the commitments that all of you have already announced, and we're looking forward to seeing what comes out of the work that you engage in in the coming months. And in the meantime, my administration is going to keep doing our part to support your efforts.

Today we're announcing a handful of executive actions that we can take immediately to expand college opportunity, including prioritizing grants for evidence-based projects, sponsoring research on improving college completion, increasing the number of AmeriCorps service opportunities to help more low-income students access college.

And our challenge going forward is to make sure your outstanding commitments mean something where it matters most: in the lives of young people. That's what Jeff Nelson, a former teacher who's here today, wanted to do. Where's Jeff? There he is, right here. I'm going to brag on Jeff for a second. *[Laughter]* Seven years ago, he cofounded a nonprofit called OneGoal. And it had one goal—*[laughter]*—and so is aptly named—to help more low-performing, low-income high school students not only get into college, but make sure they've got the continued support to succeed once they get to college.

And one of their students is a young man from Chicago named Caleb Navarro. Is Caleb here too? Couldn't make it?

Audience member. *[Inaudible]*—still hear.

The President. Well, next time you got to bring him. *[Laughter]* But he'll hear about it that I was talking about him? I'll bet he will. *[Laughter]*

So by the time Caleb was a sophomore, he wasn't doing all that well in school. He wasn't motivated to try harder; starting to give up on himself. The folks at OneGoal saw a spark of something that was special in Caleb. Once he joined their program, he started to believe that maybe he was capable of achieving more. Expert teachers helped him focus on academics and taught him how to stick with his studies, even when it was hard. Caleb started taking AP classes, something he wouldn't have imagined for himself a couple years earlier. He gave up his lunch hour to take an extra class. Now, that's serious, giving up your lunch hour. *[Laughter]* He

started out with a GPA of 2.4, ended up with a 3.8 GPA. Today, Caleb is a freshman at Dominican University, studying biochemistry, on track to graduate from college.

Now, Caleb could have been on his way to becoming just another statistic. He was a good kid, so it might not have been that he completely crashed and burned. But what was likely, the trajectory was one in which he underestimated what was possible. He shortchanged himself. He lowered his expectations. And because of just some key interventions at a critical moment in his life, he's now studying stuff that I don't understand. [*Laughter*]

And if we can replicate Caleb's story, if everybody who's represented here, each of you are touching 10, 50, 100, 1,000 Calebs all across the country in a sustained way, figuring out what works, being honest when the evidence says something doesn't work and trying something different, investing in these kids in a sustained way, teaching each other how to have an impact—if we can replicate Caleb's story across the country, imagine what discoveries he and students like him might make; what businesses they may start; what entire industries may be launched; what new sources of energy may be discovered; what lifesaving medicines might be produced; what a set of Calebs can do to change the world.

That's the power, that's the purpose of higher education: to give everybody that chance. Because everybody has got that spark. Some know it earlier; others know it later. I happen to be an example of somebody who—it came a little later. [*Laughter*] But everybody has got a Caleb out there. And we've got to make sure that they have the chance not only to fulfill their potential, but by doing so, creating that chance for us to fulfill this country's potential.

We are coming out of this recession with the most diverse, most digitally fluent, in many ways, most sophisticated generation in American history. Anybody who's interacting with young people today comes away impressed. But they're also concerned, because these kids are growing up at a time when a lot of people have lost faith in institutions and are inherently skeptical about what's possible. And I want to make sure young people with that spark never lose sense of what's possible.

If all of us work together—teachers, parents, nonprofits, corporations, school districts, university system—if we make sure they remain the best educated generation in American history, there is no limit to what they can achieve, there's no limit to what this country can achieve.

So I want to thank you all for the important work you do. Stay at it. And I look forward to seeing you at the next summit.

Thank you. God bless you. God bless America. Thank you, everybody.

NOTE: The President spoke at 12:17 p.m. at the Ronald Reagan Building and International Trade Center. In his remarks, he referred to Chionque Mines, a Jack Kent Cooke Foundation Scholar who introduced the President; and Jeff Nelson, cofounder and chief executive officer, One Goal.

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