

Administration of Barack Obama, 2015

Remarks at Macomb Community College in Warren, Michigan
September 9, 2015

The President. All right. Hello, Michigan! Oh, it's good to be back at Macomb. Go, Monarchs!

Audience member. We love you!

The President. I love you back. I do. Yeah!

I want to begin by thanking your president, Jim Jacobs, for hosting us. We have got also two outstanding members of Congress here who support every single initiative that we've got here in the state of Michigan. We've got Sandy Levin and Brenda Lawrence. We've got your mayor, James Fouts, here. [*Applause*] Well, somebody was really excited about you, James. [*Laughter*] And of course, we've got my favorite community college professor, Dr. Jill Biden, here. Jill was not fibbing; on Air Force One, she was grading papers. [*Laughter*] She was. And I was—I had flashbacks to when I was teaching law and grading papers. It's not as bad as writing papers—[*laughter*]—but reading them is tough too, sometimes.

Jill works with Michelle to support our military families. She's leading the new College Promise Advisory Board. On top of that, she teaches full time at a community college in Virginia. And her husband is not so bad either. [*Laughter*] He's okay. Love Joe Biden.

The—so, across our country, young people—and some just young-at-heart people—[*laughter*].

Audience member. All right, all right.

The President. You're young, you're young—are going back to school. Just yesterday Malia started her first day of senior year. You know, I was sitting in her room because I was going to see her off her first day of school. She puts her head on my shoulder, and she says, "Daddy, you know, you realize this is probably going to be the last time that you ever send me off for my first day of school."

Audience members. Aww.

The President. And I started—I had to look away. You know? I didn't want to just be such a crybaby. [*Laughter*] It makes no sense. Michelle and I are way too young to have daughters both—who are both almost in college now. And so as a parent, I was a little freaked out.

But as President, this time of year does inspire me, because students like the ones here are not just making the best investment in your future, but you're also making the best possible investment in the country's future. If you put in the hard work to earn your education, then it's up to all of us to make sure that hard work pays off. And that's something that I'm going to be focusing on over the next couple of weeks.

You see, education has always been the secret sauce, the secret to America's success. More than 150 years ago, Abraham Lincoln helped establish land-grant colleges all across America. About a hundred years ago, we started moving from an agrarian economy, a farm economy, to an industrial economy. And we became the first country in the world to say that every child deserves a shot at a high school education, even if they weren't born rich. And it's because we

were ahead of the curve that we ended up having the most educated workforce. And that was good for the entire economy and good for businesses.

After World War II, we gave returning heroes like my grandfather the chance to go to college on the GI bill. And in those postwar years, the investments that we made in our future made us the best educated nation on Earth. That's one of the reasons we built the world's largest economy. That's the reason we built the biggest, strongest middle class. And in places like Macomb County, you could feel secure, knowing that if you worked hard, you'd have a chance to find a good job, buy a home, raise a family, send your kids to college. We didn't promise everybody that they'd get rich, but we promised that everybody who worked hard would have a chance to get ahead and have the dignity of a decent-paying job with decent-paying benefits. That's what it meant to be middle class.

Now, in more recent decades, the economy has begun to change again. And other countries have caught up. Good jobs, in some cases, went overseas. And rather than redouble our efforts to make ourselves once again at the cutting edge and educate more and more of our young people, we decided to cut taxes for the very top. We stopped investing as much as we needed to in higher education. Tuition started going up because State legislators were providing less support. Folks who were already doing extraordinarily well, they did even better, but prosperity didn't trickle down to the middle class, which was working harder than ever. And then, finally, in 2008, a crisis spread all the way from Wall Street out to Main Street that cost millions of Americans their jobs, their homes, their savings—everything that they had worked so hard to build all their lives.

So we, together, have spent the last 7 years fighting back, getting focused on middle class economics once again. Today, our businesses have created more than 13 million new jobs over the last 5½ years. This is the longest streak of job creation on record: 66 straight months of job creation. So the unemployment rate is now at 5.1 percent, which is the lowest it's been since April of 2008. Another 16 million Americans have the security of health insurance. Our high school dropout rate is at an alltime low. More Americans are graduating college than ever before.

And something that's relevant to this area, because we refused to walk away from the American auto industry, our autoworkers, our automakers are on track to sell more cars and trucks this year than we have done in more than a decade. Workers right here in Michigan who thought they might never build a car again, they can't build them fast enough now. Chrysler has added more than a thousand jobs at the truck plant right down the road. In May, GM announced plans to invest \$1 billion at its Warren Tech Center, adding 2,600 new jobs.

So we placed our bets on American businesses and American workers, and that bet is paying off. Michigan is coming back. America is coming back. Detroit is coming back too. I mean, I don't know how the Lions are going to be this year, but I'm talking about the economy——

Audience member. Super Bowl!

Audience member. Bears!

The President. Okay. Yes. The Bears too, yes. [*Laughter*] Oh, uh-oh. Watch it now. I've got Secret Service. [*Laughter*]

But look, it's not enough to get back to where we were. It's good that we've recovered, but for the sake of future generations, we've got to do better than that. The biggest problem we

have right now in today's economy is that although we're creating jobs, the unemployment rate is down, inequality is still creeping up. A lot of times the jobs aren't paying enough. Wages are still flat.

Audience member. I know.

The President. I know. [*Laughter*] Now, some of that has to do with the fact that companies that are making record profits just aren't sharing enough of those profits with their workers. And that's a problem. And in some cases, our tax policies continue to incentivize jobs moving overseas.

But a big part of making sure that today's economy works better for ordinary folks goes back to what I started with: this issue of education. Every American willing to work hard should have a shot at a higher education. Because as the economy globally becomes more competitive, everybody has got to upgrade their skills just a little bit. Right? It's not enough just to have the same skills for 30 years, because what worked 30 years ago isn't going to work now and what works now is not going to work 5 years from now or 10 years from now, because everything is moving too fast. And if you don't have the skills to get the new jobs that pay better, if you don't have the knowledge to adapt and be creative with new machinery, new systems, new techniques, you're going to fall behind. And then, the wages for unskilled work will go down, and you'll be trapped.

Compared to those with a high school diploma, college graduates earn about \$1 million more over the course of their lifetimes. That's a lot of money, a million dollars. Even today. If you have a degree from a 2-year college, you earn \$10,000 a year more than somebody who only finished high school. So one study found that over their lifetimes, workers who complete an on-the-job apprenticeship earn around \$300,000 more than their peers who didn't go through an apprenticeship program. So whether it's through a community college, an apprenticeship program, upgrading your skills pays off. The unemployment rate for those folks are lower, and they're going to earn more money over their lifetimes.

By the end of the decade, two in three job openings will require some form of postsecondary education, some form of higher education. Now, you don't have to necessarily go to a 4-year college to get a good job, but you have to have some sort of specialized skill in order for you to advance. It's not enough just to be strong and willing to work. It used to be you walked into an auto plant, and you said, look, I'm going to get to work on time. I don't mind getting dirty. I'm willing to work hard. And that was enough. It helped, by the way, that there were strong unions. And that's a whole—I talked about that during Labor Day, by the way.

Part of what gives workers more leverage to get higher pay when the company is making a lot of money is, is that they've got a union behind them.

But whether it is a bachelor's degree, an associate's degree, a journeyman's card from an apprenticeship program, having a credential above and beyond your high school diploma, that's the surest ticket to the middle class. And in global competition for jobs and industries, having the best educated workforce in the world is the surest way for America to stay on top.

So that's why I believe no kid should be priced out of a college education. No hard-working young person should be denied a shot at success just because of where they started out in life. Because you don't know—that's the thing about America, where you start off doesn't determine where you're going to end up. I was the child of a single mom. And we weren't rich, and I turned out okay. But the reason is, I got an education. Same thing with Michelle, same thing with Jill Biden, same thing with a lot of you.

And that's why, since I took office, we've increased Pell grants for low-income students by 70 percent. We've helped over 2 million more young people afford college. We created a new college opportunity tax credit for working families, averaging about \$1,800 a year. With our new GI bill for our veterans, our heroes coming home from Iraq and Afghanistan, we've helped more than 700,000 veterans and their family members earn a college education.

We took on a student loan system that was letting big banks be the middlemen on student loans. And so they were taking \$10 billion—tens of billions of dollars in unnecessary subsidies; we said we'll cut out the middlemen, give the money directly to our students, the folks who need it.

And back in 2009, when I had no gray hair—[*laughter*]—I had a little bit, but you couldn't see it. [*Laughter*] And now you can see it. I still look good though?

Audience members. Yes!

The President. Thank you. I was fishing for that compliment. [*Laughter*]

Audience member. Better now.

The President. Better? Okay. [*Laughter*] Where was I? [*Laughter*] I got all flushed. I was blushing a little bit.

Back in 2009, I came here, and I announced my plan to invest in community colleges like this one. And sometimes, it can feel like 4-year colleges get all the attention, but that has to change. And I've tried to make sure that it changes. I have been focused on community colleges. They're at the heart of the American Dream. Community colleges are everywhere. They're accessible. They're a gateway for folks who—maybe their parents didn't go to college, maybe they can't afford a 4-year college, maybe they—the career path they want to follow isn't the traditional one.

This becomes the kind of place where you can earn the skills you need to start a great career right away. It's the kind of place where you don't have to choose between pursuing an education and supporting a family; you can do both because it's flexible. It gives folks who have to start working right away the chance to also get a skill or a degree.

It's the kind of place where young people can save money before they start a 4-year school—they can transfer their credits—a place where older workers can retool and retrain, take their careers to the next level.

Over the last 7 years, America has been graduating more students from community colleges than ever before. But I'm not satisfied. We can go further. So in my State of the Union Address, I announced my plan to bring down the cost of community college to zero. Zero.

For every young person willing to work hard, I want 2 years of college to be as free and universal as high school is today. I mean, back in the day, there were kids who got high school educations if they had a lot of money. But the point was, we realized, no, we want to make everybody educated. That will be good for all of us. And that's what we did. Well, I want to do the same thing now for community college educations.

It's easy for politicians to say that all of you are the future. You know? Every speech, right, is all you guys are the future. But it's not good enough just to say it. You've got to walk the walk, not just talk the talk.

So this is a concrete way—a concrete way—to reduce the costs of higher education for young people, to improve the skills of workers so they get higher paying jobs, to grow our economy. It shouldn't be controversial.

And I want to work with folks back in Washington, both Democrats and Republicans, to pass a responsible budget that invests in you. If students and workers and businesses live up to their responsibilities, we should be able to make it easier for you to succeed.

And by the way, in my original budget what I said was, it does cost some money to make 2 years of community college free. I said, well, the Federal Government will help States and counties and local communities, and we'll pay for it by closing up some of these corporate tax loopholes that don't help grow the economy and aren't fair anyway.

Now, unfortunately, so far at least, I've gotten a little resistance from Members of Congress. That will shock you. [*Laughter*] But at a time when we should be growing our investments in job training and apprenticeships, we've got Republicans in Congress who are going in the opposite direction. Some are even talking about shutting down the Government at the end of the month. That's what would happen if Congress fails to pass a budget. It would be wildly irresponsible. I mean, right now our economy is actually a bright spot in a pretty volatile world economy. After all the hard work American—the American people have done to get us back on our feet, to recover from that great recession, now is not the time to play games. You'd pull the rug right from under the economy. But there's a lot of talk about that in Washington for unrelated reasons that, by the way, don't even have to do with the budget. They have to do with politics and Presidential elections and posturing and all that good stuff.

Here's the good news. Investing in community colleges should be a cause that can get bipartisan support, because both parties have supported it in the past. Outside of Washington, away from Congress, people are stepping up.

So this fall, Tennessee is enrolling 15,000 students in its community college program. Not one of them had to take out a loan to pay for tuition. Just in the last 6 months, 6 more States and communities have created new programs to provide free community college, including one in Milwaukee just announced today. More than 10 others have introduced new legislation to get this done. So there's a movement going on here. It's an idea whose time has come: Free community college for responsible students. It's an idea that makes sense.

Now, to help more States adopt that idea, as Jill mentioned, we're announcing a new, independent College Promise Advisory Board. It's going to be led by two outstanding leaders: Dr. Jill Biden and former Republican Governor Jim Geringer. And they're going to work with businesses and charities and colleges and labor groups and nonprofits to make sure every young person who works hard has a shot at a great education.

And if you want more information—because we're going to need grassroots support for this idea—we want you to go to the website, headsupamerica.us—headsupamerica.us. And we call it Heads Up America because we're giving folks a heads-up. If you want a great shot at a good-paying job, then community college might be the right path for you. And if you work hard, then community college should be free.

Of course, we don't just want every student to be able to attend community college, we want them to attend a great community college. And that's the other reason I came back to Macomb. All right?

This is one of the best, most innovative community colleges in the country. Under your president's leadership, you work directly with local employers and labor unions to make sure students are getting the skills that they need to get a job right now. You help students find support for their housing and childcare so that it's easier to stay in school. Your early childhood—or early college programs gives high school students the chance to take college courses and earn credits towards a degree.

Whenever you can, you help students get out of the classroom and get hands-on training for jobs that need to be filled right now. You're learning tech skills, advanced manufacturing skills. And instead of taking on more debt for this training, a lot of you are already drawing a paycheck. That's the kind of education you want.

So we want to give workers across America the same chance that you have to get real-world experience that leads directly to a good job. The average starting wage for a worker who's finished an apprenticeship is now more than \$50,000 a year. And by the way, our competitors understand how important these programs are to their economies. On a per capita basis, England has 15 times as many apprentices as we do. Germany has 16 times as many. So that's giving them a leg up when it comes to filling jobs of the future.

Now, if England and Germany can do it—[laughter]—I mean, listen, I love the English and the Germans. I'm just saying, this isn't that hard. It's not rocket science. It requires some political will. So today we're taking action to change that.

My administration has already made the largest investment in apprenticeships in nearly a decade. We're going to build on that momentum with \$175 million in grants to 46 apprenticeship programs all across the country. And here at Macomb, together with Grand Rapids Community College, Macomb is going to work with partners across the region to give you more opportunities to "earn as you learn." Just down the road, Focus: HOPE is going to help folks living in Detroit earn new jobs or get better paying jobs.

Across America, companies like Northrup Grumman and Rolls Royce will help prepare workers for jobs in advanced manufacturing. You've got companies like Cisco that are helping them to prepare for jobs in IT. Companies like Pfizer will help prepare them for jobs in health care. Unions like the UAW and the AFL–CIO are going to help workers earn new jobs or better paying ones.

So this thing is something everybody can get behind. When our businesses are creating good jobs and our community colleges and training programs are helping workers get the skills they need to fill those jobs, you can't stop us. There's nothing we can't accomplish.

You know, just over 30 years ago, as part of his reelection campaign, President Ronald Reagan came right here to Macomb Community College. Here's what he told young people in the field house that day. "Our duty," he said, "is to make sure that you have the same America of opportunity and hope and dreams and future that we had when we were your age." Now, Ronald Reagan and I belonged to two different parties. We had a different vision about how our economy could grow. But I agree with those words. In America, it should not matter who you are, where you come from, what your last name is, who you love. Everybody deserves a chance to make it. Everybody deserves "opportunity and hope and dreams and future."

And today, with a record streak of job growth and an auto industry that's back on its feet and wages that are starting to finally rise a little bit, I've never been more optimistic about America. We are not there yet. We've got more work to do. But if we just keep on building on the progress that we've already made, if we keep restoring the link between hard work and

success, then we won't just recover from that recession that we had, we're not just going to retrain a workforce, we're going to renew our Nation's promise. We're going to rebuild our middle class. We'll remind the world why it is that America is the greatest country on Earth.

Thank you, Michigan. God bless you. God bless America.

NOTE: The President spoke at approximately 3:50 p.m. in the Sports and Expo Center. In his remarks, he referred to former Gov. James E. Geringer of Wyoming. The transcript released by the Office of the Press Secretary also included the remarks of Jill T. Biden, wife of Vice President Joe Biden, who introduced the President.

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Names: Biden, Jill T.; Biden, Joseph R., Jr.; Fouts, James; Geringer, James E.; Jacobs, James; Lawrence, Brenda; Levin, Sander M.; Obama, Malia; Obama, Michelle; Obama, Natasha "Sasha".

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