

Issue: State of Emergency: Admitting, Retaining, and Creating an Accessible and Affordable Education for Underrepresented Students

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Describe the Issue: The continual disinvestment of higher education by our state and federal governments has pushed universities to have their students make up for the loss of funding, through raising tuition and fees. Federal bans on race-based affirmative action policies, coupled with the steady resegregation of the United States have contributed the underrepresentation of Black, Latino/a, low-income, and first-generation students in higher education. These aforementioned students are usually the first that are forced to drop out due to financial issues. Students across the country realize that one of the primary strategies to mitigate the rising cost of higher education is to run campaigns that get state governments to reinvest in higher education. Students also realize that desegregated education has been shown to have substantial benefits for students of all backgrounds. All regions and populations of the United States have experienced an increase in re-segregation in the 60 years since the *Brown v. Board of Education* ruling (which ruled that racially segregated “separate but equal” schools were unconstitutional). Currently, **states with race-based affirmative action bans and/or apartheid (highly segregated) schools systems are not able to achieve fair and equal representation for black and Latino/a students.** When students from underrepresented communities (Black, Latino/a, First Generation, low-income) and those who have the privilege to afford higher education come together to work on solutions, they tend to work on holistic and inclusive campaigns to increase the state funding of higher education. By getting the state to reinvest in institutions of higher education, universities are able to keep their tuition and fees low, consequently enabling students of the aforementioned underserved communities to graduate from their respective institutions. The goal for this initiative is to create a three-pronged approach:

- a. **Federal:** The Higher Education Affordability Act being an all-encompassing and inclusive policy that is dedicated to increasing access and affordability for students regardless of race, gender, or socioeconomic status. As well as targeting early awareness and transparency, to increase the amount of students from underrepresented communities.
- b. **Statewide:** Re-emphasizing diversity, access, and affordability as core values for university administration, and election officials. This would be manifested in a budget campaign to get the state to reinvest in higher education.
- c. **Local:** Increase recruitment, enrollment, and retention rates for underrepresented students at predominantly white colleges and universities by 5% in 3-5 years. Disorientation guides, establishing mentoring programs are vital to educating and politicizing students from underrepresented backgrounds.

See Strategy Charts.

Does the issue meet the following qualifications:

Is it winnable?

In terms of **access and affordability (ACCAF)** - Statewide budget and appropriation campaigns to increase funding for higher education has been accomplished on the federal, and state level. Specifically,

in New Jersey we were able to get \$1.5 million dollar increase in the state budget for a program that is for first generation and low-income students, within a five month period.

In terms of **diversity (DIV)** - Increasing the number of students of color by 5% in 3-5 years is a specific, measurable, attainable, results-oriented, and timely goal. We must be very strategic when going about our plans in that there is a goal we want to achieve in a fixed period of time. We have enjoyed success and victories on the UMass campus this past year, including gaining allies in:

- 1000+ Student Signatures
- Student Government Association and Graduate Student Senate (Unanimous support)
- 25 Registered Cultural Student Organizations
- The Chancellor's Office
- The Vice Chancellor of Student Affairs Office
- Director of Admissions
- Chancellor's Diversity Advisory Committee

Does it directly impact and improve students' lives?

ACCAF: Yes, it does directly impact and improve students' lives primarily in virtue of the monetary resources that would have been spent on higher education, now being spent on other necessary aspects of their lives.

DIV: Yes - Case studies and conversations with Black, Latino/a, and first-generation students at UMass revealed struggles and microaggressions which inhibit student success. Some students seriously considered transferring or withdrawing from UMass as a result of these barriers. Some of the obstacles discussed were:

- Lack of supportive faculty and administration of color
- Lack of mentors (especially for STEM/Natural Science majors)
- Isolation in the residence halls and classrooms
- Underrepresentation in Student Government
- No retention and support programs

This initiative would help underrepresented students overcome barriers in order to succeed in higher education.

Does it have a clear target?

ACCAF - Yes, throughout the entirety of the country the legislative process by which a state budget is approved is nearly identical. The budget is either proposed by the Governor, or a committee (budget, appropriations, etc.) within the state legislature representing member states, and then approved by both houses in the legislature, which finally ends up on the Governor's desk for approval. These targets are those whom are elected in positions of power.

DIV - The targets of this campaign will be the Chancellors/Presidents of our respective universities along with the Director of Admissions. School board officials would also be targets in this initiative.

Does it build a measurable amount of power?

ACCAF - This is a deeply and widely felt issue that is relatable to most students attending state universities where strong partnerships can be achieved in student success. This has the potential to build student power by having a clear impact on state funding policies. This can be seen through voting power

of member schools of USSA, influenced through the action agendas that will improve the affordability and access of higher education.

DIV - An increase in the underrepresented student population will translate into more students running for Student Government and seeking leadership roles in advocacy agencies. This also increases our bargaining power in regards to deals with the administration. The shift in power dynamic toward students is vital to the longevity of our initiative.

Does it have a clear and realistic time frame?

ACCAF- The timelines would be dependent upon the process of passing a budget within each respective state. Most states run on a biennial or annual process of re-approving their budget. For each budget process the planning of the campaign would have to start at least 6-8 months before the budget is actually due. A broad based coalition of students should decide their budget priorities

DIV- The time frame of 3-5 years allows the university enough time to make fundamental and institutional changes to their policies and priorities. For year one our goal is to draft and disseminate disorientation guides, and to establish preliminary mentorship programs in local high schools.

Does it have a state/ local-organizing angle?

ACCAF-Through statewide student associations(New Jersey United Students), or broad based coalitions (Better Choices Coalition) students and allies alike will be able to mobilize and target state legislatures throughout this process. Specifically, the chairs of budget and/or appropriations committee will be targeted by students. This could involve active lobbying/advocating tactics, press conferences, op-ed in local or statewide newspapers, call-in days, and testifying in legislative hearings.

DIV- On the UMass campus we have built coalitions with the Five College Consortium (UMass, Mt. Holyoke, Amherst, Hampshire, Smith) located in Amherst, MA. We are also organizing and politicizing the UMass system (Amherst, Boston, Dartmouth, Lowell, Worcester) around fair and equal representation. We also lobbied at the Boston Statehouse around access, affordability, and diversity in April.

Could students build a diverse campus coalition around this issue?

ACCAF - Most students if not all are subject to having to take out loans, work multiple jobs, or know a fellow student who is in this situation. This widely and deeply felt issue is something that students can come together on regardless of their political identities. Within New Jersey we were able to have a coalition that represented students of color, low-income, first generation, undocumented, and LGBTQ+ students.

DIV - Students already have, and will continue to, build a diverse campus coalition around student diversity. We at UMass have built a coalition around fair and equal representation which transcends race, religion, sexual orientation, and socioeconomic status. Over 25 organizations (cultural and non-cultural) have supported us so far.

Is it likely to be debated and acted upon by the United States Congress in the next year?

ACCAF-The narrative has already been initiated on the federal level through executive orders, proposed legislation, and as talking points from elected officials. This conversation will be at the forefront with the reauthorization of the Higher Education Affordability.

DIV- With the recent decisions in Michigan regarding race-based college admission policies, many schools without affirmative action bans will soon have to justify their race-conscious procedures. The Supreme Court (not Congress necessarily) will more than likely hear a case regarding Affirmative Action in the upcoming year.

Will it strengthen and expand grassroots investment in USSA?

The diversity, affordability, and access initiatives at UMass, and New Jersey were a result of a GROW trainings, and resources offered by USSA. If these trainings could spark a movement which our Chancellor notices and forms a committee around, the national power it could have would be tremendous. This campaign also allows for the usage of inside-outside strategy. Students who prefer meeting with legislators or working on research and policy will be able to do so, while students who prefer direct action and grassroots tactics can also plug in on the local level. As the grassroots power of underrepresented students on local campuses increases, this will then increase the statewide and national power of students.

Can you provide background information and the current context of the issue?

ACCAF - A New Jersey specific fact sheet, which highlights the access and affordability crisis in the state: <http://tinurl.com/mp2v59a>

DIV - *Brown at 60* (Re-Segregation report): <http://tinurl.com/n9cok4e>

State of Emergency Presentation: <http://tinurl.com/p95zzdz>

Fact-Sheet: <http://tinurl.com/pkc5v47>

What creative and/or innovative tactics could we employ to engage the media and excite new students around this issue?

BOTH: There are a myriad of tactics we can employ including:

- Drafting a disorientation guide for incoming students of color addressing issue of race, privilege, social activism on campus, and how they can get involved. My recommendation is to email students these guides or present them with hard-copies before their orientation sessions.
- Providing campus and statewide specific literature of pertinent statistics regarding student debt, aid awards and diversity.
- Banner Drops
- Lobby training.
- Teach-Ins (virtual and interactive) similar to *Tent State*
- Inviting younger students to attend meeting with administrators
- Organize groups of 8-10 dedicated student leaders to mentor freshmen, local middle schoolers, hold college preparatory workshops
- Press conference/rallies
- Directly holding legislators accountable within legislative hearings and in public settings

Amendment:

- Students at NSC voted to add a clause pertaining to working on Financial Aid for Students with Mental Illnesses. We will be working to incorporate this clause at the USSA Board Retreat September 18th-21st.