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Regional

Viewing Obama's legacy in higher education

For eight years as president, Barack Obama showed an unusual interest in reforming higher education when compared with any other U.S. president in history. Most concerned themselves with primary and secondary education. The only possible exception is Abraham Lincoln, under whose administration the land grant university system was created.

One reason for his interest in higher education may be because Obama himself once taught at the law school of the University of Chicago. Another may be that, in retrospect, Obama has always been a great admirer of Lincoln, mirroring his stances on many issues.

As did Lincoln, Obama has always believed that the future of this country resided in having a strong production of college graduates. But this belief was accompanied by the conviction among his staff that the higher education sector needed to be more accountable and that its results should be measurable. By the same token he wanted to make higher education more accessible and affordable. So, how did he perform in implementing such beliefs?

Obama expanded Pell Grant funding. Pell grants, unlike loans, do not have to be repaid and are usually awarded to undergraduate students who have not earned a bachelor's or a professional degree so that they can enroll in college without further financial burden. He also signed legislation eliminating student loans being offered by private lending institutions, reducing the chance that students fall victim to predatory lending practices. He also capped student loan payments to not exceed 10 percent of students' annual income.

During his administration, there was an overhaul of the applications for federal student aid (FAFSA) by

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simplifying the process. This made college more affordable. He also proposed to make community college free for all students meeting certain academic goals, and for states opting in to subsidize 25 percent of total tuition costs. This promise went unfulfilled and was supposed to be implemented, and even expanded, by this year's Democratic nominee. He also offered financial assistance to more than 1.5 million incarcerated students who would be eligible for release in five years.

Thanks to these initiatives the number of applications to college in 2009 increased by 20 percent and by the next year the U.S. hit a historic high in the number of students enrolled in colleges and universities – more than 21 million.

His administration also pressed against for-profit schools that were making deceptive claims to enroll students while generating heavy student loan debt loads. These institutions were the most responsible for increasing the national student debt to more than \$1 trillion. As a consequence of this increased scrutiny, many for-profit colleges closed their doors while others softened their deceptive marketing practices.

His Department of Education developed a "College Toolkit," a sort of on-line guide to college providing information in areas such as statistical analysis of graduation rates, job placement and earnings of graduates. This measure was designed to counter the

infamous school rankings that do not really measure student success. Yet, the heterogeneity of the higher education sector in this country did not allow for a simple way to measure those parameters and the plan was scrapped in 2015.

On one hand his administration emphasized the two-year sector, but on the other support for historically black and minority-serving institutions was nowhere to be seen. In part that was not surprising since during his administration Obama seemed to shy away from issues where he might be seen as actively supporting minorities.

When he delivered the commencement speech at Morehouse College, a private all-male liberal arts historically black college (HBC) located in Atlanta, Georgia, in May 2013, where he addressed issues such as black men "not making excuses," it was the only occasion at which he did not seem to avoid racially related issues related to higher education.

In fact, because his administration often criticized historically black colleges and universities, he did not show any engagement with the White House Board of Advisors on HBCUs, and usually dismissed criticism in this area from the Congressional Black Caucus members.

Under his administration the government became more active pressing institutions of higher education that were accused by their own students of looking the other way when it came to sexual assaults on campus. For example, in May 2014 the Department of Education disclosed a list of dozens of institutions under investigation for potential Title IX violations related to sexual assault cases, bringing the issue into public view. That pushed many colleges and universities to make stricter

policies regarding sexual assaults. Yet, to this day, those allegations continue and it is believed that many incidents of sexual assaults are not even reported.

Another initiative of the Obama Administration was to fund, with \$500 million, community colleges to develop distance learning and on-campus support for education in trade and technical careers. As with many other distance-learning initiatives, it did not work that well since such an approach of education is usually only effective with students who already have a good education background and higher financial resources, which is not the case for most of the population that you find attending two-year colleges.

This approach did not support the liberal education approach that emphasizes skills that are useful in any profession: critical thinking, problem solving, teamwork and communication abilities. Obama himself made some disparaging remarks towards some forms of liberal arts education, remarks for which he later apologized.

In 2015 the federal government announced the idea of pairing colleges with for-profit institutions to offer courses to low-income students in the areas of professional credentials and degrees in manufacturing and technical jobs. One of the conditions was that such partnerships should guarantee access and affordability. The idea was to propel manufacturing jobs in the U.S.

In summary, his legacy in higher education is mixed and could be graded as B-

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