

**Campaign for the Future of Higher Education:
Testimony at the U.S. Department of Education's hearing
on President Obama's plan for higher education**

**Wednesday, November 6, 2013
California State University, Dominguez Hills**

Good afternoon. My name is Vivian Price, and I am speaking today representing the Campaign for the Future of Higher Education. We thank the President and the Department of Education for holding these hearings where such a variety of voices can be heard.

Our organization, CFHE for short, represents 65 higher education faculty and staff organizations from Hawaii to New York and from Minnesota to Florida. We appreciate the chance to share our perspective based on experience with students on campuses all around the country.

We would like to focus our comments on three issues addressed in the President's plan.

Public Funding for Higher Education

The first is a topic too often dismissed in discussions about the future of higher education—the shameful state of public funding for higher education in our country today.

We appreciate the fact that the White House's fact sheet released on August 22, 2013 noted that "declining state funding has been the biggest reason for rising tuition at public institutions." We agree, and we believe that any plan to rescue college affordability simply must start by facing harsh facts such as these:

- Between 2008 and 2013, state funding for higher education as a percentage of state personal income declined by 22.6%;
- States have cut their annual investment in higher education by nearly half since 1980 (February 2013 report from Postsecondary Education Opportunity);
- Unless current trends change, many states are literally in a "Race to Zero" in funding higher education.

We urge the President to provide leadership in facing the social cost we are paying for accepting decreased funding for higher education as the "new normal" in America.

Our current situation is not normal, and it is not our only option. As [three reports by the Campaign for the Future of Higher Education](#) detail, reasonable alternatives do exist. The bottom line in our reports is this: it would take only a relatively small commitment of resources to restore higher education funding to previous norms. But we need the President and the Department of Education's leadership to get these alternatives on the table for consideration.

...The Campaign for the Future of Higher Education, and (we believe) the vast majority of faculty and staff in higher education, hunger for change that will expand opportunities for a rich college experience and that will enable us to better prepare students for full participation in our democratic society.

MOOCs & Online Technology

A second area of concern for us involves the administration's emphasis and apparent uncritical endorsement of MOOCs and online technology as solutions to the problems of access and costs in higher education problems.

Nowhere, for instance, have we seen acknowledgment of the dismal completion rates in MOOCs or the demographics of those who are successful in those courses. That students who already have degrees are vastly over-represented among MOOC completers should raise the question whether that format is best-suited for many students desperately in search of a degree.

We review the [research on these and other issues related to MOOCs and online higher education](#) in another series of papers released over the last several weeks. In those papers we examine how the realities of the digital divide make basic access to online courses much more problematic for some groups. In fact, substantial evidence shows that the digital divide remains a reality for the very students that online promoters claim they want to reach— low-income students, students of color, and academically underprepared students.

Along with a digital divide, there is growing research showing that these same students experience an online achievement gap. While studies show that students, in general, experience reduced performance in online settings, some groups of students—community college students, students of color, less well-prepared students—experience significantly higher withdrawal rates and poorer performance than in face-to-face classes.

Research repeatedly demonstrates that online courses work best for students who are academically and technologically well-prepared, mature, and highly motivated. For most American students, who are increasingly diverse, low-income, and academically less prepared for the rigors of collegiate study, an uncritical rush to “online everything” may, despite the promise, ultimately provide only access to failure.

Student Aid Funding & Graduation Rates

A third area of concern for us involves the proposals to tie student aid funding to graduation rates and other measures. As others have also pointed out, tying funding to graduation rates has the potential for very negative unintended consequences. To protect their “ratings,” colleges could simply decrease standards or screen out less prepared applicants to increase their ratings, as we have seen some K-12 schools do when faced with similar incentives.

While matriculating and graduating more of our college-age population is certainly a worthy goal, quantitative measurements of success can often oversimplify a complex process and could wind up exacerbating current inequities. We must be sure to support and develop those institutions that promote social equality by serving less-advantaged student populations even in the face of ever-shrinking resources.

Let me end by emphasizing that the Campaign for the Future of Higher Education, and (we believe) the vast majority of faculty and staff in higher education, hunger for change that will expand opportunities for a rich college experience and that will enable us to better prepare students for full participation in our democratic society.

We look forward to working toward that goal as we also work to preserve the diversity and freedom that have made the American higher education system the envy of the world.