

The Door to Opportunity Slams Shut

By Jonathan Jackson

I received my layoff notice this week from Chicago State University. Like my 900 colleagues and the thousands of students we serve, my future is uncertain. After eight months of budget starvation, CSU has exhausted its financial reserves. A victim of Springfield politics, its very existence is no longer certain. It is time for my fellow professors, students, and anyone who believes in the power of education to sit up and pay attention.

We are in a fight. A fight not only against a governor with a virulently anti-labor, pro-privatization agenda, but against a larger national trend. As a society, we no longer respect learning. Instead of investing in higher education, state governments have slashed funding and balanced their budgets on the backs of students and their families. We saddle millions of young people with student loan debt - turning education from a source of opportunity into an albatross around their necks. We elevate politicians that celebrate anti-intellectualism as if bettering yourself was something to be sneered at. We condemn young black students to lives in poverty when we take away their education opportunities.

CSU is called the school of second chances. Most of our students would be considered non-traditional at other schools. They tend to be older, have children, or been incarcerated. Over half are low-income and 8 in 10 receive financial aid. Statistically, they are the least likely to enroll in and complete a four-year degree and yet, CSU awards more bachelor's degrees to black students than any other school in the state.

CSU is not only a second chance school, but a repository of black culture and an oasis for the surrounding community. It provides hundreds of solid middle-class jobs, fosters political participation through mayoral forums and early voting, protects African-American art, and creates a safe, learning space for disadvantaged young people. A similar case could be made for public universities throughout Illinois and the country.

Two-thirds of all black students attend public universities. More than 40 percent of African-American students had student loan debt in 2013, compared with 28 percent of white students, according to an Urban Institute study. Black students also typically take on more student debt -- \$10,295 on average, compared with an average of \$8,020 for white students.

This debt cripples young black men and women. It stops them from buying a home, saving for retirement and fully participating in middle-class life. We need a highly-educated workforce to compete in the global economy and yet, we have hundreds of thousands of bright young African-Americans who cannot afford to go to college, and millions more that leave school deeply in debt.

We should be demanding more for our young people. Quality education is a basic human right that belongs to everyone, not just those who can afford to buy it. Public colleges and universities should and must be tuition free. We shouldn't settle for half-promises, but demand accountability from our leaders. We need to fight against this injustice or millions of young African-Americans will see the door to opportunity slam shut in their faces.