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A Coalition of America’s Leading Civil Rights Groups Urges Passage of Student Aid Reform in the Senate

Several of the United States’ leading civil rights organizations have signed onto a letter urging Senate action on historic student aid reform legislation.

WASHINGTON, DC—Today, a coalition of the nation’s leading civil rights organizations, including the United States Student Association (USSA), sent a letter to leaders in the U.S. Senate, House of Representatives, and the Obama administration urging passage of student aid reform. The Student Aid and Fiscal Responsibility Act, which passed the House in September and is currently being drafted in the Senate, eliminates wasteful government subsidies to private student loan lenders and allocates the estimated \$87 billion in savings to need-based financial aid and college access and retention programs.

Additional organizations signing onto the letter include the NAACP, The Leadership Conference on Civil and Human Rights, National Council of La Raza, PowerPac, and Campaign for Community Change.

“The fact that student aid reform has received such strong support from a wide variety of organizations working on social justice issues, such as healthcare, immigration, and employment, demonstrates the eclectic societal benefits of increased federal investment in college affordability,” said USSA President Gregory Cendana.

The USSA National Student Congress voted unanimously to support student aid reform last summer. The organization’s 4.5 million college student membership has been working tirelessly on behalf of this legislation and will continue to do so until it is signed into law.

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The United States Student Association, the country’s oldest and largest student-led organization, represents over 4.5 million students at over 400 campuses across the nation. We work to develop current and future leaders and amplify the student voice at the local, state, and national levels by mobilizing grassroots power to win concrete victories on student issues.

Please find a copy of the letter below

For details or to arrange an interview, contact Jake Stillwell at 202.640.6570 ext.572 or media@usstudents.org



March 5, 2010

President Barack Obama
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW
Washington, DC 20500

Honorable Harry Reid, Majority Leader
522 Hart Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20510

Honorable Nancy Pelosi, Speaker of the House
235 Cannon House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515-0508

Honorable Tom Harkin, Health, Education, Labor, Pension Committee Chairman
615 Hart Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20510

Honorable George Miller, Education and Labor Committee Chairman
2181 Rayburn House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515

Dear President Obama, Majority Leader Reid, Speaker Pelosi, Chairman Harkin, and Chairman Miller,

As the nation's leading civil rights advocates, we write to encourage you to move forward with legislation that mandates a historic investment in our country's education and future prosperity. These proposals advanced by President Obama over a year ago, and passed by the House of Representatives in the form of the Student Aid and Fiscal Responsibility Act (HR 3221) in September 2009, will ensure education access for underrepresented communities and serve as the largest investment in education since the GI bill. As you move forward with the major policy priorities of the 111th Congress, such as healthcare reform, we ask that you include passage of student aid reform legislation. The Obama administration has stated that some level of post secondary education is needed for American youth to successfully compete in the 21st century job market. Congress must pass legislation to save the Pell grant and invest in education future workers to ensure our country's prosperity.

We adamantly support proposals for student aid reform that include tens of billions of dollars in increased Pell grant funding. The Pell grant program, established in the early 1970s to ensure that no qualified student was turned away from college due to cost, now helps over 7 million college students, a large portion of whom are first generation, non-traditional and students of color. As college costs have risen, the purchasing power of the grant has diminished. Thirty years

ago, the maximum Pell grant funded 77 percent of the cost of attending the average four-year public school, but today's maximum grant covers only 35 percent of the cost of attending a four year school. The Student Aid and Fiscal Responsibility Act (SAFRA) mandates 40 billion more dollars in Pell grant funding, increasing the eligibility pool by one million students. It is imperative that Congress take swift legislative action to fund the Pell grant to ensure continued access to this need based grant program.

Reforming federal student aid is an investment in the future of America's workforce. Ninety percent of the fastest growing job categories, sixty percent of all new jobs, and forty percent of manufacturing jobs now require some form of post-secondary education. While the need for college graduates has never been more widely felt, increased tuition and decreased state jeopardizes Americans' ability to access the education necessary to obtain these jobs. SAFRA invests 2.5 billion dollars to encourage students at Minority Serving Institutions to enter into fields of Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics. Our country must invest in the participation of underrepresented communities in careers of science and technology to ensure American has the educated workforce to compete in the global economy.

SAFRA furthers its investment in middle class and low income families by investing \$10 billion in community colleges. Community colleges educate almost 12 million students, or 44 percent of all undergraduates, a majority of whom are students of color, low income and first generation students. These numbers are expected to see steep increases as many displaced and laid off workers enroll in community college for retraining and to increase their skill base. In a time when community colleges lack resources to provide the necessary training and programs students need to move into the changing workforce, we must capitalize on the investments outlined in President Obama's proposal.

These much needed investments are made possible by President Obama's plan to eliminate subsidies to banks. Under the Federal Family Education Loan program (FFEL) banks are subsidized by the government to act as the middle man in loan origination. We support the elimination of this program because it will result in monumental education funding and turn the tide in taxpayer funded systems that prioritize the bottom-line of private banks while robbing the American people of their tax dollars. SAFRA mandates the end of costly federal subsidies as incentives for banks to originate student loans. This legislation allows those private entities to continue servicing student loans, originated through the Direct Loans program. Servicing will be based on contracts that ensure bank accountability and a quality product for students and families.

Student aid reform cannot wait. The stakes are high and Congress must act now. President Obama has proposed changes to the federal student aid system that would shift \$87 billion, in taxpayer's money, from the pockets of bankers to the students and families struggling to pay for college. We ask that the senate take immediate and necessary steps to pass student aid reform legislation that will have positive effects on America's economy for years to come. Please remember the future quality of America's higher education system as you advance broad reform measures.

For the students,

Wade Henderson

President and CEO

The Leadership Conference on Civil and
Human Rights

Deepak Bhargava

Executive Director

Campaign for Community Change

Gregory Cendana

President

United States Student Association

Janet Murguia

President and CEO

National Council of La Raza

Benjamin Jealous

President and CEO

NAACP

Steve Phillips

Chairman

Powerpac.org

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