

A Year 'Round College Calendar: Advantages and Impediments

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New Orleans, Louisiana

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Testimony

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On behalf of

The United Negro College Fund (UNCF)

Before the Committee on Health, Education, Labor and Pensions

U.S. Senate

Hearing on a Year-Round College Calendar

March 9, 2004

Good morning Mr. Chairman and Members of the Committee. I appear before you today on behalf of the United Negro College Fund (UNCF). UNCF is America's oldest and most successful black higher education assistance organization, representing 39, private, four-year historically black colleges and universities (HBCUs). UNCF has been committed to increasing and improving access to college for African Americans since 1944. The organization remains steadfast in its commitment to enroll, nurture, and graduate students, some of whom do not have the social and educational advantages of other college bound populations. Combined, we enroll over 59,000 students in primarily liberal arts institutions, many of whom go on to earn graduate and professional degrees at America's most prestigious universities.

I am pleased to share with you today UNCF's viewpoints about year-round college, and particularly how such an academic calendar might benefit UNCF students. It is important, as we begin this discussion, for you to understand something about our students. UNCF students come from a variety of family and economic backgrounds. However, more than 60 percent of all UNCF students come from families with incomes below \$25,000 (compared with 16 percent of students attending four-year colleges nationwide), while 84 percent are from families with incomes below \$50,000 (compared to 26 percent of students attending four-year colleges nationwide). Approximately 92 percent of UNCF students receive some form of federal financial assistance. Forty percent are also the first in their families to attend college. UNCF students, then, are not only disproportionately

represented among aid recipients, but they also enter college less familiar with the environment and with little or no help (at home) in successfully navigating the challenging academic requirements.

Mr. Chairman, to better serve the needs of its students, UNCF has recommended, as part of its Higher Education Act (HEA) proposals submitted to Congress last year, that Congress establish a three semester, year-round academic calendar supported by a three semester Pell Grant award. For the record, UNCF wants to be clear that it is proposing a Pell Grant for a third, full academic semester that is equal in length to each semester in the traditional two semester year. Each eligible student would qualify for a Pell Grant equal in dollar amount to the Pell Grant awarded for the other two semesters.

In UNCF's opinion, there are clear advantages to year-round college for students on UNCF campuses and at all institutions of higher education. Two distinct categories of students would be affected by providing a three semester Pell Grant:

- First, academically gifted students who wish to accelerate their studies and who realistically could complete a baccalaureate degree in three years; and
- Second, students who enter college less well-prepared and who would benefit from a more intense period of time to pursue their baccalaureate degree.

Year-round college allows students, especially Pell-eligible students, to pursue their baccalaureate degree in a more intense and focused manner. Guaranteed year-round grant aid allows students to really commit to their studies, without working so many hours and without assuming an overwhelming loan debt burden. Many of these same students are less prepared academically. Upon arriving on campus, they may be required to take developmental coursework in addition to the core college curricula. In fact, a February 27, 2004, USA Today article, entitled High Schools Skip Over Basics in Rush to College Classes, noted that 53 percent of all students entering college take at least one remedial course in order to make up their academic deficits from high school.

Countless numbers of these students initially would benefit from a reduced course load, which an extended academic year could provide. The option of a lesser course load that the year-round calendar represents is, for them, an opportunity to stay on plan academically and still attain their baccalaureate degree within 5 years. On the other hand, a year-round academic calendar would allow more academically motivated students to accelerate their studies and graduate earlier.

Additionally, when you look at those Pell recipients who are less academically prepared and those who are more academically motivated, both likely are forced to work to pay for college. As a consequence, these students may have to forego extra curricular activities because of their course and work demands. In contrast, many financially privileged students have the opportunity to participate in whatever pursuits outside of the classroom they desire while in college, sustained with the knowledge that they have the fiscal resources to take classes in the summer and still stay on plan. UNCF hopes that Congress agrees that we should want to do all we can to ensure that all students, regardless of

income, are able to enjoy some of these same extra curricular college experiences.

Members of the Committee, as I have stated previously, UNCF students, as well as many other dependent and independent students, must work to pay for college. Working more hours, or for that matter taking on increased loan debt, creates an almost insurmountable barrier to successfully completing college. No one who deals with these students on a regular basis would be surprised that many come in and out of school as a consequence. A year-round calendar, supported by grant aid, undoubtedly enhances retention for these students.

UNCF recognizes that not all institutions of higher education would want to operate on a year-round calendar. For that reason, we also recommend that a three semester Pell be optional. Campuses opting not to offer aid in this manner may provide Title IV assistance under the current program parameters. Additionally, UNCF understands that comparable changes need to be made to the Federal student loan programs, whether one offers a year-round calendar or not.

UNCF does not anticipate that all of its member institutions, nor colleges and universities as a whole, would implement a year-round academic program taking advantage of a three semester Pell Grant. However, institutions that elected to provide year-round instruction would have several benefits accrue to them - - including a steady flow of revenue and a seamless registration process - - that could provide economies of scale to participating institutions. Since campus facilities generally are available for operational purposes during the traditional summer recess, a year-round academic calendar would need to make allowances for necessary repairs and maintenance. Finally, some accommodation may have to be made with existing faculty and staff employment contracts.

Mr. Chairman, the impact of what I have just shared with the Committee is significant when one considers the financial consequences not only to students, colleges and universities, but also to this country. The longer it takes for students to complete college, the longer they remain in the system. The most recent data from the Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics indicates that, at the end of four years, 35.8 percent of all students who entered college in the fall of 1995 took four (4) years to complete a baccalaureate degree. At the end of five years, for the same cohort, 57.1 percent of all who entered in the fall of 1995 had earned their BA degree. At the end of six years, the percentage was 62.7. Furthermore, an additional 14.2 percent of students still were enrolled after year six (6) without a degree. Even if, as under the UNCF proposal, more students complete college in five (5) years, this still could represent considerable savings. At a time when Congress is so focused on the tight budget facing the nation, we may want to consider how proposals - such as the year-round academic calendar supported by a three semester Pell Grant award - recommended by UNCF potentially may reduce some financial pressures on an already oversubscribed financial aid program.

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Committee, UNCF member institutions recognize that some of their proposals may be controversial. Nonetheless, we believe that UNCF's

recommendations may add to our exploration of the merits of a year-round college calendar. We applaud you for undertaking this review and look forward to working with you as you attempt to improve access to college for all students.

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Dr. Michael Lucius Lomax, Dillard University's seventh president, appointed in 1997, has undertaken an ambitious repositioning of Dillard as one of the premiere small undergraduate institutions in the South. He has charged his new academic and administrative teams with assisting him in the re-imagining and reinvention of Dillard's role as an historically Black university while continuing to honor the tradition and excellence of its past.

Located in New Orleans, LA, Dillard is a private, four-year undergraduate institution founded in 1935, with roots in the merger of two HBCUs that date back to the 1860s. Notable Dillard alumni include former United Nations Ambassador Andrew Young, Jr., Brown University President Ruth Simmons, and jazz great Ellis Marsalis.

During his tenure at Dillard, Dr. Lomax has demonstrated a student-focused approach to leadership. His first initiative was an aggressive multi-million dollar renovation program to improve the living and learning environment for Dillard students. He has recruited strong faculty to enhance an already excellent academic program. As a result of his leadership, Dillard's enrollment has grown by nearly 40% to 2100 students, drawn from across the country, the Caribbean and Africa. Dillard's students are increasingly competitive academically with strong high school grade point averages and standardized test scores. Increasingly, Dillard graduates are seeking advanced degrees at some of the country's finest universities. In 2001, U.S. News and World Reports rated Dillard number 17 in the top tier of comprehensive colleges in the South.

As comfortable in the classroom as the boardroom, Dr. Lomax had a distinguished teaching career at Georgia's elite private and public colleges and universities, having taught literature at Morehouse and Spelman colleges, Emory University, the Georgia Institute of Technology and the University of Georgia. Additionally, Dr. Lomax had an impressive career in politics, serving for twelve years as Chairman of the Board of Commissioners of Fulton County in Atlanta, GA.

As president of Dillard, Dr. Lomax has demonstrated a commitment to public education through his leadership in the Greater New Orleans Education Foundation, which is dedicated to improving public school education in Orleans Parish and to establishing a curriculum that adequately prepares students to pursue higher education.

Dr. Lomax's volunteer activities are numerous. He is founding chairman of Atlanta's National Black Arts Festival and serves on the boards of the Studio Museum in Harlem, the Carter Center of Emory University, the United Way of America, and Teach for America.

Dr. Lomax and his wife, Cheryl Ferguson Lomax, have two daughters, Michele and Rachel. His oldest daughter Deignan graduated from Dillard University in 2000.