

GOING DRAWN BACKWARD WITH GAINFUL EMPLOYMENT

Drawing fire from education and civil rights groups, the Department of Education's proposed regulations will cause irreparable damage to low-income Americans

By Sasha Roe, Staff Writer

In its effort to separate the good from the bad in our nation's higher education system, the U.S. Department of Education might be creating adverse effects for the students who need education the most.

Earlier this summer, the department proposed gainful employment regulations that would make for-profit colleges ineligible for government-backed student loans if less than 35 percent of students and graduates were paying their loans. These schools would also be denied access to federal funds if graduates were spending more than 12 percent of their income to pay back student loans.

Recently, civil rights groups have spoken out about the proposal and its potential impact on minority students. Well-known leaders in the black community have voiced their concern on this issue, including Rev. Jesse Jackson; Willie Gary, one of the nation's leading trial attorneys; Harry Alford, President and CEO of the National Black Chamber of Commerce; Randal Pinkett, Chairman and CEO of BCT Partners; and 12 out of 39 members of the Congressional Black Caucus.

Willie Gary works to promote the importance of education for minority students through his foundation, The Gary Foundation. In a September 8 letter to Arne Duncan, Secretary of Education, Gary says he was stunned to see the department take such an elitist attitude.

"The students at career colleges are disproportionately minorities, women and low-income earners. How can the Department of Education close the door on their opportunities? These students may not have the resources or educational backgrounds to attend

Ivy League schools or other non-profit colleges or universities, but that doesn't mean the federal government should trample on their right to further their education," Gary wrote.

"My experience there was nothing short of awesome. It gave me the opportunity to turn my life around."

Rahim Salahadyn

Virginia College, Network Engineering Graduate

According to the Association for Private Sector Colleges and Universities, 2.8 million students attend career colleges, 43 percent of whom are minority students. African-Americans make up 23 percent of students, and Hispanics make up 18 percent. At career colleges, 39 percent of all grads are minority students.



*Rahim Salahadyn
Virginia College
Network Engineering Graduate*

Milton Anderson, President of Virginia College in Jackson, Miss., has become passionate about speaking out for minority students. Anderson, who worked for years in New York City for a Fortune 500 company, returned to Mississippi where he was born and raised. As the first person in his family to go to college, Anderson is devastated that the gainful employment regulations could affect millions of minority students whose only opportunity for education is through career college.

"It gives them a real opportunity to have a decent life and a real income," Anderson said.

Rahim Salahadyn is one of those students. Salahadyn came to Virginia College at 37 years old with a history of low-paying jobs and a 10-year battle with kidney disease followed by a kidney transplant.

"I had a job but not a career," Salahadyn said. "I realized it was going to be education that moved me forward. But at the age of 37, there aren't a lot of opportunities."

Salahadyn enrolled at Virginia College in the Network Engineering program and immediately found work-study at the school. Salahadyn says he remembers being shocked that employers starting calling him through the school's job placement department before he had even graduated.

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“My experience there was nothing short of awesome,” he said. “It gave me the opportunity to turn my life around.”

Salahadyn graduated with honors and was the student speaker at his graduation. Today he works for Public Employees' Retirement System (PERS) of Mississippi as a systems administrator. He also owns his own home with his wife – something he never planned for his life.

“It’s been a total turnaround from where I was,” Salahadyn said.



Ronald Gale is another Virginia College success story. When the casino Gale was working at was bought out and he lost his job, Gale knew he needed to get his education. Trying to support himself while going to school was difficult for Gale, and he ended up taking almost a year off from school to work.

“I had a good GPA, so they (Virginia College) said that I could pick up where I left off when I came back,” Gale said. “They were very willing to work with me.”

Today he works as a surgical technologist at a children’s hospital in Jackson, where he says the clinical he received through Virginia College helped him qualify for his job.

“It’s an exciting job – it’s a blessing,” Gale said. “I love working with the kids every day.”

It seems that the Department of Education should be looking for ways to provide more students with a college education, but instead, gainful employment proposals have the potential to keep millions of minorities from going to college. Students like Gale and Salahadyn are the ones who can benefit the most, realizing education may be their only hope for a better life.

“I saw some tough times,” Salahadyn said. “But I knew if I kept on the road to education, I’d be okay.”

What do the civil rights groups say?

Several civil rights groups added their voices of opposition to the debate about the Department of Education’s controversial gainful employment rule. Here’s what they said:

“While new regulations would restrict student loans for career schools with high default rates or with graduates

who don’t reach a certain salary level, the true victims will be people of color – more than 61 percent of career college students need federal financial aid to attend school. Data show that 39 percent of the graduates from career colleges are minorities, compared to 20 percent at private, non-profit colleges and 17 percent at public colleges. Moreover, 23 percent of African-Americans and 18 percent of Latinos with Associate degrees attended career colleges. But another statistic underscores the overall value of these institutions to our society:

In 2005, 76 percent of the graduates of career colleges were gainfully employed immediately after graduation.”

—Willie Gary, leading U.S. trial attorney, in a September 8 letter to Secretary of Education Arne Duncan

“I am concerned that the proposed rule casts too broad and too general a brush on many institutions, some of whom are doing an excellent job at serving economically disadvantaged and minority students. For many of these historically underserved students, educational options must be more accessible than those that typically are offered by traditional higher education institutions if they are to be meaningful.”

—Rev. Jesse Jackson, in a September 15 letter to Secretary of Education Arne Duncan

“The chamber represents 95,000 black-owned businesses with 190 affiliated chapters operating internationally to sustain black communities through opportunity. We recognize that opportunity is built largely on getting a good education and obtaining the skills necessary to gain employment. That is why we believe the gainful employment rule would disproportionately impact minority, low-income, non-traditional and other underserved students who rely on Title IV financial aid to pay for higher education. We are asking the Department of Education to

rethink this rule because of the negative consequences it will have on Black students across the country.”

—National Black Chamber of Commerce website,
www.nationalbbc.org

“As it is currently designed, the draft rule will eliminate access to higher education for many working adults and lower income students who have no alternatives at a time when state budget cutbacks are forcing state-financed colleges and universities, and community colleges, to turn away students, especially in high-demand programs such as nursing.”

—September 8 letter from members of the U.S. Congress including Alcee L. Hastings, D-Fla.; Donald M. Payne, D-N.J.; Robert C. “Bobby” Scott, D-Va.; Jason Altmire, D-Pa.; Ron Klein, D-Fla.; Edolphus Towns, D-N.Y.; Debbie Wasserman Schultz, D-Fla.; Alan Grayson, D-Fla.; Tim Holden, D-Pa.; and Ted Deutch, D-Fla. ■



Sasha Roe graduated with journalism and political science degrees from the University of Kansas. She has experience in newspaper reporting and magazine editing for both collegiate and professional publications. Sasha is currently a Creative Content Developer at PlattForm Advertising. Sasha can be reached at sasha.roe@plattformad.com.

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