Testimony of Walter Smith, Executive Director, DC Appleseed

Public Hearing on B21-0055, Community College for All Scholarship Amendment Act of 2015

DC Council Committee of the Whole

Phil Mendelson, Chair

June 23, 2015

Introduction

I am Walter Smith, Executive Director of DC Appleseed. DC Appleseed has long been involved in efforts to promote a comprehensive community college here in the District and we would like to thank Councilmember Orange and his colleagues for introducing the "Community College for All Scholarship” legislation being addressed in the hearing today.

We would like to make three points about the legislation — first, that it is being introduced at an opportune moment for the city; second, that while the concept of free community college for residents is one we support, there are many details that first need to be addressed and defined in order for the Council to be confident that the legislation will fairly and efficiently serve the needs of District residents; and third, the legislation needs to be considered as part of a larger plan that supports the college and the university and does so in a way that implements a well-thought out agenda for higher education policy here in the District.

1. This is the moment to Focus on Higher Education in the District

This is a new day in DC for higher education -- a new President of UDC is coming aboard with a solid reputation for improving graduation rates in his previous institution; a new Community College CEO has joined, and is bringing a vision and plan for a “comprehensive community college”; a new Mayor is in office who sees building pathways to the middle class as central to the goals for her administration; and a new Council is ready and willing to take action on these
issues. Part of the action that we think is needed is to bring the same energy and commitment to public higher education that the Council has brought to the ongoing improvement of pre-k-12. The current bill is a good place to begin that action.

2. The Council Should Work with UDC and other Stakeholders to Develop the Bill

DC Appleseed supports the concept of providing free community college to residents, but we think a number of details need to be addressed and questions answered before the Council can be confident that is has effectively applied that concept in the District. For example, how will the proposal affect budgeting, space, staffing and the like? How much is it likely to cost and how it will be funded? What will the goals of the program be and how will success be measured? How many new students would the program likely bring to the community college and does the college have the infrastructure in place not only to serve them but to ensure that they succeed? And how will the program affect enrollment and revenues for the Flagship?

It seems to us that all these issues need to be addressed before enacting the program. It also seems to us that the program should be developed in close consultation with UDC and other stakeholders.

3. It is Time to Develop an Agenda for Advancing Public Higher Education in the District

More importantly, though, we see an effort to improve affordability and access to community college for recent high school graduates as only one component of what needs to be a much larger discussion and undertaking: (a) determining the District’s goals for higher education and how UDC, including the UDC Community College, can contribute to those goals; and (b) determining how the District government can best support the contributions of UDC and UDC-CC.
In our view, the success of an effort like Community College for All can only be measured against and in the context of the District’s overall goals for bringing greater economic opportunity and shared prosperity to all District residents. How our higher education system can best contribute to the District meeting these goals warrants a full and informed discussion between the District government and UDC and other community stakeholders. That discussion should help lead to a shared understanding of the specific investments and programmatic efforts that will help meet the District's goals.

DC Appleseed hopes the occasion of the current bill will serve as catalyst for the development of a shared agenda for higher education in the District and a determination about how the current bill fits into that agenda. Among the goals of that agenda should be increasing the number of students who not only complete high school or its equivalent and enter college ready for college-level work, but who successfully complete a program leading to an Associate’s Degree, an industry-recognized credential, and/ or who successfully transfer to a bachelor’s degree program.

In addition, like Tennessee and other states that have made dramatic improvements in both their k-12 and higher education systems, DC should identify targets and timelines for raising college completion rates, should ensure our workforce programming and credit coursework are carefully aligned all the way through the bachelor degree level, and should have goals for per student spending and whether or not we’re willing to invest more in students who dedicate themselves to particular programs of study. We need also to determine our state financial aid policies, and whether a first dollar or last dollar community college grant program is consistent with them.

We believe the Mayor and Council have important roles to play in developing a higher education agenda for the city. We also believe that UDC must have a central role in developing that agenda. And as we have said in many previous reports and in testimony before the Council,
we believe a strong flagship and a strong community college are both important to the success of the District’s higher education agenda.

Conclusion

We hope this moment marks the beginning of a new, broader conversation that will lead to a thoughtful, systematic plan for higher education policy in DC. DC Appleseed would be pleased to contribute in any way we can to the success of that conversation.