

I Want You to Know

This week I had the opportunity and honor to join civil rights, educational, and community leaders from around the country at Adams State University in Alamosa, CO, to discuss the founding of the National Center for Historically Underserved Students. I proudly represented NADE as a founding member organization of this Center, the product of the dreams and vision of a developmental educator, Dr. Chris Gilmer of Adams State. I want to share with you the draft declaration the representatives signed at the culmination of our meetings, and I welcome your comments and questions.

A Declaration on the Rights of Historically-Underserved Students/Draft

Editor's Note: This is an organic document destined to expand and change over time as the work evolves. It is a Call to Action for America's historically-underserved students and those persons and systems entrusted with their success.

Preamble

I am important.

My Native ancestors walked the Trail of Tears and had their lands, rights, and traditions stolen from them. My grandmother was a sharecropper who hoed cotton on land she never owned.

My dreams matter.

I am the first person in my family to graduate from high school and the first to attend college. My ancestors were brought here on slave ships in chains. I am a boy born in the body of a girl. My religion is under attack in a nation founded on religious liberty.

I hope.

I defended my nation on the field of battle and yet no one wants to hire me. I am a woman who loves a woman living in a nation dedicated to justice for all, and yet it just gave us the right to marry in 2015.

From the Rust Belt to Appalachia and the Mississippi Delta to Detroit, I represent all races. Whether my ancestors chose this nation or it chose them by force, I am a proud American.

I love my country.

My grandfather quit school in the first grade. He could not read or write. No one in my family knew how to fill out a financial aid application. I am afraid my father will be deported and that our family will be separated.

I ache, yet also I achieve.

I came from a rural farming community where there was little tax base, and my school did not fully prepare me for college. I came from the inner-city where I spent more time worrying about staying alive than doing my homework. Either way, I need extra help in reading, writing, and math.

I am motivated.

I am incarcerated and trying to prepare for my reentry into society. I am a single parent with three children. I work two jobs and can't arrange my schedule or pay for childcare to attend classes during the day. I have a physical or mental disability, yet still I have a keen mind and the desire to learn. I need for you to think outside the box. I am a woman who does the same work as a man and is paid less for it.

My frustration is real.

I am an honor student who grew up in a small town, worked hard, and outstripped the low expectations society had of me. I stood on the shoulders of generations who sacrificed everything for me to be the one. I carry the joyful burden of paying it forward.

America, I am a historically-underserved student. I have given you the best of me. You have not always given me the best of you. I have many faces. I have many stories. Give me a chance and I will give you one.

I think. I feel. I demand...

We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all people are created equal, that they are endowed with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness, that these Rights can only be realized through one additional and foundational Right, the Right to be educated.

Our Unalienable Rights

1. We have the right to a free and relevant public education pre-kindergarten through high school and the right to affordable and relevant workforce training or higher education.
2. We have the right to a multicultural curriculum that is representative of our cultures.
3. We have the right to asset-based pre-baccalaureate programs which provide us with the basic skills in math, reading, and writing needed to succeed in college.
4. We have the right to fully integrated student support services designed to mitigate our challenges and make full use of our strengths.
5. We have the right to choose minority-serving institutions, and we have the right for these institutions to receive government support comparable to that received by institutions not designed to serve minorities.
6. We have the right for these minority-serving institutions to be judged and accredited fairly by standards which reflect the populations they serve and the inequality in funding which often limits their range of possibilities.

7. We have the right to choose institutions not designed to serve minorities and to expect those institutions to serve us with full commitment to equity and inclusion.
8. We have the right to teachers who believe in and are committed to our potential and to our success.
9. We have the right to be held to high academic standards while receiving extra support, if needed, to meet those standards.
10. We have the right to be supported in maintaining and nurturing the cultures and relationships which promote our success.
11. We have the right to learn in an environment wherein we feel safe, free from prejudice and intolerance, and the right to be valued as individuals, not stereotyped as groups.
12. We have the right to advocate for our rights without being labeled troublemakers or without being accused of wanting special rights.
13. We have the right to equal access, and if we work hard and give the best of ourselves, we have the additional rights of retention and completion.
14. Finally, we have the right to economic security and quality of life based on our own hard work.

Epilogue

What is Life without Liberty? What is Liberty without the Pursuit of Happiness? And what is Happiness without the opportunities which higher education affords—economic security, advancement of our families, service to our communities, and the chance to achieve and contribute all we are capable of achieving and contributing? What is a Declaration on the Rights of Historically-Underserved Students?

It is a Declaration of Inclusion and Equity, a promise from our nation to us and from us to our nation that we will join together and live into the challenge of the Statue of Liberty to “lift our lamp beside the golden door” as a beacon of hope and promise to ourselves and to the world.