Written Congressional Testimony

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Tade Oyerinde to the U.S. House Committee on Education & Workforce on The Future of College: Harnessing Innovation to Improve Outcomes and Lower Costs

Opening

Chairman Walberg, Ranking Member Scott, and members of the Committee — thank you for inviting me here today.

My name is Tade Oyerinde. I'm the founder and chancellor at Campus, a 2-year college reimagining the future of post-high-school education in America.

Background Context

At its best, American higher education is second to none on this planet – a system built to cultivate the talents of our young people and prepare them to lead productive, fulfilling, and awesome lives. And when it's functioning properly, it transforms lives and delivers great results for our society – we know, for example, that, on average, young people who complete a bachelor's degree out-earn folks with just a high-school diploma by more than a million dollars over the course of their careers.

But I'm here today because, like many Americans in my generation, I've experienced firsthand that our higher-education system has fallen off the tracks.

The cost of college is out of control – we all know this – it's like a disease that just keeps on getting worse. And so, to save money, millions of Americans are now starting college off at our community colleges, which – when they work – are truly phenomenal. Schools like Miami Dade College and De Anza College in Cupertino have the hardest jobs in the world and still deliver excellent outcomes for students at scale. And the results CUNY ASAP is delivering in New York are a shining example of what's possible. But on a systemic level, far too often, our community colleges are not equipped to be successful at actually improving the lives of students.

Here's some data. The average community college in our country has a graduation rate of about just 30%. And just 14% of students who start at a community college will transfer into and graduate from a four-year university, according to data from the Community College Research Center at Columbia University.

Here's the worst part: according to NCES data, each year approximately 260,000 students drop out of our community colleges with a collective $1.5 billion in student loans – $5,700 each – and no degree. They have no increased earning potential and are now in debt – they're worse off than if they'd never gone to college in the first place.

And it's not a matter of our community colleges not trying to do great work – they are, but they're facing real challenges – from funding cuts to structural impediments – and students are the ones getting hurt.

This is a crisis for our country. We've turned millions in my generation into unemployable debtors – young people who've started off adulthood with a negative net worth. They can't afford to buy a home, they feel they can't afford to have kids or take any risks like starting a business or pursuing a high-risk passion. And now, there's an entire generation after us increasingly opting out of post-high-school education altogether, asking themselves "Why should I even try, when a quality education is so out of reach and AI is about to take all the jobs anyway?"

And they're not entirely wrong. The arrival of AI means the skills and competencies we need to equip young people with are shifting fast. Yet, instead of facing the challenges and opportunities of AI head-on, many colleges and universities are burying their heads in the sand or even trying to ban AI altogether. In this critical moment when our work – preparing students for productive, resilient lives – has never been more crucial, too many institutions are asleep at the wheel.

The Campus Model

And so, in an attempt to be a part of the solution, several years ago I bought a 2-year college myself to build out a new model – one where students don't have to choose between quality and accessibility.

Today, more than 3,000 Campus students are pursuing degrees in fields like Applied AI, Modern Business Administration, and Information Technology. They're taking classes taught by a network of faculty who simultaneously teach at our country's top universities including UT Austin, Stanford and Morehouse, supplementing their income by also teaching our students at Campus.

Our classes are delivered live online, accessible but also actively engaging – which is crucial if you want to actually retain students to graduation. Every student is paired with a success coach – one for every fifty students – whose sole job is to make sure they graduate, by any means necessary. Our coaches kick their butts when they're slacking and provide a supportive shoulder to lean on when life gets in the way.

Students also receive a battery of additional supports needed for success – a laptop, a Wi-Fi dongle so they can attend class from anywhere, free mental-health counseling, free math and writing tutoring.

And the best part? We've figured out how to deliver all of this sustainably while keeping tuition priced below Max Pell – meaning lower-income students pay nothing out-of-pocket, and middle-class students can cover annual tuition with just a summer job at the mall or the movie theater down the street.

While it's still early, the results speak for themselves. Campus students who graduate with a GPA of 2.75 or higher are guaranteed admission into transformative four-year universities like Arizona State University, Butler University, and the University of Central Florida. Our first few cohorts have already achieved graduation rates above 40%, well above the national average of around 30% for community colleges, and we believe our model can eventually deliver 60%.

Most importantly, my team and I are most proud of the simple fact that, since introducing this model, not one of our more than 3,000 students has taken on a single cent of student loan debt to attend Campus. And we will continue to do everything in our power to keep it that way as we scale.

Our model is self-sustaining and scalable, and my team, including our President, Michael Zimmerman – the grandson of the founder of the college we acquired – is working around the clock to evolve our model and drive better outcomes for students as we grow. Our industry has to innovate our way out of the challenges we're facing – this is the way.

To accelerate our evolution, we recently acquired a company building the leading AI learning platform, led by Meta's former Head of AI, who's joined Campus as our Chief Technology Officer. His team has built the most advanced AI for actually measuring each individual student's understanding of specific concepts within each course, surfacing this information to faculty and then enabling professors to dynamically create personalized learning pathways for each student through the curriculum. This has long been the holy grail of education technology and it's now actually possible – it's just one example of how we can leverage AI to drive real results for students today.

We're able to sustainably provide all the supports we make available to students because of a simple economic reality we observed from CUNY ASAP – investments in student retention are ROI positive. Investing in success coaches, laptops, tutoring means fewer students give up and drop out. When we retain more students, we retain more tuition revenue, which enables us to invest more in student support services, which again improves retention, and on and on. Igniting this cycle is the key to achieving both high quality and low tuition cost at scale.

All of this is made possible by the support of our governing board of trustees, composed of leaders who've dedicated their lives to American education, including our Chair, Dr. John Wilson of Morehouse College, Dr. Gail Mellow of LaGuardia College, Dr. Arthur Levine of Columbia University, Dr. Eduardo Padrón of Miami Dade College, and Dr. Joe May of Dallas College. Their collective centuries of experience leading our country's top universities and 2-year colleges, combined with their impatient drive to finally see our industry solve some of these perennial problems, serves as a crucial set of guardrails within which we can safely try new things and innovate, while maintaining our focus on improving student outcomes.

For start-up capital, we tapped a group of investors from across the political spectrum, who've come together to back our vision for the future of American post-high-school education, including Sam Altman, Jason Citron, Ken Chenault, Joe Lonsdale, Trae' Stephens and Peter Thiel, the Bloomberg Ventures team – Karin and Roy – as well as Matt Greenfield, Dylan Field, Shaquille O'Neal and others. They recognize the urgency of solving this problem and decided to be a part of the solution.

Our government can likewise play a major role – I was very pleased earlier this year to see our political leaders agree, across both sides of the aisle, and in both houses of Congress, on the importance of ensuring that Pell remains fully funded. And I'm hopeful that you all, our leaders, can continue to work together to advance initiatives that establish the right incentives for state governments, institutions, and students themselves so we can accelerate progress on these issues.

Closing

In closing, our country needs to solve the challenges facing American higher education urgently. We're grateful to play a role in developing and scaling a model that works, and I look forward to staying engaged with the Committee – I'm ready and available to you all if I can be useful.

Thank you.