

Obama's North Star Goal as an Inspirational Program for Burkina Faso

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Abstract— Higher education in the USA has been a reference worldwide, but the educational system during Obama's presidency faced many hurdles: increasing costs, decreasing budgets, low graduation rates. Low student retention, high dropout rates and low minority enrollment compounded that crisis. The graduation rate fell to such a point that the position of the US as a one of the world leaders in postsecondary education became questionable. This study does a critical examination of the North Star Goal, a program set up by the Obama Administration in order to produce the world's highest proportion of college graduates by 2020 and thus help the US regain its previous status. It is a qualitative or desk-top research based on textual analysis. Indeed, the study purposefully dissects the nature and importance of the North Star Goal, the symbolism and inspirations that transformed that vision into a reality; the article is sustained by the Goal-Setting Theory, propounded by Locke and Latham (2002). The role and implication of school counselors in that success, and the model it represents for countries such as Burkina Faso is clearly researched. The current crisis in higher education in Burkina Faso and the reasons behind the low graduation rate are also pondered over. The article ends with the strategies and policies that the education sector in Burkina can adopt to achieve success as robust as the ones the North Star Goal program arrived at.

Keywords—USA, Higher education, graduation rate, North Star goal, School Counseling, Burkina Faso

I. INTRODUCTION

Higher education in the USA began in 1636 with the establishment of the Harvard College in Massachusetts. It refers to studies beyond secondary school level and usually assumes that a student has undertaken 13 years of study and has a high school diploma. By the year 1965, the USA was the first country to have more than 2,000 colleges and universities and thus the world leader in producing completed graduate students. Researchers and lecturers were highly selected and well-paid and the most popular destination for foreign students. Campuses throughout the country offer a fertile intellectual climate for the students and show a remarkable collection of talents and intellectual capital for the country.

Students from all over the world flocked to the USA because of the reputation and the high quality programs offered with accredited professors, advanced technology and research opportunities. *We're the home to the world's best colleges and universities, where more students come to study than any place on Earth. (State of the Union Transcript, 2011).*

Today things appear quite different. The United States has slipped behind many other countries in college graduate completion. It is even said that the quality of education as compared to some countries is declining. The country suffers from college attainment gap. According to the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), Straight A's (2006)

Once the global leader in producing a talent pool of graduates, the U.S. is now loosing ground to emerging nations like South Korea and China. In 1990, the U.S. ranked first in the world in four-year degrees among 25-34 year-olds; today the U.S. rank 12th (p.3)

This alarming and uncomfortable situation continued up to the arrival of Obama in 2008. Thus, Barrak Obama in his tenure wanted the USA to have once again the highest proportion of college graduates in the world by 2020. This study is the challenge of this administration we want to study, to describe its nature, its importance to the US economy, the way forward to reach the North Star and the relevance to countries like Burkina Faso.

II. NORTH STAR: HISTORY AND SYMBOLISM

A star different from the other by his constant visibility and brightness in the sky. As a star, the North Star can be seen every night from the Northern Hemisphere in term of his position. It has been since immemorial times the guiding light that prevented navigators and travelers from being lost. It has guided many people in predicament to find direction, hope, to be rescued, to find life freedom and joy. As in the bible, many enslaved African American has used it to escape slavery and find freedom, hope and joy in the Northern states in America. Metaphorically speaking, the North Star is a mission statement. A fixed destination for any individual embarking on a project. So, it requires a purpose, a goal, and involves passion and hope.

A. The National Defense Education Act of 1958

When the Soviet launched the world's first satellite in 1957, the Americans were worried that the Soviet Union had surpassed them in space technology specifically the launch of the Russian sputnik satellite. The United States space industry reacted as it coincided with a shortage of mathematicians in the country. Thus, it was difficult to find engineers, computer scientists and applied mathematicians. In an effort to achieve parity with the Soviet in space technology, the Americans decided to revise and examine their educational system. The National Defense Education Act of 1958 was taken as a program to strengthen the national defense and to encourage and assist in the expansion and improvement of educational programs to meet critical national needs. In order to achieve this goal, the NDEA awarded loans, scholarships and grants to many science and languages students. Equipment, material and funds were released to study science and languages and produce talented young men and women to pursue higher education in Mathematics and Languages (Pope, 2000). This legislation also made massive funds available for colleges and universities to create counseling and guidance training institutes and train guidance counselors for American Schools (Aubrey, 1977). The Obama North Star may be an inspiration from this nationalist competitive spirit that led to the creation of the National Defense Act of 1958.

B. OECD and Higher Education Ranking

The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) has shown in education at glance 2006 the annual report of international education statistics from OECD that the US has fallen behind other countries in college completion. US college graduation rates rank 19th out of 28 countries OECD director for education and skills (Straight A's, 2006).

C. The Lumina Foundation for Education

It is an independent, private foundation in Indianapolis with a program of creating opportunities for American students to complete college or university education. It is also reallocating the limited resources to help address the economic and social problems created by unemployment and the shortening of American high skills workers. The Lumina Foundation is encouraging the increase of tertiary graduation or completing a tertiary degree as the Bachelor, Master or Doctoral Degree. Their big goal has been the increase of the percentage of Americans with high quality degrees and credentials from 39 percent to 60 percent by the year 2025.

The foundation is also concerned with college access, affordability, college retention, and the issue of accountability. Access and affordability are reported to be the main causes. Bound, Lovenheim and Turner in their study added the lower preparation of students and the small allocation of resources dedicated to instruction and institutional choices (Bound, J.; Lovenheim, M. F.; Turner, S. 2010).

Many people in poor families are not certain to continue on in higher education. Students in minority groups such as Blacks, Hispanics are concerned. Their enrollment rate is low because of their low performance in high school and also because of their educational expectations. College enrollment needs to be increased for minority students.

There is a high retention rates especially from the first year to second year and colleges have been delaying many American students. In fact, students generally take a considerable amount of time to obtain a degree of two or four years. This situation is partly related to the low graduation rate which is also a problem. The long time taken to complete, the low graduation rate constitutes a serious problem and it is also true for effective use of institutional resources. This situation drains financial resources for the students and their families.

One of the critical issues on accountability is how universities can provide evidence of student learning that is comparable across them. There is a remarkable absence of accountability mechanisms to ensure that colleges succeed in educating students. The U.S. Department of Education points out that accountability is vital to ensuring the success of reforms in the three key areas such as college access, quality of instruction and affordability.

III. OBAMA AND THE NORTH STAR GOAL

The U.S. Department of Education has established a Commission on the Future of Higher Education in 2005 with the aim to improve Higher Education in the United States. At the national level, President Obama set forth an ambitious agenda for American postsecondary education: *That is why we will provide the support necessary for you to complete college and meet a new goal: by 2020, America will once again have the highest proportion of college graduates in the world. (State of the Union, 2009)*. And that to reach this goal, American college graduates should increase by 50%, adding at least eight 8 million additional graduates.



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The importance of the North Star Goal in Higher Education is that it would not only help the US to recover the first place but it would help the country to grow economically.

The state of our economy is a concern that rises above all others..... But the only way to fully restore America's economic strength is to make the long-term investments that will lead to new jobs, new industries, and a renewed ability to compete with the rest of the world (State of the Union, 2009). A good education as he said is a prerequisite.

Completing college and university help to have a well-paid job, gives more financial resources to meet one's needs and betters the lives. Higher education also paves the way for research and innovation for the advancement of the country. High level man power in the industries is needed.

For Obama, Higher Education remains the engine of the US economy and democracy. He emphasized the importance of Higher Education and urged more Americans to obtain a college degree as it is the gateway to many options and opportunities including increased financial success and social benefits. There is a need to instill a broad foundation of knowledge and skills equipping individuals to manage their lives in today's complex civilization and to be flexible in the face of changes in the future.

To reach this goal, graduation rate needs to be lifted, graduates must be prepared to succeed in the economy, colleges and universities must be affordable to Americans especially minorities. For the United States of America to reaffirm its position as a world leader in postsecondary education, research on issues such as access, quality, and accountability was urgently needed. Innovations and the pursuit of the best practices are recommended.

A. Vice president Joe Biden and the North star goal

As the chairman of the task force, vice president Joe Biden was committed to meet president Obama's needs. He made college affordability and accessibility a priority and issued a call to action to boost college graduation rate all over the country. The task force released a new college completion tool kit for the states and invited each governor to host a state college completion summit. The tool kit was composed of strategies and actions taken to help governors and the administration to reach the 2020-Star Goal. In order to lead the world again, every governor will have to lead the way at home, Secretary Duncan said.

B. Michelle Obama and the Reach Higher Initiative

Michelle Obama, the first Lady Reach Higher Initiative was the support given to President Obama's North Star goal to make America have the world's highest proportion of college graduates by 2020. Reach higher is encouraging high school graduates to go for a four-year university or a college program. and this commitment was accompanied by seven education initiatives. Among these seven education-related initiatives was the necessity to be provided with school counselors. The first lady strongly believes that school counselors are the key to her Reach Higher program. For that, the Secretary of Education Arne Duncan during Obama's Administration was urged to release new guidance for superintendents and school principals, and use education budget to create professional development units for school counselors, for every school counselor should have quality and relevant professional development opportunities. Both federal and state funds have been raised and allocated for training and capacity building of guidance counselors. Many universities have also made a commitment to train or revitalize their guidance counseling center.

The first Lady of the USA Address at the White House College Opportunity Agenda convening on Strengthening School Counseling and College Advising at the Harvard Graduate School of Education in October 24, 2014 was also in line of it.

I know that if we are going to reach my husband's North Star Goal to have the highest proportion of college graduates in the world by 2020, quality school counseling cannot be a luxury afforded to certain school systems. We need to raise the spotlight on this important issue and ensure students have the support and encouragement they need to achieve their dreams (Savitz-Romer, Liu, 2014 P.I).

IV. THE NORTH STAR AND IMPACT ON EDUCATION

President Obama, in the State of the Union speech in 2010, expressed his concerns and shared his goal of having every high school graduate by 2020 committed to continuing his/her education. *If school counselors were used in more effective ways — and if there were more school counselors to help our students — then our graduation rates and college-going rates would improve, and our students would be better prepared to overcome the numerous obstacles standing in the way of their success.*



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Students are performing poorly and will continue to do so if we do not have a huge push for more school counselors in our schools' systems immediately (State of the Union, 2009). The school counseling profession is a vital component of the American educational system and is necessary if they want to stay competitive with other educational systems of the world. Without school counselor's students will definitely perform at lower rates which will increase ever growing opportunity and achievements gaps (Robert, B., 2010) in NY Times.com.htm, October 25, 2010, 3:56 p.

The North Star Goal had a transformative impact on the field of school counseling. It elevated the role of school counselors in supporting students' college and career readiness, emphasizing their importance in fostering educational success and attainment.

The North Star Goal highlighted the need for school counselors to focus on preparing students for the demands of postsecondary education and the workforce. School counselors played a vital role in providing guidance on course selection, college applications, financial aid, and career exploration, ensuring that students were equipped with the necessary knowledge and skills for success. The North Star Goal fostered collaboration among school counselors, educators, families, and community stakeholders. School counselors engaged in partnerships to provide comprehensive support services, aligning their efforts with school-wide initiatives and community resources to maximize student success.

One of the significant implications of the North Star Goal was its emphasis on equity and access to education. School counselors became key advocates for students from marginalized backgrounds, working to reduce barriers to educational opportunities and supporting underrepresented students in pursuing higher education.

V. HIGHER EDUCATION IN BURKINA FASO

In Burkina Faso, Higher Education is made up of four main Public Universities in Burkina Faso: The University Joseph KI-ZERBO, Nazi Bony of Bobo Dioulasso, the University Norbert ZONGO of Koudougou. University Thomas SANKARA of Ouagadougou, the university Ledéa Bernard OUEDRAOGO in the Northern Region, the University Yembila Abdoulaye TOGUYENI in the Eastern part and the University Daniel Ouezzin COULIBALY. Universities and Higher Institutions in Burkina Faso by nature are scientific, cultural and technical establishments and whose missions are the dissemination of knowledge, research results and the development of culture.

The average population of students is 24 years and more than half of the students especially in the public universities are moving in the Social Sciences. The best success rates are recorded in the Social Sciences, Commerce, Law and Science.

According to the Department of Planning and Statistics of the Ministry of Higher Education, the evolution of higher education in Burkina Faso is in a context of scarcity of resources and high demand from an ever-growing student's population. In terms of resources allocation, higher education budget is very low and marked by a sharp decline in investment. The consequence is that most of the higher educational institutions are suffering from significant structural, institutional and financial constraints. Their internal efficiency and effectiveness are weak because of the low rate of promotion and the increasing rate of repetition and dropouts. In terms of unemployment, statistics disclosed that products from Higher Education in Burkina Faso are facing difficulties in social and occupational integration since there is a mismatch between training and employment. In public institutions the number of students is increasing and most schools are overcrowded and understaffed. Observation of staff in the universities shows the ageing of permanent lecturers in the teaching personnel and an increase of contractors.

Public higher education in Burkina Faso over the last few years is experiencing a serious crisis. This crisis is due to the massive enrollment of students, the overlapping academic years, a weak social support for students, difficult working conditions and unattractive wage conditions of faculty members, lecturers, researchers and workers. The introduction of the LMD (Licence-Master-Doctorate) system which was widely recommended would have given more credit to our universities. But the implementation without the necessary means has become questionable and has created more problems: students spend more years on campus; the graduation rate is still very low these recent years. Students seeking Masters or Doctoral degrees are facing these challenges because of this academic troublesome situation. In all, the biggest challenge of the Universities remains the training of enough highly-skilled labor and well-trained officers to increase the country's productivity and find effective solutions to the issues of the society in Burkina Faso.

VI. THE MPSR2 VISION AND THE AWAKENING

The year 2023 is another turning point in the history of the country.



As (Ouedraogo,2019) stated, it is a revolution of mentalities, a change of lifestyle, valorization of the nation heritage and potentialities, a patriotic upsurge to free from all forms of dependence. It is a refusal to the old order, rejection of the French influence, and the effective control of one's destiny.

The Revolutionary Regime, MPSR2 has started introducing some targeted reforms and new policies in line with the context and people's needs.

The vision of the head of state is appropriate and high-quality higher education as a pressing goal. The reforms consist of investing, recruiting, correcting the inadequacy between academic program and labor market demands, more representation of students in Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) to attain food and self-sufficiency, to create more industries and lift the country from a poverty stricken country to a developed one.

A decree has also established a mandatory patriotic immersion for every student who passes major national exam: high school certificate, vocational training certificate, professional training diploma. The decree describes a program composed of structured physical exercise and health education designed not only to strengthen their bodies, but to instill discipline and resilience. The second aspect is civic education, a course on the rights, duties and national values. Students are taught what it truly means to be citizen, not just subjects. They learn about the responsibilities of protecting their nation and the importance of unity over division. The third is patriotic lessons. The teaching of Burkina Faso's history, the fights for independence, its heroes and sacrifices. The patriotic immersion is now a pass to public higher education.

VII. CURRENT STRATEGIES AND POLICIES ON HIGHER EDUCATION IN BURKINA FASO

To make higher education, research and innovation a driver of development through quality training, major reforms have been implemented since the advent of the MPSR2. The first reform is to relieve overcrowding in universities and address the issue of academic delays. The months of August and September 2024 will remain etched in the annals of higher education in Burkina Faso as a time of hard work and exceptional dedication. To succeed in catching up the delays and reviving Burkina Faso's public universities by the 2025 to 2026 academic year.

This bold undertaking made it possible to shorten the accumulated delays, restore coherent academic calendars and above all prepare for the 2025 to 2026 academic year under better paces. Today, the normalization of academic years is at 90%.

For the first time in a decade, high school graduates could complete their two semesters assessments and the reset session within the allotted time because teachers and students alongside administrative staff voluntarily chose to postpone their holidays to devote themselves to an essential mission, restoring dignity to higher education higher education and reaffirming its driving role in society. The reform also targets the content and organization of courses to be taught, but also aims to address youth unemployment by introducing vocational courses as early as secondary school. Public universities will open their doors to holders of professional baccalaureate. We also notice the improvements in infrastructure and the strengthening of teachers and researchers' capacities. The university library at Joseph KI-ZERBO has been renovated and has increased its capacity from 300 seats to 438 seats.

The presidential initiative for quality education, a very comprehensive and outstanding program designed by the current leaders is undoubtedly asserts at most their commitment to revolutionize the educational system in Burkina.

The construction of 40 lecture halls over the next five years, the digitalization of academic records and the revitalization of Campus Faso, and the equipment of all the public universities with high-speed Wi-Fi network are some of the major projects the program intends to conduct.

The reference framework for priority higher education program and the university map in order to specialize each university, polytechniques and grandes écoles taking into account regional specificities and existing fields of study in research and innovation. Several achievements were made between 2022 and 2025. The continuous recruitment of university lecturers and research associates is an example. There has also been Progress in the field of health sciences with the approval of two vaccines (RTSS/AS01 and R21/matrix-m) by the world Health Organization against malaria.

From all that precedes, the current authorities, since their arrival on power, have started designing and implementing a vast program of reform, and have been committed to the cause of quality education.

That is undoubtedly why, the International Monetary Fund in a statement early in April 2025 declared that despite a challenging humanitarian and security environment, the military regime has made a commendable progress in raising domestic revenue, containing the public wage bill, an increasing spending on education, health, and social protection.

VIII. CONCLUSION

Obama's North Star Goal had a profound positive impact on the US higher education. With it, Legislation made massive funds available for colleges and universities. Education budget in the states were also raised to provide more resources for equipment, material, training institutes and trained guidance counselors. The North star goal was also about tuition free and fees for eligible residents in many public colleges and universities for students to complete higher education. Such a program indeed is an inspirational one because of its positive transformation.

In Burkina Faso, Higher education is facing several constraints: Universities are overcrowded and understaffed. They have very low budget, low rate of promotion, very high rate of repeating students and dropouts. The graduation rate is still low. Universities are suffering from quality and efficiency.

However, an awakening due the advent of the revolutionary regime in 2024 made things hopeful with the vision of the head of state for a high quality education. To achieve this, major reforms have been designed and implemented to make higher education the driver of development through research and innovation.

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