



ANNOUNCEMENT:

Introducing - NEW Policy & Advocacy Team to Transform Higher Education for #RealCollege Students

December 2, 2021

The Hope Center introduces a NEW Policy & Advocacy Team leading the charge to transform higher education for #RealCollege students.

Starting in January 2022, the team's new four additions include:

- **Atif Qarni, Managing Director for External Affairs** (formerly the Virginia Secretary of Education)
- **Bryce McKibben, Senior Director of Policy & Advocacy** (formerly U.S. Senate staff)
- **Amy Ellen Duke-Benfield, Senior Director of Policy & Advocacy** (formerly of the National Skills Coalition)
- **Mark Huelsman, Director of Policy & Advocacy** (formerly of Demos)

These individuals bring substantial expertise and leadership experience that complements and expands on Hope's current team, which includes Tom Hilliard, Denisha Hobbs, and Leslie Rios.

"The addition of these nationally renowned thought leaders will strengthen the reach of The Hope Center in advancing higher education policy across the country," said **Dr. Jason Wingard, President, Temple University**. "Their leadership is particularly critical to addressing the underfunding of public higher education and Minority-Serving Institutions."

"The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the importance of higher education programming that ensures all students have reliable and consistent access to food and housing," said **Dr. Amy Goldberg, Interim Dean, Lewis Katz School of Medicine, Temple University**. "The expansion of the Hope Center Public Policy team will fuel the Center's work to address basic need insecurity of students and to reimagine higher education policy that better supports access and attainment for all students regardless of background."

In 2021, The Hope Center partnered with federal policymakers, agencies, and state leaders to address students' urgent needs and made gains the team now hopes to make permanent. **Dr. Sara Goldrick-Rab, President and Founder of The Hope Center** said, "We don't need more thoughts and prayers—we need policy change. I'm thrilled by the opportunity this expansion creates. It reflects the growing impact of The Hope Center, and demonstrates that the #RealCollege movement has substantial momentum. The new

additions to our growing policy and advocacy team were handpicked and bring expertise from the federal and state levels to exponentially help us advance our mission.”

ATIF QARNI, MANAGING DIRECTOR FOR EXTERNAL AFFAIRS

Prior to joining The Hope Center, [Atif Qarni](#) served as Virginia’s Secretary of Education, championing PK-12 and higher education reforms at the state level, through the legislative and policy-making process. Over four years his progressive #RealCollege agenda in Virginia led to many successes, including tuition-free community college with basic needs stipend; in-state tuition rates and state financial aid for undocumented students; historic increase in need-based financial aid; and record investments in public Historically Black Colleges and Universities.

Before serving as Secretary of Education, Atif taught at Beville Middle School in Prince William County for 10 years. He also served as a GED Night School Instructor. Atif is a veteran and was a Sergeant of the United States Marine Corps and deployed to Iraq in 2003 during Operation Iraqi Freedom. Atif holds a bachelor’s in Sociology from George Washington University, a master’s in History from George Mason University, and is currently a doctoral candidate at The Peabody College of Vanderbilt University.

“Every American, regardless of their race, religion, citizenship status, or financial means, should have access to an affordable and attainable college education,” said Atif. “The Hope Center through The Real College movement is a voice for millions of college students in need—I look forward to advancing the Hope Center’s mission in getting #RealCollege supports implemented in every single institution of higher education in America.”

BRYCE MCKIBBEN, SENIOR DIRECTOR OF POLICY & ADVOCACY

[Bryce McKibben](#) will join The Hope Center in January 2022 after serving as the lead policy advisor on higher education for U.S. Senator Patty Murray (D-WA), the Chair of the Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions (HELP), where he has worked on legislation improving access to financial aid, meeting student basic needs, supporting under-resourced institutions, and responding to COVID-19. Before that, Bryce was a Policy Analyst for the Association of Community College Trustees, and a Staff Assistant for the U.S. House of Representatives’ Committee on Education and the Workforce. He is also the past president of the Washington Student Association. Bryce holds a bachelor’s from the University of Washington and a master’s in public policy from Harvard Kennedy School.

“Congress and the White House have taken significant steps through the America Rescue Plan, bipartisan infrastructure law, and soon the Build Back Better Act to provide emergency relief addressing food insecurities, housing, the digital divide, childcare needs, and workforce shortages,” said Bryce McKibben. “We have once in a generation opportunity to make these investments work for #RealCollege Students and to make them permanent.”

AMY ELLEN DUKE-BENFIELD, SENIOR DIRECTOR OF POLICY & ADVOCACY

Prior to joining The Hope Center, [Amy Ellen Duke-Benfield](#) served as a Senior Fellow at National Skills Coalition (NSC) where she was the organization's expert on state higher education policy development and implementation. With more than 15 years of experience in higher education policy, Amy Ellen worked with state policymakers to make higher education more responsive to the educational and economic needs of adult learners in their multiple roles as parents, workers, and students. She ran NSC's Postsecondary Policy Academy, helping state agency teams work together so more residents could attain postsecondary credentials. Amy Ellen also served as a Senior Policy Analyst at the Center for Law and Social Policy, where she analyzed and advocated for higher education policies to better serve low-income adults and other students, including workers, student parents, and students of color. She directed the Benefits Access for College Completion initiative to increase access to public benefits and financial aid for low-income students at community and technical colleges across the country. She also developed and advocated for a comprehensive student aid framework that combines financial aid, public benefits, and refundable tax credits to increase postsecondary access for low-income students. Amy Ellen holds an undergraduate degree from Swarthmore College and a master's degree in divinity from Emory University.

"There is a national workforce shortage in critical areas like health, education, trades and technology," said Amy Ellen. "#RealCollege policies help more people attain credentials that lead to good jobs. I look forward to advancing policy that builds a better ecosystem of support for college students across the nation."

MARK HUELSMAN, DIRECTOR OF POLICY & ADVOCACY

Prior to joining The Hope Center, [Mark Huelsman](#) served as the Associate Director of Policy & Research at Demos, where he led the organization's policy work on college affordability, student debt, and racial equity in higher education, and contributed to the organization's work on the racial wealth gap and structural democracy reform. In 2016, Politico named him, along with The Hope Center's Founder and President Sara Goldrick-Rab, one of the top 50 people shaping American politics for his efforts to make college free. He is also a fellow at the Student Borrower Protection Center. A native of Cincinnati, Ohio, Mark holds a B.A. in Government and Politics from the University of Maryland, and an Ed.M. in International Education Policy from the Harvard Graduate School of Education.

"It's time for federal and state policymakers and institutional leaders to be bold and unapologetic in building policies that reflect the experiences of #RealCollege students and address the needs of those who have been too often marginalized and ignored," said Mark.