

THE CHRONICLE OF HIGHER EDUCATION

Students

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Group Uses Documentary Storytelling to Promote Access to College

By *Justin Doubleday*
Washington

Tours of duty in Iraq and Afghanistan interrupted Donald Richards's college career—twice. Traval Mensah, the son of immigrants from Ghana, has to work 40 hours a week around his classes. After a decade in the work force, Andrea Fitch struggled to return to college and balance family obligations.

Those stories, among others, were the focus of a summit here on Tuesday held by the Institute for Higher Education Policy, which screened a 30-minute documentary, *Redefining Access for the 21st-Century Student*, and presented a panel that included its five subjects. Those in attendance were representatives of various advocacy groups and universities, as well as higher-education officials, including the departing U.S. under secretary of education, Martha J. Kanter.

Mr. Richards, a student at South Dakota State University and a member of the U.S. Army Reserve, had trouble academically for a time due to a head injury from his second deployment. He also found it difficult to return to civilian life, and to sort out his education benefits following the federal budget cuts known as sequestration and during the government shutdown.

To him, college access means "having the resources and somebody there to walk you through what you need to do," he said. With support from professors and advisers, Mr. Richards expects to graduate next summer.

Much of the talk on Tuesday centered on the lack of counseling available to both prospective and current students. "Support is important to all students at all levels," said Jenell Holder, another student featured in the film.

Many panelists recommended more-intentional outreach to middle- and high-school students, especially those in lower-income communities. Mr. Mensah, for instance, said he could have used more guidance on the financial-aid process.

Colleges have little incentive to provide such outreach, some panelists noted. "Higher education has put itself in a box," said Charlie Nelms, founder of the Destination Graduation Initiative, which aims to increase retention and graduation rates at minority-serving institutions.

Most colleges are still geared toward second- and third- generation students, he said. "We need to stop wishing that students represented some sort of ideal population."

Ms. Fitch still remembers how her high-school guidance counselor told her she was not college material. After trying but dropping out, she worked for 10 years, got married, and had two children. When she decided to return to college, "I felt I had to fight for it," she said.

A recent graduate of Colorado State University at Fort Collins, Ms. Fitch now teaches at Northglenn High School, outside Denver. She agreed with other panelists that students need more personal support: "I tell my students, 'If I did it, you can do it.'"

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jvputten • a day ago

From the IHEP Press Release: "IHEP is organizing screenings of the film at select higher education-related events throughout 2014." In my view, IHEP should *expand* access to viewing a documentary about expanding access to higher and postsecondary education, rather than restrict it to those who are privileged enough to travel to "select higher education-related events."

The filmmakers of the documentary 'First Generation' are doing it right, and IHEP should emulate it.

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